

release

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IS IT WORTH IT?

Former prisoner Helen Berhane describes her ordeal in Eritrea

PAGE 2



TAKE UP YOUR CROSS

Pray for Prisoners of Faith

PAGE 6



MORE THAN A NECKLACE

The meaning of the cross
release:potential

PAGE 10



The power of the cross

release
international
voice of persecuted christians

The power of the cross

Those Christians who are called to suffer harassment and discrimination, detention, even torture and death itself, follow in the very footsteps of Christ Himself.

By 'taking up the cross' they choose to deny themselves and follow Christ, whatever the cost to themselves.

Jesus Himself stated: 'If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also' (John 15:20).

This special edition of Release magazine is designed for use as part of the annual International Day of Prayer for the persecuted church (IDOP), which is being held in the UK and Ireland on Sunday, November 15, 2009.

In the following pages we celebrate the ordinary men and women who faithfully follow Christ in the most difficult of circumstances – proving by their words and deeds the eternal truth of the gospel.

Their varied, often extreme, experiences may not be ours – but as 'one body', one family in Christ, we are called to support them in prayer and compassionate action.



The lives of Christians who are today persecuted for their active faith in Jesus Christ give testimony to the enduring power of the cross.

'Hands close on my neck like a vice'

IS IT WORTH IT?

Eritrean gospel singer Helen Berhane was detained for two years by the authorities, during which she was severely beaten and kept in a crowded metal shipping container in the desert. In this extract from her eagerly awaited book, *Song of the Nightingale*, she asks herself 'Is it worth it?'

A single candle flickers, its flame barely illuminating the darkness. They never burn for more than two hours after the container door is locked: there is not enough oxygen to keep the flame alive any longer. It will go out soon.

The woman behind me shifts in her sleep and her knees dig painfully into my back. I try to wriggle over to give her more room, but I am already pressed up against another sleeping body. I pull my blanket up higher and curl up

'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'

(Matthew 16:24)



Helen Berhane's new autobiography, *Song of the Nightingale*, powerfully describes her experiences in prison in Eritrea, as well as the remarkable faith which sustained her. The book is due to be published shortly and will be available to order in the next edition of *Release* magazine.

as much as I can. Despite the proximity of so many people, it is freezing cold. Condensation drips from the roof and slides down my cheek, and when it moistens my lips I taste rust. The air is thick with a dirty metallic tang, the ever-present stench of the bucket in the corner, and the smell of close-pressed, unwashed bodies.

I peer around, trying to work out where she is, the woman whose mind is gone. There, by the small window hacked roughly into the side of the container. I stiffen. Sometimes she blocks the opening by stuffing her blanket into it, cutting off our limited supply of fresh air. Other nights she shouts and wails, rocking the container so that none of us can sleep. She is worse now there are more of us; nineteen in a space that can only sleep eighteen. Tonight she is quiet, and it makes me uneasy.

But I am so tired, and so I force my body to relax against the hard floor. Abruptly the candle snuffs out, I close my eyes, and think of my daughter. **Please Lord, keep her safe.**

The floor creaks. Someone must be getting up and stumbling across the sleepers to the toilet bucket. I try to shut the noise out.

Suddenly, without warning, hands close on my neck like a vice. My eyes fly open, but it is too dark to see. Then there is a guttural snarl, and I know that it is her, the madwoman, her fingers tight on my throat. I push myself up but I have no breath to scream, and I am not strong enough to shake her off. So I do the only thing I can do: I bang my free hand on the wall of the container and kick out. All around us prisoners are waking up. One tries to pull her away from me, but now she has one hand on my throat and the other knotted in my hair, yanking it away from my scalp. I gulp down a breath and manage a scream. The other prisoners start to shout too, and bang the sides of the container. There are shouts now coming from outside, and the sound of hurrying feet, the noise of the bolts sliding back and the pop as air rushes into the container and then the doors are flung open.

My eyes burn as torchlight sears across my face, and then a guard is yanking her away from me and beating her about the head and body with his baton. I fall onto all fours, gasping in air. The guards pull her out

of the container, and slam the door again. The women rush to crowd around the small window. 'They are beating her,' one of them hisses, low so as not to anger the guards. She risks another look. 'They have tied her outside,' she whispers, and the others start to lie down again, looking forward to a few hours of sleep before the guards come again to march us to the toilet field.

I lie down too, but my scalp feels as though it is on fire, and I know that I will not sleep tonight. Sometimes I cannot believe that this is my life: these four metal walls, all of us corralled like cattle, the pain, the hunger, the fear. All because of my belief in a God who is risen, who charges me to share my faith with those who do not yet know him, and who I am forbidden to worship. I think back to a question I have been asked many times over my months in prison: 'Is your faith worth this, Helen?' And as I take a deep breath of the sour air, as my scalp stings, the mad woman rants outside, and the guards continue on their rounds, I whisper the answer 'Yes.' •

HELP GENERATE A WAVE OF PRAYER FOR PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS

**International Day of Prayer
(IDOP) for the persecuted church
Sunday, November 15, 2009**



In the following pages we highlight five DVDs which capture the powerful and redeeming testimonies of Christians who have been persecuted for their faith in Jesus. By giving a unique insight into the lives of persecuted believers in Eritrea, India, Laos, Pakistan and Vietnam, these DVDs are ideally suited for use leading up to or during the International Day of Prayer.

As a special offer for IDOP, order our new video *Pray for Eritrea*, and get another DVD free of charge. We hope this will encourage you and your church to take part in IDOP in 2009. Where response cards are available these include a tear-off postcard lobbying the relevant authorities on behalf of Christians in that country.

ITEM (please tick)	QUANTITY	TOTAL
<input type="checkbox"/> Pray for Eritrea DVD Suggested donation £10 (includes 25 response cards)		£
<input type="checkbox"/> Extra Pray for Eritrea response cards (in units of 25) Please order one per family or member of your church or group		£
<input type="checkbox"/> Enemies of the state? (Vietnam & Laos) DVD Suggested donation £10		£
<input type="checkbox"/> Pray for Pakistan DVD Suggested donation £10 (includes 25 response cards)		£
<input type="checkbox"/> Extra Pray for Pakistan response cards (in units of 25) Please order one per family or member of your church or group		
<input type="checkbox"/> Bruised: not broken (Pakistan) DVD for youth groups Suggested donation £3		£
<input type="checkbox"/> Faith under fire: India DVD Suggested donation £10		£
If you order our new DVD <i>Pray for Eritrea</i>, you may choose another DVD free of charge.		Total
<input type="checkbox"/> I enclose my cheque (payable to Release International). You may also order resources by telephoning 01689 823491.		Donation to Release
		Grand total

Title _____ Name _____
 Address _____
 _____ Postcode _____
 Daytime Tel No _____ Email _____



Pop in for coffee!

Date: Monday, November 16, to Friday, November 20

We all know there's nothing quite like a satisfying cuppa to pick you up in the morning so now Release is offering you the opportunity to indulge your coffee habit while taking action to help your persecuted Christian brothers and sisters in Eritrea – the focus of Release's campaign this year.

We're asking supporters in the UK and Ireland to hold coffee mornings in their homes or churches on any day between November 16 to 20 - to raise awareness and pray for the 2,000 plus Eritrean Christians currently in prison for their faith, and the thousands more who have become refugees.

And to really get in the mood, we suggest that you accompany the drink with salty popcorn – a popular combination in the small East African nation.

Please take this opportunity to get together with Christian friends, to enjoy fellowship and a taste of Eritrean culture but also to pray for your brothers and sisters in Eritrea (please use the *May Prayer Shield* which contains a pullout on Eritrea). Copies of the pullout are available from the Release office (tel 01689 823491). Please also use the morning as an opportunity to collect signatures for our petition. Paper copies can be downloaded from our website (www.releaseinternational.org/current) or requested by contacting the office (01689 823491).

Although the principal focus of the mornings is to raise awareness and prayer, the event can also be used to raise funds. Money collected and sent to Release will be used to support Eritrean Christian refugees (please specify this when sending donations).

Areas to cover in prayer: the 2,000 to 3,000 Christians in prison for their faith and their families (many leading pastors and Christian activists have been arrested and relatives often do not know if they are dead or alive); the thousands of Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia and Sudan; for President Isaias Afewerki and his repressive regime, that they will not see Christians as a threat but will have a change of heart and introduce religious liberty.

And please, do let us know how your event goes. Send us your stories and pictures. We would love to feature some in a later edition of *Release* magazine.

We'd like to invite you and your church to help generate a wave of prayer for persecuted Christians by taking part in the annual International Day of Prayer (IDOP) for the persecuted church, being held in the UK and Ireland on Sunday, November 15, 2009.

Whether as an individual, family or church, we hope you'll join in one of the world's largest prayer events. As in previous years, thousands of churches around the world are expected to participate.

To help you, we've produced a new 10-minute video on DVD *Pray for Eritrea*, which shows how Christians are standing firm in their faith, despite being persecuted by the Eritrean authorities. This short documentary features testimonies from Eritrean Christians, and gives specific topics for prayer. It's ideal for use by home groups, prayer groups and churches.

When you show the new DVD, please also use this opportunity to collect signatures for our Eritrea petition, which is downloadable from our website www.releaseinternational.org/current

This new DVD, available for a suggested donation of £10, can be ordered using the form opposite, along with the *Pray for Eritrea* response card, which includes a summary of the most urgent prayer needs.

While IDOP is taking place in the UK and Ireland on Sunday, November 15, 2009, you and your church are of course free to choose any date which is convenient to you.



The coffee ceremony is a popular part of Eritrean social life. First coffee beans are roasted and then ground and the powder added to boiling water. The water is boiled for five to 10 minutes, then left to settle for 10 minutes before being served in small cups, with sugar but no milk. The popcorn is mainly salty. Normally the coffee ceremony takes about an hour.



PRISONERS HELPING CHRISTIANS IMPRISONED FOR THEIR FAITH

TAKING UP THE CROSS

For some Christians, taking up the cross means being detained, even tortured, rather than deny Jesus Christ, writes Release's Prisoners of Faith Manager.

Falsely accused, humiliated, betrayed, despised, isolated, questioning, often alone, they follow in the footsteps of the One they love.

Christians who have been imprisoned for their faith enter into the fellowship of His sufferings and, like the Apostle Paul before them, whisper to their brothers and sisters in Christ: 'Remember my chains' (Colossians 4:18).

In the song *There's a lot of pain (Outrageous grace)* the last line says: 'Through my Jesus I can stand'.

When I hear the words of this song I think about those who are in prison today for their faith in Christ. It is said that God cannot love His children more than He does already. God describes His children as His treasure. God loves thousands of Christians today who suffer in prison because of their faith in Christ.

Their experience is often one of intimacy with Him. In a way we do not fully

understand, they know a profound joy in sharing in the sufferings of Christ and in following in the footsteps of their Lord. As the Apostle Peter writes: 'rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ' (1 Peter 4:13).

At the same time Christians in prison also experience isolation, loneliness, fear, humiliation, inhumane treatment and even torture - and are often incarcerated in some of the worst conditions imaginable.

We thank God for the privilege of standing together with these precious brothers and sisters. Release practically or pastorally continues to support hundreds of 'prisoners of faith' and their families in various countries.

This support makes it possible for wives of prisoners to visit their husbands. It involves caring for the families of prisoners. It means challenging Christians here to be involved in prayer and advocacy on behalf of their persecuted family.

The Biblical Mandate

In Matthew 25:31-46 we find a clear call to minister to those who are imprisoned for the sake of the gospel. The passage is often misunderstood as providing either the basis for Christian social action in the world, or to suggest that salvation is something that we earn. However, a careful study of the passage makes clear that Jesus is referring to His 'brothers of mine' (verse 40).

In the gospels the brothers of Jesus are those who are related to Him in the family of faith. The list of hardships mentioned here corresponds to the hardships that Jesus lists for his followers in Matthew 10.

Jesus' words in Matthew 25 call us to minister to those who endure hardship for the sake of the faith. That hardship includes suffering in prison (verse 39). Jesus' words make clear the specific requirement for Christian believers to minister to those who are persecuted and imprisoned for their faith.

release
PRISONERS

'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'
(Matthew 16:24)

What Jesus requires of us is an active commitment to prisoners of faith. The opposite of this active commitment is not active hostility; it is indifference: 'Whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me' (Matthew 25:45). Indifference brings God's judgment.

PRAY FOR PRISONERS OF FAITH

The most important way to support Christians who are in prison because of their faith is through prayer. Please pray that:

- God will enable them to stand firm for Christ
- They may be able to share Christ with their fellow prisoners
- They may be empowered to overcome evil with good in every situation
- The Holy Spirit will grant wisdom so that they may be able to answer questions from authorities with love and forgiveness
- The authorities will allow families to visit their loved ones in prison
- The Holy Spirit will open the hearts of prison interrogators and guards to know Christ through the witness of imprisoned Christians
- God will protect and sustain the families of those imprisoned for their faith
- They are released early and continue in ministry



My husband didn't come home

Deborah's husband Job was sentenced to seven years in jail in Vietnam in 2004 for standing up for religious freedom.

'When my husband didn't come home from a meeting, I went out to look for him. No one had seen him. The next day, others from the meeting told me they had seen my husband being beaten with a plank that had many nails on it. While he was unconscious the police put my husband in the trunk of their car and drove away. A week later a neighbour told me: 'I saw your husband at the hospital'.

'My family and I went there straight away. My husband had been beaten so

badly he couldn't recognise me or the family. I cried as I tried to make him remember me.

'In the hospital, the area for prisoners had no mattress, blanket or mosquito net. The sick lie on the floor with nothing to eat. I went out to buy food for my husband but he could only drink a little because his jaw had been broken. I asked for permission to stay to take care of him - but the police said 'No'.

'They moved my husband to another prison and wouldn't tell me where he was. I found out later that they tortured him using electric tools, and after that allowed their dogs to attack him. They thought he was dead, but the Lord's power kept him alive to become a witness.'

'My husband had been beaten so badly he couldn't recognise me or the family'

ENEMIES OF THE STATE? DVD

You can find out more about Deborah's story in our moving video about Christians in Vietnam and Laos *Enemies of the State?* This 25-minute documentary includes a personal reflection from the film maker Andrew Boyd, who describes how the Lord is present with his people as Emmanuel ('God with us') even in the darkest of circumstances.

If you'd like to pray for prisoners of faith as part of this year's IDOP, why not order *Enemies of the State?* using the form on page 4. It's available for a suggested donation of £10, but if you order our new DVD *Pray for Eritrea*, you can choose to receive *Enemies of the State?* free of charge.



Release's free monthly email Prisoners of Faith email alert gives information on one Christian prisoner, with prayer points and suggestions for letter-writing. Sign up via www.releaseinternational.org/signup or by using the coupon on the back page of this magazine.