

EXTENDED INTERVIEW WITH PETR JASEK, CHRISTIAN WORKER IMPRISONED IN SUDAN FOR SPYING

Cue:

Czech-born Petr Jasek, a champion of the persecuted church, was accused of spying in Sudan and faced a death sentence. He was caught photographing churches that had been demolished by the state and was jailed for 445 days, before diplomatic intervention secured his release.

For many months, he shared a prison cell with ISIS fighters. One had been a bodyguard for Osama Bin Laden and had taken part in the killing of Egyptian Christians in Libya. When they discovered Petr was a Christian, they turned on him.

Through it all, God deepened his faith, and his resolve to share that faith.

Petr Jasek is on a speaking tour with the UK charity, Release International, and he's been telling his remarkable story to Andrew Boyd in a garden in Greater London...

In: 'My name is...'

Out: 'Thank you, too.'

Dur: 29mins 32secs

Back announcement: Petr Jasek, speaking there to Andrew Boyd of Release International. You can find out more details of his speaking tour on the Release International website.

Note: Petr's name is pronounced *Petter Yashek*.

Transcription

Introduction

My name is Andrew Boyd and you join me in conversation with Petr Jasek. Petr is a Czech-born man who used to be a health administrator, became a missionary, went to Sudan to report on persecution out there and found himself with a death sentence.

He found himself in jail in Sudan for 445 days. Thank God, he's been released, and he joins us now. Petr, welcome.

While you were in Sudan you were checking on persecution. Give us a bit of background on that...

Petr: I came to review and document on persecution cases that I had been informed about in October 2015 at a conference in northern Sudan. In my very busy schedule, I found four days in December when I could come and I could review these persecution cases, document them, report them and, if possible, provide some practical help to those victims of persecution.

Andrew: But the authorities knew you were coming, and you were under surveillance from the word go, weren't you?

Petr: Yes, they must have known about my arrival and they were closely watching all of my steps, every meeting that I had. I was aware that our conversations may be recorded, so we were meeting in very noisy places.

Andrew: But they even used night-vision cameras to record you, and covert surveillance.

Petr: Yes, I had to meet some of the persecuted Christians and visit some of the sites of demolished churches when it was completely dark. Then I was really scared when I saw the night-vision photos, realising how serious the issue was.

Andrew: They absolutely threw the book at you. They accused you of spying, arming rebels, even smuggling tiger skins – is that right?

Petr: Yes, the first information from the Czech embassy in Cairo, which is the nearest one in Egypt, was that there had been deliberate misinformation that I had been arrested because I was smuggling tiger skins. Only later on, when the consular officer visited, he found out what was the true reason, that I was trying to help persecuted Christians, and that was the reason why they also accuse me of spying, because I documented his injuries.

Andrew: Initially, you were under sentence of death.

Petr: Yes, for espionage and for waging war against the country of Sudan, I was facing the death penalty. I can tell you that this moment is really strange, it does something to you, even though you trust the Lord, when you hear the death penalty. You start to realise it's getting serious. After six months of trial, eventually I was sentenced to life imprisonment. The judge publicly presented in the newspaper that I was sentenced for 24 years, and my fellow brothers for 12 years.

Andrew: So how did you feel when you found yourself thrown in the prison cell?

Petr: I was not so much asking the Lord why this had happened, because in my last 25 years of my life, I have been encouraging many Christians in the free world that everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus must expect persecution. Paul says we will be persecuted. In my case, it was more like, 'Okay, I've been preparing others, I should be ready to be persecuted personally as well.'

Andrew: But God had done something to prepare you quite remarkably in advance. You had a dream.

Petr: Two and a half years before this experience in Sudan I had a dream. I happened to be in a prison cell and I felt like a big shame of being there, because I realised that when I was in this prison cell that my daughter had graduated as a medical doctor.

I remember some of the details, like seeing the doors, the yellowish-white colour of the doors, and the windows, 12x25 cm, with the blinds from outside, and the door that was maybe 5 cm thick. And I remember even the sound of how the door clicked when it got locked behind me.

I also remembered feeling this big shame. I woke up from this dream and I realised that it was only a dream, but at that time our daughter was in the third year of her medical university.

So I realised, in that moment after being 24-hours interrogated, at 1:30am, and actually being locked up in the cell, that this was exactly the same door I saw in my dream, the same colour, same shape of the window with the blinds from outside. I even remembered the sound of the click when the door was locked behind me.

That was the moment when I stopped blaming myself, 'What have I done wrong?' Because I knew that the Lord had been preparing me through this dream.

A few days later, I even remembered the other details, because my daughter was doing the first of her five final acceptance [exams] of the medical university on the day when I was arrested. I knew that she had one semester to go. For me it was clear that it would take a long time, my time in prison.

Andrew: So the Lord prepared you for this in advance. What were conditions like in the jail?

Petr: I went through five different prisons in my time in Sudan. Generally speaking, I can say the conditions were going from bad to worse. There was a lot of humidity, mould on the walls, bad smell from the toilet corner, creepy crawlies and flying insects all around. It was extremely cold. I was arrested in December, so, I was laying on the floor in just a T-shirt with short sleeves. I didn't have any blanket.

They told me, 'You're from Czechoslovakia, you should be used to the cold.' And I was really shivering. I could not even sleep. I probably had three hours of half sleep, half being awake, and after these three hours, the first call for prayers started.

Andrew: So the conditions were poor, but you had an even greater problem, because some of your cellmates were members of ISIS.

Petr: I found this in the morning. They asked me, 'Tell us some news from the outside world.' First of all, I had just heard what happened on November 13, 2015 in Paris. I told them, 'Did you know what happened in Paris that day?'

They said, 'Tell us.' I told them of the coordinated attacks of ISIS on five different places in Paris, 129 people got killed.

They started to celebrate, rejoice, hugging each other and jumping and shouting, 'Allah u Akhbar!' for several minutes. I decided not to tell them any more news. I realised what kind of company I was in.

Andrew: And when they realised what kind of company they were in, because you're a Christian and these were Islamic radicals who have killed Christians, what did they do?

Petr: At first, they started to limit my freedom of movement. It started with a position I was supposed to be in during the Muslim prayers five times a day. I had to face the toilet sink, so that I would not interfere with their prayers.

Later on, they made literally a slave of me. I was supposed to wash their underwear, wash the dishes of their meals, clean the toilet with my bare hands. And they started to slander me. They said, 'You clean the toilet. You're a filthy pig,' or 'You are a filthy rat.' And they stopped calling me by name. I was only a filthy pig for them.

Then they started to slap my face and beat my face with their fists, and it got worse and worse every week. Eventually, they were beating me with a wooden stick when they were interrogating me. But I contend that they were probably better interrogators than the secret police, because they were using also violence.

But, surprisingly, when I was beaten with a wooden stick, the Lord showed me the picture of himself, that after he was arrested by the Jewish authorities, he was beaten with wooden sticks, spat upon and ridiculed. But he did that because of our sins. Then he was crucified. So, I experienced tremendous peace.

At one sense, I was not even feeling much pain when they were kicking my back and legs with their shoes on. In one sense, I was kind of protected by the Lord or maybe by angels, I didn't really feel that much pain that I would normally feel in the way that they beat me.

Andrew: And one of these guys was a bodyguard for Osama bin Laden?

Petr: Yes, they were not only ISIS guys from Sudan, they were from Libya, Somalia, Egypt. One of them was the personal bodyguard of Osama bin Laden, when he was a 12-year-old. He was considered like to be a hero, because he showed them on his legs the scars from bullet wounds where he was shot by American soldiers, who pursued Osama.

By the way, all the ISIS guys that were with me were university graduates. They were doctors, pharmacists, engineers, Muslim clerics. All of them were young people. They were at the age of my children, 22 maybe to 28 years old.

You know, this Libyan guy, who was a personal guard of Osama bin Laden, later on in January 2015, he was one of those killers who slaughtered the 20 Egyptian Christians and one citizen of Chad on the Libyan shore. That was the reason why the others called him, Man of the Sword.

Andrew: My name is Andrew Boyd, I'm in conversation with Petr Jasek, who spent 445 days in a Sudanese jail, charged with spying when he had been reporting on the persecuted church. Petr, you are describing being in a cell with members of ISIS, Osama bin Laden's bodyguard, people who have killed others, who rejoice when you tell them of ISIS attacks. How was God with you in all of that?

Petr: The Lord gave me a really supernatural peace. My nature would be always to defend myself, but I got such a peace that I was actually doing things that I was admiring myself. I couldn't believe what I was doing. I was actually turning the other cheek when they slapped me on the one.

I think that power came from the Lord and through the prayers of many Christians who were praying for me. So, I asked the Lord to give me the right words and wisdom to share the gospel with them. And the Lord gave me. Sometimes they just stayed completely silent when I answered, and they had nothing to add to it.

I received the power also to pray for them when I was beaten by them. Right at the time when their aggressiveness increased so much they even decided to do the waterboarding on me, I was on my knees being beaten by them, beaten with wooden sticks, being kicked in the legs, but still experiencing this deep peace.

I realised that my home church, my little house church, which my wife continued to go to twice a week, they were discussing some Scriptures, but the brother who led that night, he felt led by the Holy Spirit. And he told the rest of the people, 'I feel that the Holy Spirit wants us to get on our knees and pray for Petr and for the situation he finds himself in right now in his cell.'

And they proclaimed the Lord's victory in the cell. It was only 14 and a half months later that I realised that the Lord guided them to pray like that, in exactly the same situation when I was on my knees been beaten by the Islamists. That explained why I experienced such a deep peace during the torture.

Andrew: That's an extraordinary account of how prayer works. What would you say to people who are supporters of Release International? We always encourage them to pray for the persecuted church. What would you say?

Petr: I would like to encourage people to pray, and when they make this commitment, to really be sincere and to do it in perseverance. I know that this is what Paul is actually asking Christians to pray for him, when he was the ambassador for Christ in chains in prison and he was writing to Ephesian Christians, that they should pray that the Lord will give them the right word whenever he opens his mouth to proclaim the gospel to his fellow prisoners.

So that's my advice. That's my challenge, to Christians who will hear about many persecuted brothers and sisters through Release International, to pray fervently for them and to ask the Lord that he would really empower especially the Christian prisoners to share the gospel in prison.

Andrew: And that's what happened to you. You were transferred to a number of different jails but did share your faith with some. Did you lead some to Christ?

Petr: Yes, that was an eye-opening moment. After four months and one day in prison, I could share Christ with 12 Eritrean refugees who were there. I spoke through two interpreters to them and shared my testimony with them and led them to receive Christ. And all of the 12 of them joyfully did that.

The next morning, they were all transferred to a different prison and I didn't see them anymore. So, I stood really and has said, 'Now Lord, I know why I have to be here for four months and one day. Then the rest of the time completely changed. My perspective changed. I stopped asking the Lord to release me from prison. I asked the Lord to give me the right words and I started to share the gospel much more boldly to the fellow Muslim prisoners as well, until I was then put into solitary confinement.

It was an amazing epiphany what happened to me in this prison. I had felt ashamed that I been so much concerned about my time being in prison, when I saw what is it like to be in for four months and one year, if you consider this time, as Paul said, a short time and a light persecution compared to the eternity of someone who can spend in the Lord's presence in heaven after hearing the gospel and receiving it.

Andrew: The change for you came when you saw prison as your mission field, the place to which you had been sent.

Petr: Yes, I clearly understood that the Lord had a purpose for me to be there. The Lord's plans for me being in prison were much bigger. After five months being in prison, when I was transferred to the solitary confinement cell again, I got my Bible.

It was a tremendous time, when I was so thankful to the Lord that I could spend the whole day, I had nothing else to do, just to read the Bible. I read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, standing in the window of the cell, within three weeks. I was so hungry for the word.

The Lord started to open the Scriptures to me in a tremendous way and in a new way, that I had never really understood the scripture like that. I was always wondering why do I have this wonderful opportunity? The answer came three months later when my court case eventually started.

We had to be transferred to a completely different person. That was a huge prison with a capacity of 10,000 prisoners. Al-Huda prison. Suddenly I was in a cell with hundreds of other prisoners, a dark cell, a very violent environment. People got injured every day by fighting each other. But the joy continued, because brothers came, and they announced that there was a chapel, one cell that had been turned into a chapel. You have to understand that in this prison, for every 400 prisoners, the prison authorities have set up a mosque. So there were many mosques, but there was only one cell, turned into a chapel.

Brothers came and invited us and immediately asked me to preach. Then I found the answer to why I had this wonderful time with the Scriptures. I had six months ministry, preaching the gospel in the prison chapel.

Of course, we were closely monitored by people who presented themselves like brothers, but they were spying on us and they were reporting us. But we did not care. But already facing the death penalty. We were already in prison. Nothing worse actually could happen to us.

Andrew: Petr, you worked for Voice of the Martyrs, which is a sister organisation to Release International. Over your time, has there been a shift in your thinking maybe from believing that the persecuted church need us, to actually, we really need what they have?

Petr: I have found that persecuted Christians were always encouraged when we showed up, even though we were not bringing any practical help to them. But the fact that someone came from overseas and was interested in their situation was a great encouragement for them.

At the same time, we were hearing their testimonies of courageous faith, despite horrible, horrible persecution, when they were losing not only their possessions and their beloved ones, but there were also losing parts of their bodies if they did not want to adopt Islam, and they want to remain Christians.

Those testimonies encouraged me personally and encouraged most likely every listener when I was sharing those testimonies with other Christians who are living in freedom, who sometimes do not have any idea that our brothers and sisters are suffering like they do.

And so, this is a mutual encouragement. This just confirms we are part of the same body. I think that we as Christians should learn a lot from these persecuted Christians, what it really means to be a Christian despite the horrible persecution.

Andrew: So what is the number one lesson you've taken from the persecuted church, now you're part of the persecuted church yourself?

Petr: Yes, I have really come to an agreement with them that if a Christian suffers for his faith, it is really a privilege from the Lord. These people understand that.

I can tell you that when you go through the physical or emotional persecution, it doesn't seem like a privilege from the Lord. And I have to admit that when I went through it, I was openly telling the Lord that I didn't want this privilege, because I felt very bad.

Later on, when the persecution was over, I had to say that it is a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ.

In today's world, how often do we hear that if you become a Christian you should be wealthy, healthy and successful, happy in everything that you do? But that's not the gospel that I read when I was in prison, that I have personally experienced. I would rather say the gospel that we read in the Bible is a persecution gospel.

The Lord himself was preparing his disciples, telling them they will be brought before religious authorities, they will be put in prison. and he warned in advance, this will be your opportunity to bear witness. But he also told them, some of you will be killed. You know, in John 15:20, he says he prepares his disciples for persecution by saying, 'The disciple is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will persecute you.' The apostle Paul was telling Christians that if they want to live godly lives in Christ Jesus, they will be persecuted – 2 Timothy 3:12.

One thing that is really interesting in the book of Acts, when Paul was encouraging and strengthening the young believers, he was encouraging and strengthening them by saying that we must enter the kingdom of God through many tribulations, Acts 14:22.

Andrew: And that really impacts how we should pray. Let me ask you a strange question. How would you, with hindsight, have wanted us to have prayed for you while you were in prison?

Petr: I asked my family and my friends to really pray that the Lord would give me the right words when I was sharing the gospel with my fellow prisoners. That was the major concern that I had. I realised that the Lord wants me to be there. I'm sure that the Lord's intention was not for me to be tortured there just for nothing, but he put me there just to share the gospel with the fellow prisoners, with the absolutely desperate, hopeless, forgotten people in that prison.

So, I would say, pray for those who are persecuted, so that the Lord will strengthen them, certainly, and the Lord will. And that the Lord will give them the opportunity to share the gospel in their place.

You should trust the Lord. It is never inner strength. What many people are thinking is that I must be a strong Christian, that I have been able to go through all of this victoriously. I can tell you, I was feeling really weak, in many situations, physically and emotionally.

Health-wise, I was suffering with heavy anaemia. I lost, simply speaking, lost half of my blood. I lost 25kg of my body weight. I felt at the real bottom of my physical and emotional strength. But, I think that's the right moment when we can start experiencing the strength of the Lord. Like Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:10, when I am weak, then I am strong. It's not about our strength. It's only about our willingness to follow Christ, no matter what will happen in our lives.

I think the main point for us as Christians is to be rooted in the Scripture. That's one of the most important revelations that I have found for myself. And I would recommend it to others too. There is no personal growth of our spiritual life, there is no growth of the church, the church's life, without getting deeper and deeper into the Scriptures.

Andrew: So our prayers should essentially be optimistic, they should be encouraging, they should be recognising that although persecution is a dreadful thing, we are at times delivered to our enemies in order to give the gospel to our enemies. So those who are persecuted for their faith, we pray for them to be strengthened in their faith and given wisdom in their situation.

Petr: Yes, that's exactly what our prayers should be. We should always be witnesses. The Greek language has the same word for the witness as for the martyr. In one sense, we should be ready to be living martyrs, living witnesses of Christ's love, especially when he sends us to those places that we would normally, definitely, prefer not to go to.

Andrew: So, in Sudan at the moment, the situation is still very difficult. Is it getting better or is it getting worse for Christians in Sudan?

Petr: The situation is definitely getting worse. I heard about two more churches being demolished. I heard about many other pastors being arrested, interrogated, prosecuted and facing court cases. I have heard also about lawyers, the two lawyers who defended our group. [One] got arrested, he got intimidated, he was, I think he spent two weeks in prison. The other lawyer, he spent about two months in prison, so that the situation is definitely getting worse than it was when I was there.

Andrew: And more churches are set to be bulldozed?

Petr: Yes. They have a list of 25 churches and since that time, two of those churches that were on the list have got already demolished.

Andrew: Petr, you have been prayed for yourself, you've been supported while in prison. What would your message be to Release International supporters who supported you?

Petr: I have been extremely deeply encouraged by the fact that there was so many people praying for me. I knew, and this was the same understanding of the other three brothers, we knew that the Lord was in control, that the Lord was the one who had the keys for ourselves.

We were still receiving information about so many Christians praying for us, writing letters to me personally, writing letters to my family, to our families, writing protest cards and letters to different embassies of Sudan in the whole world. Or just taking courage and protesting in front of the embassies around the world. That was so encouraging for us.

We had tears in our eyes, when we heard about the massive support of prayers, or the initiatives of Christians who were willing to stand up and to raise their voices for our support. This feeling of being the part of the same body and so well supported, this was so precious to us.

That's why I'm going to encourage people to really come out from their anonymous grey area of being Christians, living in a free country, enjoying our freedom; to be active, actively supporting, actively speaking out in public places and just to get to know the world about the situation that the Christians are facing in many countries of the world. I think that's what the Lord wants us to do. He wants us to really live and to be Christians and to live as Christians in public, and to act like Christians, even when our dear brothers and sisters facing this persecution.

While we pray for the persecuted Christians themselves, for those who are imprisoned, we should also not forget those who are family members.

One afternoon, I was sitting with the other two pastors and we all agreed that it was not ourselves, rather it was our wives and children who suffered much more than we did. We knew the horrible conditions we were in, but they had no idea. For instance, the wives and families of [two] pastors for five months had no idea of whether their husbands and fathers were still alive or dead. And that's really important to pray that the Lord will grant them the supernatural peace that is surpassing all human understanding, that this peace would guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Andrew: Is there anything you'd like to add?

Petr: I would say that we should not be afraid of persecution. The Lord has definitely appointed to each one of us a different role to play, but we should be deeply rooted in the Scripture. If we are rooted in his word, and we have determined to remain faithful, no matter what happens in our lives, it's not about our strength. It's about our determination, about our decision to follow Christ. He will not allow us to be tested above our strength. And he promised, in 1 Corinthians 10:13, he promises us that he will deliver us and he will give

strength to go through it, because he knows us better than we know ourselves.

Andrew: Petr Jasek, from a remarkably noisy but very beautiful garden in Greater London, thank you so much for talking to us.

Petr: Thank you, too.

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