



Embrace

Newsletter of Release Women
Summer 2020

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‘God listens and He is here for us’

Christians living in Egypt face many difficulties as a minority. This can lead to oppression and sometimes overt persecution for their faith. Ruth’s story is not unusual, but it shows how it is possible, with God’s help, to stand firm in faith through these trials.

Ruth (not her real name) is a 48-year-old Christian mother from a small village in Upper Egypt. Following a difficult domestic situation, Ruth felt she had no choice but to run away with her children – two sons and a daughter. She settled into a slum area of Cairo, living in a one-bedroomed basement, with barely any furniture.

Despite being intelligent and hardworking, Ruth had no income to support herself or her children. With the help of a Release partner in Egypt, Ruth was able to rent a nearby shop and start a small business selling detergents. With further help from our partner, she purchased a fridge and increased the number of goods she could sell. Within a few months, the shop was generating enough income for Ruth to send her children to school.



Ruth inside her new home

Ruth was so thankful to God for His care of her and her family.

However, one day, Ruth’s son returned home from school, having been beaten up by another child. The mother of her son’s attacker soon arrived at her door; she threatened Ruth and tried to start a fight. Even though it was Ruth’s

son who had been assaulted, Ruth apologised repeatedly to the woman, as she tried to resolve the situation. But the woman fought her, insisting that, ‘this neighbourhood does not host Christians’.

Despite Ruth’s efforts to contain the situation, it escalated. Other neighbours threatened her and beat her and the children. She considered going to the police station to seek help, but she rejected the idea when she realised that everyone would testify against her. When her shop was also attacked and looted, Ruth knew that once more, she had no choice but to leave. She was terrified; she felt totally alone and completely helpless, unable to provide a place of safety for her children.

However, Ruth has not given up. Because of the generosity of supporters like you, she continues to be supported by Release partners. She has relocated once more and is starting a new life with her children. Ruth is a strong woman of faith who waits on the Lord and praises Him continually. She says that she is ‘proud to have faced this for Christ’. Despite the persecution she and the family have suffered, Ruth testifies to God’s goodness, ‘God listens, and He is here for us.’

RELEASE INTERNATIONAL
voice
of Persecuted Christians

Release Women: Connecting Christian women in the UK and Ireland with their suffering sisters around the world.

Anti-Christian film teaches North Korean how to pray

Can you remember learning how to pray for the first time? Perhaps you learnt from your parents, or at Sunday school; maybe on an Alpha course, or from a Christian friend. Release International partner Voice of the Martyrs Korea reports how one North Korean Christian learnt to pray.

Mrs An (not her real name) grew up in North Korea, under a repressive regime where Christian belief is forbidden and even the discovery of owning a Bible can lead to detention in a labour camp. Although not a Christian at the time, like many others before her, Mrs An took the difficult and dangerous decision to defect, in search of a better life in another country. She was the first in the family to defect, although later, without knowing what had happened to their mother, her son and daughter also fled the country.

Mrs An escaped to China but she was arrested as a defector and imprisoned there. However, while she was in prison, she encountered Christians who helped her and it was there that she prayed for the very first time. Surprisingly, it wasn't her new Christian friends who taught her to pray. No, it was North Koreans! When Mrs An's friends told her to pray, she already knew what to do. She remembered a film she had seen while she was still in North Korea. The film had tried to portray Christians in a bad light, but Mrs An remembered how Christians prayed in the film.

On the walls of her prison cell, a previous occupant had scratched the name of Jesus Christ. So for the first time, in a prison cell in China, Mrs An prayed. She prayed that God would send her to South Korea. God did just that and through the help of other Christians, Mrs An was eventually able to settle in that country.

Now, Mrs An's son and daughter are also living in South Korea. Her children are working hard and settling into South Korean life and society. Mrs An is also working hard, but as well as her work,

she is focused on becoming a better disciple of Jesus. She attends church and has just graduated from a part-time discipleship programme run by Release partner, Voice of the Martyrs Korea (VOM Korea). The programme helps North Korean defectors address both learning and cultural gaps in their knowledge, as they settle in South Korea, a society so different from the one they have grown up in. The programme gives them an academic and spiritual foundation as it explores the rudiments of the Christian faith, as well as helping to develop their character and relationships, alongside all-important life skills.

Mrs An is proud to have graduated and she hopes to be able to continue her studies further with VOM Korea. In the meantime, she is learning to witness to her family, to other people at work and in her community. Her family have noticed the positive change in her character and attitude as she learns more of Jesus. Her son even said to her, 'You are not the mother I used to know!'



Mrs An

God used an unlikely North Korean film, some scratchings from an unknown prisoner on a cell wall, and the encouragement of some faithful believers to help to bring Mrs An to faith in Him. Her prayer was simple: that God would send her to South Korea, and He did.

However you learnt to pray, it is a privilege for us to be able to do so. In a recent interview, Pastor Eric Foley of VOM Korea was asked how we can pray for North Korean Christians. Having asked North Koreans that question himself many times, he said that they nearly always ask that we pray that God will find them faithful wherever He has placed them, and they pray the same for us. Please pray that for Mrs An and fellow North Korean defectors in South Korea and for believers still in North Korea. But pray that God will find us faithful too, wherever He has placed us.



You can hear more of Pastor Eric Foley's interview, in the All Out for God video on Release International's Facebook page.

Baker shares the Bread of Life

Earlier this year, before the Coronavirus lockdown across the world, one of the Release Women team had the privilege of travelling to Ethiopia to meet with Eritrean Christians. Here she tells Mebrat's story.

Mebrat, whose name means 'light', is a young widow in her late thirties, with four sons aged four to 19. Originally from Ethiopia, she moved to Eritrea when it was possible to get good employment as a domestic worker. There, in the late 1990s, she met and married an Eritrean, Bereket, whose name means 'blessing'. Together they lived in the capital, Asmara.

Mebrat was from an Orthodox background, and although her husband was a Christian, in her own words his faith was 'weak'. She owned a Bible and started to read it; at the same time people told her about Jesus. Mebrat gave her heart to the Lord and soon brought her husband back to faith too.

In 2002 the situation for Christians in Eritrea changed dramatically when President Isaias Afewerki closed many churches and severely restricted religious freedom, especially for evangelical Christians. Mebrat and Bereket continued to worship together, in church and at home, sometimes meeting together with others.

Bereket was arrested and imprisoned a number of times for his faith. When he was first arrested, he was warned to stop worshipping God. This frightened him, but it didn't stop him from worshipping! Once he was arrested while working at a car wash, and on another occasion, he was arrested along with others who were meeting in his home as part of a church group. During what was to be his final time in prison, Bereket became sick and was eventually released from prison.

However, despite his release and later admittance to hospital, Bereket did not recover and three years ago he died in hospital from pneumonia, a few months after his release from prison. Mebrat was left a widow, with four children to bring up alone. The youngest was just over eighteen months old when

his father died and so has no memory of him; he calls his oldest brother 'Dad'.

Mebrat loved the land of Eritrea, but she lived in fear for her children. She knew that it would not be long before her eldest sons were called up for National Service, and so she decided to return to Ethiopia. She did not have permission to leave Eritrea but when the border between Eritrea and Ethiopia was opened briefly at the end of 2018, Mebrat made her way back to Ethiopia, with her boys.

While in Eritrea, Mebrat had received some support from a ministry related to a Release International partner. But once back in Ethiopia, she started work again as a domestic worker, holding down two jobs to support her family. She has since started work as a baker, making traditional Eritrean *injera*, getting up at 3am each day to bake the sour fermented flatbread to supply the local hotels.



Injera - traditional Eritrean flatbread

Although this bread baking is part of Ethiopian and Eritrean culture, Mebrat prays that God will bless her hands as she bakes. She believes that her skill and success are part of God's provision for her and the family, just as Elijah was fed meat by the ravens, which ordinarily the birds would have themselves eaten (1 Kings 17:6). Once more, God is keeping His covenant and is looking after her family.

Mebrat and her boys miss Bereket. At first, they were depressed, but she



Praying with Mebrat

believes that God gave them grace to cope. 'We held hands and worshipped together,' she said. 'A dark cloud was over us. But when we worshipped together, the cloud went, and joy came to our hearts.' Mebrat explained that the boys have now accepted her as their mother and God as their father.

Despite the relative freedom of Ethiopia, Mebrat is living in an Orthodox area and although she is no longer experiencing direct persecution, as in Eritrea, she does not yet feel fully accepted into the community. The children miss their friends, but they are all studying and it is a great joy for Mebrat to be with her family.

Mebrat's faith remains strong and she and the boys continue to worship together. She has compassion for the people and everything she does, she does for the Lord. 'The Lord is good; I can see His goodness,' she explains. Although it is difficult to evangelise in Mebrat's Orthodox hometown, please pray that as she bakes and sells bread for people to eat, she will be able to share Jesus, the bread of life, with those around her.

You can read of two other Eritrean sisters in Christ - Aki, a former soldier in the Eritrean army now living in Ethiopia as a refugee, and Tsedal, a young widow who wants to help others who have suffered persecution for their faith in Christ - in March's Release Women email on our website (Aki) and in July's *Voice* magazine (Tsedal).

Editorial

Dear sisters in Christ,

Who would have thought that we would ever be living in such a time as this? A pandemic changes the way we think and the way we act. We must, however, take consolation in the fact that we are only partially 'locked down' and not 'locked up' as some of our sisters and brothers are.

Summer is here and normally we would be looking forward to our holidays, but the fact is, now we are living one day at a time; nothing can be taken for granted anymore. We are praying we will have food for our table. Praying our loved ones will be able to survive this pandemic. Praying our children will be safe when they go back to school. Praying we will be able to see this through and come to the end of it stronger and more faithful. Praying the Lord will intervene. Things have certainly changed for us over these past few weeks, but I firmly believe it has given us an insight into how our sisters have to pray faithfully for their needs to be met.

As we read the story of Ruth in this edition of *Embrace*, it is apparent that she is a woman of great faith who will stop at nothing to provide for her family. Mrs An's story is amazing – as a defector she leaves North Korea to make a new life for herself. That new life came about under the most unusual circumstances and involved a lot of prayer. Her story just proves that God is at work behind the scenes of all our lives even if we are unaware of Him. Mebrat is yet another remarkable woman who has suffered much in her lifetime. In order to take her four children to a safer country she must have put herself in great danger, yet as she put her trust in the Lord, He led her to a safer place. It is only the Lord who could enable these women under such terrible circumstances.

Due to our own circumstances, we are now more able than ever before to empathise with our persecuted sisters. Seeking the Lord in prayer is something we can all do during these unprecedented times.

Every blessing,

Wendy

Prayer Points



'Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance of what we do not see.'

Hebrews 11 v1 (NIV)

Please pray for Ruth:

- That she will remain strong in her faith and continue to grow in the Lord.
- That her children will be safe in their new home and make friends.
- That the Lord will continue to give her the strength she needs to support her family.
- That her neighbours will grow to love and support her, as well as respect her faith.

Please pray for Mrs An:

- For her to continue to grow in knowledge of the Lord and study further.
- That her children will be kept safe and well.
- That she will easily settle into the new culture.
- Praise the Lord for the Christians she was in prison with; may the Lord bless them.

Please pray for Mebrat:

- That she will continue to be able to bake and that her business will grow.
- Praise the Lord that she has the ability to provide for her family.
- That she and her family will soon be fully accepted into this new community.
- For her to be able to practise her faith and teach her children as she grows in her relationship with the Lord.

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