

Iranian Christians See Hope Stripped Away With Extreme Torture, Harassment on the Rise

There was hope among Iranian Christians that the mass protests earlier this year could effect change for them, but they continue to be harassed and imprisoned on spurious charges.

An Iranian convert to Christianity, Naser Navard Gol-Tapeh, who recently lost his appeal against a 10-year sentence for “missionary activities”, was reportedly moved to the infamous Evin Prison in Tehran two weeks ago—the same prison where two other Christians, Majidreza Souzanchi Kushani and Fatimeh Mohammadi (both members of the self-styled “Church of Iran”), have also been held since their arrest on Nov. 17 last year.

According to the advocacy group Middle East Concern, Kushani was charged with “disrupting national security” by being a member of an evangelical Christian group, for which he could receive a prison sentence of between two and ten years.

It remains unclear on what grounds Mohammadi is being held, in the women’s ward of the infamous prison referred to by two other Christian women who spent eight months there as the “the world’s most brutal prison”.

Maryam Rostampour and Marziyeh Amirizadeh, speaking in November, said they experienced relentless interrogation and physical threats during their time in the prison in 2009/10.

It has been eight years since their release, but Rostampour said: “When people experience living in Evin Prison they will never be the same again. The stress is too much. We can’t be

the same people. We can't be as happy as before. We don't enjoy activities like normal people because all the time we think of those who are still there."

'They broke my identity'

Another Christian who recently spent time in the prison was Saman.* A convert from Islam to Christianity, Saman was arrested in 2016 and imprisoned in Evin for 44 days because of activities related to his Christian faith.

He says the time following his release was also difficult, as the authorities kept an eye on him to ensure he wouldn't visit other Christians or attend a church meeting. He says he was traumatized but did not receive the support he needed.

A local partner of the Christian charity Open Doors recently organized trauma-care training for Christians like him, where they were offered counselling, art therapy and Bible studies. Saman says the training helped to restore his hope and faith.

Saman says of his time in Evin: "They tried to break me by telling me what a nobody I was; they broke my identity." He says he was afraid and felt hopeless, even doubting his faith: "I thought: 'Is this it? Have I wasted 13 years of believing in Him [God]? Does he even exist?'"

He says the interrogators also brought in some of his friends, blindfolded, and when asked whose fault it was that they were there, they would all say "Saman" and that they would be willing to testify against him in court.

Evin Prison was visited by a delegation of 11 Iranian MPs on 30 January to investigate alleged abuse, as Radio Farda reported. During their visit, the MPs spoke with four detainees while surrounded by intelligence officers, drawing criticism from the deputy head of parliament's Legal and Judicial Commission, Mohammad Kazemi, who said: "It would have been better if they'd stayed away, since we had to talk to the

detainees in private.”

‘We should trust the people’

Earlier this month, on the occasion of the 39th anniversary of the Iranian Revolution, President Hassan Rouhani called for unity, saying: “We should trust the people. We must allow all inclinations to participate in elections ... Our revolution was victorious when we were all together ... All Iranian races, all Iranian religions, Shiites and Sunnis, Muslims, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians—whichever believes in the constitution, that is our criteria. He is a revolutionary, and he must be respected.”

His comments followed weeks of social unrest and protests, revealing not just economic frustration but also disillusionment with the way the 39-year-old regime is perceived by some to “use Islam for their own ideology”, as Article 18’s Mansour Borji told World Watch Monitor in January.

But despite the pressures, Christianity is spreading in Iran. Official figures are hard to come by in a country where turning away from Islam is a crime, but based on observing several factors Christian charity Open Doors says there are approximately 800,000 Christians in Iran—roughly one per cent of its population of over 80 million. This is a conservative estimate, they add, as several reports show that the church is growing and that Christians from a Muslim background—and therefore unrecognized by the state—now outnumber the recognized Christian minorities of Armenian and Assyrian descent.

**Real name withheld for security reasons. {eoa}*

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More Than 100 Pastors Boldly Stand With Israel, See Tangible Blessings Afterward

In January 2017, clergy from over 100 congregations in North Central Ohio sent an apology letter to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the position the Obama Administration took in not blocking an United Nations Resolution. 2334. This anti-Semitic resolution called Israel's sovereignty of the Promised Land "an international crime."

Ten days after the Ohio clergymen sent their apology letter, a massive natural gas pipeline was approved for construction thru north central Ohio after the project was held up by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

The Rover Pipeline Project is more than twice the size of the controversial Keystone Pipeline. With its approval, the 713-mile pipeline brought hundreds of thousands of dollars to the stagnated local economy at a time when energy projects often go contested.

According to Benjamin Mutti, Coordinator of the Richland Community Prayer Network, he believes in the weeks following the biblical stand, tangible effects from the clergy collaboration could be seen upon the land.

"According to Department of Agriculture numbers, the spring turkey harvest in Richland County saw a dramatic 24 percent increase from last year, whitetail deer harvested was the best in four years and the cow herd in Richland County, which is estimated in late winter, is now at its largest number in over 30 years, which is utterly amazing!"

Mutti points out that there is no such thing in Hebrew as the word “coincidence.” The blessings the area experienced from the apology letter aftermath provoked 42 area clergymen to also request the county treasurer to invest taxpayer dollars in Israeli bonds.

“The day the county treasurer announced that the county government would invest in Israeli bonds, was the same meeting that half a million dollars in unexpected revenue was reportedly discovered to alleviate a budget shortfall! This clergy apology letter had a snowball effect and sends shivers down your spine to think that the Blessing of Abraham still impacts our generation ... even today.”

Fiery Fuel to Help You Reignite Your First Love

I was young when I resolved to love the Lord with all my heart, soul, mind and strength. I was brave and my vision was clear of the fog that seems to settle without warning over the years. I made bold, heartfelt proclamations to love Him without reservation until I saw Him face to face. Yet, I was naive as to how hazardous the way forward would be. It is for all of us.

When setbacks and losses fill our path and life plays out like we would never have projected, disillusionment and disappointment not only knock on our door but seek to encamp and move in to our inner spaces. And the open-hearted fire of our early days is threatened with damping down—if not quenching altogether. Oftentimes, when the soul that was once courageous and alive comes to the outward years of strength,

it simultaneously faces an inward implosion. Right when it's time to take a full stride, the heart can't unearth its passion and it sits sidelined by the road.

Jesus' Call to First Love

It can seem unavoidable to us, even justified, that we would lose the lively affections that we once had after all the storms have barreled through. What flame would not go out beneath that set of circumstances? we might reason. Yet Jesus speaks quite a different perspective to us in this place.

When Jesus spoke to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2, He said,

“But I have something against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember therefore from where you have fallen. Repent, and do the works you did at first, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your candlestick from its place, unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).

Rather than telling the church of Ephesus that He understood how much they'd been through and how He didn't fault them for their loss of fervency, He spoke of their *first love* as something invaluable that they had started with and something they were never to have lost along the way. The loss was such that Jesus called them to repent for departing from it and to return to what they did at first.

The passion of our early love for God—that all-in, heart-on-the-line, vulnerable given-ness—is so valuable to Him that He wants it from the beginning of our days to the end, no matter what we face in all the struggles of life that follow. First love, then, was never meant to be first love, but just love. And love is always to carry that quality of open-hearted trust and vibrant affections toward God. Circumstances change, seasons cycle through, life plays out, bodies age, but love is always to remain alive and passionate.

The Promise of Resilient Passion

It can feel overwhelming and impossible to hear these words of Jesus—I know I've felt the weight of them. Our defenses rise as we feel as though we would have hung on to our initial fiery zeal had we not been waylaid by the troubles of life. We had intended to stay just as fervent as we were at first had not disillusionment set in like a heavy weight, blanketing our skies. Again, we feel a bit justified for our loss of passion.

Yet our defenses reflect a disconnect from the heart of Jesus. His call back to *first love* is a statement of His deep love for us and His desire for our highest good. He is not asking for something harsh, but something life-giving and freeing to our souls. To live in less is to have our love for Him stifled and our ability to experience His love hindered.

We were never fashioned to live without a heart alive in passion for Jesus, and He desires to give us every grace to walk in that passion again. In fact, within His call to return to first love is also a promise—the promise that living with a persistent fiery heart is actually possible, no matter what we walk through in life. Jesus' admonition to the believers in Ephesus gives us revelation into what kind of lasting, resilient affections are continuously available to us as we respond to God's grace.

He is the Keeper of the Flame

Jesus is so invested in us. We are His inheritance and He has full intention of keeping our love alive for Him—that He might present us to Himself pure and spotless (Eph. 1:18, 5:27). He did not descend from His glory and endure the affliction of dying for us only to receive in culmination a lukewarm flame of love from His people—cooled by all the difficulties and cares of life. He has zeal that our passion for Him would not only survive, but thrive, until the day we see Him. He never settles in and leans back with us in to our waned passion,

accepting it. To do so would be to leave us in a way of life so beneath what He desired for us—what He gave His life to provide for us.

When we find ourselves sitting sidelined along the way, unsure when it was that we lost the open-hearted passion that we once had for Jesus, He speaks to us with such tenderness and such grace, stirring our love for Him once more. For though seasons and difficult circumstances and setbacks may test our love, they do not have to strip it of its fire. He is the keeper of the flame and wherever He finds a willing heart, He will stir the flames once again. Embers are not endings to Him—but new beginnings.

How can you strengthen your first love for God?

If you're seeking a refreshing and re-invigorating place to encounter Jesus, we invite you to Unwavering, IHOPKC's annual women's conference, March 22–24, in Kansas City. Join women from around the globe and hear special guests, as well as IHOPKC speakers and worship leaders. Learn more about Unwavering [here](#).

Dana Candler lives in Kansas City, Missouri, with her husband, Matt, and their four children. She and Matt serve on the leadership team of the International House of Prayer of Kansas City. Dana is also an instructor at International House of Prayer University, a full-time Bible school. She is the author of *Deep unto Deep: The Journey of the Immeasurable Love of Christ*, *Entirety: Love Gives All*, and *Mourning for the Bridegroom*.

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3 Spirit-Fueled Ways to Pass on Your Heritage of Hope

I'm glad we're Christians, Mama."

Smiling in agreement, I asked my 11-year-old daughter what made her feel that way. Her response still echoes in my heart.

"Because we have hope."

We had just returned from spending Christmas in California, where we'd helped my sister's family prepare for a move to Hawaii. My kids loved the time with their cousins—a rare privilege since they live on opposite sides of the country. And now, these cousins were moving even farther away.

This painful parting prompted my daughter to give thanks for hope.

Hope that goodbye is not forever, not when we all know Jesus. Though we live thousands of miles apart and have no idea when we'll be together again, a shared eternity is coming.

Hope that God's plans are bigger than we can imagine and He's able to make a way in impossible situations.

Hope that our loving Lord holds our future in His hands.

Hope that He's bringing good out of our pain.

Hope.

This is our inheritance as followers of Jesus, secured by the unchanging character of our faithful God, made possible by the redeeming work of Jesus.

"We have this hope as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, which enters the Inner Place behind the veil" (Heb. 6:19).

Moms and dads, ours is the privilege of breathing hope into the hearts of our children, of helping them see God's love in the midst of life's struggles.

Here are some thoughts on living out this calling:

- **Model redemption in everyday life.**

In real life, the best-laid plans go awry. Our kids' behavior isn't always ideal (and neither is ours, if we're honest.) Disappointments are part of life on this planet. Yet these moments of frustration don't have to ruin the whole day. On the contrary, they often present opportunities to showcase redemption in everyday life.

If the day's plans fell through, find some other way to have fun and make memories together.

If a discipline issue arose, after addressing it, take time to reaffirm your child and speak forward into the person you know he or she can become. Express what you love about him or her and how you see God at work in his or her life.

In disappointing situations, verbalize your faith that God is always working for the good of His children.

- **Keep the conversation going.**

As parents, we have a built-in audience. Our kids see the struggles we face and learn by watching our faith lived out in front of them. As appropriate, talk with them about how God is bringing good out of your pain (or dream about what He may do). Point out His blessings in the midst of hard times and savor His kindness together.

- **Be present.**

One of my favorite attributes of God is His nearness. Sometimes He doesn't fix our problems or make the pain go away. But He's always near (even if we don't *feel* Him). We can

do this for our kids as well. When life is hard, be intentional about making time together—to listen and give understanding, to pray, to do something fun with them, to build your friendship...

Hope is central to our faith in Christ. As we walk with Him and hold onto hope, our kids can see God in real life and find His hope for their lives, too. {eoa}

Meredith Mills is a wife and mother to three inquisitive, adventurous, fun-loving kids. She loves finding Jesus in the everyday and is passionate about helping others experience Him, too. She blogs at [. Connect with her on Facebook at Dazzled By The Son and on Instagram and Twitter @DazzledByTheSon.](#)

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When You Feel Like a Rubber Band Ready to Snap

I spend several days a week lifting heavy weights and doing all sorts of crazy new exercises in the gym. Sometimes, I forget to stretch and end up with muscles so tight I can barely walk two days later. That soreness makes me want to skip the next workout. You might say my muscles are “weary in well- doing.”

Lately, I’ve found myself in God’s gym—lifting heavy spiritual weights and doing all manner of uncomfortable new exercises. I don’t have to worry about the stretching part. He’s doing that too. God’s stretching is sometimes as painful on our souls as working over a sore muscle—I’m reminded of Lurch from *The*

Addams Family on that medieval-looking stretching machine in the dungeon—but it leaves you with a spiritual capacity great enough to move into the next season He's ordained for you.

These words from the Lord, which I recorded in my devotional *Mornings With the Holy Spirit: Listening Daily to the Still Small Voice of God*, helped me understand God's heart in the stretching:

“Will you fully yield to Me? Will you submit to My will even when it looks contrary to Your will? Will you allow Me to stretch you in this season? I want to enlarge your capacity to hold spiritual things, but that means letting go of carnal things to make more room for Me. It means cultivating a new harvest of My fruit in your heart. I want to let My gifts flow through you, but that means you must release the things that hinder My love. Will you allow Me to stretch you? Will you decrease so Jesus can increase in your heart?”

One thing I've learned in times of pressure is that there's pressure from the inside—what I call Holy Ghost pressure—and pressure from the outside the comes from people, places, things (and some of those “things” include demons). It's easy enough to resist God in the name of resisting the devil just because you don't like what's happening and assume the assignment came from the pits of hell. I've seen others lay down and let the devil walk all over them in the name of yielding to the Holy Spirit. Don't do that! Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what is of Him and what is against His will for your life. Yield to God, resist the devil.

Here's another thing I've learned about pressure. Whether it comes from the hand of God or the enemy, if you'll just keep pressing through the pressure you'll not only gain strength, the pressure will eventually let up. Don't give up. God knows how much you can handle and He won't let the enemy press you past what you can bear, either. Through the pressing, you are building spiritual strength and character that will serve you

well on the next phase of your journey.

God has purpose for everything He does. Take confidence knowing that He's stretching you so that you can hold more of His power, gain more of His wisdom, more of His character—more of Him. He wants to increase your influence and enlarge your territory. This is my prayer. Maybe it will help you too:

I say yes to You, Holy Spirit. I say yes to Your will and Your ways even when I don't understand Your work in my life. I ask You to enlarge my spiritual capacity, to enlarge my heart to love You more, and to help me surrender all that is getting in the way. {eoa}

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Your Ps. 27 Key to Facing the Spirit of Fear

"I took my small dog for a walk one night," my friend Ian said. "The area was dark except for a light near the big fountain in the courtyard of the apartment complex."

"I heard my neighbor yell from her second-floor balcony. But the sound of the water in the nearby fountain drowned her words. So I returned the greeting. Since it was Christmas time, I assumed she had yelled out, 'Merry Christmas.'"

"Then her shout became louder, 'Look behind you, Ian!'"

'Run, Ian, Run'

I turned. And my eyes caught the glimpse of a big, furious javelina charging at my small dog and me. Heart thumping, with

one swoop I scooped my puppy. And I took off like a bullet. That's when I had my Forest Gump moment. My neighbor shouted, 'Run, Ian, run!'"

Ian had his neighbor, but we have the Lord shouting to our souls, "Run, run as fast as you can."

When would He say that? Each time we're being attacked by the beast of fear.

Fear Charges at You

You're been there, haven't you? During dark nights, out of nowhere, with no warning, fear charges at you. Fearful that money will run out. Fearful our kids won't grow up the way we want them to. Fearful of losing our health. Fearful to be alone.

Afraid to stay with the wrong person ... afraid to leave them. Afraid we'll never heal from the heartache.

Goodness gracious, God is shouting to you and me, "Run, run from that spirit of fear."

And with the same authority as David did, with the same assurance and assertion, we declare: "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom will I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom will I be afraid?" (Ps. 27:1-2).

Let's Pray

Father, how foolish to be afraid, knowing you're the stronghold of my life, of my decisions, of circumstances, relationships and my future. With your power working in me, I have the strength, the courage and the authority to defeat any attack of fear. In Jesus' name, amen.

- What has you afraid today?
- Is your fear one that God cannot overcome?
- How will you display that new courage found in Christ?

{eoa}

Janet Perez Eckles *is an international speaker and the author of four books. She has helped thousands conquer fear and bring back joy.*

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