

Frontline Faith

In spite of their experience as prisoners in Afghanistan, Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer are eager to return.

Imprisonment is not a familiar concept to most Christian women in the spotlight. For Afghan relief workers Dayna Curry and Heather Mercer, however, it was their 105-day imprisonment that put them in the spotlight.

While serving in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, Curry and Mercer helped people in need, from poor street kids to elderly widows lacking hope. On August 3, 2001, they were arrested separately by the Taliban after showing a film about Jesus on their laptop computer and reading a children's storybook about Jesus in an Afghan home. Curry and Mercer landed in a Taliban prison along with four German and two Australian relief workers.

Despite the unsanitary conditions they lived in and the constant stress of not knowing what the outcome of their imprisonment would be, the American relief workers both indicate they wouldn't trade their prison experience for anything.

"I know God let me be thrown in prison—it was His gift He was giving me," says 25-year-old Mercer. "I feel like I am so much more free to be who God has made me to be and to run with the dreams I have in my heart that I think are from Him."

Studying the book of Acts in prison put Paul's message in a whole new perspective for Mercer. She saw that persecution was actually the catalyst for growth in the church.

"As I was studying Acts, I was thinking, How can I get out of this place?" Mercer says. "Paul was thinking, How can this experience build the church?"

Curry, 31, says the experience helped her trust God more than ever before. "He is sovereign and in control, and it was amazing to see the timing of everything. God had a perfect plan in all of it."

Their imprisonment also had a huge impact on their home church, Antioch Community Church, in Waco, Texas. Pastor Jimmy Seibert helped establish round-the-clock prayer networks shortly after learning about their arrests.

"So many different church members have come up and said to me, 'I've been changed as a result of praying for you and for the nations,'" Curry says. "I think the level of prayer has gone way up."

Mercer adds: "I think it has made people more bold. One woman from church told me, 'When you were in prison, it made me want to more boldly proclaim the name of Jesus because we knew you were being persecuted in the name of Jesus.'

"It's so scriptural. When Paul was in prison, he talked about how he was thankful for his imprisonment because it empowered and strengthened the church to be the church.

"It also brought the reality check that this is [a] spiritual battle," Mercer continues. "There are going to be casualties and injuries if we're going to fight the spiritual battle. We can't expect to win a war if we're not engaged in the daily battles of life."

A VISION FOR AFGHANISTAN

God gave Curry and Mercer a passion for serving the Afghan people after an exploratory trip there in the summer of 1998. Upon their return, the women made separate long-term commitments to do humanitarian aid work in Afghanistan.

"I came to see that God did not need someone with extraordinary gifts and achievements," Mercer shares in the book they wrote after their release, *Prisoners of Hope*. "God

assured me that if I would be committed to loving and serving with a soft heart, then even if my life seemed small in the eyes of the world, before God it would be great.”

The Baylor University grads hadn’t always been close to God. In fact, Curry confesses that during her teen years, she went through a rebellious season in which she experimented with drugs and even had an abortion.

As a college freshman, she had a spiritual breakthrough and knew, for the first time, that she was forgiven. God freed her from the pain and guilt that kept her from fulfilling His eternal purposes.

Mercer, a driven child, determined at age 8 that she wanted to become an astronaut. She set standards for herself that were nearly impossible to reach and faced a fear of failure.

As a high school sophomore, she went to a concert at her friend’s church and heard a man talk passionately about Jesus. That evening, she prayed the prayer of salvation, and Jesus became her center and purpose.

After moving to Waco, Texas, to attend Baylor, Mercer got involved at Highland Baptist, some of whose members founded Antioch Community Church in 1999. “There was something different about these people. They had such a huge love for Jesus that I hadn’t seen in other Christians I knew,” Mercer says.

Although a lot of people might refer to Antioch as a “missions-minded church” that is highly involved in international outreach, Mercer believes it is simply a New Testament church. “I would think that any church that loves Jesus is going to do missions,” she says, “because Jesus told us to go!”

Before moving to Afghanistan, Curry and Mercer went on other missions trips. Their service abroad increased their awareness

of the physical and spiritual needs around the world.

After graduating from Baylor in 1993, Curry spent two years in Uzbekistan, once part of the former Soviet Union, where she taught new Christians. For the first time, she saw women fully covered in Islamic dress and learned a lot about another culture and religion.

While there, she received a visit from a young couple from her home church who were on their way to Afghanistan. After they left, Curry and her group began to pray regularly for Afghanistan.

In 1996, Curry returned to Waco and worked for nearly three years as a social worker in a school for troubled youth. However, she deeply desired to go back overseas and believed God was calling her to Afghanistan.

“Once you start to pray for a country, it gets on your heart,” she says. “Ultimately, I thought Afghanistan would be a place where I could do something as a single woman. My pastor encouraged me to get out there and see.”

Mercer had lived in three foreign countries and visited 11 others by the age of 12. “Because I’ve lived overseas as a child and traveled a lot, I’ve always had an affinity for other cultures and people,” says the adventurer.

Mercer took part in Antioch’s one-year training school, which ended with a two-month outreach in Turkey. It was the first time she had actually lived for an extended period of time in a Muslim context. She told God that if He would send her to someplace difficult, she would be willing to go.

“God was developing within me a heart for the poor,” she says.

God opened doors for her and for Curry to go to Afghanistan with Shelter Now. Curry arrived in August 1999, and Mercer joined the team in March 2001. She had completed only half the

six-month language course in Dari when she was arrested.

Although she had served as a volunteer at the hospital and distributed food to Afghan families, Mercer was disappointed that her assignment ended so abruptly. Her dream was to “get inside the Afghan culture and become one of them as much as an American can become.”

THE DRAMA UNFOLDS

While in prison, the Shelter Now workers were allowed to read their Bibles and worship. They spent time praying for “whatever God laid on our heart[s],” says Curry. “Sometimes we would just have a ‘Love on Jesus’ night—worshiping and exalting God and not praying for anything specific.”

The United States began bombing Afghanistan shortly after the September 11 attack, and the Shelter Now workers were moved to another prison in Kabul. There, they lived with much fear and disruption.

Mercer says she became so emotionally exhausted that she had to make a choice: continue fighting fear or surrender to God and trust Him for the outcome. Once she surrendered to God, the grip of fear began to loosen, and she stopped putting her hope in the end result of their crisis.

“One of the Taliban officials we kind of had favor with shared that our government knew where we were, and that gave me some reassurance,” adds Curry. “But some of the bombs came really close. Every time I heard them, my stomach tensed up.”

On November 12, 2001, the Shelter Now workers were moved from Kabul—and they weren’t sure if they would make it out of the city alive. “Because everything was unraveling so fast with the Taliban, I thought, This is going to end soon one way or another,” Mercer says.

Their freedom was secured on November 15 as a result of a dramatic rescue effort conducted by the U.S. Special Forces.

The six workers were flown to safety in Islamabad, Pakistan, before returning to their respective homes.

Mercer sees the purpose in their ordeal. "There was a huge sovereign plan of God to change Afghanistan, and we were in the middle of it," she says.

Since their release, Mercer and Curry have had a whirlwind schedule. In addition to writing a book and releasing a CD, they have told their story to hundreds of groups and churches, participants at "Women of Faith" conferences and numerous journalists.

As for the future, these former prisoners hope to return to Afghanistan. Mercer acknowledges that she is thankful for the platform God has given her to share her miraculous story—but her dream is to serve the Afghan people, if God will reopen that door.

"Whatever the future holds, I am committed to serving the poor and making the name of Jesus known, no matter where God has me," she says.

Curry agrees. "I'm more committed than ever about spending my life reaching the unreached," she says. "I don't feel that I was finished serving in Afghanistan, and Lord willing, I'll be able to return."

Through their nonprofit foundation and charity called Hope Afghanistan, Curry and Mercer plan to use the financial resources generated from their book, CD project and speaking engagements to support Christian relief and development organizations and people who are helping rebuild Afghanistan.

"The country still has tremendous needs, and we are excited to be a part of the rebuilding process," Mercer says.

Carol Chapman Stertz interviewed **Dayna Curry** and **Heather**

Mercer at Antioch Community Church in Waco, Texas.