

This Christmas, Take a Moment to Pray for an Iranian Brother

Those of us in the West who are blessed with religious freedom think of Christmas as a cheery occasion. But how would you like to spend the holiday in a dark prison cell in Iran—where inmates without any legal protection are sometimes rounded up at night and hanged in secret mass executions?

Pastor Youcef Nadarkhani has been in the Lakan prison, near the city of Rasht, Iran, since October 2009. He was arrested after he complained to authorities that the local school was forcibly teaching Islam to his two sons, Daniel, 9, and Yoel, 7. (The Iranian constitution supposedly guarantees religious freedom.) The charges against the pastor, who leads a 400-member congregation in Rasht, were later changed: He was accused of apostasy and evangelism.

This will be the third Christmas Youcef has spent in a prison cell.

The Nadarkhanis' story resembles a nightmare. After Youcef's arrest, his wife, Fatemah, was arrested, charged with apostasy and sentenced to life in prison. Officials threatened to place their two sons in a Muslim family, but Fatemah was released four months later. Meanwhile, Youcef was often placed in solitary confinement, and prison guards gave him pills to persuade him to renounce his Christian faith.

In September 2010 he was given a verbal death sentence, and that sentence was put in writing two months later. He was told he would be hanged unless he recanted his faith. With help from international Christian organizations, Youcef appealed to the Iranian Supreme Court. In June of this year the court upheld his death sentence.

Present Truth Ministries, a Minnesota-based organization focused on bringing the gospel to Muslims, reported a conversation that took place in September in a courtroom in Raust, when Iranian officials demanded that Youcef renounce his faith in Jesus.

Youcef: "You ask me to recant. Recant means to return. What do you wish me to return to? The blasphemy that I was in before Christ?"

Judge: "To the religion of your ancestors, Islam."

Youcef: "I cannot."

A Muslim attorney told Present Truth that the brave pastor has discovered spiritual strength to endure his struggle. "Physically he looks weak," the lawyer said, "but emotionally his belief in Christ is keeping his spirits high."

President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and leaders of other governments have demanded that Iran release Pastor Youcef, and mission organizations serving the persecuted church have encouraged Christians around the world to send letters of protest to Iranian authorities. (Please see the link at the bottom of this page.)

I'm asking you to do one more thing: Please pray for Pastor Youcef and his family on Christmas Day. While you are celebrating the freedom Christ brought us, please bear your brother's burden and ask for God's presense, strength, comfort and favor—not only for Youcef but for the many other Iranian believers who are suffering in silence at this time of year.

The clock is ticking, and this man's life is on the line. Says Jason DeMars of Present Truth: "There are no assurances that [Youcef] will not be executed. It could happen at any time. This is the way the Iranian government operates with executions. They do not give advance notice and it is done in secret."

We tend to think of Christmas as festive and delectable, full of hot cider, sweet treats and warm memories of family togetherness. Yet the first Christmas was neither warm nor friendly. It was fraught with danger, especially after King Herod launched his campaign to kill the baby Jesus.

The same spirit that controlled Herod (and drove his son Herod Antipas to behead John the Baptist) is operating in the world today to falsely accuse, imprison and kill Christians. It is the reason more than 450 Christians are martyred every day around the world. The Bible commands us: "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body" (Heb. 13:3). Let's stand in solidarity with our brother.