

Persecuted Pastor's Unshakable Faith Inspires Inmates to Accept Christ

As Gospel for Asia pastor Ugyen Tashi entered the prison, three iron gates loomed before him like grim sentinels.

His heart felt cold when he passed through the first gate. At the second gate, a searing realization came over him: He would not see the outside world for a few years. He would be cut off from his wife, his infant daughter and his fellow believers.

The third gate led him into the dark, cramped cell that would now be his home. As he entered, the high walls seemed to close in on him.

"I could not see anything except the sky," he remembers.

Pastor Ugyen had been branded an enemy of his country for sharing the love of Christ, yet he knew God had allowed his prison sentence for a reason. The Gospel for Asia (GFA) national missionary would have three years to tell the murderers, drug addicts and thieves he would now live with about the One who came to break their shackles of bondage and set them truly free.

"Our Lord had to go through inhuman beating and humiliation and ultimately death," Ugyen says. "[My suffering] was nothing compared to the pain and agony our Lord went through. ... I thanked the Lord because it was just for three years."

Even though Pastor Ugyen was forced to leave his vibrant life of ministry and fellowship for the oppressive darkness of prison, it was as if a candle had been lit in a pitch-black room.

A Flickering Candle

Ugyen's unique presence in the prison as a child of God came to light almost immediately. When he entered the cell, some of the inmates asked him if he had brought tobacco or cigarettes. The contrast was evident: Ugyen longed to read the Bible, while they craved tobacco.

"I told those inmates I was a believer and I was brought in for sharing about Jesus to people," Ugyen says. "When the inmates heard about it, they wondered why I was punished for such a thing. They said they were imprisoned for stealing, killing and robbing, but my case was altogether different, and I did not deserve all this."

While Ugyen's presence brightened the prison with the light of Christ, challenges and darkness continued to hover over him. His battle was just beginning, but Christ would give him the strength to press on and to minister to his fellow prisoners.

Crushed but Not Destroyed

The prison conditions discouraged Ugyen's soul and weakened his health. Ten to 12 prisoners had to share a 10-square-foot room, and the prisoners were rarely allowed to use the restroom.

"If we needed to go to the restroom, we had to ask for the guard to come and accompany us," Ugyen says. "When we asked them to take us to the restroom, they would verbally abuse us. That's the reason why most of us had our own cans in which we used to urinate. Because of such things, our rooms used to be very dirty and smelly. ... I used to tell myself that not even my enemy should have to go through all this."

The cramped, unhygienic facilities also aggravated Ugyen's asthma. He got little sleep, and his health deteriorated.

One night he became severely ill. He couldn't stop coughing, and his body felt unusually cold. Although he told the guard about his health, he suffered for many hours before receiving permission to see a doctor. The guards handcuffed Ugyen and

bound his feet before taking him to the hospital.

"They took me to the hospital like an animal," he remembers.

When he arrived, the doctor didn't treat him much better.

"When I explained to [the doctor] about my ailments, he did not pay much attention but just scribbled something on a paper and prescribed some medicines for me," Ugyen says. "Since I was a prisoner, the doctor showed very little interest in treating me."

Upon returning to prison, Ugyen faced an ordeal each day to take his prescribed medicines because the guards did not permit him to keep them. As a result, Ugyen often couldn't take his medicines on time, leaving him in the same condition as before.

"I thought I would never see my family because of the sickness and the ill treatment the jail guards gave me," Ugyen says, "but God's plans are higher and better than ours."

The Weapon of Abiding

As the challenges of prison pressed in on him, Ugyen had a weapon to defend himself against despair: dependence on Christ and His Word.

"One can easily become discouraged and depressed in prison when thoughts of his family and freedom come to mind. ... When you are gripped with such thoughts, you feel as though you are paralyzed," Ugyen says. "To win over such situations, we need to know the Lord and spend time in prayer and meditating on God's Word."

Ugyen did just that, gaining strength to endure his sentence.

One Bible verse particularly uplifted Ugyen's heart: "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps. 34:8).

“Because of the encouragement from verses like this, the Lord preserved my life and gave me victory,” Ugyen says. “Nothing could discourage me or destroy me during the last three years in prison because I clung to the Word of God.”

Ugyen spent his days in prison in the presence of the Lord and often cried out to Him. As he prayed, God refreshed him and burdened his heart to reach the other prisoners.

“There is not much an individual can do [in prison] apart from praying and spending time with the Lord,” Ugyen says. “I came to know there were so many believers, pastors, churches and leaders around the world who had been praying for me. Then I started praying for the inmates in the prison and [my country].”

God responded to his prayers, giving Ugyen opportunities to tell the prisoners why the bleakness of prison hadn’t broken him. He watched many prisoners succumb to despair, resorting to drug use or reaching the brink of mental breakdowns.

“Many inmates used to wonder how I got the power to face the situation. They said they would become very discouraged and sad thinking about their imprisonment,” Ugyen says. “I used to talk to them and encourage them. ... I used to tell them very often about Jesus because they had lost hope.”

Eventually some of the inmates started joining Ugyen in prayer, and three of his fellow inmates put their faith in Christ.

Rejoicing in Victory, Staying Ready for Battle

After being released in March, Ugyen spent time rejoicing in God’s faithfulness with his family and fellow pastors. He had opportunities to share how God uplifted him and used him in prison.

“As servants of God, we need to learn the Bible and memorize

verses as much as we can," Ugyen says. "We have to prepare ourselves with the Word of God so in situations like mine, we can meditate on God's Word. One cannot guarantee that he or she would not be imprisoned for his or her faith. ... Without the knowledge of the Word of God, we would succumb to discouragement and depression. ... When we meditate on God's Word, the Lord speaks to us; He leads and guides our lives."

Abiding in Christ and feasting on His Word had sustained Ugyen even during the darkest days. While he praises God for giving him victory through the weapons of Scripture and prayer, he knows he and other believers will face many more battles because thousands in his country still wait to hear the Good News.

"There are possibilities that many could be imprisoned for sharing the gospel, just like me," he says. "All they need to know is that the Lord is still in control, and we should never lose heart."