



SIX

NORTH KOREA

Christians Endure
Horrific Conditions



2024 WORLD WATCH LIST

Rank: #1

Persecution type: Communist and post-communist oppression

Religion: Agnosticism

Persecution level: Extreme

Population: 26,090,000

Christian: 400,000

Government: Single-party dictatorship

Source: Open Doors

NORTH KOREA

Remember those in prison, as if you were there yourself. Remember also those being mistreated, as if you felt their pain in your own bodies. — HEBREWS 13:3

For twenty consecutive years, Open Doors ranked North Korea “the most oppressive place in the world for Christians.”²⁹ It only fell to second in 2022 when Afghanistan took the top spot following the Taliban takeover.

Often sick and malnourished, these captives are subjected to extreme violence and crude torture, suffering beatings with electric rods and metal poles and even being used as test subjects for medical experiments, as reported in Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s 2016 report on North Korea.

A 15-year sentence for being caught with a Bible, praying, or singing a hymn is actually a death sentence since most Christians survive only a few years in these brutal camps.

Nearly 20 percent of the country’s Christians — between 50,000 to 70,000 — are currently imprisoned in labor camps. There are believed to be approximately 400,000-500,000 Christians living in this nation where the persecution level is rated as “extreme.”

Life in the camps is unbearable.

I will never forget my first day in North Korea. As we drove over the Tumen River, our guide told us how North Koreans come to the riverbank and wait until evening to attempt the risky swim to Mainland China.

The border guards have orders to shoot on sight and anyone attempting to cross the border illegally is subject to summary execution. Our guide then added, almost as an afterthought, “The Tumen has probably witnessed more deaths than any other river in the world.”

Once inside the country, I was suddenly struck by the eerie quietness that pervades the towns and cities we visited. The streets were empty, absent of the usual traffic and busy city life, and the few people who found themselves outside seemed to meander aimlessly.

Convoys of ox carts replaced cars and public buses, and the buildings with their water-stained stucco walls looked hollow and gray. Electricity was often cut off so that at night entire towns were absorbed into darkness.

I was shocked to see students typing on keyboards while staring at blank computer screens at one government school. They were pretending to do their classwork until the power came back on.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea — a communist state of 26 million souls — is considered the most secretive nation on earth. Driven by the Kim family into isolation and a cultic reverence to the royal family, this small nation now threatens to destabilize the world with nuclear warfare. But as great a threat as nuclear warfare is, religious persecution is the world’s greatest and

most enduring crisis.

Many people don’t remember that in the early 20th century, Pyongyang was known as “the Jerusalem of the East” or that Christianity played a main role in the history of the Korean peninsula. Even after communism began to overtake North Korea, Christianity’s influence was so prevalent that Kim Il Sung’s father was a Christian and his father-in-law was a Presbyterian minister.

Nowhere is persecution of believers more severe than in North Korea. I am not even able to share with you many of the atrocities committed against these believers — especially the stories of how hundreds of Christ-followers are executed every year.

In one instance, when a group of church leaders did not reject Christ, police directed that a bulldozer be driven over them, crushing them to death.

TORTURE ALMOST BREAKS HIS SPIRIT

For my good friend and ministry partner Charlie, what he endured in prison brought him to the edge of despair. The treatment he received was so harsh, the pain he experienced so severe, he actually contemplated suicide.

Charlie directed our North Korea Bible distribution program and made many secret trips into the country to make sure the Bibles got into the hands of the right people. It was on one of those trips that Charlie was arrested.

He was charged with espionage, endured daily interrogations, experienced frequent and severe beatings, and suffered intense physical and psychological torture. His

actual “crime”? Being a committed follower of Christ.

The determination of North Korean officials to break Charlie’s spirit and get him to deny his faith was intense. Even a personal visit and plea by former President Jimmy Carter to gain his release was unsuccessful.

Finally, after eight months of torture, Charlie was released, but his health was extremely poor and his spirit low.

While he now appears to be doing well, he has lost a tremendous amount of weight. Doctors are closely watching for any signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Please pray for a rapid recovery — physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Amazingly, Charlie’s horrific experiences have not lessened his commitment to share his faith. His desire to deliver Bibles into North Korea and to train underground church leaders remains strong.

ENDURING UNIMAGINABLE CRUELTY

One of our partners working in North Korea told me a heartbreaking account of 81 believers who survived the horrors of prison camp. The descriptions I heard were staggering, gut-wrenching . . . enough to steal your breath away.

All prisoners were forced to perform 12 hours or more of intense slave labor a day, from the smallest child to the physically disabled — even pregnant women. With each description, my friend’s voice grew more solemn.

He told me of believers being beaten mercilessly by prison guards. Entire families tortured physically and psychologically. Young men mutilated and dismembered.

Small girls made to endure sexual humiliation and torment. Pregnant women forced to carry heavy rocks until they miscarried their unborn children. Cruelty so intense that I cannot even share all the details with you.

This is what our North Korean brothers and sisters face simply for identifying themselves as Christians . . . and yet they refuse to deny Christ! In the face of inconceivable evil, they choose to love. Even as they watch their loved ones — even their children — being tortured, they still proclaim that God is good!

Put yourself in their place — can you imagine losing everything for the sake of Christ?

THE COST OF A RED SCARF

“There was one homework [assignment] I wish I’d never done,” said Eun, now in her 40s.

One morning, when Eun was in third grade, her teacher told the class, “Today we’re not going to give you homework.” Naturally, all the children celebrated the news, but the teacher wasn’t finished.

“However, when you go home, look for a book,” the teacher continued. “Normally it’s black. Normally it’s hidden. Normally it’s the book your mom or dad read when you sleep. Normally it’s hidden in the closet or the drawer or somewhere that’s not reachable, but if you look hard enough you can find this book.

“And, if you bring it, we will honor you.”

Eun ran home, arriving before her mom. She looked everywhere, through drawers, cabinets, underneath

mattresses, until she finally found a small, black, leather-bound book. She hid it inside her bag and took it to school the next morning.

At school, Eun's teacher gave her a red scarf — the sign of a good kid in communist North Korea. Eun's mother didn't allow her to be involved in government-sponsored extracurricular activities, so Eun had never had the opportunity to receive this honor.

With the scarf around her neck, she ran home to tell her mom what had happened — but her mom wasn't there. In fact, Eun waited all night for her mom, but she never arrived.

When Eun got to school the following day, with an empty stomach, she found out the parents of 14 other students also hadn't come home the night before. All of these students had one thing in common: they had received a red scarf for turning in their parents' Bibles.

But the persecution in North Korea is not just something that occurred when Eun was a little girl some 30 years ago. It is even worse today.

WITNESS TO HIS TORTURERS

When I traveled to the North Korean border for the first time, many expressed concerns for my safety. After all, the country has been shrouded in secrecy for many years. But one thing that isn't a secret is that North Korea is consistently ranked the worst place in the world for Christians to live.

I heard the story of one 17-year-old boy who escaped North Korea and was working in China when God called

him to go back home and share the Gospel.

He decided the best way he could help others was by delivering copies of God's Word.

On his way into the country, soldiers stopped and searched him. When they found the Bibles, they began beating him. The boy cried out, not pleading with them to stop, but pleading with them to believe in Jesus.

Each time he said the name "Jesus," the guards hit him harder. But he continued to witness to his torturers. Finally, one of the guards asked him why this Jesus was worth dying for. The boy explained the Gospel to him, and that soldier accepted Christ.

The boy was eventually sentenced to a firing squad, but he said that his life was full because God had used him to lead someone to Christ.

"DO YOU BELIEVE IN JESUS?"

Deep in a secluded area, the men dug several shallow graves before ordering the family to get in. With each shovel of fresh dirt, the father and his six children's screams grew softer until the forest was silent.

Jun grew up hearing the story of how his great-grandfather was buried alive.

The situation in North Korea hasn't changed much since the 1940s, Jun said, when his great-grandfather was a pastor living in North Korea. Jun is now a pastor himself.

Jun's great-grandfather, Hoon, moved to North Korea to escape Christian persecution in China. Six of his children accompanied him while his wife and one daughter stayed

behind, planning to join them soon.

But Hoon's wife and daughter would never see their family members alive again.

As Hoon and the children settled into their new home, he thought he'd finally be able to spread the Gospel in freedom. But North Korea was becoming more closed, and the government was beginning to seek out Christians, imprison them — and even kill them.

One day as Hoon's youngest daughter was playing in the yard, she was approached by a neighbor. "Do you believe in Jesus?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said.

A North Korean communist overheard the conversation, and later that day, men burst into Hoon's home and dragged him and his children away.

When Hoon's wife finally arrived in North Korea, the government contacted her and told her where she could find her husband.

As the dirt was brushed away from her family's lifeless bodies, Hoon's wife realized her husband died with his arms spread out, trying to protect and comfort his youngest daughter as they died.

Now, 70 years later, Jun is carrying on his great-grandfather's legacy. He refuses to let what happened to his family in North Korea hinder him from serving the Lord. He's dedicated his life to ministering to the persecuted Christians living there.

"I had decided that I would not look at the land of North Korea after I heard that story from my grandmother,"

Jun said. "But now I am doing it because God has given me love for North Korea. The situation in North Korea in these days is no different from that period. Let us pray for the soul of North Korea and for the freedom of faith."

"North Korean people are so cut off and disconnected from the outside world that they don't even know what the word 'internet' means." — Kim Min Hyuk, escaped in 2006

"I'LL BE BACK TOMORROW"

Jang-mi was startled as the door to her cell swung open. Bruised, bloody, and soaked from her captives' attempts to wake her with buckets of water, she was surprised to see her uncle walk through the door.

Just two months earlier, Jang-mi was happily married and living in China. She had successfully escaped North Korea and was living in a Chinese border town where she met and fell in love with her husband, who also was from North Korea. It wasn't long before they discovered freedom of a different kind — they were introduced to Jesus.

With a heart on fire for Christ, Jang-mi's husband told her he had decided to return to North Korea to share the Gospel with his family and friends.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he told her.

She watched as he crossed the frozen river, headed back

into North Korea. She hoped and prayed his final words would be true. Surely, she would see him tomorrow.

But she didn't.

A few days went by, then a week, then a month. Worried, Jang-mi decided she couldn't wait any longer — she had to go look for her husband. Crossing the North Korean and Chinese border would be dangerous. North Korean police are instructed to shoot on sight.

Jang-mi mustered her courage and quietly attempted to cross the border. Almost immediately, she was captured and thrown into prison.

All day and all night, Jang-mi endured torture. It only worsened when her captors found out she was a Christian. The soldiers yelled at her, calling her — ironically — “Judas” for betraying North Korea.

Through it all, Jang-mi remained strong. She even began to share her faith with her torturers.

Finally, Jang-mi was released, and her uncle brought her to her family home. There, he gave her a gift — her father's old military hat.

“Your father wanted you to have this,” he said. “Look inside the hat.”

Jang-mi looked inside the cap and tugged on the interior flap. There, in the place where most soldiers wrote their names, was a little cross. Jang-mi was shocked.

“You mean my father was a believer in Jesus?” Jang-mi asked. “But how? Why did he never tell me?”

“Because he was trying to protect you and your family,” her uncle replied.

When a Christian is discovered sharing the Gospel or holding a single page of God's Word, they can be sentenced to 15 years in a harsh labor camp. Few people come out alive.

Jang-mi's father is now in one of those prison camps. She knows he probably won't outlive his sentence. She also found out that her husband had been caught crossing the border and was later executed for his faith.

Heartbroken, Jang-mi once more risked the cold crossing back into China. She saw her old friends, stayed in her old home, and she remembered once more how passionate her husband had been about sharing the Gospel. She thought about her father, and how he, too, was willing to die for his faith.

“I have to go back,” she thought. “I have to go back and tell those who have not heard.”

THE GOSPEL ON A TRAIN SEAT

Sung-Min tried — and failed — to escape North Korea four separate times. Each time, he was caught and sent back home. He spent many years doing hard labor in North Korea's prison camps. But Sung-Min never gave up hope that someday he would be free.

I met Sung-Min during my last visit to the North Korean border. I remember his face, and the stories he told me stick with me even now.

He said he believed freedom was worth any cost. Sung-Min's father had always dreamed of taking his family to China or South Korea. He hated raising his children in a

country where they could be thrown in labor camps for breaking even the smallest rule. He longed for a life free from the fear of oppression. But he died before he and his family could escape.

Sung-Min wanted to fulfill his father's dream, so he tried to flee the country in secret. He didn't know that soon he would discover the only *true* source of freedom — Jesus.

During his second escape attempt, Sung-Min met a group of Christians who introduced him to the Gospel. Although he was eventually captured again, he brought his newfound faith with him to his prison cell and labor camp in North Korea.

Life in the labor camps is worse than you and I could ever imagine. Believers are beaten and abused for hours on end. Still, Sung-Min and many just like him are able to withstand the torture and remain steadfast in their faith.

One day after his release from prison, Sung-Min discovered a Bible lying on a train seat. The Bible had been smuggled into the country by some of our partners. Sung-Min was so excited he had found it! He knew several security guards were watching him. So instead of taking the whole Bible, Sung-Min ripped out a single page from the book of Matthew.

He read that page over and over, committing it to memory. When he was thrown into jail after another escape attempt, the verses brought him comfort and hope. And it didn't just affect him.

Sung-Min passed the page of Matthew on to his sister, and now she is a Christian, too. Later, he discovered

that both his mother and grandmother were also secret believers. His grandmother was even a deaconess in the underground church — but she had never seen a Bible. She had heard about people owning one, but she had never held the Scriptures in her own hands.

On his fifth attempt to escape, Sung-Min finally made it. Today he prays that more copies of the Word of God will reach his nation.

HOW YOU CAN PRAY

Pray for the underground churches of North Korea. Several thousand secret churches meet in homes, caves, forests, and shores ... and need our prayers.

Pray that believers will continue to boldly share their faith in the face of persecution — and when persecution comes, they will have the strength to endure it.

North Koreans are suffering from a lack of food. So now on top of persecution, North Korean believers are facing starvation.

Pray for the leaders of North Korea. Pray for their conversion. If God can do it for Nebuchadnezzar and Saul of Tarsus, God can do it in the hearts of today's leaders.

A Note from the Author

Thank you for taking the time to read this excerpt from *If I Die ... Risking Death to Follow Jesus*. I hope it has opened your eyes to what North Korean Christians endure every day for their faith and encouraged you to keep them in your constant prayers.

If you would like to read more about the faithfulness of Christ-followers in places like China, India, Syria, and Nigeria, please scan the QR code below. **There, you can receive a copy of *If I Die* with a donation of any amount to help persecuted Christians in need.** You can also let me know if you'd be interested in having me come speak at your church about the challenges the persecuted church is facing worldwide and ways you can help.

I am so thankful for people like you who stand with our persecuted brothers and sister as they take a stand for Christ.



Scan to receive your copy of *If I Die* with a donation of any amount!

