Heroes of Our Faith

Volume 2

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Volume 2

More inspiration and strength for daily living

Patrick Sookhdeo

Heroes of Our Faith: Volume 2 – More strength and inspiration for daily living

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Illustrations

Front cover

Top row from left to right: Agnes Cao Guiying (martyred in China, 1856), Anji Faisal Zuruf (martyred in Syria, 2019), Grikor Zohrab (martyred in the Ottoman Empire, now Turkey, 1915), Leah Wanfula (martyred in Kenya, 2015) and Matthew Ayariga (from Ghana, martyred in Libya, 2015).

Bottom row from left to right: Takashi Nagai (martyred in Japan, 1951), Lionel Jayasinghe (martyred in Sri Lanka, 1988), Sonia Bibi (martyred in Pakistan, 2020. Photograph: CLAAS, Pakistan), Max Ferber (martyred in Germany, 1950. Photograph: LICHT IM OSTEN e.V., Germany www.lio.org/en/) and Queen Ketevan (from Kakheti, part of modern Georgia, martyred in Persia, modern Iran, 1624).

Back cover

Execution of a Christian in Tonkin (modern northern Vietnam) on 24 November 1838.

"… the very memory of martyrs wrought wonderful effects upon the minds of men: it confirmed them against the assaults of wicked spirits; it delivered them from impure and absurd thoughts; and set their minds in great tranquillity. The death of the martyrs was still an exhortation to Christians; the support of the Church; the confirmation of Christianity; the destruction of death; the demonstration of the resurrection; the reproach of devils; the condemnation of Satan; the doctrine of philosophy; an exhortation to despise the things of this world; and the way to lead men to the desire of a better; a comfort to men in affliction ; a motive to patience; an engagement to fortitude; and, in a word, the root, and fountain, and mother, of all that is good. When you see the martyrs despise life, though you be the most stupid and negligent of all creatures, you cannot but entertain sublime and exalted thoughts, contemning pleasures, despising riches, and desiring to have your conversation in heaven. If you languish under a disease, the Passions of the martyrs will afford you one of the strongest arguments to engage you to patience. If you are oppressed with poverty, or any other evils, cast but your eye to the bitterness of the torments which they endured; and you have a present consolation and remedy for all the troubles that can befall you."

John Chrysostom (347-407)
Archbishop of Constantinople

Foreword

An early church leader, John Chrysostom, wrote:

> The blood of martyrs waters the beautiful plants of the Church. For as plants grow the more for being watered, so the faith flourishes the more for being opposed; and the more it is persecuted, the more it grows: nor does water make a garden more fertile, than the blood of the martyrs does the Church.[1]

In this second volume of *Heroes of Our Faith*, one of my aims has been to try to give an indication of the vast scale of Christian martyrdom. The garden of the Church has not been lightly sprinkled but thoroughly refreshed by abundant rivers of life-giving water, to use the imagery of John Chrysostom.

There are many group martyrdoms described in the following pages. Some of these are single incidents, like the martyrdom of the young Egyptian woman, Demiana, and her 40 friends in the early fourth century (see January 21). Some are prolonged campaigns, such as the three-decade genocide of Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Christians under the Ottomans, which peaked in 1915. Some are whole people-groups or nations, persecuted for their Christian faith, for example, the Croats in Europe who survived and the Onguts in Central Asia who did not (see September 6, January 24).

[1] This English translation from Joseph Bingham, *Origines Ecclesiasticae*, first published 1708-1722, Book 20, chapter 7, section 6.

With the passage of time, the names of the vast majority of these faithful believers who died for Christ have been lost. But that only means lost on earth. In heaven they are known and honoured.

In a poignant archaeological discovery in Romania, the shared coffin of four martyrs was unearthed, thought to date to the fourth century. Their names are known to be Zoticos, Attalos, Kamasis and Philippos because they were scratched on the wall of the crypt. But underneath was another crypt, containing the remains of two other men, aged 45-50, with nothing to identify them. They are thought to have died during the persecution under Emperor Decius (reigned 249-251). It seems they were buried with love and respect by fellow Christians but only in heaven are their names, their lives, their testimonies, their sufferings and their deaths now known (see July 11).

Even in our day, and despite the wonders of modern communications and the quantities of information hurtling around the globe on social media, the names of many contemporary martyrs have never passed beyond their immediate community. A book about Christian martyrs during the Soviet Union era and after its collapse comments:

> It was not only in ancient times that true followers of Christ were tortured for their faith in the Lord (Hebrews 11:37). Into the cloud of heroes of faith who paid for their devoted love for God with the price of their own lives, the martyrs of our day have also entered. The names of some have been proclaimed aloud and they deserve to be remembered. The names of others, who withstood no less an ordeal of suffering, remain, as it were, in the shadows – in the shadows for people but not for God. He valued highly the work and miracle of their faith. (Hebrews 11:38) [2]

There are hundreds of thousands of martyrs mentioned in this book without their names or individual stories. There was a complete ban on Christians in Japan from 1614 until 1873 during which time it is estimated that the number of martyrs could have been as high as 40,000. But only 4,045 are known by name. In this book I have mentioned by name just seven Japanese martyrs of

[2] *Podrazhaite Vera Ikh [Imitate Their Faith] 1961-2001*, Moscow: Council of Churches of the ECB (Evangelical Christian Baptist), 2001, p.362. This comment was made in an article about 20-year-old Yuri Ivanovich Burda who was martyred in Kazakhstan in 1983 (see November 8).

this period (see July 4, December 6) and one Filipino who was also martyred there (see September 29).

According to tradition, 20,000 Christians died in Nicomedia, capital city of the eastern Roman Empire, around 303 AD. Only 22 of their names are still known: Agape, Anthimus, Domna, Domna, Dorotheus, Esmaragdus, Eugene, Euthymius, Glykerios, Gorgonius, Hilary, Indes, Mardonius, Mardonius, Maximus, Migdonius, Migdonius, Peter, Peter, Theophila, Theophilus and Zeno. Of these 22 I have been able to include the stories of just four: Anthimus, Dorotheus, Gorgonius and one of the Peters (see December 25). These four were all people of considerable status in human eyes. Anthimus was the Bishop of Nicomedia, and the other three were senior and powerful staff in the imperial household. Perhaps this is why their stories have been remembered down the ages. But surely, in the eyes of God, all who died for Him, many of them enduring hideous pain, were equally heroes of the faith.

Even where names are known I have not always been able to include them, due to limited space on the page. Many other details have had to be omitted for the same reason, whether about tortures endured or of the intervention of God and His angels to help the martyrs in their ordeals. Quotations have sometimes had to be shortened, and details of the sources that I would have liked to appear with the quotation have sometimes had to be relegated to pages 393-438. I trust the reader will look kindly on any inconsistencies of presentation that arise from the challenge of trimming to fit the space available.

Allow me to use this foreword to add something more to the story of the unnamed Nicomedians who burned to death in their thousands at their Christmas Day worship services (see December 25). A courageous leader in one church urged the congregation to remember Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into a blazing furnace in Babylon for exactly the same issue as faced the Nicomedians, that is, refusing to worship an idol. He also reminded them that they had just celebrated, through Holy Communion, the Lord's sacrifice for them, so "should we not lay down our lives for Him in this holy place?" The people were filled with great zeal to die for Christ. And die they did, for they were not delivered from the flames as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego had been (Daniel 3). Perhaps they replied to the Roman soldiers, who threatened to burn them alive, with the same words of faith and courage that Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego used to King Nebuchadnezzar: "The God we serve is able to save us from [the furnace], and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you

to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18) God, in His sovereign wisdom, chose not to save the Nicomedians from the flames but to grant them the gift they now yearned for – to die for Christ.

Many stories in this book (including the Nicomedians) involve the Roman Emperor Diocletian. By the late third century the Roman Empire had become so big that it was difficult to govern as a single unit. Diocletian (reigned 284-305) divided it into two parts, each with two emperors, and took for his capital, in the eastern half of the empire, Nicomedia in the province of Bithynia (modern Izmit, Turkey). Nicomedia was a city where the Christian faith had flourished and, by the beginning of the fourth century, it was said that half its population were Christians. Many in the emperor's household were believers, which to begin with was not an issue, for Diocletian was quite favourably inclined to Christians at first. Diocletian went on to proclaim that all four emperors were the sons or representatives of Roman gods. He himself and his junior co-emperor Galerius were associated with Jupiter, the two emperors of the western empire with Hercules.

Later he was persuaded, especially by Galerius, to start a ruthless persecution of Christians, although apparently Diocletian hoped that he could repress them without bloodshed. It began with purging the imperial household and army of Christians. Then, over a period of 14 months beginning 23 February 303, he issued four edicts for the suppression of Christianity. The first forbade Christian worship and decreed that Christian Scriptures were to be burned and churches destroyed. Christians in public service were demoted and deprived of their rights. Christian freedmen were re-enslaved. The later edicts ordered Christian clergy to be imprisoned and tortured unless they would sacrifice to the Roman gods. Finally, anyone who did not sacrifice was to be killed.

The persecution triggered by the edicts continued until 313, and many martyrs in this book died during that period, which is often called the "Great Persecution" for it was the (last and) most severe persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire, albeit applied unevenly across the empire according to the level of zeal of those in charge of each part. But how does it compare with other persecutions under other persecutors?

There was a "Great Persecution" of the Christians in Persia during the reign of Shapur II, which lasted not one decade but four (beginning about 340 and continuing until his death in 379). A historian in the following century stated that there were 16,000 Christian martyrs known by name during that period

and that the multitude of unnamed ones was too great to be counted. In this book I mention 100 unnamed faithful martyrs, but only one with a name, the valiant Bishop Shimun, executed on Good Friday 341 (see January 31).

Korea also had a "Great Persecution", which occurred during the time that Grand Internal Prince Heungseon held power. Its duration was only five years (1866-1871) but more than half the Christian community perished. Korean Christians considered it worse than their earlier persecutions because it was targeted not just at leaders but at Christians of any position in society. The vast majority of those who died were ordinary believers, poor and uneducated. Perhaps this was the greatest persecution of all times and places because of the proportion killed in such a short time, and yet "only" about 8,000 Christians died, for the already much-persecuted Korean Christian community was small to start with.

For absolute numbers, we must look at examples like the Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Genocide, in which an estimated 3.75 million Christians died in about three decades of persecution under a series of Islamic Ottoman sultans and the secularist Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk. Witnessed, reported and even photographed by horrified Western journalists, diplomats, missionaries and other visitors, not to mention sorrowfully recorded by the targeted communities themselves, this appalling and carefully planned genocide is abundantly documented, and it has been easy to find examples to include in this book.

Thankfully, the Armenian Genocide is becoming increasingly well recognised. But what I call "Timur's Genocide" was an order of magnitude greater and is scarcely known in the West. It has been calculated that this cruel and bloodthirsty 14th century conqueror was responsible for the deaths of 17 million people. As the self-proclaimed "Sword of Islam", Timur (Tamerlane) saw Christians as a priority target for slaughter, but the proportion of Christians in his total death toll is unknown (see January 24, February 24, March 10, March 19, July 26, November 18, December 27). Is it because he never advanced into Europe that Timur's record-breaking atrocities are not well known in the West? Or because in 1402 he defeated the Ottoman army, leading to the near collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Europe's enemy at the time?

Ultimately it is pointless trying to say who suffered the most. The death of each faithful servant was precious in the sight of the Lord (Psalm 116:15).

The wealth of spiritual treasure from the lives of Christian martyrs could fill whole libraries. Their example and their words have been a source of inspi-

ration, empowerment, wonder and rejoicing to believers down the ages. The example of their endurance, joy, forgiving spirit and eager anticipation of being forever with the Lord can help us no matter what our difficulties. We could be suffering physical or mental illness, disability, poverty, bereavement, loneliness, pressure of work, belittling, rejection, false accusation, discrimination, injustice, natural disaster, violent conflict, war or persecution. In all these circumstances, we can gain an eternal perspective from the martyrs and fresh fuel to sustain us if we approach their stories with humility and a willingness to learn. "The stories of our Christian martyrs are always a strength to our faith," said an Egyptian Christian to me by email just three months ago. Sadly, Protestants in recent years have tended not to avail themselves of this faith-building resource.

Some martyrs, especially those in leadership positions, were very aware of the impact their example could have on other Christians. Nigerian convert and pastor Lawan Andimi, martyred by Boko Haram terrorists in 2020, took the opportunity of a video made by his captors to speak of his consciousness of being in God's hands, whether he would be reunited on earth with his family and colleagues or whether he would be killed (as in fact did happen, less than three weeks later). I wonder whether 1 Thessalonians 5:18 had been a favourite verse of his in preaching; certainly he continued to thank God in all circumstances, even the circumstance of being held captive by Boko Haram and knowing that they would probably kill him. He said on the video, "Thank God for everything … I have never been discouraged because all conditions that one finds himself is in the hands of God. By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife, my children and my colleagues. If the opportunity has not been granted, maybe it is the will of God" (see January 20).

Another church leader who knew that martyrdom was probable and used the remaining time he had to strengthen his flock was Ignatius Maloyan, Bishop of Mardin. He was killed in Turkey in 1915, with about 400 other Christians, at the height of the Armenian Genocide. His last pastoral letter to his flock urged them to strengthen their faith and in particular to pray for courage and grace to face martyrdom (see June 11).

Many last letters to families, friends or ministry co-workers are also full of spiritual sustenance when the writer is aware that martyrdom is imminent. The China Inland Mission collected together and published some of the farewell letters from its many missionaries who were killed in the Boxer rebellion of 1900 (see December 12).

There can also be much blessing in the words of the bereaved who mourn for the martyrs and the words of the survivors who lived when others died. Baroness Cox tells of a visit to Stepanakert in Nagorno Karabakh in the early 1990s, when the Armenian Christian enclave was being attacked every day by missiles from Muslim-majority Azerbaijan.

> I visited Bishop (later Archbishop) Parkev Martirosyan in Stepanakert. Azerbaijan was firing 400 GRAD missiles every day onto Stepanakert. One morning, a missile hit the Bishop's home. Every morning when the bombing started – in the depth of winter in the cold and the dark (there was no electricity) – the Bishop would get up to pray. On that morning, just a minute after he got up to pray, a missile hit his home and a concrete slab landed on his bed. His life was literally saved by prayer! I visited a few hours later to convey my sympathy. He was standing in the still smouldering ruins of his home, obviously in a state of shock. We asked him if he had a message for the Church, for the world. I will never forget his words. He could not have had time to prepare a speech, but his spontaneous message is so profound:
>
> "We thank God that, after 70 years of Soviet Communism, we are free to pray again – in cellars and the field of battle defending the lives of those who are near and dear. It is not only the perpetrators of evil who commit sin, but those who stand by, seeing and knowing – but who do not condemn it or try to avert it. We have a Gospel of love. Whatever demonic forces are at work, not only in this war but anywhere in the world, we must never hate; we must still love."
>
> After a short pause, he looked upwards to reiterate his final sentence, "we must always love."

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti, Bishop of Iran, wrote a prayer to be read at the funeral of his son, Bahram, who was martyred in 1980. It not only asks God to forgive the murderers of his son, but also speaks wonderfully of how his terrible loss has brought him closer to God, burned up all selfishness

and possessiveness, increased his trust in God and enabled the fruit of the Spirit to multiply in his life.

A Father's Prayer Upon the Murder of his Son

O God, we remember not only Bahram but also his murderers;
not because they killed him in the prime of his youth
and made our hearts bleed and our tears flow.
Not because with this savage act they have brought further disgrace
on the name of our country among the civilized world;
But because through their crime we now follow thy foot-steps
more closely in the way of sacrifice.
The terrible fire of the calamity burns up
all selfishness and possessiveness in us;
Its flame reveals the depth of depravity and meanness and suspicion,
the dimension of hatred and the measure of sinfulness in human nature;
It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in God's love
as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection;
Love which makes us free from hate towards our persecutors;
Love which brings patience, forbearance, courage,
loyalty, humility, generosity of heart;
Love which more than ever deepens our trust in God's final victory
and his eternal designs for the Church and for the world;
Love which teaches us how to prepare ourselves to face our own day of death.
O God, Bahram's blood has multiplied the fruit of the Spirit in the soil of our souls;
so when his murderers stand before thee on the Day of Judgment,
remember the fruit of the Spirit by which they have enriched our lives.
And Forgive…[3]

Such recent words and events are well recorded. But some martyrdoms are not. Things can be forgotten very quickly or details lost in the turmoil of persecution and war, yet that does not mean the events never hap-

[3] 'Bishop Dehqani-Tafti: A Father's Prayer on the Martyrdom of His Son', in *Persian Anglican Ministry,* https://www.persiananglicanministry.com/the-right-rev-hassan-dehqani-tafti- [accessed 27 August 2021].

pened. The martyrdoms of long ago may have no supporting evidence, knowledge of them surviving "only" in the form of church traditions, preserved from generation to generation. Some academics may dismiss these as unverified (or occasionally contradictory). But a story can be true even if it has not been proved according to the rigorous standards of a professional historian. Lack of corroborating evidence does not mean that a tradition must be untrue. Only God knows. We should also bear in mind that miracles and supernatural intervention may cause secular historians to dismiss a story as make-believe.

Many of the martyrdoms from early centuries are so far in the past that clinching evidence for or against is unlikely to exist or be discovered. But why should we deny ourselves the blessing of these traditions, which have been cherished and handed down by earlier Christians who did not depend as much on the written word as we do?

It is interesting that supporting evidence does, in fact, emerge from time to time. In 2018 a mass grave was discovered on Sri Lanka's Mannar Island; carbon dating of the skeletons has led some historians to link them with a massacre of Christians there in 1544 (see December 20). In 2021 the remains of three Korean martyrs were uncovered and identified by DNA analysis and historical research as Paul Yun Ji-chung and James Gwon Sang-yeon, both beheaded in 1791 (see December 23), and Paul's younger brother, Francis Yun Ji-heon, who was hacked to pieces on 24 October 1801. The cuts to the bones match what tradition has recorded about the way each died.

Historians sometimes disagree amongst themselves. The story of Theodotus, a shopkeeper martyred in Turkey in the early 4th century (see December 6), is recorded in an ancient document that was dismissed by a renowned historian as largely fictitious, while others argued that it seemed substantially authentic. Then came the discovery of the remains of a church built just where the ancient document had said there was one, lending further credence to the document, which one scholar says has the hallmarks of an eyewitness account.

I am not a historian. Where martyrdoms recorded in this book are based on church traditions, I have tended to follow the versions that have been accepted for many centuries, which Christian scholars of the past have affirmed and in which many ordinary Christians have found inspiration and encouragement. Is there any reason to disbelieve just because

a story is wonderful? We who ground our lives on the Bible are well used to rejoicing in what God does, in both the natural and the supernatural realms, and in the faith of His people during times of trial.

Just as I have embraced many traditional stories of martyrdom without demanding rigorous proof, so I have defined Christian martyrdom in a relatively broad way.

The strictest criterion for a Christian martyr that I have ever come across is that martyrs are only those who confessed their faith in Christ verbally just before they died. There are, in fact, many such in this book.

My own belief, however, is that the martyr's crown will be bestowed also on a multitude of others who died because they followed our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Few would quibble with including those who died later of wounds inflicted by persecutors. Let us also include those who died of sickness or hardship as a result of persecution, or even as a result of fleeing persecution.

I believe that the term "Christian martyr" can also include those whose faith was known and who were hunted down and never given the opportunity to speak at the end either to deny Christ or to affirm their faith in Him. Stories like that of Hani Matti Betti, an Iraqi Christian restaurant owner murdered in 2004 (see July 19), are representative of many other similar martyrdoms of ordinary Christians in 21st century Iraq and Syria, going about their daily business, who were singled out and killed simply for their faith in Christ. Sonia Bibi, murdered in Pakistan in 2020 (see November 30), is one of many Christian young women and girls targeted for sexual purposes by non-Christians and killed for resisting.

In my view, it can also include those who died, not for affirming directly their faith in Jesus as Saviour and Redeemer but for upholding principles that He taught. For example, 96 Native American Christians, who had been evangelised and discipled by Moravian missionaries, were massacred in 1782. Formerly warriors, the Native Americans had so strongly absorbed the peaceable teachings of Jesus, such as turning the other cheek, that they did not fight back or even defend themselves (see March 9). The killers in this story were American colonist frontiersmen, and, before falling into their hands, the Native Americans had been driven north by the British to an inhospitable area where they would probably have died of hunger. Very likely the American colonists and the British would have considered themselves Christians.

Many have put themselves in harm's way by their Christian ministry, boldly continuing to preach the Gospel or care for God's people despite likely harassment, violence or death. This book has plenty of examples of people who were killed because of such ministry.

Then there were also the general hazards faced by those who left safe contexts to serve God in places where everyday life was fraught with danger, whether violence or disease. Many cross-cultural missionaries through the ages have answered God's call in the full knowledge that they could die on the mission field. Should we split hairs and deny them the honour of being martyrs? They would not have died if they had stayed at home.

Real life is complex and there is often a mixture of motives prompting attacks on Christians, which may lead to martyrdom. Sometimes ethnicity is a factor alongside religion, or vulnerable Christian minorities are attacked as a way of retaliating against the actions of "Christian" nations to which they have no connection. So it can be very difficult to define whether an individual was killed because of their faith, thus making them a martyr, or whether other reasons outweighed the religious one.

On 31 October 2010 six jihadists from the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) group burst into the Sunday evening service at one of Baghdad's main churches. Armed with machine guns and grenades and wearing explosive belts or vests filled with ball bearings, their intent was evidently to kill as many people as possible. The attackers herded about 100 worshippers into the centre of the church, while another 60 hid themselves in a room at the back. Some nineteen managed to escape. The gunmen turned off the lights and began shooting around the church. They then phoned an Iraqi TV station and demanded the release of Al Qaeda prisoners. About 8.30 p.m. when the gunmen threatened to kill all the remaining hostages, Iraqi security forces stormed the church. The gunmen opened fire on the hostages, causing a mass slaughter. In total 58 people were killed – two clergy and 46 Christian worshippers, the rest being Iraqi security and bystanders. Had those 48 Christians died for Christ or were they simply chosen for a prisoner exchange? Does it make any difference that afterwards ISI posted an online message declaring that the fuse of a campaign against Iraqi Christians had been lit and "all Christian centres, organisations and institutions, leaders and followers to be legitimate targets for the mujahidin [jihadi fighters] wherever they can reach them"?

When Jesus welcomes into His presence those who were martyred, He will not enquire which denomination they were, or ask about their church practices and theological systems. He will care only that they were faithful to Him and willing to die for His Name. In this book, I have not been concerned with the various groupings and traditions that have emerged within the Church over time (except where relevant to the story, for example the pacifism of Mennonites and Moravians). Many denominations have only come into being in recent centuries, so earlier believers did not have the option of belonging to them.

My focus instead is on Christian individuals who loved their Lord more than they loved their own lives, and died believing that Jesus Christ is the only Son of God, fully God and fully man, who died an atoning death on the cross for the sins of humankind, who rose from the dead and whose heavenly Father sent to us the Holy Spirit. We must not stumble over differences that arise from cultural and historical contexts which naturally result in different ways of expressing love for the Lord or faith in Him, and different ways of drawing close to Him, perhaps using different senses or parts of the brain. Most Christians find their hearts and souls lifted by Christian music and song, but how that music varies in different cultural contexts. In some places and times, the Lord shows Himself though visions, miracles, light, even fragrance. In other places and times Christians delight primarily in the beauty of His written Word and meet Him most often within its pages.

It has been wonderful, in writing this book, to see how God's persecuted people have reacted in similar ways across vastly different times and places. Their Christian faith has transcended their nationality, culture and church background. There were those who died kneeling in prayer. There were those who died singing praises to God; sometimes we even know which songs they sang. There were those who died expressing that most distinctive of New Testament Christian attitudes – the forgiveness of their persecutors. There were those who evangelised to the end. In around 303 Bishop Anthimus of Nicomedia led to the Lord the Roman soldiers who had arrested him, as they marched him back to the city where he was soon to be executed. He even baptised them on the way (see December 25).

Several stories mention the longing of pastors to help their people facing persecution and martyrdom. "Ah! I would like to comfort and strengthen the people with my words, but I cannot," wrote Ólafur Egilsson, an Icelandic church minister, who had been captured in 1627 by North African slave

traders and taken to Algiers along with more than 400 other Icelanders, many of them his congregation. He was separated from them soon after arrival (see December 28).

Ólafur survived, but some paid for their pastoral hearts with their lives. In 1940 the police went door-to-door in a Christian village in Thailand telling the inhabitants they must abandon their faith. Following after them came Philip Siphong Onphitak, a lay leader from the village church (whose pastor had been banished), encouraging each threatened family to stand firm. This soon led to his own martyrdom (see December 26). Far to the west and more than 1,600 years earlier, as persecution suddenly escalated in the Roman Empire and some Christians began to waver, Theodotus urged them to be steadfast, even as he put into effect all kinds of practical efforts to support them in their suffering (see December 6). He too was martyred for caring for persecuted fellow believers.

Many Christians, from the 1st century to the 21st century, have desired the honour of martyrdom. As everyone must die, they have longed to die in the best way. They have not wanted to miss out on the blessing of martyrdom, sometimes called by Egyptian Christians the third baptism, following baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit.

"Do you think we will have a place among the martyrs here?" asked an Egyptian Christian hopefully in 2018. The group of Christians was visiting a remote desert monastery, and was recalling the 28 Christians who had been martyred on their way to the same monastery the previous year (see November 2).

Bishop Anthimus willingly embraced his martyrdom. He made no attempt to escape from the soldiers seeking him and he welcomed them as his guests. They were so impressed by this and by his kind hospitality that they suggested they should report back to their superiors that they had been unable to find the bishop. But Anthimus insisted that they should obey their orders and bring him to Nicomedia, no doubt aware that he would be martyred there.

Some of the believers in the Christian Thai village where Philip Siphong Onphitak was martyred also embraced martyrdom. "We beseech you to open to us the doors of heaven," wrote Agnes Phila to the Chief of Police after the villagers had been told that they must deny Christ or be killed. She and five other women and girls, aged from 14 to 58, went to their deaths the next day (see December 26).

It may seem strange to some readers that anyone could refuse an opportunity to escape pain or death, or could urge their persecutors not to delay in carrying out their orders to kill. But some in the cloud of witnesses might be just as puzzled by people who call themselves Christians and yet seem to have the same earth-bound and materialistic values as atheists. "Don't they know," they might say to each other, "that their light and momentary troubles are achieving for them an eternal glory that will far outweigh them all?" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

Sadly, it is often those who are richest in the things of this life who are least willing to suffer for Christ, let alone to die for Him. They feel entitled to a long, comfortable and healthy life, during which they will work their way through their "bucket list" of exciting and luxurious experiences. They will be happy enough to go to heaven when they have had all the earthly experiences they want, but not before. Others have expressed the idea that dying for one's faith is a ridiculously outmoded idea, and that, if it became necessary, it would be much more reasonable to deny Christ, albeit reluctantly. Surely no one would expect me to die prematurely just for the sake of a handful of words, they might say.

But martyrdom is the frontline of the spiritual battle in which we are all engaged whether we recognise it or not. Our Christian forebears knew that pagans really hated them. The spiritual powers were pitted against each other and Christians readied themselves for death.

It has been a thrilling and humbling spiritual journey for me to write this book and to see how faith blossomed in the most unlikely of situations, leading to a commitment that defies understanding. Death for the Christian is not misery but victory, and all the more triumphant if it is a martyr's death. The verse that kept recurring to me during the writing of this book was:

> They triumphed over him
> by the blood of the Lamb
> and by the word of their testimony;
> they did not love their lives so much
> as to shrink from death.
>
> (Revelation 12:11)

A true Christian is not defined by the purity of their belief in a certain set of doctrines. James tells us that even the demons believe in one God (James 2:19). The Lord Jesus warned us that "not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). Almost every denomination and Christian group believes that only their

way is correct and many believe that no other denominational label but their own will allow entry into heaven. We need to remember, with great humility, Jesus' words of warning. For in heaven there are no denominations or traditions, only blood-bought saints.

Neither is a true Christian defined as someone who does good works or who belongs to a certain church tradition. We are not saved by our works or by the Church. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). And it is not the Church who died on the cross to take away our sins: it was Jesus Christ who did that (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Hebrews 9:15).

The only test of true Christian faith is a person's willingness to die for Him. The Christian is the person who loves Jesus and is willing to proclaim Him, if need be, in the face of torture and death, rather than deny Him. This is the ultimate test, for our faith is defined by our choices. Jesus Himself said,

> Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? Whoever is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. (Luke 9:23-26)

Despite the focus of our age on life, pleasure and self-fulfilment, there are still those, in many parts of the world today, who are willing to embrace His cross and tread behind Him that pathway which may lead to an early and painful death.

We cannot judge the heart and intention of anyone else. What we can do is face the question and answer it for ourselves: do we love Jesus enough to die for Him?

Perhaps we feel we dare not answer, remembering that all too often the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matthew 26:41). But it is not a question of our strength. Most of us will never be put to the test, and who knows but that God might give us His grace to help us if the test came? The stories in this book show that, in situations of heightened need, there

could be heightened intervention by God, just as in Bible times. We have already considered the blazing furnace of King Nebuchadnezzar. Recall too the angel who set free Peter from prison (Acts 12:6-11) and the earthquake that freed Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25-26).

It is a question only of our willingness.

"We love because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19) – and died for us.

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.[4]

Patrick Sookhdeo
All Saints' Day
1 November 2021

[4] Isaac Watts, *When I survey the wondrous cross*

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? Romans 10:14

Namuri (c. 1860)
Bringing Light to a Dark Island

"O Lord Jesus, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing. Oh, take not away all Thy servants from Tanna! Take not away Thy Worship from this dark island! O God, bring all the Tannese to love and follow Jesus!"

These were the dying words of Namuri, from Aneityum, the southernmost island of the New Hebrides (modern Vanuatu). He had given his life to Christ when missionaries came to his island and thereafter his heart's desire was to share the Gospel with the cannibals of neighbouring Tanna Island, where John Paton, a Scottish missionary, served.

Namuri taught the Tannese about the things of God, led worship services and showed them by his own example a humble, loving Christian life. But a pagan priest grew jealous of Namuri's increasing influence and threw a killing-stone at him, afterwards beating him with a club. Weak and bleeding, Namuri somehow managed to get to the mission house to warn John Paton: "They are coming to kill you; they say, they must kill us all today, and they have begun with me." But God kept the attackers at bay and John tenderly cared for Namuri's wounds.

A few weeks later, Namuri was well enough to resume his ministry. One morning during worship, as Namuri knelt in prayer, the pagan priest attacked him with a club again, leaving him for dead. Namuri crawled to the mission house and John ran to comfort him and dress his wounds. Namuri bore his pain quietly, rejoicing that he would soon be with Jesus. "For Jesus' sake!" he kept repeating, and prayed for his persecutors. At last Namuri went home to his Lord. John made his coffin and dug his grave.

When I see them thirsting for my blood, I just see myself when the missionary first came to my island. I desired to murder him, as they now desire to kill me. Had he stayed away because of such danger, I should have remained heathen; but he came, and continued to teach us, till, by the grace of God, I was changed to what I am. Now the same God that changed me to this, can change these poor Tannese to love and serve Him.
Namuri, New Hebrides, now Vanuatu (martyred c. 1860)

See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me. Isaiah 49:16

Kosheh Christians (2000)
Massacre at Beginning of New Millennium

The Christian-majority town of El-Kosheh is a relative rarity in Egypt where Christians make up just 10% of the population. It is an important trading centre for Muslim farmers from the surrounding villages.

On the last day of 1999 a dispute occurred between a Christian shopkeeper and a Muslim customer. There had been a tense atmosphere in El-Kosheh since August 1998 when two Christians were murdered by three Muslims and police had arrested 1,200 Christians. Perhaps because of these existing tensions, the New Year's Eve dispute grew into a riot. Christian-owned businesses along the main street of the town were looted and burned by Muslims.

Then, after church services finished on Sunday 2 January 2000, Muslim gangs began going door-to-door, methodically shooting dead or slitting the throats of Christians. Many of their victims were people the attackers had previously been on friendly terms with.

A Christian mother described how the gangs found a cross tattooed on the arm of her 24-year-old son and began to beat him. (Most Egyptian Christians have a small cross tattoo on their inner wrist or thumb – a position chosen so that it is visible in everyday life as a constant witness to their faith.) "They said they would stop if he said he was a Muslim," recounted his mother. "He said he would rather be murdered – so they smashed his head in, then cut off his arms."

As rumours spread, riots also broke out in nearby villages where shops and a church were destroyed. Twenty-one Christians were killed, around 40 injured and 260 Christian-owned shops and homes were looted, destroyed and burned.

Fear not to place thy hand within the nail-pierced palm. Fear not to trust His guidance. The way He trod is marked by bleeding feet and wet with many tears. He leadeth thee aright, and heaven's splendour soon shall open to thy spirit, and thou shalt know that all triumphant souls – those who have overcome indeed – have found their entrance by this path into the realms of light.
John G Lake, Canada (1870–1935)

The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace.
Numbers 6:24-26

Ivan Skumatov (1975)
The Lord's Face Shines on Him

One night in 1975 Ivan Skumatov, a pastor in Krasnyi Luch (Khrustalny), Ukraine, was killed by officers of the KGB, the much-feared foreign intelligence and domestic security agency of the Soviet Union.

One of the KGB's responsibilities was the general surveillance of the population. Its officers arrested, imprisoned and executed "enemies of the state", which included many Christians. Church leaders were a special target of persecution. A principal KGB method applied to church leaders was "divide and rule", so disinformation and rumours were circulated, creating mistrust. Individuals were pressured and intimidated to try to compromise them or to persuade them to collaborate secretly with the authorities. As a result some pastors became informers against their fellow Christians.

The KGB had been targeting Ivan for a long time, trying to bribe him to work for them as an informant. But he consistently refused, so they arrested him and shot him dead. Ivan was martyred for being an honest, righteous Christian pastor who was loyal to the Body of Christ.

To hide the evidence of their crime, the KGB threw Ivan's body under a moving train, which crushed his head. Early the next morning they told his wife that her husband had died in a railway accident. But the story was flawed and by the middle of the day it was clear that the so-called "accident" was murder. The church buried the body of their pastor with his portrait placed in the coffin above the neck where his head should have been.

Joined in one spirit to our Head, where He appoints we go,
And still in Jesus' footsteps tread, and do His work below.
We all are one who him receive, and each with each agree,
In him the One, the Truth, we live; blest point of unity!
Partakers of the Saviour's grace, the same in mind and heart,
Nor joy, nor grief, nor time, nor place, nor life, nor death can part.
Charles Wesley, England (1707–88)

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation… each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: 'Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites… we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!' Acts 2:5-9, 11

Samsun (123)
First Martyr of Parthian Empire

The Gospel came early to the ancient land of Parthia (Khorasan, modern Iran). Some members of its Jewish community were in Jerusalem when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost and they heard the disciples speaking the Parthian language. Surely there were Parthian Jews among the 3,000 added to the number of believers that day (Acts 2:41).

The Parthians had conquered other nations and created an empire that lasted 500 years, although it was already on the wane by the first century AD. The dominant religion of the Parthian Empire was Zoroastrianism. Many scholars believe that the Magi who followed the star to Bethlehem were Zoroastrian priest-astrologers from Parthia.

One of the Parthian converts to Christianity was Paqida, the son of a slave belonging to a Zoroastrian priest. Paqida became a Christian in 99 AD and was severely persecuted by his family, who imprisoned him in a dark room when he refused to deny Christ. He escaped, became a missionary amongst the mountain villages and later a bishop overseeing the church in Adiabene. (Adiabene was one of the conquered countries that had become part of the Parthian Empire; its capital was Arbela, now Erbil in modern Iraqi Kurdistan.)

Paqida's successor as Bishop of Adiabene, Samsun, became the first Christian martyr of the Parthian Empire. He preached the Gospel among the Zoroastrian villages, bringing many to Christ and baptising them. This infuriated the Zoroastrian priests and the Adiabene nobility. Samsun was captured, tortured and beheaded in 123 AD.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness, Bow down before him, his glory proclaim; With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness, Kneel and adore him: the Lord is his name.

John S B Monsell, Ireland, now Northern Ireland (1811-75)

Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.
Deuteronomy 31:6

Zheng Musheng (1994)
Denied by Men, Accepted by Christ

Zheng Musheng, a farmer from Hunan Province, China, became a Christian in 1990. His life was completely changed. He was active in preaching and sharing the Gospel, he loved his Christian brothers and sisters and sought to glorify God in everything.

He was murdered while in police custody, although he had never broken any law. On 5 January 1994 government officials held 21 Christians, including Brother Zheng, during a raid on a prayer meeting in his village. The others were released but Brother Zheng was taken to the police station. There he was beaten and tortured all night to try to extort a confession. By the time morning came, he was near the point of death and the police apparently dared not send him home. Instead he was transferred to the county jail.

Within 24 hours of being taken into custody he was dead. When his wife, Yin Dongxiu, eventually found his body at a hospital she saw that it was covered with injuries. Police officers claimed he had been beaten to death by fellow prisoners. Observing that his injuries were consistent with torture methods known to be used by the police, Sister Yin refused to sign the papers for his cremation. Officers signed the papers in her place.

To add to the suffering of his widow, all her property, bedding, furniture and food were seized by the local government, leaving Sister Yin, her two young children and elderly mother hungry and freezing in the winter cold.

Father, long before creation
Thou hadst chosen us in love;
And that love, so deep, so moving,
Draws us close to Christ above.
Still it keeps us,
Still it keeps us,
Firmly fixed in Christ alone.

Hymn believed to have been written as the theme song for a student conference in Beijing in winter 1952-3. This first verse responds to the communist claim that "labour creates everything".

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.
2 Corinthians 2:14 (ESV)

Abo of Tbilisi (786)
Emboldened to be the Sweet Fragrance of Christ

Abo, a Muslim Arab, was a skilled perfumer living in Baghdad, capital of the Islamic Abbasid Caliphate, where he met Prince Nerses of Kartli (part of modern Georgia). Kartli was a Christian nation which had been conquered by Muslim armies and was now under Abbasid rule. Nerses was being held captive in Baghdad by the Abbasids, but after three years was released and took Abo back with him to Kartli.

There, amongst the Georgian Christians, Abo came to faith in Jesus, but kept it secret, for fear of the Muslim authorities who controlled Georgia. Before long Prince Nerses, who was constantly in conflict with his Muslim overlords, sought refuge in Khazaria and Abkhazia, which were Christian countries not ruled by the Abbasids. Here Abo dared to practise his faith openly and was baptised. After this he grew bolder and bolder, and returned to Georgia where he shared his faith openly in the streets of Tbilisi. He was threatened, but declared, "I am prepared not only to be tortured for Christ, but to die for His sake as well." He was arrested, tried for apostasy from Islam and sentenced to death.

On the day of his execution, 6 January 786, Abo prepared for his death as if for a feast. "Weep not, but rejoice, for I am going to my Lord," he said cheerfully to the Christians around him. On his way, he thanked God for having brought him from his earthly occupation as a perfumer to that of following the "sweet fragrance of Christ's commandments". Three times the executioners swung their swords in mock blows, hoping that, even now, Abo would return to Islam. Finally they beheaded him.

Once upon a time I myself was a skilled perfumer and mixer of fragrant oils. But today this is my anointing for the grave. From now on I shall no longer be anointed with this perishable oil of my petty nature, but as Solomon the Wise taught me in his Song of Songs, "I ran in the savour of Thy good ointments," O Christ, who filled me with the imperishable perfume of Thy faith and love. Thou knowest, O Lord, that I have loved Thee more than I have loved myself.
Abo of Tbilisi (martyred 786)

Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. Jeremiah 6:16

Alicia Castilla (2013) and Nelson Ramos (2011) Colombian Guerrillas' Target

Alicia was shot and died on the spot in her own home, in the presence of her three children, her father and her pastor who had just finished an evening devotional with the family. It was 7 January 2013, and four months after guerrillas from Colombia's National Liberation Army (ELN) had demanded that she leave her home in Arauca, north-east Colombia near to the border with Venezuela.

The assassins then told Alicia's 18-year-old son, Hernán, that the family had three days to leave the region; after that the guerrillas would return and kill any remaining family members.

Two years earlier, Alicia's husband, evangelist Nelson Ramos, had been killed by the ELN in front of her and their two daughters, then aged 7 and 4. He had come to personal faith in Christ just two years before his death and was sharing the Gospel in the very dangerous area where the family lived. For the Colombia-Venezuela border area is rich in petroleum resources, and the ELN and other armed groups were fighting for control of it. Violent groups also used the area as a drug-trafficking route, persecuting those who opposed them, namely the Church.

In the midst of this culture of fear, revenge and death, Christians were spreading the life-changing love of Jesus which brings peace and forgiveness to communities. Hernán initially declared that he would avenge his father's death and planned to join the Colombian military to gain training in weaponry, but he changed his mind, renounced his vow, and committed his life to the Lord.

Father, make me a crisis man. Bring those I contact to decision. Let me not be a milepost on a single road; make me a fork, that men must turn one way or another on facing Christ in me.

Jim Elliot, American missionary martyred in Ecuador in 1956

The LORD is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? Psalm 27:1

Minas and his Father (2014)
A Martyr's Widow

"My future and my kids' future are 100% in His hands." With these words, Angela, an Armenian Christian and a martyr's widow from Aleppo, Syria, declared her confidence and trust in God despite all that had happened to her family. On 8 January 2014 she had received a phone call from Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) saying that they had beheaded her husband, Minas, and her father-in-law.

The two men had gone out to work one hot summer's day in 2013 at their ice-making factory, which was the only Christian-owned factory in the area. But they were kidnapped by IS, after being betrayed by a Muslim employee whom Minas and his father had cared for and treated like a son. Initially only Minas was seized, but when his father begged the militants to be taken instead of his son, IS took them both.

The Christian men had a strong faith. Before being abducted, Minas would pray daily on his knees and taught his children to do the same. His father would read the Bible in the factory every day, despite his poor eyesight.

A fortnight later a Muslim fellow captive, who had been released, contacted Angela to tell her where her loved ones were. After two months Angela began to receive threatening phone calls from IS and then came the call to say the two men had been beheaded on 6 January 2014. Soon afterwards a DVD showing footage of the killings was sent to her. They said, "Your husband was very stubborn. We could not convince him to leave Christianity."

According to the former fellow captive, "They received the penalty for being Christians, because they refused to leave Christianity."

I got peace in my heart. I realised it was not a punishment but the love of God to preserve me and my children.

Angela, reflecting later on her situation

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels. Revelation 3:5 (NKJV)

Two North Korean Christians (2013) Before God No One is Nameless

Two Christians were killed in the secretive communist state of North Korea in 2013. Many other North Korean Christians may have died for their faith that year, but unreported.

The first Christian was shot by a border guard as he tried to cross into China. He had previously visited China several times for work, and while there he had committed his life to Christ, after studying the Bible with a Christian he met there. He went back home to North Korea, excited about his new Christian faith and eager to share it with his family. After a while he decided to return to China to receive some more Bible training so that he could better explain the Gospel truths to his family. It was on this trip that he was shot dead just as he was leaving North Korea.

The second Christian also studied the Bible in China. Before returning to North Korea, he was baptised, well aware of the hardships that were likely to lie ahead for him. When the North Korean authorities discovered that he was a Christian, they sent him to a labour camp where not only had he to do heavy labour with hardly any food but also was cruelly tortured because of his faith. He died there in the labour camp.

The names of these Christians, and many other North Korean martyrs, are unknown to us, but Christ knows His own and their names are written in the Book of Life.

My name is in the Book of Life, oh, bless the name of Jesus;
I rise above all doubt and strife, and read my title clear.

My name once stood with sinners lost, and bore a painful record,
But by His blood the Saviour crossed, and placed it on His roll.

While others climb through worldly strife to carve a name of honour,
High up in heaven's Book of Life, my name is written there.

Daniel S Warner, USA (1842-95)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. Colossians 3:23

Felipe Songsong (1685)
A Filipino Carpenter in the Marianas

Felipe Songsong (or Sonson), born into a prominent family in Pampanga, Philippines, served as a soldier until his mid-50s. But when his wife died he gave up the military life, handed all his material wealth to his son and offered himself to serve the Church in practical ways. His main skill was carpentry and he built wooden houses and churches. In 1668 he went as a missionary to the Mariana Islands, where he served the Christian community on Guam as carpenter, tailor and cook. He was known for his humility and the loving care with which he performed his duties. "When with great promptness he finished one task, he went on to another... And if on some day he had no occupation… he was totally occupied in devotions and spiritual books, in having many periods of prayer, and in giving good advice."

Felipe was martyred during a period of anti-Christian aggression in the Marianas. In July 1684 the 73-year-old was savagely attacked by pagan islanders who tried to behead him. He survived for a further six months but finally succumbed to the wounds in his head and neck, dying as he knelt in prayer.

That evening, when the Carpenter swept out
The fragrant shavings from the workshop floor,
And placed the tools in order and shut to
And barred, for the last time, the humble door,
And, going on His way to save the world,
Turned from the labourer's lot for evermore,
I wonder – was He glad?

That morning, when the Carpenter walked forth
From Joseph's doorway, in the glimmering light,
And bade His loving mother long farewell;
And, through those rose-shot skies with dawning bright
Saw glooming the dark shadow of the Cross,
Yet, seeing, set His feet toward Calvary's height,
I wonder – was He sad?

S Alice Ranlett, USA (c. 1886-1936)

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.
Psalm 107:4-7

Hikmat Sleiman (2010)
"Ethnic Cleansing" in Mosul

Hikmat, a 75-year-old Christian, was shot dead on 11 January 2010 in front of his house in Mosul, Iraq. He had closed up his small greengrocer's shop for the day and made his way home, but a group of gunmen were waiting for him. They opened fire, killing him instantly. His murder was part of a wave of anti-Christian violence in Mosul (especially targeting Christian shopkeepers), which Iraqi Christians believed to be an attempt by Islamist extremists to frighten Christians into fleeing the area, so that it would become purely Muslim – a type of "ethnic cleansing".

Mosul is the modern name for the ancient city of Nineveh, at one time the capital of the Assyrian Empire, to which the prophet Jonah was sent. The nearby Plains of Nineveh are Iraq's Christian heartland, where there is a string of settlements whose roots date back to the dawn of Christianity. Iraqi Christians are descendants of the indigenous people of Iraq, whereas Iraqi Muslims are descendants of Arabs who came to the area only 1,400 years ago during the Islamic conquests.

After the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Islamist extremists singled out Christian leaders, churches and businesses for attacks.

For lasting peace in this ancient land – from you, O Lord.
For wisdom and compassion for all in authority – from you, O Lord.
For comfort for families separated or bereaved – from you, O Lord.
For the release of captives – from you, O Lord.
For safety and security for minority communities – from you, O Lord.
For refreshment for the weary and healing for the sick – from you, O Lord.
For continuing faithfulness of the ancient churches of this land – from you, O Lord.
For tenacity of spirit for small Christian groups – from you, O Lord.
For the mutual enrichment and support of those of different Christian traditions – from you, O Lord.
Litany for Iraq (from the Chaldean Church)

For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.
Colossians 3:3

Joesoef Tappi' (1946)
"Our Souls are with Christ above!"

"Even though our bodies are still here, our souls are with Christ above!" This was Joesoef's reply, when asked before his execution if he was ready to die for his faith or would deny it.

Joesoef, born in 1903, was the son of a *To minaa*, that is, a spiritual leader of the Torajan ancestral animist religion. The Torajans are an ethnic group indigenous to a mountainous region of South Sulawesi, Indonesia, and Joesoef was born in a place known locally as "the land above the clouds". Dutch missionaries were at work in this region in the early twentieth century and through them Joesoef came to faith in Christ. In 1928 the missionaries sent Joesoef as an evangelist to Pantilang, an area that was deeply resistant to the Christian faith.

In 1941, as the Second World War raged, the missionaries asked Joesoef to become a pastor. He hesitated, but then agreed: "Remembering the cross of Christ for my sin, I dare to stand before the church, not from myself but from God who came into the world as a king. While also remembering what applies to Paul, which is 'For me to live is Christ and to die is gain' [Philippians 1:21]."

The next year the Japanese occupied Indonesia and all the Western missionaries were interned. Church leadership devolved on to Indonesian pastors, such as Joesoef. Although Japan surrendered in 1945, some Japanese soldiers continued fighting, especially in remote areas. Joesoef was taken by Japanese soldiers and detained with about 40 other Christians in a small entrenchment. Every day they would sing and pray, until January 1946 when they were beheaded one by one with the samurai sword of their executioner.

Tunjukkanlah jalan menuju damai abadi
Berikanlah kekuatan iman yang hakiki.

Show the way leading to eternal peace
Give us a strength of faith which is genuine.

Yolias Mailoa (a Christian refugee from Maluku, Indonesia). Over 9,000 Indonesians are believed to have died in anti-Christian violence in the province of Maluku between 1999 and 2001 and the campaign of terror by Laskar Jihad created as many as half a million refugees.

Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness! Matthew 25:21

Kiran (2016)
A Shocking Attack in Pakistan

Seventeen-year-old Kiran was killed on the evening of 13 January 2016 after she and two friends, Shamroza (18) and Sumble (20), rejected the unwanted advances of four Muslim men in one of the elite areas of Lahore, Pakistan. The girls explained they were devout Christians and did not practise sex outside marriage. Bravely, they scolded the young men for their untoward advances.

The three girls were beauticians, on their way home after a hard day's work, intending to get back to their homes in the poor Christian community of Baowala as quickly as possible, before it got too unsafe. After the girls' rejection, the four men changed their demeanour and became hostile and threatening. They said that if the girls did not get into the men's car of their own accord, they would be forced in. The girls tried to run away. This enraged the men even further. One of them shouted, "How dare you run away from us? Christian girls are only meant for one thing, namely, the pleasure of Muslim men."

The men crashed their car into the three girls, breaking Sumble's hip and several of Shamroza's ribs as the impact threw them to the ground. Kiran was lifted off her feet and on to the bonnet of the car. The young men laughed and increased their speed, until they saw another car ahead and braked suddenly. Kiran was thrown up into the air by the emergency stop, then fell to the ground. Her head broke open and numerous bones were smashed. Within minutes she was dead.

Loving Shepherd of Thy sheep,
Keep Thy lamb, in safety keep;
Nothing can Thy power withstand,
None can pluck me from Thy hand.
Jane Elizabeth Leeson, England (1809-81)

The kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Matthew 13:45-46

Francisco Fernández de Capillas (1648)
Joyful in Prison

In one of his letters from prison in China, Francisco wrote: "I am here with other prisoners and we have developed a fellowship. They ask me about the Gospel of the Lord. I am not concerned about getting out of here because here I know I am doing the will of God. They do not let me stay up at night to pray, so I pray in bed before dawn. I live here in great joy without any worry, knowing that I am here because of Jesus Christ. The pearls I have found here these days are not always easy to find."

Born in Spain in 1607, Francisco deeply desired to see the expansion of God's Kingdom on earth. After years of preparation he was sent, at the age of 34, to Fujian Province in south-east China, where he shared the Gospel and established a Christian community. Every day he would go out visiting the sick and discipling new believers.

In 1644 the Manchurian Qing dynasty came to power. They entered the city of Fu'an and immediately began to persecute the Christians. A number of believers were injured in an anti-Christian riot which flared up on 13 November 1647. Francisco set out to visit them but on the way was seized by a group of soldiers and thrown in prison. His conduct in prison won the admiration both of his fellow prisoners and of the prison guards. But on 15 January 1648 he was taken from his prison cell and beheaded. Local Chinese Christians found his remains two months later.

O that pearl of great price! Have you found it?
Is the Saviour supreme in your love?
O consider it well, ere you answer,
As you hope for a welcome above.
Have you given up all for this Treasure?
Have you counted past gains as but loss?
Has your trust in yourself and your merits
Come to naught before Christ and His cross?

"Den Kostliga Pärlan", a Swedish hymn (author unknown) translated by Andrew L Skoog (1856-1934)

My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation. He is my stronghold, my refuge and my saviour – from violent people you save me. 2 Samuel 22:3

Tomi Alipa, Heri Tobio and Imanuel Tetembu (2015) Villagers Killed at Work in Poso

Three Indonesian Christian farmers were killed in Poso, Central Sulawesi, in January 2015, murdered by Islamist militants, seeking revenge for police arrests.

Tomi (22), also known as Dolfis, was a university student who had been working with his mother, Jana, and sister, Dian, in a field near their home in Tangkura village, on this date in 2015. Tomi left the field before the others, in order to move the family's cattle home. The two women heard three gunshots and found his lifeless body covered in blood. Distraught Jana confronted a group of about eight Muslim men and demanded to know why they had killed her son. The men told her it was in retaliation for the arrest of some members of the East Indonesian Mujahidin (MIT).

The next day, the bodies of two other Christian farm workers from the same village, Heri and Imanuel, both in their 50s, were found dead with several gunshot and knife wounds.

Poso Regency has a Muslim-majority population in the towns and coastal villages, but the highlands have a majority Christian population. From 1998 to 2000 it was the scene of major Muslim-Christian conflict when over 2,000 people were killed or went missing. A peace agreement, the Malino Declaration, was reached in 2001.

In this world Your people suffer,
For Christ we stand fast and pray:
"Please, Lord Jesus, help us."
There are many victims of the conflict
Let there be no more killings
Give Your peace, please bring peace to Maluku

Rafel Nanuru, a Christian refugee from Maluku, Indonesia (see also January 12). In a CD produced by Barnabas Fund in 2002, this was sung by Merlin and Astri Tawale, whose home city, Ternate in North Maluku, was completely Islamised during the period 1999-2001, making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to return.

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. Genesis 12:1

Berard, Peter, Otho, Accursius and Adjutus (1220)
A Moroccan Marketplace

On this day in 1220 Berard and his four companions, Peter, Otho, Accursius and Adjutus were executed by the Sultan of Morocco.

Berard, born in Leopardi to a family of Italian nobles, was a powerful preacher and spoke fluent Arabic. He was chosen by Francis of Assisi to be part of a missionary party sent to Morocco to preach the Gospel amongst the Muslims there. The missionaries set off in 1219, travelling by way of Islamic Spain. In Seville they preached in the mosque that salvation could be found only in Christ. The furious Muslim leader ordered that their heads be cut off immediately, but his son intervened, appeased his father's anger, and persuaded him to let the missionaries set sail for Morocco.

On their arrival in Morocco the five immediately began preaching openly to the people they came across in the marketplace. This soon got them arrested, and they were ordered not only to stop preaching, but also to leave the country. In fact, they were expelled twice, but on both occasions returned and continued to preach, in defiance of the Moroccan authorities. The Sultan commanded that they be severely beaten and also tried to bribe them to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. But they refused to deny their Lord and Saviour. In a fit of rage the Sultan "opened their heads with his scimitar".

Their martyrdoms sparked a missionary calling in many other Christians, who gave their lives so that others could hear the Good News (see October 10).

Many that have been long travelling, are now entering into their possessions and inheritance, which the Lord is daily enlarging in them, and to them. Oh that thy lot may be among them, inwardly witnessed and possessed by thee! Prize inward exercises, griefs, and troubles, and let faith and patience have their perfect work in them. O desire to be good, upright, and perfect in God's sight! and wait to feel the life, Spirit and power which makes so.

Isaac Penington, England (1616-79)

Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now. Joshua 23:7-8

George of Ioannina (1838)
A Janissary who was Always a Christian, Never a Muslim

At the gallows on 17 January 1838, after asking for his hands to be untied, George made the sign of the cross and answered his tormentors' final question, "What are you?" with these words, "I am a Christian and I shall die a Christian. I bow before my Christ."

George was born in 1808 in the village of Tsourchli (modern Agios Georgios, Greece) in the Greek part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. He was brought up to love the Lord by his devout Christian parents but when he was eight they both died. His brother and sister cared for him, until, at the age of about twelve, he became one of the last Janissaries. The Janissaries were an elite Ottoman military corps comprising men who had been Christian boys, kidnapped from their families, forcibly converted to Islam and trained as soldiers. The Janissaries were eventually disbanded in 1826.

George was taken into the service as a groom to the horses of an officer called Hatzi Abdullah. When Hatzi's commander, Imin Pasha, was made the Ottoman ruler of Ioannina (modern north-western Greece) in 1836, he took Hatzi and George with him. George was known by the Muslims as Giaour Hasan ("unbelieving Hasan").

George married a Christian woman, Eleni, and when the couple had a son, they had him baptised and named John. This caused the Muslims to view George as an apostate from Islam, to be punished by death according to sharia. He was tortured to try to make him "return" to Islam, but George courageously maintained, "I was never a Turk [Muslim]; I was always a Christian." Eventually he was sentenced to death by hanging.

It is our duty not only to hold fast, but to hold forth the word of life; not only to hold it fast for our own benefit, but to hold it forth for the benefit of others, to hold it forth as the candlestick holds forth the candle, which makes it appear to advantage all around, or as the luminaries of the heavens, which shed their influence far and wide.

Matthew Henry, Wales (1662-1714)

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD *descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.* Exodus 19:16-18

Sinai Desert Martyrs (early fourth century)
Saved by God's Fire

An ancient manuscript in the Syriac (Aramaic) language was discovered by British twin sisters, Agnes Lewis (1843-1926) and Margaret Gibson (1843-1920) who were Bible scholars, linguists and travellers.

The manuscript recounted the martyrdom of 40 monks at Mount Sinai and 39 at Raithu (modern El-Tor, Egypt) on the same day. Ammonius, the author of the manuscript, sorrowfully records the suffering the Christians endured at the hands of pagans who suddenly attacked them, killing every monk they found at Mount Sinai until God miraculously intervened.

The text describes it in this way: "[They] were also nearly killing us; for no man stood up against them; except the merciful God; He who stretched out His hand in conjunction with those who call upon Him from their whole heart. And He commanded and a flame of fire was seen on the summit of the Holy Mount, and it was a wonder … falling on our faces, we worshipped God, and supplicated that He would carry us over the present necessity, which lay heavy on us, to a prosperous issue. Nay, even the Barbarians also, terrified by this new and unwonted sight, by a sudden impulse took to flight, many [of them] even leaving [their] arms with [their] camels, nor did they brook a moment's delay." The surviving Christians thanked God for sparing them and Ammonius wrote, "I praise God all the time, the omnipotent Father, the one for whom there is praise forever and ever. Amen."

At Raithu, Paul, leader of the monks, urged them to endure their suffering with courage and a pure heart. They were slaughtered by the Blemmyes, a pagan desert tribe from east of the Nile (in modern Sudan).

Do not grieve if you do not at once receive from God that which you ask. He wishes to benefit you still more by making you persist longer in your patient prayer before Him. For what can be higher than to address one's converse to God, and be in communion with him?
Nilus of Sinai, Egypt (400-430)

For in that day every one of you will reject the idols of silver and gold your sinful hands have made. Isaiah 31:7

Ulfrid (1028)
Destroyer of a Pagan Idol

Although little is known about Ulfrid (also called Wilfrid or Wulfrid), it is clear that he was passionate for the glory of God. Ulfrid was an English nobleman, with the highest education possible in eleventh-century England, who decided to use his intellectual abilities in the service of the King of kings. He left England to preach the Gospel, first in Germany, and then in Sweden, a land where, despite earlier missionary efforts in the ninth century, the Christian faith had not yet taken a firm hold.

Ulfrid led many Swedes to the Lord. But his work met great opposition, not least in Uppsala which was then a major centre of pagan worship and sacrifice. In his zeal for Christ, Ulfrid attacked a much revered idol of the Norse god Thor, hacking it to pieces with an axe, in the presence of a large crowd. He wanted to show that this statue was merely man-made. The enraged pagans rushed upon him and put him to death on the spot in 1028 and threw his body into a bog.

But Sweden already had its second Christian king, and Christianity became an officially recognised religion in Sweden, alongside paganism. The pagan worship and sacrifices continued in Uppsala; Christians had to pay to be exempt from participating. Within a few decades, the Christian faith became well established, although still facing resistance in the region around Uppsala and Stockholm.

O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the works Thy Hand hath made
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder
Thy pow'r throughout the universe displayed.
Then sings my soul my Saviour God, to Thee
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!

Carl Gustav Boberg (1859-1940). This hymn was originally written in Swedish. English translation by Stuart K Hine (1899-1989)

My times are in your hands. Psalm 31:15

Lawan Andimi (2020)
In God's Hands

Pastor Lawan Andimi, a leading church figure in north-east Nigeria and a convert from Islam, was kidnapped on 2 January 2020 by Islamist terrorists from the Boko Haram group. In a video released three days later by his captors, he urged his loved ones not to cry or worry about him but to "thank God for everything". He affirmed that we are all in the hands of God no matter what happens to us: "I have never been discouraged because all conditions that one finds himself is in the hands of God. By the grace of God, I will be together with my wife, my children and my colleagues. If the opportunity has not been granted, maybe it is the will of God."

On 20 January Boko Haram announced that they had killed Pastor Andimi. He had survived attempts on his life in 2015, 2016 and 2017, repeatedly targeted because he had led many Muslims to Christ, including his father-in-law who was a famous *mallam* (Quranic scholar).

On Sunday 2 February 2020 five million people took part in peaceful marches across the country protesting against the murder of Pastor Andimi and the failure of the Nigerian authorities to halt the rising wave of violent Islamist attacks against Christians, especially church leaders. The march was the final event of a three-day fast which took place in 28 of Nigeria's 36 states.

My times are in Thy hand;
My God, I wish them there;
My life, my friends, my soul, I leave
Entirely to Thy care.

My times are in Thy hand,
Whatever they may be;
Pleasing or painful, dark or bright,
As best may seem to Thee.

My times are in Thy hand;
Why should I doubt or fear?
My Father's hand will never cause
His child a needless tear.

William Freeman Lloyd, England (1791-1853)

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable.
1 Corinthians 15:58 (NKJV)

Mark, Demiana and her 40 Friends (early fourth century)
A Steadfast Daughter

Demiana's father, Mark, who was a Christian and a district governor in Egypt, wanted her to marry. But she decided to remain single so that she could devote her life to serving the Lord. At her request, Mark built a large house in the desert where she and 40 likeminded friends lived, fasting, praying, reading the Bible and doing handiwork.

The Roman Emperor Diocletian began to suppress Christianity, requiring everyone to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Demiana was horrified to hear that her father had done so and reproached him severely: "I wish I had heard the news of your death rather than knowing that you have forsaken God, who created you … How could you deny your Saviour who shed His blood to save you and kneel down to stone idols inhabited by Satan? What you did, my father, is cowardly and shameful. If you insist on what you have done … then you are not my father and I am not your daughter."

Moved by his daughter's words, Mark wept bitterly in repentance. He declared to Diocletian his faith in Jesus and was beheaded.

On discovering it was Mark's daughter who had persuaded him to return to Christianity, Diocletian ordered soldiers to her desert house. Demiana prayed for a strong faith and gave her 40 friends a choice: "If you are willing to die for Jesus' sake then you may stay, but if you cannot withstand the torments of the soldiers then hurry and escape now." All 40 replied, "We will die with you."

When the soldiers arrived, Demiana declared, "As for me, I worship my Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and His Good Father and the Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity ... and in His Name I will die and by Him I will live forever."

She was tortured in many agonising ways, which she survived with angelic aid. Then she and her 40 friends were beheaded.

I am ready for death in the Name of the Saviour, Jesus Christ, my God. I believe, and in His Name do I rely, will die, be with Him, and live forever.

Mark, after Demiana rebuked him for sacrificing to idols of Roman gods

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from my cries of anguish? Psalm 22:1

Martyrs of Erzerum (1550)
Seventy Souls in One Night

"In the year of the Armenians 999, in the city of Erzerum, the children of dirt killed seventy souls in one night. It was a great calamity."

This brief but heartfelt summary of the martyrdom of 70 Armenian Christians occurs in an Armenian-language manuscript entitled *History of Adam and His Grandsons.* The document gives a chronological history, first outlining the generations from Adam to Christ and then recording key dates in Armenian history. The two short sentences quoted above, about the massacre in the city of Erzerum (modern Erzurum, eastern Turkey) in the Armenian year 999 (1550 AD), form the third and final section of the history. Most likely it was written shortly after the massacre had occurred and it seems the historian, so detached in presenting most of the earlier events, was unable to stop his own personal distress showing as he recorded what happened in Erzerum. Perhaps he was an eye-witness. Perhaps some of his relatives were among those who died.

This account is the only surviving record of 70 people who died for Christ. No one now on earth knows how they perished, what pain or fear they endured before the end came. But their stories are known and honoured in heaven.

Perhaps we want to ask not only "how?" but also "why?" Why did these brothers and sisters of ours die violently half a millennium ago? Why must any of the Lord's people suffer at the hands of evil men? Why, O Lord, why?

Why, O Lord, why?
They are hurting.
They are crying.
They are shamed.
They are abused.
They die alone.

Why, O Lord, why?
Oh that they may know
Your tender care,
That binds them to you,
Enfolded in your arms,
Your steadfast love
That never ends
Your strength that will sustain them,
Your grace that is all-sufficient
Until they reach their heavenly home.

Patrick Sookhdeo, Guyana (born 1947)

I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. Hosea 2:19

Mariam (2013)
Fifteen Temporary Marriages

Mariam, a 15-year-old Christian girl from al-Qusair, Syria was seized by Islamist rebels early in 2013 and subjected to systematic sexual violence. Each day one of the Islamists would marry her, rape her and then divorce her. The next day, another Islamist would do the same thing. This terrible ordeal continued in the same way for 15 days, one "husband" for each year of her life, which was then brought to an end when her abductors killed her.

Temporary marriages (*mut'ah*) are lawful in Shia Islam and are sometimes adopted by Sunni Muslims as well during periods of jihad. Effectively, it is a form of legalised prostitution. Rape is all too often used as an unofficial weapon of war, but in the Syrian Civil War, which had begun about two years before Mariam was abducted, its use was formalised.

Before the attack on Mariam, Yasir al-Ajlawni, a Salafi Sunni sheikh, issued a *fatwa* via YouTube calling for the rape of women who were not Sunni Muslims. He said that it was "legitimate" for Muslims who were fighting for an Islamic state in Syria to "capture and have sex with" such women and applied to them the term *melk al-yamin*, a Quranic term for non-Muslim sex slaves. This followed an earlier similar announcement by a Saudi Islamic cleric.

Mariam's grotesque torment before her martyrdom was a travesty of the loving and lasting marriage that God intended for humankind. But even the best human marriage is only a pale imitation of God's faithful love for His people, so often likened in the Bible to a marriage, for God is love (1 John 4:8).

Come down, O Love divine,
Seek Thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with Thine own ardour glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, Thy holy flame bestowing.

Bianco da Siena, Italy (c.1350-99), translated by Richard Frederick Littledale (1833-90)

Those who look to him are radiant. Psalm 34:5

The Ongut People (c. 1370-1405)
Forgotten in History, Remembered in the Annals of Faith

By the 8th century the rulers of the Ongut (Ongud) people were Christians and so were many of the ordinary people of this Turkic tribe from the steppes of Central Asia and northern Mongolia. By the early 13th century they were living in a number of urban settlements along the Yin mountains (modern Inner Mongolia, China), many of them holding administrative positions.

In 1281 an Ongut called Markos became patriarch of the Church of the East. Three years later he sent Sauma, a fellow Ongut, to the European rulers, including Philip IV of France and Edward I of England, asking for joint action against the Muslims to regain Jerusalem. When these powers expressed surprise that a Christian envoy came from "the king of the Tartars", Sauma replied: "Know ye that many of our fathers in times past entered the lands of the Turks, the Mongols, and the Chinese and have instructed them in the faith. Today many Mongols are Christians. There are queens and children of kings who have been baptised and confess Christ. The khans have churches in their camps. They honour Christians highly and there are many faithful among them."

The Onguts had a rich artistic culture and archaeological finds, such as carved gravestones and about a thousand bronze crosses, indicate a thriving Christian faith. Two stone tablets, carved with ancient crosses, found near Beijing may mark the site of the cave in which Sauma lived for seven years before travelling to Europe. One is inscribed with words from Psalm 34:5 in the Peshitta (a Syriac translation of the Bible).

In the second half of the 14th century the Onguts succumbed to sickness and persecution. Many died of plague and most of the rest were eliminated by the fearsome Muslim conqueror Timur (Tamerlane). Eventually this Christian people-group vanished from the records.

If I cannot see Thy face and live, then let me see Thy face and die.
John Wesley, England (1703–91)

In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. Isaiah 63:9 (ESV)

Jeikwaragu and Bingguok (1968)
Yali Tribe of West Papua

"Who will go to them?" asked missionary Stanley Dale (see September 19). Someone had sent word that the Yali people in the lower Heluk valley in West Papua (formerly Irian Jaya), Indonesia were ready to follow Christ, as the Yali in the upper valley had already done. It would clearly be a dangerous mission, because the animist Yali were known to be furious about the conversions to Christianity. But two Yali believers volunteered, Jeikwaragu (Yekwara) and Bingguok (Bengwok).

The two friends set off down the valley and in the first village preached to the villagers and stayed the night. The next morning they climbed up to a village called Ilia and, on the narrow ridgeline, gathered people around them and began to share the Good News. They were warned that there were people coming to harm them. "Let them come," replied Jeikwaragu calmly, "Perhaps when they get here, they also will decide to listen to the good words we bring."

But the warriors were approaching at speed, indicating that they had come to kill. The two evangelists fled – into an ambush. Bingguok was killed almost immediately. Jeikwaragu threw himself into some bushes, but then burst out again shouting, "I am a child of God; why should I hide? Shoot me and shoot Jesus too." The next moment he was shot through the chest and fell dead.

These martyrdoms inspired a number of Yali believers to take the step of baptism.

Your Yali osuwa ("place of refuge") was limited to just one geographical location. If a beleaguered man couldn't get to it in time, he died without mercy. And it offered protection only from physical danger, not spiritual. For this reason God saw that your people needed a better kind of osuwa, one that could be around you in any geographical location – one that could deliver you from spiritual as well as physical danger. That is why He sent His Son.

Don Richardson (1935-2018), Canadian missionary to West Papua

For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. 2 Corinthians 1:5-6

Lydia Alexandrovna Lilyanova ("Maria") (1930)
Gift of Consolation

The small town of Gatchina, near Petrograd (now called St Petersburg) in Russia, was a place of healing for many who went to visit a nun called "Matushka Maria" (Mama Maria). She loved to help and comfort those in sorrow. Her gift of consolation was the fruit of her own experiences of patient endurance of affliction. For she had Parkinson's disease and needed constant care. The slightest touch caused her pain and she could speak only in a slow monotone with a half-closed mouth. She bore her illness meekly and without complaint, never bad-tempered, constantly in prayer.

Many would come, burdened with grief or depression, to visit Maria, leaving with peace in their hearts, their fears calmed, their despondency gone, radiant with joy. These transformations were so dramatic that they were seen as miraculous healings.

News of the healings spread beyond Gatchina to Petrograd (whose name had been changed to Leningrad in 1924 by the communist Soviet authorities who now ruled the country). In 1930 Maria was arrested for "counter-revolutionary propaganda" (her God-given gift of consolation) and "participating in a counter-revolutionary organisation" (meaning an organisation of two people: Maria and her brother). Perhaps the real reason for her arrest was that she had criticised the de facto leader of the Russian Orthodox Church for declaring unconditional loyalty to the Soviet Union and its communist leadership.

The helpless invalid, almost paralysed, was dragged by her arms, which were twisted behind her back, along the floor and thrown on to a truck which took her to Leningrad, where she was imprisoned. Some eight weeks later it was announced that she had died in the hospital.

Intense sorrows, like gold in a furnace, purify the soul, give it life, fortify and temper it. A man becomes less sensitive to his everyday sorrows and sufferings on earth, becomes calmer, more balanced, looks at the world more seriously and soberly, becomes less attached to the earthly, thirsts more for the heavenly, the eternal, the unending.
Joseph of Petrograd, now St Petersburg (1872-1937)

But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:4-5

Augustine Zhao Rong (1815)
Impressed by Christian Kindness

Augustine's first job was in the county prison in Wuchuan, Guizhou Province, China. In the 1770s anti-Christian persecution broke out and many believers were imprisoned. One prisoner who greatly impressed Augustine was a French missionary called Jean-Martin Moye (1730-93) who led many of his fellow prisoners to Christ. Struck by Jean-Martin's kindness and the visibly changed lives of the new Christians, Augustine wanted to know more about this religion. He listened carefully to Jean-Martin's preaching and praying and in 1776 he gave his life to the Lord and was baptised.

Augustine grew in spiritual maturity and was a great help to the local church. In 1779, when famine struck neighbouring Sichuan Province and thousands died of a plague, Augustine was sent to help the suffering believers. He became a gifted and respected Bible teacher and sometimes preached for three days solidly. Seeing both his fearlessness and his effectiveness the church sent him to a challenging work amongst the Lolo (now known as Yi) ethnic minority group in Yunnan Province. He travelled widely, encouraging the scattered believers to remain steadfast in their faith.

Another bout of persecution broke out in 1815. Augustine was arrested and taken to Chengdu, the provincial capital of Sichuan, where a judge treated him harshly. He was given 70 strokes with a bamboo stick on his shins and then 80 blows on the face with a leather sole. Augustine was in his late 60s and his aged body could not cope with this treatment. He died in prison on 27 January 1815.

Dear Christian, chosen by and beloved of the Lord, you should trust the Lord without the slightest shadow of doubt, uneasiness or fear. The Lord loves you, once died for you, redeemed you and has made you his heir. Since the Lord loves you so, He will never do anything that is detrimental to you. Admittedly, some of the things that the Lord ordained to happen to you might apparently be your loss, your grief, and might puzzle and perplex you. But if you remember that Jesus said, "What I am doing you do not understand now; but you will know after this", you will be greatly comforted and gladdened.
Wang Mingdao (1900-91), Chinese pastor imprisoned for 23 years by the Communists for his Christian faith

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. 2 Peter 1:3

Stundists (1867 onwards)
An Hour a Day with the Word of God

Felix Pavilkovski, a preacher from Kherson (in modern Ukraine), was arrested in late 1891. He was a "Stundist", that is, a member of a Russian Christian movement that had begun in the 1860s under the influence of German Protestants who had settled in southern Russia three generations earlier.

Felix spent months in prison, including three days in a cage-like structure set in the foul prison latrine, so shaped that he could neither sit nor stand. With the "help" of false witnesses, he and six other Stundists were tried, convicted and sentenced to exile in Siberia. Their wives and children were allowed to accompany them. Before the march of thousands of miles began, iron rings were riveted around the ankles of the Stundists so that each could be chained to a convict sentenced to labour in the mines. Such was the hardship of the journey that three of the Stundist wives (including Felix's own) and eight of the 13 Stundist children died on the journey.

The Stundists were pious and godly, with a great love for the Word of God. It was their habit to set aside an hour (*Stunde* in German) a day to read the Bible. Despite harsh persecution, which began in 1867, from the Russian authorities and peasants alike, the movement continued to grow. Many Stundists were sent to Siberia, just as Felix was, and when they got there it was up to them to find a way to survive and avoid starvation in the barren land.

Persecution continued until Tsar Nicholas II signed a decree on religious toleration in 1905, but returned again during the communist era (1918-91). Even today, the evangelicals of Russia face considerable harassment.

God's will and revelation are found in the New Testament; therefore obtain a New Testament at all costs, and study it day and night.

Karl Bonekemper (1827-93), Stundist pastor at Rohrbach, north-east of Odessa (in modern Ukraine) who emigrated to the USA

A person's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed. Job 14:5

Ngulongo Year Batsemire and 30 Villagers (2020)
Only God Knows the Time of Death

"*They came at night and knocked at the door. My father opened the door. They asked him why he had defied their order of leaving Christianity and becoming a Muslim. He replied that he was raised in a Christian family, became a Christian and [was] baptised … and he cannot convert to another religion. The Islamists threatened to kill him. He said that it is only God who knows the time of his death and if it is time for him to die then he is ready to die a Christian. Then they slaughtered him.*"

With these words Paluku described the martyrdom of his father, Ngulongo Year Batsemire, a 60-year-old pastor whose throat was slit in his own home in a church compound in Eringeti, north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) on 29 January 2020. The attackers, armed with machetes, were from an Islamist group called the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) and introduced themselves as Muslims. Ngulongo's wife Kapitula, who was hiding under the bed, heard them utter a local phrase known to be used when they were looking to kill Christians but spare Muslims. Before killing Ngulongo, they tried to get him to say where they could find other pastors.

On the same date at least 30 other people in four villages in the Beni territory of North Kivu were killed in night-time raids by the ADF.

This was not the first time the family had suffered at the hands of Islamist militants. In April 2017 rebels kidnapped two of Ngolongo's sons, elder brothers of Paluku, and took them to the mountains. They were never seen again.

The power of an age to come,
Is now at work where Jesus reigns,
He knows the battered history of men,
The wounds, the pain and all travail.
He truly came to heal, renew, redeem,
And took the lonely path of pain for us,
Cried out in agony, yet victory he gained …

Albrecht Hauser, Germany (born 1938)

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, spreading the word.
Acts 11:19

Cypriot Christians (Ottoman Period 1570-1870)
Island Persecution

Cyprus was the first place to be visited by Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey, when they left Antioch and were "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (Acts 13:2-12). But they were not the first to bring the Gospel to the Mediterranean island, for some of those scattered by the persecution connected with Stephen's martyrdom travelled to Cyprus, spreading the Christian message to Jews (Acts 11:19). Barnabas was himself a Cypriot (Acts 4:36) and so was another early believer in Jerusalem called Mnason (Acts 21:16).

Church tradition records that Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead, had to flee persecution in Judea and settled in Cyprus, where he led the church in Kition (modern Larnaca) for 30 years. According to tradition, Barnabas was stoned to death by angry Jews in Salamis, the principal city of ancient Cyprus, whose ruins lie near modern Famagusta.

Arab Muslim armies invaded Cyprus in the seventh century but in 688 an unusual treaty was signed between the Byzantine Emperor Justinian II and the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik. According to this treaty, Cyprus was to be ruled jointly by the Christian Empire and the Islamic Caliphate, an arrangement which lasted until 965, when Cyprus came completely under Byzantine control.

The Church flourished until 1570 when Cyprus, at that time ruled by Venice, was conquered by the Muslim Ottoman Turks. The conquest was completed in 1571 when Famagusta fell after a long siege. Under Ottoman rule Christians were treated as *dhimmis* in accordance with sharia: they no longer had full legal rights and they were discriminated against in a range of ways. Many Christians were killed for their faith or officially compelled to convert to Islam; others were converted by Muslim missionaries. In 1878 control of Cyprus passed from the Ottomans to Britain.

… the only-begotten God, who came forth from the Father, wills that in a time of persecution and a time of temptation we surrender our whole selves to fire and sword, but that we guard our "head" – in other words, that we do not deny Christ, since "the head of every man is Christ".
Epiphanius of Salamis, (c. 315-403), quoting 1 Corinthians 11:3

And when you look up to the sky and see the sun, the moon and the stars – all the heavenly array – do not be enticed into bowing down to them and worshipping things the LORD your God has apportioned to all the nations under heaven. Deuteronomy 4:19

Christians of Assuristan (c.340-379)
Great Persian Persecution

Assuristan, a name meaning "land of the Assyrians", was a province of the Persian Empire at the time when Persia was ruled by Sassanid dynasty (224-651). It was roughly equivalent to modern Iraq. Under Sassanian rule, Zoroastrianism became the state religion, and at various times followers of other religions suffered official persecution.

The long reign of Emperor Shapur II (309-379) included a time of harsh persecution of non-Zoroastrians. Beginning about 340 and continuing until his own death, he inflicted great suffering on the Assyrian Christians.

The church historian Sozomen, writing in about 425, recorded the efforts of Christians to calculate how many Christians were killed during those four decades. He says that 16,000 were listed by name, but in addition there was a multitude of other unnamed martyrs too great to be counted.

The persecution began in the early 340s when a *firman* (decree) was issued requiring Christians to pay double taxes. Shimun, Bishop of Ctesiphon, declared that Christians were too poor to pay the extra tax, but it was extracted from them anyway with great cruelty. Shimun (also known as Simeon Barsabba'e) was brought in chains before Shapur who commanded him to worship the sun, or all the Christians would be destroyed. Shimun refused, and was forced to watch the execution of 100 Christian prisoners, including many clergy, before being killed himself. It was Good Friday 341. Shapur also ordered the destruction of all church buildings.

O our Lord Jesus, worshipful king, who conquered the tyrant, death, by your suffering. O Son of God who promised us new life in the kingdom on high, remove from us all harm, and make tranquillity and mercies to dwell in our land, that on the day of your appearing we may live before you, and go out to meet you according to your will, with hosannas we will give thanks to your name for your grace toward our race. For your mercies have multiplied toward our humanity, and your love has shone forth upon our mortality, You have blotted out our debts with your pardon. Glory to your name for your gift...

East Syriac Liturgy, by Ephrem the Syrian, Turkey (c. 306-373)

While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Acts 7:59-60

Tryphon (250)
Full of Faith and the Holy Spirit, God's Grace and Power

"Lord, do not count against them these sins that they are committing against me," cried Tryphon, as his persecutors raked his body with iron hooks, scorched his flesh, hammered nails into his feet and made him walk through the streets of Nicaea. He had been sentenced to death by beheading but this was not needed as he died from his torture.

Tryphon was born at Kampsade in Phrygia (modern Campsada in Turkey). From childhood his daily work was to take care of geese. But his work for the Lord was a powerful ministry of healing the sick and driving out unclean spirits as he travelled around preaching. One year he saved the inhabitants of Kampsade from starvation, when his prayers turned away a plague of locusts that were devouring the crops.

The little daughter of teenage Roman Emperor Gordian III (reigned 238-244) was possessed by a demon that shouted, "Only Tryphon is able to drive me out!" Gordian sent servants across the empire to find the unknown healer. Enquiries led them to the Phrygian gooseherd, whom they brought to Rome, and he cast out the child's demon.

But, two emperors later, fierce anti-Christian persecution broke out on the instigation of Emperor Decius (reigned 249-251). Many Christians apostatised. Tryphon was arrested and taken to Nicaea for interrogation, where he boldly declared his allegiance to Christ and even began to ridicule the Roman forms of pagan worship. Thus came about his martyrdom, at which Tryphon prayed like the first Christian martyr Stephen, whose Spirit-filled ministry of miracles he had also shared (Acts 6:5,8).

As the first martyr prayed to you for his murderers, O Lord, so we fall before you and pray; forgive all who hate and maltreat us and let not one of them perish because of us, but may all be saved by your grace, O God, the all-bountiful.
Eastern Orthodox prayer

See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone. Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.
Song of Songs 2:11-12

Théophane Vénard (1861)
A Psalm-Singing "Bird" in a Cage

Théophane spent the last two months of his life in a cage, awaiting execution for refusing to deny Christ. Conditions in his cage in Tonkin (in modern Vietnam) were squalid, but from it he wrote beautiful letters of consolation to his family in France, joyfully awaiting his martyr's crown. It was noted that, although in chains, he was as cheerful as "a little bird".

Théophane had arrived as a missionary in Tonkin in 1854, knowing that he was going into danger. Emperor Minh Mang (reigned 1820-41) had been famous for his persecution of Christian missionaries, whom he banned in 1825. As a strict Confucian, Minh Mang was opposed to Christianity, believing that it undermined the basic principles of Vietnamese religious and political life, especially worship of, and obedience to, the emperor who was considered a divine emissary. By the time Théophane came to Tonkin, the emperor was Tu Duc (reigned 1847-83), who, like his grandfather Minh Mang, sought to suppress Christianity and forbade the preaching of the Christian faith.

Shortly after Théophane's arrival, Emperor Tu Duc issued a new edict against all Christians, and many of them went into hiding in caves and woods. However, Théophane continued to preach boldly and openly, day and night. Eventually he was betrayed, captured, tried and sentenced to death by beheading. On his way to his execution on 2 February 1861 he sung psalms and hymns praising God.

A slight sabre-cut will separate my head from my body, like the spring flower which the Master of the garden gathers for His pleasure. We are all flowers planted on this earth, which God plucks in His own good time: some a little sooner, some a little later.

Théophane Vénard (1829-61), letter addressed to his father

They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Acts 2:46-47

Kim Beom-u (1786)
The Long First Martyrdom of the Korean Church

Kim Beom-u allowed his clinic in Seoul (in modern South Korea) to be a meeting-place for Christians. But one day in 1785 a group of young men, gathered there to worship the Lord, were arrested, along with Kim Beom-u. The young men who, like most early Korean believers, were high-born, were released. But Kim Beom-u, who had lowly origins, was imprisoned and tortured. He refused to deny Christ and was eventually banished. About a year later he died of the injuries inflicted on him by the torturers. Thus he gained the high honour of the first martyr's crown in Korea.

How Christianity reached Korea is known only to God. It could have been East Syriac missionaries travelling the Silk Road to China in the 7th to 9th centuries. It could have been Christians amongst the Japanese troops who invaded Korea in the 1590s. It could have been Koreans returning home from foreign travels during which they had met Christians in other countries.

The first known Koreans to respond to the Gospel and believe were some of the Korean prisoners of war brought back from Korea as slave labour by the Japanese in the 1590s. Over 2,000 of them became Christians in Japan, and at least 24 were martyred there. But the first known Korean Christians in Korea itself were those who encountered Christians and Christian literature when visiting China. A slow trickle of conversions resulted, mainly among the educated elite. It was not until 1777 that a group began to pray regularly together, write hymns and set aside every seventh day for rest.

Give us hope to look forward to happy tomorrows.
Give us courage to face hardships without losing hope.
Give us faith so that the joy of receiving Christ will lead us to serve our fellow man.
Give us appreciation for the gifts we have received that we might use them responsibly,
Daring to give friendship, service and love.
Kim Kwan Suk, South Korea (1922-2002)

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

Sadhu Sundar Singh (1929)
A Penniless Wandering Holy Man

"I feel no fear at the thought of one day dying in Tibet (in modern China). When that day comes I shall welcome it with joy. Each year I go back to Tibet, and perhaps even next year you will hear that I have lost my life there. Do not then think 'He is dead' but say 'He has entered Heaven and Eternal Life; he is with Christ in the perfect life.'"

These were the words of the famous Christian *sadhu* (a wise and ascetic holy person) Sundar Singh, who travelled South Asia carrying nothing but a New Testament. He greatly desired to share the Gospel in Tibet, and would go there every year despite encountering strong opposition including several attempts on his life. It was in Tibet that he disappeared in 1929.

Sundar Singh was born into a Sikh family in north India in 1889. He attended a Christian school where the New Testament was read daily and he felt its "Divine attractiveness". His adored mother died when he was 14, and in his anguish and grief the boy burned a copy of the Gospels in public.

One night Sundar spent seven hours praying that God, if He really existed, would reveal Himself. Suddenly he saw a Man who asked, "How long will you deny me? I died for you." He saw the Man's nail-pierced hands and was astonished that his prayers had been answered so unexpectedly by a vision of Jesus. Sundar gave His life to Christ. He became a traditional Indian *sadhu,* dependent on the charity of others, and took to the road, spreading a message of love, peace and new birth through Jesus Christ.

While sitting on the bank of a river one day, I picked up a solid round stone from the water and broke it open. It was perfectly dry in spite of the fact that it had been immersed in water for centuries. The same is true of many people in the Western world. For centuries they have been surrounded by Christianity; they live immersed in the waters of its benefits. And yet it has not penetrated their hearts; they do not love it. The fault is not in Christianity, but in men's hearts, which have been hardened by materialism and intellectualism.
Sadhu Sundar Singh, India (1889-1929)

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. John 8:12

Andrea Santoro (2006) and Other "Cartoon" Martyrs Shot While at Prayer

Andrea Santoro was kneeling in prayer in his church in Trabzon, Turkey, on 5 February 2006, when he was shot from behind by a 16-year-old Turkish Muslim called Oğuzhan Akdin. A witness heard the teenager shout "*Allahu Akbar*" ("Allah is the greatest").

Born in Italy, Andrea died in the country he liked to call "the great land where God chose to speak to mankind in a special way". His first visit to Turkey had been in 1993 when he went to Antakya (ancient Antioch). It was in this city that the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26) and it was in this country that the seven churches of Revelation (chapters 2 and 3) were located. Andrea saw that Turkey needed the presence of Christ, the light of the world, to be renewed there again. He desired intensely to return to Turkey as a shining, prayerful witness to Jesus Christ in that land; and so he did in 2001.

The young assassin was arrested a few hours later and gave as his motive the irreverent cartoons of Muhammad published by a Danish newspaper in September 2005, which had suddenly come to global prominence in late January 2006. Not only is any pictorial image of their prophet considered forbidden by Muslims but also these caricatures made fun of him and of their religion. A violent backlash by outraged Muslims targeted Christian minorities around the world and Andrea was one of many martyrs who had nothing to do with the cartoons but were killed during the furore, simply because they were Christians.

The Light of the just and joy of the upright is Christ Jesus our Lord.
Begotten of the Father, He manifested Himself to us.
He came to rescue us from darkness and to fill us with the radiance of His light.
Day is dawning upon us; the power of darkness is fading away.
From the true Light there arises for us the light which illumines our darkened eyes.
His glory shines upon the world and enlightens the very depths of the abyss.
Ephrem the Syrian, Turkey (c. 306-373)

Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it. Mark 10:15

Fausta, Evilasius and Maximus (311)
A Little Child Will Lead Them (Isaiah 11:6)

Fausta was raised by her Christian parents to love the Lord Jesus. But they died and she was left an orphan at the age of 13. The local governor, Maximus, whose area included the city of Cyzicus (in modern Turkey) where Fausta lived, sent her to an 80-year-old pagan priest called Evilasius, who ordered her to renounce Christ.

Fausta bravely responded, "I do not worship gods that are blind, deaf and mute; I have a Father in heaven, my Lord Jesus Christ. I am unable to abandon Him." Evilasius applied pressure by various cruel tortures, but she did not seem to feel pain. When she was locked into a wooden trunk, the plan being to saw it in half with her inside, her torturers wore themselves out trying and the saw broke. Evilasius was shaken by the evident power of God, protecting His young follower from harm, and announced that he too would become a Christian.

Maximus began to investigate, starting by having Evilasius tortured. The old man asked the young girl to pray for him as he bravely endured his suffering. Then Fausta was tortured again. She was given over to be eaten by birds of prey, but the creatures would not touch her. Nails were driven into her head and body. Finally, the two Christians were thrown into a cauldron of boiling water, from where they prayed for their torturers. Seeing their faith and endurance, Maximus also embraced Christ. He was thrown into the same cauldron, and all three perished together – the young girl who had loved the Lord all her life, the old pagan priest who had at last found the true God, and the energetic Roman official carrying out imperial policy.

I realised that my life was to be one of simple, childlike faith, and that my part was to trust, not to do. I was to trust in Him and He would work in me to do His good pleasure.

C T Studd, England (1860-1931)

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death. Revelation 12:11 (NKJV)

Jean-Paul Sankagui (2017)
Counted the Cost, Willingly Stayed

Jean-Paul and his wife Mary felt called by God to minister in Ramandji, a Muslim neighbourhood on the outskirts of Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. There they planted a church in 1993 and continued faithfully in ministry amongst the local people.

They were still there when the Muslim rebel group Séléka seized political power in this Christian-majority country in 2013. Years of civil war, political turmoil and violence by militant groups followed. In 2014 United Nations peace-keeping forces arrived to try to protect civilians. Muslim militias took control of the area where Jean-Paul and Mary lived, imposing what the UN peace-keepers described as "a reign of terror". One of these militias was led by a notorious Muslim warlord known as "Big Man". Most of Jean-Paul's church members fled. Mary urged Jean-Paul to leave Ramandji and serve the Lord somewhere safer, but he was determined to stay in obedience to God's original call.

On 7 February 2017 Jean-Paul was killed outside his church by supporters of "Big Man", who went on to set fire to his home, his church and another church building in the neighbourhood. Earlier the same day "Big Man" himself, and one of his fighters, had been killed in a shoot-out with security forces. In retaliation his supporters targeted the local Christians.

Five other pastors were killed in the first five weeks of 2017. Yet Jean-Paul had stayed on, faithful to God's call to be a witness for Christ in the Muslim community.

I grant it costs much to be a true Christian. But what sane man or woman can doubt that it is worth any cost to have the soul saved? When the ship is in danger of sinking, the crew think nothing of casting overboard the precious cargo. When a limb is mortified, a man will submit to any severe operation, and even to amputation, to save life. Surely a Christian should be willing to give up anything which stands between him and heaven. A religion that costs nothing is worth nothing! A cheap Christianity, without a cross, will prove in the end a useless Christianity, without a crown.
J C Ryle, England (1816-1900)

Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people? Jeremiah 8:22

Madline Wagih Demian (2014)
Pharmacy Attacks in Egypt

Most pharmacy businesses in Egypt are run by Christians. Therefore when an angry Muslim fanatic, armed with a knife, went looking for Christians to kill in Kom Ombo, Upper Egypt, on 8 February 2014 he started at a pharmacy. Mahmoud Mohamed Ali's first attack on a Christian pharmacy assistant, as the assistant checked the price of the medication that Ali had requested, was not fatal, and Ali moved on to another pharmacy. Here he managed to stab 30-year-old Madline Wagih Demian in the neck, severing an artery so that she quickly bled to death.

After leaving the second pharmacy, Ali encountered two Christian students, walking together in the street and stabbed one of them, Marian Kamal Shafik (19). Marian survived and later testified how this experience renewed her faith. Before the attack she had been overwhelmed with loneliness and felt that God had abandoned her. She said, "I was away from God. I was upset at God, and He let me go through this to tell me He hasn't left me, and that He would be with me in all situations."

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul. (Refrain)

Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.

Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend,
Who, if you ask for knowledge, will never fail to lend.

If you cannot preach like Peter, if you cannot pray like Paul.
You can tell the love of Jesus, who died to save us all.

African-American spiritual

Greater love has no-one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.
John 15:13

Liudmila Pryashnikova and Vladimir Zaporozhets (2014) Two Martyrs on Sakhalin Island

On the very day that the Church in Russia was commemorating martyrs of the Soviet period, two new martyrs, very different from each other, were added to the list of Russian martyrs.

The Russian-owned island of Sakhalin lies off Russia's far eastern coast, near Japan. In its largest city, Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk, a 25-year-old man, armed with a gun, burst into a church on Sunday 9 February 2014 and opened fire on the congregation, shouting against God and against Christianity. He also fired at a cross and other Christian symbols in the church. Stephan Komarov described himself as a "neo-pagan" who hated the Church and Christians. Liudmila, a Christian worker, died when she was shot in the face as she tried to help women and children escape from the building.

Her fellow church-worker, Hilariona, described Liudmila's character: "You'll rarely meet such a magnanimous, warm, and loving person as her. She showed her Christianity by her very way of life … She had the rare quality of never entering into conflict with anyone. I do not remember a single instance of her arguing with anyone, trying to get the upper hand, or trying to make a place for herself under the sun … She bore her obedience peacefully, with humility and love, and with such dignity that she was an example to all."

The other person killed on that day was Vladimir, who was in the habit of begging outside the church. When he heard the shots being fired, he ran inside and, placing himself right in front of the gunman, pleaded with him to stop. Four bullets were the answer he got. Vladimir laid down his life for the sake of others.

For you I took the path to life eternal.
With smitten face I turned the other cheek.
For you I suffered frostbite, thirst and hunger.
Praise be to You whose Glory I do seek.

Russian hymn/poem (19th century)

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.
Hebrews 10:24-25

Abitinian Martyrs (304)
Gathering for Sunday Worship

"The obligation of the Sunday is indispensable. It is not lawful for us to omit the duty of that day. We celebrated it as well as we could. We never passed a Sunday without meeting at our assembly. We will keep the commandments of God at the expense of our lives." These words came from the mouths of a group of Christians as they were being tortured on the rack.

It was 304, the second year of terrible persecution under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Christian worship was now forbidden and Christians had been ordered, on pain of death, to hand over their Scriptures to be burned. But this congregation, led by Saturninus, continued worshipping together, Sunday by Sunday, in the house of Octavius Felix – until they were arrested. Forty-nine Christians were seized, including Hilarianus, a son of Saturninus, who was only a child, and Dativus, a senator. All declared their Christian faith so unflinchingly before the magistrates that the magistrates themselves applauded their courage.

Then, in shackles, the Christians were sent to appear before the proconsul in Carthage. They sang hymns all the way, praising and thanking God. The high-ranking Dativus was the first to be questioned. When he admitted to being a Christian and present at the assembly of Christians, he was put on the rack and torn with iron hooks. Then the others, including the women, also underwent this torture. Hilarianus, the youngest, showed no fear and answered his interrogator: "I am a Christian; I have been at the [Sunday worship], and it was of my own voluntary choice, without any compulsion."

Felix and one other died on 11 February from their wounds; the remaining 47 Christians perished later from the hardships of prison.

We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope. We meet together as an assembly and congregation … offering up prayer to God as with united force … We assemble to read our sacred writings.
Tertullian, Carthage, in modern Tunisia (c. 160-c. 225)

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. Luke 9:23

Anant Ram Gand (2019)
No Turning Back

Six-year-old Purno was asleep at home in Odisha state, India, when he was woken by three men knocking at the door and shouting at his father. His mother and sisters had gone out earlier in the day. On gaining entry, the men tied his father's hands and dragged him from the house. Purno ran crying behind them until the men told him not to follow, bundled his father into a car, and sped off. The bloodied body of Purno's father, 40-year-old Anant Ram Gand, was found on 11 February 2019, lying on a road. He had been beheaded.

Anant had converted to Christianity nine months earlier and been baptised just two months before the attack. His conversion angered the other villagers, who put the family under a lot of pressure to renounce Christ, and forced them to relocate to the outskirts of the village. They also prevented the family from getting water at the village well.

It is believed that the attack was carried out by Maoist Naxalites, at the behest of local extremists. According to Pastor Chanan Jani, Anant had been a Naxalite before he became a Christian.

Commenting on Anant's Christian faith, the pastor said, "His passion and dedication were unbelievable. Most days, he fasted and prayed. The entire family embraced their faith wholeheartedly."

I have decided to follow Jesus …
No turning back, no turning back.

The world behind me, the cross before me …
No turning back, no turning back.

My cross I'll carry, till I see Jesus …
No turning back, no turning back.

Nokseng, a Garo tribesman from Assam, India, who converted to Christianity in the middle of the 19th century. Formation of words into a hymn attributed to Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929)

Taste and see that the LORD *is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him.* Psalm 34:8

Mathayo Kachila (2013)
"Butchered" in Tanzania

Pastor Mathayo Kachila (45) was passionate about the issue of Tanzanian Christians having the right to slaughter animals for food, just as Tanzanian Muslims did. There was no legal or constitutional reason why Christians could not be butchers in Tanzania, but traditionally the job was done by Muslims, so that they could kill the animals in the correct Islamic way, thus making the meat *halal*, i.e. permitted for Muslim consumption. But Christians like Pastor Mathayo did not want to eat meat that had been dedicated to Allah with an Islamic prayer.

In 2013 tensions over this issue began to escalate. Muslim-owned butcheries were suffering loss of sales as more Christians began to buy non-*halal* meat from Christian butcheries. In the town of Buseresere angry Muslims rioted.

When Christians booked a non-Muslim butcher for a Christian funeral, a machete-wielding group of rioting youths attacked Christian butchers' shops in Buseresere early in the morning of 11 February 2013. They contaminated the meat with a harmful substance and in one shop pulled down and destroyed a sign which said, "Jesus is Lord." Pastor Mathayo was hacked to death by the rioters.

Lord, Lord, bless Africa, may you lift her glory,
Hear our prayers, give us one spirit,
Even though it's tough in this world.
We are troubled with so much pain
Lord give us strength to overcome, so as to fight the devil

Enoch Sontonga, South Africa (c. 1873-1905). This is an English translation of his hymn *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* written in 1897 in the Xhosa language. A Swahili translation starting *Mungu ibariki Afrika* (God bless Africa) is the national anthem of Tanzania

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see … These were all commended for their faith. Hebrews 11:1, 39

Lankoandé Babilibilé, Tindano Omar and others (2020) Burkina Faso's Faithful Christians

In the early hours of 11 February 2020, Lankoandé, a church deacon, was shot dead by Islamist extremists in front of his wife at their home in Sebba, north-east Burkina Faso. He had helped to establish the first churches in the region, near the border with Niger, and was known for his Christian witness especially among the Muslim-majority Fulani people.

Lankoandé's car was stolen by the gunmen and used to abduct Pastor Tindano of the same church, along with two of his daughters, his son and two nephews. On 13 February news came that Tindano and his three male relatives had been murdered. His daughters were released the same day. The gunmen had also burned down the church building.

A few days later, on 16 February, Islamist militants burst into a Sunday worship service at a church in the northern border village of Pansi, killing 24 people, including the pastor, and injuring 18 others. The attackers also set fire to the church building and looted oil and rice from local shops.

This roll call of recent martyrs in Burkina Faso, some named and some unnamed, along with those who survived, is like the glorious list of believers in Hebrews 11 which includes triumphant victors alongside those who died in agony. Some mentioned in that chapter are Bible characters whose stories we know in detail. Others are completely anonymous and the only thing we will ever know about them, this side of heaven, is the persecution they endured. But all are commended for their faith.

Give thanks to God for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and for His gift of eternal life to all who believe. Praise Him for believers who, trusting God, have persevered in faith and did not cling to life in the face of death (Revelation 12:11). Pray that their sacrifice will inspire their brothers and sisters to endure whatever sufferings befall them and will also convince their persecutors of the truth and power of the Gospel. Pray too that their bereaved families and churches will not grieve without hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13) but be comforted by the knowledge that their loved ones died for Christ.

Barnabas Fund's Prayer Diary, Good Friday, 14 April 2017

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them – not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve. 1 Peter 5:2

Paul Liu Hanzuo (1819)
Merchant by Day, Shepherd by Night

Twenty-four-year-old Paul Liu Hanzuo was an illiterate shepherd in the village of Lezi, Sichuan Province, China. He had grown up in a Christian home and was so strong and committed in his faith he was invited to study at a missionary Bible school. Paul gladly accepted and eleven years later he was heading up the outreach in three districts of Sichuan, still known for his modesty and simplicity.

Emperor Jiaqing (ruled 1796-1820) initiated a new period of anti-Christian persecution, by means of a series of harsh edicts. Two edicts of 1811 were directed against Chinese people who were studying for Christian ministry and against those propagating the Christian faith. This put Paul in double danger, and he often disguised himself as a merchant or farmer, travelling around selling goods or vegetables by day, so that at night he could visit the Christians under his care in whatever area he was in.

In 1819 Paul went to visit some Christians in Dezhou. He asked a Christian carpenter to construct a canopy for a meeting they were planning, but the specifications were wrong. The carpenter became angry and upset at the suggestion that he had made a mistake. He betrayed Paul by reporting his whereabouts to the authorities and telling them that Paul was a Christian preacher. The authorities stormed the house where Paul was staying and imprisoned him in dreadful conditions, chained to the wall, for five months. On 13 February he was executed by hanging.

As our Father makes many a flower to bloom unseen in the lonely desert, [let us] do all that we can do, as under God's eye, though no other eye ever take note of it.

James Hudson Taylor (1832–1905), English missionary to China

For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end. Psalm 48:14

Twenty-One Builders of Sirte (2015):

Tawadros Youssef Tawadros (46), Magued Seliman Shehata (41), Hany Abd el Messiah (33), Ezzat Boushra Youssef (32), Malak (the elder) Farag Ibrahim (31), Samuel (the elder) Alham Wilson (28), Malak (the younger) Ibrahim Seniut (28), Luka Nagati Anis (28), Sameh Salah Farouk (26), Milad Makin Zaky (26), Issam Baddar Samir (24), Youssef Shoukry Younan (24), Bishoy Stefanos Kamel (24), Abanub Ayat Shahata (23), Girgis (the elder) Samir Megally (23), Mina Fayez Aziz (23), Kiryollos Boushra Fawzy (23), Gaber Mounir Adly (23), Samuel (the younger) Stefanos Kamel (22), Girgis (the younger) Milad Seniut (22), Matthew Ayariga

Video of a Group Martyrdom on the Seashore

On 12 February 2015, the Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) militant group released a report in their online magazine *Dabiq* showing photos of twenty-one Christian construction workers – twenty Egyptians and one Ghanaian – whom they had kidnapped in the city of Sirte, eastern Libya and now threatened to kill. The men had come to Libya as migrant workers to earn money to support their families back home. Thirteen came from the same village in Egypt.

Three days later a gruesome five-minute video, with the caption "The People of the Cross, followers of the hostile Egyptian Church", was published, showing the beheading of the captives on a Mediterranean beach. The Christians were kneeling, dressed in orange jumpsuits, with the black-clothed jihadists, each armed with a knife, standing behind them. It clearly shows many of the Christians praying "Lord Jesus Christ" in Arabic in their final moments.

The Ghanaian captive, Matthew Ayariga, was singled out for special questioning. One of the terrorists asked him, "Do you reject Christ?" and demanded that he follow Islam. Indicating the Egyptian Christians next to him, Matthew answered, "Their God is my God," before he too was pushed face forward on to the sand and beheaded.

Christ has turned all our sunsets into dawns.
Clement of Alexandria, Egypt (died 215)

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for ever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. Philemon verses 15-16

Onesimus (109)
Slave of Christ

In his youth, Onesimus (meaning "useful") was a slave belonging to Philemon, a Christian who lived in Colossae, a city in Phrygia (in modern Turkey). Fearing punishment from his master for something he had done wrong, Onesimus fled to Rome where he was imprisoned for being a runaway slave. Running away from your master was a serious crime in ancient Rome. There were rewards offered, advertisements posted with detailed descriptions of missing slaves, and professional slave-catchers who would hunt down the fugitives. If caught, the runaway slaves were severely punished, sometimes killed.

In prison Onesimus met the Apostle Paul, found faith in Christ and was baptised. Paul sent Onesimus back to his master Philemon, and wrote Philemon a letter, now part of the New Testament, urging him to forgive his runaway slave and accept him as a brother in the Lord.

Philemon did forgive and accept Onesimus as a Christian brother, and, as requested by Paul, sent him back to Rome so that he could be of service to Paul who was imprisoned there. Not only was Onesimus useful but also he was "my very heart", wrote Paul (Philemon verse 12).

Church history records that Onesimus continued in that position until Paul's martyrdom in about AD 66 or 67, and thereafter he served other apostles until their deaths. Then he went to preach the Gospel in Colossae, Spain, and Patras in Greece, eventually becoming bishop in Ephesus.

In the year 109, Onesimus was arrested and brought to trial. He was stoned and beheaded for clinging to his faith in Christ.

…whereas the outside world called them "Christians", the earliest believers repeatedly referred to themselves in the New Testament as the Lord's slaves. For them, the two ideas were synonymous. To be a Christian was to be a slave of Christ … early martyrs responded similarly … "I am a free man, the slave of Christ" … Whether slave or free in this life, they had all been set free from sin; yet having been bought with a price, they had all become slaves of Christ. That is what it meant to be a Christian.
John F MacArthur, USA (born 1939)

For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light. Psalm 36:9

Evarist Mushi (2013)
Church Leaders Attacked in Zanzibar

On this day in 2013, Pastor Evarist Mushi died after being shot in the head by two young men who blocked his way as he tried to get out of his car to enter church on the island of Zanzibar in Tanzania.

Two other attacks occurred on church leaders in Zanzibar around this time. On Christmas Day 2012, Ambrose Mkenda was shot in the face and shoulder by two attackers at his home and Joseph Anselmo Mwagambwa suffered severe burns to his face and arms when acid was thrown over him as he left an internet café in September 2013. Both survived the attacks.

Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous region of Tanzania. Its population is 99% Muslim, whereas the population of Tanzania as a whole at that time was about 61% Christian.

The Islamist group Uamsho was seeking independence for Zanzibar – partly because of decades of economic decline and partly in order to establish sharia (Islamic law) – and targeted the Christian community with violence.

Christ has arisen, alleluia.
Rejoice and praise, alleluia.
For our redeemer burst from the tomb,
Even from death, dispelling its gloom.

(Refrain) Let us sing praise to Him
with endless joy,
Death's fearful sting He has come to
destroy.
Our sin forgiving, alleluia!
Jesus is living, alleluia!

"Go spread the news: He's not in the
grave.
He has arisen this world to save.
Jesus' redeeming labours are done.
Even the battle with sin is won."

Christ has arisen to set us free
Alleluia, to Him praises be.
Jesus is living! Let us all sing;
He reigns triumphant, heavenly king.

Bernard Kyamanywa, Tanzania (born 1938), *Mfurahini, Haleluya (Christ has Arisen, Alleluia)*, originally written in Swahili, translated by Howard S Olson (1922-2010)

How lovely is your dwelling place, LORD Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God … Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. Psalm 84:1-2, 5

Dagestan Christians (2018)
Volatile North Caucasus

The congregation was beginning to leave after the Sunday service in Kizlyar, in Muslim-majority Dagestan, on 18 February 2018, when a man, carrying a hunting rifle and a knife, ran towards the church shouting "*Allahu Akbar*" ("Allah is the greatest") and opened fire. Church members managed to shut and barricade the door before he got inside. Nevertheless, five women died, including an award-winning doctor, Lyudmila Shcherbakova, who had more than 40 years' experience working in hospitals in Dagestan, and Nadejda Terliyan (45), a deaconess at the church, who organised pilgrimages for church members.

Lawless Dagestan (in the Russian Federation) has long been seething with jihadi activity. The gunman, identified as Khalil Khalilov (22), a local Muslim, was shot dead by the police. Islamic State claimed responsibility, describing Khalil as a "soldier of the caliphate". Many unemployed and radicalised Muslim youths from the republics of Dagestan and Chechnya, in the volatile North Caucasus region, travelled to Syria and Iraq to engage in jihad. Generally known collectively as "Chechens", they are especially fierce and highly skilled fighters.

You cannot scare Christians with murders; for Christians to die for Christ is an honour.

Pastor Sergei Ryakhovsky, at the funeral of Dagestan pastor Artur Suleimanov who was martyred on 15 July 2010

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
John 13:35

Abdoulaye Daoud and Abakachi (2013)
Cameroonian Converts
and the Testimony of Loving One Another

Four converts from Islam to Christianity were travelling together near the Cameroonian shores of Lake Chad on 19 February 2013, when their vehicle was stopped by four armed men who demanded to know which member of the group was Abdoulaye. When they had got the four Christians out of the vehicle, the armed men opened fire. Aiming at Abakachi first, thinking he was Abdoulaye, they killed him on the spot. Abdoulaye and another convert were shot as they fled. They were taken to hospital, where Abdoulaye later died from his injuries.

Abdoulaye led a group of converts from the mainly-Muslim Kotoko people. He had previously been threatened by the Islamist militant group Boko Haram, who emerged from neighbouring Nigeria.

After Abdoulaye was martyred, other Christians cared for his widow and their twelve children. His Muslim mother became a Christian after seeing the love that other Christians showed to her son's bereaved family.

"Love as I love," He said again,
And then came Calvary
When Jesus loved them to the end
And showed them His love's full extent.
"By this the world will see
That you belong to Me."

So Jesus' friends must love and care
For one another's needs,
Must one another's burdens bear,
Must earthly treasure give and share,
Must house and clothe and feed,
Must pray and intercede.

By this, by love for Jesus' own,
The world shall see the Lord.
When sacrificial love is shown,
Disciples make their Master known.
Through lives and love outpoured,
Their Friend will be adored.

Caroline Kerslake, England (born 1961)

Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve … But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD. Joshua 24:15

Pius Kim Chin-hu (1814)
Korean Family of Martyrs

Pius was born into a famous upper class Korean family in Solmae, Naepo, Chungcheong Province (in modern South Korea) and became an official in the regional government. At the age of 50, in about the year 1788, his son, who had become a Christian, shared the Gospel with him and urged him to get baptised. At first Pius refused, conscious of his post in the government. However, as his son kept persuading him, he was gradually drawn to Jesus Christ. Eventually he committed his life to the Lord and was baptised, after which he gave up his position in the government to focus on fulfilling his Christian duties.

Korea's ruling Joseon dynasty at this time was Confucian and it fiercely opposed the rise of Christianity among the ordinary people, many of whom had turned *en masse* to Christ. The Confucian rulers were shocked that the new Christians were called "friends" of God, a term (in Korean) that implied equality.

Pius was arrested and released four or five times, starting in 1791 during the Sinhae persecution. After his final arrest, in 1805, he was held in prison and never released again. The officials and prison guards respected him for his noble and dignified personality and conduct, but he still had to endure great suffering and pain, eventually dying in prison on 20 February 1814 at the age of 75.

Pius' great-grandson Andrew Kim Taegon (see September 15), grandsons Ignatius Kim Chae-jun and Andrew Kim Han-hyon and granddaughter Theresa Kim were all martyred for their faith. Truly this was a family who chose to serve the Lord.

I don't want to live like clouds
Swept here and there by the wind.
I don't want to live like pieces of wood
Swept along with the waves of the river.
I want to live like the rock
That stands firm, even in the rainstorm.

Qday Lee, South Korea

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:32

Arastoo Sayyah (1979)
First Christian Martyr of the Iranian Revolution

When Pastor Arastoo Sayyah was martyred on 19 February 1979, his killers performed their task by cutting the blood vessels of his neck as if slaughtering an animal. They left a bullet lying by his side, apparently to show that they could have shot him but chose to kill him in the more traditional Islamic way.

This murder, which took place in Pastor Arastoo's church office in Shiraz, occurred just eight days after the victorious completion of the Iranian Revolution and the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty of shahs. The revolution led to the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran ruled by sharia. Pastor Arastoo had left Islam to follow Christ, and the Islamic law of apostasy demands the death sentence for any sane adult male apostate from Islam.

Before long, the Iranian church's hospitals and schools were expropriated by the new government, and church bank accounts were confiscated. The Islamic Republic did its best to suppress Christianity in Muslim-majority Iran banning the Bible in Farsi (Persian, the national language of Iran), closing Farsi-speaking churches, murdering Christian leaders, and imprisoning and forcing into exile many Christians. However, instead of disappearing the Christian convert community in Iran has grown from just a few believers in 1979 to hundreds of thousands, with many more in the Iranian diaspora.

Arastoo had a great passion for sharing the Gospel, often travelling to rural villages to talk one-to-one with people and distribute Bibles. He encouraged other converts to sing Christian songs in the traditional Persian style, so that Iranian people could relate to the Christian message through them.

Cover the way with flowers, clap your hands.
Jesus Christ is on the way!
Dance together and be kind to each other.
Jesus Christ is on the way!

Iranian Christian song (translated from the Farsi original)

I am the LORD your God …You shall have no other gods before me.
Exodus 20:2-3

Friedrich Weissler (1937)
Judge Who Opposed Nazi Regime

As Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party (more commonly known as the Nazi Party) rose to power in Germany in the 1930s, German Protestants divided into two groups. One called themselves "German Christians" and embraced many of the nationalist and even racist aspects of Nazi ideology. The other called themselves the Confessing Church and sought to resist the "Nazification" of the Church; their founding document, the Barmen Declaration (1934), stated that the head of the Church was Christ (i.e. not Hitler).

The legal advisor to the Confessing Church was Friedrich Weissler, born to Jewish parents in Upper Silesia in 1891 and baptised a Christian when a child. Friedrich had been a lawyer and a judge, until suspended (later dismissed) from his position as a judge in March 1933 due to his opposition to the Nazis.

In 1936, the Confessing Church's leaders prepared a memorandum addressed to Hitler, which condemned the constant Nazi attacks on church freedoms, the abuse of legal process, the use of concentration camps, the anti-Semitism and the glorification of the "Aryan" race, concluding that the Nazis would lead the German people into disaster. After delivery to Hitler on 4 June, the text somehow reached the foreign press.

On 7 October 1936 the Gestapo arrested Friedrich and accused him of passing the memorandum into the hands of foreign media. Because he was of Jewish descent he was not taken to court for a hearing; instead he was sent directly to Sachsenhausen concentration camp where he was tortured to death between 13 and 19 February 1937. He was the first martyr of the Confessing Church to be murdered as a victim of the Nazi persecution of the churches.

Who stands his ground? Only the man whose ultimate criterion is not in his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all these things when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and allegiance to God.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer (martyred 1945), a founding member of the Confessing Church

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. Psalm 91:1

Jacob Janzen and 229 other Mennonites (1919-1920) Russian Massacres of Peace-loving German Christians

After the Russian Revolution of 1917 many Christians suffered terrible persecution. Amongst these were the Mennonites – peaceful and hardworking believers of German descent, who lived in close-knit communities in southern Russia (modern Ukraine). They had a strong faith and were committed to non-violence.

On 29 November 1919 bandits, seeking Christians to attack, arrived at the 15 villages of the Zagradovka Mennonite Settlement. During a three-day killing spree, they murdered 229 people, including children. When the Bargen family heard what was happening elsewhere in their settlement, Mrs Bargen read Psalm 91 over her family in faith that they would be saved when the attackers reached their village. Almost immediately the bandits were in their house, carrying unsheathed, blood-stained swords. They swung their weapons at Franz Bargen but missed. They threatened to rape Mrs Bargen but she managed to push her way out of the room, her baby in her arms, and hid in the pig-sty with her children and servants.

Later the group got across the fields to safety in another village, where they were cared for in the home of Pastor Jacob Janzen. A Mennonite proverb says: "I will charge thee nothing but the promise that thou will help the next man thou finds in trouble."

Three months later Jacob's house was attacked by bandits, who lined up Jacob, his son and a friend, one behind the other, and shot Jacob, hoping that the same bullet would kill all three. They might well have accomplished this, if they had not used a sawn-off gun which diminished the power of the bullet. Jacob fell to the ground and died. His son was slightly wounded and their friend escaped unharmed.

We who were formerly no people at all, and who knew of no peace, are now called to be a church of peace. True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace. Their hearts overflow with peace. Their mouths speak peace, and they walk in the way of peace.
Menno Simons (1496-1561), an Anabaptist leader from the Friesland (modern Netherlands). His followers became known as Mennonites

And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Matthew 10:30

Kerait Peoples (c. 1370–1405)
A Vanished Tribe of Christians

The first of the northern tribes of the vast plains now known as Mongolia to become mainly Christian were the Keraits, converted by missionaries from the Church of the East (East Syriac Church). An 8th century letter lists their khan as one of four great Christian kings.

During the 12th century, the Keraits were one of the most dominant tribal confederacies in the Mongolian plateau. Their settlements lay around Ulaanbaatar. Their last khan, named Toghrul (1130-1203), was allied for a while with Genghis, khan of a smaller Mongol tribe. But by 1205 Genghis had become the sole ruler of all the tribes in the Mongolian plains. Genghis Khan's yasa (law code) began: "It is ordered to believe that there is only one God, creator of heaven and earth, who alone gives life and death, riches and poverty as pleasures Him – and who has over everything an absolute power." The influence of the Christian faith of the Keraits, Genghis' strongest tribe, is clear. Keraits continued to provide a Christian presence amongst Mongol government personnel for a long time.

A Kerait princess, Sorghaghtani Beki, was daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan and mother of Kubla (Kubilai) Khan who conquered China. Because of her influence, Kubla assisted the almost-eradicated Chinese Church, enabling it to flourish again. Another Kerait princess, Doquez-khatum, married Hulagu Khan, the Mongol who sacked Baghdad in 1258; because of her the lives of the Baghdad Christians and perhaps others were saved.

Later the Keraits were so persecuted that, like other tribes of Central Asia, they lost their Christian faith. One of the main factors was the Islamic conquest by Timur (1336-1405, also called Tamerlane) in which huge numbers of Christians were amongst the estimated 17 million people he killed.

Trust the past to the mercy of God, the present to his love, and the future to his providence.
Augustine of Hippo, in modern Algeria (354–430)

But now, Lord, what do I look for? My hope is in you. Psalm 39:7

Thomas Christians (1784-90)
A Sub-continent Church Two Millennia Old

"Tipu Sultan tied the naked Christians and Hindus to the legs of elephants and made the elephants to move around till the bodies of the helpless victims were torn to pieces … Christian and Hindu women were forced to marry Mohammadans. Those Christians and Hindus who refused to be honoured with Islam, were ordered to be killed by hanging immediately." – Paolino da San Bartolomeo (1746-1806), a missionary and historian who wrote of his travels in *A Voyage to the East Indies*

This terrible persecution was inflicted on the Thomas Christians of south-west India, when the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, invaded and took control of the Malabar Coast (1784-1790). Many thousands of Christians were martyred, while others fled further south. Churches were damaged, a theological college was razed to the ground and crops were destroyed.

There are around four million Thomas Christians in the world today, tracing their faith back to a missionary visit by the Apostle Thomas in AD 50 or 52. In the 4th century, a group of 72 Syriac-speaking Christian families travelled from Edessa (modern Turkey) to south India. The migration was in a response to a dream experienced by the group's leader, Bishop Joseph, in which he saw the Indian Christians being humiliated and persecuted. The Knananites, as they were called, settled in Kodungallur, one of the seven towns where Thomas had built a church. They taught, encouraged and built up the faith of the beleaguered Indian Christians and converted many other Indians to Christianity. Their community now numbers about 300,000.

Although Turkic Muslims virtually eliminated the Church in north and central India in the 14th century, a Christian presence always remained in the south, and survived even the atrocities of Tipu Sultan.

May the ears which have heard your word be deaf to clamour and dispute;
may the tongues which have sung your praise be free from deceit;
may the eyes which have seen the tokens of your love shine with the light of hope.

Liturgy of Malabar, South India

So do not be ashamed of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner. Rather, join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God.
2 Timothy 1:8

John Kalphes (1575)
"I will not Renounce my Sweetest Jesus"

John Kalphes lived in Constantinople (now Istanbul, Turkey), the capital of the Ottoman Empire. He was a cabinet-maker, so skilled that he was given the task of adorning the interior of the sultan's palace, and a certain dignitary apprenticed his nephew to John. John was also famous for his Christian charity, caring for orphans and prisoners and many people turned to him for help.

Meeting John again at a later date, the former apprentice, who had gained a prestigious position at court after completing his apprenticeship, asked John what Christian books said about the Islamic prophet Muhammad. John tried to avoid answering the question, but because of the youth's persistent demands, he eventually declared, "Our Lord Jesus Christ is the one and only true God," and then gave his opinion about Muhammad.

The young man reported to his fellow Muslims that John had insulted their prophet. John was brought to trial, where the authorities demanded that he renounce Christ, but he declared: "I will not renounce my sweetest Jesus; I believe in Him and worship Him, and confess Him to be true God and perfect Man."

After torture, they sent him away for six months of penal servitude with a fleet in the Black Sea. Following that he endured three months of beatings in prison but remained faithful to the Lord. Eventually they beheaded him, in a crowded city square on 26 February 1575.

I'm not ashamed to own my Lord,
Or to defend His cause,
Maintain the honour of His Word,
The glory of His Cross.
Jesus, my God! I know His name,
His name is all my trust;
Nor will He put my soul to shame,
Nor let my hope be lost.
I know that safe with Him remains,
Protected by His power,
What I've committed to His trust,
Till the decisive hour.
Then will He own my worthless name
Before His Father's face,
And in the New Jerusalem
Appoint my soul a place.
Isaac Watts, England (1674-1748)

Search me, God, and know my heart. Psalm 139:23

Armenian Christians in Azerbaijan (1988-1990) Sumgait and Baku Massacres

"Gangs, ranging in size from about a dozen to more than fifty, roamed around, smashing windows, burning cars, but all looking for Armenians to attack. The roving gangs committed acts of horrific savagery. Several victims were so badly mutilated by axes that their bodies could not be identified. Women were stripped naked and set on fire. Several were raped repeatedly."

The British journalist, Thomas de Waal, is describing the massacre of Christian Armenians in the seaside town of Sumgait in Muslim-majority Azerbaijan in 1988, when Muslim Azeris hunted down and killed, raped and maimed their victims in their homes. Some were burned alive. Others were thrown from windows.

The violence began on the evening of 27 February and lasted for three days, even though Sumgait is only half an hour's drive from the Azeri capital Baku. Credible sources report that up to 200 Armenians were murdered, although official Soviet estimates said merely that "over 30" were killed and 200 injured.

Less than a week before the Sumgait massacres, the people of Nagorno-Karabakh, an autonomous region inhabited by Armenian Christians that the USSR had forced under Azerbaijani administration, had begun peacefully protesting against repression and discrimination. The response of the Azerbaijani authorities to this peaceful initiative was a military crackdown.

In 1990 another massacre took place of Armenian Christians. Between 13 and 19 January, hundreds of Armenians across Baku were beaten, tortured or killed and up to 200,000 were expelled from the city. These massacres marked the beginning of a conflict that, three decades later, remains unresolved.

Now, Lord, save and keep me, for I have put my trust in you. Liberate me from my trouble, so that the malicious one will not cast me into oblivion, for he battles against me in his insidious ways. Even over secrets you have dominion, Lord, and you search the hearts and innermost being. Purify my heart and my thoughts.

Gregory the Illuminator (c. 240-c. 325), an Armenian brought up as a Christian in Caesarea, Cappadocia (Kayseri in modern Turkey). He returned to Armenia in 286 where he spoke about his faith. After enduring much persecution, including years in a deep pit, Gregory led King Trdat of Armenia to Christ, and thus the country officially became a Christian nation in 301.

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Hebrews 10:22

Saleem Masih (2020)
Tortured to Death for "Polluting" Water

Saleem (22) died on 28 February 2020, three days after being tortured on the instructions of an influential Muslim cattle farm owner in Kasur, Punjab Province, Pakistan, for washing in water from the Muslim's well. The young farm labourer had just finished unloading chaff from a vehicle and, covered in dust, felt the urge to wash at the well.

Saleem was rinsing himself in water pumped from the well when the enraged farmer accused him of polluting the water supply by his "unclean" Christian touch. At the farmer's orders, a group of men rushed over, yanked Saleem away from the water and began beating him. They called him a *chuhra* (latrine-cleaner) and dragged him to their cattle farm where they tied his hands and feet and tortured him with sticks and heated iron rods. Then they rolled a heavy iron rod over his entire body, causing multiple fractures and internal injuries.

By the time his family reached the farm, Saleem was lying unconscious on the ground, his face and body bleeding severely. Ghafoor Masih, his father said: "We are poor, we are Christians, but we are Pakistani citizens too. Although there is not much hope, I want justice for my son." Saleem was killed for nothing but being a Christian.

Are you washed in the blood,
In the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?
Are your garments spotless?
Are they white as snow?
Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Elisha Hoffman, USA (1839-1929)

We have escaped like a bird from the fowler's snare; the snare has been broken, and we have escaped. Psalm 124:7

Agnes Cao Guiying (1856)
Socially Vulnerable, Spiritually Humble, Open to God

As an orphan and then a young widow rejected by her in-laws, Agnes would have been one of the most powerless and insignificant people in 19th century Chinese society. Her vulnerability, however, allowed her to be humble and open to the call of God on her life.

Agnes' Christian parents died when she was young, but a pastor made sure she was cared for by Christians. It was noticed how quick she was to learn about Christianity. At the age of 18, she married a farmer, but her husband's family treated her as an outsider because she was a Christian. Two years later, her husband died and Agnes was driven from the house by her in-laws.

When the Church discovered how well Agnes knew the Christian faith, she was sent to Guangxi Province to do missionary work. Here she enthusiastically began teaching others, especially local tribeswomen, not only the Gospel but also about household management. She was much loved by those she taught.

In 1856 when the gentle and modest Agnes, then aged about 35, was visiting Yaoshan, she and 14 other believers were arrested. They were taken to the local temple where they were interrogated and tortured. Many were released but Agnes was kept in prison. Her faith in her Heavenly Father never wavered and finally, in a cage so small that she could only stand up, she died on 1 March 1856, crying out, "God help me!" She had found ultimate freedom in Christ, being united with Him forever.

When Thou wouldst pour the living stream,
Then I would be the earthen cup,
Filled to the brim and sparkling clear.
The fountain Thou and living spring,
Flow Thou through me, the vessel weak,
That thirsty souls may taste Thy grace.

Xi Shengmo, known as "Pastor Hsi", China (c. 1836-96), translated by Francesca French

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment … Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. 1 Peter 3:3-4

Eudocia (107)
Known for the Beauty of Her Soul

Stunningly beautiful Eudocia (or Eudokia) was born to Samaritan parents in Heliopolis in Phoenicia (modern Baalbek in Lebanon). With her dazzling looks, she attracted wealthy admirers and amassed a huge fortune, until her conversion to Christ.

One night, when Eudocia was 30, she heard singing from the house of her Christian neighbour and then heard someone reading Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, which speaks of Jesus separating sinners from the righteous at the Last Judgment. In the morning she hurried next door to find out more and discovered that a Christian called Germanus, on his way home from a pilgrimage, was visiting. It was Germanus whose prayerful singing and Bible-reading she had heard. Conscious of her sinful life, Eudocia asked Germanus how she could be saved. Following his directions, she spent a week in seclusion, fasting and praying, and then gave away all her wealth and possessions to the poor, rejected all her suitors, and devoted her life to the Lord Jesus Christ, in Whom she had now put her trust.

Eudocia became known for the beauty of her soul as well as the beauty of her face. She stored up treasures in heaven, and, in a life devoted to God, found the pearl of great price.

She was a passionate preacher and led many to Christ, thus angering the pagans who dominated Roman society at this time. Eventually, in her extreme old age, she was arrested by the Roman authorities and executed by beheading on 1 March 107.

Since with all my soul I behold the face of my beloved, therefore all the beauty of his form is seen in me.

Gregory of Nyssa, Turkey (c. 335-c. 394)

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit. Ephesians 1:13

Salama Fawzy Tobia and Nine Others (2014) Egyptian Migrant Workers in Libya

The gunmen went from door to door of an apartment building in Libya where many Egyptian migrant workers lived, asking whether the residents were Muslim or Christian. They offered rewards to anyone who would hand a Christian over to them. In this way, they found seven Egyptian Christian men, aged 17 to 25, whom they took away. The bodies of the Christians were found soon afterwards, on 25 February 2014, at a beach in Benghazi.

Then on 2 March, Salama, aged 23, who had lived in Libya for two years, was shot in the head by a gunman while he was loading fruit and vegetables on to his produce stall in Benghazi. He suffered extensive brain damage. His family took him back to Egypt, where he died on 15 March. Salama's uncle described him as a "peaceful person" who "came into the world and left the world without hurting anyone".

Two other Egyptian Christians were killed in Libya the same month – one was found shot dead in Jarutha on the outskirts of Benghazi on 3 March and the other, like Salama, was shot in the head while unloading vegetables at a shop in Benghazi on 29 March.

Salama's family believe that he was shot because of his cross tattoo, which identified him as a Christian. For Egyptian Christians, tattoos are not a fashion statement but an indelible and defiant mark of their faith. The small black cross tattoo which virtually every Egyptian Christian has on their wrist or hand – impossible to hide – serves as a constant visible reminder that, in an overwhelmingly Muslim society, they represent Jesus.

My marks and scars I carry with me to be a witness for me that I have fought His battles who will now be my rewarder.

John Bunyan, England (1628-88)

Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before. Daniel 6:10

Japanese Girl (c. 1557)
A Faithful Maid who Prayed Twice Daily at the Cross

Japan's first martyr was a young girl so obscure that we do not even know her name. She lived on the island of Hirado, off the north-west coast of Nagasaki Prefecture in the mid-16th century when the Gospel was newly arrived and spreading rapidly.

On Hirado there were many conversions and baptisms, and by 1557 two church buildings had been erected, as well as a number of large crosses. Crowds of Christians would come every morning and evening to pray at the foot of these crosses, and among them was the young maid of an unbelieving master. He threatened to kill her unless she gave up her daily devotions at the nearby cross. Ignoring his threats, the young maid continued praying at the cross, as Daniel in the Old Testament had continued faithfully praying to God despite the decree that everyone should pray only to King Darius.

Daniel was thrown into the lions' den as punishment, but God rescued him by shutting the mouths of the lions. But it was different for the Japanese maid. One morning, as she was returning home, her master met her, in a furious rage and brandishing a sword with which he cut off her head.

The Christians buried her, and urged each other to imitate her example by remaining faithful unto death.

The life that moves me most is the life that so abounds in love that it forgives even its enemies … Someone will doubtless ask, "Is such a foolish thing possible?" Yet One there was with as great a soul as this who trod this earth of ours. His name was called "Wonderful". He was called Jesus. A son of a carpenter and a carpenter Himself. I have found the highway which I must walk in His atoning life. Love is mightier than rebellion.

Toyohiko Kagawa, Japan (1888-1960)

Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:32

Christians in Yemen (2016)
Attack on Staff of Care Home for the Elderly

It was about midday in Yemen's port city, Aden, on 4 March 2016. Two men were arguing with the security guard of a Christian-run care home for the elderly, trying to convince him that they had come to visit their mother. The guard was doubtful but eventually opened the gates for them. Too late, he realised the pair were gunmen who were immediately joined by another four, all with automatic weapons.

The armed men rampaged through the care home, where about 80 elderly people lived, going from room to room, handcuffing their chosen victims, forcing them outside and then shooting them in the head. Four Christian nurses were killed: Margherite and Reginette were from Rwanda, Anselm from India and Judith from Kenya. All had been due leave but had postponed their journeys home so that they could continue to serve the people of Yemen. The gunmen also killed four local nurses, four security guards, three cleaners and one gardener. At least five who died were Ethiopians. One member of staff survived by hiding in a storeroom refrigerator. The elderly residents were unharmed.

The last prayer of the Christian nurses on the day of their death had been Ignatius' prayer for generosity.

Eternal Word, only begotten Son of God,
Teach me true generosity.
Teach me to serve you as you deserve.
To give without counting the cost,
To fight heedless of wounds,
To labour without seeking rest,
To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward
Save the knowledge that I have done your will. Amen

Ignatius of Loyola, Spain (1491-1556)

Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for those who are gracious and compassionate and righteous. Psalm 112:4

Macrobius (c. 303)
Egyptian Horrors under Emperor Diocletian

Macrobius (Makrawy) was bishop of a very special place – Nikiu, where, tradition says, Mary, Joseph and the infant Jesus rested for seven days in their flight from the wrath of King Herod. (Nikiu is modern Zawyat Razin in Egypt's Nile Delta.) Macrobius had the gift of healing, and one of those restored to health by his prayers was a paralysed man called Eucharistos.

In the year 303 a great persecution began, on the orders of the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Macrobius was summoned to appear before the governor of Nikiu. On realising that Macrobius was bishop of the city, the governor ordered him to be beaten and humiliated. A mixture of lime and vinegar was poured down his throat, but God kept Macrobius from harm.

Next the governor of the far larger city of Alexandria turned his attention to Macrobius, having heard of the signs and wonders performed by Macrobius in the Name of Jesus. He had Macrobius imprisoned and then tortured by a variety of means: pressed with wheels, parts of his body cut off, thrown to lions, thrown into the sea, thrown into fire, and boiled in oil and pitch. But the Lord strengthened Macrobius to endure it all.

Not wanting to see him suffer any more, Julius El-Akfahsi, the grateful father of Eucharistos, urged the governor to kill Macrobius. His advice was heeded and Macrobius was beheaded around March 303. Julius took the body, for he was called by the Lord Jesus Christ to care for martyrs, and had embraced the humble responsibility of preparing their bodies for burial. He also wrote the biographies of the martyrs, with the help of 300 young men whom he appointed as his assistants.

Abba Macarius was asked, "How should one pray?" The old man said, "There is no need at all to make long discourses; it is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy.' And if the conflict grows fiercer say, 'Lord, help!' He knows very well what we need and he shows us his mercy."
Macarius of Egypt (c. 300–391)

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12 (ESV)

Forty-Two Martyrs of Amorium (845)
Seven Years of Steadfastness

For seven years, 42 Christian men from the city of Amorium, all of high rank, were held in a dark dungeon in Samarra (in modern Iraq). Throughout this time, their Arab Muslim captors tried to persuade them to convert to Islam, sometimes by threats and torture, sometimes by offering them rewards. When it became clear that nothing was going to make them deny Christ, they were condemned to death.

On 6 March 845, on the banks of the Euphrates River, they were beheaded and their bodies thrown into the river by their executioners who were Ethiopian slaves.

Despite their high status in life, only seven of the martyrs are known by name. The first to die was the most senior, Constantine Baboutzikos, brother-in-law of Empress Theodora. His secretary, also called Constantine, was martyred too. The leader of the group of 42 was Theodore Krateros, believed to have been a general in the Byzantine army. Two more senior military men were Aetios, a general, and Kallistos, who had begun his career in the imperial bodyguard and risen through the ranks, eventually becoming leader of the province of Koloneia (in modern Turkey). There was also Theophilos, a nobleman, and Bassoes, described as a "runner".

A Christian from Amorium had become Byzantine emperor in 820, which initiated a period of great prosperity for the city, which lay in Phrygia (in modern Turkey). Other Amorian emperors followed. Due to its relationship with the imperial throne of the Christian Byzantine Empire, Amorium became a target for the Muslim Caliph Al-Mu'tasim who captured and systematically destroyed the city in 838, killing tens of thousands of Byzantine soldiers and civilians.

Afflictions cannot make us miserable, if they are not our own fault. A blessing may arise from them, and we may be blessed in them. They are so far from taking away a good man's happiness that they really increase it … To be approved by God is the great aim of a Christian in all his trials, and it will be his blessedness at last, when he shall receive the crown of life.
Matthew Henry, Wales (1662–1714)

Holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. 1 Timothy 1:19

Leonid Feodorov (1935)
Teaching Children the Bible, even when Forbidden

"If the Soviet Government orders me to act against my conscience, I do not obey … the Church holds that children must be taught their religion, no matter what the law says. Conscience is above the law. No law which is against the conscience can bind." This was the bold declaration of Leonid Feodorov, when he was on trial for disobeying a decree which had been issued by the communist authorities of the Soviet Union dated 21 January 1921 forbidding clergy to teach religion to anyone under the age of 18.

Leonid and 17 others were summoned to Moscow to appear before a revolutionary tribunal in 1923, charged with counter-revolutionary activities. At the trial Leonid also said, "Our hearts are full, not of hatred, but of sadness. You cannot understand us. We are not allowed liberty of conscience."

He was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, first in Moscow's Butyrka prison and then at Solovki Camp on an island in the White Sea. In 1929 he was transferred to a small village near Pinega, in the far north of the Russian mainland, where he lived in an *izba* (log hut) and was put to work making charcoal. He began conducting Bible classes for local children and was therefore moved to Poltava, near the town of Kotlas, where he lived out the rest of his sentence in exile. He died in Viatka, worn out by the rigours of imprisonment and years of hard labour, on 7 March 1935, at the age of 55.

During his lifetime, Leonid saw the truth of his own prediction: "Russia will not repent without travelling the Red Sea of the blood of her martyrs and numerous sufferings of her apostles."

Truth is so obscure in these times, and falsehood so established, that, unless we love the truth, we cannot know it.

Blaise Pascal, France (1623–62)

Because your love is better than life, my lips will glorify you. I will praise you as long as I live … I will be satisfied as with the richest of foods.
Psalm 63:3-5

Dulal Sarkar (2005)
Beheaded in Bangladesh

Dulal (35) was the lay pastor, evangelist, security guard and caretaker of his church in the village of Jalalpur in the south-western district of Khulna, Bangladesh. He was passionate about sharing his faith and had planted several churches in the area.

It is not against the law in Bangladesh to try to lead Muslims to Christ, although it can still be very dangerous. Dulal would have been well aware of that, for a prominent Bangladeshi Christian doctor, Abdul Gani, had been beheaded six months earlier (see September 18). But knowing the risks did not stop Dulal from sharing his faith one day in early March 2005 with a group of Muslims from his village, even persuading them to come with him to the church to talk more with the main pastor. Several of the Muslims put their faith in Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

On 8 March, Dulal once again found an opportunity to talk about his beloved Jesus with Muslim villagers. He was on his way home afterwards when ten local Muslims attacked him and then beheaded him.

Dulal was killed because he was so in love with His Saviour that he could not keep quiet about it. He wanted to take this salvation to others. To him faith was not a personal matter to be kept to himself; it was to be shared with others.

We are happy in the love of the Lord, as fish in the water;
We take honey from His sweet teachings, as bee on the lotus.

I will love Jesus, and will stay with the Lord always;
I will love Jesus, and will be His faithful disciple.

I want to be part of the Cross of Jesus; I fill my soul with His love.
I want to take the marks of nail in my own hands and think of salvation for others.

William Carey, English missionary to India (1793-1834), English translation of a hymn he wrote in Bengali

Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. Luke 24:38-39

Gnadenhütten Massacre (1782)
Considered the Wounds of Jesus Every Day

"They are the five wounds of my crucified Saviour; these I consider daily, and find always new lessons for my heart." Native Americans who became Christians through Moravian missionary work in the 18th century were persecuted and ridiculed by Native American pagans and by white colonist frontiersmen. One colonist derided a Native American believer for his illiteracy, but the Christian insisted that every day he read five letters: the wounds of Christ.

As pacifists, the missionaries did not take sides on the issue of American independence from Britain. They were therefore viewed with suspicion by both the British and the American colonists (see November 23). In the 1760s they began moving west from Pennsylvania to Ohio, seeking to evangelise its tribes and find somewhere the Native American Christians could settle. The first Ohio convert was baptised in 1770. More followed, and in 1771 new settlements of Native American Christians were established in Ohio, named Gnadenhütten ("Tents of Grace"), Schoenbrunn and Salem.

In 1781 the Native American Christians of the Delaware tribe, who had embraced Moravian pacifism, were forced out of their homes by the British, who suspected them of supporting the colonists. Driven north like cattle for a hundred miles, the Native American Christians and white Moravian missionaries were then left to fend for themselves in a hostile landscape that yielded no food. Winter came. When the snow lay deep and starvation loomed, some travelled back to their settlements to harvest the corn in their fields. While they were there, a group of colonist frontiersmen, pretending to save them from the British, took prisoner the trusting Christians.

The Christians begged for time to prepare themselves for death, but soon, as they sang together, they were attacked by mallet, tomahawk and scalping until 62 adults and 34 children lay dead.

Then asking pardon for whatever offense they had given, or grief they had occasioned to each other, they kneeled down, offering fervent prayers to God their Savior – and kissing one another, under a flood of tears fully resigned to his will, they sang praises unto him, in the joyful hope that they would soon be relieved from their pains, and join their redeemer in everlasting bliss.

John Heckewelder, born in England, moved to America (1743-1823)

I lift up my eyes to the mountains – where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth. Psalm 121:1-2

Avar Christians (14th century)
Mountainous Medieval Christian Nation

Dagestan, in the mountainous Caucasus region of the Russian Federation, is today a hotbed of Islamic extremism. But long ago there was a Christian kingdom here, later conquered and obliterated by Muslim peoples.

In the 6th century, the king of the Avar people lived in a mountain-top fortress. He and his court were Christians, and Christianity was the state religion of his kingdom, although most of the Avar population continued in their ancient animistic beliefs. The name of the Christian Avar kingdom was Sarir. Archaeological evidence suggest that a strong Avar church had developed by the 8th century. The nearby Alan people (in modern Iran) became Christian early in the 10th century and there was frequent intermarriage between the royal families of the Avars and the Alans.

This alliance between two Christian kingdoms in the Caucasus alarmed the Muslims of the region, who agreed to assist each other against Sarir. By the early 12th century a combination of economic and military pressure had led to the disintegration of Sarir. A Muslim khanate (which lasted until 1864) was established, with sharia (Islamic law). In the 14th century Timur (Tamerlane), the Turko-Mongol conqueror, killed huge numbers of Christians, including Avars, and also subsidised the development of Islamic institutions. But it was in the high mountainous territory that Christians held out the longest against Islam. The Avar village of Karakh did not adopt Islam until 1435.

The Avars, the largest of the many ethnic groups in Dagestan, are now a 99.9% Muslim people. They still live in ancient villages 2,000 metres (6,500 feet) above sea level, and are called "mountain dwellers" by the neighbouring peoples.

When God wants to move a mountain, he does not take a bar of iron, but takes a little worm. The fact is, we have too much strength. We are not weak enough. It is not our strength that we want. One drop of God's strength is worth more than all the world.

Dwight L Moody, USA (1837-1899)

"Do not fear their threats; do not be frightened." But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. 1 Peter 3:14-15

Jos Christians in Nigeria (2012, 2020) Caught in the Uneasy Middle Belt

In January 2012 militant Islamist group Boko Haram issued a "three-day ultimatum to the southerners [i.e. Christians] living in the northern part of Nigeria to move away". The group made good their threat in the early months of 2012, with suicide attacks on churches in Jos, the capital of Plateau State, which lies in the uneasy Middle Belt between Nigeria's largely Muslim north and its Christian south. On 26 February two women and an 18-month-old child were killed and around 50 people injured when a car packed with explosives drove into a church compound and exploded three metres from the church.

In early March Boko Haram declared "war" on Christians and announced their plans to "eradicate Christians from certain parts of the country". Two days later, they threatened to "put into action new efforts to strike fear into the Christians of the power of Islam by kidnapping their women", assaulting them and demanding ransom from their families. Then on Sunday 11 March at least ten people were killed after explosives were detonated in a suicide attack at the gates of another church in Jos.

Since 2012 anti-Christian violence in the Jos area has continued, including attacks by militant Fulanis. In one such incident, on 1 December 2020, three Christians were murdered during a Fulani militant attack on the Gura Pana community, about twelve miles south-west of Jos. Dalyop Davou (75), Joseph Swanta (20), who came to help Dalyop, and Davou Mwanti (59) were shot dead by the militants.

The Christians of Jos refused to be intimidated by threats. They continued worshipping Sunday by Sunday. They were not fearful or frightened, for Christ lived in their hearts, the Lord and Saviour whom they loved, revered and trusted.

The spirit that refuses to hate when men are hateful. The spirit that is just when others are unjust. The spirit that is unselfish when others are selfish. These are the men that can be used by the Prince of Peace to make peace.
Frank Buchman, USA (1878-1961)

The wicked flee though no-one pursues, but the righteous are as bold as a lion.
Proverbs 28:1

Dilawar Khan (1869)
Bold for Christ (translation of "Dilawar Masih" the baptismal name of Dilawar Khan)

Dilawar was born into a Muslim family in Afghanistan, and brought up to rob and plunder, in accordance with the local belief that Allah had given them the stronghold of the mountains so they could plunder the plains. Dilawar became leader of a brigand group that operated near the Khyber Pass and was notorious for kidnapping rich merchants for ransom.

An army officer offered Dilawar a place in the distinguished Guide Corps of the British Indian Army, if he would lead an honest life. Dilawar eventually agreed and became an excellent soldier – brave, alert and cautious. He was soon promoted to *subadar*.

One day in Peshawar (in modern Pakistan), Dilawar was surprised to see a British colonel preaching Christianity in the bazaar, with a noisy crowd around him. Dilawar began to argue with Colonel Wheeler, but accepted from him a copy of Carl G Pfander's book *Mizan-ul-Haqq* ("The Balance of Truth"), an apologetic book that seeks to explain Christianity by contrasting it with Islam. After reading it, Dilawar began challenging the mullahs to disprove Christianity. When they could not, he became convinced of the Gospel. He began to speak about Christ to all he met. The apostasy of one as renowned as Dilawar of course resulted in death threats from outraged Muslims.

In 1857 Dilawar's unit was sent to Delhi to help put down the Indian Rebellion (Indian Mutiny). When Delhi fell, he refused to join in the plundering, and returned to Peshawar empty-handed.

Because he was now a Christian, the British government began to entrust Dilawar with sensitive work. In 1869 they sent him on a secret mission to Chitral. The mullahs there recognised the famous apostate and his guides purposely misled him, then abandoned him to perish in the snowy mountains.

Uncertainty as to our relationship with God is one of the most enfeebling and dispiriting of things. It makes a man heartless. It takes the pith out of him. He cannot fight; he cannot run. He is easily dismayed and gives way. He can do nothing for God. But when we know that we are of God, we are vigorous, brave, invincible. There is no more quickening truth than this of assurance.
Horatius Bonar, Scotland (1808-89)

Shout for joy, you heavens; rejoice, you earth; burst into song, you mountains! For the LORD *comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones. But Zion said, 'The* LORD *has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me.' 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!'* Isaiah 49:13-15

Christians in the Bolshevik Revolution (1917-28)
Communist Chaos

Religion is an illness from which people need to be cured, and Christianity is like an infection that people can pass on to others. At least that was the opinion of the Russian revolutionary leader Lenin (1870-1924). On gaining power in 1917, Lenin quickly began to separate church from state and to reduce the influence of Christians on society. He ordered the seizure of church property and banned the teaching of religion in schools. Many atheistic journals attacking religion were published.

Church leaders urged their flocks to be ready to suffer for Christ, and soon the leaders themselves were being targeted, with clergy of all denominations killed in spontaneous violence. Between June 1918 and January 1919, 370 clergy were murdered.

In 1921 a number of Christian leaders called for freedom of religion. The response was a communist policy of terror. More clergy were killed and ordinary Christians as well. In this one year, several thousand clergy and over 12,000 church members died for their faith.

In 1922 the Solovki Camp (see March 7), a former monastery, was created as a concentration camp for opponents of the regime. Many Christians were executed there by firing squad. The 1920s in Soviet Russia (from 1922 called the Soviet Union) witnessed an uninterrupted procession of victims and martyrs. Almost all these Christians went unswervingly to their death; instances of apostasy were few and far between.

If I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous revolution that swallowed up some 60 million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men had forgotten God; that is why all this has happened."
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russia (1918–2008)

May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, *the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.* Ruth 2:12

Chin State Christians (2020)
Hiding from Jet Fighter Airstrikes

Airstrikes on 14-15 March and 7 April 2020 by Myanmar army jet fighters killed 28 civilians, including a three-year-old child, from five villages in Christian-majority Chin State. "Many villagers were hiding under houses hit by artillery fire from the planes … That's why many were burned and injured and others killed," said a local witness. Their wooden houses, raised off the ground on stilts, suffered severe damage and some were completely destroyed by fire. About 2,000 people fled to neighbouring villages.

Chin State is the poorest in Myanmar (Burma) and its population is estimated to be 90% Christian.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar has a history of oppressing minorities and promoting the Buddhism of the dominant Burman ethnic group. Since the 1960s the main method of maintaining the dominance of Buddhism has been violent attacks by the armed forces on Christians and other non-Buddhists. A number of Chin pastors and Christian leaders have been killed (see August 4) and in the five months following the February 2021 military coup more than 80 Chin, including ten children, were killed. In Chin State, the construction of churches is prohibited, crosses are destroyed and replaced with Buddhist pagodas or statutes of monks, the printing of Bibles in the Chin language is not permitted and Bibles are often confiscated. Many Chin Christian children have been enticed or forced to become Buddhist monks and nuns.

The military's stated reason for the attacks in March and April 2020 was that Arakan Army rebels, composed mainly of Buddhists from Rakhine State on Chin State's southern border, had taken cover in the predominantly Christian villages. However, Chin Christian leaders suspected that, based on past systematic persecution, the main reason for the indiscriminate attack on the villages was that the inhabitants were Christian.

There is a place brighter than the sun
And we will reach it by faith,
Our Father is preparing a house for us,
That is glittering like silver and gold.

Hymn inscribed on the gravestone of Pu Hreng Kio, a Chin church leader, from Aibur, Chin State (died 1961)

Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked. Psalm 84:10

Akash Bashir (2015)
Lahore Church Bombings

"Let me go. I have a bomb and you will die," said the suicide bomber to Akash Bashir who had grabbed hold of him to prevent him entering the church.

"I will die but I will not let you enter into the church," replied Akash, holding the bomber still tighter.

It was Sunday morning, 15 March 2015, in Youhanabad, a Christian neighbourhood in Lahore, Pakistan. Akash (aged 20) was as usual one of the volunteer security guards at his church. His family did not like Akash doing this, and feared for his life. But Akash saw things differently. Protecting his fellow Christians when they gathered to worship was a driving force for him, and each Sunday morning he would leave home early to perform his security duties, sometimes at 5 a.m. but mostly at 7 a.m, staying five hours to ensure the safety of the people in and around the church.

Of course, Akash died as the bomber detonated himself. So did the security guard at a church in another part of Youhanabad which was targeted that same Sunday morning by another suicide bomber. The coordinated attacks were organised by the Islamist militant group Jamaatul Ahrar. At least 16 people were killed and over 70 injured in the twin attacks but these numbers would have been far higher had not both bombers been stopped from entering the church buildings.

After the attack, some Christians fled Youhanabad, but Akash's mother, Naz Bano, said tearfully, "If we did run away it would undo the bravery that Akash showed the world."

Just where you stand in the conflict, there is your place. Just where you think you are useless, hide not your face. God placed you there for a purpose, whatever it be. Gird your armour! Be faithful at toil or rest! Whatever it be, never doubting God's way is best. Out in the fight or on picket, stand firm and true. This is the work, which your Master gives you to do.

From a letter sent by prayer supporters in USA in the 1935 to a missionary in the North West Frontier Province in India (now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan)

Join with me in suffering, like a good soldier of Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 2:3

Theban Legion (286)
Massacre of a Whole Legion

The Theban Legion was a unit of the Roman army composed entirely of Christians from Thebes (modern Luxor) in Egypt. It was said to number about 6,600 men. Around the year 286, part of the Theban Legion, approximately 5,200 soldiers, together with some other legions, were sent to quell a rebellion in Gaul (modern France).

After the task had been achieved, the emperor ordered the victorious troops to kill some Christians and sacrifice to the Roman gods in gratitude for their success. Other legions obeyed but the Theban Legion refused and withdrew to set up camp near Aguanum (modern St-Maurice in Switzerland).

The Thebans sent a message to the emperor: "We are your soldiers but also the soldiers of the true God. We owe you military service and obedience, but we cannot renounce Him who is our Creator and Master…we cannot stain our hands with the blood of innocent people (Christians)… we would rather die innocent than live by any sin."

When the emperor heard of their unanimous refusal, he ordered that the legion be decimated. Every tenth man was put to death and the survivors told there would be a second decimation unless they followed the emperor's orders. The Theban commander Maurice exhorted his men to stand firm, and be ready to die for Christ like other martyred Christian soldiers. He told them their newly murdered comrades had gone to heaven before them.

When the emperor realised that he would never persuade the Thebans to go against their Christian faith, he ordered the whole legion to be slaughtered. Some of the legion posted elsewhere were not present at the massacre at Aguanum. These men were methodically sought out and killed in 14 different locations.

The imperial [Roman] power is great, but consider … how great God is. He sees the hearts of all; he probes their inmost conscience; he knows all things before they come to pass, he knows the innermost secrets of your heart.
Ambrose of Milan, modern Italy (c. 339–397)

You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit. Job 10:12

Vam Ngaij Vaj and Hmong Christians (2011-13) Ethnic Minority in South-East Asia

On Good Friday 2013, the day when Christians particularly remember the suffering and death of their Lord and Saviour on the Cross, a Hmong Christian leader from Vietnam's Central Highlands, Vam Ngaij Vaj (also called Hoang Van Ngai) was beaten to death, and possibly electrocuted, while in police custody. His neck, shoulders and torso were bruised and battered, yet police called the death a suicide. The official reason for his arrest was that he had been "destroying the forest" although he had merely been clearing brush from his field, but the Hmong Christian community believed that he was targeted because he was a church leader and the whole incident was intended to terrorise them.

The Hmong are an ethnic group who live in mountainous regions of China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Many of them are Christians. Those who are Christians in Marxist-governed Laos and Vietnam often face persecution, not only as religious believers but also because of the fact that the Hmong had sided with the USA during the Vietnam War (1955-75) and in a "secret war" against communists in Laos (1964-73).

In one incident in Dien Bien province, Vietnam, in 2011, more than 70 Hmong people were killed by security forces and hundreds injured during peaceful demonstration, calling for religious freedom and land reforms. More than 2,400 Hmong people were arrested.

Many of the believers living in the Central Highlands of Vietnam originally came from the north-west region, where they were subject to arbitrary arrest, beatings by police, forced or coerced eviction, and fines for converting to Christianity. Since the beginning of the 21st century, they have fled in large numbers, hoping that they would be able to practise their faith freely further south. Sadly the persecution has followed them.

Lord, come to our hearts like the big waters in a deep gorge and sweep all that is wrong away!
Hmong prayer, at a prayer meeting in Guizhou, China in 1914, as noted down by English missionary Samuel Pollard (1864-1915)

But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. Matthew 6:6

Kakure Kirishitans (1630s)
Secret Christians in Japan

Western missionaries arrived in Japan in 1549 and, over the following decades, hundreds of thousands of Japanese turned to Christ. One convert was a *daimyo* (nobleman) from Shimabura, near Nagasaki, who became a Christian in 1580. Many local people in the area followed the example of their feudal lord and became Christians too. Suddenly in 1587 persecution of Japan's Christians (or Kirishitans, as they were called) began, with an order to expel foreign missionaries. Later came an order to execute the Kirishitan leaders in Kyoto and Osaka: twenty Japanese Christians and six foreign Christians from various parts of Japan were crucified in Nagasaki on 5 February 1597.

In 1614 the Kirishitan religion was banned across Japan, and persecution increased. Relatively quick execution methods, such as beheading, crucifixion or burning at the stake, seemed to inspire onlookers to greater faith. So the Japanese authorities devised more prolonged methods. The most agonising was to suspend the Christian upside down in a dark pit partly filled with excrement (see September 29). Some Christians lasted weeks before dying of this particular torture.

Christianity became an underground faith, with no church buildings, crosses, or other visible signs. Its followers were called the Kakure Kirishitans (hidden Christians). Despite the secrecy, there were periodic round-ups when large numbers of Christians would be imprisoned or executed. This continued until 1873 when the ban on the Kirishitan religion was lifted. It has been estimated that by then there may have been as many as 40,000 Japanese martyrs, although only 4,045 are known by name.

The saints of God are called His hidden ones [Psalm 83:3]. Why so? Not only because they are hid in God's decree, and hid in Christ's wounds, but oftentimes God hides them in a time of danger and calamity: they are hidden ones. He reserved to Himself seven thousand that had not bowed the knee to Baal. The prophet knew not where there was one, but God knew there seven thousand [1 Kings 19:18].
Thomas Watson, England (1620-86) in a sermon preached 19 August 1662

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people. Deuteronomy 26:5

Arameans (1st century to present day)
The Legacy of the Language of Jesus

The oldest Christian communities in the world, dating back to the 1st century, are of Aramean (Syriac) people. They have been called "a Church of martyrs from the beginning".

The ancient land of Aramea covered much of modern Syria. In the Old Testament it was frequently an enemy of God's people, even though Rebekah, Leah and Rachel were all Arameans. The Israelites were later commanded by God to remember that their redemption story began with their ancestor Jacob, a "wandering Aramean".

During a period of rule by Assyria, the Arameans were dispersed around the Assyrian Empire; thus their language, Aramaic, spread widely, becoming the *lingua franca* of the Fertile Crescent. It was the mother-tongue of the Lord Jesus, still used by some Christian communities in the Middle East, especially in church liturgies.

Over the last two millennia, the Arameans suffered much persecution for their Christian faith, with many martyrdoms, under the Romans, Persians and Muslim Arabs. Another cause was the murderous invasions of Timur (Tamerlane) in the 14th century, from which many Arameans retreated to the mountains of what is now Iraqi Kurdistan. The Kurds, backed by the Ottomans, later turned on their Christian neighbours in 1843, 1846 and 1860 with large-scale massacres of Arameans.

The Arameans suffered alongside the Armenians as oppressed Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. In the early 20th century oppression turned to genocide, with 250,000 to 500,000 Arameans killed. A century later they were targeted by Islamist terrorists seeking to eradicate Christianity. In one incident in 2013, the Syriac town of Saddad in Syria was attacked and 45 Christians martyred. Seven from one family died, including grandparents and grandchildren, and their bodies were thrown into a well.

With the thousands of thousands, and the millions of millions of the fiery angels, who stand before You, O Lord, and unceasingly glorify You, may we also be worthy to praise You thrice, crying out and saying: Qadish (Holy).
The Liturgy of Saint Jacob Bar Salibi, Syriac Orthodox Church

There are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. 1 Corinthians 14:10

Four Christian Bible Translators (2016) The Bible in Every Language

There are 7,353 languages in the world, but as of October 2019 only 698 had a complete Bible. Approximately 1.5 billion people were still waiting for a full Bible in their mother tongue. Bible translators throughout the world are working hard to bring the Word of God to every nation, tribe, language and people (Revelation 14:6). They often work in dangerous places, giving their lives for the spread of the Gospel (see March 27).

In mid-March 2016, four local Christian Bible translators were killed when Islamist militants raided their office in the Middle East. The attackers sprayed bullets around the office, killing two of the translators, and injuring several more. Then, with their weapons, they bludgeoned to death another two translators who had leapt on top of the lead translator, saving his life.

It takes years to complete a Bible translation. Work in progress needs to be securely stored. In the attack, the militants destroyed office equipment and burned all the books and other translation materials in the office. But praise God the hard drives containing the translation work for eight language projects were preserved. Undeterred by the martyrdoms of their colleagues, the remaining translation team members announced that they would be re-doubling their efforts to translate God's Word for the eight language communities.

Word of God, across the ages comes the message to our life;
Source of hope forever present in our toil and fears and strife;
Constant witness to God's mercy, still our grace whate'er befall,
Guide unfailing, strength eternal, offered freely to us all.

In the tongues of all the peoples may the message bless and heal,
As devout and patient scholars more and more its depths reveal.
Bless, O God, to wise and simple, all the truth of ageless worth,
Till all lands receive the witness and your knowledge fills the earth.

Ferdinand Q Blanchard, USA (1876-1968)

I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. Jeremiah 31:13

Younis Masih and Jameel Masih (2011)
From Joy to Sorrow, then Eternal Joy

Residents of Hurr Camp, a Christian community in Hyderabad, Sindh Province, Pakistan, were joyfully celebrating their church's 30th anniversary on 21 March 2011, when a group of Muslim youths gathered outside the church, playing music loudly on their mobile phones and taunting Christian women as they arrived for the celebration.

Four Christian men, Younis (47), Jameel (22), Siddique (45) and Waseem (20) politely asked the Muslim young men to stop teasing the Christian women and respect the sanctity of the church. A verbal clash ensued before the youths left. They returned armed with handguns and opened fire on the Christians, killing Younis and Jameel instantly and seriously injuring Siddique and Waseem.

The local police were unwilling to pursue the case, a common form of anti-Christian discrimination in Muslim-majority Pakistan. Jameel's mother, Surraya Bibi, said: "The police acted as if it was not important." It was not until late at night that the police finally filed a report of the incident and then only after the families had to dishonour their loved ones by blocking the main road with their two dead bodies for several hours.

The joyful church celebration turned into a time of mourning, especially for Younis's widow and four children, and for Jameel's widow who had been married only a month. But in heaven both young and old will rejoice together in the presence of their Lord forever.

Come and celebrate now, come and celebrate now,
Sing your praises to Jesus with joy, joy, joy.
Jesus came to earth for me, my Lord Jesus lived for me.
Jesus came to die for me, my Lord Jesus loves me.
Lord you came to take my sin and set the captive free.
You died for me, You were crushed for me,
And then You rose again my Saviour and my God.
I am now my Lord's, now my Lord is mine.

"Khushi Khushi Manao" ("Come and celebrate now"), English translation of Hindi/Urdu hymn

Father, forgive them. Luke 23:34

The Christians of the Mamel Reservoir (Mamilla Pool) (614)
Massacre in Jerusalem

"How many souls were slain in the reservoir of Mamel! How many perished of hunger and thirst! How many priests and monks were massacred by the sword! How many infants were crushed under foot… How many parents perished on top of their own children!" These are the words of a monk called Strategos, an eyewitness to the terrible massacre which occurred in 614 AD when the Persians conquered Jerusalem. The killing of its Christian inhabitants was chiefly performed by Jews, both Jewish fighting units who were part of the Persian army and local Jews from Jerusalem.

The Mamel reservoir was used by the conquering Persian troops to hold thousands of captured Christians. Strategos records that Jews invited Christian prisoners in the reservoir to convert to Judaism, promising to ransom and free any who did so. None of the Christians would deny Christ but, says Strategos, the Jews bought many of them from the Persians anyway, and then killed them, until the reservoir ran with blood. Hundreds of church buildings were also destroyed. Special ferocity was aimed at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, revered as the place where Jesus' body lay between crucifixion and resurrection. Eventually the Persians intervened to stop the carnage.

How many Christians died? The lowest figure suggested is 30,000. A modern Israeli archaeologist, Ronny Reich, estimates 60,000. This is close to Strategos' figure of 66,509 calculated by totalling the number of Christian corpses at different locations in the city. The highest figure suggested is 90,000 as estimated by a Byzantine chronicler and also cited by Jewish scholars in the 19th century, such as Munk and Graetz, who saw the massacre as vengeance for what Jews had suffered at the hands of Christians.

We have been crucified with Christ; now we shall live for ever.
Alleluia, alleluia! Give thanks to the risen Lord.
Alleluia, alleluia! Give praise to His name.

Donald Fishel, USA (b. 1950)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. Ephesians 5:1 (ESV)

Attalus and Martyrs of Lyon (177)
Ten Days in Lyon

Under the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned 161-180), the Church was severely persecuted. For those in Lyon and Vienne in southern Gaul (modern France) persecution peaked in 177. Christians had already been forbidden to appear in the marketplace, forum, baths or any public place. If they did, they were liable to be mocked, beaten and robbed. They were not safe at home either, for their homes were broken into and vandalised.

Over a period of ten days, 48 of the most zealous Christians were rounded up, falsely accused of cannibalism, incest and other things, then tortured with "blows, dragging, plunder, stoning", imprisoned and finally martyred. Thus, in the words of the 4th century church historian Eusebius, they "became emulators and imitators of Christ". About half of the martyrs were local Gauls and half were missionaries from Asia Minor (modern Turkey), who had come to Gaul under the leadership of Bishop Pothinus, and settled there.

Attalus, from Pergamum (modern Bergama, Turkey), was placed in an iron chair and roasted over a fire. The oldest martyr was Pothinus himself, now 90 and very sick. He was beaten, kicked and dragged about by the soldiers and mob, dying two days later in prison.

The youngest martyr was also one of the Asian missionary group. Just 15 years old, he was taken every day to see his fellow Christians being tortured, in the hope that he might be frightened into denying Christ; but his faith did not fail and on the last day of the killings, he himself was put to death.

Father, give completeness to beginners,
Understanding to the little ones,
And help to those who are running their course.
Give sorrow to the negligent,
Fervour to the lukewarm,
And to the mature a true humility,
For the sake of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.
Irenaeus of Lyon, modern France (c. 130-200)

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Philippians 1:22-24

Lionel Jayasinghe (1988)
Dead to Self, Alive to God

Lionel was a boy of twelve when he entered a Buddhist monastery in Sri Lanka to become a monk. He knew nothing of Christianity until he was given a tract; its contents angered him greatly as he felt such efforts to evangelise were disruptive to society. However, there was a Bible verse in the tract that he could not forget: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Eventually he felt compelled to find out more and contacted the church whose address was given on the tract. After exchanging letters with the pastor, Lionel visited the church in his Buddhist monk robes, talked all evening and all night with the pastor, until in the early morning he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. Before long he was a Christian missionary, equipped only with Bible and bicycle, and soon he had planted a small church in the strongly Buddhist town of Tissamaharama.

For five years he continued his ministry, facing much opposition. Protests were often held outside the simple church building. Bibles were burned. His church members were threatened that they must stop attending and some were subjected to violence. But Lionel continued to serve the Lord faithfully until on 25 March 1988 he was murdered in front of his wife Lalani and their baby son Shamil. Lionel was first shot, then stabbed in the chest then shot again in the face. Christians believed that his assassins had been hired by local Buddhist extremists.

In the year that Lionel died, many people in Tissmaharama began to turn to Christ, and by 2003 there were 1,200 believers and seven house churches in the area.

If you want me to die, I'm ready, but I'd prefer not, because I have work to do here. But if I die, I want to write on the wall with my blood, "Jesus is alive."
Lalani, widow of Lionel Jayasinghe, who continued to serve in the church at Tissamaharama, Sri Lanka, after her husband's death

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

Sidhom Bishay (1844)
Martyred by Molten Tar

Sidhom Bishay was an Egyptian Christian who worked as a government employee in the city of Damietta. One day he was on his way to church when a Muslim donkey-driver ran into him and started scolding him for not knowing his inferior *dhimmi* (non-Muslim) status according to which he should have given way to the Muslim. As crowds gathered, the Muslim driver falsely accused Sidhom of insulting Muhammad.

Sidhom was brought before an Islamic judge and the city governor, who ordered him to convert to Islam or die. Refusing to embrace Islam, Sidhom was condemned to death. After flogging and torture, he was paraded through the city seated on a buffalo, naked and facing rearwards, while angry citizens hurled insults at him. All the time he kept praying to Jesus. Finally, molten tar was poured over his head and face. He was left outside his home and died five days later on 25 March 1844.

This martyrdom occurred while Muhammad Ali was pasha and viceroy of Egypt (1805-48), a period generally seen as marked by relative tolerance towards the Christian minority. Ali's modernising reforms led to the creation of a professional bureaucracy in which talented Christian men could rise to high positions, despite the ruling in sharia (Islamic law) that Christians should not have authority over Muslims. An Armenian Christian even became Egyptian Minister of Commerce and Minister of Foreign Affairs. Yet the authorities were slow to respond to Sidhom's brutal martyrdom. Eventually they punished those responsible and, as a kind of compensation, gave the Christians of Damietta permission to put a cross on top of their churches and carry a cross at funerals.

All who believe and are assured that grace and truth were obtained through Jesus Christ, and who know Christ to be the truth, agreeably to His own declaration, "I am the truth," derive the knowledge which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ.
Origen, Egypt (c. 185-c. 254)

They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor, their righteousness endures for ever; their horn will be lifted high in honour. Psalm 112:9

Benjamin Camil (2013)
Always Serving Others

Benjamin Camil (35), from Damascus, Syria, was on his way home on the morning of 26 March 2013, after distributing food to destitute people during the Syrian Civil War, when he was caught in a bomb explosion and killed on the spot. As a Syrian church leader said afterwards, Benjamin had been "giving a helping hand with the over-load of social work during these painful times." This was typical of Benjamin, who was "so close to everyone. He was always present, with an open ear, and was always ready to help and share his modest possessions with those most in need." Because the bomb had targeted a Christian quarter of the city, the Christian community considered him a martyr.

Benjamin was training to be a deacon and had been looking forward to serving in the Church. The Acts of the Apostles records how the early church distributed food every day to the needy and overseeing this food distribution was the task of deacons (Acts 6:1-6).

How blessed, from the bonds of sin and earthly fetters free,
In singleness of heart and aim, Thy servant, Lord, to be!
The hardest toil to undertake with joy at Thy command!
The meanest office to receive with meekness at Thy hand!

With willing heart and longing eyes, to watch before Thy gate,
Ready to run the weary race, to bear the heavy weight;
No voice of thunder to expect, but follow calm and still,
For love can easily divine the One Beloved's will.

Thus may I serve Thee, gracious Lord thus ever Thine alone,
My soul and body given to Thee, the purchase Thou hast won:
Through evil or through good report still keeping by Thy side,
By life or death, in this poor flesh let Christ be magnified!

How happily the working days in this dear service fly!
How rapidly the closing hour, the time of rest, draws nigh!
When all the faithful gather home, a joyful company,
And ever where the Master is, shall His blest servants be.

Karl Johann Philipp Spitta (1833), translated from the German by Jane Borthwick (1854)

I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Isaiah 6:1

Tom and June Jackson (1990)
In the Hollow of His Hand

American missionary Tom and his British wife June were a wonderful Bible translation team, serving Christ in the West African country of Liberia for many years. Between the two of them, they were fluent in Bassa, Gio and Mano and had translated the New Testament into those languages and by December 1989 were working on the Old Testaments.

In that month, fighting broke out between government and rebel forces in Nimba county, where Tom and June had lived for many years. It was the beginning of a long and bloody civil war. The rebels consisted mostly of Gio and Mano people, who had been greatly oppressed by the government. Tom and June wrote in what proved to be their last newsletter that "we had sought the Lord and he had given us peace" to stay in Liberia and continue to serve the Lord there.

One of Tom's favourite hymns was:

> 'Til the storm passes over, 'til the thunder sounds no more,
> 'Til the clouds roll forever from the sky.
> Hold me fast, let me stand in the hollow of Thy hand,
> Keep me safe 'til the storm passes by.

An African proverb says, "When elephants fight the grass gets hurt." On 27 March 1990 the Jacksons were killed in crossfire between the opposing sides, as they tried to drive to safety.

But we must not dwell on doom and gloom. We borrow the far seeing eye of faith of prophets and see God still high and lifted up, still transcendently triumphant over the present travail. We endure as seeing Him who is invisible. Even now we get a glimmer of glory. God bringing marvellous deliverance to His people. No doubt we will hear more in due time but the full story of the perfection of God's ways will only be told when all His suffering saints are gathered to their eternal home. The contrast between that future day and this present one has a way of making us homesick for heaven.
Tom Jackson, letter dated 18 February 1990

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18

Mary Sameh George (2014)
Identified as a Christian by the Cross

On 28 March 2014, Egyptian law-school graduate, Mary (25), was attacked and killed by an angry mob of Muslim Brotherhood Islamists who were rioting in the Ain Shams area of Cairo. She was on her way to deliver food and medicine to the poor through a church ministry in which she was involved.

Spotting a cross hanging from Mary's rear-view mirror, the rioters recognised her as a Christian and targeted her, first shooting her through the windscreen of her car, and then dragging her out and finishing her off in the street.

Mary had recently told her father that she wanted to dedicate all her energy to serving God and helping the poor of Cairo. After her terrible death, he said: "From what happened to my daughter we learned that we have to be ready. We all have to wake up. There is no guarantee when someone is going to die. So we have to start getting prepared now."

To the old rugged Cross, I will ever be true
Its shame and reproach gladly bear
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away
Where His glory forever I'll share

So I'll cherish the old rugged Cross
Till my trophies at last I lay down
I will cling to the old rugged Cross
And exchange it some day for a crown.

George Bennard, USA (1873-1958)

Hear me, O LORD, hear me, that this people may know that You are the Lord God, and that You have turned their hearts back to You again. 1 Kings 18:37 (NKJV)

Moussa Gana (1975)
Buried Alive in Chad

Madana village, in southern Chad, was famous for the occult power of its river, the Lao. The local belief was that anyone who touched its waters would die. Moussa, an evangelist, and some other Christians wanted to show that Jesus was more powerful than any spiritual forces of the river, and therefore organised a Christian fishing event. They gathered by the river singing, "We will vanquish Lao in the Name of Jesus Christ." A number of hippos came out of the water and fled. Moussa then told the Christians to start fishing. The rest of the villagers waited three days for the Lao to inflict something terrible on the fishermen but nothing happened, so on the fourth day the whole village came out to fish. This event led many to put their faith in Jesus.

In 1973 Chadian President Tombalbaye started a movement to reject Western culture and return to traditional Chadian culture, including a secret tribal initiation rite called *yondo*. The brutal animistic ceremony was condemned by the Church, but it was mandatory for all men. Thirteen pastors who refused to undergo it were buried alive in 1973, during the first round of *yondo*. In 1974, there were reports of another three Christians buried alive and an evangelist sewn up inside a tom-tom where he died three weeks later.

In 1975, Moussa was seized by soldiers but refused to undergo *yondo*, which would have meant praising animistic spiritual forces. He climbed down into the grave prepared for him, asking a cousin to cover him with a blanket. The soldiers threw a Bible to him and announced that they were burying God. *Yondo* initiates danced all night on his grave. For three days Moussa could be heard groaning under the soil.

Jesus give me your strength
So that I might be just.
Forgive me my sins
So I can live in eternity with you.

Jesus call me to follow You,
You have put your Word in me,
I announce your Word to the whole world,
To kings and to the people.

Elie Ndoubayidi, Chad. *Jeju, Jeju, i am singam* is a hymn from Chad, written in the Ngambai (Ngambaye) language around 1974 during a night of prayer at a time of persecution. Elie was awaiting arrest the next day, but a miracle happened, and he was not arrested. The hymn is still sung in Ngambai churches

If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. Isaiah 58:10

Maria Skobtsova (1945)
Gassed at Ravensbrück

Maria was born into a Russian noble family in Riga, Latvia, which was then part of the Russian Empire. As a teenager she embraced atheism and became involved in radical intellectual circles. But she was drawn back to Christianity by considering the humanity and suffering of Jesus: "He also died. He sweated blood. They struck his face."

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, she fled with her family, eventually arriving in Paris in 1923. Here she began caring for the outcasts and poor. Her home was always open to refugees, the needy and the lonely. It also became a centre for Christian theological discussion, for in Maria's life, theology and service to the poor always went hand-in-hand.

When the Nazis occupied Paris during the Second World War, Jews started to approach Maria's home seeking help. She provided shelter and enabled many to escape. As a result, the Nazi SS soldiers broke up her work with the poor and destitute and closed down her house. She was arrested and locked up in the notorious Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany.

In Ravensbrück she continued to minister to those suffering around her, reading aloud to the women around her from a prayer book that had been smuggled in. She was a light in a dark place, encouraging others in their faith through her counselling and love, even as her health deteriorated. Maria was killed by gassing on 31 March 1945. It is believed that her last act was to take the place of a Jewish woman who was being sent to death in the gas chamber. She voluntarily died in her stead.

I am your message, Lord. Throw me like a blazing torch into the night.
Maria Skobtsova (1891–1945)

We pray this so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.
2 Thessalonians 1:12

Karl Bregenzer (1931)
Burdened for the Lost in Nicaragua

Karl was born in 1894 in Germany. The adventurous young man emigrated to the USA at the age of 17. In 1922 Karl, his wife, Elizabeth, and mother-in-law, Mrs Remke, went to Nicaragua as missionaries.

Six years later the family, now with two young children, moved to the village of Musuwas, among the Mayangna people where they constructed a church building, held services and started a school. The Mayangna people converted en masse to Christianity.

At this time, the revolutionary General Augusto Cesar Sandino and his followers (the Sandinistas), famed for their cruel guerrilla tactics, were involved in a nationalist rebellion against the American occupation of Nicaragua.

On 31 March 1931 the family's morning devotions centred on the text "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Later that day a Sandinista general entered Musuwas with a band of marauding men. Karl sent Elizabeth into the jungle with her mother and children, and himself stayed behind in the village, his New Testament in his pocket. Elizabeth said later that he had been "much burdened" that morning "with the souls that were still lost and it was this that kept him there to give the Gospel to the enemy for 'how shall they hear without a preacher?'" Within minutes, Karl was a prisoner of the Sandinistas. They asked him, "Whom do you pray to?" His reply was: "I pray to the Lord Jesus Christ."

The general put a machete in the hands of a villager loyal to Karl, commanding him to kill the missionary, but the villager refused and fled. The general then ordered one of his own men to kill Karl. With one quick swipe the missionary's head was off.

If it be His will that they kill me, then I know that somehow His name will be glorified, and that is all that is important.
Karl Bregenzer (1894-1931), spoken to his wife on the day of his martyrdom, as he resisted her pleas to hide in the jungle with her and the rest of the family

I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with unfailing kindness. Jeremiah 31:3

Hasani, and other converts from Islam (1938)
Muslim-Majority Xinjiang

In the early months of 1933 an armed Muslim faction from Khotan (modern Hotan, Xinjiang province, China) seized several towns and implemented sharia (Islamic law). Immediately they began to rid the region of Christianity, in particular the converts from Islam, who numbered just a few hundred including their children. The Christian women (and girls as young as eleven) were forcibly married to Muslim men, though they refused to renounce their Christian faith.

Male Christians were beaten and imprisoned. Many perished from conditions in the overcrowded, unventilated, bitterly cold, little cells; others were tortured to death or beheaded. By the end of the 1930s, at least 100 Christian men had been martyred. One was Hasani (20) from Yarkand. His soothing voice had calmed the other prisoners every night as he sang to his Saviour in the Uighur language. One of his favourites was "Loved with Everlasting Love". When his singing was no longer heard, the prisoners in nearby cells concluded that he had died of starvation.

After several years in prison, when all the leading Christians were dead, the handful of survivors were released.

Loved with everlasting love,
Led by grace that love to know;
Spirit, breathing from above,
Thou has taught me it is so.
O this full and perfect peace!
O this transport all divine!
In a love which cannot cease
I am His, and He is mine.

Things that once were wild alarms
Cannot now disturb my rest;
Closed in everlasting arms,
Pillowed on the loving breast.
Oh, to lie forever here,
Doubt and care and self resign,
While He whispers in my ear,
I am His, and He is mine.

His forever, only His;
Who the Lord and me shall part?
Ah, with what a rest of bliss
Christ can fill the loving heart.
Heaven and earth may fade and flee,
Firstborn light in gloom decline;
But, while God and I shall be,
I am His, and He is mine.

George Wade Robinson, Ireland (1838-77)

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.
Isaiah 43:1-2

Garissa University College Students (2015)
#147notjustanumber #theyhavenames

At dawn on 2 April 2015, four Islamist militants stormed Garissa University College in north-east Kenya, taking hostage over 700 students. After killing two unarmed guards, the attackers moved from room to room through administrative buildings, classrooms and dormitories, asking students their religion. The Muslim students were released, but any who identified themselves as Christians were killed on the spot.

Kenyan Defence Forces besieged the college for nearly 15 hours. In the end, more than 550 students managed to escape, but 79 of them were injured. The number of dead was at first recorded as 147 but later rose to 148, of whom 142 were students killed because of their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Determined that the martyred students should not be reduced to a mere statistic, a Kenyan social media campaign set out to tell the story of each individual victim, using the hashtags #147notjustanumber and #theyhavenames. Friends and families of the victims began to honour the lives of those who died with tributes: Leah Wanfula (21), the first of nine children in her family to go to university, loved Christian activities; Gideon Kirui (22) whose whole village raised the money for him go to university; Selpher Wandia (21) who dreamt of being a teacher; and young Mildred Yondo (18) who loved music and mangoes.

The Somali-based Al Shabaab group claimed responsibility for the massacre. Garissa is not far from the border with Somalia.

If there is no enemy within, the enemy outside can do no harm.
African Christian saying (referring to 1 Peter 5:8-11)

The LORD is my strength and my defence; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him. Exodus 15:2

Berber Christians (7th century to ?)
Large Christian Community in Islamic North Africa

The Muslim armies who invaded North Africa in 647 AD differed in both religion and ethnicity from the people they conquered. The Muslims were Arabs but the indigenous people of the Maghreb (North Africa west of Egypt) were from an ethnic group known in ancient times as the Amazigh ("free and noble men") but since Roman times called Berbers.

Christianity had been thriving in North Africa for several centuries. The famous theologian and prolific writer Augustine of Hippo (354-430) had been bishop of what is now Annaba in Algeria. When he died there were 700 bishoprics (dioceses) along the North African coast. But after Islam had conquered and subjugated the Christians as *dhimmi* their numbers began to dwindle as some fled, some converted to Islam and some were martyred. By 1073 there were only two bishoprics left (outside Egypt).

When Tunis was captured by the Muslims in 1159, its Muslim citizens were taxed, but Christians and Jews were given a choice between converting to Islam or being put to death. Nevertheless Tunis became one of the last strongholds of Christianity in the Maghreb. In the early 15th century there were Berber Christians in Tunis and also Nefzaoua, to the south. Poignantly, they even extended a Tunis church building at this time, perhaps because the last scattered Christians across the Maghreb were gathering together there.

But soon after this all known Christian presence in the Maghreb disappeared, although traces remained in folklore and language. For example, the word for "sacrifice" in the language of the Touareg Berbers is *tafaske*, derived from the Latin for Easter, *Pascha.*

The light of the Gospel is now returning to the Maghreb, with thousands of Muslims, mainly Berbers, turning to Christ.

When Thou art our strength, it is strength indeed, but when our strength is our own it is only weakness.
Augustine of Hippo, in modern Algeria (354–430)

In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on people as they slumber in their beds, he may speak in their ears. Job 33:15-16

Nanvunani Shamimu (2014)
Encounter with Christ through Dreams

Ugandan Muslim sisters, Nawudo Hasifa (19) and Nanvunani (17), became Christians after they had the same dream on the night of 4 April 2014 in which a man dressed in white appeared to them, telling them to go and be prayed for in a church.

Two days later it was Sunday and the sisters went to a church in Kawaga, where they told the pastor about their dream and that they were ready to become Christians. The pastor prayed for them to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour of their lives, and the congregation welcomed them with joy.

However, the girls had been seen entering the church building by some local Muslims, who told their father. He sent a group of 32 young Muslim men to threaten the church and warn the pastor that the girls must never worship there again.

When Nawudo and Nanvunani arrived home that evening, their enraged father demanded to know why they had been to church, and began hitting them both. Later Nawudo described what happened: "[Our father took] a blunt object and started beating us indiscriminately. My sister was hit somewhere near the neck. She fainted and became unconscious. My father tried to wake up my sister, but there was no response. I knew she was gone."

Nawudo, bleeding and in pain, fled to the home of a church elder, who took her by motorcycle to another town to be cared for by Christians there. "I know I cannot go back to my father because I have become a Christian," she said, "I am grateful to the church for welcoming me and taking me as their child."

You may fear that the Lord has passed you by, but it is not so: he who counts the stars, and calls them by their names, is in no danger of forgetting his own children. He knows your case as thoroughly as if you were the only creature he ever made, or the only saint he ever loved.

C H Spurgeon, England (1834-92)

Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.
Psalm 90:12

Youssef Adel (2008)
Tragedy in Baghdad

Youssef was returning from a trip to the market, with his wife Lamia, when gunmen shot him down at the gate of his house, near the church in the Iraqi capital, Baghdad, which he led. It was 5 April 2008.

Youssef had known his life was in danger. As an Assyrian church minister he was a conspicuous Christian target. He had been getting threats intended to scare him away from his post as director of a high school attended by both Christian and Muslim pupils. But Youssef paid no attention to this intimidation. Knowing that his days on earth were numbered, he used his time wisely, investing in that which is eternal.

Before being ordained into the ministry, Youssef had been an engineer. He first served at a church in the neighbourhood of Dora, to the south of Baghdad. This was formerly a Christian area, but Christians became very unpopular after the Gulf War of 1990-91. They were gradually driven out by repeated threats and attacks on church buildings, leaving a predominantly Sunni Muslim population in Dora. Youssef transferred to the mainly Shia Muslim central district of Karrada. Here he continued to serve the Christian community and lead church services until his martyrdom.

The Christian community in Iraq was estimated at about 1.4 million in 1990 but now is thought to be less than a quarter of that figure.

Die to the world, repudiating the insanity that pervades it. Live to God, and by apprehending God, apprehend your own nature as a spiritual being created in his image.

Tatian the Assyrian, Adiabene, modern Erbil in Iraqi Kurdistan (c. 120-173)

… let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:1-2

Matthew Tagwi (2020)
Widow Prays for Husband's Killers and Continues their Ministry

"My prayer is that his killers will get to know this Jesus I know. I do forgive them and will pray that the Lord saves their souls." Rose (27), the widow of Pastor Matthew Tagwi who was killed by Fulani militants on 6 April 2020, prayed this prayer for her husband's killers immediately after hearing of his death.

Rose, already a mother of two young children, Esther (6) and Joy (2), and seven months pregnant, was not with her husband in the village when the attack occurred. She had gone to Kwall for an antenatal check-up and had stayed overnight. It was there that she heard the devastating news of the attack on Nsah village, Plateau State, Nigeria that killed not only her husband but also three other Christians, two of whom were children from the same family.

Pastor Matthew had been posted to the community of Nsah only one month before he was killed. Rose said, "This is a call by God we both answered and I will continue this work and no attacks by Islamist herdsmen will stop us or stop me, even after his death."

To persevere is to keep going when all seems lost, when there seems no hope and when you have plumbed the depths of suffering. Rose, in her darkest hour, chose to persevere and not give up her calling. Her Master, too, persevered and endured the cross. For "suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us." (Romans 5:3-5)

Lord God, when thou givest to thy servants to endeavour any great matter, grant us also to know that it is not the beginning, but the continuing of the same, until it be thoroughly finished, that yieldeth the true glory; through him who, for the finishing of thy work, laid down his life for us, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen

Prayer developed from the words of Sir Francis Drake, England (1540–96)

Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Luke 10:3

Xac'atur Koblec'i (1517)
Lamb among Wolves

"Are you an Armenian or a Muslim?" This was the question posed by Turkish soldiers to Xac'atur Koblec'i as he arrived at the market in Amida (modern Diyarbakir, in Turkey) to buy some bread. In about 301 AD, Armenia became the first Christian nation, and ever since Christianity has been a strong part of Armenian identity, so that the soldiers' question really meant "Are you a Christian or a Muslim?"

When Xac'atur replied that he was an Armenian, the soldiers loudly declared that he had previously converted to Islam. This was untrue, but hugely increased the threat to Xac'atur, as someone who had converted to Islam and then left it again would be considered an apostate from Islam, liable to the death penalty. The soldiers found false witnesses to support their accusation and brought Xac'atur before the pasha and the *qadi* (Islamic judge), who tried to persuade him to "return" to Islam. Xac'atur stoutly affirmed Christ as Lord and refused to deny Him.

He was sentenced to be burned to death. The Muslim population collected wood and on 7 April 1517 the fire was lit. The soldiers drew him near to the flames to scorch him first before burning him completely. One of the soldiers wondered what Xac'atur was saying, as he felt the flames. On hearing that he was praying, "My God, my God, help me," the soldier unsheathed his sword and beheaded him.

In an Armenian-language manuscript written in 1517 recounting his martyrdom, Xac'atur is described as a "lamb among wolves".

For so long as we are sheep, we conquer: though ten thousand wolves prowl around, we overcome and prevail. But if we become wolves, we are worsted, for the help of our Shepherd departs from us: for He feeds not wolves, but sheep: and He forsakes you, and retires, for neither do you allow His might to be shown. Because, as He accounts the whole triumph His own, if you being ill used, show forth gentleness; so if you follow it up and give blows, you obscure His victory.
John Chrysostom (c. 347-407), Archbishop of Constantinople (modern Istanbul, Turkey)

They saw that the fire had not harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them…They trusted in him and defied the king's command and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any god except their own God. Daniel 3:27-28

Thomas of Tolentino, James of Padua, Peter of Siena and Demetrius of Tbilisi (1321)
Twice Thrown into Fire, Twice Unscathed

Four missionaries set sail for China: three Italians and a Georgian. However, a storm forced their ship to stop at Tana (modern Thane, near Mumbai, India). There Thomas, James and Demetrius were brought before the *qadi* as witnesses in a domestic abuse case. (Peter stayed behind to look after their belongings.) Thomas argued powerfully that Christ was God incarnate. The *qadi* asked Thomas his opinion of Muhammad. When he gave it, the Muslims began shouting that Thomas must die for his blasphemy.

All three were tied up and left in the intense heat of the midday sun to die, but they sat praising God, unharmed. Then a fire was made in the city square and the missionaries thrown in. People flocked to see whether or not they would be harmed by the flames. James went first, and emerged joyful, praising the Lord and without the slightest burn. The *qadi* proclaimed that James had survived because of his clothes. So they stripped James, rubbed oil over him, piled more wood on the fire, and threw him in a second time. Thomas and Demetrius fell to their knees in prayer and James again emerged unscathed.

The governor and *qadi* were afraid that the awe-struck crowd might convert en masse to Christianity, so they imprisoned the three and sent men to kill them. "Through death temporal we attain life eternal," said the missionaries to their executioners. As they were beheaded, on 8 April 1321, the midnight sky was filled with bright light.

The *qadi* tried to persuade Peter, by promises of rewards and by torture, to deny Christ. Peter refused, so they hung him on a tree from noon to night, which he survived; then they cut him in two.

Spirit-filled souls are ablaze for God. They love with a love that glows. They believe with a faith that kindles. They serve with a devotion that consumes. They hate sin with a fierceness that burns. They rejoice with a joy that radiates. Love is perfected in the Fire of God.
Samuel Chadwick, England (1860-1932)

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. Psalm 23:4

Egyptian Christians (2017)
Palm Sunday Church Bombings

Churches in Egypt were packed with worshippers on Palm Sunday (9 April) 2017, when twin suicide bombings took place, one in a church in Tanta, the other in a cathedral in Alexandria. They were timed for maximum casualties on one of the busiest days of the Church year.

In Tanta a man wearing concealed explosives managed to pass through a security check and detonate his explosive device inside the church near the front pews killing 30 people, including many children, and injuring 78. A video of the service recorded how the sounds of a choir singing hymns rapidly gave way to screams of anguish and panic. Blood-spattered walls and scattered body parts "adorned" the church, which had been decorated with intricately woven palm leaves for the special day.

At Alexandria, the device exploded outside near the cathedral's gates after police officers directed the attacker towards a metal detector. Seventeen people were killed, including three policemen who had been involved in preventing the attacker from entering the cathedral, and 48 were injured.

Palm Sunday marks the day when Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a lowly donkey, as all the people shouted "Hosanna" and threw down their clothes and palm branches on the road before Him. "See, your king comes to you, gentle and riding on a donkey," (Matthew 21:5) as the prophet Zechariah had foretold (Zechariah 9:9). When the Pharisees asked Jesus to rebuke the joyful crowd of disciples, He replied, "I tell you, if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." (Luke 19:39-40)

When I trust deeply that today God is truly with me and holds me safe in a divine embrace, guiding every one of my steps I can let go of my anxious need to know how tomorrow will look, or what will happen next month or next year. I can be fully where I am and pay attention to the many signs of God's love within me and around me.
Henri Nouwen, Netherlands (1932-96)

You are the light of the world…let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:14, 16

Aleppo Christians (2012-16)
The Battle of Aleppo

"You are the light of this city," said a Muslim living in Aleppo to a Christian doctor there. It was the middle of a bitter civil war and Aleppo, as Syria's largest city and its industrial centre, was the focus of a major military confrontation.

During the Battle of Aleppo (2012-16) Christian neighbourhoods were often a target of the Islamist rebel groups. Hundreds of Christians were killed or kidnapped. Others were martyred by the Islamist rebels when they refused to become Muslims, including three Christian doctors who were beheaded. Some were crucified. Many fled, as did the Muslims.

On the night of 10-11 April 2015, a heavy bombardment by rebel forces caused massive destruction in the government-held Sulaimaniyah neighbourhood's eastern district. It was a predominantly Christian area where Armenians and Assyrians lived. Twenty Christians died that night and hundreds were injured. While others celebrated Easter 2015 with church services and family get-togethers, Christians in Aleppo were digging through the rubble to locate bodies of those who died after a ferocious round of rocket bombs rained down on their neighbourhood.

By 2017 so many had fled that there were estimated to be only 35,000 Christians in Aleppo compared with 400,000 before the war began in 2011. But for the remaining population of the city, the Christian presence had made a huge difference. For three years, there had been little food and almost no electricity in the besieged city. When Christians spoke words of hope to their neighbours, they gave "light" to their beleaguered community.

I welcome, then, with heart sincere,
The cross my Saviour bids me take;
No load, no trial, is severe,
That's borne or suffered for His sake:
And thus my sorrow shall proclaim
A love that's worthy of the name.

Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon, France (1648–1717)

Let my teaching fall like rain and my words descend like dew, like showers on new grass, like abundant rain on tender plants. Deuteronomy 32:2

Kgasane and other Sotho Christians (1884) Condemned by the Rain Queen

The Gospel was spreading among the Sotho tribes of southern Africa, especially the Pedi people. In 1864 their king's favourite wife and his brother were baptised. This must have been a great encouragement to the small community of Pedi Christians, but it soon brought persecution to them. For King Sekhukhune saw this as undermining his authority and began to persecute the believers. On 15 November that year, 32 Christians were brought before him and beaten with clubs. They were commanded to abandon their faith or be killed. They fled to Botshabelo (in modern South Africa), which in the Sotho language means "place of refuge", a mission station which had just been founded by two German missionaries.

Prince Kgasane from the Lobedu, another Sotho tribe, became a Christian while visiting Port Elizabeth to buy guns for his tribe. Returning home with guns and a Bible, he began to speak about his new faith, which soon created hostility towards him. He hid the royal divining bones and amulets of the tribe's traditional religion, so they could not be used. In 1883 Kgasane left the court, gathered a group of Christians and established a Christian village.

Next year a drought struck the Lobedu area. The Lobedu were ruled by a series of rain queens, believed to have the power to bring the vitally needed rain, so this was a serious challenge to the legitimacy of the current Rain Queen Modjadji. She blamed the Christians for the drought and unleashed persecution on Kgasane's Christian village. On Good Friday 11 April the village was attacked and burned to the ground. Kgasane was shot dead outside his little church at Modubeng (near modern Mooketsi, South Africa). About 40 other Christians – men, women and children – also died.

The love of the Father is like a sudden rain shower that will pour forth when you least expect it, catching you up into wonder and praise and unspeakable speech. When this happens, do not put up an umbrella to protect yourself but rather stand in the drenching rain of the Father.

Richard Foster, USA (b. 1942)

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Isaiah 58:6

Stanislaus (1079)
A Martyr who Cared for the People of Poland

King Boleslaw the Bold murdered Stanislaus, Bishop of Krakow, with his own hands on 11 April 1079. Stanislaus had irked the cruel, violent and tyrannical Polish king by speaking out against his acts of political and social injustice. King Boleslaw (reigned 1076-79) resented the Church's interference and dispatched soldiers to murder the bishop, while he was alone in a chapel. When the soldiers got there, and saw the bishop with their own eyes, they did not dare to attack him. Infuriated, King Boleslaw rode to the chapel himself and plunged his own sword into Stanislaus, with fatal results.

Stanislaus came from a noble family, but gave away all his inheritance and gave up all worldly pleasures when he entered church ministry. His preaching and his love for the Lord Jesus were so great that they brought about a wave of Christian renewal with many committing their lives to Christ. It was because of this that he was eventually created a bishop in 1072 at a time of great political unrest in Poland. His martyrdom is viewed as a result of his care, in Christ's Name, for the people of Poland.

Sorrow afflicts me, my heart bleeds with pain,
As in the Garden, Jesus prays in pain;
Drenched in bloody sweat, the cup He accepts,
On death He reflects.

Tenderly His eyes look up filled with tears
At the crowd who jeers.
Let my heart of stone, smitten be with grief,
O my sweet Jesus, cure my unbelief.
I'm sorry, Jesus, for offending You.
My God, I love You.

From *Gorzkie Zale* (*Bitter Lamentations*), a collection of hymns about Christ's suffering, from the villages around Warsaw in 18th century Poland

Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. John 15:4 (ESV)

Yu Chenhua (1956)
Ministered to Body and Soul in China

At the age of 28, Yu Chenhua was recuperating from tuberculosis when he committed his life to the Lord Jesus, no doubt to the great joy of his devoutly Christian parents and grandparents. He also experienced God's healing and never again suffered from lung problems.

Before Yu Chenhua fell sick, he had already graduated from medical school. In 1933 he was appointed to a well-paid position as director of ophthalmology at Xiangya Medical College. He moved with his family to Changsha, Hunan Province. Life was wonderful, but in 1936 he abandoned it all in order to respond to the call of God and go to Shanghai to minister alongside the preacher Watchman Nee (see May 30).

Yu Chenhua had many opportunities for lucrative medical work, but instead he started a small clinic next to the church so that he could devote more time to Christian work. He loved to talk about his Saviour while caring for the sick.

In 1955, the Communist government of China began an "elimination of counter-revolutionary movement" in Christian circles. On 29 January 1956, there was a major raid on a Christian gathering in Shanghai, when Yu Chenhua was amongst the Christians arrested. He was put under house arrest within the church, while the authorities tried to coerce or bribe him into incriminating other Christians. For 20 days he resisted this pressure, and then was transferred to a prison, where for 50 days he was tortured and interrogated by day and night. Still he refused to report on any of his beloved Christian friends. Eventually he was released to a hospital where he died from the torture he had endured on 13 April 1956.

To be a truly God-loving person, to fully do God's will, to sacrifice all, and to desire an absolutely selfless life, one must focus wholeheartedly on the Cross. God has shown me that the Cross is the only way that pleases Him. Therefore I always adore that life – the life through the Cross.

Yu Chenhua (1901-56), written on 2 July 1938

Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord.
Romans 12:11

Sarkis Levonian and 27 Christian Delegates (1909) Church Aflame

"I perceive that this journey will be dangerous. The Lord has shown me that there is fire ahead waiting to devour all of you. I entreat you to abandon this trip." These were the words of Apraham, an Armenian believer, to his brother Sarkis in spring 1909. Sarkis was preparing to travel with 27 other church leaders, sent by their congregations across Cilicia, to an Armenian evangelical convention in Adana, southern Turkey. But Sarkis was not to be dissuaded and the group set out from Aintab (modern Gaziantep).

On the way, they stopped at Osmaniye and gathered in a church building for a night of prayer. Suddenly they found the church surrounded by a frenzied Muslim mob, who were responding to a secret edict issued by the Ottoman government to massacre Christian leaders in that region. The mob drenched the church with kerosene and set it alight. The old wooden building blazed up immediately and no one could escape.

As the flames closed in, Sarkis urged the others: "Brothers, be strong and courageous. Stand fast in the faith. Soon we will join the ranks of the martyrs in Christ's presence." Stretching his hand out of the window of the burning church, he prayed, like Jesus on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." It is recorded that all 28 church leaders perished on that 14 April.

Sarkis Levonian, a distinguished professor of mathematics, had become deeply devoted to Christ during a revival in Aintab in the first few years of the 20th century, and went on to be a great Bible teacher. He was known for his humility and for his gift of encouragement to any who were struggling.

Deep in our heart we tend the flame, and as your servant we remain.
By this, we will our voice unite, bringing glory day and night.
Moravian prayer

My enemy will say, "I have overcome him," and my foes will rejoice when I fall. But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation.
Psalm 13:4-5

Nauman Masih (2015)
A Kerosene Attack in Pakistan

On this day in 2015 a young Pakistani teenager died in hospital in Lahore, five days after being set on fire because of his Christian faith. Nauman, a tailor's apprentice who was aged about 14, was on his way from the tailor's shop where he worked, when he was stopped by two young Muslim men on their way to Friday midday prayers at the local mosque. The men, whose faces were covered, boxed him in with their motorbikes. They started to abuse him verbally and asked him what faith he belonged to. When he replied, "I am Christian," they abused him even more, and slapped him on the face several times. Then one doused Nauman with kerosene oil and the other threw a lighted match, setting him on fire. They then rode off at speed.

Nauman's death from his injuries came as a further shock to the Christian community, for he was initially expected to recover from the burns that covered only 55% of his body. About 2,000 people, including several prominent Christian leaders, attended the funeral of the young martyr.

Nauman, an apprentice who agreed to work for a tailor for a set period of time for low payment in order to learn a skill, was also a disciple of Jesus, the King of kings, whom he had promised to serve not for a set time, but for ever and with a reward in heaven. So he courageously stated his faith before two aggressive young men, knowing that he was putting himself in grave danger by standing up for his Master.

I have borne scorn and hatred,
I have borne wrong and shame,
Earth's proud ones have reproach'd me,
For Christ's thrice blessed name:
Where God His seal set fairest
They've stamp'd their foulest brand;
But judgment shines like noonday
In Immanuel's land.
Anne Ross Cousin, Scotland (1824–1906)

Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness. James 3:18

Magnus Erlendsson, Earl of Orkney (1117)
A Man of Peace

"O noble, humble and steadfast martyr Magnus," begins a 12th-century hymn. Magnus had been known for his gentleness and Christian piety. He died comforting his murderer and giving his life, Christ-like, to bring peace.

Magnus, his brother Erling and their cousin Haakon, sons of two earls who co-ruled the Orkney islands (in modern Scotland), were taken hostage by a Viking king in 1098. The king took the three young Orcadian nobles to raid Anglesey, but Magnus refused to fight, saying he had no quarrel with anyone there. During the battle he stayed on the ship, singing psalms.

The Vikings viewed such behaviour as despicable cowardice. Magnus had to flee the king's wrath, and did not return to Orkney until 1105. Thereafter he and Haakon ruled Orkney jointly as earls, until trouble-makers created a dispute between the cousins.

Peace talks were arranged to take place at Easter 1117 on the island of Egilsay. Each side agreed to bring only two longships, but Haakon arrived with eight ships of warriors. Magnus was captured and, trying to prevent bloodshed, he offered to go on pilgrimage and never return, be permanently exiled, or be blinded/maimed and imprisoned for life. Haakon chose the third, but the chieftains, tired of having two earls, insisted that one must die.

Haakon ordered Magnus's execution, but his warriors refused. Haakon then ordered his cook, Lifolf, to do the deed. Lifolf wept as he approached Magnus with an axe, but Magnus comforted him, "Be not afraid, for you do this against your will and he who forces you sins more than you do." Kneeling before Lifolf, he said, "Take heart, poor wretch, for I have prayed to God for you, that He be merciful to you." Lifolf brought the axe down on Magnus's head.

Afterwards there was a great change in Orkney, as hatreds vanished and divisions were healed.

Lord, make me an instrument of Thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.
Francis of Assisi, modern Italy (1182–1226)

"Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?" He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land". Jonah 1:8-9

Christian Refugees (2015)
In a Boat on the Mediterranean Sea

Over 100 people were crammed into a 12-metre rubber raft, tossing on the waves of the Mediterranean, on a perilous voyage from Libya to Italy in April 2015. The passengers came from many different countries; most were Muslims but some were Christians. The group of strangers had one thing in common – all hoped to escape terrible situations of war, persecution or poverty and find a better life in Europe.

When the raft began to deflate and water started seeping in, arguments and even fights broke out. The Muslims said they would not tolerate any Christians on board. Three Nigerians and six Ghanaians were thrown overboard because they refused to pray to Allah for help in the time of danger, but prayed to God in the Name of Jesus. All nine Christians drowned within minutes.

"One of them was my brother Nana, born June 4, 1987," recalled Yeboah, a Christian from Ghana. "Two of my friends, Amankwana and Asiedu, were the last ones to be pushed into the water. None of them could swim. I heard their screams, and then they were gone."

An Italian naval vessel intercepted the boat and 15 men, who came from the Ivory Coast, Mali and Senegal, were arrested on suspicion of "multiple aggravated murder motivated by religious hate". Seven were later convicted. Christian survivors revealed that they too would have been thrown overboard if they had not formed a "human chain" by linking their arms.

Awake my soul; give thyself unto sacred songs,
Lay to rest the stings that are born of matter.
Thee I invoke in song, Thee in the ocean,
Thee over islands, on mainlands,
In cities and on the craggy mountains,
Thee when'er I rest the twain feet of my limbs
On the far-famed plains,
Thee blessed Creator of a universe.
Synesius of Cyrene, in modern Libya (c. 370-c. 413)

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:48

Perfectus (850)
The First of 48 Martyrs of Córdoba

Perfectus was a minister serving in a church in Córdoba. Now a city in the south of modern Spain, the Córdoba that Perfectus knew was under Islamic rule, having been captured and largely destroyed by Muslim forces in 711. By the time of Perfectus, Córdoba was the capital of Al-Andalus, as the Islamic part of the Iberian peninsula was called. Christians and Jews were subjugated, with second-class status, their lives hedged by many inconvenient, restrictive and humiliating regulations.

Córdoba was developing rapidly and prospering. Its famous mosque, with columns like a forest of red-and-white palm trees, had been completed more than 60 years earlier and the current Emir of Córdoba, Abd al-Rahman II (822-852), had already expanded it. He also encouraged poets, musicians and administrators. The city was well on its way to the glory it enjoyed in the next century as one of most cultured cities of Europe, a great centre of arts and science.

In the midst of this, Christians were being martyred. Two Muslims challenged Perfectus to say who was the greater prophet: Jesus or Muhammad. This question put Perfectus in grave danger and at first he refused to answer, but the men insisted. Finally Perfectus replied by questioning the nature of Muhammad's prophethood. Several days later he was arrested, tried in an Islamic court, found guilty of blasphemy, and executed by beheading on 18 April 850.

The death of Perfectus began a period of many martyrdoms. Between 850 and 859 eleven Christians were executed for apostasy from Islam and 37 others, many of them in full-time ministry, for blasphemy. Old and young, male and female, they all died for Christ.

O God, Father of your only Son, you dwell in heaven
And you scoff at those who rise against your Anointed One.
Grant us special grace that we may not yield to adversities,
That the unbelief of those who do not know you may be done away with,
And the faith of those who cling to you may be crowned.
Hispano-Mozarabic Rite (7th century), a liturgy used in Spain from earliest times and continued by the Mozarabs, who were Christians living under Islamic rule in medieval times in modern Spain and Portugal

Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer…Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown. Revelation 2:10

Ethiopian Christians (2015)
Islamic State Victims

Ethiopian Christian men are kneeling on a beach in Libya. Behind them, the video shows a line of Islamic State terrorists dressed in military-style camouflage uniforms. The terrorists behead the kneeling Christians. Text on the screen identifies the dead men as "Followers of the Cross from the enemy Ethiopian Church". The video then switches to another group of Ethiopian Christian men who are shot in the head in the desert.

Just over a month after 21 Christians were martyred in Libya (see February 15), another video by the terrorist group Islamic State (IS), was posted online on social media sites on 19 April 2015, showing the killing of 30 Ethiopian Christians in two separate locations in Libya.

IS's commentary justified the violence by arguing, from the teachings of classical Islam, that Christians should convert to Islam or pay *jizya*, that is a tax imposed on Christians and Jews, which functions as an explicit sign of subjugation under Muslim rule. A regime change in Libya in 2011 created a power vacuum that allowed Islamist terrorists to get away with such shocking violence against Christians.

The families of the victims have the knowledge that their loved ones were faithful to the Lord even unto death and that Jesus the Living One promises them a crown of life (Revelation 2:10): not the crown of thorns (John 19:5) that their Saviour wore for them, but an imperishable crown which will last forever and never fade away (1 Corinthians 9:25; 1 Peter 5:4).

Therefore, in exhorting and preparing our brethren, and in arming them with firmness of virtue and faith for the heralding forth of the confession of the Lord, and for the battle of persecution and suffering…it must be laid down what hope and what reward await the righteous and martyrs after the struggles and the sufferings of this time, and that we shall receive more in the reward of our suffering than what we suffer here in the passion itself.

Cyprian of Carthage, in modern Tunisia (c. 200-258)

She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her. Mark 14:8-9

Basilissa and Anastasia (68)
A Beautiful Thing

The Roman emperor Nero (54-68 AD) is infamous as a deranged sadist, with many Christians amongst his victims. The apostles Peter and Paul probably died on his orders. But what happened to the charred, mauled, crucified or headless bodies of the martyrs?

Two well-born women, Basilissa and Anastasia, took upon themselves the dangerous task of giving reverent and dignified burials to the martyrs in Rome, including Peter and Paul.

It is likely that Basilissa and Anastasia knew about Joseph of Arimathea, who, just a generation earlier, had lovingly cared for the body of our Lord, wrapping it in linen, placing it in a tomb and rolling a stone across the entrance (Mark 15:43-46). They would probably have known of the women who prepared spices to anoint His body, only to find that He had risen from the dead (Mark 16:1-6). They probably also knew the story of the woman who poured perfume from an alabaster jar on Jesus' head and how Jesus commended her for the beautiful thing she had done in preparation for his burial (Mark 14:6). For all these events are recorded in Mark's Gospel, and Mark's main source is believed to have been Peter, by whom Basilissa and Anastasia are believed to have been taught.

Eventually this brave ministry led to the women's own martyrdom under Nero. They were arrested, flogged and mutilated: their hands and feet were cut off and their tongues cut out, all in an effort to make them deny Christ. But Basilissa and Anastasia were faithful to the end, which came by beheading.

We will ask, with instancy of prayer and supplication,
That the Creator of the universe may guard intact unto the end
The number that hath been numbered of His elect throughout the whole world,
Through His beloved Son Jesus Christ,
Through whom He called us from darkness to light,
From ignorance to the full knowledge of the glory of His name.
Clement of Rome, modern Italy (martyred c. 100)

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: in this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. 1 John 4:16-19

Sri Lankan Christians (2019)
Easter Sunday Explosions

"How many of you are willing to die for Christ?" said the Sunday School teachers to the children of Zion Evangelical Church, Batticaloa, on Easter morning 2019. Every child raised their hand. Minutes later, the class was over. The children spilled out to play in the church grounds while the adult congregation gathered inside for the main Easter worship service. It was then that a suspicious-looking stranger was ushered out of the building by Ramesh, a church member. The stranger was a suicide bomber and detonated himself, killing at least 15 adults, including Ramesh, and 14 of the children who had just pledged their willingness to die for Christ.

The death toll at Zion Church would have been far higher but for the courage of Ramesh, who gently persuaded the bomber to leave the crowded building. The explosion therefore occurred outside.

The wave of explosions in Sri Lanka on 21 April 2019 evidently targeted Christians on the holiest day of the Christian year. Three were in churches, and three in hotels where Christians were likely to meet for Easter breakfast after an all-night vigil. Islamic State claimed responsibility in a statement that made clear their main intention was to target Christians, with a secondary interest in "nationals of the coalition".

The final death toll eventually reached 253 – mostly Sri Lankan Christians but also including some foreigners who were in the hotels. Perhaps the last to die was a Sri Lankan Christian called Arun who, ignoring his own wounds, had cared for others amid the carnage until he collapsed. He died of his injuries on 4 June 2019.

We say to the suicide bomber, and also to the group that sent the suicide bomber, that we love you and we forgive you. No matter what you have done to us, we love you, because we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.
Roshan Mahesen, pastor of Zion Evangelical Church, message of forgiveness given in a video posted on Facebook on 26 April 2019

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Matthew 5:9

Seven Melanesian Missionaries (2003)
Peacemakers

In the late 1990s the Solomon Islands became riven by ethnic rivalries between various rebel groups. Who could bring peace to this situation? The obvious choice was a group of Christians called the Melanesian Brotherhood. Founded in 1925, its primary aim was to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the most remote parts of the Solomon Islands and the rest of Melanesia, but over the years the Melanesian Brotherhood had developed a reputation as peacemakers.

With their help, the Townsville Peace Agreement was signed in Australia on 15 October 2000 and some Melanesian Brothers threw the rebels' weapons into the sea. However, there was one guerrilla leader, Harold Keke, who refused to accept the peace agreement and continued to lead the Guadalcanal Liberation Army. At Easter 2003, a Melanesian Brother called Nathaniel Sado, who already knew Harold Keke, went to reason with him and try to persuade him. He did not return. Hearing rumours that he had been murdered, six more of the Melanesian Brothers set off on 23 April to find out what had happened and to bring his body back. They were Robin Lindsay, Francis Tofi, Alfred Hill, Ini Paratabatu, Patteson Gatu and Tony Sirihi. This group also disappeared.

In August 2003, it was confirmed that all seven Brothers had been killed. Nathaniel had been tortured for several days before dying from his injuries, three of the rescue party had been shot and killed on arrival at Keke's camp, and the other three had been beaten and tortured before being shot.

In the midst of sorrow there is life. We have fought with death and love has won. Now may we live out that legacy of peace our brothers have left with us and continue the work they have begun. May we have witnessed something of what passion and death share even now in this life; something of the joy and hope of their resurrection.

Chaplain of the Melanesian Brotherhood, after the funerals of the seven Melanesian martyrs

And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: … To the one who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows except the one who receives it. Revelation 2:12,17 (NASB)

Lazarus (1802)
Bulgarian Shepherd of Pergamum

When Lazarus was on his way to his execution, many Muslims mocked him for being so foolish as to give his life for Jesus. He had already endured extensive beatings, and the previous day he had been tortured with red-hot irons on his body, heavy stones on his chest and even the stretching of his tongue – all in a vain effort to make him deny Christ and convert to Islam.

Lazarus had been born in 1774 in Bulgaria, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire. Later he moved to Pergamum (modern Turkey) to work as a shepherd. One day he fell asleep on the job, and his dog attacked a Turkish Muslim woman passing by. Woken by the dog's barking, Lazarus rushed to her rescue and the only damage done was a torn dress.

The woman, however, told her husband that a Christian shepherd had tried to rape her. Her husband went out to punish the perpetrator, but mistakenly beat to death another man. To cover up his crime, he brought Lazarus before a judge on a charge of attempted rape, and on 7 April 1802 Lazarus was put in prison. The wife's relatives insisted that Lazarus must either convert to Islam or be executed for dishonouring the woman. Lazarus refused to deny his Lord, no matter what torments were inflicted on him. Finally he was hanged on 23 April 1802.

Christ chooses us, buys us, calls us by name, makes us His own and delights in caring for us … He literally lays Himself out for us continually. He is ever interceding for us; He is ever guiding us by His gracious Spirit; He is ever working on our behalf to ensure that we will benefit from His care … the Good Shepherd spares no pains for the welfare of His sheep.
W Phillip Keller, Kenya (1920-97)

But you will not leave in haste or go in flight; for the LORD *will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear guard.* Isaiah 52:12

Armenian Intellectuals (1915)
Poets, Writers and Doctors

The Armenian Genocide was a horrific crime of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, organised by the rulers of the Ottoman Empire. Together with the Greek Genocide (see June 12) and the Assyrian and Syriac Genocide (see May 23), its aim was the mass extermination of Christian minorities living under Ottoman rule and the death toll is estimated at 3.75 million. Some were killed outright; others died on long forced marches to distant camps, from hunger, exposure or violent attacks. In 1915 alone, approximately 800,000 Armenians perished.

On 24 April 1915 and the days following, there was a big round up in the Ottoman capital Constantinople (modern Istanbul) of thousands of Armenian intellectuals and leaders – writers, teachers, journalists, doctors, members of the Turkish Parliament and public activists – who were later killed one way or another. Armenians saw the removal of their intellectuals and leaders as effectually "cutting off the head" of their community. Here are the names of a few:

- Daniel Varuzhan, distinguished poet and public activist who died on 26 August 1915 during deportation on the road to Çankiri (modern Turkey).
- Atom Yarjanian, pen name Siamanto, was another great poet who also died in August 1915 on the road to Çankiri.
- Nazaret Taghavaryan, a public figure and doctor who died in 1915 during deportation on the road to Urfa.
- Grikor Zohrab, a writer, lawyer and MP, was killed in 1915 during deportation, on the road to Diyarbakir.

The date 24 April is now Armenian Genocide Memorial Day.

Guard us, O Christ our God, in peace under the shadow of your holy and venerable cross. Deliver us from the visible and invisible enemy. Make us worthy to give you thanks and to glorify you together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and always and unto the ages of ages. Amen
A prayer from the Liturgy of the Armenian Church

By faith Abel brought God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. Hebrews 11:4

Johann Maier, Josef Zirkl and Michael Lottner (1945) Tongue Silenced, Deed and Death Continue to Preach

"An apostle of peace, he gave his life for the preservation of Regensburg … His tongue is silenced, but his deed and his death continue to preach." This is the inscription on the tomb of Johann Maier at Regensburg Cathedral, Germany, where he was a preacher before his martyrdom in the last days of the Second World War.

During the war, he had been interrogated by the Gestapo several times regarding his anti-Nazi sermons. On 22 April 1945 the advancing US Army reached the River Danube and was only 20 km away from Regensburg. Late in the afternoon of 23 April, a crowd gathered at the city's central square, demanding that Regensburg be surrendered to the American troops, for it was clear that a German victory was impossible. When the protest threatened to get out of hand, Johann urged the crowd to remain calm and respect authority. He then began to speak, giving reasons for declaring Regensburg an open city and calling for a peaceful handover to avoid further bloodshed. Before he had finished, he was arrested and within hours had been condemned to death as a "saboteur". He was hanged at 3.25 a.m. the next morning on the very spot where he had stood to speak the previous day.

Hanged with him was a much older Christian, Josef Zirkl (74), who was also a staunch opponent of the Nazis. His crime: he had stood too close to Johann during his speech (for he was deaf) and protested his arrest. Michael Lottner (46), a Christian policeman who had retired due to a service-related injury, also protested Johann's arrest and was shot resisting arrest. His body was laid beneath the gallows on which Johann and Josef were hanged.

Three days later the US army entered Regensburg without a fight.

Christ avoided suffering until his hour had come, but when it did come he seized it with both hands … if we want to be Christians we must show something of Christ's breadth of sympathy by acting responsibly, by grasping our 'hour', by facing danger like free men, by displaying a real sympathy which springs not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Germany (1906–45)

You are the salt of the earth. Matthew 5:13

Aleppo's Armenians (2016)
101st Anniversary of the Genocide

"We will show the Armenians and the Christians who we are… We have been ordered not to leave any Armenians in the area." This threat was issued by a rebel group in the Syrian Civil War on 22 April 2016.

Three days later, on 25 April 2016, Armenian districts in Aleppo were attacked, killing around 60 Christians and injuring 124. Many of the victims were children and elderly people. Ten apartment blocks and over 30 houses were destroyed.

Aleppo's Christians saw this sudden renewal of violence as deliberately timed to coincide with annual commemoration of the Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Genocide of a century earlier, marked by Armenians on 24 April.

Before the Syrian Civil War, Aleppo had had a large population of Armenian Christians, the descendants of Armenians from Turkey who found refuge and safety in Aleppo when they fled from the Armenian Genocide. But by 2016 there were estimated to be fewer than 8,000 Christians remaining in the Armenian sector of the city as they fled the anti-Christian violence of some of the rebel groups. By the next year, the whole Christian community in the city was only a tenth of its pre-war size (see April 10).

Their presence although small was visible. Professor Jany Haddad, an Armenian Christian, was one of the few surgeons who stayed in Aleppo throughout the war. A Muslim patient said to him, "Please do not leave Aleppo, you are the salt of the earth." When he questioned her about this Biblical phrase, she explained how she could not do any good cooking without salt. In this way Christians were "keeping the taste, the love and the hope of our nation alive".

The sun by the action of heat makes wax moist and mud dry, hardening the one while it softens the other, by the same operation producing exactly opposite results; thus, from the long-suffering of God, some derive benefit, and others harm; some are softened, while others are hardened.
Theodoret of Cyrrhus (near Aleppo) (c. 394-c. 458)

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. Philippians 3:20

Bulgarian Christians (1876)
Crushing the April Uprising

Bulgarians, long subjugated as second-class residents of the Islamic Ottoman Empire because of their Christian faith, rose in rebellion in April 1876, after pressures on them increased. The cruel and terrible suppression of this uprising became known in Britain as the Bulgarian Horrors.

Up to 15,000 Bulgarians may have died. In Batak alone, an estimated 5,000 were killed by the irregular *bashi-bazouk* units of the Ottoman army who burned, shot, maimed and beheaded without restraint. Many of the dead were children, impaled on *bashi-bazouk* bayonets.

After a battle against the *bashi-bazouk*, the men from Batak decided to negotiate with their leader Ahmet Aga, who promised to withdraw his troops if the Batak disarmed. When the Batak men laid down their weapons, the *bashi-bazouk* attacked and beheaded them.

Those hidden in the House of Bogdan surrendered with the promise they would be spared. When more than 200 men, women and children came out they were stripped of their valuables and clothes, and brutally killed.

The mayor, Trendafil Kerelov, was roasted alive. His daughter-in-law had heard Ahmet Aga himself issue the command for Trendafil to be "put on a skewer" and burned. Her baby, Vladimir, was impaled on a sword.

The *bashi-bazouk* burned the school, with 200 people hidden in the basement. Others had taken refuge in the church but, after three days without water, they had to venture outside. The *bashi-bazouk* were there and beheaded them, sparing only those who converted to Islam.

Before the *bashi-bazouk* left Batak, they set fire to the church building, but failed to destroy its stone walls. Ahmet Aga had planned to repopulate the town with those who converted to Islam, but it turned out that there were not enough of them.

It is difficult for you, but think of how it was for the Saviour on the Cross. The end is near; life passes quickly. We are guests on earth, migratory birds.

Seraphim (Sobolev) of Bogucharsk, Bulgaria (1881-1950)

Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love. 1 Corinthians 16:13-14

Burkina Faso Christians (2019)
"Pray for Me to Keep the Faith"

The congregation were chatting in the church courtyard, after the Sunday morning service on 28 April 2019, when twelve Islamist gunmen roared up on motorbikes and ordered them to gather together under a tree. The gunmen demanded that the Christians convert to Islam, but they refused. One by one, individuals were called out from the group under the tree, taken behind a building and shot. In this way died Pastor Pierre Ouédraogo, his son Wend-Kuni, his brother-in-law and deacon, Zoéyandé Sawadogo, Sayouba Sawadogo, Arouna Sawadogo and Elie Boena, a primary school teacher. A seventh victim, Adama Sawadogo, was seriously injured but survived.

Pastor Pierre had recently had a vision, from which he understood that he was in imminent danger, but had told relatives that he preferred to die for his faith rather than leave the small town of Silgadji where he had ministered for nearly 40 years.

"Pray for me to keep the faith because we know we may die very shortly," said a Christian mother to her son after the attack at Silgadji.

This anti-Christian attack in northern Burkina Faso was soon followed by more. On 12 May 2019 terrorists stormed a Sunday service in Dablo, shooting dead the pastor and five church leaders.

The following day, Islamist militant gunmen launched a murderous attack on a church parade in Zimtenga, killing four people who were in prominent positions in the parade.

On 25 January 2020 Silgdaji was attacked again. This time the gunmen targeted the market-place, rounding everyone up into two groups: men and women. They threatened to kill any Christians who refused to convert to Islam. At least ten men were shot dead, and the women were told to leave Silgadji.

However long the night, the dawn will always break.
African Christian saying (based on Matthew 10:22; 24:13)

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this? John 11:25-26

Ali Akhond (1933)
A Kashgar Tale

Ali was a zealous Muslim, who prayed five times a day and went regularly to worship at the mosque. For Ali this was not just to meet the requirements of his religion but because he longed to feel at one with Allah. Yet even the mystical contemplation techniques of the Sufi brotherhood to which he belonged did not seem to have the power to make that happen; Allah still felt very distant.

One day at the market in Kashgar (Kashi in modern China) he heard amidst the hustle and bustle the words "Yes, I shall never die." It was a frail and elderly Christian missionary speaking and Ali concluded that the man must be mad. However, the words stuck in his mind.

Later Ali got a job in Kashgar, enabling him to hear lectures on Islam in the city, but he also went to a church service where he heard the words "He shall never see death", and then, "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (John 8:51; 17:3). Over and over again he read a Gospel he was given at the church, he made a habit of attending Sunday worship, he closely watched the family lives of the missionaries, and eventually he gave his life to Christ. His wife became a believer, and their home a peaceful, happy place.

Ali became the evangelist of Kashgar church and preached passionately. But he was constantly harassed and threatened by Muslims. When persecution came in 1933 (see April 1) he was martyred for his love of the Lord Jesus Christ.

They climbed the steep ascent to heaven
Through peril, toil, and pain;
O God, to us may grace be given
To follow in their train.

Reginald Heber, England (1783-1826), Bishop of Calcutta, India

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. Ephesians 2:14

Burundian Martyrs (1997)
All One in Christ Jesus

When civil war broke out in Burundi in 1993 between the Hutus and Tutsis, a Christian ministerial training college in Buta was a refuge for both the warring tribes. The students made a special point of living together as a Christian community where the love of Christ was more important than ethnic origins.

Early in the morning of 30 April 1997, armed invaders, allegedly from a Hutu rebel group, attacked the college, while the students were still in bed. The students were ordered to divide into two groups: Hutus and Tutsis. But they refused to separate themselves, preferring to die together than to have one ethnic group killed and the other survive.

Their plans frustrated, the attackers used their rifles and grenades to slaughter 40 of the students, aged 15 to 20. Some of the victims sang psalms of praise, others prayed, "Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do."

Just before the massacre, the students had been on an Easter retreat. A leader wrote afterwards that at this retreat, the students had been "enlivened by a new kind of spirit, which seemed to be a preparation for the holy death of these innocents. Full of rejoicing and joy, the word in their mouths was 'God is good and we have met Him.' They spoke of heaven as if they had just come from it … From that day on, they prayed, they sang, they danced to church, happy to discover, as it were, the treasure of heaven … Their death was like a soft and light path from their dormitory to another resting place, without pain, without noise, nor fear. They died like martyrs … thus honouring the Church of Burundi."

What should we do? … Let us invoke the goodness and mercy of our God, while we are in this exile of tears, before death overtakes us.

Horsiesi, Egypt (c. 305-c. 390)

Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing. Isaiah 40:26

Li Zubai, Song Hecheng, Song Fa, Zhu Guangxian and Liu Youtai (1665)
Chinese Astronomers

Li Zubai was the leading Chinese astronomer of his generation. Baptised in 1622, he worked at the Institute of Astronomy, Peking (now Beijing) with the German missionary and astronomer Johann Adam Schall von Bell.

Li Zubai co-wrote a book with Schall about the telescope, and in 1664 published a Christian tract *Tianxue chuan'gai* (*A Summary of the Spread of Heavenly Teaching*). It told how God had created the world, the Chinese were descendants of Adam and Eve, and a branch of the human race migrated to China after the Flood. The claim that Chinese people had originated in foreign lands was unwelcome to some.

On 15 September 1664, Yang Guangxian, a Chinese Muslim, presented a petition charging the Christian astronomers with treachery, preaching an abominable religion and teaching false astronomical methods. Schall and his companions, together with some Chinese officials at the Institute of Astronomy, were sentenced to death.

Five Chinese Christians were publicly beheaded: Li Zubai, Song Hecheng, Song Fa, Zhu Guangxian and Liu Youtai. While Schall awaited his death, the Imperial Palace was struck by an earthquake and caught fire; at the same time, a comet appeared in the sky. The authorities, alarmed by these apparent portents, released Schall, but he never recovered from the hardship of his imprisonment and died on 15 August 1666. Some said that the principal cause of his death was a broken heart after the murders of his five Chinese friends. Five years later, the emperor acquitted Schall and Li posthumously while Yang was dismissed from office for misleading the government.

Those that adore Heaven instead of the Lord of Heaven are like a man who, desiring to pay the emperor homage, prostrates himself before the imperial place at Peking and venerates its beauty.
Matteo Ricci, Italy (1552-1610), missionary to China, whose 1602 map of the world in Chinese introduced the findings of European exploration to China. Schall took up Ricci's mantle

But as for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause. Job 5:8 (NKJV)

Pakistan "Blasphemy Law" Victims (1987-2020) A Law that Brings Persecution

Pakistan's notorious "blasphemy laws" are greatly feared by the Christian minority. Desecrating the Quran carries a mandatory sentence of life imprisonment, and defiling the name of Muhammad carries a mandatory death sentence. Crucially, there is no penalty for false accusation and the lower courts of Pakistan tend to give greater weight to the testimony of a Muslim than that of a Christian. Christians are very vulnerable because simply stating certain aspects of the Christian faith could be construed as "blasphemy".

From 1987 to 2018, about 229 Pakistani Christians were accused of "blasphemy" (along with people of other religions). At the time of writing no one has yet been officially executed but many Christians have been extra-judicially murdered by zealous Muslims trying to please Allah by killing a blasphemer, even if a court has acquitted the person or before their trial could be conducted in accordance with the law. Fifteen Christians died like this between 1990 and 2012. Mansur (Manzoor) Masih was shot dead in May 1994 as he left the court which had just acquitted him. He and two other Christians had been accused of writing "blasphemous" remarks despite two of them being illiterate.

"Blasphemy"-related vigilante violence in Gojra in 2009 resulted in nine Christians being burned alive. Rumours that Christians had desecrated the Quran swept through the town and a mob of hundreds set fire to Christian homes. Later it was revealed that the violence was planned in advance.

Some "blasphemy" victims die while in police custody. Two young Christian men, Nazir Masih in 1993 and Robert Fanish Masih in 2009, died in this way bearing signs of torture. Others die in prison from lack of medical care. In 2011 Aslam Masih died from tuberculosis and dengue fever and Qamar David from a heart attack.

I was accused because of the name of Jesus and I knew I would be freed because of Jesus.
Aasia Bibi, Pakistan (born 1965) after being acquitted of "blasphemy" charges in October 2018 and resettled in Canada. She had spent nearly eight years on death row in a prison in Pakistan

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Romans 12:1

Christians in the Democratic Republic of Congo (2016-20)
Attacks by Ugandan Islamist Group

"It was eerie; hundreds of houses abandoned and thousands of people displaced. I saw four coffins and a funeral or two on the road. I saw people carrying their mattresses and things in cars, on motorcycles, on foot. Hundreds of homes along the road are abandoned. Where there was a thriving community, there is now a ghost town." This is how a Congolese Christian described the aftermath of a night attack on a village in North Kivu province, eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), on 3 May 2016. Attackers had infiltrated the village armed with axes and machetes, getting past army positions to kill residents in their homes. The final death toll was around 34.

The attackers were thought to be the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an Islamist group of Ugandan origin, who have carried out numerous attacks on the Christian population of this part of DRC for years. For example, in a string of attacks between 20 November and 3 December 2020 on five villages in North Kivu, terrified Christians flooded the streets as the jihadists, armed with guns, machetes, clubs, swords and axes, circled churches in each village. At least 30 Christians died. In Mayitike village, the ADF tried to force the villagers to convert to Islam. A pastor who lost all five members of his family said, "They also tried to force my wife and our four children to convert to Islam, but when they refused to convert, they shot my wife in the head while our four children were cut into pieces with a sword."

To be a living sacrifice will involve all my time. God wants me to live every minute for Him in accordance with His will and purpose, sixty minutes of every hour, twenty-four hours of every day, being available to Him. No time can be considered as my own, or as "off-duty" or "free". I cannot barter with God about how much time I can give to serve Him. Whatever I am doing … all should be undertaken for Him, to reveal His indwelling presence to those around me.

Helen Roseveare, England (1925-2016), missionary in the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo

I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness. John 12:46

Yusuf Ali Nur (2010)
Between Pirates and Islamists in Somalia

School teacher Yusuf Ali Nur was a leader in the tiny Somali church, comprised of converts from Islam and their children. Although the church was "underground", Yusuf's faith was known and he was on a list of Somali Christians drawn up by the powerful Islamist militant group Al Shabaab – a list of people to be tracked down and killed. (At one point, Al Shabaab boasted that they had killed every convert in Somalia.) In the territory that they controlled Al Shabaab enforced strict sharia (Islamic law) including punishing thieves with amputation. Radio stations were forbidden from playing music and school bells were banned because they resembled church bells. Teachers like Yusuf who taught English were also condemned as Al Shabaab preferred schoolchildren to learn Arabic.

In 2009 Yusuf moved to Xarardheere (Harardhere), a pirate stronghold, where he shared the Gospel. In April 2010 Al Shabaab advanced towards Xarardheere, presumably wanting to wrest control of this lucrative sea port from the pirates, but were repelled by a pro-government militia. Al Shabaab condemned piracy as un-Islamic but reportedly also taxed the pirates on their ransom money and sometimes gave weapons training to them.

On 4 May 2010 Al Shabaab, again battling for control of Xarardheere, were searching house-to-house for enemy fighters from a rival rebel group. Bursting into one home, they found 57-year-old Yusuf, and shot him multiple times at close range, killing him.

O Lord Jesus Christ, son of a Hebrew mother,
Who rejoiced in the faith of a Syrian woman and a Roman soldier,
Who welcomed the Greeks who sought Thee,
And suffered an African to carry Thy cross.
Help us to bring all races and nations
To the throne of Thy Heavenly Grace. Amen

Lutheran Church, Zululand, South Africa

The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.
Psalm 145:18

Johann Andres (1937?)
From South to North to South, and Then Where?

As a Mennonite pastor in the USSR, Johann Andres was in grave danger. Mennonites were not only Christians but also pacifists, giving a double reason for the communist authorities to persecute them – and persecute them they did. Johann was designated a "cult servant" and all such "were to be eliminated because they blocked the course of the revolution" as his daughter Justine later expressed it. In 1930 he was taken from his home village called Friedensruh (meaning "peace and rest") in a Mennonite settlement called Molotschna in the southern USSR (modern Ukraine). He was moved steadily northward, from one prison to another, suffering hunger, thirst, cold and vermin, until he found himself in Murmansk, a port lying north of the Arctic Circle.

There he was set to work cutting wood in the immense virgin forest. If he did not fulfil his quota, he did not get his allotment of bread. He fell sick but survived until 1934 when he was released. However, he could not return to Molotschna until 1936.

The next year, he was taken again. In 1937 many Mennonite men were being seized at night from their beds and led away; Johann was one of the first to be taken. The women never saw or heard from the men again and never knew how they died. "It seemed the earth had swallowed them," said Justine.

Molotschna was the largest of a number of German-speaking Mennonite communities in the southern USSR (see February 23; July 3). Many of their men were imprisoned, exiled or executed during Soviet times, leaving communities leaderless. Those in Ukraine also suffered greatly during the Holodomor (a Ukrainian word meaning "killing by hunger") of 1932-33, a deliberate man-made famine created to subjugate the Ukrainians.

When the need is greatest, God is nearest.
Justine Schmidt, née Andres, eldest child of Johann Andres, writing from a refugee camp in the Netherlands, 1946

And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ. Ephesians 3:17-18

Kachin Christians (2011-21) Human Rights Abuses

In early May 2012, two Kachin children, aged five and seven, were playing in the Ta Li River in Myanmar when a loud bomb blast startled them. As they tried to run to safety, soldiers from the Myanmar army opened fire and killed them.

The military of Myanmar (formerly Burma) has persecuted the non-Burman, non-Buddhist minorities, especially since a military coup in 1962. One of the persecuted minorities are the Kachin ethnic group. Ngunla recalled in February 2013 how she and her fellow villagers fled into the jungle when the army came, many later dying there from malnutrition and illness. "We had been forced to construct military camps, dig canals around their camps and carry their ammunition. Many died while doing so," she said. During those months of conflict, some 200 Kachin villages had been torched and more than 60 Kachin churches destroyed.

Soon afterwards, in August 2013, in Nhka Ga village, Pastor Ram Mai, his son Nang Mawn Htin Aung, a deacon Lahkreng Hkaw Duk, a young man Yung Hpa Hkyen, and seven others were bound, hung upside down, beaten and tortured by soldiers during interrogation inside the church. Hkaw Duk and Hpa Hkyen were later taken away blindfolded and killed.

In early May 2021, after the February coup, a group of villages near Momauk Township in Kachin State were targeted by the Myanmar army. Repeated bombardment over several days killed two people, injured ten, destroyed many houses and caused thousands to flee, leaving behind all their possessions.

When the Myanmar government nationalised all mission schools and hospitals and expelled missionaries in the mid-1960s, the Kachin people were about 40% Christian. By 2020 around 95% of Kachin people were Christians.

Oh, the love of Christ! It is the secret of life's inspiration and the source of Heaven's bliss. Oh, the love of Jesus! We cannot understand it now, but what a beautiful study for eternity!... boundless in its breadth, infinite in its length, unfathomable in its depth, and measureless in its height.
Adoniram Judson, USA (1788-1850), missionary to Burma

This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 1 John 4:9

Japanese Christians (1613)
Victims of the Shogun

The scene was a banquet given by a senior Japanese official. The year was 1613. Among the guests was a prominent Christian. He had already been banished from two provinces because of his faith and had resisted many attempts to make him deny Christ. A sword was brought and placed before him. No doubt he knew very well what it signified, but he raised it respectfully to his head, as was done in Japan when receiving anything worthy of honour. He examined it carefully, praising the workmanship, and handed it over to the officer, who at once killed him. His brother, also a Christian, was killed in a similar manner and afterwards his children and mother were beheaded.

Many localised persecutions of Christians broke out in Japan in that year. Several Christian *samurai* (hereditary warriors) were executed after they refused to obey when their *daimyo* ordered them to renounce the Christian faith. Thousands of Christians attended their execution, not treating them as criminals but hailing them as martyrs.

Japan at that time was ruled by a shogun called Tokugawa Ieyasu (ruled 1603-16). Seeing how united and committed the Christians were in their faith, and fearing a rebellion, he issued an edict in 1614 to ban Christianity throughout Japan, expel missionaries and senior church leaders, and demolish church buildings.

Public executions of Christians continued until probably 1623, by increasingly painful and prolonged methods. But eventually the authorities realised that rather than frightening people away from the foreign faith, the martyrdoms were actually leading to an increase in the faith. So other ways to suppress Christianity were used.

Away from the city, Jesus was nailed to the Cross because of us.
We contemplate His death, but we do not know the depth of His suffering.
The cause of His death was our sins,
So we could achieve forgiveness and entry into the Kingdom.
The price of perdition was the precious blood of Jesus.
Oh, Lord who loves, I want to follow You through Your wounds.
Japanese Christian song

Trust in him at all times, you people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge. Psalm 62:8

Henri Vergès (1994) and Eighteen Other Martyrs of Algeria (1994-1996)
Last Minutes in the Library

"Are you aware that death is watching you day and night?" a friend asked Henri Vergès on 25 March 1994. Henri, who was busy putting a new cover on a book, replied, "Listen, my choice was made in 1948. I offered my life to God. My destiny is in the hands of the Almighty."

Born in France in 1930, Henri had lived in Algeria since 1969, serving as a missionary, a teacher and, since 1988, a librarian. Henri's library was intended to help disadvantaged young people in Algiers. Here he assisted the youngsters with their schoolwork and helped them prepare for their exams.

But now civil war was raging between the Algerian government and various Islamist rebel groups. Since the outbreak of war in December 1991 the library had become a safe place and a refuge from the chaos and violence. Every day it was filled with children and young people.

In 1993 the Islamist groups had told all foreigners and non-Muslims to leave the country, but Henri had ignored this. On 8 May 1994 Henri was shot dead at point-blank range, together with a Christian woman called Paul-Hélène who also worked in the library. Their killers were from the Armed Islamic Group, one of the main Islamist insurgent groups in the civil war.

A further 17 foreign Christians serving God in Algeria were martyred between 23 October 1994 and 1 August 1996. All had refused to leave, despite the danger. Amongst the martyrs were seven French Trappist monks kidnapped from their monastery in Tibhirine on the night of 26 March 1996; their heads were found on the road to Medea on 30 May 1996.

None of us knows the hour of our death but we must be ready for it. We must neither flinch from death nor shrink from our God-given tasks.

Live today as if you were going to die a martyr this evening.
Charles de Foucauld, France (martyred in Algeria in 1916)

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Matthew 16:16 (ESV)

Suleman Hadayat Masih (2016)
Bearing the Name of Christ

In May 2016, the body of 14-year-old Suleman was found hanging in the stables where he lived and worked in Chehl Kalan, Gujranwala, Pakistan. The three Muslim brothers, Aurangzaib, Humayun and Jahangir Bashir, who owned the stables, claimed that Suleman had committed suicide. But the stables' ceiling was too high for him to have hanged himself.

Suleman trained horses to dance to drum beats at wedding ceremonies (a traditional wedding feast entertainment in Pakistan). By working at the stables, he was able to help support his family.

The circumstances surrounding his death were mysterious. A week before he was killed, Suleman disappeared and his family searched for days in vain. Eventually Aurangzaib "had a clue" where the boy might be and took Suleman's father, Hadayat Masih, to a place 13 miles (20 km) from the family's home. There they found Suleman, but he gave no information to his family as to why he had gone missing, perhaps because Aurangzaib was present. Suleman returned to work at the stables.

The next morning as Hadayat passed the stables he heard a scream, and saw the three brothers walking away. When he entered the building, he saw his son's body hanging from the ceiling. A post-mortem examination of Suleman's body found neck and head injuries.

Police suggested that one of the three brothers had struck the boy in anger, causing him to fall and suffer a fatal blow to his head. The brothers then hung the lifeless body to make the death look like suicide.

In Pakistan "Masih" is a common surname for Christians. It means "Messiah" or "Christ". This defenceless boy's life was treated as worth nothing, because he was a Christian.

The union of believers is grounded in the mystical union of Christ and His Church. The Bible speaks of a two-way transaction that occurs when a person is regenerated. Every converted person becomes "in Christ" at the same time Christ enters into the believer. If I am in Christ and you are in Christ, and if He is in us, then we experience a profound unity in Christ.
R C Sproul, USA (1939-2017)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28

Madagascar Christians (1835-61)
Tangena Ordeal

Christianity flourished in Madagascar under King Radama, who was pro-European and happily accepted missionaries into his country, and a Church was planted. When he died in 1828, he was succeeded by his widow, Queen Ranavalona I who was obsessed by power and feared anything that appeared to threaten this, such as Christianity.

In February 1835 she formally forbade the practice of Christianity by her Malagasy subjects. It became a "forbidden cult" with the punishment for owning a Bible, meeting with other Christians to worship or refusing to deny Christ specified as death. (Foreign Christians, however, were allowed the freedom to continue to practise their faith.)

However, many local Christians continued to worship and meet together, despite the decree. Those caught were imprisoned, condemned to hard labour, fined, subjected to the "Tangena Ordeal" or executed. Christians were killed by smothering, starvation, burning, or being boiled alive. In one public execution 15 Christian leaders were dangled from ropes over a rock-filled ravine about 150 feet (50 m) deep. The ropes were cut when they refused to deny Christ.

It is impossible to know the exact number formally executed during Queen Ranavalona's reign (perhaps between 80 and 200) but in addition many Christians died from the "Tangena Ordeal". In this, the accused was forced to swallow poison extracted from tangena nuts; their guilt or innocence was determined by the way the body reacted. Death indicated guilt.

Western missionaries left Madagascar soon after the 1835 decree. Between 1835 and 1861 (when Queen Ranavalona died) the Church in Madagascar was run solely by Malagasy Christians, and it grew faster than in the easy days of King Radama.

In heavenly love abiding, no change my heart shall fear;
And safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here:
The storm may roar without me, my heart may low be laid;
But God is round about me, and can I be dismayed?
Anna Laetitia Waring, Wales (1823-1910)

Don't be afraid…Those who are with us are more than those who are with them. 2 Kings 6:16

Chiman Lal (1857)
Martyred in a Mutiny

The 1857 Indian Rebellion against their British rulers (also called the Indian Mutiny) was strongly motivated by the concerns of Hindu and Muslim Indians that the British were trying to impose Christianity on them. On 11 May 1857, the rebel soldiers entered Delhi, the ancient Mughal capital, and hunted down and killed not only the British but also all the Indian Christians they could find, most of whom would have been recent converts from Hinduism or Islam.

One of the first converts to be killed was Dr Chiman Lal (Chimmun Lall) who was pointed out to the rebel troops on that May morning. His conversion to Christianity in 1852 had caused a huge scandal, because he was a high profile individual, being sub-assistant surgeon of Delhi and physician to the Mughal emperor. He also ran a medical dispensary in Daryaganj. He was attending to his patients at this dispensary when he was shot at point blank range. A plaque in Dr Lal's memory, in the church where he used to worship, records: "He fell a martyr to his faith on the day of the massacre of Christians in Delhi 11th May 1857." It finishes by quoting the last words of the first martyr, Stephen: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." (Acts 7:60)

Rev William Owen recorded the courage and faithfulness of many Indian converts to Christianity during the uprising who, despite being severely persecuted or killed, refused to deny Christ and convert to Islam or Hinduism. He noted that the converts were "true to the standard of the cross" and very few lapsed compared with the scores who remained steadfast in the hour of trial.

This is no time to flee, except to God in prayer … O Lord, many of thy people have been slain before this by the sword, and burned in the fire, for thy name's sake. Thou didst give them help to hold fast in the faith. Now, O Lord, we have fallen into the fiery trial. Lord, may it please thee to help us to suffer with firmness. Let us not fall nor faint in heart under this sore temptation. Even to the death, oh! Help us to confess, and not to deny thee, our dear Lord. Oh, help us to bear this cross, that we may, if we die, obtain a crown of glory.
A R Hubbard, a British missionary in Delhi. These are his words as he gathered those around him to pray on 11 May 1857 at 9 a.m. He was martyred later that day

And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them. Mark 10:16

Marcel and Bashar Nemeh, Jessica Karajian, Suhair Adnan, Anji Faisal Zuruf and Hala Mkashkash (2019) Precious Children

Marcel and his younger brother Bashar were in their Sunday School class, together with other local children, on 12 May 2019 when a rocket, fired by the Islamist rebel group Al Nusra, struck the Christian town of Suqaylabiyah where the children and their families lived and went to church. Four children – Bashar, Jessica, Suhair and Anji – were killed instantly in the horrifying attack, their young lives wiped out as they learned about their Lord and Saviour. A Christian woman called Hala was killed alongside the children.

Five other children were hit by shrapnel, including Marcel. He suffered terrible head injuries and was rushed to hospital for emergency treatment. Sadly, five days later, he succumbed to his wounds and died in the hospital. The Nemeh brothers' father had been killed in 2014, in the same Syrian civil war that took the lives of his sons. Yasmin Zarrouf, their mother, was left entirely alone in the world, her husband and two precious boys torn from her life.

The terrorists targeted residential areas and the town's monastery, which sits high on the hill overlooking Suqaylabiyah and doubled as a community centre and school, falsely claiming it to be a military centre. Situated on the border of terrorist-held areas, Suqaylabiyah was targeted many times during the war and more than a hundred residents were killed.

The attacks on 12 May came just after the Syrian government army's liberation of the nearby town of Qalaat Al Madiq. One mother was hopeful "we could finally begin to breathe, that we could finally allow our children back out onto the streets of our city and into the schools again." But the Syrian civil war was not over.

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle breast,
There by His love o'ershaded, sweetly my soul shall rest.

Frances Jane Crosby, USA (1820-99)

Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
Lamentations 3:22-23

Christians of Surabaya, Indonesia (2018) Killed by Suicide Bomber Family

Co-ordinated suicide bombings carried out by members of the same Indonesian family, recently returned from Syria, struck three churches in Surabaya on Sunday 13 May 2018. Nineteen people were killed and over 40 injured.

Early in the morning, two young men aged 18 and 16, riding a motorcycle, were stopped at a church entrance by its volunteer security guard, Aloysius Bayu Rendra Wardhana. Shortly afterwards, the men detonated their bombs, killing Aloysius and five others, including brothers Evan (12) and Nathan (8).

Shortly afterwards the mother of the young men, carrying two bags, tried to enter another church with her two daughters, aged twelve and nine. All three were wearing *niqabs* (Islamic face-coverings with eye slits) which is unusual in Indonesia. Their appearance aroused the suspicions of the security guard, Yesaya Bayang, who blocked their way. The woman threw her arms around Yesaya and detonated her bombs, and the two young girls did likewise. Yesaya was critically injured but no one else was killed.

Ten minutes later, two explosions, from the same car, were heard at a third church. After hitting three people, the driver, who was the husband and father of the suicide bomber family, had rammed the car into the entrance gate, killing eight people, including Daniel (15) who had just finished Sunday School. He was run over and lying under the car as it blew up. Five others died of their injuries later, including Tee Suk Tjien (64), and her son Agus, who were both very involved in the church.

Pastor Wahano said, "We don't understand why this happened, but we continue to teach about forgiveness and love. God's plan is still good." Forgiveness was the consistent response from the three congregations.

Living together full of love,
Compassionate love leads us through the world.
Come and establish our hearts,
Don't let our brotherhood be broken.
Only with love, with love, with love we will be one.
Welly R Soputan, a Christian refugee from anti-Christian violence in Maluku, Indonesia. This 2001 song is called *Damai* (*Peace*)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand.
1 Corinthians 15:1

Faye Pama Musa (2013)
Called to Work Among His Own People

On Tuesday 14 May 2013, after finishing an evening Bible study at his church, Pastor Faye Pama Musa (47) went home. But apparently he was followed. For two Islamist militants broke into his house, dragged him outside and shot him dead. His daughter, who had followed them out, pleading for her father's life, saw him killed.

Since at least 2007 Pastor Musa had been aware that his life was in danger. He lived in Maiduguri, the Muslim-majority city in Borno State, north-eastern Nigeria, where in 2002 the Islamist militant group Boko Haram had come into being. But he refused to think of fleeing. "I am an indigene of Borno State, and God has called me to work among my people," he said. "I believe that the best people who reach a people with the Gospel are those who understand the culture of these people." He considered that Muslims could be won for Christ only by showing love to them and "not through fighting".

The martyrdom of Pastor Musa came less than an hour after the then president of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, declared a state of emergency in Borno and two other states of northern Nigeria most affected by the Boko Haram insurgency.

Pastor Musa ministered in a very hostile environment, a safe haven for extremists but a place where Christians were marginalised and persecuted. He had been outspoken about the plight of Christians. To be a Christian in Borno State, he said, "is deciding to become a second-class citizen".

The heart of the Gospel is the pierced heart of the Son of God. It is all there, at the cross … His breathtaking act of turning that same cross into the instrument of redeeming love, reconciliation and salvation. He died for those who killed Him. By His blood he forgave those who spilled it. That is the Gospel story.
Reinhard Bonnke, Germany (1940-2019), who led many Gospel missions throughout Africa

Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him.
Ecclesiastes 8:12 (ESV)

Mirza Abraham (1893)
"Jesus, though you kill me"

When he was baptised, about the year 1890 at Khoy in Persia (modern Iran), Mirza Abraham, a convert from Islam, knew that he was "putting a sword to his throat". After his baptism he was expelled from his community, and his wife and property were taken from him. He moved to Urmia, where he earned a meagre living from writing and other work, giving away half of his earnings to those even poorer than himself.

In May 1892 he was arrested in a village where he had gone to preach, and brought before the *serperast* (a Muslim official appointed to safeguard the interests of the Christian minority). Refusing to comment on the Islamic prophet Muhammad, Mirza Abraham declared, "My faith is in Christ and His Word. He is my Saviour." In response came the command, "Beat him." As he was viciously beaten and kicked by the officials, the crowd, and even the *serperast* himself, Mirza calmly recited verses from the New Testament. To the *serperast* he said, "You may shoot me from the cannon's mouth but you cannot take away my faith in Christ."

After more ill-treatment and two weeks in prison, constantly preaching Christ to his fellow-prisoners, Mirza was taken to Tabriz. On leaving Urmia he called on the other prisoners to confirm that he had taught them "the way of life in Jesus".

At Tabriz he was held in prison for about a year, until in April 1893, while in a dungeon with a dozen other prisoners, all ruffians, he began to tell them about Jesus. This angered them, and they started beating and kicking him, then took turns to choke him "until his eyes almost fell from their sockets". They kept asking him, "Is Ali true, or Jesus?" (Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, is a very important figure in Shia Islam, which predominates in Iran.) Mirza's reply was, "Jesus, though you kill me."

A few days later, Mirza was released from the dungeon, but his throat was so damaged and swollen that he could barely speak or eat. The swelling grew worse. He seemed to know that his earthly suffering would soon be over and

said to a visiting missionary, "All is well; tell the Church to pray for me and commend me to Jesus."

He died on Sunday 14 May. When the Crown Prince was informed of Mirza's death, he asked, "How did he die?" The jailor answered, "He died a Christian." The Crown Prince ordered that Mirza should be buried. As his body was conveyed to the grave, people said, "There goes the Muslim who became a Christian."

"His faith and courage are the wonder of all," commented *The Star in the East* in its contemporary report of the martyrdom.

The wings of reason and faith have brought me to experience a new beginning.

Hafiz was there, and I begged him to untie the knot of this secret.
Hafiz opened his mouth and whispered to me: "I've foreseen that a redeemer is come."

Tell me his name, I said, my soul is longing to hear his name,
tell my wounded soul his message.

These words became his habitual phrase saying:
"O, dear soul, good news for you. The Messiah is coming."

I whispered the name of Messiah to my soul, I spread every drop of my being across the sea,
And I closed my external eyes and opened my inner sight.

When I opened the eyes of my soul, I saw a stable, I finally saw what I had seen
In search of him, I was freed from myself. It was the child that I was in quest of…

Swiftly my eyes fell on the roof of the stall and I heard an angel say:
"Remember the day of union of friends"…

My eyes became the eyes of a lover wanting more.
Hafiz said, "A star gleamed and become the moon of the assembly of the world,
And become the consoler and comforter of our broken hearts."

Andreas (Reza) Shahsavari, Iran (born 1956), *With Hafiz (in search of Christ)*, translated by Sara Afshari. Andreas suffered greatly for his faith. He was arrested, imprisoned and tortured a number of times, yet he never gave up preaching the Gospel. Hafiz is a 14th century Persian poet greatly beloved by Iranians

Greet … my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who have risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house. Romans 16:3-5

Wang Zuomei (2000)
Inner Mongolian "House Churches"

Inner Mongolia, that vast and sparsely populated region of China, had seen a three-year revival in its eastern part towards the end of the 20th century. Evangelists from the "house churches" (unofficial churches) of neighbouring Heilongjiang Province had travelled to the region to spread the good news of Jesus and many believed, both ethnic Mongolians and also Han Chinese living in Inner Mongolia. (Han are the main ethnic group in China comprising 93% of the population.)

Wang Zuomei was a Chinese leader of 52 "house churches" in Bairin Zuoqi, Inner Mongolia, linking together over 4,000 believers.

The growing size and influence of this network of churches soon came to the notice of the Chinese communist authorities who saw it as a threat to the stability of the area. Brother Wang was taken into custody at a local police station in 2000. The other Christians expected that he would be questioned and released but by end of the day he had still not returned home. As the days passed, their anxiety deepened. Eventually the police announced that he had committed suicide while in custody, but his fellow believers knew that he had been tortured to death.

Just seven months after his martyrdom, Brother Wang's widow reported that God had moved with such power in the area that the house churches had increased from 52 to 130.

As I follow the Lord, I do not turn back;
As I accept the Lord, I do not regret.
Though the road is rocky, I have no complaint;
Though tears are rolling down my face, my heart is filled with joy.
Serving the Lord is not, is not under the shade of green.
Serving the Lord is not, is not in the greenhouse.
We may be jailed. We may go through valleys of sorrow.
We must go through Marah to reach Elim.

Lu Xiaomin (born 1970), a Chinese Christian of the mainly-Muslim Hui ethnic group. Her words here reference Exodus 15:23-27

I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it. Ezekiel 37:14

East Timorese Christians (1975-99)
Genocide on a Christian Island

"There were many dead bodies in the streets – all we could see were the soldiers killing, killing, killing." Thus the Bishop of Dili recalled the terrible time in December 1975 when Indonesia invaded his country, East Timor. An estimated 2,000 Timorese civilians were massacred in the first few days after the invasion.

The island of Timor in south-east Asia is divided into West Timor, which is part of the Muslim-majority country of Indonesia, and East Timor (Timor-Leste). Christianity is the dominant religion throughout the whole island, with West Timor being about 95% Christian and East Timor even higher. East Timor was a Portuguese colony until a Timorese resistance movement declared independence on 28 November 1975. Just nine days later, its huge Muslim neighbour, Indonesia, with a population of about 130 million, invaded the little Christian half-island, whose population was about 700,000. The following year Indonesia declared that East Timor was now a province of Indonesia.

The Indonesian occupation (1975-1999) was a time of terrible suffering for the East Timorese. Estimates of the number who died (killed or from hunger/illness due to forced relocation away from their farmland) range from 102,800 to 200,000. It has been recognised by some as a genocide of the Timorese people. Yet during this time, the number of churches in East Timor grew, increasing from 100 in 1974 to over 800 in 1994.

East Timor voted for independence on 30 August 1999. In response, pro-Indonesian militias went on a violent rampage, accusing Christian leaders of sheltering people and helping the resistance fighters hiding in the forest. A multi-national peace-keeping force moved in and, with the help of the UN, East Timor became an independent nation in 2002.

On this journey, in this life's struggle,
Joys and sorrows alternate, nevertheless your love abides…
Many bodies have been scattered, Lifeless and without voice,
Only You Lord know, how they surrendered their lives and souls.
Frederick Putjutju, refugee pastor from Tobelo, Indonesia, 2000

Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on his throne as king to rule for the LORD your God … he has made you king over them, to maintain justice and righteousness. 2 Chronicles 9:8

King Erik IX of Sweden (1160)
A Christian Lawgiver

Erik IX (reigned 1150-60) was the Christian ruler of Sweden, a small Christian country which was bordered by various pagan realms all of which had in common a love of fighting and a hatred for the Christian kingdom.

On 18 May 1160, which was Ascension Day, while worshipping in a church near Uppsala, Erik was told that a nearby pagan Danish army was coming to kill him. As he left the church, the pagans attacked him, giving him one wound after another and taunting him, then finally beheaded him.

King Erik is honoured both as humble and pious, an upholder of the Christian faith and as a Swedish national hero. He was called Erik the Lawgiver, as he provided fair laws and just courts for his people. According to tradition he was a righteous ruler, giving generously to the poor and sick, and defending the oppressed. He was also known for his personal piety, giving much time to prayer and fasting. He became the ancestor of a long line of Swedish kings.

Tradition also attributes to Erik the initial spread of the Christian faith into neighbouring Finland, which was pagan at this time. Around 1155, he led an expedition to Finland, to establish a protected Christian mission there headed by Henry of Uppsala, who is now considered the founder of the Church in Finland.

O God, who didst call thy servant Erik of Sweden to an earthly throne that he might advance thy heavenly kingdom, and didst give him zeal for thy Church and love for thy people: Mercifully grant that we who commemorate him this day may be fruitful in good works, and attain to the glorious crown of thy saints; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Swedish Liturgical Prayer Book (traditional language version)

My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. Exodus 33:14

Roy Orpin (1962)
Missionary Resting in Jesus

"Bitter Bamboo" was the name of the little tribal village in Thailand where Roy from New Zealand and his British wife Gillian spent their first year of marriage, serving as missionaries.

When Gillian found she was pregnant, Roy was at first afraid, because there was escalating violence in south-east Asia at that time. Then he remembered the words of 2 Corinthians 10:5 ("we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ"). As her due date drew closer, they moved to the mission hospital at a regional town, to await the baby's birth but Roy returned to prepare their new home in another village. Two robbers attacked him, demanding his valuables, and then shot him. He struggled on with his wound, before being taken to a hospital where, for four days, his life slowly ebbed away. Word reached Gillian at the mission hospital and she was able to travel to Roy's hospital, reaching it shortly before he died. As Roy lay dying, with Gillian by his side, they sang his favourite hymn: "Jesus! I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art".

Roy died on 19 May 1962, aged 26. Gillian, widowed after less than 13 months of marriage, soon gave birth to their son, Murray, and returned with her baby to the UK. "The Lord strengthened me through Scripture," Gillian later testified, and when Murray was only six months old she felt God calling her to return with Murray to Thailand and continue with the missionary work his father had started.

Jesus! I am resting, resting in the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness of Thy loving heart.
Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee, and Thy beauty fills my soul,
For, by Thy transforming power, Thou hast made me whole.

Ever lift Thy face upon me, as I work and wait for Thee;
Resting 'neath Thy smile, Lord Jesus, earth's dark shadows flee.
Brightness of my Father's glory, sunshine of my Father's face,
Keep me ever trusting, resting, fill me with Thy grace.

Jean Sophia Pigott, Ireland (1845–82)

And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. 2 Peter 1:19 (NKJV)

Liu Rongyao (1999)
Coal Mine Terror in China

Liu Rongyao was a faithful believer in the Lord Jesus Christ and a zealous evangelist. He attended a "house church" (unofficial church) in Anhui province, eastern China, which was part of a network of tens of thousands of Christians that had grown from a great revival.

One day in 1997 Brother Liu and six other church elders were praying together when their meeting was raided by the Chinese police. All seven Christians were arrested and sentenced to forced labour in a coal mine for three years. Here the men were subjected to terrible torture. One had lumps of coal forced down his throat until they could be seen pressing against the walls of his stomach. Yet he continued to preach the Gospel and brought many prisoners to faith in Christ.

Local gangsters were brought to the prison to punish the Christians. They smashed Brother Liu's head with rocks. Despite the severity of his injury, he was not allowed any medical care. When the prison authorities saw his health deteriorating so much that he seemed close to death, they notified his family that he had rammed his own head against a wall. He was released and taken to hospital, where doctors found fragments of coal embedded in his brain. Miraculously he began to recover but 18 months later a cancerous tumour was discovered in the place where his skull had been broken. He died in 1999 of the cancer that was caused by the torture he received for being a Christian.

In the dark night, I have seen dawn;
In the dark night, I have seen the morning star;
In the dark night, I raise my head to the Lord.
The song of praises is even louder.
In the dark night, flowers are more fragrant;
In the dark night, the steps are firmer.
There are only a few miles left in the dark night.
Remember, you must be loyal to the Lord.

Lu Xiaomin, China (born 1970) a house church member (see May 16)

May the groans of the prisoners come before you; with your strong arm preserve those condemned to die. Psalm 79:11

Mangalorean Christians (1784-99)
Fifteen Years of Captivity at Srirangapatna

The port city of Mangalore in south-west India had a flourishing Christian community. When Tipu Sultan, Muslim ruler of the kingdom of Mysore and famed for his military successes against the British East India Company, captured it from the British in 1784, he then turned his attention to the Mangalorean Christians.

The Christians were accused of aiding the British, so Tipu seized the properties of Christians, destroyed their churches and records, and took captive an estimated 60,000 (or up to 80,000). He forced these Christians to walk 202 miles (320 km) to his capital Srirangapatna, near Mysore, a journey which took about six weeks. It is believed that around 20,000 perished on the way, due to hunger, disease and ill treatment by the soldiers.

Tipu forcibly circumcised many thousands of Christian men who survived the journey, thus converting them to Islam. Those who refused to embrace Islam were disfigured – their noses, upper lips and ears were cut off – and thrown into the dungeons in Srirangapatna or enslaved. Young women and girls were distributed as concubines. Many of those held in captivity died under the harsh conditions. They were not released until 1799 when Tipu was killed at the Battle of Srirangapatna.

The number left alive with their Christian faith at the end of all this is often quoted to have been only 15,000 to 20,000.

Tipu himself stated that he persecuted the Managalorean Christians simply because of their faith. His expressed view has been summarised as "to spare them was mercy, to honour them with Islam a favour. No fault being imputed except them being Christians."

The basis for power in weakness is of course that power is related to the cross, where life comes through death. No Christian … is exempt from bearing the cross. The cross is the mystery of life through death.
Vinay Samuel, India (born 1942)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Philippians 1:21

Marawi Christians (2017)
Five-Month Siege in the Philippines

On 23 May 2017 Islamist militants laid siege to the city of Marawi in the southern Philippines. It was part of a decades-long armed struggle by Filipino Muslims against the government. During the next five months of siege and bloody conflict, the militants "targeted Christian civilians for the worst of the abuses, including at least 25 extrajudicial killings, mass hostage-taking, and extensive looting of civilian property", reported Amnesty International. Some of the abducted Christians were forced to make bombs for the militants or used as human shields.

The vast majority of the city's population of 200,000 fled in the first week of the siege. Civilians were often given a religious test at unofficial checkpoints as they tried to leave the city. Those who could not, or would not, recite the *shahada* (the Muslim creed) were killed. (Reciting the creed, no matter what the circumstances, is considered by most Muslims to be conversion to Islam.) Some Muslim residents helped Christians to evacuate by escorting them out of the city in their vehicles or disguising them in traditional Muslim clothing.

John, a Christian construction worker, witnessed the killing of a co-worker on 23 May. Black-clad armed men approached his colleague, asking if he was a Muslim or Christian. When he answered that he was a Christian, they shot him dead. On 24 May militants killed eight Christian bakery workers with a shot to the head when they refused to say the *takbir* ("*Allahu Akbar*", meaning "Allah is the greatest"). On the same day militants cut the throats of six Christian carpenters at Banggolo market. Around 28 May, six Christian painters tried to swim to safety via a nearby lake; they were pursued by militants, who managed to shoot three of the Christians.

How you live that life is the thing that matters, not how long. The life is Christ's.
Alfonso Gaspar Taqueban Makil (1927-63), a Filipino missionary Bible translator in Vietnam who was killed during the Vietnam War

Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. Psalm 105:4

Christians of Urmia and Surrounding Villages (1915)
Assyrian Sayfo in Persia (modern Iran)

In 1900 the Persian city of Urmia was about 40% Christian, predominantly Assyrians, and in the early part of the First World War Christians in the Turkish Ottoman Empire fled to Urmia to escape genocide. But at the same time the Ottomans and Russians were fighting over Urmia itself, and from January to May 1915 it was held by the Ottomans.

Some of the Christians fled with the Russian troops when they evacuated Urmia in January 1915. But the hurried departure and the bitter Russian winter caused the deaths of about 2,000 on the way, mainly elderly and children.

On 3 January 1915, Turks and Kurds, together with many of the Muslims in Urmia, began raiding nearby Christian villages, capturing or killing their inhabitants, most of whom were unarmed. In February, almost the entire village of Gulpashan (population 2,500) was massacred. It is estimated that 6,000 Christian villagers were killed at this time, despite the efforts of many of their Muslim neighbours to protect them.

An estimated 25,000 Christians took refuge in various American, British and French properties in Urmia. According to a missionary in Urmia at that time, Rev YM Nisan, about 800 to 1,000 Christians died in the first half of 1915 from the following causes: fear, inadequate shelter, cold, hunger, typhoid. Some also died violently. For example, the Turks seized 50 to 60 leading Assyrians from the French mission, including the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Dinkha, and demanded huge ransoms. Rev Nisan tried to ransom the patriarch, but the Turks kept raising the price. Finally, the Turks tied the hostages together, arm to arm, and shot them dead, including the patriarch.

Be brave, take courage, be patient, falter not, be firm and look up. In a few moments we will be with Christ!
Assyrian Patriarch Mar Dinkha, words of encrouagement to his fellow prisoners before they were martyred together on 23 February 1915

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! 2 Corinthians 9:15

Max Ferber (1950)
Caring for God's People

"When he left [the USSR], he took information with him about people that were imprisoned in labour camps because they refused to work in the Red Army because of religious reasons. From Germany Ferber kept contact by writing letters and he organised material help for the Baptists living in the Soviet Union … Ferber copied his essays and sent them to different countries … with the request to publish them in the religious press."

This is an extract from the "punishment file" kept by the Soviet authorities about Max Ferber. On these grounds a Soviet war tribunal in Berlin in 1949 sentenced him to 25 years' imprisonment. But he survived less than one year. Decades later his family were informed he had died in a prison hospital in Berlin on 24 May 1950, supposedly from a heart attack.

A German citizen born in Lugansk (in modern Ukraine) in 1899, Max moved to Moscow in 1921. When the leaders of the church he attended were arrested in 1927 Max took up their mantle and began preaching. Soon the church had to go "underground", meeting in little groups in apartments.

In 1931 more Christians were arrested and Christian literature was destroyed. Max immediately volunteered to distribute Christian literature and aid to needy Christians and those in exile. But the Soviet security agencies were watching him and in 1933 he was deported to Germany. But Max did not forget the persecuted Christians in the Soviet Union and continued writing to them, sending them money and food, and raising awareness of their plight with Christians in the West until his own arrest. His fellow prisoners reported that he was put under pressure to renounce his Christian faith, but never yielded.

Regardless of the prohibition of the government we held church gatherings illegally. At these meetings we organised Bible readings and material help for the families of prisoners from our church and sent care packages to the prisoners in the convict stations. In all these things I was personally actively involved … I know of facts of reprisals towards my fellow Christians. Through their arrests I felt obligated to continue their work.

Max Ferber's testimonial (in 1948) speaking about his life as a Christian in the Soviet Union 1921-33, recorded in the minutes of a judicial interrogation

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.
Luke 14:27 (ESV)

Nimmaka Laxmaya (2014)
Radical Hindu Fanatics

"We killed your father because he refused to deny Jesus Christ."

This is what the murderers of Nimmaka Laxmaya (aged about 50), a convert from Hinduism, told one of his sons after he found his father's body dumped on a roadside in India's Orissa state (now called Odisha state) on 25 May 2014. The radical Hindu nationalists were hunting for people who had just been baptised, as Nimmaka's son had been.

Nimmaka was a faithful Christian but very poor, without farmland or a proper house. He was a "daily labourer", having to find new work each day. On this day he had gathered together with other Christians near the village of Dherubada, home to the tribal Kondho people, for the baptismal ceremony of 29 Christians, one of whom was his own youngest son. Walking home alone after the communal meal, carrying the baptismal clothes worn by his son, Nimmaka was brutally attacked and killed by a group of radical Hindus who had been ordered to find and kill a newly baptised convert from Hinduism.

When Nimmaka refused to deny Jesus Christ, they tied him around the neck and dragged him like an animal, smashed his head with a large stone and dumped his body in a nearby wooded area.

Returning home along the same road a few minutes later, his son saw blood on the ground and signs of violence. He followed the trail and found his father's body, with the murderers close by. They threatened to kill him too if he came nearer. Terrified he ran for help. The culprits were arrested, but their supporters continued to threaten Christians in the area with a similar fate if they refused to deny Christ.

From my many years' experience I can unhesitatingly say that the cross bears those who bear the cross.
Sadhu Sundar Singh, India (1889-1929)

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12-13

Swazi Christians (1900)
A King's Dream

In May 1900 a report was sent from Swaziland (now Eswatini) to neighbouring South Africa of the terrible atrocities that the Christians were facing. At that time Swazis, who were mainly pagans but recognised a supreme being as creator, were carrying out a systematic persecution of Christians. Month after month Christians were being killed for their faith in Jesus Christ. One of these martyrs, who lived near the Ezulwini mission station, pleaded with the pagan attackers to spare his wife and himself. This they refused to do, so he prayed to God; just as he was finishing the prayer they stabbed him to death. This kind of incident was a common occurrence in those days.

Christianity had found its way into the Kingdom of Swaziland as a result of a dream. King Sobhuza I (reigned 1815-36) dreamed one night of strange people with white skin and hair like the hair of a cow's tail, who carried around a book and metal discs. In the dream he was instructed to choose the book (the Bible) but reject the metal discs (money). The king commanded his son, the future King Mswati II (reigned 1840-68), to search for these strange people.

Some time later, King Mswati II received news of people resembling those in his father's dream, telling others about *Mvelinchanti* ("He who appeared right at the beginning") and preaching from a book. The king sent a delegation to Wakkerstroom, South Africa, to invite them to Swaziland to teach his people this message. This Christian missionary work began in Swaziland in 1844.

The great joy was to find death to self-centredness. The light from Heaven dispersed all of the darkness that remained in my heart. I forsook the way of darkness and chose the way of the Lord Jesus. Since that time I have never had any desire to go back. Today I do not desire anything from the past. If I fall, I arise and go forward.
Lillian Bhembe (1905-96), speaking of the great revival at Endzingeni, Swaziland in 1924, when she committed her life to God

He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.
Revelation 21:4

Syrian Christians (2013)
Tears in Christian Villages

Until 2011 Syria was one of the easiest places in the Arab Muslim world to be a Christian. Christians made up a sizeable minority, around 10% of the population, and were respected and treated as equals by the Muslim majority. In a few Christian-majority villages, such as Maaloula, some of the older people still spoke Aramaic, the language of the Lord Jesus.

But this all changed with the "Arab Spring" when clashes between government forces and opposition fighters escalated into a brutal civil war that tore the country apart.

As Islamists grew in power and became the most prominent groups amongst the rebel fighters, Christians were increasingly targeted simply for their faith, and anti-Christian violence in Syria was seen on a larger scale. For example, rebel fighters massacred almost 40 residents of the Christian village of Dweir, on the outskirts of Homs, on 27 May 2013. Women and children were among those killed. At least two residents were tortured before they were murdered.

On 4 September 2013, the historic Christian-majority village of Maaloula was attacked by Al Qaeda-linked rebels. After a suicide bomber blew himself up at a government checkpoint, the rebels seized control of the village. They went into every Christian home and destroyed evidence of the inhabitants' faith. At least seven Christians were killed and most of the residents were forced to flee. At the funeral of three of the murdered Christians, it was said, "Let history record that Maaloula is crying today."

God has a bottle and a book for his people's tears. What was sown as a tear will come up as a pearl.

Matthew Henry, Wales (1662–1714) referring to Psalm 56:8, "You have taken account of my miseries; Put my tears in Your bottle." (NASB)

'What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade. Mark 4:30-32

Enravota and Christians under Bulgarian rule (814-833)
Persecution by Pagan Khans

The pagan khan (ruler) of Bulgaria, Omurtag (reigned 814-831) was very hostile to Christians. When his eldest son Enravota began to show interest in Christianity, Omurtag was horrified and disinherited him. Enravota later converted and was baptised. His brother Malamir, who had become khan in his place, tried to make Enravota deny Christ, but Enravota stood firm. In 833 he was killed on his brother's orders and is celebrated as the first Bulgarian martyr.

Enravota was not, however, the first Christian to be martyred by pagan Bulgarian rulers. In 814 (between the death of Omurtag's father, Khan Krum the Fearsome, and the enthronement of Omurtag) Byzantine Bishop Manuel was cut in two, his arms cut off at the shoulders, and the parts thrown to dogs. This killing was ordered by Ditseng, one of two generals who held power during the interregnum, both persecutors of Christians.

When Omurtag himself took power, the martyrdoms continued, focusing on church leadership in territories Krum had conquered, especially Adrianople (modern Edirne in Turkey) of which Manuel had been bishop. There were 377 martyrs, including two other bishops, George and Peter, who were clubbed to death and a bishop called Leontius who was killed by having a sword thrust up inside him. At least two of the martyrs, Loubomiros and Chotomiros, were Slavs, the indigenous people who had been conquered by the Bulgars (who were descended from Mongolian warriors). Another two, Koupergos and Asfir, may have been Bulgars, like Prince Enravota.

In 864 Khan Boris I was baptised and during the rest of his long reign established Christianity in Bulgaria.

This faith, which I now die for, will spread and increase across the whole Bulgarian land, although you may wish to oppress it with my death. In any case, the Sign of Christ will establish itself and churches of God will be built everywhere and pure priests will serve the pure God and will deliver "sacrifice of praise and confession" to the invigorating Trinity. Idols, and priests as well, and their ungodly temples, will crumble and will turn into nothing, as if they had not existed. Enravota of Bulgaria (martyred 833)

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Sanwal Masih (2014)
Teenager Raped and Killed in Pakistan

It was some children who found Sanwal Masih, a young Christian man, collapsed and semi-conscious after his terrible ordeal, on 29 May 2014. The children immediately went to tell Sanwal's family. His uncle rushed to the scene and took 17-year-old Sanwal to hospital. Due to his critical condition, he had to be transferred to another unit. On the way there Sanwal told his uncle how he had been raped and poisoned at the estate where he worked at Dhalia Chatta Tahsil, Wazirabad by a young Muslim man related to his boss. Soon after this, Sanwal died, as he was transferred to a third hospital.

The Muslim owner of the estate came to the family's house and threatened them in an attempt to force them to bury the body immediately. As poor and despised Christians, marginalised and alienated from mainstream society, they had no influence and were very vulnerable to pressure from a wealthy Muslim, just as Sanwal had been vulnerable to horrific violence. But his family refused to yield to the intimidation. They reported the murder to the police, a post mortem was carried out, and the accused man was arrested.

Sanwal Masih and his family were like many New Testament Christians: lowly, ignoble, foolish and despicable in the eyes of the world, without power or influence … but chosen by God to be in Christ Jesus "who has become for us wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31).

Why, O Lord, why
Must Your people suffer
At the hands of evil men
Who set traps that they fall in,
Who devise ways for their destruction,
Who slander their name
And malign their character,
Who cause them injuries,
Hurts and pain,
Who pursue and hound,
Seeking their destruction?

Patrick Sookhdeo, Guyana (born 1947)

I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Philippians 3:10

Watchman Nee (1972)
A Chinese Pioneer of Faith

A devout Chinese Christian woman prayed for a son. Like Hannah in the Old Testament, she promised that, if God gave her a son, she would give him back to God (1 Samuel 1:11). In 1903 her prayer was answered and she gave birth to a baby boy, named Ni Shu-Zu. The boy grew up loving the Lord and, while in his teens, began to preach the Gospel and plant churches. In 1925 he took the name Ni Tuosheng (meaning "Watchman Nee") and went on to become a famous Christian writer and Bible teacher.

By 1949 his ministry had resulted in 70,000 Christians in 500 local churches. This was the year when the Communist People's Republic of China was founded. Watchman Nee sent some Christians out of the country to safety but he himself continued his ministry in China, saying, "If a mother discovered that her house was on fire, and she herself was outside the house doing the laundry, what would she do? Although she realised the danger, would she not rush into the house? Although I know that my return is fraught with dangers, I know that many brothers and sisters are still inside. How can I not return?"

In 1952 he was arrested, and later sentenced to 15 years in prison. When his sentence had been served, in 1967, he was told he must renounce his faith before he could be released. He refused, and two thugs were put into his cell with orders to physically abuse him. Despite the pain they inflicted he never denied Christ, and died in prison on 30 May 1972.

His last letters provide a glimpse into his suffering. Prison censors did not allow him to mention the Lord's Name, but in his final letter, written on the day of his death, he alluded to his joy in the Lord: "In my sickness, I still remain joyful at heart."

Our old history ends with the Cross; our new history begins with the resurrection.
Watchman Nee, China (1903–72)

For we live by faith, not by sight. 2 Corinthians 5:7

Vendean Christians (1793-94)
Peasants Massacred in the French Revolution

The French Revolution of 1789 was actively opposed to Christianity. The Church was subordinated to the new revolutionary government when the National Assembly passed the Civil Constitution of the Clergy on 12 July 1790. On 27 November clergy were ordered to take an oath swearing allegiance to the government; those who refused were imprisoned or exiled.

The rural Vendée region in western France was populated by many devout Christians who were outraged to see the Church oppressed. Only 10% of clergy in the Vendée took the oath.

On 6 March 1793 all churches not served by "constitutional" clergy (i.e. those who had taken the oath) were permanently closed. This triggered a peasant uprising in the Vendée, its aim being to have local churches re-opened with their former ministers back to lead the services. Some Vendeans took up arms and fought. On 1 August 1793 the government ordered the complete physical destruction of the Vendée. Villages and crops were destroyed and there were numerous atrocities against civilians, who were shot, stabbed, bayoneted, guillotined or killed by mass drownings (*noyades*) in the River Loire.

From January to May 1794 at least 20,000 Vendean civilians, perhaps as many as 50,000, were massacred by the twelve "infernal columns" of the revolutionary government's army. Historians believe that in total around 170,000 Vendeans died (a seventh of the population). Some have described this as a genocide on the basis of their religion.

General Westermann wrote to the Committee of Public Safety: "There is no more Vendée … According to the orders that you gave me, I crushed the children under the feet of the horses, massacred the women who, at least for these, will not give birth to any more brigands… I have exterminated all."

...the true martyrs of Jesus Christ are called His witnesses: and all the saints, who by their holy practice under great trials, declare that faith, which is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen, are called witnesses. By their profession and practice they declare their assurance of the truth and divinity of the Gospel, having had the eyes of their minds enlightened to see divinity in the Gospel, or to behold that unparalleled ineffably excellent, and truly divine glory shining in it.
Jonathan Edwards, USA (1703–58)

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel (which means "God with us"). Matthew 1:23

Amanuel Wondimu (2021)
God with Him, in Life and in Death

Amanuel, a 17-year-old Ethiopian Christian, was shot dead on 11 May 2021 in broad daylight on a roundabout in the town of Dembi Dollo, Oromia region. Oromia regional special forces, supported by local police, claimed that he belonged to the banned Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), considered by the government to be a terrorist group. They arrested and beat Amanuel, then paraded him, forcing him to shout, "I am a member of Abba Torbe [part of the OLA]. Don't do what I did. Learn from me."

The town's administration posted a video on social media showing security forces taunting the bloodied school-boy, who had a handgun tied around his neck. He was shot twice in the head. Witnesses said local police and armed forces ordered vehicles at the roundabout to stop and compelled local residents and business owners likewise to watch the killing. They were warned that anyone attacking the security forces would suffer a similar fate.

After Amanuel's killing, security forces harassed the mourners at his home. About 35 of them were taken to the police station and detained there for many hours, including Amanuel's six-year-old sister.

His Christian family strenuously denied that Amanuel had any association with the OLA, and his father explained that Amanuel was a devout Christian and served as a deacon in his local church. Another relative said that Amanuel never had any involvement in politics, adding, "He spends most of his time in the church. The accusations against him are absurd."

"Amanuel" is the Biblical word "Immanuel" meaning "God with us" in Amharic, the main language of Ethiopia. It is one of the titles of the Lord Jesus who Himself was falsely accused, paraded in public, mocked and executed unlawfully by the state authorities.

Nothing surpasses the full knowledge that God is with you!
Ernest Agyemang Yeboah, Ghana (born late 20th century)

I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. Revelation 3:8

Ragheed Ganni and Three Deacons (2007)
"How Can I Close the House of God?"

"This is war, real war, but we hope to carry our cross to the very end with the help of Divine Grace." This was how Rev Ragheed Ganni (35) described the situation in Mosul, Iraq, in 2007 in one of his last emails before he was killed in front of his church on 3 June 2007. He was martyred together with three sub-deacons – his cousin Basman Yousef Daud, Wahid Hanna Isho and Gassan Isam Bidawed – all of whom, together with Wahid's wife, Baian Adam Balla, had decided to accompany Ragheed after the church service because of threats to his life.

On leaving the church that Sunday, the four Christian ministers and Baian were stopped by armed men. One shouted that he had warned Ragheed to close the church and demanded to know why he had not done so. Ragheed replied, "How can I close the house of God?" After leading Baian away, the assailants demanded that the four men convert to Islam. When they refused, they were shot dead.

Vehicles loaded with explosives were parked around the four bodies, so that no one could approach them. It was not until night that the police were able to defuse the explosives and collect the bodies.

On returning from theological studies in the West to his home city Mosul in 2003, Ragheed had organised Bible courses, and worked with the young, poor and sick. Saddam Hussein had recently been ousted, and Iraq was descending into civil war. In 2006 Ragheed wrote to a friend, "Hundreds of Christian families fled outside the city including my family and uncles. About 30 people left all their properties and fled, having been threatened. It is not easy but the grace of the Lord gives support and strength. We face death every day here."

We empathise with Christ, who entered Jerusalem in full knowledge that the consequence of His love for mankind was the cross. Thus while bullets smashed our church windows, we offered up our suffering as a sign of love for Christ. Ragheed Ganni, written after an attack on his church on Palm Sunday 2007

In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Ephesians 2:21-22

Monmoth Sikder and other Gopalganj Christians (2001)
Bombing of a Church in Bangladesh

On this day in 2001, at a Pentecost Sunday church service in the village of Baniarchar, Gopalganj, a deadly bomb attack by Islamist extremists killed ten of the 70 worshippers, and wounded 30 others, some severely. It also destroyed most of the church building. Amrito Sikder lost his younger brother Monmoth (21) that day. He had been sitting in the choir area of the church where the blast struck. A farm worker, he was the only one in his family who earned an income. His death brought financial insecurity and misery "like a black shadow" to his family. The loss of a son was such a heavy blow to his mother that she became mentally ill.

Monmoth was a single individual, from a lowly background, but was part of a victorious community, the Body of Christ, that spans the world and all time and eternity, and can never be destroyed.

Gopalganj district in south-western Bangladesh has a sizeable Christian majority which is rare in a country where Christians account for less than 1% of the population. The Islamic terrorist group Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh claimed responsibility for the bombing.

The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the Word;
From heav'n He came and sought her
To be His holy Bride;
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.

The Church shall never perish!
Her dear Lord, to defend,
To guide, sustain, and cherish
Is with her to the end;
Tho' there be those that hate her
And false sons in her pale,
Against the foe or traitor
She ever shall prevail.

Samuel John Stone, England (1839-1900)

I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you. Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do their spirits rise up and praise you? Psalm 88:9-10

Gwoza Christians (2014)
Boko Haram "Caliphate"

In early June 2014 the predominantly Christian area of Gwoza, in Borno State, Nigeria, was attacked by Boko Haram. The militants rampaged through villages, killing residents and torching churches and homes. In Attagara village, where a church was attacked by gunmen during a Sunday service on 1 June, nine Christians who had volunteered as the security team were killed. Two days later, the militants returned to Attagara, this time dressed in military uniforms. Pretending they were the Nigerian Army come to protect the villagers, they ushered them into the church, then opened fire on the captive crowd.

At least 300 people were killed in the two-day assault, their bodies scattered across the villages and in the bush. With insurgents still in the area, it was difficult to return to bury the dead. Nearly all the men and boys were massacred; even a six-year-old was beheaded – just because he was a Christian. A number of Christian teenage girls were kidnapped. Around 36 church buildings were destroyed and a thousand homes looted and burned. Jihadi flags were hoisted symbolising Boko Haram's claim to the territory.

After weeks of sacking villages to cleanse the area of Christians and establish an Islamic state, Boko Haram came to the predominantly Christian town of Gwoza on 6 August where they killed at least 100 people, shot or slashed to death. Some managed to escape to the nearby hills where they survived on wild fruits. Later in August, Boko Haram declared Gwoza town the headquarters of its "caliphate". Christian men who refused to convert to Islam were beheaded and their wives forced to marry Boko Haram fighters.

Never did the church so much prosper and so truly thrive as when she was baptised in the blood. The ship of the church never sails so gloriously along as when the bloody spray of her martyrs fall on her deck. We must suffer and we must die, if we are ever to conquer this world for Christ.
C H Spurgeon, England (1834–92)

Built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. Ephesians 2:20

Boniface (754)
"How Good it is to Die"

Boniface, from Wessex (the south-west of modern England), spent many years evangelising on the European mainland, especially amongst the people of Frisia (in modern Netherlands) and Thuringia (in modern Germany). Some were pagans and some were Christians whose faith had become riddled with superstition, paganism and heresy.

In 723 in the presence of a large crowd at Geismar (Thuringia), he chopped down with ease an enormous oak tree that was sacred to the Germanic god Thor. Breaking into four pieces, the fallen tree revealed its rotten interior. This demonstration of power over the pagan "gods" was the beginning of a successful missionary work in Germany, converting pagans and renewing the faith of Christians.

Boniface died a martyr in Frisia on 5 June 754, along with 52 other Christians, while on a missionary preaching tour. On Pentecost Sunday, armed pagans descended on the missionaries' camp. Trying to protect his head from a sword-wielding attacker, Boniface (now aged about 80) held up the book he had been reading aloud to some new Christian converts. This blood-stained book, with deep cuts into its parchment pages, still exists in the Dommuseum (Cathedral Museum), Fulda, Germany, but it did not save his earthly life.

The book contains two essays by Ambrose, one of which is about the Holy Spirit and the other called *How Good it is to Die*.

Eternal God, the refuge of all your children,
In our weakness, you are our strength,
In our darkness, our light,
In our sorrow, our comfort and peace.
May we always live in your presence,
And serve you in our daily lives;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Boniface (martyred 754)

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. 2 Timothy 1:7 (NKJV)

Samaru Madkami (2020)
Passionate Young Indian Christian

"If anything happens to my pastor, I will not fear. I will take charge of Pastor's work and serve the Lord!" said 14-year-old Samaru, who realised that his pastor, as leader of the small group of Christian families in Kenduguda village, Odisha state, India was in danger. Indeed Samaru's own father, a church elder, had received death threats. But it was Samaru himself who was martyred for Christ, not long after he had made his fearless declaration.

Samaru's horrifically mutilated body was found by police on 6 June 2020. Two days earlier a gang had persuaded Samaru to come to a meeting in the jungle. There they tortured him before slitting his throat, smashing his head with a rock and burying his body.

Extremists had been targeting Christian families in Kenduguda. At one time there had been thirteen Christian families, but only four remained in June 2020. Samaru's family, who had converted to Christianity three years previously, were subject to "harassment" by local villagers. On the same night that Samaru was killed, the gang abducted and threatened to kill with knives his elder cousin, Unga. Thankfully Unga managed to escape. In a previous attack, fanatics tried to tie Unga up in a jute bag and throw him in the river.

Samaru was a devout Christian who shared his faith with enthusiasm. His pastor, Bijay, was inconsolable on hearing of the boy's death and said, "Samaru was a passionate Christian. He always shared the Gospel with youth and children from the village."

My rice never tastes sweet to me in the evening, unless I have told some one about Jesus during the day.

Josiah Burder, India (c. 1830-81)

We must obey God rather than human beings! Acts 5:29

Quirinus of Sescia (309)
Obedient Croatian Servant of God

During a time of persecution of Christians in the eastern Roman Empire, orders were given for the arrest of Quirinus. He fled the city of Sescia (modern Sisak, Croatia), but was found and captured.

When questioned by Maximus, the Roman magistrate, Quirinus, quoting Matthew 10:23, said, "I obey the orders of my Master, who said, 'When they persecute you in one city, flee to another.'" Maximus demanded to know who gave this order. Quirinus replied, "Jesus Christ, who is the true God."

"Don't you know that the emperor can find you in all places?" asked Maximus, to which Quirinus answered, "I know this: that our God is with us and can succour us in all places. He it is that grants me strength in this my decrepit age, and will also uphold me during your tortures."

Regarding the emperor's order that everyone must sacrifice to the Roman gods, Quirinus had a simple reply: "I cannot obey orders that are contrary to my religion. How can I refuse to obey God, in order to please men?"

Maximus had Quirinus scourged and imprisoned where at midnight he was surrounded by a great light, causing Marcellus, the jailer, to put his faith in Jesus. Quirinus was sent in chains to Sabaria (modern Szombathely, Hungary) where he was thrown into the River Gyöngyös tied to a millstone. Both Quirinus and the stone floated to the surface, enabling him to exhort the Christians to stand firm in the faith. His final prayer, before sinking underwater, was, "Christ Jesus, my Saviour, these people have already seen the wonders of Your power. Grant me now the grace to die for You, nor permit me to lose the crown of martyrdom."

All sufferers can find comfort in the solidarity of the Crucified; but only those who struggle against evil by following the example of the Crucified will discover him at their side.
Miroslav Volf, Croatia (born 1956)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Acts 1:8

Li Xinheng and Meng Lisi (2017)
"Silk Road" Missionaries

Two Chinese missionaries, Li Xinheng (24) from Hunan Province and Meng Lisi (26) from Hubei Province, were kidnapped in Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, on 24 May 2017 by gunmen masquerading as policemen. They were killed on 8 June by militants from Islamic State.

China had earlier pledged to invest over $55 billion in Pakistan to finance projects for China's "Belt and Road" infrastructure plan aimed at linking China with the Middle East and Europe along new "Silk Road" routes. Chinese churches, excited about the outward focus of this initiative, began to establish their own missionary training and sending organisations. China has borders with several Muslim-majority countries, and many Christians, like Brother Li and Sister Meng, committed their lives to bringing the Gospel to such places.

The task of proclaiming the Gospel – a command we can never set aside – is often attended with great risk. The Apostle Paul wrote of the many dangers which he faced (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). Yet it is a privilege that must be embraced, even if it leads to death.

The blood of missionaries is shed in the right place
Their touching stories are spread in the world
The closest kin feel extremely sad
The Lord will comfort them, turn grief into power
Look at their faces that were beautiful and serene
At young age, the golden time
They devoted their lives
My heart can't be calm
My tears flow
I'm ready to be a martyr
And walk on the road of evangelisation in the West
Your blood shall not be bled in vain
Instead, will be the power in that place
Pakistan, wait for us
The Chinese church will keep on heading to you

Lu Xiaomin, China (born 1970), a song to honour the two martyrs

As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.
Psalm 133:3 (AV)

Abu Monsur Barakat and the Christians of Hasbeiya (1860) At the Foot of Mount Hermon

At the foot of Mount Hermon lies the town of Hasbeiya (in modern Lebanon) where, in 1860, Osman Beg, a Turkish colonel, represented the ruling Ottoman Empire. He was hand in glove with another Hasbeiya resident, Sitt Naaify, sister of a wealthy and influential Druze leader, Said Beg Jumblatt, who commanded the Druze forces as they rose against the Christians that summer. On 4 June the Druze surrounded Hasbeiya but Osman Beg refused to protect the Christians. Sitt Naaify asked him for the surrender and disarming of the Christians. On Osman Beg's guarantee of personal safety, the Christian men gave up their weapons but were then kept imprisoned, thirsty and desperately hungry, in his *saray*.

The governor of Damascus sent "help" to the Christians in the form of a Druze sheikh, Kenj el Amad, who had been burning Christian villages and killing Christians in the Bekaa valley. Arriving at Hasbeiya on 10 June, Kenj el Amad went to Sitt Naaify for orders. A Druze lieutenant begged her to spare the men, executing only their leaders. "Impossible!" she replied for her brother had ordered: "Not a Christian is to be left alive from seven to seventy years."

The soldiers drove the Christian men from the *saray* building into its central courtyard; then the gates were thrown open and the armed Druze rushed in and began to butcher the unarmed, famished Christians. Abu Monsur Barakat, a church elder, stood up and prayed. At the words, "In Thy Name, Lord Jesus" he was cut down by an axe-wielding Druze who cried, "Call upon your Jesus and see whether He can help you now! Don't you know God is a Druze?"

By evening 800 bodies lay in the courtyard and every Christian house was burned. Osman Beg took the Christian women and children to Damascus, where on 9 July they endured another massacre.

By your prayers you can bring down the rain of mercy.
Charbel Makhlouf, Lebanon (1828-98)

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Matthew 5:11

Adnan Masih (2013)
Falsely Accused for His Faith

The police beat Adnan round the head with an iron rod, cut him with a sharp knife, broke his legs and pulled out his fingernails and toenails. When he was almost dead, they broke his neck and hung his body in the toilet.

Adnan, an 18-year-old Pakistani Christian, worked as an air-conditioning and fridge mechanic in Lahore. He died in police custody in Sharaqpur Sharif on 10 June 2013 after enduring six days of severe torture. He had been arrested in connection with the disappearance of a young Muslim woman even though he insisted he did not know her. Apparently she was having an affair with a Muslim man and left her husband. Her parents claimed that she had been kidnapped.

Police officers seized mobile phones belonging to Adnan and the woman and the call records from their network providers, but they found no record of any communication between the two. They did discover calls between the woman and three young Muslim men who were summoned to the police station, but later freed after paying a bribe.

The police were trying to force Adnan to confess to being involved in the woman's disappearance. After his death they claimed he had committed suicide.

False accusation is one of the weapons of the devil, who is called the "accuser of our brethren" (Revelation 12:10, AV). Although, like Joseph (Genesis 39-41), some experience vindication in this life, there are many other instances when falsely accused Christians have to suffer the results continually, knowing that their ultimate vindication is with God.

One day after a long journey, I rested in front of a house. Suddenly a sparrow came towards me blown helplessly by a strong wind. From another direction, an eagle dived to catch the panicky sparrow. Threatened from different directions, the sparrow flew into my lap. By choice, it would not normally do that. However, the little bird was seeking for a refuge from a great danger. Likewise, the violent winds of suffering and trouble blow us into the Lord's protective hands.

Sadhu Sundar Singh, India (1889-1929)

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Galatians 6:14

Ignatius Shoukrallah Maloyan (1915)
Only Boast About the Cross

As the Armenian Genocide gathered pace, Ignatius Maloyan, Archbishop of Mardin (in modern Turkey), expected the worst. On 2 May 1915 he wrote a last letter to his flock, urging them to strengthen their faith, be loyal to the Ottoman authorities and pray for strength to face martyrdom.

Ignatius was arrested on 3 June, and hundreds of other prominent Mardin Armenians in the following days. When he disproved a false accusation of having weapons, he was given the choice to convert to Islam or die. Ignatius refused to reject his Saviour: "I consider the shedding of my blood for my faith to be the sweetest thing to my heart because I know for sure that if I get tortured for the love of the One who died for me I would become one of the happiest blessed people and I will see my Lord and my God in heaven. You can only beat me and cut me into pieces but I will never deny my religion." He was then savagely beaten and his toenails pulled out.

On 10 June Ignatius and over 400 Christians were marched through the main street of Mardin and on north-east for about 50 km. There, by the road, they were given a last opportunity to save their lives by renouncing their faith, but they replied, "We will die, but we will die for Jesus Christ!"

Ignatius took what bread they had left, broke it and gave it to the kneeling believers for Holy Communion. Then the soldiers killed them, except Ignatius. Yet again he was offered the choice: Islam or death. Ignatius answered, "I told you before that I would live and die loyal to my faith and can only boast about my Lord's noble cross." He was shot dead.

O my beloved children, I entrust you to God. I ask from you to pray to the Lord to give me strength and courage to spend this temporary life, and if necessary to shed my blood for him.

Ignatius Maloyan, Turkey (1869-1915), the last words of his message to his flock, 2 May 1915

When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn. Proverbs 29:2 (AV)

Greek Christians in Ottoman Anatolia (1914-23) A Forgotten Genocide

It began on 12 June 1914 with the massacre of about 100 Greek Christians in Phocaea, a town near Smyrna (modern Izmir in Turkey). Other massacres soon followed, as well as forced deportations involving horrendous death marches without food, water or shelter during which thousands died, starvation, summary expulsions, arbitrary executions and the destruction of Christian cultural, historical and religious monuments.

What could be called the "Greek Genocide", comprising organised and systematic atrocities against Greek Christians, soon spread to other parts of the Ottoman Empire including Pontus, Cappadocia and Cilicia. Mirroring the empire's policy towards Armenians, Assyrians and Syriacs, the aim was ethnic cleansing of Christian minorities. The genocide, which claimed the lives of up to 1.5 million Greek Christians, began under the Ottoman Empire's "Young Turks" and continued under the government of Kemal Atatürk that succeeded it. In spring 1920 a whole Greek Christian village in the Pontic Mountains was sent on a death march by the Kemalist forces. By late 1922, most of the Greeks of Anatolia had either fled or been killed. Those remaining were transferred to Greece under the terms of the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which formalised the exodus and barred the return of the refugees.

For the "Pontic Greeks" of Anatolia (modern Turkey), the Pontic Mountains, south of the Black Sea – an area that in ancient times was the country of Pontus – had been their homeland for over 3,000 years. They became Christians, perhaps through the believers scattered by persecution to various parts of Anatolia to whom the Apostle Peter wrote: "God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Peter 1:1).

The Ottoman Muslims arrived in Anatolia in the 13th century and soon subjugated the non-Muslim inhabitants. Discrimination and repression became persecution in the 19th century and genocide in the 20th.

A sight of heaven will mitigate a cross on earth.
Stephen Charnock, England (1628–80)

Even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.
Psalm 139:10

Sobame Da and Three Other Mali Villages (2019-20) Over a Hundred Killed, Some Charred Beyond Recognition

When heavily armed jihadists descended on the majority-Christian village of Sobame Da in the Mopti region of central Mali on 10 June 2019 they slaughtered everyone they could find. Over a hundred villagers died – including women, children and the elderly – some shot, some burned in their homes. The exact death toll, which could have been as high as 135, was hard to establish because of the extreme charring beyond recognition of some of the bodies. Just a few of the men survived.

The Islamist extremist attackers had arrived on motorbikes and pickup trucks at night and encircled the isolated village.

The villagers were from the ethnic Dogon people, who had lived in central Mali for centuries as settled farmers. From time to time nomadic Fulani herders, a largely Muslim ethnic group, would come into the area. Some Fulani extremists had links to the jihadists waging war since 2016 to occupy north and central Mali with the declared aim of establishing sharia (Islamic law).

Many Christian villages in Mali were laid waste throughout 2019 and hundreds had to flee with only the clothes on their backs. Almost a year after the attack on Sobame Da, jihadi attacks on the mainly Christian Dogon villages of Bankass, Koro and Tillé in central Mali on 26 May 2020 killed 27 people in less than 24 hours; some were burned alive.

The Apostle Paul spoke of facing death all day long, like sheep ready to be slaughtered. But this is not the end, for we are more than conquerors (Romans 8:36-37).

I am precious in His sight,
He will hold me fast;
Those He saves are His delight,
He will hold me fast.
He'll not let my soul be lost,
Christ will hold me fast;
Bought by Him at such a cost,
He will hold me fast.

Ada Habershon, England (1861-1918)

… unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. John 12:24

Tadem Villagers (1915)
Sweeter Home Above

"We were taken to another village, past a field where wheat was piled high in big stacks. They started to kill us, one by one. They knocked my brother down first. They hit him in the back of his head. My six-month-old sister was hit and dropped to the ground. I was scared. They struck many people before they got to me. I hid underneath the bodies of some women. My mother said, 'Why are you doing that? We are all going to die anyhow.' I did it anyway, they got my legs. They chopped everyone. When we woke up the sun was shining. I saw a little boy … 'How come they didn't kill you?' he said, 'I don't know.' There was blood all over the place."

This eye-witness testimony comes from Nectar Vanetzian, an Armenian Christian who was one of the few survivors of the Ottoman Empire's attack on the village of Tadem (modern Tadim, Turkey) in 1915, the worst year of the Armenian Genocide. Many Armenian villages like Tadem fell victim to the ethnic cleansing of Armenians and other Christians from the Ottoman Empire. Villagers either fled or were killed. If they converted to Islam, they were spared.

At Tadem two church ministers were among the first to be killed. The church that once stood out on the village skyline is nowhere to be seen today, but Armenian Christian communities are now found all over the world.

…they did not give away the adamantine loyalty to the faith
in exchange of the pleasures of this transient life;
and like the seed of wheat fallen on the good soil
they produced a crop hundredfold,
Sovereign Lord holy and true! How long will it be until you make judgment
And grant justice for the blood that was shed.

Armenian hymn (from the Canon of Newly Canonised Martyrs)

The LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome Deuteronomy 10:17

Mpeketoni Christians (2014)
Al Shabaab Terrorists in Coastal Kenya

"They came to our house at around 8 p.m. and asked us in Swahili whether we were Muslims. My husband told them we were Christians and they shot him in the head and chest." Anne Gathigi, a Christian from the town of Mpeketoni on Kenya's coast, recalled the terrible events of 15 June 2014 when masked gunmen went on a shooting spree, shouting *Allahu Akhbar* ("Allah is great") and setting fire to buildings and vehicles.

The attackers were from the Somali-based Islamist group Al Shabaab and their target was a predominantly Christian town in a mainly Muslim region of Kenya. Not only did they select a Christian town but also they took care to select Christians and other non-Muslims as they went door-to-door, questioning occupants and shooting those who were not Muslims. Fifty Christians were killed, almost all men, while the women were forced to watch. According to some reports, the children of pastors were also killed.

In a further attack on 17 June, houses in the nearby villages of Majembeni and Poromoko were set on fire. At least 15 people were killed in these overnight attacks. Again Christians were specifically targeted.

"Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods," declared Jethro (Exodus 18:11). Isaiah, too, declared the Lord's power and at the same time His gentleness in tending His flock like a shepherd who carries the lambs in His arms (Isaiah 40:10-11).

The Lord my Shepherd is
In times of want
He provides for my every need.
In times of distress
He gives me rest.
In times of turmoil
He restores my soul.

In the waters
I find refreshment.
In the green pastures
I am sustained.
In the valley of shadows,
Where death lurks,
He takes away the fear.

Patrick Sookhdeo, Guyana (born 1947)

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Psalm 73:25-26

Ri Hyon-ok (2009)
Accused of Being a Spy

On 16 June 2009, Ri Hyon-ok (33), a passionate believer in Jesus Christ and mother of three, was publicly executed in the north-western city of Ryongchon, near the border with China. Her "crime" was distributing the Bible, a book banned in communist North Korea. Ri Hyon-ok was also falsely accused of spying for South Korea and the USA.

The day after her execution, her entire family – her husband, three children and parents – were sent to a political prison in the north-eastern city of Hoeryong. It is common in North Korea for three generations to be punished for the "offence" of one person. Indeed, the practice of punishing the relatives of Christians, as well as the Christians themselves, goes back to at least 1791, only 14 years after Korean Christians first began to meet together for prayer: when cousins Yun and Gwon were executed in that year for burning their ancestral tablets, their relatives were banished or enslaved.

At the end of the 19th century, Christianity flourished in Korea. The north-western city of Pyongyang (modern capital of North Korea) became known as the "Jerusalem of the East" and a great Christian revival peaked there in 1907. However, since the division of Korea, into North and South, in 1948, the cult of personality surrounding the founder of North Korea, Kim Il-Sung (1912-94) and his descendants, is now virtually a state religion.

North Korea is one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a Christian.

… though you are in the world, yet you are not of the world … You are not of them which look for their portion in this life … whose captain is the god of this world, even Satan … But you are of them that look for a city of God's own blessing. You are of them that know yourselves to be here but pilgrims and strangers; for here you have no dwelling-place … You are of them whose portion is the Lord, and which have their hope in heaven whose captain is Christ Jesus, the Son of God, and governor of heaven and earth. Unto him is given all power.
John Bradford, England (1510-55), written in 1554, at the beginning of his imprisonment

Hatred stirs up conflict, but love covers over all wrongs. Proverbs 10:12

Charleston Martyrs (2015)
No Room for Hate

"We are the family that love built. We have no room for hate so we have to forgive." When the Governor of South Carolina, USA, called for the death penalty after nine Christians died in a shooting incident at a church, the families of the victims, facing the man in court who had taken away their loved ones, publicly forgave him.

On 17 June 2015 a young white man, Dylann Roof, sat in a prayer meeting at an African American church in Charleston, where, by his own account, he was treated with complete kindness. After an hour he rose to his feet and shot dead nine of the praying Christians including the pastor Clementa Pinckney, who was also a member of the South Carolina Senate.

Founded in 1817, Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church is one of the oldest black congregations in the American South. At that time in South Carolina, African Americans (then mainly slaves) were only allowed to worship in daylight hours and if the majority of the congregation were white. So a church formed of 4,376 black worshippers was always breaking the law. The church also taught its congregation to read and write, in contravention of a South Carolina law which banned black literacy. One Sunday in June 1818, 140 church members were arrested, and eight were sentenced to fines and ten lashes each. In 1822, 35 church members were executed for planning a slave rebellion. The church was burned to the ground but the congregation continued to meet in secret until it was rebuilt after the Civil War (1861-65).

Forgive someone. Today forgive.
Turn from bitter to positive.
End frustration, anger, pain;
Wash the anguish from your brain.
No need to reconcile or tell;
Just feel better and get well.
A brand new, peaceful life to live,
That's your gift, when you forgive.

Joanna Fuchs, USA (born 1941?)

Suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. Acts 9:3-5

Leontius, Hypatius and Theodulus (c. 70-79)
Road to Damascus Experience on the Road to Tripoli

Leontius, a Roman army officer, based in the Phoenician city of Tripoli, was known for his bravery, good sense and virtue. He was also a Christian who had led many people to the Lord.

Adrian, governor of Phoenicia (modern Lebanon), had authority to execute Christians if they refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Hearing of Leontius, Adrian sent the tribune Hypatius with a detachment of soldiers to arrest him. On the way to Tripoli, Hypatius fell ill and dreamt that the God of Leontius healed him. He shared this dream with his soldiers, and they decided to pray to the God of Leontius. Immediately Hypatius was healed. He and his friend Theodulus hastened on to Tripoli to find Leontius, leaving the other soldiers to follow.

On arriving in Tripoli, the pair were met by a stranger who gave them lavish hospitality in his house. When they discovered that their host was Leontius, they asked him about his God. Before long both believed and were baptised.

Adrian had Leontius, Hypatius and Theodolus arrested, and threatened them with torture and death unless they renounced Christ. All three remained steadfast. The two soldiers were tortured – Hypatius was raked with iron claws and Theodulus beaten with rods – and beheaded. Leontius was first tortured, then offered rewards if he would deny Christ, then tortured again by suspended head down with a heavy stone about his neck. Finally he was executed by being beaten with rods until he died.

O, soul on the highway from earth into glory,
Surrounded by mysteries and trials so near,
Let the light of thy God in thy life be resplendent.
For Jesus will guide thee, thou needest never fear.

For earth is a school to prepare thee for glory,
The lessons here learned you will ever obey.
When eternity dawns, 'twill be only the morning.
Of life with Me, always as life is today.

John G Lake, Canada (1870–1935)

'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets… In faithfulness he will bring forth justice; he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.' Isaiah 42:1-4

Helena Aloun Sawa (1999)
Left in a Shallow Grave in Iraqi Kurdistan

Aloun Sawa's family found that his military pension stopped just two months after his death, while those of his dead comrades-in-arms continued. He and his family were Assyrian Christians but the other fallen soldiers and their families were Kurdish Muslims. When the Sawa family appealed for reinstatement of the pension, it was suggested that in order to continue receiving it the family should hand over their daughter Helena to work as a housekeeper for a senior Kurdish leader, living in his house. Out of desperation, the family agreed.

On 5 May 1999 Helena's family were expecting her for her regular monthly visit home. When she did not arrive, they made enquiries but found no one willing to help them try to find their 21-year-old daughter.

On 19 June a shepherd came across her body, in shallow grave near the Dohuk dam. Part of the body was exposed and wild animals had been eating it. The Sawa family were brought to the grave to identify her remains.

Helena's death fitted a well-established pattern in many Muslim contexts of the abduction and murder of Christian girls and young women.

How joyful is the day on which I believed in Christ
My joy was made complete at dawn, and my voice sang with gratitude
My love to my glorious Saviour day by day will it grow
A new life, a joyful day when I reunite, with my Beloved.

Sung by Myriam, an Iraqi Christian refugee girl whose family was forced to flee to Erbil, Kurdistan when Islamic State took control of their hometown of Qaraqosh in August 2014

You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Revelation 2:3

Gagauz Martyrs (16th to 18th centuries) Uniquely Christian and Turkic

For most Turkic people-groups, Islam is a major part of their identity. But one group is different: the Gagauz people are Turkic but Christian. They embraced Christianity many centuries ago and preserved it until today despite immense pressure. Indeed they were once known as "the guard unit of the Byzantine Empire", because of its people's devotion to the Christian faith of the Byzantine Empire. They preserved that faith even after coming under the Muslim yoke of the Ottoman Empire from 16th to 18th centuries and suffering much discrimination and persecution.

Their origins are obscure and they are first recorded in historical writings in the 19th century when they migrated from the region known as today's Bulgaria to Bessarabia (in modern Moldova) in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1806-12. Those living in Turkey in 1922 were forcibly resettled in Bulgaria and Greece.

There are no known cases of Gagauz converts to Islam. Bulgarian Gagauz remember many stories of what happened to those who refused to convert during Ottoman times: many were killed and many young girls threw themselves into the Black Sea to avoid forced conversion and marriage to Muslim men.

The Gagauz, a mainly rural people, continued to maintain their Christian faith when under Soviet communism. In the 1940s many of their churches and other Christian institutions were forcibly closed. In 1990, during the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the Gagauz in southern Moldova declared independence and established the Gagauz Republic. But it remained unrecognised and in 1994 reintegrated into the Republic of Moldova as the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia (Gagauz Yeri).

Most of the world's Gagauz now live in Moldova, populating the poorest region of that poor country, and also in the Odessa region of Ukraine. Some are also found in Bulgaria and Russia.

… not even good deeds really help people, but only faith in Jesus Christ. I learned that only to God belongs true greatness. In order to be saved, one must believe in Jesus Christ and change his life … I always want to be with God.
Oksana, a Gagauz Christian child, at a Christian summer camp in 2016

Why should I fear when evil days come, when wicked deceivers surround me.
Psalm 49:5

Vincent Ou, about 40 other Chinese Christians, 8 French missionaries, 1 Irish missionary and 1 Belgian missionary (1870) "Unequal Treaty" Triggers Tianjin Massacre

Vincent, from the southern city of Nanhai, found faith in Christ at the age of 14. Initially he was scared of the anti-Christian persecution in China, but over time his faith gave him courage and, with his father, he bravely helped missionaries to enter China from Macau, in spite of the dangers to his own life. In 1843, at the age of 22, he accompanied a missionary to the distant region of Inner Mongolia to share the Gospel.

The Tianjin Massacre was a violent outbreak of anti-foreigner and anti-Christian sentiment. It was triggered by the treaties of Tianjin of 1858, what the Chinese called an "unequal treaty", opening up several Chinese ports to Western trade and residence and giving foreigners, including Christian missionaries, the right to travel in the interior of China. Tianjin was one of the treaty ports. In the next decade, the Western powers and Japan each claimed a piece of Tianjin, creating "concessions" (self-contained nations within a city). Many Chinese people in Tianjin deeply resented the presence of so many foreigners and the work of the missionaries, especially their orphanage.

Summer 1870 was hotter and drier than usual, making the public mood unsettled. On 21 June the French consul, Henri Fontanier, fired into a crowd of locally prominent people, missing the district magistrate but killing his servant. The consul was immediately murdered, and 20 other foreign residents were killed, including ten women missionaries at the orphanage who were publicly tortured to death. Five church buildings were burned down. The enraged mob also killed about 40 Chinese Christians, who were the same religion as the hated foreigners. One was Vincent, who was strangled and cut into pieces.

Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins. Our broken lives are not lost or useless. God's love is still working, He comes in and takes the calamity and uses it victoriously, working out His wonderful plan of love.
Eric Liddell (1902-45), Scottish missionary to China, born in Tianjin to missionary parents

Jesus said, "Feed my sheep". John 21:17

Mykola (Nicholas) Konrad, Volodymyr Pryjma and other Ukrainian Christians (1941) Serving Christ's Sheep

In September 1939, the armies of Soviet Russia invaded Polish-ruled Western Ukraine, the homeland of Mykola Konrad, an eminent theologian. Anticipating that persecution of the Church would soon follow, the seminary at Lviv, where he was a professor, closed and all the church pastors were given permission to flee with their families. As Mykola's four children were grown up, he volunteered to stay behind in Ukraine with his wife Antonina, and took up the position of pastor in the nearby village of Stradch.

By June 1941 many pastors in Lviv itself had been imprisoned by the Soviet secret police on the charge of collaborating with anti-communist separatists. However, the pastors in the outlying villages had not yet been persecuted. On 22 June, Germany launched a huge military attack on the Soviet Union and the Soviet army, in full retreat, passed by Stradch.

On the morning of 26 June, Mykola received a call that one of his parishioners was sick. Volodymyr, the church's choir director, pleaded with him not to go because of the danger. Mykola insisted but urged Volodymyr, who had two young children, not to accompany him. In the end they both went.

On their way home they were confronted by two secret police, who forced the two Christians, at gunpoint, to walk along the road towards the city. The villagers who witnessed this assumed that they were being taken to be imprisoned. Instead, once they were out of sight, the two men were driven into the woods and shot.

On the same day, pastors and other Ukrainians held in the Soviet prisons in Lviv were murdered en masse by machine-gun, as their communist captors fled the city before the advancing German army.

Through the way of suffering and the Cross went the Most Holy Master of all pastors, Christ Himself; this is proclaimed by the Cross of the Lord displayed today. Anyone who wants to serve Him must follow the same path … In one word, each one of us must crucify himself with Christ.
Tikhon of Moscow (1865-1925), preaching in San Francisco, 17 September 1900

For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 14:11

Pelagius of Córdoba (c. 926)
Child Martyr Chooses Christ

Pelagius (Pelayo), was only 13 when he was martyred in Córdoba, Spain. His uncle Hermoygius, Bishop of Tuy, had been captured by the Muslim Caliph Abdurrahman who ruled much of Spain at that time. The bishop persuaded the caliph to let him go and hold instead his nephew Pelagius, who was at that time ten years old. Apparently the bishop intended to send a ransom payment to free his nephew but this never happened, and it was the child who eventually had the honour of dying for Christ, not his eminent uncle.

Three years passed with Pelagius still languishing in prison in Córdoba. Then the caliph asked to see the Christian boy prisoner. His remarkable good looks amazed the whole court and the caliph offered to make Pelagius a court page-boy if he would convert to Islam. Pelagius refused the offer, saying that he would obey the caliph in everything "but first I am Christ's. Nothing may part me from Him." The caliph was enraged and, as Pelagius continued to affirm his faith in Christ, so the caliph grew angrier. According to tradition, Pelagius also refused the caliph's homosexual advances, thus infuriating him even further.

The caliph ordered Pelagius be hung up by his wrists, but despite the pain Pelagius still refused to deny Christ. He was brought back to court, bleeding from his wrists. The caliph offered him the choice: "Happy freedom, honour, my favour and protection – or death. Choose!" The boy replied, "I have chosen: Christ!" The caliph had Pelagius torn to pieces with iron pincers, his hands and feet cut off, and finally thrown in the river.

Still to the lowly soul
He doth Himself impart,
And for His dwelling and His throne
Chooseth the pure in heart.

John Keble, England (1792–1866)

I found the one my heart loves. Song of Songs 3:4

Febronia of Nisibis (c. 304) Would Not Change her Eternal Bridegroom

In the year 284 a baby girl called Febronia was born and a Roman Emperor called Diocletian began to reign. While Febronia was growing up in a convent in Nisibis (modern Nusaybin, Turkey), Diocletian was becoming gradually more hostile to Christians. When she was a young woman, he sent soldiers east, led by Selenos and two of his nephews, Primus and Lysimachos; their orders were to destroy the Christian faith,

Selenos was famed for his anti-Christian ferocity but Lysimachos was different, as his mother had become a Christian and had told him not to harm Christians but to be a friend to Christ. Lysimachos and Primus discussed together how to save the Christians. Primus stopped ordering their arrest and began urging them to escape.

As the soldiers approached Nisibis, the clergy and nuns fled except Febronia, the abbess and an elderly nun. When Primus found the three women, he advised them to escape, but they refused to quit their place of spiritual service, saying they would trust in the Lord.

Having seen Febronia's great beauty, Primus suggested that Lysimachos could save her life by marrying her. A soldier overheard and Febronia was arrested, shackled and led before Selenos with a heavy iron collar round her neck. Selenos offered her riches and status if she would deny Christ and marry Lysimachos. Febronia answered that she would not exchange her Eternal Bridegroom for any worldly honour.

Torturers then set to work on Febronia. She was stripped, beaten and burned on a pyre. The watching townsfolk pleaded for mercy, but Selenos ordered more tortures. She was scourged until her bones were exposed, her teeth were broken, her hands and feet hacked off and finally she was beheaded.

Because I am in love with Him to whom I have offered my soul, I am eager to come to Him, if He holds me worthy to suffer and endure the fight that is for His sake.

Febronia (martyred around 304)

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness. Psalm 17:15 (ESV)

Shigho (2015)
Undaunted in Face of Martyrdom

Nineteen-year-old Shigho, from Kobane, Syria, converted from Islam to Christianity. He paid for this decision with his life when Islamic State (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) militants returned to attack his town on 25 June 2015, months after they had been driven out. IS executed him as an apostate from Islam. At least 145 other people died in Kobane that day in IS's killing rampage.

Other believers who knew Shigho refused to be daunted by his martyrdom and sent the message to concerned Christian friends outside the country, "Don't worry about us. Even if they were to cut our heads off ten times we would still say that Jesus is Lord!"

Show me Thy face – one transient gleam
Of loveliness divine,
And I shall never think or dream
Of other love save Thine:
All lesser light will darken quite,
All lower glories wane,
The beautiful of earth will scarce
Seem beautiful again.

Show me Thy face – the heaviest cross
Will then seem light to bear;
There will be gain in every loss,
And peace with every care.
With such light feet the wears will fleet,
Life seem as brief as blest,
Till I have laid my burden down,
And entered into rest.

Author unknown, published in USA, 1881

From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. Galatians 6:17

Severian Baranyk (1941)
Marked with the Cross

After the Soviet Russian forces withdrew from the Ukrainian city of Drohobych during World War II, the Germans, who had advanced into the area (see June 22), allowed people to come to the prison and claim the bodies of their murdered relatives. A young boy, Yosyf Lastoviak, was too little to see anything in the crowd that gathered at the prison gates, so climbed a tree to get a better view. He later described what he saw behind the prison: a big hole filled with sand from which there came a "terrible stink". People were digging in the sand with their hands and dragging out bodies. Yosyf recognised the black and swollen corpse of Severian. Later Yosyf's father told him that Severian's chest had been marked with a cross-shaped knife slash.

Severian had been born in 1889 in Galicia (in modern western Ukraine) and became the *hegumen* (head) of a monastery in Drohobych in 1932. A faithful follower of Jesus Christ in the Soviet Union, his life was noted for his special kindness to youth and orphans. His joy was infectious and his preaching inspirational.

On 26 June 1941 the NKVD (the Soviet secret police during World War II and a forerunner of the KGB) arrested Severian and took him to Drohobych prison. The NKVD, who were extremely anti-Christian, were used by the Soviet authorities against "political" prisoners across Eastern Europe. He was never seen alive again. This sort of arrest and disappearance were often used by Soviet authorities to deal with Christians they wanted to be rid of.

I know the road you walked was anything but easy
You picked up your share of scars along the way
But now you're standing in the sun, you've fought your fight and your race is run,
The pain is all a million miles away.
The only scars in heaven, they won't belong to me and you
There'll be no such thing as broken, and all the old will be made new
And the thought that makes me smile now, even as the tears fall down
Is that the only scars in heaven are on the hands that hold you now

Mark Hall and Matthew West, USA, song published in 2021

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Philippians 4:6

Beatrice Mukashaka (2014)
All-Night Prayer in Uganda

Every Friday night, Christians from the Chali Born Victory Church would gather and pray by candlelight until morning. As the darkness deepened around them, but with the light of Christ in their hearts, they relied on the Holy Spirit to guide their prayers as they interceded for their community and nation.

On the night of 27-28 June 2014, about 20 Christians were at the all-night prayer meeting. At around 2 a.m. twelve Muslims armed with machetes and axes burst into the church in Kyegegwa, Uganda. Eighteen-year-old Beatrice was hacked to death in the savage attack, and three other people were injured, including a one-year-old baby. The attackers then escaped to a nearby mosque from where they killed a policeman when the police surrounded the mosque.

Pastor Jackson Turyamureba, who narrowly escaped death, said that the church had previously had problems with a group of Muslims attempting to convert members of the congregation to Islam. The Islamist group had the aim of transforming Uganda into an Islamic nation and would often kill anyone who refused to convert.

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit,
Hallelujah! We are asking for your Holy Spirit,
Descend on us and lead us on,
We acknowledge that we are your children.
Oh Lord, we pray you lead us on.
We have heard your voice, Oh Lord, calling us.
Hallelujah! We are praying we receive your Holy Spirit.
Lead us on, guide us, Lord, take the wheel, Oh Lord, we pray you lead us on.

Ugandan Gospel Song, *Ruhanga Ishitwe/Otwebembere (Lead us on)*

For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 1 Thessalonians 4:14

Samuel Munson and Henry Lyman (1834)
Pioneer Missionaries to Indonesia

When he was a young man in Maine, USA, Samuel heard a missionary sermon that fanned into flame a desire to "fly as a herald of the Cross". Elsewhere in the USA, Henry also longed to be in missionary work. As a sick child, he had been solemnly dedicated to the Lord by his father if the Lord spared the young boy's life.

The two men and their wives were sent out by their missionary board in 1833 to Batavia (modern Jakarta, Indonesia) with these words: "You 'go bound in the spirit' to uncongenial climes, and distant nations…opposed to the religion of Christ…Your labours may be soon terminated by death. But you have given yourselves to Jesus Christ without reserve, for the work of missions among the perishing heathen…He has pledged to you, everywhere, and in all circumstances, his special presence, assistance and comfort."

The following year Samuel and Henry were travelling around the various islands and by June were trekking into the interior of Sumatra, amongst the Batak people. Their first encounters were with friendly Bataks, and the two missionaries would spend the night in their villages. But on 28 June they were surrounded by a large party of Batak cannibals who shot dead Henry and killed Samuel with a spear, eating them both the next day.

Today the majority of the Batak people-group are Christian, and are a shining light for the Gospel in Sumatra, which is mainly Muslim with sharia law in force in Aceh province in the far north.

[A] good man is immortal till his work is done. Their warfare was accomplished, the crown of glory was awaiting them, and the Lord saw fit thus early to call them up to wear it. To them, sudden death was sudden glory – they departed, and were with Christ, which was far better. The manner of their death was violent, and to human feelings, dreadful, - but of Stephen, who died a more dreadful death, an inspired penman assures us that he fell asleep. Thus of our brethren it may be said, "they sleep in Jesus".

Walter Henry Medhurst (1796-1857), English missionary to Batavia (in modern Indonesia), in a letter to the missionary society about the deaths of Samuel Munson and Henry Lyman

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. Philippians 2:3-4

Meng Zhangzuan (1900)
Caring for Others Before Himself

Pastor Meng led the way to martyrdom for Christians in Baoding, Hebei Province, China, during the Boxer rebellion in 1900. He was far away at a conference when he heard that the anti-foreigner, anti-Christian Boxer rebels were preparing to attack his home town, and he rushed back to be with his flock of about 120 believers.

On 28 June a group of Boxers burst into the chapel, stabbed him in the head, twisted one arm till it was dislocated, and dragged him to a nearby temple where they scorched his shoulders with burning candles, trying to force him to give away the whereabouts of his oldest son.

The next morning they cut off his head, putting it on display for all to see. Over the next two days, most of the missionaries and Chinese Christian men in Baoding were also killed, following Pastor Meng's lead in martyrdom.

Just as Pastor Meng was the first martyr in 1900 Baoding, so his father had been the first Christian convert in Baoding in 1878. As a pastor, Meng was known for his God-given ability to win souls for Christ, his humility and dependence on Christ's power.

Pastor Meng's 13-year-old son, Titus, was the only member of his immediate family to survive the Boxer attack. Pastor Meng had urged young Titus to go into hiding, saying that otherwise none of the family would be left to tell the story of Jesus. Titus reluctantly obeyed. A non-Christian named Mr Zhang who was notoriously violent took Titus into his home and lovingly cared for him for three months. With Zhang's protection, others were too scared to betray Titus to the Boxers.

The basic reason we give thought for others is that we ourselves are loved by God… We should aim to make up for what they lack; we should support them in their weaknesses; we should share their heavy burdens; and we should seek to alleviate their suffering… We cannot learn such concern unless we always keep close to God; unless we bask in the love of God; and unless we experience the power of God.
Wang Mingdao, China (1900-91), a pastor imprisoned for his faith

The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. Zephaniah 3:17 (ESV)

Solomon Belayineh, Aschalew Ababu, Teferi, Sinqinesh (2020) Ethiopian Martyrs

Solomon, an Oromo Christian, was challenged by Oromo Muslim extremists to tear off the thread "necklace" around his neck, worn by many Ethiopian Christians as a sign of their baptism. He refused to deny his faith in this way and so they beheaded him. According to his widow Yenenesh, "The attackers said that it is only one who prostrates with us before Allah for prayer who is considered an Oromo."

Hundreds of Ethiopian Christians, from many ethnic groups, were killed in late June and early July 2020 in coordinated attacks on Christians in Oromia regional state by the Qeerroo (literally, "bachelors"), a youth movement of Oromo men. The attackers, armed with guns, machetes, swords and spears, and carrying lists of Christians, went door to door, seeking individuals to kill, particularly those who were active church members. Police stood by and watched as Christians were carefully selected and murdered, and Christian homes and businesses destroyed. Together with local authorities, who are mainly Muslims in this part of Ethiopia, the police even at times aided the attackers by leading them to Christian businesses and preventing fires from being extinguished.

Christians in Bale Agarfa were horrified at the death of their fellow believer, Aschalew, whose eyes were gouged out and his headless body left in the open. No one was allowed to retrieve it until wild animals had eaten most of it. In Gedeb Assasa, an elderly Christian couple, Teferi (87) and his wife Sinqinesh, were beaten to death in their home. Their hacked bodies were then dragged through the streets. In Dera, the attackers played with the corpses of the Christians they had killed, "dancing and singing, carrying the chopped or hacked body parts of those they slaughtered".

He whom the prophets of old had foreshown,
The Crown of the martyrs, the Strength of His own,
The Pilot of spirits, Who led by a star
The ancients in wisdom who came from afar.
Jared the Psalmist, Ethiopia (5th century)

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. Hebrews 4:16

Garissa Christians (2012)
Fight Back with Prayers, not Violence

Kenyan Christians vowed to respond with prayers, not violence, after coordinated attacks on two churches on Sunday 1 July 2012 left at least 17 people dead and around 65 injured.

The anti-Christian violence occurred in the north-eastern town of Garissa, whose population is mainly ethnic Somali Muslims, while the country of Kenya as a whole is over 80% Christian. The churches were targeted during their Sunday services. The first attack took place at the African Inland Church (AIC), where gunmen from the Al Shabaab Islamist militant group shot dead two policemen who were guarding the building before throwing grenades inside. As the congregation tried to escape, the assailants opened fire, raining bullets on the fleeing worshippers, killing 15 of them. On the same Sunday, two grenades were thrown at another church, injuring three people.

Although Christians felt targeted by militant Islamists at their church services, the next Sunday across the whole country Kenyan Christians made their way to church as normal. In the port city of Mombasa (another predominantly Muslim part of Kenya), a Christian called Margaret Wakio (28), holding a Bible in one hand and a hymn book in the other, entered church saying, "We will fight back, but through prayers, not weapons."

Whether things or persons be for us or against us depends upon ourselves. Can we really count as a foe, something that constantly forces us back to our Centre, back to the soul of things, back to First Principles, back to Prayer, back to God, back to Love! Can a thing be an enemy that makes of us a man or a woman of Prayer? May we not indeed give much praise for such experiences? All things shall be made to work together for Good.
Laetitia Withall (1881-1963), born in Australia, lived most of her life in UK

There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Proverbs 18:24

Peter Li Quanhui and Raymond Li Quanzhen (1900)
"Whoever does God's will is my brother" (Mark 3:35)

Two Christian brothers, Peter (63) and Raymond (59), from the village of Chentun, Hebei Province, China, were martyred on 30 June 1900, during the Boxer rebellion, an uprising which targeted Chinese Christians as part of its efforts to prevent the spread of Western influence.

When the Boxer rebels discovered Peter, and Raymond with his five-year-old daughter, Magdalene, hiding among the reeds in a nearby marsh, they beheaded Peter on the spot for refusing to renounce Christianity. They then dragged Raymond to a Buddhist temple, and Magdalene was taken away by a Buddhist nun.

At the temple, Raymond told the rebels that his family had been Christians for generations and declared, "We do not worship false gods. There is no way for me to give up my religion." Infuriated by this bold declaration, his captors subjected him to a terrible ordeal. Firstly, they tried to get him to make an offering to the Buddhist idols. When he refused, they spent an afternoon torturing him by burning his skin with incense sticks and cutting off his ears and arms. Blood was said to have covered his whole body, yet still he refused their demands. When the Boxers realised that he would never deny Christ they killed him.

Without suffering how is it possible to taste the depths of the goodness of the Lord?
After tasting it, how can one be obsessed with worldly desires?
O Suffering, I used to flee from you.
But today the Lord has commanded me to endure all that you have for me…
O Suffering, you make the moments with my Lord so much better.
You are the oxygen of the saints. Without you, they would have stopped breathing.
You are so close to me.
O Suffering, let us walk arm-in-arm together.

Zhang Rongliang (born 1951), Chinese house church leader, imprisoned for his faith on a number of occasions. Written from Xihua Prison, Henan Province, March 1978

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.
2 Timothy 4:7

Abram J Klassen (1931)
Remaining at His Post

"Don't try to dissuade me. You must leave… My situation is quite different. My role in Russia is not complete, my work here not done. In fact, it is about to begin. My congregation needs me more than ever before. Should I cast my gun into the trench and flee in panic the moment when the enemy heralds the attack? If I left the church now, you, I myself and everyone would despise me – the first of all my Lord and Master. I will remain at my post until my Master allows me to leave or I fall in battle for my Master."

In 1925 the future of the peaceable Mennonite Christians in the Soviet Union looked bleak. Believing they faced destruction by the communist authorities, Abram Klassen's younger brother Peter decided to emigrate and wanted Abram to come too, but Abram, a pastor, refused.

The Soviet authorities gave Abram a choice: renounce his Christian activities and retain his civil rights; or continue his work, and be stripped of his rights and all possibility of making a livelihood. Abram continued his ministry and was imprisoned in 1928. He was told that if he publicly admitted he had preached a non-existent God he would be freed. But Abram refused, just as he had refused his brother's request to flee.

His death sentence was commuted to ten years' exile in the Russian far north, starting in May 1930. Despite hard labour, lack of food and deteriorating health, Abram continued his pastoral ministry and became greatly beloved by the local population. He suffered two strokes and died on 5 July 1931, even though hospital staff gave him food from their own meagre rations and paid for medicine to try to save him.

I will remain at my post until my Master allows me to leave or I fall in battle for my Master. I will not throw down my banner.

Abram J Klassen, Spat, Crimea (1884-1931), a Mennonite minister

Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life. John 4:14

Petro Kasui Kibe (1639)
The "Living Water" that Never Dried Up

Petro's torturer called him "the man who would not say, 'I give in'". Petro's parents were converts to Christianity and Petro was born in 1587, the year when anti-Christian persecution suddenly began in Japan as the powerful *daimyo* Hideyoshi issued an order to expel all foreign missionaries.

At the age of 13 Petro began theological studies and, on graduation six years later, he chose the new name "Kasui", meaning "living water".

The shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu issued an order in 1614 to ban Christianity and expel senior church leaders and missionaries once again. Petro fled to Macao, sailed to India, and then travelled the Silk Road on foot for 2,000 miles through deserts, mountains and rivers, enduring storms, hunger and Muslim attacks. He reached Jerusalem in 1619, the first known Japanese person to set foot in the city.

He returned to Japan in 1630, finding it still hostile to Christians. Undeterred, he went north, ministering to the secret believers known as "Kakure Kirishitans" (see March 18) along the way, and settled in Sendai where he served the Christian community for nine years.

Then he was captured and sent to Edo (modern Tokyo) where he met Cristóvao Ferreira, a Portuguese missionary who had renounced Christ (after being tortured) and tried to get Petro to do likewise. Petro tried to persuade Ferreira to return to the faith, but neither man convinced the other.

Petro was then subjected to a gruelling torture regime, including the excruciating *tsurushi* pit (see September 29). Encouraging others to persevere for Christ, he himself also remained firm. The prison guards finally speared him to death on 4 July 1639. His indictment read: "He ignored the edict of the shogun and he ministered to Christians."

Every weakness contains within itself a strength.
Shusaku Endo, Japan (1923-96), author of *Chinmoku (Silence)*, a 1966 novel about 17th century Portuguese missionaries to Japan and the slaughter of their converts by the Japanese authorities

For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world – to bear witness to the truth. John 18:37 (ESV)

Five Egyptian Christians (2013, 2015)
Witness in Murder Trial Killed

Egyptian Christian Shahid was killed in January 2015, just 500 metres from his home. It was the day after a hearing at Luxor Criminal Court, in connection with the case against 17 Muslims accused of killing Shahid's cousin Emil and three other Christians on 5 July 2013. Shahid was a witness for the prosecution.

The rampage by armed Muslims in the village of Al-Dabayia in 2013 had not only killed four Christians, but also critically injured four others and left 42 Christian homes and shops badly damaged, burned and looted. For 18 months, the Christians in this part of Upper Egypt had lived under the shadow of a deadly wave of anti-Christian violence, apparently a response to the ousting of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi in a coup on 3 July 2013. Morsi was affiliated to the Islamist organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Before Shahid was killed, relatives of the 17 accused had asked a church minister to arrange a meeting with relatives of the four victims to persuade them to drop the charges. The murder of Shahid triggered panic among the local Christians. Girguis Noushy Habib, older brother of two of the victims, said, "We have been threatened with death ever since we testified in the prosecution. We live in a state of fear and terror… Our lives are in danger. They killed Shahid to terrorise us and pressure us to drop the charges against the relatives."

Shahid's name is the Arabic word for "witness" or "martyr". Likewise in New Testament Greek the same word *martus* means both "witness" and martyr".

Increase your praises to Christ, lift up the Lord with your tunes,
Call out the heroes, His heroes, who walk with the cross before you.
Say that He has risen and death has no authority,
There is no forgiveness except through His blood, and the light of the Gospel is increasing.
Say that He has conquered darkness and its authority,
He has lit up our days and given them colour, and the light of day is increasing.
Say that He is defeating His foes,
We're winning with His testimony and blood, and our heritage is increasing.
Live the joy of heaven, joy, joy,
Satan will wear the clothes of one in mourning and our praises to You will increase.
Egyptian Christian song

Explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. 1 Corinthians 2:13

Putax (1524)
Workplace Theological Debate in the Midst of Horses

Putax was a Christian who earned his living shoeing horses in Amid, Persia (modern Iran). He was surrounded by Muslims, both as customers and as apprentices. With a well-grounded knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the Muslim majority, as well as Christian doctrine and where it differed from Islam, Putax was an able debater. He spoke Turkish, Persian and Arabic and his workplace became a centre for deep theological discussion. When Muslims visited, he would speak of Christ and enthusiastic seekers were brought to his home to talk more about the faith. Eventually he had a church of 90 people.

One day he was asked to debate with the local sheikh who hoped to convert Putax to Islam. This effort failed, but the sheikh spread false information that Putax had indeed converted to Islam. The local *qadi* (Muslim judge) summoned Putax to find out the truth. When Putax denied that he had become a Muslim, the *qadi* offered him money to convert, but Putax refused. Putax was sent to the higher authority of the pasha (a title for high-ranking Ottoman officials and officers). His strong stand for Christ eventually brought a sentence of death by fire. Putax was burned to death on 6 July 1524.

These hands of mine that have gained from your table,
This body that has been fed and sustained by your grace,
Oh Lord, strengthen them day and night
So that they can boldly and victoriously serve you.
Our tongues that have praised you
And now sing your greatness,
Oh Lord, help them not to speak ill
And not to take the path of the ignorant and cold-hearted.
My two eyes which have seen your kindness,
My two ears that have heard your commands,
Open them to the importance of your service to human kind,
And make them sing in harmony with your tone of love.
Let our souls be lit by your light, oh Lord,
So that we can always give more lights to the world.
If our soul gets light from your grace, oh Lord,
It will never die, it will shine for eternity.

Jalil Qazzaq, Iran (1879-1956), poem in Farsi translated by Sara Afshari

A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh. Genesis 2:24

Peter To Rot (1945)
In Defence of Christian Marriage, under Japanese Occupation

After Japanese forces occupied the Australian-administered Territory of New Guinea (now Papua New Guinea) in 1942, foreign missionaries were interned or killed. A local Christian, Peter To Rot, already active in teaching both children and adults the faith and in leading prayer meetings, was left to take charge of his church in Rakunai village on the island of New Pomerania. The Japanese began to loot and destroy church buildings and in 1943 banned all Christian activities. So Peter built a wooden chapel in the bush where Christians could meet secretly.

The Japanese reintroduced polygamy, which had been traditional in New Guinea until the advent of Christianity. Their aim appeared to be to win support from local leaders and counteract "Western" influence. Many local people remembered the days of polygamy. In Rakunai, for example, Christianity was barely a generation old, as it was his father, the village chief, who had first converted when almost the whole village decided to follow Jesus.

Many people responded to the Japanese initiative by taking a second wife but Peter spoke out against it: "I will never stop telling Christians about the dignity and great importance of the sacrament of marriage." Peter's wife Paula feared that her husband's determination would endanger their family, but Peter responded, "If I have to die, that's fine, because I will die for the kingdom of God among our people."

One day in 1945 a local police officer who wanted to take a second wife had Peter's house searched. Religious items were found and Peter admitted to leading a prayer meeting. When he also spoke against bigamy he was arrested and sentenced to two months' imprisonment. On 7 July, he was given a lethal injection, but the poison worked too slowly, so Japanese soldiers strangled and stabbed him to death.

As God by creation made two of one, so again by marriage He made one of two. Thomas Adams, England (1583-1652)

He will swallow up death for ever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. Isaiah 25:8

Suzan der Kirkour (2019)
Raped and Stoned to Death in Syria

Suzan (60), an Armenian Christian, was a retired local school teacher living in the mainly Christian village of Al-Yacoubia. After retirement, she worked as a volunteer at her local church, helping young people prepare for their baccalaureate. Rather unusually in Middle Eastern society, she was unmarried. By the summer of 2019 she was one of only about 18 women left in the village, for most had fled from the violent aggression of the Islamists who had a strong presence in Idlib governorate, Syria. A devoted teacher, Suzan stayed on in the village for the sake of her pupils so that they could continue their studies. She was respected as a "pillar of the community".

On 8 July she disappeared. Her worried church minister sent some Christians to search for her. The next day they found her lifeless body in a field near the village. The autopsy showed that she had suffered a cruel ordeal. Over an estimated period of nine hours, she had been brutally tortured, repeatedly raped and then stoned to death. The perpetrators were Islamists from the Jabhat al-Nusra group.

…Is there no cure for wounds, no friend to lend a pitying ear?
Why art thou troubled, wandering heart? Weep not! See Jesus near!
Sorrow and hardship are for all, though differing forms they wear.
The path He gave us teems with thorns. The feet must suffer there…
Justice ordained it; mercy then made it more light to bear.
Unasked by thee, Christ sweetened it, His love infusing there.
From heaven's height He hastened down, pitying thy trouble sore;
With thee a servant He became, Himself thy wounds He bore.
He filled His cup celestial full of thy tears and pain,
And tremblingly, yet freely, He dared the dregs to drain…
He feels and pities all thy woes, He wipes away each tear;
Love He distils into thy griefs; weep not, for He is near!

Leo Alishan (1820-1901), Armenian poet

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. 1 Peter 1:18-19

Zhang Huailu (1900)
Baptised in Blood

The children learning at the Christian mission in Zhuketian village, Hebei Province, China used to laugh at Brother Zhang's attempts to read. At the age of 57 and against his family's wishes, he had begun attending their classes, the only adult among the students. But Brother Zhang would say, "No matter what happens, I love God with all my heart. God saves my soul. It does not matter that I cannot read."

When his decision to follow Christ became known, he suffered as there were only six or seven Christian families in his village. Much of the opposition came from his own relatives, but Brother Zhang proceeded in his Christian walk with simplicity and humility. He longed to be baptised.

Taking advantage of the Boxer uprising and its hostility towards Christians, some local criminals started an extortion scheme, demanding money in return for not reporting Christians to the Boxer rebels. Brother Zhang paid 300 silver pieces to the extortioners to guarantee that they would not denounce him as a Christian.

Forewarned of the Boxers' plans, most of the Christians escaped the village before the Boxers attacked on 9 July, but Brother Zhang was too slow and so was captured. The extortionists pleaded with the Boxers not to harm Brother Zhang and told them that he was not a Christian. But Brother Zhang, in his simplicity and sincerity, was confused by their pleas and said that if he was not a Christian then "why did you take money from me to ensure my freedom?"

Hearing this, the Boxers seized him, beat him and beheaded him. His desire for Christian baptism had never been fulfilled, but that day he was baptised in his own blood.

As I silently rub the drops of blood on the wall, I can only find the right words when I think of that merciful and just God who is so far away, and yet so close. Lin Zhao, China (martyred 1968), Christian poet, who wrote poems with blood, pricked from her finger, while imprisoned in China

I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. 1 Timothy 1:12-16

Munshi Dev Tado (2020)
Persecutor who Became a Preacher

Like the Apostle Paul, Munshi (28) was a persecutor of Christians before he came to faith in Jesus. He had belonged to the militant communist Naxalite group and would participate in its persecution of Christian families. Then, through the ministry of a local evangelist, Munshi himself became a Christian. He left the Naxalites and began sharing the Gospel around India's western Maharashtra state. He started a church on his own land in his village in Gadchiroli district, a remote tribal area where radical Hindutva groups also operated. His conversion to the Christian faith and his constant witness to others created hostility.

Twice the Naxalites ordered him to stop evangelising, but Munshi ignored them. He was murdered on 10 July 2020 by suspected Maoist Naxalite attackers, who took him to a forested area near his home and shot him dead. He left behind a wife, three young daughters and a son.

Naxalites are also believed to have carried out the beheading of Anant Ram Gand in 2019 (see February 11).

We face a humanity that is too precious to neglect. We know a remedy for the ills of the world too wonderful to withhold. We have a Christ too glorious to hide. We have an adventure that is too thrilling to miss.
Theodore Williams, India (1935–2009)

There is no God like you in heaven or on earth – you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. 2 Chronicles 6:14

Epictetus, Astion and Others (290-304)
Early Romanian Martyrs

According to tradition, the Apostle Andrew preached in Dacia (part of modern Romania). Adjoining Dacia was Lesser Scythia (another part of modern Romania), which was a place of exile and death for Christians in the Roman Empire who refused to worship the pagan gods. Thousands of people died there from cold, hunger or torture, for example in a time of fierce persecution under Emperor Diocletian (284-305).

Most of the martyrs are now known only to God, but some names are recorded. Epictetus and his disciple Astion were martyred on 8 July 290. They had come from Asia Minor to Halmyris, a city on the River Danube, to preach the Christian faith. More than 1,000 inhabitants of the city converted to Christianity. Because of this, Epictetus and Astion were interrogated before judges, imprisoned and tortured. Their steadfast endurance led one of the judges, Vigilantius, to decide to follow Christ, but finally Epictetus and Astion were beheaded. Other known martyrs were Ephrem, killed on 7 March 304 in Tomis (modern Constanta), and Montanus and his wife Maxima who were martyred by drowning on 26 March 304.

In 1971 archaeological excavations under the Christian basilica at Niculiţel revealed a crypt containing the remains of four martyrs, buried together in one wooden coffin, probably in the fourth century. All had been decapitated. The heads of three had been placed on their necks, while a fourth was resting on his chest. An inscription on one wall read "Christ's martyrs". The names of the four martyrs – Zoticos, Attalos, Kamasis and Philippos – were scratched on the opposite wall.

The lives of these martyrs remind us of the long uninterrupted continuity of the Christian faith on the banks of the Danube and the love of Christ that sustained Christians in this land even during the brutal communist regime of the 20th century.

You teach about the cross… we live under the cross.
Traian Dorz, Romania (1914-1989), Christian poet imprisoned for 17 years for his faith

Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, the LORD *will be my light.* Micah 7:8

Samoan and Rarotongan Christians (1840-41)
South Pacific Church Grown from the Blood of Martyrs

The small South Pacific island of Erromango (in modern Vanuatu) was a dangerous mission field. The first two missionaries had lasted only a few hours before being killed and eaten in 1839 (see November 20). But the blood of these martyrs seemed only to encourage and inspire the Christians of other Pacific islands to come and take their place in bringing the Gospel to Erromango.

Christians from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands and Samoa, although very new believers, were quick to volunteer in their hundreds to serve Christ. Before their conversion they had been warriors and some had been chiefs in their own islands, but on the hostile mission field of Erromango they patiently endured hunger, insults, abuse and murder.

In 1840 two Samoan missionaries settled in Erromango, but within a year both were moved off the island, worn out, emaciated and nearly dead from their sufferings. Despite being great fighters before they met the Prince of Peace, they had meekly submitted to a life of drudgery accompanied by daily death threats.

There was no lack of brave Christians ready to replace them. Indeed, whenever a missionary was withdrawn or died, others instantly volunteered to take their place. It is recorded that 40 Christian martyrs – men, women and children – from Samoa and Rarotonga lost their lives by violence, disease or starvation as none of the Erromangans would assist them with acquiring food.

By 1841 the task on Erromango seemed hopeless and all the remaining missionaries were withdrawn. But from time to time other brave Samoan missionaries still came to the island, and eventually the Gospel took root and flourished. In 1880 a church building was dedicated and named the Martyrs' Church. By 1900, 95% of the people of Erromango identified as Christians.

It may be they will understand what I say, but if I fall [looking towards another Christian] if I fall, you my brother, follow me; and if you fall let another, and another, until Erromango and all its people shall be won for Jesus.
A Rarotongan Christian, formerly a "great warrior", speaking to a group of Rarotongan believers at a prayer meeting held soon after hearing the news of the martyrdom of John Williams on 20 November 1839

Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only. James 1:22 (AV)

Hans Scholl, Sophie Scholl, Alexander Schmorell and Willi Graf (1943)
White Rose's Christian Conscience

Using a small duplicating machine, students at Munich University, Germany, wrote, typed, published and distributed six leaflets between 1942 and 1943 defying the powerful Nazi state. When the youngest, Sophie (21), was interrogated by the Gestapo in February 1943, she said it was her Christian conscience that had compelled her to oppose the Nazi regime.

Disillusioned by their experience in the Hitler Youth and military service, four of the founding members, Hans and his sister Sophie, Alexander and Willi, found solace and strength in their Christian faith. The group, who called themselves "the White Rose", came into being in the spring of 1942, when Hans declared, "In the name of civic and Christian courage something must be done." In Christian writers down the centuries, they found justification for opposing Nazism. Sophie wrote of this dark time, "I shall cling to the rope God has thrown me in Jesus Christ, even if my numb hands can no longer feel it." Her favourite Bible verse was James 1:22.

Their leaflets, calling on the German people to stand up against the Nazis, were distributed in many ways. On 18 February 1943 Hans and Sophie were seen throwing leaflets over a banister. Four days later, found guilty of sedition, they were executed by guillotine. It is said that Sophie's last words were, "God, you are my refuge into eternity."

Over the next few weeks, Alexander, Willi and over 80 other suspected White Rose members were arrested. On 13 July 1943 Alexander (25) was guillotined. Amongst his last words was the command, "Don't forget God!" Willi was guillotined on 12 October 1943 after six months' solitary confinement, during which he refused to yield up the names of any other members of the group.

Man is free, to be sure, but without the true God he is defenceless against the principle of evil. He is like a rudderless ship, at the mercy of the storm, an infant without his mother, a cloud dissolving into thin air.
The White Rose, wording from their fourth leaflet

Many are my persecutors and my enemies, yet I do not turn from Your testimonies. Psalm 119:157 (NKJV)

Ivan Vasilyevich Moiseyev (1972)
Red Army Soldier for Christ

Ivan knew that the Soviet army authorities would kill him for his active Christian witness. And they did. The day before his death, he wrote to his brother asking him to tell their parents that he "is following the commandment of Jesus Christ to go into Christian combat and he doesn't know if he will ever return".

Ivan had been brought up by peasant farmer parents as a Christian, worshipping in an "underground" church in what is now Moldova. After his baptism in 1970, he became very active in talking about the Lord Jesus, and continued to do so when, later that year, he was drafted into the Soviet army for compulsory military service.

Soon he was being subjected to pressure and persecution of many kinds in an effort to stop him sharing his faith. For two weeks in mid-winter he was forced to stand outside all night wearing only a thin summer uniform; miraculously God kept him warm. In January 1971 he was handed over to the KGB for twelve days; their final torture method was to dress him in a rubber suit, which could be pumped full of air, putting huge pressure on his body.

Once Ivan was challenged to prove that God exists by obtaining home leave for a certain sergeant, leave which was all but impossible to get. After praying, Ivan spent the night explaining the Christian faith to the sergeant. The next day an order came for the sergeant's leave, and he believed in God, as did other men in the barracks.

Ivan was arrested on 16 July 1972, beaten, stabbed, burned and finally drowned in the Kerch Strait (off modern Ukraine). Soon afterwards his military unit was broken up because so many men in it had become Christians.

I have one higher allegiance, and that is to Jesus Christ. He has given me certain orders, and these I cannot disobey.
Ivan Vasilyevich Moiseyev (martyred 1972)

We went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance… Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me! Psalm 66:12, 20

Florian (304)
Through Fire and Water to Eternal Glory

Florian, born in Aelium Cetium (modern Sankt Pölten, Austria), was a Roman soldier who rose to become commander of the army in the Roman province of Noricum (approximately modern Austria). One aspect of his work was to organise and lead an elite group of soldiers whose sole duty was to fight fires.

We do not know how or when Florian became a Christian, but he had become a believer by 304 when Emperor Diocletian's persecution of Christians was at its height. While on his way to Loriacum (modern Lorch), Florian met some soldiers and asked them where they were going. They responded, "Have you not heard the emperor's commands… he orders all men to offer libations to the gods, and that those who refuse should be put to death by various means?"

Florian answered, "Fellow soldiers, what else do you need, seeing that I am a Christian? Go and tell the *praeses* [governor] that I am a Christian and am here." Surprised by his spontaneous confession of faith, the troops dutifully arrested their commander and brought him before the governor, Aquillinus, who first encouraged, then ordered Florian sacrifice to the pagan gods and thus prove he was not a Christian.

When Florian refused, Aquillinus ordered him to be beaten with clubs. "Be as angry and do as much harm as you can since you possess power over my body which has been given to you for now," said Florian. "If you want to know why I do not fear your tortures, light a fire, and I will climb upon it." Florian was scourged twice, half-flayed and then drowned in the River Enns with a stone tied round his neck.

We bear the torch that flaming
Fell from the hands of those
Who gave their lives proclaiming
That Jesus died and rose
Ours is the same commission
The same glad message ours
Fired by the same ambition
To Thee we yield our powers.

Frank Houghton, England (1897–1972)

For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. 2 Corinthians 4:6

Lekë (Alexander) Luli (1944) and Ndre (Andrew) Zadeja (1945) Albanian Christians

At the end of 1942 most of Albania's mountainous interior was controlled by 8,000 to 10,000 communist guerrillas who began as a resistance movement to the occupying Italian and German forces during the Second World War. On 16 July 1944, Alexander, a church minister, was murdered by these guerrilla forces. His captors cut his throat and dumped him in an unmarked grave in Kosovo.

In November that year, Enver Hoxha, a strong defender of Marxism-Leninism and admirer of the Soviet leader Stalin, came to power in Albania. This was the beginning of the atheist government's savage and brutal campaign against Christians which lasted for 40 years.

Ndre Zadeja, a Christian poet and writer, became another martyr when he was tortured and shot by the communist government, without a trial, in March 1945. Christians were often killed on a charge of spying for foreign powers. By 1968, about 200 clergy had been executed or sent to labour camps.

In 1967, the year when Albania declared itself to be the first atheist state in history, Hoxha ordered a final attack to wipe out religion, closing, and either converting or destroying 2,167 places of worship (both churches and mosques).

In 1990 when the communist system collapsed, Albanians were finally allowed religious freedom. New churches were built and many people turned to Christ, perhaps remembering their former Christian heritage. There had been Christians in Dyrrhachium (modern Durrës) as early as the first century. (Astius, the first bishop of Dyrrhachium, was martyred around 98 AD.) New mosques were also built, and many Albanians returned to their Muslim roots, for Islam had been the dominant religion in Albania before communism. The Islamisation of Albania had taken place in various waves during the four centuries of Ottoman rule (15th to 19th centuries).

Words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.
Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu "Mother Teresa" (1910-97), Albanian missionary to India

My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent. Psalm 109:1

Hamidian Massacres (1894-96)
300,000 Christians Killed by the Ottomans

In 1894 the Armenians in Sasun (in modern Turkey) rebelled against the Ottoman state, which was increasingly persecuting its Christian minorities. Refusing to pay an oppressive tax, they were killed in their thousands by Ottoman troops and Kurdish tribesmen.

In September 1895 the Ottomans' response to an Armenian protest in Istanbul was to unleash another anti-Armenian massacre, targeting the Armenian communities of 13 large towns. This time the violence was inflicted by the Turkish Muslim neighbours of the Armenians, incited by the Sultan's agents.

In Tadem (which was attacked again in 1915, see June 14), Hadji Begos boasted of killing 100 Armenians with his own hand. He hunted a naked Christian girl through the streets, displayed the body parts of a Christian woman whom he had cut up, and flayed ten church ministers. When the aged abbot Ohannes Papizian refused to convert to Islam, Begos had the abbot's hands cut off, then his arms at the elbows, then his head.

In Urfa young Armenian men were slaughtered like animals to be eaten: they were thrown on their backs, held by their hands and feet and then their throats were slit while an Islamic prayer was recited. In December 1895, Ottoman troops burned Urfa cathedral, in which 3,000 Armenians had taken refuge, and shot at any who tried to escape.

In 1896 another 5,000 Armenians were killed in Istanbul by Turkish mobs, apparently coordinated by government troops.

The Hamidian Massacres, named after Sultan Abdulhamid II, are amongst the first atrocities of the Armenian, Assyrian, Syriac and Greek Genocide (see also November 1). In total as many as 300,000 Christians were killed, over half a million became refugees, and 2,000 Christian villages were looted and destroyed along with 600 churches.

O Lord and Saviour, life-giver, unto the dead give life.
And raise up those that have grown weak and stumbled in the strife!
Nerses the Grace-filled ("Shnorhali") (1102-73), Catholicos of Armenia

A people who risked their lives to the death. Judges 5:18 (ESV)

Paul Robert Schneider (1939)
Against Nazism and Viking Myths

In 1934 Pastor Paul Schneider was conducting a funeral service for a member of the Hitler Youth. A local Nazi leader stepped forward and said, as if to the deceased in his coffin, "Comrade..., you have now been enlisted in Horst Wessel's battalion in heaven." The hundreds of young Germans present would have known that Horst Wessel was a Nazi, glorified as a hero after being shot dead in 1930 in a street fight with political opponents. The Nazis were reviving old pagan legends, one being the Viking myth that after death an individual joins other departed warriors in Valhalla (heaven). Paul responded by explaining to the congregation the Christian Gospel and that there is no Horst Wessel group in heaven. He was punished for this by a week in prison and a warning to stop opposing the state. It was a warning he did not heed.

After another two months in prison in 1937, he was given an expulsion order forbidding him from returning to his home or church in the Rhineland. This order he ignored and in October was preaching again at his church.

His punishment this time was to be taken to Buchenwald concentration camp where he continued to preach to prison guards and prisoners, even from the window of his cell while held in solitary confinement. Every time he preached, he was punished. When asked why he did it, he said, "Somebody has to preach God's Word in this hell." On Hitler's 49th birthday (20 April 1938), Paul was the only person in the camp who refused to remove his beret to honour Hitler and the swastika flag; for this he suffered 25 lashes of the whip.

On 18 July 1939 he was murdered by a lethal injection of strophanthin in the camp infirmary.

Overcoming all human fear, [Pastor Paul Schneider] so consciously took on himself the cross of Christ even to death.
Buchenwald survivor who heard Paul Schneider preach in the concentration camp

Do not let those gloat over me who are my enemies without cause; do not let those who hate me without reason maliciously wink the eye. They do not speak peaceably but devise false accusations against those who live quietly in the land. Psalm 35:19-20

Hani Matti Betti (2004)
A Restaurant Owner

Hani, the Christian owner of Al-Hanna restaurant in Al-Dawasa district of Mosul, Iraq, was murdered on 19 July 2004 by an Islamist Wahhabi group after being accused of serving American customers. A local report stated that the militants yelled at Hani: "You are a Christian. Why do you sell food to the Americans? Are you an agent for the Americans?"

The militants associated Hani's Christian faith with the "Christian" USA which was at that time making war on Iraq, at the head of a coalition including many other "Christian" nations of the West.

Attacks like this began to happen after the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that quickly led to the fall of Saddam Hussain later the same year. For many in the Muslim majority of the Iraqi population assumed that Christian Iraqis would be traitors to their country and loyal to their coreligionists, the invaders. So Iraqi Christians were caught in the middle and suffered greatly. Some – like Hani – paid the ultimate price simply for being a Christian.

O Lord, Your people are bruised and broken
Their lands ravaged,
Their homes destroyed,
Their churches deserted,
Their children distraught.

O Lord, in You I put my trust
For evil abounds and traps are set for me.
False accusers rise up
And spread malicious lies and falsehood.
O good Lord, deliver me.

Patrick Sookhdeo, Guyana (born 1947)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. Revelation 3:20

Tarsykia Matskiv (1944)
"I killed her because she was a nun."

Tarsykia's story is one of little outward drama until her final 24 hours on earth. But inwardly she followed a demanding spiritual road, as she dedicated her life to the Lord's service in the fullest, deepest and most sacrificial way she could.

Tarsykia was born in the village of Khodoriv, Lviv Oblast (modern Ukraine), in March 1919, scarcely 18 months after the Bolshevik Revolution had brought Lenin to power and established Marxist rule in Russia. When she was two years old, the Soviet Union was founded, which included Ukraine in its territory. As the gigantic atheist communist state developed, the child Tarsykia was developing a great love of prayer and of attending church. At the age of 19, despite her mother's disapproval, she entered a convent and, in course of time, became a nun. She was passionate that others should know and love God as she knew and loved Him, and once said that she would "sacrifice her life for the conversion of Russia".

The Second World War saw German troops occupying Ukraine from 1941 until Soviet forces arrived in 1944. On 17 July 1944 the Soviets started to attack the city of Krystynopil, where Tarsykia was based. She and the other nuns took shelter in the convent basement as heavy bombing continued all day and night. Next morning at 8.00 a.m. the bell to the gate of the convent rang. The nuns were expecting a visit from the priest who gave them spiritual care, so Tarsykia ran out to open the gate. But their visitor was a Soviet soldier, who shot her dead. Later he said, "I killed her because she was a nun."

God has long been calling all to come to Him,
Yet you remain bound to this world.
With what are you repaying Christ for His suffering and death?
For His shed blood, what are you giving?

Help me, my God, to understand the love,
That was proved to us on the cross.
Only then will I be able to follow You
Through the storms and suffering on this earth!

Traditional Ukrainian hymn

They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son. Zechariah 12:10

Kaija-Liisa Martin and Seija Järvenpää (2014)
Aid Workers in Afghanistan

In western Afghanistan, just outside the city of Herat, there is a district named Injil, meaning "Gospel". There was a Christian community here until at least the 14th century – a fact often forgotten in a country where the Christian presence was eventually eliminated under Islamic rule. It was in Herat that two Finnish Christians, Kaija-Liisa and Seija, both aid workers and both in their fifties, were shot at point blank range by two men on a motorcycle on 24 July 2014 while in a taxi on their way to work.

The women had served in Afghanistan since the late 1990s with a Christian organisation which had been operating in the country for almost 50 years, mainly in health and economic development projects.

After a visit back to her homeland, Kaija-Liisa had returned to Herat just a week before she was killed, to take up the role of regional team leader, overseeing various projects, such as a mental health clinic for a war-traumatised generation. Seija had returned in 2013 in order to pilot a mental health project after completing a number of years of further studies in Finland.

A close Finnish friend spoke of their selfless service: "These women have given their lives – now literally – to help and serve the neediest of the needy in the hardest of places." They had lived through five tumultuous years of extreme Islamist rule under the Taliban (1996-2001) and many dangerous years which followed, in order to help the most marginalised Afghan women.

You are worthy, O Lamb, our Lord and God.
In the midst of earth's wolves we follow you
And sing along with those fully alive,
Above in our true home. We trust in you.
Ah, Afghanistan, if only you knew
The value of the things you throw away.
But in the age to come, not long from now,
You will. Yes, you shall know. Like waking from
Dark slumber you will see the one you pierced.

Kurt Mähler, USA, who lived in Afghanistan for a while and knew Kaija-Liisa and Seija

God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Psalm 46:1

Ili Christians (1342)
Frontier Town in China's Wild West

In the 14th century, the remote frontier town of Ili (modern Yining, Xinjiang), in far north-west China, was a place to which criminals and Christians were banished. Back then it was a very difficult place to get to, with mountains and glaciers to be traversed. However, brave missionaries travelled there and it was a flourishing early Christian mission centre.

In 1342, a rebel prince, who was a fanatical Muslim, poisoned the ruling khan and took his throne. The usurper immediately issued an edict ordering all Christians to renounce Jesus Christ and embrace Islam. Failure to do so would result in death. Taking no notice of this, the Christians publicly professed their faith and continued to worship openly.

At that time there were seven missionaries in Ili, selected for the maturity of their faith to serve in such a remote place. In June, they were arrested, chained together and made to stand before a furious Muslim mob, who struck the missionaries with whips and sticks, stabbed them, and cut off their noses and ears. The missionaries did not yield, but raised their voices to glorify Jesus and preach the Gospel until the Muslims beheaded them.

The local Christians, who included ethnic Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Mongols, Russians and Han Chinese, refused to flee and were thrown into prison, where they were tortured and many were killed.

The Church in Ili survived this onslaught and continued to exist for at least the next 430 years. Later, after the communist party came to power in 1949, Ili once again became the "gulag" (*laogai*) of China, a place to which criminals and Chinese Christians who refused to renounce their faith were exiled, helping to keep a Christian presence in the area.

A safe stronghold our God is still,
a trusty shield and weapon;
he'll keep us clear from all the ill
that hath us now o'ertaken

Martin Luther, Germany (1483-1546)

If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. 1 Peter 4:16

Yemane Kahasay Andom (2009)
Denied Medical Treatment

Yemane (43) died of malaria on 23 July 2009, but he died for Christ. For the previous 18 months he had been held in the Mitire Military Confinement Centre in Eritrea, imprisoned for his Christian faith, and the prison camp authorities refused to give him any medical treatment when he fell sick. His body was already weak from repeated beatings during his time in detention and two weeks before his death he had been put in solitary confinement for refusing to sign a statement recanting his faith.

I'm a part of the fellowship of the unashamed. The die has been cast. I have stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I'm a disciple of His and I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still. My past is redeemed. My present makes sense. My future is secure. I'm done and finished with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, tamed visions, mundane talking, cheap giving, and dwarfed goals.

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity. I don't have to be right, or first, or tops, or recognised, or praised, or rewarded. I live by faith, lean on His presence, walk by patience, lift by prayer, and labour by Holy Spirit power.

My face is set. My gait is fast. My goal is heaven. My road may be narrow, my way rough, my companions few, but my guide is reliable and my mission is clear. I will not be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, deluded or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice or hesitate in the presence of the adversary. I will not negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity. I won't give up, shut up, or let up until I have stayed up, stored up, prayed up, paid up, and preached up for the cause of Christ. I am a disciple of Jesus. I must give until I drop, preach until all know, and work until He comes. And when He does come for His own, He'll have no problems recognising me. My colours will be clear!

An African Martyr's Prayer, 20th century

I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:8

Jean-Marcel Kesvere (2014)
The Cost of Serving Christ in Cameroon's Far North

The price of being a missionary became starkly apparent for three Cameroonian Christian couples attending a series of missionary training seminars in Cameroon on the last day of the last seminar, in late July 2014. On that day came news that the body of Jean-Marcel Kesvere (45) had been found that morning in Bargaram, in Far North Cameroon. He was another Cameroonian missionary, who had planned to attend the seminar with his wife, Sharifa, but had been kidnapped by Islamist militants from the Nigeria-based Boko Haram group on 24 July.

Jean-Marcel Kesvere was described as "an amazing servant of the Lord", courageous, peaceful, and undaunted by difficulties. He had planted six churches, and his body was found near the village of Kamouna where one of those churches was established.

In 2014 the situation had been getting increasingly dangerous for Christians in the Far North region of Cameroon, where many Muslims live. In July that year, Boko Haram militants, who aim to eradicate Christians from as much territory as they can, carried out two attacks, killing 25 people and abducting others. Jean-Marcel Kesvere was one of those abducted. The attackers asked him what he did for a living and when he replied that he was a pastor, they bundled him into a car. His wife and children managed to escape with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

Yes, the Christian faith has a price, but missionary work in a context of persecution requires a greater price. I am ready to pay for my Lord as my brother Kesvere.

Yakob, Cameroonian missionary at the training seminar in July 2014

Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? Luke 15:4

Kim Yeong-hak (Yonghuk) (1933)
Pastor to Korean Migrants in Russia

"As long as even one [of my church members] remains in Vladivostok, I will continue to serve here because they are my sheep and I am their shepherd." Kim Yeong-hak was the first Korean pastor to suffer martyrdom overseas.

In 1910 Japan annexed Korea and soon made it like a giant prison camp. Many Christians were concerned about the way in which Christian schools were forced to embrace Shinto practices. Some got involved in the "March 1st Independence Movement" when it spread through the country in 1919. Kim, now pastor of a church in Gangwon Province (modern South Korea), was at the centre of the movement. He was arrested by the Japanese, along with virtually every pastor in Seoul and Pyongyang, and endured three harsh years in Seodaemun Prison, Seoul.

After release in 1922, he volunteered for mission work in Russia, where many Koreans had fled. But persecution under the Japanese in Korea was simply replaced by persecution under the Communists in Russia. Those without citizenship were prohibited from gathering for worship. It was a dangerous time but Kim refused to leave and continued to serve the Korean church in Vladivostok until the authorities detained him in 1930. They tried to force him to reject his faith, but he refused. He was sentenced to ten years' hard labour in Siberia, where he died in 1933, brave and faithful to the end.

But none of the ransomed ever knew
How deep were the waters crossed,
Nor how dark was the night that the Lord passed through,
Ere He found His sheep that was lost,
Out in the desert He heard its cry,
Sick and helpless and ready to die.
"Lord, whence are those blood-drops all the way,
That mark out the mountain's track?"
"They were shed for one who had gone astray,
Ere the Shepherd could bring him back."
"Lord, whence are Thy hands so rent and torn?"
"They're pierced tonight by many a thorn."

Elizabeth Cecilia Douglas Clephane, Scotland (1830-69)

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. Matthew 5:44-45

Hakkâri Christians (1843)
Worst Horrors since Timur's Time

"The houses of the wretched inhabitants were fired, and they themselves hunted down like wild beasts and exterminated. Neither sex nor age met with favour or mercy; the mother, brothers and sisters of the patriarch were the objects of peculiar barbarity, the former being literally sawed in two and the latter most shockingly mangled and mutilated." – a report in *The Times* newspaper on 6 September 1843, describing a massacre of Christians in Hakkâri (south-eastern Turkey).

This terrible event was just one of a series of massacres in 1843, during which at least 10,000 Christians were killed by an alliance of Kurdish leaders. Many Christian women and children were also captured and sold as slaves or bestowed as gifts on influential Muslims.

The mountainous region, inhabited mainly by Kurds, had had a Christian presence since at least the 4th century. In the 15th century many more Christians settled in Hakkâri having fled from the Mosul area to escape the ravages of the conquering Timur (Tamerlane).

The anti-Christian massacres were initiated by the powerful Kurdish leader Badr Khan in July 1843. Influenced by a fanatical Islamic scholar, his troops burned, killed and destroyed whatever they could find. It has been said that the atrocities were the worst since the time of Timur.

The two halves of the body of the patriarch's 87-year-old mother were placed on a raft on the River Zab, with a note reading, "Go and carry to your accursed son the intelligence that the same fate awaits him."

There are no Christians in Hakkâri now, only a few ruined church buildings.

The Gospel calls to love. And love includes the believer and the unbeliever, the near and the far, the friend and the enemy. And this love is like unto the love of the Most High Creator in its characteristics, for He makes His sun to rise and sends down His rain upon the good and the wicked.
Ishu'yab b. Malkun (died 1256), Bishop of Nasibin, modern Nusaybin, Turkey

You will not have to fight this battle. Take up your positions; stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will give you… Go out to face them tomorrow, and the Lord will be with you. 2 Chronicles 20:17

Four Nigerian Converts from Islam (approximately 2018)
"Men in White Fighting for Us"

Return to Islam or see their children killed: that was the terrible choice facing four Nigerian widows in a group of 76 Christian converts who had been captured by Boko Haram terrorists. Only a week earlier, the terrorists had killed their husbands, who were the leaders amongst the group of captives.

As the women sat together into the night, struggling under this terrible burden, their children came running in, telling their mothers that Jesus had appeared to them and told them all would be well. Then He appeared to the whole group of captive Christians telling them not to fear for He would protect them. He said they should not renounce Him but stay strong, knowing that He was "the Way, the Truth and the Life".

In the morning the children, the youngest a four-year-old girl, were lined up against a wall by Boko Haram. Their mothers refused the offer to return to Islam, and the terrorists prepared to shoot. Suddenly the gunmen began grabbing at their own heads, screaming and shouting, "Snakes, snakes!" Some ran away and others dropped dead. As one fell to the ground, a Christian captive reached down to pick up his weapon, but the youngest child put her hand on his arm and said, "You don't need to do that. Can you not see the men in white fighting for us?"

The 72 Christians survived. But their four leaders had been martyred. Ordered at gunpoint to deny Christ and return to Islam, the men had refused and were shot dead in front of their families and friends.

Of his deliverance I will boast, till all that are distressed
From my example comfort take, and soothe their griefs to rest.
Nahum Tate (1652-1715) and Nicholas Brady (1659-1726), both born in Ireland

Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!
Amos 5:24

Gudina Tumsa (1979)
Communist Ethiopia

The religious persecution of bygone communist governments is all too easily buried in history. One such was the Marxist-Leninist one-party rule of Ethiopia from 1974 to 1991 and one of its Christian martyrs was Gudina, a pastor who preached on the liberating power of the Gospel. Gudina called his Christian faith a "religion of love and justice" which brought a new life of freedom and dignity to his people. He paid with his life for his opposition to the government when he was extra-judicially executed by the Derg (military junta) in 1979.

Gudina was one of the first seven pastors of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY). Its democratic structure was a novelty in Ethiopia, which had for centuries been ruled by hereditary emperors until the communist takeover.

Gudina wrote, "Let not anyone deceive himself in taking Christianity as one of the social systems or ideologies. To be a Christian is to be a follower of the risen Christ, confessing him as the Lord of history." A clash between communist ideology and owning Christ as Lord was inevitable.

From 1977 Mengistu claimed absolute power and began eliminating his opponents. The Church suffered great persecution; much of its land and property was destroyed and its schools and hospitals were expropriated. Gudina was put under surveillance and twice arrested.

On 28 July 1979 he was abducted and for many years no one knew what had happened to him. It was not until 1992 that his death by strangulation at the hands of the Derg was confirmed. His wife, Tsehaye Tolesa, was arrested, tortured and imprisoned for almost ten years. Their children fled overseas.

To be a Christian is not to be a hero to make history for oneself. A Christian goes as a lamb to be slaughtered only when he/she knows that this is in complete accord with the will of God who has called him to his service.
Gudina Tumsa (1929-79), written a week before his abduction and murder

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot shaken, let us give thanks … indeed our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:28-29 (NRSV)

Eustathius (Evstati) of Mtskheta (550)
Consumed by God's Fire

Eustathius was descended from a long line of Zoroastrian priests, but declined his family's attempts to make him a priest too. He moved from Persia (modern Iran) to the Christian town of Mtskheta in Iberia (part of modern Georgia). Iberia was at that time controlled by Persia, whose official religion was Zoroastrianism. Here Eustathius worked as a shoemaker and eventually decided to follow Christ.

Other Persians tried vainly to persuade him to return to Zoroastrianism, a religion in which fire has an important part. Ustam, the chief of Mtskheta Fortress, threatened him but Eustathius replied, "For the sake of Christ I am prepared to endure not only torture but even death itself with rejoicing!"

Having no authority to punish him, Ustam sent Eustathius to the *marzban* (governor) in Tbilisi, together with seven other Zoroastrian converts to Christianity. The furious *marzban* ordered their heads and beards to be shaved, their noses pierced, weights hung round their necks and had them chained and thrown into prison to await execution. Two of the eight denied Christ and were pardoned. But later the rest were also freed, when the *marzban* yielded to the pleas of Iberian dignitaries.

A few years later a new *marzban* was appointed for Iberia and before long the Zoroastrian priests told him about Eustathius's conversion. Eustathius was arrested again, saying to his family as he was taken away: "Farewell, for I am not destined to return home again. I will not betray Christ."

Before the new *marzban*, Eustathius reaffirmed his Christian faith in a lengthy speech. The enraged *marzban* ordered that his head be cut off that night and his body left outside to be picked clean by the birds (in line with traditional Zoroastrian death rituals).

… through their crime we now follow thy footsteps more closely in the way of sacrifice. The terrible fire of the calamity burns up all selfishness and possessiveness in us … It makes obvious as never before our need to trust in God's love as shown in the cross of Jesus and his resurrection.

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti (1920–2008), Bishop of Iran (1960-90), from his prayer to be read at the funeral of his son, Bahram, martyred in 1980

For them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed. 1 Samuel 2:30 (AV)

Aleem Masih (2014)
"Honour" Killing in Pakistan

When Nadia Din left Islam to follow Christ, her family were furious. They grew even angrier when on 8 April 2014 she married Aleem, a Christian whose family had been Christians for generations. For Islam not only forbids apostasy but also forbids a Muslim woman to marry a Christian man. Nadia's Muslim relatives felt she had dishonoured them all by what she had done, so they set out to restore the family honour.

After the wedding Aleem and Nadia, knowing themselves to be in danger from her relatives, fled from Lahore to another town. They even filed court papers to seek protection from threats.

Nadia's mother, Parveen, stayed in contact with her daughter by telephone. After a while she told Nadia that the family had forgiven the couple and asked them to come and meet the family on 30 July. Trustingly, the couple travelled to Data Darbar, a famous Muslim shrine in Lahore, and waited in a rickshaw for Parveen. Suddenly Nadia's father, her brother and a stranger got into the rickshaw and forced the driver at gunpoint to take them all to a farm. There in a field the men beat both Aleem and Nadia, finally shooting dead Aleem. But Nadia had jumped in front of her husband to shield him and two bullets hit her abdomen. She was rushed to hospital and survived after a major operation.

Nadia's brother announced in his village that he had restored the honour of his family by killing a Christian infidel, then handed himself into the police station as the murderer. The mob chanted that he was a hero and threatened to kill other local Christians to restore the honour of Islam.

God, of your goodness, give me yourself; you are enough for me, and anything less that I could ask for would not do you full honour. And if I ask anything that is less, I shall always lack something, but in you alone I have everything.
Julian of Norwich, England (1342–1416)

They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. Revelation 22:4

Martyrs of Najran (c. 523)
Women Make a Brave Stand

A Jewish king called Yusuf As'ar (also known as Dhu Nuwas and Masruq), reigning in southern Arabia, fiercely persecuted the Christians there. In 523 he blockaded Najran, a Christian town. The inhabitants surrendered because the king had promised to spare them. But they were *not* spared, for he tried to force them to renounce Christ.

Some 427 clergy were thrown into a ditch filled with burning fuel, over 200 noblemen were beheaded, and 4,000 ordinary people were killed for refusing to declare "Christ is a man and not a God".

Troops then rounded up 177 wives and daughters of the martyred noblemen, who were ordered by the Jewish general to spit on the cross and become Jews. The women replied, "God forbid that we should spit on His cross or that we should treat it with contempt for by it He has prepared for us redemption from our error… We pray that, as our husbands died, we may be deemed worthy to die, we also for the sake of Christ, God."

The women, with their children, were taken to the place where their menfolk had been martyred. Covering their children with clothes, they stood praying as arrows were fired at them until, one by one, they fell wounded to the ground. Their prayer was:

"Christ, God, come to our help! O, our Lord Jesus Christ, behold our oppression in this moment and turn not away from us, but grant in us the power to accomplish this our way by martyrdom for Thy sake, that we may also go and reach our brethren who died for Thy sake."

When none was left able to stand, soldiers went in with swords to finish them off, along with the children.

He that hath seen God once in the face of Christ, dares look the grimmest creature in the face, yea, death itself under any shape. The fear of all things flies before such a soul.
Richard Sibbes, England (1577-1635)

They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.
Isaiah 11:9

Eluned (Welsh: Eiliwedd) (late 5th century)
A Brecon Princess

Princess Eluned was a daughter of the devout Christian King Brychan of Brycheiniog (modern Brecon, South Wales). One of many pagan Celts who converted to Christianity during the period of Roman rule in Britain (43-410), King Brychan brought up his children in the faith with a view to them spreading the Gospel to the Welsh and other Celtic people. According to tradition he had 24 sons and 24 daughters, most of whom went as missionaries to Cornwall, but Eluned chose to remain in Wales.

A pagan prince sought to marry Eluned and thus form a political alliance, but she refused him and ran away to avoid being forced into the relationship. As a Christian she did not want to marry a pagan prince; instead she espoused herself to Christ, the Prince of Peace. She travelled to Llanddew, Llanfilo and Llechfaen, but in all these places the locals, despising her dishevelled appearance, did not welcome her. She was homeless until her arrival at Slwch Tump where the local lord hospitably received her and gave her protection. Later she lived in an isolated hermitage on a nearby hill called Pen Cefn-y-Gaer (Penginger), but eventually her rejected suitor found her. She ran away from him again. He chased her down the hill and beheaded her. (It was a pagan Celtic belief that the human soul resided in the head, so after battle they would decapitate the corpses of their enemies and collect up their heads to store or display.)

On the mount of crucifixion,
Fountains opened deep and wide;
Through the floodgates of God's mercy
Flowed a vast and gracious tide.
Grace and love, like mighty rivers,
Poured incessant from above,
And Heav'n's peace and perfect justice
Kissed a guilty world in love.
William Rees, Wales (1802-83). Originally in Welsh (*Dyma gariad fel y moroedd*), translated into English by William Edwards (1848-1929), it became known as the "love song" of the Welsh Revival (1904-05)

A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. Isaiah 42:3

Iraqi Christians (2004)
Five Churches Attacked

Christians were very vulnerable to attacks by Islamist militants in the years after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Weak and defenceless, believers saw their homes destroyed and members of their community killed, simply because they were followers of Christ.

Sunday is a working day in Muslim-majority Iraq, so the main Christian worship services are held in the evening. On Sunday 1 August 2004, a wave of car bombs was detonated within a few minutes of each other outside five Iraqi churches – four in the capital Baghdad and one in Mosul in the plains of Nineveh, the historic centre of Iraqi Christianity. The bombs were timed to go off as Christian worshippers were leaving the evening services. At least twelve people died, and over 60 were injured.

Christians believed that the aim of the bombs was not only to kill and maim as many as possible but also to frighten them into leaving Iraq. The largest explosion was in Karada, in central Baghdad, where a car bomb outside a church left a crater more than 1.5 metres wide. But the bloodiest assault was at a church in the Christian neighbourhood of Dora in southern Baghdad where bodies and human remains were scattered across the church's precincts.

In November 2003 bombs had been found at two Christian schools, accompanied by messages ordering Christians to convert to Islam or be killed; and in December a bomb exploded at a church in Baghdad on Christmas Eve.

These many attacks on the Iraqi Christian community showed not only their vulnerability but also their faithfulness, for they did not yield to the temptation to deny Christ.

Thou wilt not break a bruised reed,
Or quench the smallest spark of grace,
Till through the soul thy power is spread,
Thy all-victorious righteousness.

Charles Wesley, England (1707-88)

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labour prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Thessalonians 1:3

Faith, Hope and Love (126)
Sophia's Three Daughters

Faith, Hope and Love were named after the three Christian virtues in 1 Corinthians 13:13 by their mother Sophia, a Christian widow from Rome (in modern Italy). She raised them to love the Lord Jesus and show their faith openly, during a time when Christians were persecuted.

The virtue of the three beautiful sisters attracted attention. One day an official called Antiochus denounced the Christian family to the emperor. They prayed fervently for strength not to fear the impending torture and death, but to fear God.

Summoned in turn to sacrifice to the goddess Artemis, all the girls refused, with a calm composure that astonished the onlookers. The oldest sister, Faith, aged twelve, was the first to suffer for her faith in Christ when she was put in a cauldron of boiling tar and oil. She sat in it as if it were cool water and praised God. Despairing of making her deny Christ, her persecutors beheaded her in front of her mother and younger sisters.

Then Hope (aged ten) was thrown first into a fire and then into a cauldron, but she remained unharmed. Before her beheading, she encouraged nine-year-old Love, "Do not be left here, sister. Let us stand together before the Holy Trinity." Love was thrown into a stove, but walked about in it as if in a cool place, singing praises to God. The emperor ordered ever more cruel tortures, but Love endured all until finally she too was beheaded.

Sophia watched it all, then buried her daughters and mourned at their graves for three days, before dying peacefully at the graveside. Although she had not suffered for Christ in the flesh, she had suffered for Him in her heart.

O Lord Jesus, unto Thee Thy lamb doth cry with a great voice: O my Bridegroom, Thee I love; and seeking Thee, I now contest, and with Thy baptism am crucified and buried. I suffer for Thy sake, that I may reign with Thee; for Thy sake I die, that I may live in Thee: accept me offered out of longing to Thee as a spotless sacrifice.
Apolytikion, an Orthodox Christian worship hymn

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news.
Isaiah 52:7

Zang Kho Let and Luai Thang Thihnak (1993)
Chin Pastors Targeted

It was in the early 1900s that the first Chin person decided to follow Christ. Mountainous, poor and remote Chin State now has the largest concentration of Christians in Myanmar (Burma) and the Christian faith is deeply entrenched in Chin culture and identity. Large Christian crosses were erected on hilltops overlooking villages.

In 1990 the military government (see March 14) began sending troops and Buddhist monks to try to persuade Chins to convert to Buddhism. They also destroyed the hilltop crosses and tried to prevent Chin Christians from evangelising the 10% of Chins who still followed traditional animist religions.

Luai Thang Thihnak was an evangelist in the Paletwa region, a predominantly animist area. In June 1993, while officiating at a wedding, he was kicked, punched and beaten with a rifle butt by a soldier for holding a Christian service without army permission. The army warned him that they would not tolerate the presence of a pastor in the area. Two months later, on 14 August, his dead body was found near a river. His arms had been broken and there were cuts from a knife or sword on his chest and back.

On 2 August, the army interrogated Pastor Zang Kho Let. They beat him mercilessly, trying in vain to make him confess to using church funds to buy weapons. Then they cut open his mouth to the neck, saying, "We cut open your mouth so that you will no longer preach." After two days of such treatment he was still alive, so they suffocated him with a plastic bag. After he was dead, the soldiers shot him, claiming he had been trying to escape.

The beautiful mountains and hills of our land
Where the symbolic crosses used to stand
Oh my God! Where are they now?
Let's ceaselessly pray to the Lord
The enemy is now shamelessly using them for abode
But someday they must be the temples of the Lord.
Pi Thong Thluai, a Chin Christian. This song, translated into English by Pu Thlasui Tluangneh, is about the destruction of Christian crosses in Chin State.

Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always. Remember the wonders he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced. 1 Chronicles 16:11-12

Eusignius of Antioch (362)
Eyewitness to Cross in the Sky

According to tradition, Eusignius was martyred at the age of 110. Evidently blessed with great robustness, he had served 60 years with the Roman army before retiring. In his long life many Roman emperors had come and gone, some of them ruthless persecutors of Christians, but one was Constantine, the first Christian emperor. He converted to Christianity after seeing a cross of light in the sky with Greek words meaning, "In this sign, conquer." The following day, 28 October 312, his troops won a decisive victory. The entire army, including Eusignius, had witnessed the cross in the sky. The following year Constantine and his co-emperor Licinius issued the Edict of Milan 313, which established freedom of religion throughout the empire.

After retirement, Eusignius settled in his home town of Antioch in Syria and devoted himself to prayer, fasting and good works. In 361 Emperor Julian came to the throne. Rejecting his Christian upbringing, the new emperor announced his conversion to paganism and became a ferocious persecutor of the Church. He purged the top-level bureaucracy of Christians and attempted to revive pagan Roman religious practices. He is known as Julian the Apostate.

Two men with a dispute asked the aged Eusignius to decide the matter. The one whom Eusignius judged to be at fault was so angry at the decision that he denounced Eusignius as a Christian before the emperor. At his trial, Eusignius fiercely criticised the emperor for his apostasy, citing the example of his uncle Emperor Constantine and the sign of the cross in the sky. Julian ordered Eusignius to deny Christ and honour the Roman gods. Eusignius refused and was beheaded.

Now in the strength of Jesus rise with haste,
Your eager course fulfil with joy, nor waste
The lingering hours of time's short day;
For evening falls and beckons you away
To stand before the gate.
And then, die well, for life's last tide
Must swiftly ebb and will for no man wait
One moment more beside.

Samuel Rutherford, Scotland (1600-61)

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Christians of the Central African Republic (2013)
A Nation Rocked

The Islamist Séléka rebels, a coalition of local militants and foreign jihadists, seized control of the Central African Republic (CAR) in a bloody coup in March 2013. Targeting Christian villages, they rampaged throughout the Christian-majority nation, killing, raping and looting, but sparing Muslim villages. In June, a group of bishops wrote, "One has not yet finished counting the loss of human lives, and the rapes, looting, the burning of villages, the destruction of fields, violations and looting of private homes, families illegally dispossessed of their homes illegally occupied by a strong man or by an armed gang." They also highlighted "the zeal and determination with which the elements of Séléka have desecrated Christian places of worship".

In early August 2013, at least 15 believers were killed when rebels raided 14 Christian villages in Bouar, west CAR. The militants threw the dead bodies, including a five-month-old baby, into a river. At least 1,000 were displaced. By the end of the year many more had fled.

In December at least 400 were killed when fighting broke out in the capital Bangui. A church where people took refuge was attacked by Muslim groups. Christians were hanged, stabbed or beaten to death by their Muslim neighbours and their shops pillaged and looted. Many bodies were left abandoned in the streets. An open grave with dumped bodies was discovered near to a Séléka base.

O Lord our God, who has called us to serve You,
In the midst of the world's affairs,
When we stumble, hold us;
When we fall, lift us up;
When we are hard pressed with evil, deliver us;
When we turn from what is good, turn us back;
And bring us at last to Your glory.

Alcuin of York, England (c. 735-804)

All the nations may walk in the name of their gods, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever. Micah 4:5

Simele Massacre (1933)
Killed in Ancestral Homeland

In 1933 violent persecution struck Assyrian and Syriac Christians once again. Although this community had lived in what is now Iraqi Kurdistan for centuries, their numbers had increased in the previous 90 years as many returned to the ancient homeland, fleeing from Kurdish persecution (see July 26) or from the Ottoman Empire's anti-Christian genocide (see May 23). Now it was the armed forces of the Iraqi state (founded in 1932) who systematically massacred the Christians.

After the First World War, when the major powers re-drew borders in the Middle East, there were hopes that an Assyrian state might be formed. But this did not happen then, nor when the British mandate in Iraq ended in 1932. The Christians were left as a minority within a Muslim-majority country.

Bakr Sidqi, a Kurdish Iraqi general, was given permission to eliminate "any and all Assyrians". On 7 August Iraqi soldiers carried out a massacre in and around the town of Simele, machine-gunning or bludgeoning Christians to death. Some were set on fire with burning Bibles, pregnant women were bayoneted, young girls were raped. A survivor recalled how the soldiers said, "Either become Muslim or we will kill you." The attacks continued until 11 August, and also targeted more than 100 nearby Christian villages. A British eyewitness said, "I saw and heard horrible things in the Great War [World War One], but what I saw in Simele is beyond human imagination."

Back in the second century, the inhabitants of Simele (meaning "in the Name of God") had become Christians en masse, but by 1933 Kurdish Muslims predominated. The total number of Christians killed in this massacre is estimated at 3,000 to 6,000. August 7 is now commemorated annually as Assyrian Martyrs Day.

In Your light we shall see light, Jesus full of light.
For You are the True Light that lights the creation.
Make us shine with Your glorious light, O Radiance of the Heavenly Father.
The Liturgy of Saint Jacob Bar Salibi, Syriac Orthodox Church

Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, we will come to them and make our home with them. John 14:23

Kund Iverson (1853)
Drowned for Obeying God's Word

Kund was a little Norwegian boy of strong faith who lived in Chicago, USA. He loved his Bible and his Saviour and never failed to attend Sunday school.

One summer afternoon in August 1853, he went to see his cow. When he came to a stream of water, a gang of other boys came up to him and tried to force him to enter Mr Elston's garden and steal some apples. As a Christian, Kund knew it was wrong to steal, so he said promptly, "I cannot steal." His refusal infuriated the gang, who grabbed him and shouted, "You've got to." They dunked his head again and again into the stream, demanding that he steal the fruit. Again and again Kund repeated that God had said, "Thou shalt not steal." (Exodus 20:15, AV)

This angered the gang even more, as they were used to being able to frighten smaller boys into robbing gardens for them. Even though the water was choking him, Kund never wavered, for he knew what God had said. Finally they held him under until his struggles stopped. He would die rather than break God's law, and was drowned for his steadfast integrity in keeping to his Christian principles.

Nothing is so blessed as quiet, unbroken communication with our Lord. The sense of the Lord's nearness, which then fills our souls, is greater than any other peace, joy, inner satisfaction, or security which we have known. Even adversity and sorrow lose their sting when we share everything with the Lord… Everything is different when the Lord is at our side… Our difficulties no longer frighten us. Not even human contrariness or the unpleasantness we experience at the hands of our fellow men can disturb our peace. In the quiet, peaceful joy which we are experiencing we do not feel like being angry with them.

Ole Hallesby, Norway (1879-1961)

How long, Sovereign Lord? Revelation 6:10

Takashi Nagai (1951) and other Nagasaki Christians (1945) Atomic Bomb

Nagasaki: famous across the world as the Japanese city on which America dropped their second atomic bomb. But before that Nagasaki was renowned amongst Japanese Christians as a centre of the faith – and therefore of persecution. Twenty-six Christians were crucified in Nagasaki in 1597. In 1637-38 some 37,000 Christian peasants in the Nagasaki area were massacred. In 1867-69 around 3,000 Christians were arrested in Nagasaki and deported to other parts of Japan.

The atomic bomb of 9 August 1945 was detonated over Urakami, the Christian district of Nagasaki, killing more than 10,000 of the 15,000 Christians in the city as well as 60,000 other Nagasaki residents. The hypocentre of the blast was 500 metres from Urakami Cathedral, one of the largest churches in the Far East.

The planned target had been Kokura, but clouds prevented the plane crew from seeing the ground. After circling three times, they gave up and flew to Nagasaki (population 250,000). Its huge cathedral was easy to spot, despite the weather, and there they dropped the bomb. In addition to the 70,000 instant deaths, many other people died in the coming days, weeks and years from injuries and radiation poisoning.

A Christian doctor, Takashi Nagai, survived until 1951. His wife, at home when the bomb fell, had died immediately in its fiery ruins. In his last years, Dr Nagai lived in a simple one-room cabin which he called *Nyokodo*, meaning "Love-Thy-Neighbour-as-Thyself House". Despite the fact that he was slowly dying, he devoted his life to prayer, serving others and seeking God's glory in all things. His final words, after commending his spirit to God, were "Pray, please pray."

Each of us must experience pain and tragedy, including the ultimate tragedy, death, and maybe a violent one at that. If we have Nagai's kind of faith in the Father's Providence and in Christ's all-embracing death, we can meet anything with peace.
A sermon in a Japanese church, close to the 40th anniversary of the atomic bombs, 1985

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. Colossians 2:15

Christians in the Soviet Union (1929-39) Viewed as "Enemies of the People"

The Penal Code of the Soviet Union did not list believing in God as a "crime". So other articles in the Code had to be used against faithful Christians, such as the 40,000 Russian Orthodox clergy and 40,000 other church workers who perished in the period 1929-39. Article 58 (anti-Soviet propaganda, counter-revolutionary activities and espionage) was often used.

Evangelical churches, which were mostly in rural areas, were almost completely destroyed. This resulted from the 1930s policies of mass terror, the collectivisation of small landholdings, and the closure and confiscation of "prayer houses" (that is, churches). Many Christians were sent to gulags (labour camps) or shot.

The worst persecution was in 1937-38. According to an official Soviet report, in four months 31,359 "churchmen and sectarians" were arrested, of whom 13,671 were sentenced to death by shooting.

Many executions took place at the Butovo firing range, in Leninsky District, Moscow Oblast. On 8 August 1937 the first 91 victims were transported to Butovo in trucks marked "Bread" or "Meat". Some were shot in the back of the head. Others were killed by flooding their trucks with carbon monoxide gas. The last executions there were on 19 October 1938. The exact number killed at Butovo remains unknown but it included about 1,000 members of the Russian Orthodox clergy. Other church leaders were also killed, deemed "enemies of the people".

It was not until 1989, when communist rule started to collapse, that relatives of those shot began to receive death certificates. Butovo was transferred to the Church in 1995. A small church dedicated to "New Martyrs" was inaugurated the next year and a larger Church of the Resurrection was completed in 2007.

If you want to find something real in Christianity, then search for it only through the risen Christ … God entered our human struggle, the great struggle of spirit against darkness, evil, oppression. He who was rejected, condemned, killed, humiliated, somehow focused all the misfortunes of the world in himself and triumphed over all of them.
Alexander Men, USSR, modern Russian Federation (martyred 1990)

For He was indeed crucified in weakness, yet He lives by God's power. And though we are weak in Him, yet by God's power we will live with Him to serve you. 2 Corinthians 13:4 (Berean Study Bible)

"Dusty" Miller (1945)
Crucified for his Goodness

"Dusty dead? Dusty – the man of deep faith and warm heart – the man who was incapable of a mean act, even against a brutal tormentor. He had been rewarded for his goodness by hatred – his radiant goodness which must have maddened the warrant officer to the point where he went berserk. There, like his Master, he died, so far from his homeland, so far from everyone, yet so near to God. I moved off to a corner of the camp that I might bear my grief alone. The surroundings misted so that nothing was clear anymore; there was only the reality of suffering, disappointment, and sorrow. Then I could see once again the light that had challenged the darkness in the valley of the shadow – light that had been reflected from gentle faces… I could see Dusty Miller kneeling before me with his rag and his basin, telling me with a smile of his plans for the future as he cleaned my ulcers… The words of St Paul came to me: 'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of the darkness, hath shined in our hearts.' [2 Corinthians 4:6, AV] It was that light which I had seen in so many faces that helped me to see in my own darkness."

These words were written by Ernest Gordon, a fellow British prisoner of war (PoW) in a Japanese concentration camp in Thailand during the Second World War. The prisoners were forced to construct a railway to Burma (Myanmar), during which many thousands died. Dusty was a constant source of hope and encouragement to his fellow prisoners. When Ernest was very sick and thought to be dying, Dusty and another Christian PoW cared for him so devotedly that, against all expectation, he recovered.

But Dusty's own death was not from the harsh conditions in which the PoWs lived and laboured. Just two weeks before the war's end he was crucified by a hostile Japanese guard.

I see His blood upon the rose, and in the stars the glory of His eyes,
His body gleams amid eternal snows, His tears fall from the skies.
All pathways by His feet are worn, His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn, His cross in every tree.
Joseph Plunkett, Ireland (1887-1916)

Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. 1 Peter 4:12-13

Gurumurthy Madi and Sukhdev Negi (2015)
Maoist Guerrillas in India

Pastor Gurumurthy Madi (aged 29) was known in Malkangiri district of Odisha (formerly Orissa) state as a preacher of the Gospel, who shared the Word of God and was always ready to give help to the needy. Odisha state is one of the Indian states where a Maoist guerrilla group called the Naxalites were operating, especially in remote tribal areas (see also February 11).

Naxalites claim to represent the poorest and most socially marginalised members of Indian society and adhere to the Maoist doctrine of peasant-led revolution. For decades they had waged guerrilla warfare against landlords, politicians and security forces. In 2015 they controlled large territories in eastern India.

Through Pastor Madi's ministry, two Naxalite commanders and 22 Naxalites gave themselves up to local police. This brought him to the attention of Naxalite leaders who demanded that he hand over a fellow pastor who had been a Naxalite before his conversion to Christianity. Madi refused to do so. For this, he was shot dead in the forest near his village by a group of Naxalites on 17 August 2015.

Just five days earlier Sukhdev Negi, an influential Christian and *sarpanch* (village chief), had been killed by Naxalites in front of his family on 12 August 2015, in Bhairamgarh, Chhattisgarh state. When local Christians protested, his attackers beat them too. Sukhdev's brother, Sahdev, had been abducted by Naxalites in 2013. On his release, the Naxalites warned him never to return to his home village or to speak about his Christian faith.

If I ask to be delivered from trial rather than for deliverance out of it, to the praise of His glory; if I forget that the way of the Cross leads to the Cross and not to a bank of flowers; if I regulate my life on these lines, or even unconsciously my thinking, so that I am surprised when the way is rough and think it strange, though the word is, "Think it not strange", "Count it all joy", then I know nothing of Calvary love.

Amy Carmichael, Ireland, now Northern Ireland (1867–1951)

Oh, that my words were recorded … that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead, or engraved in rock for ever! I know that my redeemer lives. Job 19:23-25

Cassian of Imola (363)
Teacher Killed by Pupils' Pens

Cassian was a Christian schoolteacher in Imola, a town roughly equidistant from modern Bologna and Ravenna, in north-eastern Italy. As he instructed his pagan pupils in their studies, he also discreetly taught them the Christian faith. During a period of Christian persecution under the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate (reigned 361-363), teachers were ordered to take an oath to the pagan gods, which Cassian, as a Christian, refused to do. He was therefore turned over to the authorities and interrogated. Steadfastly refusing to deny Christ and sacrifice to the pagan gods, he was condemned to death. Since he was a schoolteacher, he was sentenced to die at the hands of his own pupils, who were to be his executioners.

The boys had no weapons except their school "stationery" which in those days consisted of a wax-covered wooden tablet and an iron pen-like implement called a stylus, which had a sharp point at one end to scratch letters on the wax. At the other end the stylus had a flat blade that would be warmed and then used to smooth the wax, erasing the writing so the tablet could be re-used.

Cassian was stripped naked and tied to a post. Then some 200 schoolboys set about stabbing and hacking him with their styluses and hitting him with their tablets. Cassian suffered thousands of small wounds and punctures all over his body, but no fatal blow could be struck with any of the implements. It is believed to have taken the boys days to kill him, Cassian remaining conscious throughout and encouraging them to strike him harder because he was eager to die for Christ.

The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell;
It goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.
The guilty pair, bowed down with care, God gave His Son to win;
His erring child He reconciled, and pardoned from his sin.

O love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure – the saints' and angels' song.

Frederick Martin Lehman, USA (1868-1953)

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.
Acts 16:31

Abdalla Yousef and Mahanna Mohammed (1994)
Muslim Clan Becomes Christian

In the early 1970s a Sudanese Muslim called Abdalla Yousef had a vision that gave him and the whole of his clan – about a hundred people – the desire to become Christians. After a period of Christian teaching, they were received into the church in 1972-73. The Archbishop of Khartoum had taken the precaution of consulting the Sudanese authorities and had received an assurance that this group of people were free to choose their religion. The clan suffered some harassment in the small town of Um Ruwabba, where they all lived, and therefore moved to the larger town of Wad Medani, near Khartoum. Some two decades later, conversion from Islam to another faith became officially punishable by death in Sudan under the 1991 Criminal Act. On 14 July 1994, security forces and police raided Abdalla's house and took away Bibles and baptismal certificates. Eight people were arrested, some of whom were later released. Four days later, Abdalla (65), Ahmed Yousef (51), Mahanna Mohammed (43) and Hassan Bakhit (43) were brought to trial and charged with apostasy. Abdalla, the clan chief, was sentenced to 100 lashes, after which he had to return to Islam or be hanged and crucified. His sentence was implemented immediately, but after the fourth stroke Abdalla fell to the ground, so the rest of his punishment was suspended. Mahanna received 100 lashes. There was no doctor present either during the administration of the punishment or afterwards. The two other accused were released to await further judicial procedures. On the same day, 18 July, four more members of the family were arrested. In mid-August Abdalla Yousef and Mahanna were executed by crucifixion. In July 2020, Christians rejoiced greatly, especially converts from Islam, when the news came that Sudan's apostasy law had been abolished.

…a message of joy so deep, a message of hope so high, A message of love so wonderful, a message of salvation so sure; The message of a Father who loves, and Himself is love, Who shows mercy, and Himself is mercy… Human beings have passed You by these 2,000 years. And have never really discovered love or mercy, joy or hope, or the salvation they so desire, Or even a Father that gathers them together into one family, And loved them before they came into being, And loves them now in order to love them into eternity. We may not understand this love, but do not allow us to ignore or reject it.
Gabriel Zubeir Wako (born 1941), Archbishop of Khartoum, Sudan

When you are brought before … rulers and authorities, do not worry about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say. Luke 12:11-12

Prince Constantin Brâncoveanu, His Sons Constantin, Stefan, Radu and Matei, and Brother-in-Law Ianache Văcărescu (1714) Romanian Princely Dynasty Wiped Out

When Constantin became Prince of Wallachia (modern Romania) in 1688, one of his first tasks was to oversee the publication of the Bucharest Bible, the first complete translation of the Bible into the Romanian language. Wallachia was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, but Constantin, guided by Christian principles, ruled wisely and justly. He built or restored many churches and founded many schools. His reign was considered a period of blessing for Wallachia.

In 1714 Constantin was deposed by the Ottoman Sultan Ahmed III. He, his four sons and advisor, Ianache (who was also his brother-in-law), were imprisoned and tortured. They were offered their freedom if they would convert to Islam and pay a large sum, but they refused. On 15 August they were brought before the Sultan. Constantin was invited to renounce his Christian faith to save his relatives. He replied: "All my fortunes and all I had, I have lost! Let us not lose our souls. Be brave and manly, my beloved! Ignore death. Look at how much Christ, our Saviour, has endured for us and with what shameful death he died. Firmly believe in this and do not move, nor leave your faith for this life and this world." His four sons and advisor were beheaded in front of him. Matei (12), the youngest, was so frightened after seeing the heads of his brothers fall that he started to cry and asked his father to let him convert to Islam. Constantin said: "Of our kind none have lost their faith. It is better to die a thousand times than to leave your ancient faith just to live a few more years on earth." Matei listened and offered his head. Lastly, Constantin himself was beheaded.

A man really believes not what he recites in his creed, but only the things he is ready to die for.
Richard Wurmbrand (also known as Nicolai Ionescu) (1909-2001), Romanian pastor of Jewish descent who was imprisoned in communist Romania for 14 years for his faith

I took you from the ends of the earth, from its farthest corners I called you.
Isaiah 41:9

Edwin Nobbs and Fisher Young (1864)
The Way of the Cross

In 1861 two Christian fathers, who had settled on Norfolk Island, offered their young sons, Edwin and Fisher, to the work of the Melanesian Mission. The boys were given time to "count the cost" but later that year both made their decision to give themselves to the work of God. Three years after that, Edwin (21) and Fisher (17) were on a mission trip to the Solomon Islands and landed at an island called Santa Cruz (Holy Cross), where they were attacked with arrows. Both were injured, and had medical care when they got back to their ship. An arrow that had gone right through Fisher's wrist was pulled out. Edwin's cheek wound at first seemed less serious. All seemed well for a day or two until the dreaded tetanus (lockjaw) began to afflict them. Soon Fisher's jaws were tightly locked and the pain grew intense. In his agonies, Fisher never lost his childlike trust in his heavenly Father. Thinking of his earthly father's coming grief and forgiving his killers, he said, "Tell my father that I was in the path of duty; he will be so glad. Poor Santa Cruz people!" His thoughts then turned to the angels singing in heaven, and very soon he joined them there.

Some days later Edwin's jaws also stiffened. At first there was hope he might survive, for he was a big strong man. Even in his delirium, he spoke only of things holy and pure and was almost continually in prayer. His death struggle on 5 September was so terrible that three people could scarcely hold him, and at last he passed into the place where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

Behold everything dependeth upon the Cross, and everything lieth in dying; and there is none other way unto life and to true inward peace, except the way of the Holy Cross … how dost thou seek another way than this royal way, which is the way of the Holy Cross?
Thomas à Kempis, Germany (1380-1471)

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures for ever. Isaiah 40:8

Gideon Adwok Deng, Simon Anyang, William Olyew and Baptist Mufighi (1964)
Sudanese Christians

"We will deal with you." This threat to the Christians of Sudan was uttered by Mohammed Irwa, the Sudanese Interior Minister, in 1964.

The Sudanese government, based in the mainly Muslim, mainly Arab North, had already ordered the immediate expulsion of all foreign missionaries on 27 February 1964. After the Interior Minister's words, the killing of Sudanese Christians began.

On 15 August Pastor Gideon Adwok Deng, who served in Malute (now Melut, South Sudan), and two of his church elders, Simon and William, were killed. Their bodies, weighted with stones, were dumped into the River Nile.

Baptist Mufighi of Deim Zubeir (now Uyujuku, South Sudan) was tortured and killed by "security" police. He had started a Christian school that faced much opposition from the local Muslim community, especially the man who ran the nearby Muslim school.

The country was in the midst of a civil war between North and South, which had begun in 1955, a year before it gained independence. The people of South Sudan, who were mainly African and either Christians or followers of traditional African religions, sought a measure of autonomy from the North, which differed from them in both ethnicity and religion. The government accused Sudanese pastors and Christians in the South of aiding the Southern insurgents.

During a wave of brutal violence in 1964, many churches closed for months or even longer, and schools were closed for the whole year. However, the young Church in the south of Sudan stood steadfast in their faith. After two long civil wars, South Sudan eventually became an independent nation in 2011.

But God is not defeated.
Ezra Baya Lawiri (1917-91), Sudanese church minister killed in crossfire during the second civil war in Sudan. He is reflecting on the persecution of Sudanese Christians in the 1960s.

The ways of the LORD are right; the righteous walk in them. Hosea 14:9

Martha (1983)
Bible Distributor

Martha was born in communist China in 1959. She committed her life to Jesus Christ as a teenager, joined a "house church" (unofficial church) and fervently shared the Gospel. In 1982 she got engaged but decided to postpone her wedding for two years in order to concentrate on distributing Bibles.

Bible distribution was a demanding ministry. As she travelled, Martha would sleep in the open and often got badly bitten by mosquitoes. Sometimes she was also attacked by zealous communists opposed to what she was doing. One day Martha was four hours late for a rendezvous in the city of Xi'an with another Christian. Arriving at last, she explained that on the way a group of communist village leaders had beaten her after discovering that she had given away a Bible.

To Martha, all of this suffering was worth it, in order to distribute the Word of God to fellow believers and to seekers of the truth. But on one trip she disappeared. Her friends and family found a scribbled letter telling them she had been arrested. A few weeks later, at the age of 24, she was executed.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Bibles had been banned in China. Many Christians copied portions of the Scriptures by hand, memorised Bible passages or shared together one village's single tattered text. Any copies discovered were confiscated or burned. In the early 1980s the Chinese authorities allowed the Church to resume printing Bibles but it could not print enough to meet the growing needs of believers. Also, the sale of Bibles was approved for "internal distribution" only, through official (i.e. legally registered) churches, not in bookshops. Rural Christians and those who belonged to house churches still struggled to obtain a Bible.

All the way my Saviour leads me, cheers each winding path I tread;
Gives me grace for every trial, feeds me with the living Bread.
Though my weary steps may falter, and my soul athirst may be,
Gushing from the Rock before me, lo! A spring of joy I see.

Frances Jane Crosby, USA (1820-99)

I know that the LORD secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy. Psalm 140:12

Nasir Masih (2004)
Pakistani Christian Dies in Police Custody

Nasir Masih died on 19 August 2004, after three days of being beaten and tortured by the police in Sheikhupura, Pakistan. He had been seized from his home in Baldia by a group of Muslims on 16 August. A few hours later, the police informed his family that Nasir had been arrested and charged with theft. The allegation was made by one of those who seized him, and his father declared that it could not have been be true, saying, "This is a conspiracy based on religious enmity to kill my son." By the time Nasir was dead, he had sustained 20 separate injuries.

Hundreds of Christians protested against Nasir's murder by blocking the Sheikhupura to Lahore road on 20 August. As a result, the police eventually registered a case against ten people, including six policemen, for torturing Nasir to death. They also registered cases against 30 protestors, two of whom were pastors preparing to lead Nasir's funeral.

Many Christians in Pakistan are denied justice, especially if they are poor, such as Nasir's family. Those who violently abuse them are rarely punished.

O Lord, let not Your people be crushed.
Grant them the peace beyond understanding.
Lift them out of the depths of despair
And give them Hope.
Lift them up from where they lie trampled
And give them Your Divine strength to go on.
In their afflictions, comfort them.
In their trials, strengthen them.
When their strength is gone, grant them Your strength.

Patrick Sookhdeo, Guyana (born 1947)

That they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:2-3

El Kaid (1902)
Spoke Only of Jesus

One of the first indigenous Moroccan believers for many hundreds of years, El Kaid ("the Captain"), left Islam to follow Christ in 1890. He made his decision after reading the Scriptures with a Lebanese missionary who had come to Morocco as a Bible colporteur (distributor). El Kaid was an officer in the local artillery; hence the nickname by which he was always known to the missionaries.

El Kaid stood firm in his faith in the Lord Jesus Christ despite many persecutions. In 1901, fully aware of the death penalty in Morocco for those who left Islam, he began to serve as a Bible colporteur himself, along with two other Moroccan Christians. He was known for "his sterling Christian character, his eager appreciation of spiritual truth, and his diligence in service". But his earthly service was cut short so that he could stand "before the throne of God and serve him day and night" (Revelation 7:15).

In the northern town of Larache, a fanatical Muslim denounced El Kaid publicly as a traitor and infidel, and called upon townspeople to put him to death (in line with the teachings of classical Islam about the death penalty for adult male apostates). One day El Kaid was attacked in the street by a group of Muslims who fatally injured him. In his last hours, as he lay delirious, his Muslim relatives did their utmost to persuade him to repeat the Islamic creed and thus die a Muslim, but he spoke only of Jesus.

Oh, my joy, my delight, would you but read them [the Bible] and believe what they contain of treasures and precious jewels. I entreat you to read them if it be but once, and you would then see how your heart would cling to them. Then would you exclaim, "Yes, there is neither doubt nor question about their being the books of God!" And every day, yea, every hour you would read them with joy and teach and preach and guide others to these precious jewels.
Kamil Abdul Messiah, a Muslim convert to Christianity from Beirut (in modern Lebanon) in a letter to his father dated 19 June 1891

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father's care… you are worth more than many sparrows.
Matthew 10:29, 31

Alberico Crescitelli (1900)
"Not a Leaf Drops that God does not Will"

"Life and death are both in the hands of God: not a leaf drops that God does not will… Be of good cheer and don't worry about me. I am in the hands of God and I am happy." These words were written by a 37-year-old Italian missionary, Alberico Crescitelli, who was serving God in China. It was 1900, the time of the "Boxer" rebellion against Westerners and Christians. A hard-working, uncomplaining servant of Christ, Alberico had gained the respect of the local Chinese Christians in Shaanxi province where he had the pastoral care of a thousand Christians living in seven villages. But in 1900 he was transferred to the remote county of Ningqiang, a wild, isolated place high in the mountains and a hive of Boxer activity.

On 20 August Alberico was taken into the home of a local official, supposedly for his protection, but he was betrayed into the hands of Boxer rebels armed with knives and sticks. Rather than trying to escape, Alberico knelt and prayed. With a fierce blow to his left arm, the Boxers almost severed it. Another blow broke open his nose and lips. After stripping him naked and tying his hands and feet to a pole, they carried him to Yanzibian town.

He prayed for his tormentors as they beat and taunted him all night long. At noon the next day the Boxers killed him on a riverbank, then dismembered him, throwing his body parts into the water. A much-loved man of God, who lived a humble, sacrificial life, was called home.

Any place where you can bless and console a soul, where the people are poorest, where there is much pain and suffering…is a place of honour for a minister of the church … My heart tells me that I am where I belong, where God wants me and I am happy.
Alberico Crescitelli (1863–1900)

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you. Exodus 12:13

Wahid Jacob and Iskander Toss (2013)
Cross Marked Homes and Shops

"Dozens of churches, homes and businesses have been set alight and looted in Egypt, forcing millions of Christians into hiding amid the worst bout of sectarian violence in the country's modern history," reported *The Times* newspaper in August 2013. In one village, Islamists daubed the Christians' shops and homes with a red cross marking them as targets for attack. More than 90 churches and other Christian ministry buildings were attacked across Egypt. In Cairo, a cross over the gate of a Christian school was replaced with an Al Qaeda flag while the school was burned down. Some Christians were pressed to pay *jizya*, the classical Islamic tax on non-Muslim minorities and a sign of their subjugation.

Wahid, a young church deacon from Assiut, was kidnapped on 21 August, then tortured and murdered. His body was left in a field. The following month, in Minya province, a Christian barber called Iskander was severely beaten and killed. His body was attached to a tractor and dragged through the streets. Muslim friends managed to get hold of his body and quickly buried it, but the Islamists dug it up again and continued dragging it around town.

Assiut and Minya were both Islamist strongholds in Upper Egypt but also home to substantial Christian communities. Anti-Christian violence followed the ousting of Egypt's Islamist president, Mohammed Morsi, at the beginning of July 2013.

In heaven, on earth, your glory's renowned
Pagan oppressors your ridicule found
Heroes, though you die you are
Living in eternal heaven afar
No death to him who apostasy resists
Through Jesus, shaking thrones of atheists
No death to any, who by martyrdom's chain
The status of role model ever attain
No death to those who their souls present
On truth's altar, daring not to relent
No death to stranger here
Who through the world, as visitors steer.

Patriarch Shenouda III of Alexandria, Egypt (1923–2012)

As the eyes of a female slave look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows us his mercy. Psalm 123:2

Serapia (c. 119) and Sabina (125)
Converted through the Godly Witness of her Slave

Serapia (Seraphima) was brought up in Rome (in modern Italy) by devout Christian parents. After they died, many men wanted to marry her but she refused, consecrating herself to God alone. Selling her possessions, she gave the proceeds to the poor and entered voluntary slavery in the service of a Roman noblewoman called Sabina. Serapia's love, godliness and hard work soon resulted in her mistress becoming a Christian.

The two women worshipped secretly with other Christians until Serapia was summoned for questioning by the Roman authorities. Serapia refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods and declared her faith in the one true God, Jesus Christ. Her punishment was to be handed over to two young men for a night so they could defile her. Serapia prayed to Jesus, and, as the men approached her, an earthquake shook the city and the two men fell to the ground as if dead.

In the morning, this situation was discovered. The provincial governor assembled the tribunal and there accused Serapia of sorcery. She denied it but said that Jesus Christ had the power to restore the men to life. At her request, the two unconscious bodies were brought into the tribunal. "Pray to your Christ," ordered the governor and Serapia did so. They were restored to life and began talking, saying that a man, shining like the sun, had stood between them and Serapia to protect her.

Nevertheless, the governor ordered Serapia to be tortured with flaming torches. She continued to refuse to make pagan sacrifices and was beheaded in 119. Sabina buried Serapia in her own tomb. As a result, Sabina too was accused of being a Christian. She refused to deny Him and was beheaded on 29 August 125.

Lord Jesus,
Grant me that which I lack – fearlessness and the courage to witness out of love for You. You have promised to answer our prayers. This I believe and I know that by Your Holy Spirit You will empower me and give me the courage to witness.
My Lord Jesus, I will fix my eyes upon the goal above. Soon suffering will be over and transformed into glory, and I shall be at Your side for ever. Amen.
Basilea Schlink, Germany (1904-2001)

We do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved. Hebrews 10:39

Gopona Nayak and Iswar Digal (2008)
Widows Tell of Convert Husbands' Martyrdoms

Gopona and his young wife Monalisa, both converts from Hinduism to Christianity, fled into the forest, chased by enraged Hindu extremists. It was 24 August 2008, and their part of India's Orissa (now Odisha) state was wracked by anti-Christian violence. Gopona was caught by the mob when he fell down a hill into a field submerged in water. Refusing to return to Hinduism, he was stoned by the mob, who then dragged his unconscious body into a church and doused the building with kerosene. He was burned to death. Monalisa hid in the forest for days. She could not turn to her family for help, as they had rejected her when she became a Christian. Indeed, they blamed her misfortune on her decision to follow Jesus.

In August–September 2008 almost 100 Christians were killed, at least 232 churches destroyed, more than 600 villages ransacked with 5,600 houses looted and burned, and 54,000 Christians left homeless.

Iswar was another convert from Hinduism but his wife Rumina was from a Christian background. They and their children took refuge from the August violence in a relief camp, but on 19 September they ventured out to visit his sick father (who had also become a Christian). Hoping not to be seen, the family arrived at night, but a mob carrying axes, machetes and swords came looking for them. The family hid in the forest, but in the morning a group of 15 Hindu extremists found them. Iswar fell as he was trying to escape and was caught. The attackers dragged him to a river where they beat him and then killed him by cutting his body into three parts, throwing his remains into the water.

O for a faith that will not shrink
Though pressed by every foe,
That will not tremble on the brink
Of any earthly woe.

Lord, give me such a faith as this,
And then, whate'er may come,
I'll taste e'en here, the hallowed bliss
Of an eternal home.

William H Bathurst, England (1796-1877)

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. John 3:14-15

Arisdagés (328), Krikoris (335) and Husig (344)
Gregory the Illuminator's Son and Grandsons

Gregory the Illuminator (see February 27) had two sons, Vrtanés and Arisdagés. The latter became a hermit in the mountains of Turkey, but was sought out by King Trdat (Tiridates) III of Armenia, who had turned from persecuting Christians to believe in Christ because of Gregory. Arisdagés was taken from his austere hermitage to help Trdat's efforts to bring all his subjects to faith in Christ. Despite royal favour, Arisdagés was murdered by Archelaus, governor of Dzopk (in modern south-eastern Turkey). Arisdagés had rebuked the governor, who then bore him a grudge, and when Arisdagés came to Dzopk for a pastoral visit, Archelaus killed him.

Meanwhile Vrtanés had become the father of twins, Krikoris and Husig. The missionary work initiated by Gregory and continued by Arisdagés was further advanced by Krikoris, who planted churches over an area reaching the Caspian Sea. One of the nomadic tribes to whom Krikoris preached were the Mazkuts (in modern Azerbaijan and Dagestan). Their initial interest in the faith waned when they learned that looting, pillaging, killing and even coveting were forbidden. Disgusted by this information, they tied Krikoris to the tail of a wild horse, which was then driven across a plain until he was dead.

Husig also went into pastoral ministry and did not shirk from upholding the teachings of Christianity. He excommunicated King Diran (grandson of Trdat) and his courtiers for their immorality and for shedding innocent blood for political aims. One day the king and his attendants tried to enter a church in Dzopk, but Husig was there and came out to prevent them, telling them they were unworthy to go inside. The attendants dragged Husig into the church and beat him with rods. Husig died later of his injuries.

When you see the cross, know and believe that you are seeing Christ enthroned on it; when you pray before the cross, believe that you are doing so concerning Christ our God and not with inanimate matter. For it is Christ who receives the veneration you offer before the cross; and it is He who hears the supplications of your mouth and fulfils the desires of your heart, which you ask with faith.
Nerses the Grace-filled ("Shnorhali") (1102-1173), a descendant of Gregory the Illuminator

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. Acts 20:28

Philippe-Jacques Abraham and Flavianus Michael Malke (1915) Two Shepherds of the Church

During the Ottoman Empire's genocide against its Christian minorities, which peaked in 1915, two bishops of different denominations, Philippe-Jacques Abraham and Flavianus Michael Malke, were amongst the millions of Christian martyrs. Both were bishops of Gazireh (modern Cizre, Turkey), both were executed in late August 1915, both had been given the choice between conversion to Islam or death, both were given time overnight to make their decision, both refused to convert to Islam. But the method of execution differed.

Born in the Christian town of Tel Keppe (in modern Iraq), Philippe-Jacques Abraham became Bishop of Gazireh in 1882. As the large-scale killings of Christians in 1915 developed, he appealed to a Muslim Agha for protection for the town's Christians, but his efforts were in vain. He himself was arrested by the Ottoman authorities on 21 August and executed on 28 August by gunshot. His dead body was dragged through the town's streets.

Flavianus Michael Malke, born in 1858 in Kalaat Mara (near Mardin, Turkey), saw his mother murdered and his church looted and burned during the 1895 Ottoman massacres of Christians (see July 17). As Bishop of Mardin and Gazireh, he lived in extreme poverty, and sold his church vestments to help the poor. In June 1915, while out making pastoral visits in a rural area, he heard that Ottoman forces were preparing to massacre Christians in Gazireh. Friends urged him to withdraw to a safe location, but he declared that he would never withdraw and said, "I will spill my blood for my flock." He returned immediately to Gazireh where he was arrested by the Ottoman authorities. He was arrested on 28 August and executed the next day. He was beaten unconscious before being beheaded.

My beloved brethren, let us not prefer anything, let us not hasten to obtain anything more than love. Let no one have anything against anyone, let no one repay evil for evil. Do not let the sun go down on your anger, but let us forgive our debtors everything and let us welcome love, because love covers a multitude of sins.
Ephrem the Syrian, Turkey (c. 306-373)

Saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you will never be put to shame or disgraced, to ages everlasting. Isaiah 45:17

Parikhit Nayak (2008)
Saved for All Eternity

"Convert or be killed," yelled the mob, many of whom were neighbours from his own village, as they dragged Parikhit for almost a mile by a bicycle chain around his neck. Parikhit bravely replied to his persecutors that he had accepted Jesus and that Jesus would save him. But before long they had poured kerosene on him and burned him to death, after grotesquely torturing him.

Did Jesus fail to save Parikhit?

Parikihit had left Hinduism to follow Christ, which was why the Hindu extremists killed him on 27 August 2008 amidst the anti-Christian violence occurring in Odisha (Orissa state), India. The Bible is full of promises of God's protection and deliverance for those who trust in the Lord yet countless Christians suffer greatly for their faith and many die as martyrs.

These are promises for eternity. Jesus said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

Our Saviour went on to warn that believing in Him can turn members of your own household into enemies but "Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:34-39)

Parikhit lost his physical life for Jesus' sake but was saved for all eternity. Jesus has acknowledged him before His Father in heaven (Matthew 10:32).

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.

Perfect submission, all is at rest,
I in my Saviour am happy and blest;
Watching and waiting, looking above,
Filled with His goodness, lost in His love.

Frances Jane Crosby, USA (1820-99)

I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. John 10:9-10 (ESV)

A Grozny Worshipper (2018)
Holding the Door

Worshippers rushed to shut the doors and secure the bolts when shots were heard outside their church along with chants of "*Allahu Akbar*", during a worship service on Saturday 19 May 2018. The church was located in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, a strongly Islamic republic in the North Caucasus region. But the congregation were almost all elderly women; there was just one man and the church minister, Sergiy Abasov. So there was little hope of them being able to keep out the terrorists for long, especially when the gunmen started shooting right through the door.

Before long the terrorists were inside the building and trying to take hostages. One of the elderly women was killed and the man who had been trying to hold the door was injured.

Sergiy ran to another part of the church and shouted from a window across to his wife who was standing outside their home, "Get inside!" One of the attackers had already spotted her and opened fire, but, as he re-loaded his weapon, she dashed into the house and locked herself in the basement, thus saving her life.

The gatekeepers open the door to their shepherd, Jesus, because they know His voice and trust Him. But a stranger who comes to steal, kill and destroy they will neither let in nor follow, because they do not know his voice (John 10:1-5).

I heard the voice of Jesus say, "I am this dark world's light;
Look unto me, thy morn shall rise, and all thy day be bright",
I looked to Jesus, and I found in him my star, my sun;
And in that light of life I'll walk till travelling days are done.

Horatius Bonar, Scotland (1808-89)

Blessed in the one who trusts in the LORD. Proverbs 16:20

Rajesh Digal and Divyasingh Digal (2008) Dalit Pastor Martyrs of Kandhamal

In the history of Christian persecution in India, the year 2008 and the district of Kandhamal, Odisha (Orissa) state, hold a special place (see also August 24 and 27). The impoverished Christian minority, who are mainly Dalits (the lowest level of the Hindu caste system) or tribal people, were the target of an orgy of violence from the Hindu majority.

On the night of 26 August 2008, Rajesh, a Dalit pastor, was on his way home, having heard there was violence in his village of Bokinga, when a mob of Hindu extremists intercepted him and found a Bible in his bag. The mob offered to spare his life if he accepted Hinduism. He refused, so they buried him in a muddy pit up to his neck, and left him there for two days. On the third day they took him out, but he still refused to renounce Jesus Christ. Each time he refused they cut off one of his limbs. It is believed his body was eventually burned and the ashes thrown in a nearby river. Because there was no body, his widow, Asmita (29), was unable to receive the compensation money the government had agreed to give the families of those murdered during the violence.

Divyasingh, another Dalit pastor, was killed on the same day as Rajesh, his body thrown into a drain. His terrified widow, Pushpanjali, from a Brahmin family, moved back to her parents' house, but later they threw her out because she refused to re-convert to Hinduism.

My husband gave his life for the Lord. It's caused me great problems for my earthly life, but in spite of everything, I won't deny Jesus Christ, and my children will grow up knowing him.

Asmita Digal, widow of Rajesh Digal

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. John 14:27

Sharoon Masih (2017)
Beaten to Death by a Classmate

In August 2017 Sharoon (17), a Christian from Pakistan's Punjab province, started at a new school. Sharoon was a kind-hearted, hard-working and affable boy. In his previous schools he had always been loved by teachers and pupils alike. His father, a poor brick-kiln worker, had saved money for years to send his high-achieving son to this model government school.

Unable to afford the proper school uniform, Sharoon had turned up on his first day at school in casual clothes. His teacher slapped him twice on the face and forced him to stand outside all day in the sun. He was the only Christian in his year group and suffered greatly at the hands of the other boys. One said to him: "You're a Christian. Don't dare sit with us if you want to live."

"Sharoon and I cried every night as he described the daily torture he was subjected to," recalled his mother Razia.

On 30 August 2017 Sharoon went to the school office to submit his admission form. A Muslim classmate called Ahmed Raza, sitting with his legs outstretched, blocked Sharoon's way. Sharoon asked him to move, but Ahmed refused. As Sharoon tried to pass, his foot accidentally touched Ahmed's leg. In a culture where Christians are considered by some Muslims as ceremonially unclean and to touch anything with a foot is insulting, this enraged Ahmed. He punched Sharoon on the head, knocking him to the ground. Ahmed continued beating Sharoon, while other students and teachers watched. Eventually, when they noticed that Sharoon was not moving any more, he was taken to hospital but pronounced dead on arrival.

Mukti dilaye Yesu naam (Salvation is given in Jesus' name)
Shanti dilaye Yesu naam (Peace is given in Jesus' name).

Jesus is the Ocean of Grace: You are majestic, Lord.
Jesus, You were born in a manger [made of wood],
You were crucified on the cross [made of wood].

For the remission of our sins, Jesus has been sacrificed on the cross.
By shedding Your blood on the cross, You paid the full price for our sins.
"Mukti Dilaye" ("He Saves"), Hindi/Urdu Christian song

Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up. James 4:10

Gerard (1046)
Vata Pagan Uprising

King Stephen I (reigned c. 1000-38) was the first Christian king of Hungary, but its population were mainly pagans. When a devout and learned Christian pilgrim from Venice, Gerard (Gellért), was travelling in Hungary the king persuaded him to stay and tutor his son. Later the king appointed him to evangelistic duties and Gerard won many Hungarians to Christ.

Gerard wrote *Deliberatio supra hymnum trium puerorum* ("Meditation on the Hymn of the Three Young Men"), the oldest surviving work of Hungarian theological literature. It was a wide-ranging commentary on Daniel 3, a Bible chapter telling the story of three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, who survived unscathed when they were thrown into a fiery furnace for refusing to worship a gold image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up. Unaware they were going to be miraculously saved, they declared with amazing faith and courage before their ordeal, "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18)

Stephen was followed by another Christian king, Peter, but in 1046 the peasants, led by a pagan nobleman called Vata, rose up against the king and against his faith. They wished to reinstate paganism and abolish Christian rule. Vata dedicated himself to the devil and declared war on Christians. Many believers, especially church leaders, were martyred. One was Gerard, who was put into a cart and pushed over a cliff (modern Gellért Hill, Budapest) on 29 August 1046.

Be humble in this life, that God may raise you up in the next. Be truly moderate and do not punish or condemn anyone immoderately. Be gentle so that you may never oppose justice. Be honourable so that you may never voluntarily bring disgrace upon anyone.
Stephen I of Hungary (975-1038)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. 2 Corinthians 1:3

Juma Nuradin Kamil, Hassan Adawe Adan and Asha Mberwa (2011) Somali Converts from Islam

Juma, a Christian convert from Islam, was forced into a car by three men and kidnapped on 21 August 2011 in south-western Somalia. On 2 September, his body was found on the street in the outskirts of Hudur City, Bakool region. He had been decapitated and his severed head was placed on his chest.

Killing by beheading is the method favoured of Al Shabaab, a Somali Islamist terrorist group, and those who have left Islam to follow Christ are one of their priority targets. Many Muslims believe this is the way that non-Muslims should be killed, as suggested by a verse in the Quran which speaks of striking their necks (Q 47:4).

Juma had been a Christian for three years and was resolute in his faith. Local Christians said his abduction was performed so efficiently that he must have been closely monitored for some time. People in the neighbourhood where Juma's body was found were reluctant to bury it, fearing to be associated in any way with a convert from Islam. So his body lay in the open for two days.

Earlier in 2011, on 18 April, two Muslim extremists entered the house of another Somali Christian called Hassan (21), who lived in Shalambod town. They shot him dead. On 7 January in Warbhigly village, near Mogadishu, Asha (36), a mother of four, had also been killed for her Christian faith by Islamic extremists, who cut her throat.

Somalia is almost 100 per cent Muslim. The small number of Christians, all converts from Islam and their children, are extremely vulnerable. There are no church buildings in the country. In the period 2008-11 at least 25 Somali Christians were martyred for their faith.

Father of compassion and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, please pour out your comfort on our brothers and sisters in Somalia, who face every day the possibility of death, because of their decision to follow Your Son. Send your angels to guard them and keep them safe. Fill their hearts with peace, joy and hope. Give them in abundance the ability to love their enemies. May their lives reflect in every way the character of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray.
Barnabas Fund's Prayer Diary, 29 May 2016

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 1 John 3:16

Habib the Deacon (c. 310) Surrendered Himself

When the Roman Emperor Licinius (reigned 308-324) commanded that pagan altars be restored and sacrifices made to the god Jupiter, Christians were in grave danger. A deacon called Habib from Telzeha (Thelsaea), near Edessa (modern Urfa, Turkey), a major centre of Christianity at that time, went secretly from village to village, reading the Word of God to the Christians, encouraging them not to be afraid and urging them to stand fast in their faith and refuse to worship pagan gods.

Habib's resistance was eventually reported to the emperor, who told the local governor Lysanias that anyone daring to transgress the imperial command should be burned. Lysanias ordered a search for Habib but he was ministering to Christians in another place and could not be found. Therefore his family and the inhabitants of Telzeha were arrested instead and put in chains in prison. When news of this reached Habib, he decided he must make himself known and appear before the judge, lest others were martyred because of him. He surrendered himself to Theotecnus, the governor's chief attendant, who, rather than arresting him, urged Habib to flee for his life. Habib refused and was duly interrogated and tortured. Lysanias decreed that no mercy should be shown towards him but that extreme punishments should be inflicted on him so as to terrify others. Habib bravely endured each torture and, quoting often from the Scriptures, passionately defended Christ. After the judge's 27th question, Habib was sentenced to be burned to death.

His martyrdom took place shortly after the deaths of two other Edessan martyrs, Shmona and Guria (see November 16).

As for these inflictions, which thou supposest to be so bitter with their lacerations, out of them are plaited crowns of victory for those who endure them. Habib the Deacon (martyred c. 310), responding to Theotecnus's command: "Let him be stretched out and be scourged with whips, until there remain not a place in his body on which he has not been scourged."

Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. 1 Peter 4:19

Christians in Iraq (2004)
Beheadings on DVD

In September 2004 a DVD was distributed in Mosul, a city near Iraq's Christian heartland, the Nineveh Plains, which showed a video clip of the beheadings of two local Christians: Raymond Forooq Shimun (32) and Firas Hadi Potrus (26). No date for the beheadings was given. Christians believed that the distribution of the DVD was meant to frighten them into leaving the area, which has had a Christian presence for nearly 2,000 years. The goal of terrorist groups in Iraq was often the ethnic cleansing of all indigenous Christians.

This came at a time of relentless attacks on Christians in Iraq. On 31 August three Christian women in their twenties – Tara Majeed Betros Al-Hadaya, Taghrid Abdul-Massih Ishaq Betros and her sister Hala Abdul-Massih Ishaq Betros – were killed as they travelled from the hospital in Mosul where they worked to Bartella, a town in the Nineveh Plains where they lived. In the same month, five churches had been bombed simultaneously in Baghdad and Mosul killing 12 people (see August 2). Then on 1 September Gewargis Youaresh Nisan was killed when a terrorist bomb exploded in the Karrada district of Baghdad and Nisan Sliyo Shmoel was run over by a car as he was leaving hospital in Mosul; on 2 September two brothers Khaled and Hani Boulos were shot dead in Mosul; on 10 September, Mark Louis Sheeto (13) was killed when a mortar fell on his home in Bakhdeda; and two bombs exploded at churches in Baghdad on 9 and 11 September.

Be still, my soul; the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change, He faithful will remain.
Be still my soul; thy best, thy heavenly friend
Through thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul; though dearest friends depart
And all is darkened in the vale of tears;
Then you will better know His love, His heart,
Who comes to soothe your sorrows and your fears.
Be still, my soul; your Jesus can repay
From His own fullness all He takes away.

Katharina von Schlegel, Germany (1697-1768)

Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Ephesians 6:19-20

Babylas of Antioch and Three Boys (c. 250/1)
Buried in Chains

Babylas, Bishop of Antioch (Antakya, modern Turkey), was a faithful shepherd who took care of widows and orphans and instructed his flock in the Christian faith. He once banned a pagan Roman emperor from entering the church, commanding him to take his place with the penitents instead.

A later emperor, Decius (reigned 249-251) instigated a severe anti-Christian persecution. An edict in 250 decreed that on certain days all men must sacrifice to the emperor and other Roman gods. Certificates were issued to those who complied. Many Christians who refused were executed or died in prison. Babylas was ordered to worship the pagan gods on pain of death. Correctly guessing that Babylas would refuse, the emperor ordered him to be bound in chains and led through the city. Babylas replied, "Emperor, these chains are as venerable for me as your imperial crown is for you. For me, suffering for Christ is as desirable as the imperial power is for you. Death for the Immortal King is as precious to me as your life is to you."

Three young brothers whom Babylas had discipled were with him at his trial. Confident that the children's faith would not fail, he said to the emperor, "I have given them an education, cultivated them with guidance, and here before you in a small body are these great young men and perfect Christians. Test them and see."

The emperor tried in vain to entice the boys to renounce Christ. Enraged, he ordered each to be whipped with a number of lashes corresponding to their age. Epolonius received twelve lashes, Prilidianus nine and Urbanus seven. Eventually all four were martyred. At his request, Babylas was buried in his chains, symbolising his love and loyalty to God.

The death of the martyrs is not death, but the beginning of a better life, and the prelude of a more spiritual conversation, and a change from the worse to the better. Do not then look at the fact, that the mere body of the martyr lies destitute of energy of soul; but observe this, that a greater power takes its place by the side of it, different from the soul itself – I mean the grace of the Holy Spirit, which pleads to all on behalf of the resurrection, by means of the wonders which it works. John Chrysostom, Turkey (c. 347-407)

Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself … a place near your altar, LORD Almighty, my King and my God. Psalm 84:3

John Bradburne (1979)
Vagabond Finds a Home

When World War Two began, 18-year-old John, from the north of England, joined the army. He soon found himself in Malaya, fighting the Japanese. It was in Malaya that he encountered the Lord Jesus and committed his life to serving Him. Perhaps it was then that the Lord gave him the deep desire for martyrdom that John spoke of years later.

After the war John led a restless life, wandering around Europe and the Middle East, living out of his Gladstone bag, until he found his home in 1969 as warden of Mutemwa leprosy settlement, near Mutoko, Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), serving leprosy patients in the Name of Christ. But his loving care brought him into conflict with the management, and he was sacked for refusing to put number tags around the patients' necks or to reduce their meagre diet. He moved to a tin hut, without water or sanitation, just outside the perimeter fence of the settlement, and continued to help the people affected by leprosy as much as he could. In the last twelve years of his life he wrote around 5,000 poems, including one for each of the leprosy patients.

John's longed-for martyrdom came at the hands of the guerrilla fighters of ZANLA (the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) who were struggling for independence from white minority rule. When the fighting began to approach Mutoko, John's friends urged him to flee, but he insisted on staying with the leprosy patients. The guerrillas captured him, humiliated him and interrogated him. They offered him the opportunity to escape on condition he left the country and abandoned his beloved flock of leprosy patients. He refused and, as he knelt praying, they shot him in the back.

God's love within you is your native land.
So search none other, never more depart.
For you are homeless save God keeps your heart.

John Bradburne (1921-79)

The church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.
1 Timothy 3:15 (ESV)

Croat Christians (15th-17th centuries) Bulwark of Christianity

When the Ottoman Turkish Muslims, having taken Bosnia in 1463, sought to advance further into Europe, their way was blocked by Croatia, a country which had been Christian since the 9th century. Thus began what is called "two centuries of Croatia in mourning", referring to the tremendous losses, both of human lives and of territory, suffered by Croatia "the bulwark of Christianity".

The period 1493-1593 was called the Hundred Years' Croatian-Ottoman War. By 1533 the Ottomans had enslaved about 600,000 Christian men and women from Croatian lands. In 1592 an Ottoman army attacked and occupied Bihać, which was at that time the Croatian capital. Nearly 2,000 Croats were killed and 800 Croat children were taken as captives to Turkey to be brought up as Muslims and become janissaries (see January 17).

The following year the Ottomans were decisively defeated at the Battle of Sisak, stopping for a time the advance of the Ottoman Empire into Europe. But the Ottomans continued to occupy parts of Croatia until the late 17th century. In these parts, the Church as an organised structure virtually disappeared. Some church buildings were turned into mosques and many new mosques were constructed. A significant Muslim migration into the area took place. Many of the more educated Christian Croats were martyred, while the masses were subjugated as serf-like *raja* under the rule of the Ottoman elite.

Overall some 3,000 Croatian towns or villages were reduced to ashes and more than 550 churches and monasteries (the centres of cultural life and learning) destroyed. The clergy and intelligentsia were eradicated, leaving an illiterate population whose history, heritage and culture had been forcibly removed – but not their faith. For Croat Christianity was built on strong foundations and endured. Today, in the 21st century, about 91% of Croatians identify as Christian.

A man who is well grounded in the testimonies of the Scripture is the bulwark of the Church.
Jerome, Stridon, Roman Province of Dalmatia which included modern Croatia (342-420)

To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it. 1 Corinthians 4:11-12

Eun Hee (2014)
Bringer of Hope and Aid

North Korea, a country where hunger is normal, is sometimes afflicted with famines so severe that people ended up eating grass. In one such famine, Eun Hee made the dangerous river crossing into China. She went there seeking food, but encountered Jesus, the Bread of Life, and became a Christian. With immense courage, she chose to return to North Korea to share the Gospel with her family, despite the fact that Christians are very severely persecuted by the North Korean authorities. Eun Hee would invite the poor and hungry into her home to eat and hear about Jesus. Her home became a secret church, a place where people were fed both physically and spiritually.

Knowing the risks, she nevertheless went backwards and forwards to a safe house in China collecting from it food, clothes and medicine to take back for the poor in North Korea. Even when it became increasingly dangerous to cross the border, she continued to follow the calling God had given her to feed and clothe the needy. One day the police searched her house and found her Bible. She was arrested and was never seen alive again by her family or friends.

Guide our minds, uphold our thinking,
Keep our limbs for service fit;
Feed our faith with love's pure burning,
Purged from malice and deceit.
Christ our Lord, be bread for eating;
Faith, our wine for drinking be:
May we taste the joyous Spirit,
Drunk with His sobriety!
May this new day pass in gladness,
Modest like the dawn's fresh bloom,
Faith like midday shining brightly.
Thoughts untouched by evening gloom.
Now the dawn with splendour rises; Jesus is our only Dawn:
Son unveiled by Heavenly Father, Father in the Logos known.

Ambrose of Milan, in modern Italy (c. 339–397)

The LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. Isaiah 61:1

Singkeaw Wongkongpheng (2015)
Lao Pastor Kept Proclaiming Christ

Pastor Singkeaw was stabbed to death because he refused to stop proclaiming Christ. In the late 1990s, during a time of intense anti-Christian persecution, he began sharing the Gospel in Luang Prabang Province, northern Laos. In 2000 he started a church in Na-ang village, which grew to a congregation of 58 people. For more than 15 years, this pastor of a small village church took a strong stance on his constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of worship and ignored orders from the authorities to cease evangelising the local people. For this he was frequently persecuted, even though he was, as described by a local Christian leader, a law-abiding citizen who led a simple life, materially poor but spiritually rich.

On 8 September 2015, at 10 p.m. five men broke into Singkeaw's home, and seized his wife. When he came to her rescue, the men tried to abduct him. He offered money, but one of the intruders, Mr Wansai, who claimed to be with the secret police, said that they had come to kill the pastor only. As Singkeaw shouted for help, he was stabbed three times in the back.

His son, Manh, chased after the men as they fled, injuring Wansai, who was taken to hospital. Wansai was later identified as a police officer working as a prison guard in Pha-Oh Prison.

Local Christians believed that the men intended to abduct, kill and dispose of Singkeaw and his wife in the same way as they had apparently dealt with another Christian couple who disappeared many years earlier in Luang Namtha Province and whose bodies have never been found.

I don't want to leave you, the family or the village. I am your son. But I know Jesus is the Son of God and came to the world to save people from sin, only Him and no other way rescues humans from sin.

Young Lao Christian convert when asked by his father to choose between his family and village or following Jesus

Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. Job 16:19

Greek Christians in the Ottoman Empire (1913) "A Human Slaughterhouse" Recorded in Words of the Time

"Since the bands that accompany the advancing army are continuing to burn the Christian villages and to kill the inhabitants, I beg you, in the name of God, to save our nation from destruction and the Turkish army from disgrace." – Telegram dated 3 July 1913 from the Metropolitan of Heraclea (modern Eregli, Turkey) to the commander of the Turkish Ottoman army.

"The Turkish army, as it marched forth to take possession once more of Kessane, destroyed, looted and burned the Greek villages near Gallipoli." – Message to Germanus V, Patriarch of Constantinople, dated 7 July 1913.

"On the same day, July 17, the army passed to Kalivia. When they entered it a trumpet was sounded and an officer gave the order, 'Plunder and massacre!' (Yagma, Yakun, Kessin [loot, burn, cut]). Thereupon the army dispersed and killed all the Christians they met … The village and neighborhood are full of corpses of men, women and children. Many girls allowed themselves to be burned in their houses in order to save themselves from the soldiers. Several of the victims went mad … Sakche was a hamlet of seven Greek families. When the army appeared an officer demanded of a man whether the hamlet was Christian or Moslem, and on his reply gave orders to burn it. The order was obeyed. The inhabitants who had not fled were burned." – Report by the assistant bishop of the Metropolitan of Rodosto, dated 25 July 1913, who was part of a fact-finding commission sent to investigate reports of massacres.

"There are trustworthy reports of appalling massacres by Turkish irregulars coming from districts in Thrace, which the Turks are re-occupying. It is said that the country about Mala-gara [Malkara] has been converted into a human slaughterhouse, and the Turks are wreaking a direful vengeance on Christian villages." – Newspaper article in the Australian *Daily Standard*, 29 July 1913.

What I see around me would drive me insane, if I did not know that no matter what happens, God will have the last word.
Paisios of Mount Athos, Greece (1924-94)

We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Romans 6:4

Porphyrius (362)
Genuine Baptism

Porphyrius, a famous comic actor, was martyred during the time of Roman Emperor Julian, known in Christian tradition as "Julian the Apostate" (reigned 361-363). On the emperor's birthday in 362, the actors gathered together to perform a play before the emperor at the theatre in Ephesus (in modern Turkey). Porphyrius, a pagan, was to mimic and lampoon the ritual of Christian baptism. During the performance he was immersed in water and recited his words for the play: "The servant of God, Porphyrius, is baptised in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Then, departing from the script, after emerging from the water he announced himself a Christian.

The emperor rebuked and threatened him and even offered him gifts to continue the performance mocking baptism. But Porphyrius refused, declaring, "I am Christian. I am Christian." The emperor had him tortured and beheaded.

And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me!

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

Charles Wesley, England (1707-88)

God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth. Philippians 2:9-10

Yesu Dasu (2000)
The Name of Jesus

The body of Yesu Dasu (52), cut into several pieces, was found in a pool of blood at a cattle shed near Mustabad village, Kothakunta, in the south Indian state of Telangana (formerly part of Andhra Pradesh).

Hindu extremists had often warned Yesu (whose name means "Jesus" in Hindi) to stop preaching Christ or face the consequences. Ignoring the threats, Yesu continued to preach and live out his Christian faith. On 11 September 2000, he was grabbed in his home by two unidentified attackers, who arrived on motorcycles and took him to the outskirts of Mustabad. After tying his hands together, they struck him several times on the neck with an axe, eventually beheading him.

An extremist form of Hinduism called Hindutva (meaning "Hindu-ness"), which emerged in India in the 1920s, gradually gained influence in Indian politics in certain states from the 1980s onwards and came to national power in 2014 when Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), became Prime Minister. Hindutva's aim is to create a pure nation – religious purity, not racial. India is described as the motherland of Hindus. Pressure is put on Indian Christians to "reconvert" to Hinduism; this phrase is used whether or not the individuals concerned have ever been Hindus. This activity is known as Ghar Wapsi (Coming Back Home).

Hindutva interprets the Hindu scriptures as teaching a "warrior religion", justifying a violent approach to non-Hindus and also tolerant Hindus who disagree with the Hindutva ideology. Pastors and Christian converts from Hinduism are particularly targeted.

In the midst of a storm, You say "be still",
You are my strength, my God, You are my faith.
In the past You were with me,
Even today Lord, You stand with me,
And You will be with me in the days to come.
In the fierce and raging storm, You will be my rock,
I see Your footprints on the rising wave.

Indian Christian song (2020) translated from Hindi

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree". Galatians 3:13 (ESV)

Matias Ndombi (2020)
Hung on a Tree

Matias left this earth with the Name of his Lord on his lips. A survivor heard Matias cry loudly to Jesus for help as he fled the Islamist terrorists who attacked the passenger vehicle he was in while it was driving through Pundanhali in Mozambique.

The Islamists also heard him cry out and realised Matias was a Christian. Since he believed in Jesus, they said, he would be killed in the same way as Jesus. His body was found hanging by ropes from a tree with his head cut off. Of the 28 people killed in the attack on 12 September 2020, Matias was the only one hung on a tree.

Matias had worked with a mission agency training Mozambicans in evangelism to the unreached people-groups of northern Mozambique. He was described as "an angel of God" raised up to help share this vision among local churches and a "cultural guide and confidant" to Kenyan and American missionaries as they sought to fit into the Makonde community. When the missionaries inadvertently caused offence, Matias would intervene to clear misunderstandings, at times risking his own reputation. One missionary recalled the sweet times of fellowship with Matias and his family on Sunday afternoons, sharing together sorghum porridge, cassava and vegetables.

On 12 August 2020 the terrorists, who had been dealing out death and destruction since 2017, seized the strategic port city of Mocimboa da Praia. Matias' house in the city was burned and his family moved to Nampula, but Matias continued to work in Palma. It was on his way to visit his earthly family that the Lord took him to his heavenly Home. He was buried in a mass grave with the others murdered in the bush that day.

The cross sums it all. Yes, Matias Ndombi's tomb is one of the many tombs along the journey of ministry to unreached peoples. May the Lord inspire many to follow Christ willingly in this journey of making disciples among the nations despite the pains on the way.
Patrick Nabwera, Kenya

Rulers persecute me without cause, but my heart trembles at your word.
Psalm 119:161

Queen Ketevan (1624)
A Georgian Queen

Ketevan was queen of Kakheti, a kingdom which had been created from the eastern part of Georgia in 1490. Her husband, King David, reigned from 1601 to 1602 and after his death she was regent until their son, King Teimuraz I, was of age to rule for himself. She engaged in much church building and charitable work.

Shah Abbas I of Persia (modern Iran) ruthlessly persecuted Christians on the edge of his empire and attempted to subjugate Kakheti and the neighbouring Georgian kingdom of Kartli. In the hope of avoiding an invasion of her country, Ketevan surrendered herself as a hostage to Abbas in 1614. Her courageous action did not, however, avert war. At least 60,000 people were massacred by the Persian armies and over 100,000 were deported to Persia. Ketevan and her grandsons, Alexander and Levan, were held in captivity in Persia for five years. Then the young princes were castrated, after which one went mad and the other died.

Abbas replaced the Christian kings of Kakheti and Kartli with Muslim rulers. He also embarked on a campaign of ethnic cleansing and resettled the conquered area with Turkic tribes.

During this period Teimuraz was a rallying figure for Georgian opposition to Persian rule. Angered by this Christian resistance, Abbas demanded that Ketevan should convert to Islam. On her refusal, he had the queen publicly tortured in Shiraz on 13 September with red-hot pincers which cruelly tore away her flesh. Throughout her suffering she continued to cry to the Lord. In the end a burning brazier was thrown on her body and she was put to death by strangulation with a bowstring.

"Now I am free," she said, "to live or die;
To suffer whatso'er my God ordains.
O Father! Let me praise thee joyfully
For this deliverance from the deadliest pains...

William Forsyth, Scotland (1818-79), *The Martyrdom of Kelavane*

Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge. Psalm 16:1

Mario Acidre and Nickarter "Boy" S Gonzalo (2011)
Prayers for Safety

The day before his death Mario, a convert from Islam who boldly shared the Gospel with the Muslim community, prayed for the safety of all Christian workers in Jolo. This was not an unusual prayer in the southern Philippines, as the area was controlled by Islamist militant groups linked to Al Qaeda whose aim was to install an independent Islamic state in this part of the country.

On the evening of 27 August 2011, Mario was shot inside his own home by a gunman who broke in. Bleeding profusely from six bullet wounds, he was rushed to hospital and, after a 14-hour wait for blood supply, he survived surgery only to die of kidney failure.

Mario served as a lay pastor at Jolo Evangelical Church in the Sulu archipelago. On the day of his death, he had refused the amulets offered to him by Muslim vendors who claimed they would protect him from bullets. He asked them instead to pray to God for protection. Days earlier, he had been sharing the Gospel with Muslim parents at a local school.

After his murder, other Christians received threats but Mario's example gave them strength and encouragement to continue their Gospel work in the Muslim-dominated area. On 14 September 2011, Nickarter (54), a Christian leader and a vocal and passionate advocate for peace in Sulu, was shot dead outside his home in Isabela City. On the day of his death, Nickarter had filed a police report on a suspicious man following him. Three hours later, at 6 p.m., he was parking his motorcycle at his home when an unknown assailant shot him three times in back. He died an hour later in hospital.

My neighbours warned me that I should not go out, but I am not afraid because I know Jesus is powerful, and He will not forsake me.
Mayang, widow of Mario, in the dangerous times after his martyrdom

This is what he promised us – eternal life. 1 John 2:25

Andrew Kim Taegon (1846)
Eternal Life Begins Now

"My eternal life is beginning now," said Andrew, just before his execution in Korea on 16 September 1846 at the age of 26. It seemed that martyrdom ran in his veins. In 1814 his great-grandfather, Pius Kim Chin-hu, was martyred (see February 20). When Andrew was young, his family moved from Chungcheong Province to Kyonggi Province to escape severe persecution. But in 1839 the arrival of European missionaries triggered another major persecution of Christians. This persecution, apparently intended to exterminate the Church, began with the arrest of church leaders. At least 254 Christians were arrested, of whom 121 were either executed or died in prison. Andrew's father, Ignatius, was one of the martyrs in 1839.

From childhood Andrew had a deep faith. He was baptised at the age of 15 and later trained for Christian ministry in China and the Philippines. While preaching to Chinese fishermen on the Korean island of Yeonpyeong in 1846, he was arrested and sent to prison in Seoul, from where he wrote: "Keep in mind that our Lord Jesus has come to this world, suffered countless torments, and founded and fostered his Church through pain and suffering … as the Holy Bible says that our Lord even takes care of the hair on our heads ... in this difficult time, to be victorious, we must be steadfast using all of our strength and capabilities like brave soldiers fully armoured in the battlefield. Be steadfast, and let us meet in Heaven."

Let's go, let's go, let's go to Heaven!
Where is Heaven?
It's where there are ten thousand blessings.
Heaven is high in the sky.
The glory of God appears there.
The Trinity is shining there,
And the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed.

Choi Yang-eop, Korea (died 1861), a hymn

Ah, Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you. Jeremiah 32:17

Euphemia (303/4)
Lions and a Bear

Euphemia was martyred in the first year of the Great Persecution under the Roman Emperor Diocletian (reigned 284-305). The daughter of Christian parents, she lived in Chalcedon, across the Bosphorus from Byzantium (modern Istanbul, Turkey). In 303 Priscus, the governor of Chalcedon, decreed that all citizens should appear at a pagan festival to worship and offer sacrifices to an idol of the god Ares.

Determined not to betray her Saviour, Euphemia went into hiding but was discovered in a house with 49 other Christians, worshipping the Lord. Because of their refusal to sacrifice to the pagan god, the 50 were tortured for 19 days but none of them wavered in their faith. Priscus sent them to the emperor for trial, except Euphemia who was the youngest. It was hoped that Euphemia, now all alone, would renounce her faith, but she prayed fervently to the Lord Jesus for strength.

She was then subjected to various forms of torture, including being tied to a wheel with sharp knives. When she prayed aloud, the wheel miraculously stopped and could not be made to move. She was thrown into a fire but emerged unscathed. Finally, on 16 September, she was put into the arena at Chalcedon to be devoured by wild beasts. At first none of the beasts would attack her, the lions merely licking her feet. But when a bear made a small wound on her leg, Euphemia collapsed and died.

An arena or public amphitheatre in the centre of a town would often be used by Roman emperors for "entertainment". Christians were burned to death, fed to wild animals (*damnatio ad bestia*) as Euphemia was, or killed by gladiators, in front of public crowds.

We are people endowed with reason, for whom it would be the greatest disgrace to abandon the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth, in order to worship dumb, senseless idols. We are not afraid of torments you threaten us with. They will be easy for us to bear and will show the power of our God.
Euphemia (martyred 303/4) when ordered to sacrifice to a pagan god

Speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. Ephesians 4:15

Lambert of Maastricht (c. 705) Spoke Truth to Power

Lambert was born into a noble family in Maastricht (in modern Netherlands), given a religious-oriented education, and became Bishop of Maastricht in 670. He was much loved by his flock for his holiness, asceticism and generosity to the poor. Nevertheless in 674 Lambert had to flee into exile after siding with the king of the eastern Frankish kingdom of Austrasia (modern Belgium and parts of France and Germany), rather than the majordomo of the palace in the western Frankish kingdom of Neustria (modern northern France).

In 681 a new majordomo called Pepin was appointed at the Neustrian palace, after which Lambert was reinstated as Bishop of Maastricht. Renewing his pastoral work, Lambert energetically visited the Christians in far-flung parts of his diocese, despite dangers and threats, and preached the Gospel to the pagans who still inhabited these areas.

Then Pepin put away his wife and replaced her with his concubine, Alpaida. Like John the Baptist, who spoke truth to power when he challenged Herod for marrying his brother's wife Herodias (Mark 6:17-29) Lambert was the only bishop who dared to rebuke Pepin. Alpaida was furious and appealed to her brother Dodo, who killed Lambert around 705 by stabbing him through the heart with a javelin at a chapel in Liège, Belgium.

O God, who called … John the Baptist to be both in birth and death the forerunner of your Son: grant that, as he was slain for truth and justice, so we may boldly resist corruption and vice, and receive with him the unfading crown of glory; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.
The Collect for the Beheading of John the Baptist, Scottish Episcopal Church

When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig-tree." John 1:47-48

Abdul Gani Gomes (2004)
Under a Banyan (Bengal Fig) Tree

Late in the evening of 18 September 2004, Dr Abdul (48), a Christian convert from Islam, was hacked to death and beheaded by four militants as he passed under a banyan tree near his home. Banyan trees, also known as Bengal fig trees, spread sideways indefinitely as aerial roots that develop from the branches descend and then take root in the ground to become new trunks. Over time one tree can resemble a very dense thicket, or a mini forest, as a result of the tangle of roots and trunks. It was from such a hiding place that the militants sprang out to attack Abdul with sharp knives as he took his usual route home from work in the town of Duyanipur, northern Bangladesh.

Abdul (also known by his Christian name Joseph), his wife, Teresa, and their two daughters left Islam to follow Christ in 1995. He became a respected Christian leader and a medical practitioner in his home district of Jamalpur, 140 km north of the capital Dhaka. His death not only deprived his family of their beloved father and husband but also deprived the community of a kind-hearted and compassionate man, admired by his neighbours. On one occasion he had even mortgaged his own home to raise funds for flood victims.

Two Islamic extremists confessed to the killing, saying they resented Abdul because he encouraged other Muslims to convert to Christianity. Teresa was present at the trial and, in front of the judges, the killers said they would kill her too unless she converted back to Islam.

Lord, O Lord, you have created me in Your image and in Your love.
All praises and glory is Yours, Lord, O my Lord.
How many times have I hurt You by disobedience,
O my Lord, You are faithful, good, merciful.
All praises and glory are Yours, Lord, O my Lord.
(You have) kept me in Your grace, in Your forgiveness.
Sing Hallelujah, sing Hallelujah.
"Bidhata" ("The Creator"), Bengali Christian song

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart. Ecclesiastes 3:11

Stanley Dale and Phil Masters (1968)
Mission to the Yali

On 19 September 1968 Stanley (52) and Phil (36) left their families at the mission post in Irian Jaya (modern West Papua, Indonesia) and made their way through rugged mountains and dense jungle to share the Gospel with the Yali people in the Yeng Valley. The Yali, a pygmy tribe who still practised cannibalism, had heard that "corrupt" people were coming to challenge their way of life and customs. So when the missionaries appeared in their village the Yali warriors formed a line to confront them. The missionaries decided to trek north, closely followed by the Yali.

On the evening of 21 September Stanley hung a picture from a tree and preached to the Yali warriors. The next day the Yali launched their attack. A hail of arrows descended on the missionaries, some 50 hitting Stanley. As each arrow pierced his body, he pulled it out and broke it in two, until he had no strength left to do so. Remembering what they had heard preached about the resurrection, the warriors cut up the bodies and dispersed the pieces in the jungle, presumably to prevent the men coming to life again.

Stanley, an Australian, had first seen the mountains of Irian Jaya while in the army and longed for an opportunity to return with the message of God's love. His first contact with the Yali people was in 1961, around the time that Phil, from the USA, joined the mission work. Many in the upper Seng Valley became Christians, but not in the lower Seng Valley. Jeikwaragu and Bingguok, two young Yali Christians, went down the valley to preach earlier in 1968, but never returned (see January 25). Stanley and Phil then followed.

Within a few years of these martyrdoms many Yali gave their lives to Christ, attracted by the courageous faith of the four men who suffered so much to bring them the Good News.

Live in such a manner that death may not find you unprepared.
Thomas à Kempis, Germany (1380-1471)

The joy of the LORD is your strength. Nehemiah 8:10

Pisora (Basura), Pisikhos, Fanalikhos and Theodore (early 4th century) Four Courageous Bishops

"We beheld the most wonderful ardour, and the truly divine energy and zeal of those who believed in the Christ of God. For as soon as sentence was pronounced against the first, one after another rushed to the judgment seat, and confessed themselves Christians. And regarding the indifference the terrible things and the multiform tortures, they declared themselves boldly and undauntedly for the religion of the God of the universe. And they received the final sentence of death with joy and laughter and cheerfulness; so that they sang and offered up hymns and thanksgiving to the God of the universe till their very last breath."

This eyewitness account of the martyrdoms of Egyptian Christians early in the 4th century, during the Roman Empire's Great Persecution, was given by the church historian Eusebius, who visited Egypt. He describes how large numbers of Christian men, women and children died after hours or days of excruciating torture.

When Emperor Diocletian issued a series of edicts ruthlessly suppressing Christianity, Pisora, Bishop of Masil (in Egypt), greatly desired to shed his blood for the Name of Christ. Gathering a group of Christians together, he told them of his longing to receive the crown of martyrdom. They all wept, saying, "To whom will you leave us … as orphans?" But Pisora could not be dissuaded. Also in tears, he committed them to the Lord Jesus and said goodbye. Three other bishops went with him: Pisikhos, Fanalikhos, and Theodore. Together they presented themselves to the city governor and declared their faith in Christ. For this they were cruelly tortured, especially when the governor found out that they were bishops. They endured with patience, until they were beheaded and received martyrs' crowns.

But most wonderful of all is the fact that we who have consecrated ourselves to him, honour him not only with our voices and with the sound of words, but also with complete elevation of soul, so that we choose to give testimony unto him rather than to preserve our own lives.

Eusebius of Caesarea, in the Holy Land (260-340)

[Love]… is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.
1 Corinthians 13:5-6

Manuel Camacho (2009)
His Widow Preached to her Husband's Killers

"Mum, don't worry. Dad died for Christ and now he is with Christ." Strengthened by these words from her ten-year-old son, Gloria fetched her Bible and, shaking and sobbing, preached to her husband's killers.

For eight years, in the face of numerous challenges and great risk, Gloria and her husband Manuel had led a church in Chopal village, San Jose del Guaviare, a stronghold of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) which had a Marxist-Leninist ideology. In this guerrilla-controlled area, pastors and Christians were often attacked and churches forcibly shut down. In April 2009 Pastor Manuel took part in an evangelistic event at which three FARC guerrillas and seven members of a right-wing paramilitary militia surrendered their lives to Christ.

On 21 September that year Manuel was shot outside his home by FARC fighters. Evidently the FARC was angry that its fighters were becoming Christians and that Manuel, despite their threats, had not stopped preaching in towns and villages across the municipality.

On the day of the murder, Manuel and his family went to a meeting which the FARC had invited them to. Manuel thought that the FARC was going to grant his church the official permission he had previously requested. Instead he was shot five times, and, after a FARC fighter yelled, "Make sure that dog stays dead," a sixth shot was fired into his neck. Gloria ran to clean his face and, with the help of her children, dragged his body under a tree. Then she preached to all who came near to listen.

If we hold tightly to anything given to us unwilling to allow it to be used as the Giver means it to be used we stunt the growth of the soul. What God gives us is not necessarily "ours" but only ours to offer back to him, ours to relinquish, ours to lose, ours to let go of, if we want to be our true selves. Many deaths must go into reaching our maturity in Christ, many letting goes.
Elisabeth Elliot (1826–2015), missionary to Ecuador where the Auca people killed her husband

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful servants. Psalm 116:15

Munaza; Naiher and Eshan; the Naeem family; and many others (2013)
Words of Faith and Forgiveness from Peshawar's All Saints Church

"My daughter is a martyr; I am proud of her and I forgive the culprits since this is the message of my faith. Jesus on the cross said, 'Father, forgive them for they don't know what they are doing' (Luke 23:34)." Mr Samuel's young daughter Munaza was one of the Christian worshippers who was killed on 22 September 2013, when two suicide bombers targeted All Saints Church, Peshawar, north-western Pakistan. In the months before the bombing, Munaza had spent much time in prayer. It was this and his own Christian faith that enabled Mr Samuel to forgive the Taliban bombers who blew themselves up in the church's courtyard, killing over a hundred Christians and injuring hundreds more.

Mr and Mrs Gohar lost their daughter Naiher (8) and son Eshan (11) in the attack and Mrs Gohar herself suffered multiple injuries. But, echoing the words of the psalmist, Mr Gohar affirmed, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust" (Psalm 91:2).

Teenager Shaloom Naeem went to church with his family that morning but left it with no one. His entire immediate family had been killed: father, mother and sister. But Shaloom encouraged his fellow Christians to continue to attend church, saying, "Although my entire family is dead, I am not afraid to go to the church. We should thank God and His great love."

Christina, whose husband was martyred and four-year-old daughter Mehak was injured in the horrific attack, said, "I have a strong faith in Jesus, because He said, 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.' (John 14:18)."

Our faith was strengthened because tests are a part of life, and God never lets His people down.
Shakeela. Her husband was martyred in the attack on All Saints Church and she was injured by ball bearings from the bombs that lodged into her legs, leaving her unable to work

The law of truth was in his mouth, and injustice was not found on his lips. He walked with Me in peace and equity, and turned many away from iniquity.
Malachi 2:6 (NKJV)

Samson Nfunyeku (2015)
Evangelist Killed after Religious Debate

Samson led many Muslims to Christ during his long years of service as an evangelist in eastern Uganda. On 22 September 2015 the 59-year-old took part in a church-organised theological debate, part of a series of discussions between Christian and Islamic scholars held at the Tirinyi Trading Centre. But that evening the debate had to be cut short when tempers flared and the argument got very heated.

In the early hours of 23 September Samson's mutilated body was discovered close to his home in Kalampete village, Kibuku District. His head injuries and a mark on his neck indicated that he had been strangled and it was believed to have been done by local Islamists upset by the debate. At Samson's funeral, Gauma Samuel, a senior church leader, said, "We are going to miss the courage and passion seen in the life of Samson, who was out to win Muslims for Christ."

About 85% of Uganda's population is Christian, and about 15% are Muslim. Some eastern areas have strongly Islamic areas, where extremists can be a threat to Christians. Freedom of conscience and freedom to worship are constitutional rights in Uganda, but those who convert to Christianity from Islam are often rejected by their families and may suffer violence and other persecution at their hands (see April 6).

Despite my sufferings, I know from the Bible that God can take a disadvantage, and turn it into an advantage (Genesis 50:20). Apostle Paul writes in Philippians that he was imprisoned for the furtherance of the gospel, and as a result, many of the brethren in the Lord were emboldened by Paul's bonds to speak and preach the word without fear (Philippians 1:12-14). In a very like manner, I carry a very compelling and a very sobering message, with an aim to: motivate Christians to not be so timid in their faith; to preach boldly the Truth; and for Christians to stand up and be the light of the world.
Pastor Umar Mulinde, Ugandan Christian convert from a Muslim background who survived a serious acid attack in 2011 and at least twelve assassination attempts

Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? Esther 4:14

Queen Shushanik (475)
Armenian Queen in Georgia

Prince Varsken was ruler of Hereti, a province of south-eastern Georgia. Hereti was at that time under Persian control, so Varsken was actually the *pitiakhsh* (viceroy) of the Shah of Persia. His wife Shushanik (Susanna) was the daughter of Armenia's supreme commander.

Shushanik, a devout Christian, was horrified when she heard that her nominally Christian husband had converted to Zoroastrianism, the religion of Persia at that time, no doubt to please his Persian overlords. Worse still, he had promised to make his wife and four children become Zoroastrians too.

Shushanik fled the palace with the children and sought refuge in a nearby church. That evening she was visited by Elder Jacob who predicted, "Varsken's cruelty and mercilessness are unmistakable. Know that terrible trials await you." He continued, "Will you be firm and unbending in your position?" She answered, "I would rather die than unite with him and destroy my soul!"

When Varsken tried to persuade her to deny Christ and become a Zoroastrian, Shushanik refused and condemned his apostasy. She did, however, agree to return to the palace, but once there locked herself in a small room and refused to eat with her husband who had betrayed Christ. Varsken was furious. He beat his wife, dragged her by the hair, put her in iron fetters and imprisoned her for six years. But nothing he could do would make her renounce her faith in Christ. One day the beating was so severe that it killed her.

My Father God is real to me; in Christ revealed His heart I see.
I am His child, a princely heir; in royal rights with Christ I share.
My Saviour's name is real to me; in battle gives my victory;
It breaks the rule of Satan's host, restores the pow'r of Pentecost.
The Spirit's real, His mighty power protects me in temptation's hour;
In perfect light He guideth me, and makes Himself reality.
The Word is real, O soul, rejoice! It is my blessed Saviour's voice!

Maria Woodworth-Etter, USA (1844-1924)

Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my final end be like theirs!
Numbers 23:10

Waleed Saad Shaker and Nash'at Shenouda Ishaq (2013) Working Far from Home in Libya

On 25 September 2013, two Egyptian Christians, Waleed (25) and Nash'at (27), were killed by a group of Muslims after they refused to convert to Islam. Both were migrant workers in Libya, where they earned money to send home to their families in Egypt. Waleed supported an elderly father, a disabled brother and two sisters. Nash'at supported his wife and two children, aged 6 and 3.

The attack took place on a rural road in Derna district, north-eastern Libya, and seemed at first to be an armed robbery. But Derna was a hotbed of Islamic extremist activity. The attackers first seized the belongings of the Christians and beat them. Then they demanded that the Christians recite the *shahada*, the Islamic creed, which would be in effect to convert to Islam. When the pair refused, the attackers tied them up and shot at them.

A shepherd discovered Waleed and Nash'at in the desert. They were taken to Derna hospital where Waleed was found to be dead on arrival. His head had been beaten and his death certificate identified injuries to his head as the cause of death. Nash'at was still alive and gave details about the assault to a relative before succumbing to his injuries.

Libya has long been a place to which Egyptians have travelled in search of work. Of all the minorities in Libya, Egyptian Christians have been especially a target of Islamic State (see February 15 and March 2). The Church in Libya is composed mostly of expatriates with only a very small number of indigenous believers.

It is our battle to be summoned to your courts and, in fear of execution, to fight there for the truth. But the battle is won when the goal of the struggle is reached. This victory of ours gives us the glory of pleasing God, and the spoil of eternal life. But, you say, we are vanquished. Yes, when we have obtained our wishes. Therefore we conquer in dying; we seize the victory in the very moment that we are overcome.
Tertullian, Carthage, in modern Tunisia (c. 160-c. 225)

When they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him.
Luke 23:33 (NKJV)

Bangui Christians (2015)
"Calvary" in the Central African Republic

"When will this Calvary end for the people of the Central African Republic?" asked Pastor Vincent as he wept for his daughter and her husband whose throats had been cut, when attacked in their home. Thousands of people had already been killed in the violence afflicting the Christian-majority country for the previous two years (see August 6).

The violence had begun when the Séléka Islamist armed group briefly overthrew the government. Christian communities were the target of their attacks. In the early morning of Saturday 26 September 2015 Islamists marched from their stronghold in Bangui's 3rd district to the 5th district, a predominantly Christian part of the capital city. Carrying automatic guns, grenades, machetes and knives, they torched houses and cars and attacked several buildings, including a church, dispensary and police station. "Anti-balaka" militia, who misleadingly called themselves "Christians" despite being condemned by church leaders, retaliated. At least 42 people were killed, a further 80 were injured in clashes and over 30,000 fled to displaced persons' camps in various parts of Bangui. One eyewitness described the scene with these words: total carnage, chaos, and surreal.

The attacks were prompted by the murder of a Muslim motorcycle taxi driver, whose body was discovered dumped in the street, mutilated and his throat cut. Despite the motive and the murderer being unknown, the Séléka Islamists responded with violence against Christians. It was thought that the body of the murdered Muslim had been brought from far away and planted in order to create trouble.

King of my life I crown Thee now - Thine shall the glory be;
Lest I forget Thy thorn-crowned brow, lead me to Calvary.
Lest I forget Gethsemane,
Lest I forget Thine agony,
Lest I forget Thy love for me,
Lead me to Calvary.
May I be willing, Lord, to bear daily my cross for Thee;
Even Thy cup of grief to share – Thou hast borne all for me.
Jennie Evelyn Hussey, USA (1874-1958)

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.
Mark 10:43-45

Nigerian Christian Students (2002 and 2012) Serving Christ in Serving Others

Muslims in northern Nigeria often quote the saying, "Islam rules; it is never ruled." Christian teaching, however, advocates being a servant to all.

When a Christian student was elected to a leadership position in the student union at the Federal College of Education in Zaria, Kaduna State in 2002, rioting broke out. Twenty Christian students were killed, 50 were injured and required treatment at the local hospital, some female Christian students were raped and many other Christian students fled. Disgruntled Muslims had whipped up resentment among local Muslims who then stormed the campus. It was an indication of the pressure on Christians in Nigerian states with sharia (Islamic law).

Christians were viewed by Muslim extremists as having demanded equality with Muslims, thereby renouncing their protected but subordinate *dhimmi* status according to sharia; thus it was considered legitimate to attack the Christians.

More martyrdoms occurred in 2012 when at least 26 people were killed at the Federal Polytechnic in Mubi, Adamawa State. Most of the victims were called out by name from their rooms in a hall of residence, as gunmen (suspected to be Boko Haram terrorists) went door-to-door. At the time of the massacre, the rector of the polytechnic was a Christian, a fact which had already caused tensions in the institution. The election of a Christian to lead the student union appeared to trigger the violence.

So let us learn how to serve
And in our lives enthrone Him
Each other's needs to prefer
For it is Christ we're serving.

This is our God, the Servant King
He calls us now to follow Him
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.
Graham Kendrick, England (born 1950)

Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. Deuteronomy 8:3

Omar Khalafe and Mariam Muhina Hussein (2009) Shot Dead for Sharing God's Word in Somalia

On 15 September 2009 Omar was stopped at a checkpoint controlled by Al Shabaab Islamist militants. The 69-year-old, who had converted from Islam to Christianity about 45 years earlier, was carrying 25 Somali Bibles to deliver to secret groups of Somali believers. When the militants discovered this, they shot him dead and dumped his body some distance away with the 25 Bibles placed on top.

Later the same month, Sheikh Arbow, an *Al Shabaab* leader, sent his wife to the home of Mariam, a 46-year-old Christian woman who led an underground Christian group in Marerey village. The task of the sheikh's wife was to confirm whether there were Bibles in Swahili in Mariam's home by pretending to be interested in Christianity. Swahili is spoken by those of Bantu ancestry (that is, descendants of slaves brought to Somalia from East Africa in the 19th century).

The plan worked. Seeing her visitor's interest, Mariam agreed to discuss Christianity with her and read out passages from the Bible to her. But Mariam was hesitant when Arbow's wife asked to take away a Bible, saying that it might not be safe for her, and asked that instead she would come and visit regularly for further discussions. Arbow's wife left and promised to come again.

But the next day it was Arbow himself, with some other men, who arrived at Mariam's home. In a friendly manner he asked to check something in the Bible. Knowing only that Arbow was, like herself, a Somali Bantu and that his wife had visited the previous day, Mariam handed him a Bible. He then told her they were looking for Christians who had defiled Islam and ordered her to hand over any other Bibles. When she produced a further five, Arbow shot her dead.

Break Thou the bread of life, O Lord, to me,
That hid within my heart Thy Word may be:
Mould Thou each inward thought, from self set free,
And let my steps be all controlled by Thee.

Open Thy Word of Truth, that I may see
Thy message written clear and plain for me;
Then in sweet fellowship walking with Thee,
Thine image on my life engraved will be.

Mary A Lathbury, USA (1841-1913)

With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise. 2 Peter 3:8-9

Lorenzo Ruíz (1637)
A Thousand Lives to Give

The most agonising death that the Japanese authorities of the 17th century devised for Christians was called *tsurushi*. In fact it was not meant to kill them but to force them to recant their faith, for entire districts would have been depopulated if all the Christians had been killed. So the authorities aimed to make apostates, not martyrs. But many Christians did endure to the end and died from the *tsurushi*. Tens of thousands of Japanese Christians lost their lives for the sake of their faith, whether by *tsurushi* or other methods.

Tsurushi consisted of being hung upside down by a rope around the ankles, usually in a pit partly filled with excrement. One hand was tied to the body but the other was left free so that the victim could signal when they could bear it no longer and were willing to recant. In order to prolong the torture, a gash was cut in the person's forehead to prevent too much blood gathering in the head. Some Christians lingered for weeks like this before dying from blood loss and suffocation.

Some non-Japanese Christians were also subjected to *tsurushi*. Lorenzo was born in the Philippines, the son of a Chinese father and Filipino mother, both Christians. In 1636 he was falsely accused of killing a Spaniard and therefore fled the country, taking ship with a group of three European and two Japanese missionaries who were sailing to Japan. Within days of their arrival, they were arrested and told to recant their faith or face death. They refused to deny Christ so were taken to Nagasaki and subjected to *tsurushi*. Lorenzo remained firm in his faith and eventually died, as he dangled head-down in the filthy pit. The other five also died martyrs' deaths.

Had I a thousand lives, all these to Him shall I offer.

Lorenzo Ruiz (martyred 1637)

Through the praise of children and infants you have established a stronghold against your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger. Psalm 8:2

John Ian Maina (2012)
Sunday School Attack in Kenya

John pushed his wheelchair-using father to church on 30 September 2012, then joined his Sunday School class. He had brought some cakes to share with his friends after church, because the previous day had been his ninth birthday. The children, aged six to ten, were waiting for their lesson to begin when a grenade was hurled into the classroom, blowing off the roof. John was killed and eight children were wounded.

Earlier in the month Kenyan authorities had managed to thwart several planned terror attacks on the church building, which was named after the early Christian martyr Polycarp. It was situated in the Pangani area of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, adjoining Eastleigh, a neighbourhood nicknamed "little Mogadishu" because most of the residents of Eastleigh were either Somali refugees or Kenyans of Somali origin. This made the church a convenient target for Islamists in Eastleigh. The Somali Islamist terror group Al Shabaab had already killed many Christians in Kenya.

After attending John's funeral, Sally Gatei, a Sunday school teacher, said, "Every week we wondered, 'What if it's this week?' Yet every week we turned up for church."

Most of the adults of the church thought that Sunday School should be cancelled the Sunday after the attack that killed John. But most of the children insisted that they should meet together as usual, even though the classroom had not yet been repaired.

"From the lips of children and infants you, Lord, have called forth your praise." (Matthew 21:16).

"Mother," one day said little Sue,
"When our dear little baby died,
And had to leave your loving arms,
Who took her on the other side?"

"O Susy, when God's children die,
Jesus, who died their souls to save,
Receives them in his own kind arms,
And bears them safe across the wave."

"Who Took the Baby", *Our Children's Magazine* (April 1862), published by the ragged school movement

We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. 1 Corinthians 15:51-52

Oregon Christians (2015)
In the Twinkling of an Eye

"If you are a Christian then stand up," said gunman Chris Harper-Mercer (26) to his fellow students at a writing class at the Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon, USA on 1 October 2015. Having first ordered students to get down on the ground in the centre of the classroom, he asked them one by one about their religion. Those who stood and acknowledged their Christian faith were told they would see God in "one second" and were shot in the head. Those who said they were not religious or said nothing were sometimes shot in the legs or elsewhere.

The first victim was class teacher Lawrence Levine (67). After that Harper-Mercer killed eight students, the first three being Christians, and wounded several others, before shooting himself. Rebecka Carnes (18), a Christian girl with an aura of kindness about her, was one of the youngest victims. Jason Dale Johnson (33) had previously battled addiction, survived, and as a committed Christian was now on his way to a better future. Sarena Dawn Moore (44), a mother of three and a strong believer in the power of prayer, counted her enrolment in college as a direct answer to prayer and praised God for opening this door. In one of her last social media posts she affirmed her desire to stand up for Jesus.

Stand up, stand up for Jesus,
Stand in His strength alone;
The arm of flesh will fail you,
Ye dare not trust your own:
Put on the gospel armour,
Each piece put on with prayer;
Where duty calls, or danger,
Be never wanting there.

George Duffield, USA (1818-88)

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:19-21

Bartolomé Blanco Marquez (1936)
Returning Good for Evil

When Bartolomé was arrested in 1936 and given a death sentence, he requested his relatives to avenge him only "with the vengeance of a Christian: returning much good to those that have tried to do me evil". During the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), many Christians were put to death for holding firm to their beliefs. The left-leaning government would not tolerate opposition or any refusal to join the army. Bartolomé, from Córdoba, was imprisoned in Jaén for his refusal to be mobilised in the army against Franco's military rebellion. During his trial, he remained true to his faith and convictions and did not protest being condemned to death. He even informed the court that if he lived he would still continue being a committed Christian. On 2 October 1936, at the age of 21, he went to his execution site barefooted, "in order to be more conformed to Christ". Refusing to be shot from behind, his last words were: "Whoever dies for Christ should do so facing forward and standing straight. Long live Christ the King!" He fell to the ground under a shower of bullets.

A letter to his girlfriend, Maruja, written in prison on the eve of his death, shows his profound faith: "My sentence before the court of mankind will be my soundest defence before God's court; in their effort to revile me, they have ennobled me; in trying to sentence me, they have absolved me, and by attempting to lose me, they have saved me. Do you see what I mean? Why, of course! Because in killing me, they grant me true life and in condemning me for always upholding the highest ideals of religion, country and family, they swing open before me the doors of heaven."

In my final days, God is my light and what I long for … worldly goods and delights are of no avail if we do not manage to save our souls … let my memory always remind you that there is a better life, and that attaining it should constitute our highest aspiration.

Bartolomé Blanco Marquez (1914-1936), letter written from Provincial Prison Jaén, dated 1 October 1936, the day before he was executed

Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around … I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" Acts 17:22-23

Dionysius the Areopagite (c. 96)
Athenian Convert

Christianity came early to Athens, Greece, with the visit of the apostle Paul in 51-52 AD. Distressed at seeing a city full of idols, Paul delivered a famous sermon (Acts 17:22-31) to the people of Athens from the Areopagus, a prominent rock outcrop on which the city's judicial council (also called the Areopagus) would meet. He recognised their yearning for spiritual reality and proclaimed to them "the God who made the world and everything in it", the Lord of heaven and earth who does not live in temples built by hands, going on to speak of the Day of Judgment and Christ's resurrection. Some of those who heard Paul speak became believers that day, among them Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus (Acts 17:34).

Born into a wealthy Athenian family, Dionysius had studied both in Greece and abroad. He was in the Egyptian town of Heliopolis (near modern Cairo) at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and recorded the exact hour when "darkness came over all the land" (Mark 15:33). Commenting on the dismaying disappearance of the sun, he said, "Either the Creator of all the world now suffers or this visible world is coming to an end."

For years Dionysius wondered what this meant and whether it was a sign from heaven, until he heard Paul preach about Jesus Christ, believed and was baptised. Passionate about Jesus and His message, he abandoned his judicial career and dedicated himself completely to serving the Lord. According to tradition, Paul later appointed him the first bishop (overseer) of the new Christian community in Athens.

After many years of hard work and ministry, Dionysius suffered martyrdom by fire in Athens under the Roman Emperor Domitian.

We acknowledge one God, uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, illimitable, who is apprehended by the understanding only and the reason, who is encompassed by light, and beauty, and spirit, and power ineffable, by whom the universe has been created through His Logos, and set in order, and is kept in being. Athenagoras the Athenian (c. 133-c. 190)

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands … while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. 2 Corinthians 5:1, 4

Emmanuel Hanna Paules and Bassam Eshoo (2011) Double Murder in Northern Iraq

"The attacks on Christians continue and the world remains totally silent. It's as if we've been swallowed up by the night." These were the words of a Christian in Kirkuk, Iraqi Kurdistan after a double murder, a number of kidnappings and a spate of attacks on churches.

In the space of three weeks in August 2011, five churches were targeted with bombs, two of which exploded damaging the church buildings. On 30 September in the outskirts of Kirkuk, the body of Emmanuel (60) was found sprawled by the side of the main road to Baghdad, his clothes torn. It appeared that he had been strangled by Islamist militants and then shot. Another Christian, Bassam (30) was shot dead by extremists on 2 October in an attack on the restaurant in Mosul where he worked. The only motive for killing him was his faith in Jesus Christ. He was hated without a reason, as Jesus was (John 15:18-25).

Over 40 Christians had been killed in Mosul alone in 2008. As a result many fled to safer places within Iraq such as Iraqi Kurdistan (an autonomous region in the north of Iraq) or left their homeland altogether.

We are waiting to know that our villages are safe and secure. We believe the dear Lord will allow us to see that day; and on that day we will return to deserted and ruined houses, empty schools and hospitals. As for our precious churches, it is heartbreaking for us to imagine what they will look like when we return. But we can rebuild… These days, we pray in tents, having left behind ancient churches that lived the story of a flourishing Christianity, blessed with strong willing believers and martyrs… It is no secret that hatred of minorities has intensified in certain quarters over the past few years. It is difficult to understand this hate. We are hated because we persist in wanting to exist as Christians.

Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda of Erbil, Iraq, 10 February 2015

Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 1 Corinthians 1:17

Cotylas, Axoua and Tatas (4th century)
The Power of the Cross

Cotylas and his sister Axoua were children of Shapur II, ruler of the Sasanian Persian Empire, whose religion was Zoroastrianism. Shapur reigned his entire life (309-379).

The last 40 years of Shapur's reign are known as the Great Persecution because of the severe suffering inflicted on Christians. During this time, accusations were brought to Shapur about Tatas, ruler of the country of Maydasayeen, saying that he was a Christian. Tumakher was sent to check this claim and to torture Tatas if it was found to be true. Tatas was a friend of Prince Cotylas, who immediately travelled to be with Tatas.

Tumakher's investigations revealed that Tatas was indeed a Christian; he was therefore thrown into a furnace. But Tatas made the sign of the Cross over the fire and it died down. Marvelling at this miracle, Cotylas asked Tatas where he learned this "magic". In Zoroastrianism, fire represents the light and power of God.

"This is not magic but is through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ," replied Tatas, telling his friend that with faith Cotylas could do the same and even more. Putting his faith in Christ, Cotylas made the sign of the Cross over the fire, which retreated from him.

On hearing of this, Shapur had Tatas beheaded and Cotylas tortured and imprisoned. Axoua was sent to persuade her brother to return to Zoroastrianism, but instead Cotylas led her to faith in Christ. When she said to her father, "There is no God but Jesus Christ," he had her tortured to death. Then Cotylas was tied to the tails of horses and dragged over mountains until he too was dead.

Living water of my being, Jesus, my God.
I want to be in your presence, hear your voice.
Forgive my selfishness, my Saviour, Jesus.
Guide me, my beloved Jesus, I come to you tired of this world.
Bless me with a new existence.
Fill me up with your Spirit, my beloved Jesus.
Iranian Christian song (translated from the Farsi original)

"Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the LORD *Almighty.*
Zechariah 4:6

Colombian Church Leaders (1990-2019) Drug Cartels and Illegal Armed Groups

In the midst of the armed conflict, extortion and kidnappings that have wracked Colombia since the 1960s, the courageous preaching of Christian pastors has led many young people to renounce violence and illegal activities. Pastors have therefore been a major target of violence themselves.

The Colombian conflict has involved government forces, leftist guerrilla groups and right-wing paramilitaries. In the 1970s drug gangs emerged and drug cartels became major producers and processors of illegal drugs.

In the 1990s, the conflict escalated in remote rural areas. Illegal armed groups imposed restrictions on religious activity, at times completely prohibiting it. Many church leaders received death threats and some were killed. In one six-month period in 1999, more than 25 pastors were killed and about 300 churches were closed.

In the period 2007-09, three pastors, Manuel Camacho (see September 21), Humberto Méndez and Joel Cruz García, were killed for defying restrictions on preaching and evangelising imposed by the largest leftist guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP).

A peace agreement in 2016 demobilised FARC-EP but left a power vacuum, resulting in other illegal armed groups vying for territorial control. Pastors in rural areas were often *de facto* community leaders and therefore armed groups would try to force pastors to cooperate as they sought to bring a community under the group's authority. Two pastors were killed in Antioquia, a region in north-western Colombia plagued by violence from groups fighting for control of drug trafficking routes and ownership of illicit crops. On 16 September 2018, Martínez Pérez (55) was killed outside his home for refusing to transport a paramilitary group in his boat and on 9 February 2019 Leider Molina was killed by five bullets after preaching at his church.

Power for life and hope are made possible by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Christian experience of people living in a world deeply affected by powerlessness and hopelessness.
C René Padilla (1932-2021), born in Ecuador, brought up in Colombia, lived in Argentina from 1967 until his death

To the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood Revelation 1:4-5

Hwang Sa-yeong (1801)
The Silk Letter

Death by slow slicing – also called "death by a thousand cuts" – was the execution method used in the early 19th century for the worst criminals in Korea. It was the way in which Hwang Sa-yeong was martyred after a letter he wrote in October 1801, detailing the terrible persecution of Korean Christians, was discovered.

In this year a period of severe persecution began, initiated by Dowager Queen Kim. After she banned Christianity, 672 Christians were arrested, mostly from the upper classes and a quarter of them women. They were tried in court, beaten and tortured. Some 400 were exiled, 156 were beheaded and many others died in prison.

Hwang Sa-yeong's letter, addressed to the Bishop of Beijing, was written in 13,311 tiny Chinese characters on a piece of silk measuring 62 x 38 cm and described the persecution of the Christian community in Korea. It also requested financial support, for persecution had greatly impoverished the Church as the property of its wealthy members had been confiscated. The piece of light-weight fabric was folded and sewn into the collar of a courier.

Unfortunately, the courier betrayed Hwang and the contents of the letter reached the Korean authorities instead of the Bishop of Beijing. Hwang was arrested, tried and executed by slow slicing. About a hundred alleged collaborators were executed too.

An edict was issued that Christians should be treated as traitors and put to death so that they would have no descendants.

The grace of our Lord in this country is special. From the beginning, Christian teaching came to us without an evangelist. We cannot count all the special blessings we have received. The punishment this year was to root out our sinful shortcomings. But the Lord, in his grace, has not abandoned us and [has] left us a way out in the midst of atrocious destruction. That is a sign that the Lord will protect and save this country.
Extract from the Silk Letter (1801)

For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. 1 Timothy 2:5-6

Abdulmasih Aniya, Ashur Abraham and Bassam Michael (2015)
"I am a Christian"

A video made by their murderers shows three Syrian men, dressed in orange jumpsuits, kneeling in a row in a sandy landscape. Each gives his name and then states, "I am a Christian." Then they are shot in the back of the head. The video, made by the terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, ISIS or Daesh), was released on 8 October 2015 but it is believed to have been filmed on 23 September 2015 which was the first day of the Islamic festival Eid Al-Adha ("the Feast of Sacrifice") when Muslims ritually slaughter animals.

The three victims, Abdulmasih Aniya, Ashur Abraham and Bassam Michael, came from the towns of Tal Jazirah and Tal Shamiram in north-eastern Syria. The men were the first hostages to be executed out of over 200 Christians abducted by the radical Islamist group in February 2015, when it overran 35 Christian villages in the Khabar river valley. In a scripted moment in the video, another Christian hostage points to the bodies on the ground and says, "Our fate is the same as these if you do not take proper procedure for our release."

ISIL demanded a $14 million (£11 million) ransom for the release of the remaining over 200 hostages, but the Syrian Christian communities could not afford this, nor did they trust the terrorists. After months of negotiation the Church eventually secured the release of most of the kidnapped Christians, with the last 43 released in February 2016.

Christ and His ransomed people are to exercise a ministry through all the coming ages, revealing the greatest thing in the heart of God, the love which operating through self-abandonment and sacrifice, ransomed, redeemed and remade lost humanity. Thus for all the universe and for the ages proceeding in beauty from the Being of God, the Cross will abide as the supreme revelation of God, through which all creation will come to an understanding of His holiness and His love, the deepest and truest things of His Being.
G Campbell Morgan, England (1863–1945)

Protect my life from the threat of the enemy. Hide me from the conspiracy of the wicked, from the plots of evildoers. Psalm 64:1-2

Celeste Joseph, Buddha Laxmi Joseph, and Deepa Patrick (Paitri) (2009) "The Saddest Day"

More than 100 people were praying together at a church in Lalitpur, close to Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, at about 9 a.m. on 23 May 2009 when a bomb exploded. The blast killed Celeste, a 15-year-old girl, and Deepa (19), who was visiting from India with her new husband for their honeymoon. The Church in Nepal, barely two generations old, had never experienced such violence before. "This is the saddest day in the history of Nepali Christians," said Tirtha Thapa, a Nepali Christian leader. On 2 June a third martyr was created when Celeste's mother Buddha Laxmi Joseph (45) died of the injuries she had sustained in the explosion.

A radical Hindu militant called Sita Shrestha (27) admitted that she had brought the bomb into the church in a bag and put it on the floor under a cushion, then left the building. When someone moved the bag to make some space, it exploded.

Police said the bomber was inspired by the Nepal Defence Army (NDA), an extremist group which seeks the restoration of Nepal's Hindu monarchy and of Hinduism as the country's official state religion.

The NDA claimed responsibility for the blast, and left a handwritten note in the church that the attack was meant as a warning for Christians. In a published statement the NDA announced, "We want all the 1 million Christians out of the country. If not we will plant 1 million bombs in all the houses where Christians live and detonate them."

गाऔं गीत प्रभुको मलि्जुली छौं सब जो
मृत्यु छायां तराईमा हडि्छु जोखमि नडराई
उनको लठ्ठी समाई शान्त दनि्छन् हामीलाई
Let us sing together the Lord's song
When I walk through the valley of death
I am not afraid of the dangers for I hold His staff and He gives me peace.

Nepali hymn translated by Tanka Subedi

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. Mark 8:35

Daniel and Companions (1227)
Preaching to Muslims of the Maghreb

The martyrdom of Berard and his four companions in Morocco in 1220 (see January 16) did not deter European Christians from bringing the Gospel to non-Christian lands; in fact it inspired many to do so. Amongst them were six Italians called Agnellus, Samuel, Donulus, Leo, Hugolinus and Nicholas and their Spanish leader, Daniel, who sailed from Spain to North Africa, arriving on 20 September 1227. The area they arrived in was part of the Almohad Islamic caliphate.

The missionaries stayed in a small village just outside the city walls of Ceuta. (Modern Ceuta is a Spanish enclave bordered by Morocco and the Mediterranean Sea). The inhabitants of the village were mainly Christian merchants who told the missionaries that Christians were forbidden to enter the city. Realising the danger of their mission, the missionaries spent much time in prayer. Then, in the early morning of Sunday 3 October, they entered Ceuta and immediately began boldly preaching Christ to the Muslim residents. This caused uproar in the city. The seven were soon arrested and brought before the sultan who, thinking they were mad, ordered them to be imprisoned. On the following Sunday they were brought before the sultan again. Trying both promises and threats, he sought to make them deny Christ, but without success, so all were condemned to death.

Each approached Daniel, their leader, to ask his permission to die for Christ, and then all seven were beheaded on 10 October 1227.

Blessed be God, the Father of mercies, who comforts us in all our tribulations! Our Lord has commanded us: "Go and preach the Gospel to all creatures." He has said: "The servant is not greater than the Master; if men persecute you, remember that they first persecuted Me." Struck by these words, we poor and unworthy servants of Jesus Christ have abandoned our home, and have come to preach in this country for the glory of God and the salvation of souls … although we may have much to suffer, we are greatly comforted in the Lord.
Daniel and companions, letter written from prison in Ceuta to the Christian merchants outside the city walls

Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken, and the prey of the tyrant be rescued, for I will contend with those who contend with you, and I will save your children. Isaiah 49:25 (ESV)

Sinai's Christians (2017)
"Favourite Prey"

Egypt's Sinai Desert, a triangular peninsula linking Africa and Asia, was already a hotbed of jihadi activity when the Egyptian arm of Islamic State released a video on 22 February 2017 promising more attacks on the "worshippers of the cross" and referring to certain prominent Egyptian Christians as their "favourite prey".

Several Christians had recently been martyred in or around the northern Sinai town of el-Arish. On 30 January shopkeeper Wa'el Youssef (35) was shot dead at his downtown grocery store by three masked men. The killers then sat down and consumed soft drinks and snacks next to his dead body and in front of his terrified wife and son. On 12 February Bahgat William Zakher (40), a doctor, was stopped while driving his car and shot dead. The next day Adel Shawqy (57), a labourer, was shot dead while trying in vain to stop masked men from kidnapping his son in broad daylight on a crowded street. Three days later, Gamal Tawfiq Girgis (45), a teacher, was shot dead while assisting his wife at their shoe shop.

The IS video announced that Christians were no longer *dhimmis*, an Islamic term for Christians and Jews living under Islamic rule; according to sharia, they are not to be killed so long as they agree to abide by various humiliating rules to show that they are inferior to Muslims. The video accuses Egyptian Christians of "empowering the West against Muslim nations" implying that they were not behaving as subjugated people should. The militants circulated death lists online and on the streets, warning Christians to leave or die.

Nearly 350 Christians fled from their homes in el-Arish "with nothing but their clothes on their backs and their children in their hands".

For we … are tossed in the billows of this world, which frequently overwhelm us. But by the protecting hand of heavenly grace we are raised up again from the deep.
Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), a letter to John, Abbot of Mount Sinai, dated 600 AD

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures for ever. Psalm 136:1

Chamu Hasda Purty (2015)
Enduring Love through Ongoing Persecution

It was late evening on 12 October 2015 when Pastor Chamu (54) was summoned to pray for a sick child. Rushing to the family's home, he prayed for the boy and helped the parents admit him to hospital. He had just returned to his own home when eight armed men barged in and shot him dead.

Pastor Chamu had lived in Sandih village, Khunti district, in the tribal-dominated state of Jharkhand, in eastern India. He was well respected and valued in the community, serving all irrespective of caste.

Most of the population of Jharkhand are Hindus, but there is a minority of Christians including many poor indigenous tribal people or Dalits (the lowest level of the Hindu caste system).

Two weeks prior to Chamu's murder, over 300 people belonging to the Asur tribe converted to Christianity. This appears to have antagonised radical Hindutva nationalist groups who accused Christians of luring poor villagers to Christianity with material offers.

After Chamu's murder, his family left the village and rarely returned, but in 2020, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, they had to return to their home village. On 16 April, two armed men appeared at the door and demanded to know, "Is this the house of the pastor who was killed? That pastor was killed but you didn't learn your lesson. You're still assembling in large numbers for Christian prayers." They shot Neelam, one of Chamu's daughters, in the thigh and then left.

These are tough days, but God is good – and He gives wisdom and safety to His people.
Indian church leader, 11 January 2021 about the situation of Christians in India

I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life. 1 Samuel 1:11

Liu Haitao (2000)
Power of a Mother's Prayer

As a child, Haitao had learned from his Christian mother how to pray. At the end of his short life it was her prayers that uplifted the 21-year-old as he lay dying. In his last moments, he told her, "I am very happy. Truly! Keep the faith and follow the Lord to the end."

Haitao was arrested on 4 September 2000 with 27 other believers while attending a "house church" (unofficial church) training session in Xiayi county, Henan Province, China.

After 23 days they were all released except Haitao and one other. The Public Security demanded 5,000 yuan (£600) for Haitao's release, but this was an impossibly high sum for his parents, who were poor farmers, so Haitao remained in prison. He was beaten by the other prisoners and tortured by the police. Yet he still shared his meagre food rations with fellow prisoners. His pre-existing kidney condition flared up because of the harsh conditions and he became seriously ill, but no medical treatment was given to him.

Eventually his parents were notified and came to take him to hospital. Too weak to walk and weighed down by heavy iron shackles on his ankles, Haitao had to be carried by his father to a three-wheeled taxi. At the hospital the shackles were removed, but within a few hours he died in his mother's arms as she prayed, "Dear Lord, forgive them – they know not what they do. Lord, have mercy on us – have mercy on China! … May Your great love flow down from the cross and melt these heavy chains and the even colder and crueller hearts of men! Lord, have mercy and save our fellow countrymen!" Haitao's last word, whispered faintly but clearly, was "Amen".

The Lord has saved me with His limitless love and given me eternal life and sonship. I cannot receive His grace in vain or despise His salvation. I am sad because over 90% of the Chinese people are still ignorant of Christ. If the Lord will use me, I will willingly give my youth and my entire life to the work of evangelism.

Liu Haitao (martyred 16 October 2000), words in his diary after committing his life to the Lord in early 1999

Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering. Hebrews 13:3

Wehazit Berhane Debesai (2013)
Eritrean Prisons

Like Liu Haitou in China (see October 13), Wehazit, an Eritrean Christian woman in her thirties, suffered martyrdom because of illness caused by the harsh conditions of her imprisonment. In the case of Wehazit it was pneumonia, which she developed after a year in prison. She was given no medical treatment because she refused to renounce her Christian faith. She died some time in the week of 14 October 2013.

When arrested in 2012 for involvement in Christian activities outside of the government-approved denominations, she had been doing national service. All Eritreans aged 18 to 40 must do national service for 18 months, but this can be greatly extended, sometimes for more than a decade. Wehazit's fiancé Yohannes was arrested the same day and both were held at Adi Quala. Wehazit was kept in solitary confinement. Her death coincided with the arrest of around 70 Christians at a prayer gathering in the capital Asmara, bringing to almost 300 the number of Christians known to have been taken into custody in 2013.

At the time of writing, Eritrea remains one of the worst countries in the world for Christian persecution. Conditions are so harsh for believers that it is described by some as Africa's North Korea. In 2001 the Eritrean government cancelled elections, closed down independent media and in 2002 extended its repression to "non-traditional" religious groups. Since then only three Christian denominations have been legally permitted – Eritrean Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Lutheran – as well as Sunni Islam. Many thousands of Christians, mainly evangelicals, have suffered severely at the hands of a government known for its appalling prison conditions and widespread use of torture.

Sometimes I cannot believe that this is my life: these four metal walls, all of us corralled like cattle, the pain, the hunger, the fear. All because of my belief in a God who has risen, who charges me to share my faith with those who do not yet know him, and who I am forbidden to worship. I think back to a question I have been asked many times over my months in prison: "Is your faith worth this, Helen?" And as I take a deep breath of the sour air, as my scalp stings, the mad woman rants outside, and the guards continue on their rounds, I whisper the answer: "Yes."

Helen Berhane, Eritrea, (born c. 1974) imprisoned 2004-06

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Romans 11:33

David James Cooper (1902)
Called to Higher Service

The year 1902 was one of sorrow and loss for the Christian community in Morocco. In August El Kaid, a Moroccan believer, was killed by a mob in Larache (see August 20) and on October, David, a missionary from Belfast (now in Northern Ireland), was shot in the back while shopping at a market in Fez, which was at that time the capital of Morocco and its spiritual centre. His murderer later declared that he had come from his village to the city and bought a gun, determined to kill the first Christian he met. He held that if there had been any good Muslims, they would have already killed all the Christians.

The bullet, which was made of hard salt, passed right through David's abdomen. Despite his great pain, he assured his wife that God would take care of her and the children, prayed for his murderer and soon afterwards died peacefully.

When the Moroccan ruler, Sultan Abd al-Aziz, who was trying to introduce European-style administration to Morocco, heard of this he took unprecedented action. The killer, who had claimed the traditional sanctuary in a mosque, was dragged from there to the sultan's presence and severely punished. This treatment for the killer of a Christian was disapproved by the general population, but the governing classes and merchants were more supportive of the missionaries.

The sultan gave Mrs Cooper a gift of £1,000 (equivalent to more than £100,000 today) as an expression of his sympathy in her bereavement. Thus he was part of the fulfilment of David's dying assurance to his wife that she and their children would be cared for.

… it seemed as if [David Cooper] were indispensable. But God, who cares ten thousand times more for [the missionary work in Morocco] work than he did or we can, has permitted his death, so we bow our heads in faith and worship, assured that God makes no mistakes, and that He can and will accomplish His purposes of grace by our brother's removal even better than by retaining him at his post. How, we cannot tell, but we believe in some way He will.
Edward H Glenny, North Africa Mission Council, December 1902

Be glad, people of Zion, rejoice in the LORD your God, for he has given you the autumn rains because he is faithful. Joel 2:23

Che Jinguang (1861)
Watered by God's Grace

In 1856 Che Jinguang (meaning "golden light chariot"), keeper of the Confucian temple in Boluo, Guangzhou, China, became the town's first Christian. His conversion was the result of reading a New Testament given to him by a Bible colporteur who passed through the town. Longing to know about the wonderful book that stirred his soul, Brother Che travelled to Hong Kong where he had heard there was a Christian missionary. Brother Che asked the missionary, James Legge from Scotland, to baptise him, but James hesitated to baptise someone he hardly knew. Brother Che's longing only deepened and one evening, after a prayer meeting, he took off his cap and, letting the pouring rain fall on his head, said, "You don't believe in me, and are afraid to baptise me, but I am a true man, and God, whose rain is now falling on me, knows it. See, God is baptising me."

Seeing such earnestness, James baptised him and Brother Che returned to Boluo where, despite being quite elderly, he became a self-supporting itinerant evangelist, carrying a board on his back on which were written Bible verses in Chinese. Soon he was no longer the only Christian in Boluo. In 1860 he travelled to Hong Kong again, with 25 converts, all asking to be baptised.

Next year James travelled with Brother Che around the region, where many were becoming Christians. Afterwards a group of ruffians seized Brother Che in Boluo and carried him off to a nearby village. Tied by his thumbs and big toes, he was hung from a beam all night while they tortured him, urging him to deny Christ and offer incense to an idol. Brother Che continued to refuse so, on 16 October, they killed him, throwing his body in a river.

They seized the chariot of the Gospel, and attempted to hold it back from its course of light and blessing through the earth. Vain was the attempt … at the banquet of Christ there is room for men of all nations.
James Legge (1815-97), Scottish missionary to China. This extract comes from a sermon given in 1871

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.
Joshua 1:9

François-Isidore Gagelin (1833)
Strong in the Lord from Childhood

"I want to toughen myself up to go and preach in distant lands," said eleven-year-old François-Isidore when his sister ran to bring him dry clothes after he got soaked out in the fields near his home in France one rainy day. He did not waver in his conviction of his calling, despite his mother's laments, and in 1821 at the age of 22 set off to Vietnam.

The Vietnamese Emperor Minh Mang (reigned 1820-41) was unfavourable to foreign interference and grew increasingly hostile to Christianity. It was in this context that François-Isidore worked zealously for the Lord, struggling to preach in a tonal language where words changed their meaning according to the pitch at which they were uttered. He loved to hear the Vietnamese Christians pray. To him it was like a song: "They make a melodious sound so beautiful, so pleasant that I do not get tired of listening to them."

In January 1833 an edict of persecution against Christians was issued by the emperor. As it was implemented, church buildings were destroyed and Christians went into hiding. Fearing that panic would spread, François-Isidore resolved to calm the situation by surrendering himself. In August, he entered Hue, the then capital of Vietnam, and was imprisoned. Later he was condemned to death for having left Dong Na to preach Christ in other places. This information, responded François-Isidore, "fills me with joy to the bottom of my soul … the grace of martyrdom, of which I am very unworthy, has been, from my earliest childhood, the object of my most ardent wishes." On 17 October 1833 François-Isidore was executed by strangulation.

Sing for a thousand stars to burst. Praise and bless God in joy…
God is the fountain of holy grace, forgiving the sins of the people.
Love is far and wide, more durable than rivers and mountains, higher than clouds.
Kim Long (born 1941), "Ca Lên Đi 1", Vietnamese Christian hymn

As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God. Psalm 42:1

Isaac Jogues, Jean de Lalande and Huron Christians (1642, 1646)
The Indomitable One

A bad harvest in the Great Lakes region of North America in 1642 led to the martyrdom of many Huron Christians.

Isaac, a French missionary who had lived among the Huron people for six years, winning many to Christ, set off with some Huron believers to get supplies from Quebec (in modern Canada). On their way home they were attacked by Mohawk people, eager to capture Christian Hurons. For Hurons and Mohawks were enemies and the Mohawks were also enraged that some Hurons had given up traditional tribal ways to follow a foreign religion. Isaac and many of his companions were seized, beaten and tortured. Two fingers of Isaac's right hand were cut off but it was much worse for the Huron believers who were brutally treated and killed, while he strove to comfort them in their time of trial.

While in captivity, Isaac learnt the Mohawk language so that he could continue to spread the Gospel. Seeing his steadfast spirit, his captors named him Ondessonk, meaning "the indomitable one".

Eventually Isaac was freed when Dutch traders paid his ransom, and returned home to France, but in 1646 set out again for the Great Lakes, accompanied by Jean de Lalande. The two were captured by Mohawks and on 18 October 1646 Isaac was murdered in the village of Ossernenon (in modern New York State) by a blow from a tomahawk to his head. Jean was killed the following day.

'Twas in the moon of winter-time when all the birds had fled,
That mighty Gitchi Manitou [God] sent angel choirs instead;
Before their light the stars grew dim, and wandering hunters heard the hymn:
"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria."

O children of the forest free, O sons of Manitou,
The Holy Child of earth and heaven is born today for you.
Come kneel before the radiant boy who brings you beauty, peace and joy.
"Jesus your King is born, Jesus is born, in excelsis gloria."

Jean de Brébeuf, France (1593-1649), "Huron Carol", written c.1642 in Wyandot/Wendat (language of the Huron people). Jean de Brébeuf and a number of Huron Christians were martyred by Iroquois on 16 March 1649 in a village now called Waubaushene, Ontario, Canada

I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6

Abdikhani Hassan, Fartun Omar (2013) and Mursal Isse Siad (2012)

"Spreading a Wrong Religion"

"We have information that Hassan is spreading a wrong religion to our people, and we are looking for him," said someone to one of Abdikhani Hassan's Muslim neighbours in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia. Abdikhani was a convert from Islam, active in sharing his Christian faith, who ran a community clinic and a pharmacy. Soon afterwards, on 20 October 2013 his pregnant wife and children were left grieving when Abdikhani was killed by seven gunshots to his chest. The two gunmen, who attacked him as he walked home in the evening from his pharmacy, were suspected of belonging to the Islamist militant group Al Shabaab.

Earlier in the year, another Somali Christian, Fartun (42), had also been shot dead. She was the widow of Mursal (55) who had been killed for his faith on 8 December 2012, after receiving death threats on his cell phone for leaving Islam. The couple had decided to follow Christ in 2000.

On 10 April 2013 she and her children, on their way by bus to seek refuge with relatives, were stopped at a roadblock in an area controlled by Al Shabaab. The militants ordered the passengers to disembark and questioned them one by one. They recognised Fartun as "the woman whose husband was killed last year". The other passengers were allowed to board again and the bus left. A few days later her body was found near Buulobarde with bullet wounds on her right side.

The immortal God, who created the world,
Gave you a covenant that will never fail.
On top of the mountains, if I stay for a month,
With snow falling on me, I will not deny my Saviour.
For a hundred years, if I stay in the desert,
Without a farm, livestock and wife, I will not deny my Saviour.
If I am slaughtered, thrown into the sea,
And beaten with a club, I will not deny my Saviour.
If I am hungry and I have no money,
I will never deny my Saviour.

A Somali Christian song "Baaqiga Eebbow" ("The Immortal God") in English translation

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. James 5:16

Debalal (2013)
Prayed for the Sick

Debalal (36) had been praying for months for the healing of a devout young Hindu man called Kumar. His regular visits appeared to bring comfort to Kumar and it seemed that the illness was gradually improving. Praying for the sick was a major part of Debalal's Christian ministry, as he himself had come to the Lord after his broken leg was healed by Christian prayers.

About 3.00 a.m. on 20 October 2013, Kumar sent a message to Debalal asking him to come again and pray for him. Despite the time, Debalal could not say no to a request from a sick man crying out in pain and he went. At Kumar's home, Debalal closed his eyes to pray, with a Bible on his lap. While this was happening, Kumar left the room and returned with an iron rod and a *khukuri* (a sharp, curved Nepali knife). He beat Debalal, then cut him all over his body and finally slit his throat, leaving him to bleed to death.

Debalal had converted to Christianity in 2006 after receiving healing of a broken leg through prayer. Grateful for what he had received from the Lord, he thereafter proclaimed the Gospel in the local villages. He was a kind, loving man always eager to help those in need, so many villagers regularly came to him for prayer. But others ordered him to "stay away" saying Nepal was a "Hindu nation". People in rural areas often despised Christians; however, no one expected this kind of brutal violence. It appeared to be a pre-planned attack as Kumar had recently purchased a *khukuri*. He told the police that he murdered Debalal because he was forcefully converting people and told his wife that he was going to kill more Christians.

Opposition, persecution and martyrdom are part of the cost of following the Lord and bringing the gospel to a desperately needy world … We are always heartbroken when we lose someone, but while we weep here on earth, there is rejoicing over those who came to know Jesus through this man [Debalal].
K P Yohannan, India (born 1950), who supported Debalal's ministry

The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body… I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable… For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 50, 53-54

Gayle Williams (2008)
Aid to Disabled Afghan Children

"No one could have asked for a more humble daughter with a more loving heart. She died doing what she felt the Lord had called her [to]." Gayle's mother was speaking after her 34-year-old daughter had been gunned down in the street as she walked to work in Kabul, Afghanistan, on 20 October 2008.

A Christian aid worker with dual British and South African nationality, Gayle had been working with disabled Afghan children including the blind, deaf and those who had lost their limbs to landmines and bombs, teaching them the skills they needed for survival. A Taliban spokesman stated that Gayle was killed "because she was working for an organisation which was preaching Christianity in Afghanistan".

Aware of the dangers, Gayle had nevertheless chosen to live in a modest house and refused to have an armed guard as she moved around Kabul. Her bullet-riddled body was left lying in a pool of blood. A few weeks earlier, Gayle had attended the funeral of a Christian colleague, at which she commented, "These bodies are only temporary. When I get to heaven I will have a new body."

Our willingness to be used as God's vessel can make His Father-heart a reality to our hurting world.
Floyd McClung (1945-2021), missionary in Afghanistan 1970-73

Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 13:14

Nunilo and Alodia (851)
Sisters Whose Love for the Lord Could Not be Hidden

Nunilo and Alodia lived in 9th century Huesca in Aragon (modern Spain), which was then part of the Islamic Emirate of Cordoba. Their Christian mother brought her daughters up as committed believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Their father, a Muslim, died and when their mother re-married it was to another Muslim man. The girls themselves resolved never to wed, because they wanted to be married only to Jesus.

The sisters' stepfather disapproved of their love for the Lord. In Islam, a child with at least one Muslim parent is deemed to be a Muslim. The sisters, in eschewing the Islamic religion of their father and following Christ, were therefore classed as apostates from Islam, even though they had never been Muslims. Their brutal stepfather, who was a high-ranking person, made them suffer for this.

The sisters got permission to go and live with a devout Christian aunt where they could pray, fast and read the Bible and also busy themselves in works of charity. They rejected all offers of marriage. As their Christian faith blossomed in their Christ-like lives, it could not be hidden.

The emir at this time was Abd al-Rahman II (reigned 822-852), under whom a cruel persecution of Christians took place. The sisters were arrested as apostates. According to the Maliki school of sharia, which predominated in Islamic Spain, a sane adult apostate should be put to death. Nunilo and Alodia refused to abandon their faith in Christ, despite many threats and tortures. The emir then sent them to a brothel to try to wear them down but to no avail. They were beheaded in prison on 22 October 851.

You, O eternal Trinity, are a deep sea, into which the more I enter the more I find, and the more I find the more I seek … O eternal Godhead, O sea profound, what more could you give me than yourself? … Clothe me, clothe me with yourself, eternal truth, so that I may run this mortal life with true obedience, and with the light of your most holy faith.
Catherine of Siena, modern Italy (1347-86)

Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the sheepfold and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, *I will be joyful in God my Saviour. The Sovereign* LORD *is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights.* Habakkuk 3:17-19

Elias Lunyamila Meshack (2013) and Dioniz Ng'wandu (2014) Strength to Move On

"I thank God: He gives me strength and I have never gone to bed hungry. He is with my children and gives us strength to move on and do well," said Mary.

At first Mary had many agonised "Why?" questions for God when her husband Elias was killed while guarding their church near Lake Victoria in northern Tanzania. A youth leader, Elias was on guard during an all-night worship service (21-22 October 2013) because there had been a spate of attacks on churches in the area. Machete-wielding assailants attacked the worshippers during the night and Elias was killed.

Mary was devastated, not only for herself but also because toddler Prosper and his baby sister Prisca had lost their father. But as time passed, God enabled her to accept her widowhood, draw close to Him again and affirm her thankfulness for His care of the family.

Sadly, the incident was not unique. On 9 October 2014 Dioniz, a school teacher, was killed when Islamist extremists attacked an early morning prayer meeting in Bukoba, north-west Tanzania. The masked assailants entered the church with ease as the building was still under construction and had no windows or doors. Situated in a mainly Muslim part of Tanzania, it had received threats from Muslims who vowed to reduce the number of Christians in the area.

What makes you always happy and ever strong?
Even when like tilapia you're thrown in deep sea?
Though you can't swim, you sing a favourite song!
What indeed changes your agony into glee?
What calms you down amid a hostile throng?
Why are you positive like an evergreen tree?

You do not seem to fear summer or severe winter
The winds may blow like death across your soul;
Unfairness may rain on you like the el-nino rains;
And thrust you down; almost fainting to the floor;
But you bounce right back to the top of mountains
Are you made of sponge that absorbs every blow?

You want to know the reason why I keep positive?
Positive because I've got an altogether positive Saviour.
When the tempest raged, the sea became negative,
It was deadly dark and the fog didn't want to clear –
For even the skies were gloomy and utterly negative.
But Jesus; my positive Saviour took away my fear!

Through the pain, I have learned to love Him more.
Now I know His voice better; twice He spoke to me;
I know His footsteps in battle; thrice He went before
He gives me joy and peace and hope – at stormy sea.
Yes, I am only human but my Saviour is in control.
That's why I'm happy - all my being goes aglow.

Christopher Mwashinga (born 1965), Tanzanian poet, "I am only Human"

From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. Psalm 61:2 (NKJV)

Ivan Yasko (1980)
Refused to Betray

Ivan was a very new believer, not yet baptised and not yet a member of any church, when the Soviet Union's KGB approached him in Gomel (in modern Belarus) and tried to recruit him as an informer. Ivan refused. In order to try to escape from the KGB, he moved to Sindarevskoe (modern Ukraine) and it was here that he was baptised and joined the local Christian community.

One day he met the same KGB officers, who asked, "Don't you remember us from Gomel?" They threatened and pressurised him, trying to get him to agree to report to them what other Christians were doing, but again Ivan refused.

On 18 October 1980, as Ivan was leaving for work, he said to his father, "I don't want to go out today; something is heavy on my heart." Nevertheless he did go to his workplace, did his day's work and left at 8.00 p.m. to go home. But he never got there. His parents found him in hospital, severely beaten up, the back of his skull fractured. Despite his head injury, he remained conscious and after a while it seemed that he was beginning to recover.

Then his sister, who was by his bedside, was asked by doctors to leave the room because they needed to do a simple procedure on him. Another patient in the same room afterwards said that what the doctors actually did was something quite different from what they had told his sister. After this, Ivan never regained consciousness and died on 24 October aged only 22: an ordinary but faithful believer, martyred by the Soviet communist authorities for refusing to betray his fellow Christians.

Heavy laden with thy grief,
Do thy tears like raindrops flow?
Christ hath all thy sorrows borne,
Long ago.

Sad and doubting! Lo, the sun
Shines upon a glorious day;
He is risen, come see the place
Where He lay.

Hymns of the Russian Church, translated by John Brownlie (1857-1925)

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!
Romans 5:7-10

Fadi Jamil Haddad (2012)
Laid Down his Life Trying to Save Others

Fadi's naked body was discovered beside a highway, mutilated and with the eyes gouged out, a gunshot wound to his head. He had been "one of the most prominent workers for national reconciliation and the healing of wounds" as described by Syrian State Television when they announced his death.

Fadi was a church minister in Qatana, the Syrian city where he had been born and brought up. But when the Syrian Civil War broke out in 2011, and kidnappings began to abound, Fadi took on a new and very dangerous area of service, one that required enormous courage and which put his life repeatedly at risk. He began to function as an intermediary negotiating the release of people who were being held hostage. Taking no political position, he gained a reputation as a man of God trusted by all sides in the conflict.

One day in October 2012 he set off by car to seek the release of a Christian doctor who had been kidnapped ten days earlier. He brought with him the ransom money demanded by the doctor's captors. But, in attempting to gain the doctor's freedom, Fadi himself was kidnapped. We can only imagine his thoughts, but perhaps he recalled how his Lord, the Prince of Peace, was betrayed into the hands of those who so cruelly put Him to death, a death which reconciled us to God.

Several days later, on 25 October, his body was found. As if not content with hideously wounding this "healer of wounds" terrorists set off a bomb at his funeral, killing two civilians and a number of soldiers. Extremists in the city said that if Christians refused to leave they would end up in the grave.

If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him.
C T Studd, England (1860-1931)

God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realised. Hebrews 6:10-11

Judas Thaddaeus (Jude) (c. 65)
The Other Judas – Judas the Martyr

At the Last Supper, this Judas (not Judas Iscariot) was the one who asked Jesus why He chose to show Himself to the disciples and not to the whole world after His resurrection (John 14:22). He tends to come near the end when the apostles are listed in the New Testament, often next to Simon the Zealot, with whom, according to tradition, he later travelled the Middle East, preaching the Gospel. But otherwise little is known of Judas Thaddaeus – except that he was martyred.

Different churches remember different stories of the last three decades of Judas Thaddaeus's life. It is perhaps because he shared a name with the infamous apostle Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, that the life story of the faithful apostle Judas is so obscure. It is probable that the name "Judas" became unpopular amongst Christians, and all the Judases of the early Church seem to have adopted other names, causing later believers some difficulty in trying to be sure who was who. Judas the faithful apostle is named and described in a variety of ways (Matthew 10:3; Mark 3:18; Luke 6:16; John 14:22).

In all the confusion, one fact is repeated in every tradition – that Judas Thaddaeus was martyred around 65 AD. This may have taken place in Beirut in the Roman province of Phoenicia (modern Lebanon) or in Persia (modern Iran) or in Armenia (see December 15). He may have been clubbed to death or killed with an axe. Whatever version of the story is true the one repeated message is this: that he died for Christ.

And people who do not know the Lord ask why in the world we waste our lives as missionaries. They forget that they too are expending their lives… and when the bubble has burst they will have nothing of eternal significance to show for the years they have wasted.
Nate Saint, USA (martyred 1956), missionary to Ecuador

I will follow you wherever you go. Luke 9:57

Eleanor Chesnut, Ella and Amy Machle, John and Rebecca Peale (1905)

Willing to Go Anywhere

"I am willing to be sent to whatever location may be deemed fittest… I do not… set my heart on any one place, but rather pray that wherever it may be will be the appointed one, that what powers I possess may be used to the best advantage." With these words, Dr Eleanor Chesnut, from the USA, sent off her application to the Foreign Mission Board in 1893.

The Board sent her to China to be a doctor at a mission hospital in Lianzhou (Lien-chou), Guangdong Province. She was so dedicated to her work that once she cut a large piece of skin from her own thigh to provide a skin graft for an amputee.

On 29 October 1905 a conversation between another missionary doctor, Edward Machle, and some Buddhist priests turned into a heated argument. In the end the dispute was settled amicably, but a crowd of bystanders attacked the mission station and burned it to the ground. The missionaries fled. Eleanor, with Edward's wife Ella, their eleven-year-old daughter Amy and the recently arrived missionaries John and Rebecca Peale, hid in the darkness of a large complex of interlinked caves, but their pursuers found them. Calmly, Ella spoke to the mob about Christ until a blow from behind ended her life.

Eleanor's last act was to tear off part of her skirt to bandage a gash on the head of a Chinese boy accidentally hurt in the melee. Her last words were pleading for the lives of the others to be spared, even if she herself were killed. Killed she was – thrown into the river, speared with a pitchfork and held down until she drowned. Then the Peales and young Amy were killed too.

Being in doubt, I say,
Lord, make it plain!
Which is the true, safe way?
Which would be in vain?
I am not wise to know,
Nor sure of foot to go,
My blind eyes cannot see
What is so clear to thee;
Lord, make it clear to me.

Being perplexed, I say,
Lord, make it right!
Night is as day to thee,
Darkness as light.
I am afraid to touch
Things that involve so much;
My trembling hand may shake,
My skilless hand may break –
Thine can make no mistake.

Anna Bartlett Warner, USA (1827-1915), quoted by Eleanor Chesnut

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Hebrews 13:7

Christians in Krasnoyarsk (1937)
Remember Those Who Have Gone Before You

On this day in 1937 a group of about 30 Christians, including a number of pastors, were shot dead in southern Krasnoyarsk, in the remote coldness of Siberia (then in the Soviet Union), and buried together in a mass grave.

Many of the martyred Christians were in their thirties, but Ivan Ivanovich Galitsky, a Baptist preacher from Kursk, Ukraine, was quite a lot older. At the age of 57 he had been sentenced in 1935 to three years' exile in Minusinsk, Krasnoyarsk. While in exile, he was elected pastor of the Baptist church, but was arrested again on 23 June 1937, together with 14 other Christians. Held in Minusinsk prison, Ivan, like most prisoners in the USSR in those days, was tortured throughout his time in detention. A case was fabricated against the group of 15 that they were involved in organised counter-revolutionary activities. They were sentenced on 22 October to death by shooting. On 31 October they were executed, but in 1957 posthumously rehabilitated by Krasnoyarsk Regional Court.

The tribunal that heard their case was one of the notorious Soviet troikas – panels of three officials who dealt out the quickest and roughest of "justice", usually sentencing people either to death by shooting or years of exile in a gulag prison camp. Executions were carried out speedily and secretly. Those tried by the troikas had little or no opportunity to defend themselves. In any case, the outcome was often determined before the hearing had begun if there were quotas of executions or imprisonments which had to be met. Landowners, criminals and church leaders were amongst the "anti-Soviet elements" tried by the troikas.

Great spiritual sensitivity is granted to you from the Lord … you have become workers in [Christ's] vineyard. With what self-denial have you given up your youthful years, your years of strength and zeal and your years of tranquil old age … May God grant patience and consolation to you and may you live with oneness of mind amongst each other.
Sergei Mechev, Russia (1892-1941), written from exile in the far north in 1931. Later he was martyred

"But now be strong … For I am with you," declares the LORD *Almighty. "This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear."* Haggai 2:4-5

Zhang Hongmei (2003)
Tortured on the Tiger Bench

Sister Zhang (33), a Christian in one of China's unofficial "house churches", was bound with heavy chains to a so-called "tiger bench" – a torture method used in China in which a seated prisoner's legs are extended out in front of them and tied tightly with leather straps to a small iron bench. Bricks or other hard objects are then placed under the feet and added to in layers, raising the feet until either the straps break or the prisoner's legs break. Victims often pass out from the pain during these torture sessions.

What crime could justify such a punishment? Sister Zhang had been arrested on 29 October 2003 on a charge of "illegally carrying out religious activities". This was because she was involved in a "house church", i.e. a church which is not registered and therefore neither controlled by the government nor legal. In fact, she had belonged to a house church for ten years.

The police telephoned her family in Dong Miaodong, near Pingdu city, Shangdong, demanding payment of a bribe for her release, but the amount was far too high for a poor farming family to pay, so her husband and brother went to the police to plead for her release. It was then that they saw her bound to the "tiger bench", so badly injured and bruised from the beatings and torture that she could not even speak. Despite their protests, they were forced to go home without her.

The next day the family were told that Sister Zhang had died. An autopsy revealed several wounds to her face, hands and legs, along with serious internal bleeding. About a thousand people marched to the city offices demanding an inquiry, but no inquiry ever happened.

Life is pitiful, death so familiar, suffering and pain so common, yet I would not be anywhere else. Do not wish me out of this or in any way seek to get me out, for I will not be got out while this trial is on.
Gladys Aylward (1902–70), English missionary to China, in a letter to her mother sometime between 1938-40 when she went from village to village, sometimes hiding in mountain caves, to avoid capture by the Japanese who had invaded China

Ploughmen have ploughed my back and made their furrows long. But the LORD *is righteous; he has cut me free from the cords of the wicked.* Psalm 129:3-4

Isidore Bakanja (1909)
250 Lashes for Praying to God in the Belgian Congo

Isidore was about 18 when he gave his life to the Lord Jesus. Wanting to have fellowship with other believers as well as more opportunities to share the Gospel with unbelievers, Isidore moved from his village to a town. He got a job on a Belgian-owned rubber plantation, but soon discovered that the plantation manager, Van Cauter, hated Christians.

One day Van Cauter flew into a rage when he saw Isidore praying during a rest period, and ordered him to be flogged with an elephant-hide whip that had nails protruding at the end. When Isidore's skin was flayed from his back, the other workers refused to flog him anymore, but Van Cauter threatened their lives, so they continued, perhaps up to 250 lashes in all. Afterwards Isidore lay in a pool of blood, his back so lacerated that some bones were exposed. He was heard saying, "He did not want me to pray to God… He killed me because I said my prayers… I stole nothing from him… It's because I was praying to God."

No medical treatment was given and Isidore's wounds began to fester as he lay helplessly in the rubber factory. A visiting inspector found him and took him away, hoping to heal him. Isidore survived for six months, in agonising pain, praying daily and offering his suffering to God. He died of septicaemia on 15 August 1909, having said that he had forgiven Van Cauter.

At the Council of Berlin (1884-5) Britain, France, Germany and Portugal decided to give the Congo to King Leopold II of Belgium; "lofty ideals and philanthropic intentions" were announced by the delegates for its future. The reality that followed, however, was one of the most brutal colonial situations in history.

Tell them that I am dying because I am a Christian.
Isidore Bakanja, Belgian Congo, now Democratic Republic of the Congo (1887-1909)

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. 2 Corinthians 3:2-3

Cassian of Tangier (298)
Denouncing Injustice, Announcing Christ

Cassian was the official court recorder in Tingis (modern Tangier, Morocco). His duties were to transcribe court proceedings and judgments into written form. According to tradition, Cassian minuted the proceedings in 298 when Marcellus, a centurion, was on trial for refusing to serve any longer in the Roman army because he had become a Christian and wanted to serve only Jesus Christ. Amongst the short-hand notes taken by Cassian would have been these words of Marcellus:

> We know of no vengeance, however we may be wronged. We do not ask for vengeance, but with Christ we pray, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."
> … I serve Jesus Christ, the everlasting King! So far am I from seeking to escape suffering for the name of Christ, that I, on the contrary, consider it the highest honour which you can confer upon me.

Did Cassian there and then become a Christian, was he already a believer, or did he put his faith in Christ as he mulled over Marcellus's words during the weeks in prison that lay ahead? We do not know, but what we do know is that Cassian was so indignant at the pronouncement of a death sentence on Marcellus that he threw down his stylus and tablet, vowing he would not record any more of the proceedings. When asked why, Cassian replied that the sentence was unjust. Immediately he was arrested. After a period in prison he was brought back into the same court and tried on 3 December. Making almost the same replies that Marcellus had given on 30 October, he affirmed his Christian faith, was sentenced to death and executed.

O God, if we are turned away from you we fall, if we are turned to you we rise, and if we stand with you we abide for ever.
Augustine of Hippo, in modern Algeria (354–430)

When he has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. Job 23:10

Diyarbakir Massacres (1895)
A "Giant Oven"

"All of Diyarbakir became a giant oven," wrote a church minister, Habib Jarwe, describing how Muslim mobs attacked Christian homes and shops in the Turkish city of Diyarbakir on Friday 1 November 1895, pouring petrol into them and setting them ablaze. The violence began after midday prayers at the mosque and stopped abruptly three days later. Christians of any ethnic group were targeted, leaving at least 1,000 Christians dead and many thousands unaccounted for.

Some Christians had sought refuge in a large stone church building but Kurdish Muslims (who were assisting the Turks in the massacre) surrounded it, shot into it, broke through the roof and threw in fuel and burning torches. Eventually they managed to smash open the doors, and those inside were forced out, only to be met by a storm of bullets as they emerged into the open. One of those hiding was Pastor Yinyis Khathershian, a visitor from Egypt. When the mob realised he was a clergyman they beat him almost unconscious, then stuffed into his mouth a sacred book they found lying in the church and mockingly asked him to preach a sermon. He died in the flames.

Massacres in the countryside of Diyarbakir *vilayet* (province) continued for another 46 days. An estimated 6,000 Christian families (about 30,000 people) died or disappeared from 119 villages, and 50 women and girls were taken captive. Many Christians were burned to death in churches they had fled to. In Sadiye village only three men out of 300 inhabitants survived and in Miyafarkin (modern Silvan), there were only 15 survivors from a village of 1,000. Christians were given the option to save their lives by converting to Islam, but they would cry, "Death rather than deny our faith."

Then e'en in storms I shall you know, my sure support and refuge too;
In ev'ry trial I shall prove assuredly that God is love.
Christian F Richter, Brandenburg, modern Germany (1676-1711), translated from the German original by John Wesley (1703-91)

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. 2 Corinthians 4:18

Asaad Farouk Labeeb and Six Members of the Youssef Shehata Family (2018)
Bus Ambushed in Egyptian Desert

On this day in 2018, inside a remote monastery in Egypt's western desert, all was calm. A group of Christian visitors, including adults, children and babies, spent the day there praying and especially remembering 28 Egyptian Christians martyred the previous year, on 26 May 2017, on their way to that very monastery. Someone asked hopefully, "Do you think we will have a place among the martyrs here?" For martyrdom is viewed by Egyptian Christians as a precious gift from God. Another replied, "We have given our life for martyrdom."

At the end of the day, the group re-boarded their bus and minibus and set off on the long journey home, followed by vehicles carrying another group of Christian visitors to the monastery. But on the way, gunmen ambushed the convoy and opened fire, killing seven people. The martyrs were the Christian bus driver Asaad Farouk Labeeb (36) and six members of the Youssef Shehata family: Nady (54), Rida (51), Poussy Melad (41), Kamal (20), Bishoy Rida (15) and Marya Kamal (12). The Islamic State militant group (IS, ISIS, ISIL, Daesh) claimed responsibility for the attack.

The monastery is thought to have its origins as far back as the late third century, but within a few years was abandoned when severe persecution began in the early fourth century under the Roman Emperor Diocletian. The caves in the area were occupied by hermits, living individually. Later, perhaps between the fifth and seventh centuries, the hermits came together to form a community, which re-occupied the empty buildings.

The monks, the ascetics and the hermits lived by looking at the unseen. They looked at the seen things and found them temporary and passing away, not worth their attention. So they were elevated above that level and above any desire for such things. They died [to] the world and [to] what is seen, looking at the unseen, due to their love for the King, Jesus Christ … The same thing applies to the martyrs and confessors. They approached death, without looking at the world and all that is in it. They rejected the temptations presented to them because their eyes were fixed on the unseen, the eternal life that is not seen and on what eyes have not seen.
Patriarch Shenouda III of Alexandria, Egypt, (1923-2012)

I have indeed seen the affliction of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their oppressors, and I am aware of their sufferings.
Exodus 3:7 (Berean Study Bible)

North Korean Christians (2013) Executed Before Thousands for Owning a Bible

Secluded from the outside world for decades, North Korea is regularly named as the worst place in the world to be a Christian. Despite the Marxist state's espousal of atheism, North Koreans are expected to follow the principle of *Juche* (self-reliance) which is almost like a religion in its veneration of the ruling Kim family. Anyone caught engaging in any kind of Christian activity is severely punished. It was estimated that there were around 70,000 Christians held in prison camps in North Korea in 2013, where they were brutally treated, starved, tortured and sometimes worked to death through hard labour.

But inside this closed and secretive country, the punishment of Christians can be made very public, as a warning and deterrent. Among 80 people publicly executed in seven North Korean cities on 3 November 2013 were those who had been caught in possession of a Bible. Others were executed for offences such as prostitution, pornography or watching or illegally trafficking South Korean films. Their "accomplices" or relatives who were implicated in the "crimes" were sent to prison camps. According to witnesses at one of the executions, in the city of Wonsan, eight people, their heads covered with sacks or bags, were tied to stakes at a local stadium and killed by machine gun fire. Around 10,000 people, including children, were forced to watch. Our Heavenly Father also watched but not from a distance. Ever with His children, He was right beside them in their hour of need and they were surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1).

You are love, and you see all the suffering,
Injustice and misery, which reign in this world.
Have pity, we implore you, on the work of your hands.
Look mercifully on the poor, the oppressed,
And all who are heavy laden with error, labour and sorrow.
Fill our hearts with deep compassion for those who suffer,
And hasten the coming of your kingdom of justice and truth.
Eugène Bersier, Switzerland and France (1831-89)

For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 2 Corinthians 2:15

Shehzad Masih and Shama Bibi (2014)
Burned in a Brick Kiln

On 4 November 2014 Shehzad (26) and his pregnant wife Shama (24) were severely beaten and then thrown into a brick-kiln furnace, where temperatures can reach 980°C. At least one of them was still alive as they entered the flames.

Not long before, Shama had been burning papers belonging to Shehzad's recently deceased father. A Muslim who had a grudge against the Christian family spread a rumour that she was burning the Quran. According to witnesses and police, local Islamic leaders prepared a fatwa, calling for those who had desecrated the Quran "to be burned the same way that they burned the [holy book]".

Very early in the morning, as Shehzad and Shama, with the youngest of their three children, walked to Gujjar brick kiln where they worked, an announcement was made from the local mosque, asking all Muslims to gather at the kiln to avenge the desecration of their holy book.

A huge crowd of Muslims duly assembled at the kiln near Kot Radha Kishan in Pakistan's Punjab province, and attacked the Christian couple. Shehzad and Shama were paraded naked and beaten with sticks until their legs were fractured and they could no longer walk. Then they were dragged to the kiln's furnace and thrown in.

Because of His death on the Cross, all sinners are saved,
He was hung on the Cross, He bore intense suffering,
He paid the price for our sins with His blood on the Cross.
His precious blood flowed like a spring,
His blood washed our sins and covered our transgressions.
Why should I not sing praises to Him? My life revolves around Him,
I will follow Him to see the scenes of forgiveness on the Cross.
We will carry your love to the people of the world,
For the forgiveness of sins, so their lives will be saved.
Give us the capacity and strengthen our courage,
People who are perishing, we bring them to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.
Padri Prem Bhaghat, Pakistan (1910-82)

For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. 1 Corinthians 11:26

Winnie Mwenda Mutinda and John Kikavu (2011)
In Remembrance of Jesus

The grenade lobbed into the home of Patrick Mutinda on 5 November 2011 killed his eight-year-old daughter Winnie and also John Kikavu (25), a church member who was inside the family home at the time. Winnie's older brothers, Samuel (12) and Peter (10), and her grandmother Rachel Kandu, were all seriously wounded.

Patrick's home was near the gate of the compound of the church which he served as an elder and also guarded as its watchman. It was situated on the outskirts of the predominantly Muslim town of Garissa in north-east Kenya, near the Somali border, an area vulnerable to attacks from Islamist extremists such as the Somali militant group Al Shabaab (see April 2 and July 1), who were suspected of being behind this attack.

Although violent attacks against Christians were fairly commonplace, this one was unusual because of the words called by the attackers as they fled: "You will have to stop taking wine." The church's pastor, Ibrahim Makunyi Kamwaro, commented that he believed the attackers were referring to the church's Holy Communion services, at which the Christians took a sip of wine in remembrance of Christ's blood shed to take away our sins. Islam forbids the drinking of alcohol.

At the time of the attack another local pastor had received a threatening text message ordering Christians to leave the town of Garissa within 48 hours; otherwise they would see a "bomb blast taking your life" and "war".

According to thy gracious word in meek humility,
This will I do, my dying Lord, I will remember thee.

Thy body broken for my sake, my bread from heav'n shall be;
Thy testamental cup I take, and thus remember thee.

When to the cross I turn my eyes, and rest on Calvary.
O Lamb of God, my sacrifice, I must remember thee.

Remember thee, and all thy pains, and all thy love to me;
Yea, while a breath, a pulse remains, I will remember thee.

James Montgomery, born in Scotland, moved to England (1771-1854)

LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry. Psalm 88:1-2

David Mokoni and Seven Others (2019)
Lament Sung in Far North Cameroon

A distraught Christian community in Far North Cameroon mourned with a newly written song of lament after violence by the Boko Haram Islamist group claimed at least eight lives. The martyrs included their retired pioneering pastor, David Mokoni, and a hearing-impaired boy, who were both killed in a merciless night attack on 6 November 2019. The militants went on to loot and destroy the church in Moskota, setting fire to much of the village and destroying food and other supplies.

It was the second attack on the village in a week. In an earlier attack, on 31 October 2019, one man was killed, more than 140 oxen and cattle were stolen, and the health centre and shops were looted. On the same day, in Kotserehé village, five people were hacked to death with axes, knives and wooden clubs. One of them, a 15-year-old boy, was sleeping so soundly that he did not hear the intruders. Rebecca, an eyewitness, described the ruthless attack: "They thrust the blade of the axe so deeply into his skull, to the point we had to use a hammer to get it out of his head."

Repeated attacks caused many to flee the rural areas for larger towns and cities and, according to a local Christian leader, left some families in the community in the worst state of extreme psychological distress he had ever seen. The severe violence led a young Christian man to pen the following lament. All the district were singing the song as they tried to come to terms with their terrible suffering.

Moskota village has become the scene of the agonies of Boko Haram.
Only the dead, only the displaced;
Only ghost villages, shops ransacked and emptied;
Only health centres plundered and looted;
Only cattle taken away; empty buildings.
Boko Haram struck – our founder Pastor Mokoni paid the price.
And when a pastor falls in Africa doesn't that mean anything?
Only … emptiness.

Lament by a young Cameroonian Christian, November 2019

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Matthew 11:29-30

Vicente Liêm de la Paz and Jacinto Castaneda (1773) Yoked Together

In October 1773 Vicente and Jacinto were taken from prison, yoked together and forced to walk through the streets of Tonkin (modern northern Vietnam). The yoke bore the words *Hoa Lang Đạo Sư* (Christian pastors). Vicente from Vietnam and Jacinto from Spain had not met until being imprisoned together earlier that month, but the yoke intended to shame them was ironically also a symbol of the close bond they quickly developed as they suffered together for Christ.

Christianity was banned in Tonkin, but Vicente, undaunted, had continued his travelling ministry until arrested. "Everywhere he ardently loved and helped everybody. He exhorted everybody to be courageous, consoled the sorrowful and encouraged the faithful to be strong and not to be afraid of any difficulty and danger." Later believers described him as a model of faith, hope, love and wisdom.

After the yoke, they were sent to a three-day religious debate organised by Trịnh Sâm, the ruler of Tonkin, involving Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. Vicente and Jacinto earned admiration for their clear explanation of the Christian faith, using references from classical Chinese literature, but afterwards they were tried and sentenced to decapitation.

On 7 November, on their way to be executed, they were stopped by their guards in front of the palace so that Trịnh Sâm could either confirm the death sentences or release them. A guard called out suggesting that Vicente, as a Tonkinese, should be spared. But Vicente responded that it would not be fair and the two of them should be treated the same, either both killed or both freed. They went on together to their martyrdom.

Christ's yoke … is the yoke of Sonship … It was a yoke meant for two. It could only be borne aright when disciples and he bore the yoke together. Illustration may be taken from the yoke fitted to the shoulders of the two oxen that drew the Eastern plough. That yoke was only easy for each ox as they both cheerfully bore it together … It is true that rest comes for man in the spirit of sonship; but it is also true that it does not come to man in a lonely sonship – only in a sonship fully shared with Christ.

Robert Tuck, England (19th century)

LORD, what are human beings that you care for them, mere mortals that you think of them? They are like a breath; their days are like a fleeting shadow.
Psalm 144:3-4

Yuri Ivanovich Burda (1983)
Red Army "Accident"?

Yuri, a Russian believer, had been drafted into the Soviet Union's military, known as the "Red Army". In May 1983 he was sent to an air base in Astrakhan, in the far south of the Soviet Union, about the same latitude as the Crimea where he had grown up. By Russian standards, the winters in Astrakhan were relatively mild and balmy. Like many Christians, Yuri refused to swear the Red Army Oath, for Jesus had taught His disciples, "Do not swear an oath at all" (Matthew 5:34). He was therefore sent to work as a driver at Semipalatinsk (in modern Kazakhstan), a nuclear test site in the distant Siberian steppe, which was bitterly cold in winter.

On 1 November, Yuri's parents were informed by an army telegram that their son was dead. When they asked for details, Major Pavlov told them an implausible story about the 20-year-old accidentally electrocuting himself while washing his feet.

"Did you know that Yuri was a Christian? Did he take the oath?" they asked.

Pavlov's answers were "Yes" and "No", claiming also that Yuri had not been oppressed for refusing to take the oath.

Young men in the Soviet Union were obliged to do compulsory military service, often far from home and in isolated places. Christians were frequently severely punished for their refusal to take the Red Army Oath on religious grounds. It was forbidden by law to give weapons to anyone who had not taken the oath, so refusing to swear it was in effect the serious crime of refusing to do military service. Some who would not swear were given alternative non-combatant duties, some were sentenced to years imprisoned in corrective labour camps or, in Yuri's case, mysteriously died.

O Christ, Thou art my King, Thy cause I make mine own,
All that I have I bring, to lay before Thy throne;
The oath of fealty now I take, to live and suffer for Thy sake.

Hymns of the Russian Church, translated by John Brownlie (1857-1925)

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Hebrews 13:8

Bernhard Lichtenberg (1943)
Prayed for Jews and Jewish-background Christians

Bernhard used his cathedral in Berlin, Germany, to speak out boldly against the rise of Nazism in his country, especially condemning the persecution of Jews and Jewish-background Christians. After Kristallnacht (9-10 November 1938 when Nazi paramilitaries violently attacked Jewish neighbourhoods) until his arrest on 23 October 1941, he prayed daily from his pulpit, despite repeated Nazi warnings, for "the sorely tried non-Aryan Christians, the Jews, those in concentration camps, the victims of bombing and war on both sides …"

Eventually the Gestapo searched his home and found a declaration he had written to be read the following Sunday, responding to a Nazi leaflet. "This leaflet states that every German who supports Jews with an ostensibly false sentimentality, be it only through friendly kindness, commits treason against his people. Let us not be misled by this un-Christian way of thinking but follow the strict command of Jesus Christ: 'You shall love you neighbour as you love yourself.'"

During his interrogation, Bernhard made the same point about loving your neighbour. He asked if he could accompany the deported Jews and Jewish Christians into exile to give them spiritual sustenance. At his trial he said, "I submit that no harm results to the state by citizens who pray for the Jews." In May 1942 he was given a two-year prison sentence for insidious attacks on the state and commenting on politics (forbidden for clergy).

In prison, Bernhard's health began to fail. The Gestapo offered to set him free if he would refrain from preaching. He asked again to be allowed to accompany the deported Jews and Jewish Christians to Poland. Orders were then issued for his internment in the Dachau concentration camp. It was on his way to Dachau that Bernhard died on 5 November 1943 aged 67.

We know what happened yesterday. We do not know what tomorrow holds. However, we have experienced what happened today. Outside the synagogue burns. That is also a house of God.
Bernhard Lichtenberg's proclamation from the pulpit after Kristallnacht

I will praise the LORD as long as I live. Psalm 146:2 (ESV)

Nicholas (1754)
Restored to His Senses

Nicholas worked as a stonemason in Magnesia (modern Turkey). As a Christian living under Muslim rule in the Ottoman Empire, life must have been hard for him; no doubt he often thought wistfully of his childhood and devout Christian parents, now dead, on the Greek island of Chios. One day he had a terrible accident which left him unable to speak and mentally incapacitated. Local Turks saw his new vulnerability as an opportunity to convert him to Islam, but as he could not speak he could not recite the Islamic creed – a necessity for conversion. They sent him back to Chios where his sister cared for him. But a rumour reached the island that he had converted to Islam in Magnesia, so the Ottoman authorities in Chios dressed him in Turkish clothes and gave him a Muslim name.

For years he worked as a shepherd until he met a monk named Cyril, who prayed that Nicholas would be restored to his senses. He was healed, and thereafter devoted his life to Christian prayer.

One day he entered a church building but was driven out by the Christians who recognised him as the mute "Muslim". Nicholas went home and wept inconsolably. A church minister and two villagers took him to the Ottoman authorities, who questioned him. Nicholas dumbfounded all present with his answer: "I was born a Christian, I was brought up as a Christian, I have never denied Christ for Islam, and I will never deny Him, but will die a Christian."

Viewing Nicholas as an apostate from Islam, the Ottoman authorities tortured him and arrested the Christians who had brought him. The minister joined the Muslims in urging him to embrace Islam, but Nicholas refused.

After a month of torture he was beheaded. Tradition records that a thick darkness fell on Chios at that moment, the only light being the shining face of the martyr. In order to destroy this brilliance, the Ottomans set fire to his body but it gave off a beautiful fragrance as it burned.

Humble-mindedness will bring all the virtues.
Anthimos of Chios, Greece (1869-1960)

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Mark 16:15

Ron Davies (1947)
The Call to Kashmir

Once when home on furlough from missionary service in Kashmir (now divided between Pakistan and India), Ron, a Welshman, was asked by a puzzled young woman: "What is a call?" His face lit up. He opened his Bible and read aloud from Mark 16:15, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature!" He continued, "The call! That is the call. God expects every Christian to go somewhere with the Gospel. All you have to do is to find out just where He wants you to go. It may be here in your own home town, or it may be He wants you to go to Africa, to China or to Kashmir. If you are a Christian, you must preach Christ somewhere!"

Ron had begun his missionary work in Kashmir before the Second World War. After the war ended, he went home to the UK but his heart longed to return to Kashmir with the Gospel and to serve the people there. Soon he was back in Kashmir, with five other Western missionaries in his care, four women and one man.

Pathan tribesmen would often raid towns and villages. One day in November 1947 Ron heard of a likely Pathan attack, so he set off to help three of his female colleagues who were in danger. He managed to get them to safety but stayed behind himself only to be met by the Pathan warriors, who fired their rifles at the unarmed missionary. He died among the people he had come to love and save for Christ.

I would rather win souls than be the greatest king or emperor on earth; I would rather win souls than be the greatest general that ever commanded an army … My one ambition in life is to win as many as possible. Oh, it is the only thing worth doing; to save souls, and, men and women, we can all do it.

R A Torrey, USA (1856–1928)

Everyone will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. Stand firm, and you will win life. Luke 21:17-19

Garabed Khalujian and 800 other Christians in Sivas (1895)
"At Midday, Like a Cyclone, Sivas was Smitten"

On Sunday 10 November 1895 Garabed preached powerfully to his Armenian congregation at Sivas (in modern Turkey) on the text "not a hair of your head shall perish" (Luke 21:18). Two days later, Sivas was attacked by an enraged Muslim mob. "At midday, like a cyclone, Sivas was smitten," wrote one of his church members afterwards.

Garabed and some of his flock took refuge in the upper storey of a house, where they locked the door and knelt in prayer. Towards evening another murderous crowd of Muslims arrived. Garabed spoke to them so calmly that they seemed taken aback. Three times they offered him his life and freedom if he would deny his faith. But Garabed declared, "I not only believe in Jesus Christ for my own part, but have all my life striven to bring others to faith in Him."

"Then you must die," was the reply. Garabed raised his hands towards heaven and then fell to the ground, as two bullets struck him. He was buried the next day, with 800 other victims.

This massacre was one of many that are jointly called the Hamidian massacres (see July 17). According to missionaries, the authorities smashed the windows of Turkish shops in Sivas and then blamed the Armenians, in order to create a pretext for attacking them. Many towns and villages around Sivas city were plundered and destroyed, with thousands of Christians killed.

... devotion to Christ is not lessened but increased. Many people think the spirit of unbelief and indifferentism has spread so widely that… people will no longer die for Christ. But out of 100,000 Armenians massacred, 90,000 were actually martyred because they would not deny Christ. In all lands, Christians praise the old martyrs, the church fathers: let them know that there are as noble church sons and daughters to-day…
George H Filian (1853-1942), an Armenian pastor, writing about the 1895-6 massacres in Turkey

My God turns my darkness into light. Psalm 18:28

100,000 Georgians (1226)
The Most Terrible Night in Georgian History

Tradition records that the Christian faith was brought to the little kingdom of Georgia in the Caucasus in the first century by the residents of Pontus, an area to the south of the Black Sea, who were present on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). But it was the preaching of a Christian woman called Nino, from Cappadocia, that led to Georgia becoming a Christian nation. In a vision, she was commanded to preach the Gospel in Georgia, so she set out with around 50 Christian women to obey her calling. While travelling through Armenia, during King Trdat's persecution of Christians, all the women except Nino were executed. She continued alone to Georgia, arriving in about 319, where her preaching converted the royal family and the whole nation. Georgia declared Christianity as its state religion in the early fourth century.

In 1226 Sultan Jalal al-Din of Khwarazm and his Turkmen army attacked Georgia. On the first day of battle the Georgian army bravely defended Tbilisi, but at night some Persians living in the city secretly opened its gates and let in the invading army.

Georgia still remembers the night of 9 March when 100,000 Georgian Christians were martyred. Boys were castrated and women were raped. Babies, torn from their mothers' arms, had their heads smashed against the bridge over the River Mtkvari. The city was filled with wailing and lament.

The Tbilisi citizens were forced by the Turkmens towards the bridge, where their faith was put to the test. Pictures of Jesus and other holy pictures, taken from the cathedral, were placed by the Turkmens in the middle of the bridge and the Georgians were commanded to cross the bridge, spitting on the icons as they passed. Those who did so were spared, but those who refused were decapitated. The river was filled with 100,000 severed heads and headless bodies, carried downstream in its bloody waters.

The martyrs of thy Lord, for their deeds, gained their crown of incorruptibility by Thee, our God, for they had received power by Thee, and have overthrown the mighty power, and have broken down the powerless idols.
Lord Jesus Christ, save our souls!
A Georgian Orthodox troparion commemorating the 100,000 martyrs of Tbilisi, translated from old Georgian by Kakha Tsagareli

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16

Mumin Abdikarim Yusuf (2009)
Shared the Love of Christ

Christians in Somalia face severe persecution in their strongly Muslim homeland. On 14 November 2009 the body of a young Somali Christian convert called Mumin (23) was found on an empty residential street in Mogadishu's Yaqshid district. He had been shot twice in the head by the Somali Islamist terrorist group Al Shabaab. Dumping a body with gunshot wounds in a public place was a typical way that Al Shabaab would warn people of the likely penalty for resisting them.

A 15-year-old Muslim had reported that Mumin had been trying to convert him to Christianity. On 28 October Al Shabaab extremists searched Mumin's home for Christian materials but could not find anything. Nevertheless, they took him into captivity and beat him severely, knocking out all his front teeth and breaking some of his fingers.

Not knowing whether Mumin had revealed during the beating any information about other Christians, local believers relocated themselves for safety. His Muslim family members were also in danger, as they were accused of failing to report his conversion to Christianity. They stated, however, that they did not know their son had become a Christian.

Despite the immense danger he faced, Mumin did not hold back from sharing his personal experience of Christ's love – and paid the ultimate price. "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all… We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:14, 20-21)

Pray, pray, believers pray ...
Help, help,
help our people to get ...
Help, help,
help our people to get ...
Help them to get the holy book.
Help them to get the Gospel.
Help them to get what is good,
Help them to get the light.
Pray, pray, believers pray …

"Duceeya" ("Pray"), a Somali Christian song in English translation

I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD *has done.* Psalm 118:17

Shmona and Guria (c. 309)
Edessan Martyrs

In 308 Christians in the eastern Roman Empire had already endured five years of severe persecution, when Emperor Galerius added yet more pressure to try to force everyone to worship the Roman "god" Zeus. Shmona and Guria travelled to the villages around Edessa (modern Urfa, Turkey), a centre of Christianity, encouraging the believers: "Do not be afraid of the threats of persecutors, and do not deny the Messiah, in whose hands are your spirits, and He gives you power and might and heroism over the wretched persecutors."

News of their activities eventually reached the authorities, and both men were arrested along with many other Christians. The other believers were released after being scourged or "combed with irons" (a torture method in which large iron combs were raked over the person's body, tearing their flesh).

Shmona and Guria remained in prison unharmed. When the governor of Edessa tried to persuade them to obey the imperial edict, Shmona declared, "Far be it from us that we should leave the Messiah our God! And to this image of wood made by carpenters and fastened with blacksmiths' nails we will not bring spices, and to a dumb idol we will do no obeisance… and the one God, Lord of all, who is in Heaven, we will not call false … We do obeisance to God the Messiah … He is our Light and our Physician and our Life."

Then their tortures began. The jailer hung them by their arms and stretched them by their feet for six hours, dislocating their shoulders and breaking their bones. They were incarcerated for weeks in the "Dark Hole", with no light at all. Shmona was then hung for another three hours, by one foot, but aged Guria was spared. In the early hours of 15 November they were tried, sentenced to death and quickly beheaded before the city's population woke.

Not indeed die, as thou dost suppose, but live indeed, according to what we believe.
Shmona at one of his trials before the Governor of Edessa

Those who trust in the LORD are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures for ever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds his people both now and for evermore. Psalm 125:1-2

Nikola Tavelić, Deodato Aribert of Rodez, Peter of Narbonne and Stephen of Cuneo (1391)
Mount Zion Endures For Ever

Nikola, a Croatian, was one of 60 Christians from various places who responded to an appeal to work as a missionary in Bosnia, which was at that time dominated by a heretical Christian cult called Bogomilism. Over a period of twelve years, the missionaries successfully spread the Christian message to many thousands.

In 1383 he was once again selected to join a group of missionaries but this time his field of service was to be the Holy Land, which was ruled by the Islamic Mamluk Sultanate. He was accompanied by Deodato and Peter from France, and Stephen from Italy. The four lived at the Mount Zion Monastery in Jerusalem, where they spent several years learning Arabic and ministering at the holy sites connected to Jesus' life, which drew pilgrims from across Europe. Their lifestyle at the monastery was very simple and they followed a strict discipline of daily prayer. Mount Zion at that time, with its Christian presence, has been described as being "almost like an island amid a sea of Muslims".

The Muslims of Jerusalem were very resistant to the Gospel and after eight years Nikola and his colleagues had seen little fruit from their work. They therefore decided to be more proactive in presenting the Christian message. With great care, they prepared a document that explained Christian doctrine and refuted Islam, and on 11 November 1391 read it aloud before the Qadi (Islamic judge) of Jerusalem and many other Muslims. Their audience listened attentively but, far from being convinced, demanded furiously that the four take back what they had said and convert to Islam or be killed. The Christians refused to do so and were killed just inside the Jaffa Gate on 14 November.

You are telling us to become Saracens [Muslims]. Know, therefore, that for Christ and for our faith in him we are not afraid, neither of death nor of the fire of this earth.

Nikola Tavelić and companions, 14 November 1391, in front of the fire on which they were to be burned alive. In fact, the angry crowd hacked them to pieces and then threw the pieces on the fire

Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Luke 18:16-17

Anugrag (Anmol) Gemethi (2013)
Sunday School Pupil Killed in India

On 17 November 2013, seven-year-old Anugrag (affectionately called Anmol), already a faithful believer in the Lord Jesus, waved goodbye to his parents and happily skipped off to Sunday School, and into the safe arms of His Saviour forever. After the church service, Anmol had lunch at the home of Christian friends in a neighbouring village in the south of India's Rajasthan state. They waved him goodbye and watched him cross the little bridge that joined the two villages. But Anmol never arrived home.

By evening his parents were anxiously searching and the next morning his father Harish went to the police station and filed a missing person's report. Late in the afternoon, family and friends found Anmol's body floating in a pond, with his mouth gagged, his neck cut and deep wounds on his hands, feet and arms, his toes broken and burns to various parts of his body. His face was mutilated, without eyes, nose or ears. Despite these injuries, the police autopsy report stated that he had drowned and that his injuries were caused by "animal bites".

Anmol's terrible death was apparently designed to terrorise and traumatise not only his parents, but all the local Christians. Ten years earlier, Harish and about 45 other Hindus put their faith in Jesus after witnessing the miraculous healing of Harish's brother. After that, Harish led many more people to the Lord, but this was deeply resented by some in the community. "For years some local Hindu extremists have been threatening to kill me and have damaged my family countless times," Harish told the police. The most recent threat had been earlier the same month in which his son was killed.

God demands nothing extraordinary nor difficult; on the contrary, He is best pleased by a simple and child-like conduct.
Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte-Guyon, France (1648–1717)

To the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the First and the Last, who died and returned to life. I know your affliction ... The one who overcomes will not be harmed by the second death. Rev 2:8-9, 11 (BSB)

Christians of Anatolia (1394-1402)
Timur's Genocide

Never defeated in battle, the much-feared Turco-Mongol warrior Timur (1336-1405) used scorched-earth methods to conquer a vast empire for himself, its capital at Samarkand (in modern Uzbekistan). It is estimated that, using mainly sword and fire, his armies killed 17 million people. In order to terrorise his enemies, Timur (also known as Tamerlane) would have his troops build towers or pyramids of human heads, held in place by mortar. With the passage of time, these became pyramids of skulls.

Timur called himself the "Sword of Islam" and it was he who effectively eliminated Christianity in what is today Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In the Middle East the Christians, already subjugated under Muslim rule, suffered terribly at Timur's hands. Middle Eastern Muslims also suffered but, as the dominant community, they were able to recover after Timur had wreaked his destruction. The subjugated Christians were not so resilient and in some places the Christian presence disappeared.

The furthest west that Timur conquered was Anatolia (modern Turkey), in which many Christians lived, although the Muslim Ottomans ruled much of the territory. In 1394 he sacked Amida (modern Diyarbakir) burning all its inhabitants – mostly Christians – in a huge bonfire. In 1400 he captured Sivas and buried alive 4,000 of the Christian soldiers defending it, but spared the Muslims. In 1402 he destroyed all the churches of Erzincan and, at the end of that year, besieged the Christian city of Smyrna (modern Izmir). He invited its leaders to convert to Islam or pay *jizya* (the Islamic tax on subjugated non-Muslim people), both of which they refused to do. Smyrna was believed to be impregnable, but Timur soon captured it and slaughtered all the inhabitants. Again there were mass beheadings.

Go ahead and burn our flesh – in the Heavenly Kingdom our souls will burn with a divine flame more radiant than the sun! ... The Lord alone knows the sincerity of our will and comforts us in our righteous afflictions.
Martyrs of Kvabtakhevi Monastery, Kartli, in modern Georgia, 1386, in response to an ultimatum by Timur's troops to renounce Christ and live or to be driven into the church and burned alive

Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I shall not be shaken.
Psalm 62:6

Ferewini Gebru Tekleberhne (2010)
Metal Shipping Containers

In November 2010 Ferewini, aged about 35, was shot dead while trying to escape from the notorious Sawa military camp in the East African country of Eritrea. She had been arrested for being a Christian and incarcerated for two years in a metal shipping container where she experienced extremely hot temperatures in the daytime and very cold temperatures at night.

Confined in metal shipping containers; forbidden to pray aloud, sing, preach or have a Bible; and tortured to make them recant their faith are just some of the harsh conditions that Christians in Eritrea typically experience while in detention. They are offered freedom in return for signing a piece of paper to say that they have renounced their faith. Some have died from their torture or because of being denied medical care (see December 22).

Since 2002, Eritrea's Marxist government has been one of the world's worst persecutors of Christians and regards certain Christian denominations as a threat to national unity. Church buildings have been closed down and Christians are subject to arbitrary arrest and detention without due process of law. Many believers have fled to nearby countries, such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, Egypt and Israel, to escape persecution. Some have died along the way or been taken hostage for ransom. Those caught were sent back to Eritrea.

O Lord, Jesus Christ, who art as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land,
Who beholdest thy weak creatures, weary of labour, weary of pleasure,
Weary of hope deferred, weary of self;
In thine abundant compassion, and fellow feeling with us, and unutterable tenderness,
Bring us, we pray thee, unto thy rest.
Christina Rossetti, England (1830–94)

The LORD will fulfil His purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands. Psalm 138:8 (ESV)

James Harris (1839)
Eaten at Erromango

James Harris had felt the call of God to bring the Gospel to the Marquesas Islands in the southern Pacific Ocean. How thrilled he must have been to have the opportunity to travel with the famous English missionary, John Williams, who had already spent two decades in the South Pacific. James planned that after this voyage he would to return to Britain, train for missionary work and then go to the group of craggy volcanic islands that the Lord had laid on his heart.

In 1839 James was voyaging with John Williams and WC Cunningham, the first British vice-consul in Samoa, to an unevangelised group of islands, the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu). On 20 November, the three were rowing in a small boat towards Erromango island. Many men waited on the beach: would they be hostile or friendly to their strange white visitors? James was the first to take off his shoes and wade ashore. The islanders ran to him. The more experienced John told James to sit down, and the islanders brought coconuts for him to drink. John distributed gifts of fish-hooks and cloth. The three rambled along the shore, talking to the islanders, until they reached a small river. James continued inland on his own and disappeared in the vegetation. Suddenly he came running back, followed by yelling islanders with clubs and spears. They struck him down and he fell into the river. Cunningham got to the boat, but John was killed. The islanders ate the bodies of the two missionaries.

The violence of the Erromangans perhaps reflected their previous experience of white men. Recent visitors had stolen their yams and pigs, cut their precious sandalwood, introduced a disease from which numerous islanders died, and killed many others.

Use me then, my Saviour, for whatever purpose, and in whatever way, you may require. Here is my poor heart, an empty vessel; fill it with your grace. Here is my sinful and troubled soul; quicken it and refresh it with your love. Take my heart for your abode; my mouth to spread abroad the glory of your name; my love and all my powers, for the advancement of your believing people;"
Dwight L Moody, USA (1837-99)

The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart. Romans 10:8

Kabardians or Upper Circassians (14th-16th centuries)
Christian Pages Running Through History

"Every Muslim nation in Russia has a Christian page in its history," said George Maximov, a Russian church leader. The Kabardians, whose homeland is the modern republic of Kabardino-Balkaria (in the Russian Federation), are now seen as a Muslim people-group. Yet the Christian "page" of this, the largest of the Circassian people-groups, began early and lasted long. Tradition says that the apostles Andrew and Simon the Zealot brought the Gospel to the Circassians. Evidence of a Christian heritage can be seen in some common Kabardian surnames such as Shogenov ("shogen" meaning priest) and Kardanov ("kardan" meaning deacon).

Islam began to make inroads among the Christian Kabardians in the 14th century, with raids by a Turkic group known as the Nogai Horde. Many Kabardians were killed for refusing to convert to Islam. For three centuries, the Kabardians fiercely resisted Islamisation and were the last of the Circassian people-groups to convert to Islam.

In the 16th century, when the Ottomans ordered the khans of the Crimean Tatars to spread Islam among the Circassians, many Kabardians were again forcibly converted to Islam, including after being defeated in battle in 1570 by the Crimean Tatars. Christian clergy were killed, their books burned and their accoutrements stolen. By the 18th century Islam was the dominant religion of the Kabardians.

Some Kabardians left Islam to follow Christ. Sultan Idarov converted to Christianity in 1558; at this time the upper classes were Muslim but most of the rest of the population were Christian. In 1759 a Muslim nobleman, Kurgoko Konchokin, became a Christian. He founded a settlement for Christian Kabardians in what is now Mozdok, North Ossetia, which still has a community of Christian Kabardians. Today there is a new movement of Muslim Kabardians turning to Christ.

Our people simply forgot that a person can become Christian. People are vigorously opposed to it. But in fact it is absolutely normal. We have to make a choice in our lives... We have to choose the path that is dear to our hearts and not be afraid of anything. When you convert to [Christianity], your life is divided into "before" and "after". In this life we have to choose – are we with God or not?

Mikhail, a Kabardian Christian convert from Islam, 2015

Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.
John 5:24

Kenyan Christians (2014, 2018)
Bus Passengers Targeted

Taking a bus journey in certain parts of Kenya can be very dangerous for Christians. Indeed, it can become a journey from earth to heaven.

A deadly assault took place on 22 November 2014 on a bus as it travelled through Mandera county, in north-east Kenya, on its way to Nairobi. About 60 passengers were on the bus when it was raided by Al Shabaab Islamist militants. The gunmen first separated out those who looked Somali (presumably assuming that they were Muslims). They then forced the remaining passengers to recite the *shahada* (Islamic creed), an act which is considered by most Muslims to be conversion to Islam. Those unable or unwilling to say the *shahada* were shot dead. In this way, 28 Christians were martyred.

Four years later, on 14 September 2018, Al Shabaab stopped a bus travelling to the north-eastern city of Garissa, whose inhabitants are mainly ethnic Somalis. The passengers were ordered to produce their identity cards, by which the terrorists could see whether the passengers were locals or whether they came from the Christian-majority parts of Kenya. Three "non-locals" were separated from the other passengers and asked to recite verses from the Quran and say the *shahada*. Two of them refused – a boy called Joshua who assisted the bus driver and a labourer from the town of Masalani. These two were murdered.

Father, hear the prayer we offer: not for ease that prayer shall be,
But for strength, that we may ever live our lives courageously.

Not for ever in green pastures do we ask our way to be:
But the steep and rugged pathways may we tread rejoicingly.

Not for ever by still waters would we idly quiet stay;
But would smite the living fountains from the rocks along our way.

Let our path be bright or dreary, storm or sunshine be our share;
May our souls, in hope unweary, make Thy work our ceaseless prayer.

Love M Willis, USA (1824-1908)

Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name is exalted; his splendour is above the earth and the heavens. Psalm 148:13

Ten Missionaries and a Toddler (1755) Stayed to Proclaim the Name that is Above all Names

In 1755 Britain and France were at war in a global conflict that extended to North America and dragged in the native Americans to fight on both sides. A small settlement of missionaries, mainly German, were living near modern-day Lehighton, Pennsylvania, USA. As Moravians, they were pacifists. In the middle of November they heard of an impending attack from French-supported native Americans. Some of the missionaries moved away to a safer place but 16 stayed where they were, believing it was "better that a Brother should die at his post than withdraw and have a single soul thus suffer loss". Most of the 16 had only arrived at the settlement that same year, 1755.

The attack came as they were eating their evening meal together on 24 November, the loud barking of their dogs giving the alarm. Joachim Sensemann went out to lock up the meeting house (church), an action which turned out to be the saving of his life. Martin Nitschmann opened the door to see what was happening and was immediately killed. Native Americans poured in. Twelve of the missionaries fled to for the attic, but Susanne Nitschmann did not make it and was captured. Then the attackers started setting light to all the buildings – church, school, bakery and dwellings including the house in which all the missionaries were. Three missionaries jumped from a window, but only two of them survived, for Christian Fabricius stumbled, enabling the attackers to shoot and scalp him. The other eight perished in the fire: Gottlieb and Christina Anders, and their son Johann (aged 14 months); Martin Presser, Catharina Sensemann, Leonhard Gattermeyer, George Schweigert and Frederick Lesly. Susanne Nitschmann died in captivity about six months later.

Indians [Native Americans] of many tongues learned the Name above all names and the reality of sins forgiven and of sonship with God. In dangers of wild men and of white men, in hunger and thirst, in loss of earthly goods and comforts, often in weariness and painfulness, the Moravians ministered to soul and body of red men, because of the constraining compassion of Christ.
V Raymond Edman, USA (1900-67)

Your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you. 1 Corinthians 6:19 (NKJV)

James "Intercisus" (421)
Cut into Pieces

James was a military officer and favoured courtier of Yazdegerd I, Persia's *shahanshah* (king of kings). On coming to the throne in 399 Yazdegerd had been a friend to Christians and in 409 issued an edict of toleration. In the following years there were many converts from the state religion of Zoroastrianism to Christianity. This alarmed and angered the Zoroastrian high priest who brought his concerns to Yazdegerd.

In 420 Yazdegerd permitted a limited campaign against Christians. But his instructions that the violence was to stop short of killing and that only recent converts be targeted were ignored.

James did not dare to face the persecution and so apostatised. But his wife and mother were broken-hearted and wrote him a strong letter of rebuke. The letter convinced James he should take a stand for his faith. Less than a year after the persecution began Yazdegerd died and was succeeded by Bahram V. Under Bahram's rule the persecutions reached a greater height of cruelty. Christians were flayed alive or thrown into pits to be devoured by rats. The outbreak of war between Persia (modern Iran) and the Christian Byzantine Empire added fuel to the flames of persecution.

Nevertheless, James proclaimed his faith to Bahram. In 421 he was cut into 28 pieces in a prolonged execution that ended with his beheading. During his ordeal, James kept declaring that he would one day rise in glory and said, "This death which appears so dreadful is very little for the purchase of eternal life." He became known as James Intercisus, meaning "James cut into pieces".

In times of exhaustion and sorrow, in times of joy and honour,
I hasten to you, for I know your door is always open for me.
My only beloved, in this world I only have You.
All my pride is in You, You are my honour.
I have You, I desire no one, You are my reason and my companion,
O my dear Lover, I give you my life.
O gracious Lord, happy is the day that I join You,
O Good Shepherd, I will always rest in You.

Hassan Dehqani-Tafti (1920–2008), Bishop of Iran (1960-90)

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2

Nurta Mohamed Farah (2011)
"Honour" Killing of Somali Girl

Nurta, a 17-year-old Somali girl who converted from Islam to Christianity and was rejected by her family, found eternal love and acceptance from her heavenly Father.

When Nurta's parents discovered her new faith, they beat her severely for leaving Islam. When this had no effect on her, they thought she must have gone mad and took her to a doctor who prescribed medication for a "mental illness". The medicine also had no effect on her decision to follow Jesus. Nor did twice-weekly recitations of Quranic verses (a traditional Somali cure for illness, especially mental illness).

All these efforts having failed, they began to shackle Nurta to a tree by day and put her in a small, dark room at night, while continuing to beat her frequently. Did she find comfort, during the hours she was tied to the tree, in remembering that her crucified Saviour too had been fixed to a "tree"?

Somehow she managed to escape and fled from her home village to live with relatives. But she was shot dead on 25 November 2011, apparently the victim of an "honour" killing, that is, a killing intended to restore the honour of a family which has been shamed by the action of one of its members, usually a woman or girl. Local people said that the men who shot her in the chest and head were relatives or acting at the request of relatives.

Nurta stood firm to the end and did not renounce her faith in Jesus.

Lord God, your love has called us here,
As we, by love, for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
Though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind
Your call to hear, your love to find.

Brian A Wren, England (born 1936)

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Acts 7:55

Pan Shoushan and William Fleming (1898)
First Miao Convert Killed with First CIM Martyr

Pan Shoushan became a Christian around 1880 in the Chinese province of Guizhou. He did not belong to the Han (the majority ethnic group in China) but was a Miao. Some years later, Evangelist Pan, as he was now known, was working among the Miao tribes with a British missionary from the China Inland Mission (CIM). They were based at a small town called Panghai, where the Miao people lived on one side of the river and the Han people on the other. The Han objected to the mission work, despised the Miao, and hated Evangelist Pan for helping the foreign missionaries. But the Miao flocked to church on Sundays to hear Evangelist Pan preach.

In 1898 the British missionary fell sick and another CIM missionary took his place. This was William Fleming, a Scot who had found the Lord after settling in Australia. He and Evangelist Pan went on a preaching tour, which seems to have prompted some Han to decide to kill the foreigner. Their murderous plans were apparently well known in the nearby town of Zhonganjiang, for when William and Evangelist Pan arrived there on 4 November no one would sell them rice for lunch. The Christians continued on and then found themselves under attack by some men who had followed them since morning. Evangelist Pan fell under a sword blow. William grappled with the sword-wielding attacker but eventually was overcome and killed. The bodies of William and Evangelist Pan were stripped naked and left on the public road for three days before burial. The provincial authorities offered a sum of money in compensation, but the CIM refused to accept it, for the missionaries laid down their lives in the same way as their Lord did, freely and without charge.

...when Stephen was being stoned to death, our Lord Jesus Christ was there – the most interested spectator – waiting to receive the spirit of His first martyr, so was He present at Panghai to receive the spirit of the first CIM martyr. For Mr. Fleming, so blessedly ready for the translation and yearning to see the face of the King, there can be no sorrow.… The Lord never sells the lives of His servants too cheaply. Cannot we expect that, as the result of these lives laid down, there shall spring forth an abundant harvest to the glory of God?

C F Whitridge, Secretary of the CIM Australasian Council, June 1899

The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth.
Isaiah 54:5

Mariah Manisha (2011)
Redeemed by the Blood of the Lamb

On 27 November 2011 18-year-old Mariah was killed by her Muslim kidnapper, after declining to marry him, refusing to convert to Islam and fending off his attempt to rape her; Mariah, from Khushpur, Faisalabad District, Punjab province, Pakistan loved her Saviour very much. She was described as a "good, simple girl" with a "crystal clear faith" who spent her time assisting her mother in the home.

Her killer, the drug-addicted son of a rich landowner, had pursued and threatened her for some time. One day, when she went to a canal near their village with her mother to fetch water, Mariah was kidnapped and later shot dead by her rejected suitor.

Rapes and kidnappings of Christian girls and young women by Muslim men are frequent in the Muslim-majority country of Pakistan. Often the victims are tricked or forced to convert to Islam (an official legal conversion, not a heart-change) and then forcibly married to their kidnapper. Initially the police did not want to hear of Mariah's murder because of the high status of the murderer's father. False witnesses popped up and said that she killed herself. Others tried to buy the silence of the girl's family. This is an Islamic practice called *diya*, in which money is paid as compensation for an injury or death. Mariah's parents rejected the offers of "blood money" saying, "We are not for sale." Mariah's life had already been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

There is a redeemer
Jesus, God's own Son
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Holy One
Jesus my redeemer
Name above all names
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah
Oh, for sinners slain
Melody Green, USA (born 1946)

What do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? 2 Corinthians 6:14-15

300 Nuns on the Solovetsky Islands (1935)
"We will not work for the Antichrist"

The scene was a gulag (Soviet forced labour camp) in the Solovetsky Islands archipelago (in modern Russia). About 300 nuns declared together, "We will not work for the Antichrist." They were lined up in the courtyard, with the other prisoners watching. The camp commander approached a nun in the front row, and shouted "You will work!" When she replied, "I will not work for the Antichrist," he shot her dead with his revolver. The rest of the nuns knelt down and began to pray. The next nun in the line was asked the same question and gave the same answer. Another shot rang out and she fell dead. This was repeated until the commander ran out of ammunition. Swearing, he shouted, "I will send you all to your God!" The kneeling nuns prayed loudly. The NKVD (secret police) were ordered to remove the safety locks from their rifles. Calling the nuns by an insulting name, the commander repeated his question, "Will you work?" The nuns prayed even louder. At the command "Fire!" a volley rang out. All the remaining nuns fell dead.

The Solovetsky Islands had previously been the location of a famous monastery. In 1923 the Solovki special forced labour camp was set up on the islands and became a prototype for the whole gulag system. The nuns refused to do any work except kitchen work or nursing in the camp's hospital, but these options were not allowed. They were punished with solitary confinement. Every ten days they were taken out of their punishment cell and asked if they were ready to work. Again and again they refused. They were transferred to Muksalmu island to work on a livestock farm, where they were killed.

Though deprived of all material strength the Church is always victorious in sacrifice.
Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russia (1918-2008)

For we are members of His body. Ephesians 5:30

Werner, Jean-Pierre and Rode Groenewald (2014)
God's Hands and Feet in Afghanistan

South African pastor Werner (46) and his wife Hannelie had a clear calling from God in 2002 to be "His hands and feet" to the Afghan people. The family went to Afghanistan to serve as humanitarian workers, offering medical care, leadership courses and community training. Werner wrote: "I am a change agent. Wherever I can, I try to influence positive change. I find great peace in the knowledge that I have contributed to someone else's advancement in life."

On 29 November 2014 Islamist Taliban fighters, disguised as policemen, threw a grenade at the gate of the compound of the international aid agency in Kabul where Werner lived and worked, before forcing their way into the two-storey guesthouse. Werner was shot in the leg in his office on the ground floor. Nevertheless, he managed to get upstairs to try to protect his two children, Jean-Pierre (17) and Rode (15), but minutes later all three had been shot dead. The Taliban said later that they killed the family because the guesthouse was housing a secret Christian missionary group.

Hannelie, who was out when the attack happened, said later, "We knew we had chosen a dangerous land in which to live and work … We had to count the cost of obedience. We had to be prepared to lay down our lives. We had to die to self and our human needs and follow Jesus. Life there was hard … Because we knew we MUST be there, we did not live in fear. Our lives and safety were in the hands of God. We knew that if something would happen to us, that the Lord would have a higher purpose."

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;
yours are the only hands with which He can do his work,
yours are the only feet with which He can go about the world,
yours are the only eyes through which His compassion can shine forth upon a troubled world.
Teresa of Avila, Spain (1515-82)

Let me find favour in thy sight, my lord, for that thou has comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken kindly unto thy handmaid. Ruth 2:13 (ASV)

Sonia Bibi (2020)
Handmaid of the Lord

Like many Pakistani Christian women, 24-year-old Sonia worked as a maid in the home of a well-to-do Muslim family. Also like many Pakistani Christian women, there was a Muslim man who wanted to marry her. Unusually, however, this man did not kidnap her but made a formal marriage proposal. In line with Pakistani tradition, Shehzad asked his mother to visit Sonia's parents and suggest that a marriage be arranged.

But Sonia's family declined the offer of marriage. "They were Muslims and we are Christians. That's the reason I refused," explained her father Allah Rakha Masih, a poor sanitary worker.

Shehzad had followed Sonia for about five months before the proposal was made. After being refused, he threatened to kill her. Then on 30 November 2020, while in a street in Rawalpindi, Sonia was shot in the head and died on her way to hospital. The gunman was reported to be Shehzad.

According to her father, Sonia was murdered for refusing the marriage proposal (a marriage that would have required her to convert to Islam, in line with sharia and with Pakistani norms). He commented, "We are Christians from generations, and Sonia was a true Christian and strong in her faith and she has been killed for following her Christian faith."

Sonia was the eldest of six siblings and an important breadwinner for her very poor family. Her mother, Teressa, who had to give up her job as a maid two years previously after she was injured in an accident, said her daughter had "worked hard like a son" to support the family.

It is the character of the redeemed of the Lord, that they follow the Lamb wheresoever he goes, with an implicit faith and obedience. As the eyes of a servant are to the hand of his master, and the eyes of a maiden to the hand of her mistress, so must our eyes wait on the Lord, to do what he appoints us, to take what he allots us.
Matthew Henry, Wales (1662-1714)

The LORD is the everlasting God … He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall. Isaiah 40:28-30

Ouoba Family (2019)
Men and Boys from One Family

Tambougou Adjima, a senior church leader in Burkina Faso, cried uncontrollably for ten minutes before he could manage to bring out the words to tell how the survivors of an attack on a village church phoned him and described what had happened.

Nine men and five boys of the Ouoba extended family were shot dead during the Sunday morning worship service at Hantoukoura village, in the south-east of the country, on 1 December 2019: Tchitchiéba (the church's pastor), Boudjargou, Paripougni, Hamiyabdi, Kondjoa, Mandiempo, Taladi, Tchientchiadi, Kokoada, Yensougri (16), Kondjoa (15), Mimpama (14), Yampani (14) and the youngest Lamoudi (12).

Shouting "*Allahu Akbar*", the jihadi militants burst into the church building when it was filled with about 80 worshippers, 15 of whom were male, the rest being women and children. There was only one male survivor from the church's entire congregation.

The timing of the atrocity, during Sunday morning worship, mirrors several other attacks in 2019, when at least 152 Christians were killed in Burkina Faso and thousands forced to flee their homes. The murderous rampage began in Silgadji in April (see April 28) when six Christians were shot one by one for refusing to deny Christ.

In the midst of suffering, God is present. We may never understand how in this life but we can be assured that He is working out His purposes and glorifying His name.

We were neighbours back home and we were living together in peace when these people came to kill Christians. They were Muslims [our neighbours], but because they were favourable to Christians they were threatened as well, so fled also to Kaya. Now that we share some of our food and love with them, they decided to give their lives to our Lord because they noticed the genuine love we were benefitting from our brothers [and sisters] in the faith.

Displaced Christian from northern Burkina Faso, speaking in October 2019, after fleeing to Kaya earlier in the year

As you come to him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 2:4-5

Kenyan Quarry Workers (2014)
Living Stones

Soon after midnight on 2 December 2014, while the workers were fast asleep in their tents near the stone quarry where they worked in a remote district of Kenya near the Somali border, Islamist militants surrounded the camp and roused the sleeping workers. Peter Nderitu, who hid in a trench during the attack, heard the militants separate Muslims from non-Muslims by making them recite the Islamic creed, the *shahada*. Muslims consider that when a non-Muslim recites this creed the person has converted to Islam. Those who could not or would not recite the *shahada*, most of whom were Christians, were ordered to lie on the ground. Then they were shot in the back of the head. Four victims were later found beheaded in their tents. A few managed to escape.

A total of 36 quarry workers, mainly Christians, were killed by around 50 armed members of the Al Shabaab Islamist group. The attack took place in Mandera county, which has a high proportion of Somali Muslims in its population. Al Shabaab said afterwards that the attack was "part of a series of attacks planned and executed by the Mujahideen to serve as a response to Kenya's occupation of Muslim lands and their ongoing atrocities therein, such as the recent air strikes on Muslims in Somalia". The Kenyan airstrike itself had been a response to the killing of 28 bus passengers in November (see November 22).

Like their Lord Jesus, the Christian stone workers were rejected by their human persecutors, but chosen by God and precious to Him.

Christ is at this moment gathering a people from among the Gentiles. He is building up the great temple of the Lord, adding stone to stone. He cannot come till this is done. When all this is done, then He will come, and put on the top-stone, with shoutings of "Grace, grace unto it."… When He comes, those that are ready will enter in with Him to the marriage, and the door will be shut… At present the godly are poor and despised, often in trouble… but in that day they will be like the stones of a crown.
Robert Murray McCheyne, Scotland (1813–43)

And then all the peoples of the earth will mourn when they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other. Matthew 24:30-31

Yasa, Pinu, Naka and Pedi (2020)
One Beheaded, One Throat Slit, One Neck Broken, One Burned

Four Christian farmers, Yasa (Yata), Pinu, Naka and Pedi, were killed in a brutal attack by Islamist militants in a remote village on the Muslim-majority island of Sulawesi, Indonesia, on 27 November 2020. The militants beheaded one victim, slit the throat of a second, broke the neck of a third and burned to death the fourth.

The four martyrs, who were related to each other, worked with a Salvation Army outpost in the village, helping to develop its ministry and outreach. At the time of their deaths, the Salvation Army congregation comprised twelve families, that is, about 40 people, in a village of 150 families. There was a weekly worship service and Sunday School for the children.

The attack took place in the village of Lemban Tongoa, in a densely forested, upland region of Central Sulawesi. The gang of around ten Islamist militants, armed with guns and knives, who killed the four believers also burned down the Salvation Army church building and five village homes.

A generation earlier, Muslims and Christians had lived peaceably as equals in Indonesia, in accordance with the country's guiding principle of Pancasila. But since that time, there had been a rise in hard-line Islamic ideology, resulting in growing violence against Christians. Nevertheless, Yasa, Pinu, Naka and Pedi "dared to tell [God's] gospel in the face of strong opposition" (1Thessalonians 2:2) and ended up giving their lives for it.

To be without faith is to be without any ground of hope for the future. It is only by faith that we can have any reasonable ground for expecting any happier state of things in the new world than we have in the present.
William Booth, England (1829–1912), founder of the Salvation Army

Remember him – before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:6-7

Catherine of Alexandria and many she led to Christ (c. 305)
Wheel of Torture Shattered

Daughter of the governor of Alexandria, which was a great centre of learning and culture, Catherine became a noted intellectual while still a teenager. She also made a decision to follow the Lord Jesus.

Catherine lived her short life during the reign of Roman Emperor Maximian, who violently persecuted Christians. She boldly denounced his cruelty and declared her own faith in the one true God. Astounded at the audacity of the young woman in Egypt, Emperor Maximian summoned 50 pagan philosophers to use all their skills to debate with her, with the aim of persuading her to deny Christ. Catherine, however, although not yet 20, spoke of her faith so eloquently that she defeated the eminent scholars in debate, and several of them were persuaded to put their trust in Christ. They were immediately executed.

Maximian ordered Catherine to be scourged. When her whole body was bleeding she was imprisoned. During her imprisonment, she was visited by over 200 people, all of whom converted to Christianity. Even the empress was eager to meet the extraordinary young woman and, together with Porphyry, a military commander, went to see her in the dungeon; both believed and were baptised.

Catherine was then condemned to die on a breaking wheel. This was a slow and painful death, using a large wheel in various ways to shatter the person's bones. Then the mutilated body was threaded through the spokes and the person left to die. But when Catherine's turn came, the instrument of torture broke into many pieces at her touch. After this miracle, the empress, Porphyry and 200 soldiers publicly confessed their faith in Christ and were beheaded for it. The furious emperor had Catherine beheaded too.

Take my silver and my gold;
Not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
Every power as thou shalt choose.

Frances R Havergal, England (1836-79)

The mountain peaks belong to him. Psalm 95:4

No Ga (1943)
Tibetan Christian

No Ga was not yet a Christian when he set off with American missionary, Victor Plymire, on an evangelistic expedition across No Ga's homeland, Tibet (in modern China). Taking yaks laden with thousands of Gospel booklets, they travelled the vast, sparsely populated plateau. More than once Victor set free "Gospel yaks" in the hope that Tibetan nomads would capture the wandering beasts and read the booklets they carried.

No Ga began to sense that time after time Someone was intervening to save them from danger and disaster. The most remarkable example was when the travellers were sentenced to death by a chief in an extremely isolated part of Tibet. The executioner's sword was on their necks, when a messenger burst in with a letter from the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhism, granting permission for them to proceed on their journey. It seemed clear to No Ga that Victor's God must be the true God.

No Ga's commitment to Christ infuriated his family, who threatened violence against him. The transforming power of Christ was evident in his life, contrasting with the magical arts and demonism of Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetan culture. When the elders of No Ga's village built a mountain-top Buddhist shrine, he refused to assist because he was a Christian. The elders said that his decision angered the gods.

Several days later No Ga fell ill with a cold. As if to help his sick relative, No Ga's brother-in-law prepared some hot tea for him, secretly lacing it with poison he had bought at a fur trappers' supply store. No Ga drank every drop and within seconds was dead.

Were human eyes capable of beholding the invisible, they might have seen the soul of No Ga, the Tibetan Christian, taking its flight upward past the hills and above the snow-enshrouded mountains. Now, beyond all suffering and danger, he stood in the presence of the One he loved more than life itself. And he could stand there unashamed, for he had been faithful unto death.
David V Plymire (born 1931), writing about his father's missionary work in Tibet

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.
Ecclesiastes 9:10

Theodotus and Other Martyrs of Ancyra (early 4th century)
Finishing the Race

Theodotus was a shopkeeper in Ancyra, capital of the Roman province of Galatia (modern Ankara, Turkey). He was a devout Christian, known for his perseverance and self-discipline. He not only showed great kindness to others, especially other believers, but also shared his faith and led many to Christ.

The early fourth century saw a steep rise in anti-Christian persecution after a series of devastating imperial edicts. These were implemented with great zeal in Galatia by its governor, Theotecnus, who gained his promotion to the governorship by promising he would quickly force all the Christians in Galatia to become pagans. His previous track record as a persecutor was such that many Christians fled the city when they heard he was to become governor. Some began to waver in their faith, but Theodotus encouraged them to stand firm. He used his shop as a refuge for persecuted Christians, a hospital for the sick and a place for Christian worship. Governor Theotecnus added a further twist to the persecution by ordering that all food for sale in the market be sprinkled with offerings made to pagan idols, thus making it impossible for conscientious Christians to eat it. Theodotus responded by laying in stores of food at his shop.

As Christians in the area began to be martyred, Theodotus rescued their bodies so that they could be properly buried. He even managed to retrieve the bodies of seven Christian women who, with stones tied round their necks, had been executed by drowning in a lake for refusing to become pagan priestesses. But a friend he had asked to help with this difficult night-time task betrayed Theodotus to the Roman authorities. He was arrested and brought before Theotecnus – to whom he boldly affirmed his faith – then tortured and killed.

Do not weep for me, brethren, but glorify our Lord Jesus Christ, by whose aid I am finishing my course and overcoming the enemy.
Theodotus of Ancyra, as he went to his beheading

Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice. 1 Samuel 15:22

Paul Yun Ji-chung and James Gwon Sang-yeon (1791) Worshipping Christ Instead of Ancestors

Yun Ji-chung (who took the Christian name Paul) was baptised in 1787, just ten years after Korean believers first gathered together for prayer. Like many of the early Korean Christians Paul came from the nobility. He immediately began to witness, and his mother, younger brother, Yun Ji-heon (Francis) and cousin Gwon Sang-yeon (James) all became Christians.

The Yun brothers' mother died in summer 1791. At her request, she was given a Christian, rather than a Confucian, funeral. Paul and James even set fire to their families' ancestral tablets, vital in Confucianism and Korean culture as representing the spiritual presence of the dead.

Orders were therefore given for the arrest of the two men, who fled, and their uncle was detained in their place. Hearing this, Paul and James surrendered themselves to the authorities. They were tortured but refused to renounce Christ, and then beheaded on 8 December 1791 at Jeonju (in modern South Korea). As further punishment, their homes were destroyed, and their relatives banished or enslaved.

The official state ideology of the Joseon Dynasty, which ruled Korea from 1392 to 1897, was neo-Confucianism, whose ancestral rituals posed an immediate problem for the young Korean Church. Some Christians thought the rituals merely an expression of filial piety, which they could perform with a clear conscience, but most thought they were idolatry.

Koreans considered filial piety the most important of the social relationships essential for a good and stable society. In the Ten Commandments, filial piety was far down the list at number five, yet an individual's relationship with a transcendent God was number one – this seemed strange. Loving your neighbour appeared to most Koreans a dubious way to organise a society in comparison with the tried and tested Korean emphasis on caring for your family.

A man can go against a king or his parents, but never can I disobey the Almighty Lord, our Father.
Paul Yun Ji-chung (martyred 1791)

Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1:17

He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. Colossians 1:17-18

Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky (1937)
Russian Polymath

Known as "the Russian Leonardo Da Vinci" because of his enormous range of abilities – priest, theologian, philosopher, mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor, poet, linguist – Pavel's life goal was to bring together science, philosophy and theology, all in the pursuit of the truth, which in his view was the truth of Christian revelation. In April 1906 Pavel wrote: "There is only one thing that would suffice for me and that is ceaseless ascetic endeavour, requiring strenuous concentration of all the forces of one's soul, not allowing for one moment of second thought and ending, in the near future, with the cross."

Pavel, who was born in the town of Yevlakh (in modern Azerbaijan) in 1882 to a Russian father and an Armenian-Georgian mother, showed an unusual aptitude for science and mathematics as he grew up as well as a deep Christian faith. His great work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*, was published in 1914.

Three years later came the Bolshevik Revolution. Initially the communists worked with him on projects like the electrification of rural Russia, but when he mentioned the Kingdom of God in a work on geometry, he was briefly exiled. In 1933 false charges of fascist agitation and a conspiracy to overthrow the state were brought against him. Pavel was sentenced to ten years in the gulags. In 1937 he was transferred to Leningrad (now St Petersburg) where on 25 November he was sentenced to death for refusing to inform on a fellow Christian. He was transported by train with another 500 prisoners to a forest where he was shot dead by firing squad on the night of 8 December 1937.

...Yes, in life everything is in a state of unrest, everything is as unstable as a mirage. And out of the depths of the soul there rises an unbearable need to find support in the "Pillar and Ground of the Truth"… not in just one of the truths, not in one of the particular and fragmented human truths, which are unstable and blown about like dust chased by the wind over mountains, but in total and eternal Truth, the one Divine Truth, the radiant and celestial Truth, that "Truth" which … is the "sun of the world".

Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky (1882-1937), from *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.
Galatians 2:20

John, Magdalena and Louis Minami, Simon and Agnes Takeda, Joanna Takeda (1603) Japanese Crucifixions

"I go before you and thus show the road by which you also should reach paradise … I hope that ere long you will follow in my footsteps." In the early hours of 9 December 1603 Simon uttered these words to his wife, Agnes. Then he was beheaded in his home in Yatsuhiro, south-eastern Japan, with an elaborate Christian ceremony, dressed in his best clothes and attended by other Christians and his household. The previous day John Minami had been publicly beheaded at Kumamoto.

But killing the men who refused to deny Christ was not sufficient punishment – their families had also been sentenced to death. Later on 9 December Simon's mother, Joanna, and Agnes, with Magdalena and Louis, the wife and adopted son of John, were crucified. Their corpses were left on the crosses at the Yatsushiro execution ground for a year.

In 1603 a fervently Buddhist *daimyo* called Kato Kiyomasa held power in Higo province. The predominantly Christian city of Yatsushiro was within his territory. In November all the notable Christian men were summoned, on pain of death, to appear before a famous Buddhist monk and place the *Hokkekyo* (Buddhist book) on their head to indicate that they believed its teaching. All complied except John and Simon.

The officer charged with implementing the executions pleaded with his friend, Simon, to yield, but Simon replied, "If it were a question of my worldly goods and of my life, I would sacrifice them willingly in the service of my [*daimyo*], but since the salvation of my soul is at stake, and I am strongly urged to renounce my religion, I declare that I cannot do what you ask, and a thousand deaths will not make me a traitor to my conscience."

There is no place for comfort like the cross. It is a tree stripped of all foliage, and apparently dead; yet we sit under its shadow with great delight, and its fruit is sweet unto our taste.
C H Spurgeon, England (1834-92)

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. 2 Corinthians 4:7

Samosata Martyrs (297)
Tempered Earthen Vessels

Seven Christians were crucified at Samosata (modern Samsat, Turkey) in 297. Hipparchus and Philotheus were magistrates, who had committed their lives to Christ three years earlier. Since then they had prayed together daily in Hipparchus' home, in a secret room where they had put a cross on the eastern wall. The other five, called James, Paragrus, Habibus, Romanus and Lollianus, were young friends of the magistrates and had only just decided to follow Christ when their persecution began.

All were killed for refusing to join in the pagan rites at a three-day celebration to mark a victory of the Roman army. During these celebrations, the five younger men discovered the older two at prayer and were mystified as to why they were praying at home, when all citizens had been ordered to pray at Samosata's new pagan temple.

Hipparchus explained, "Him we adore who hung upon the cross. Him we confess to be God, and the Son of God begotten, not made, co-essential with the Father, by whose deity we believe this whole world is created, preserved and governed." The five young men believed and were baptised, although fearful of persecution. The two magistrates encouraged them: "The earthen vessel or brick is but dirt till it be tempered with clay and has passed the fire."

On the third day of festivities, the emperor was told that two of the magistrates had not sacrificed to the gods, in fact had been absent from public worship for three years. They were arrested and imprisoned.

All seven then appeared before a tribunal, were racked and scourged, then carried back to seven separate dungeons where they were held for two months on starvation rations. Still they refused to deny Christ, so they were crucified.

The Heavenly Father does not ask for golden vessels. He does not ask for silver vessels. God asks for yielded vessels – those who will submit their will to the will of the Father. And the greatest human attainment in all the world is for a life to be so surrendered to Him that the name of God Almighty will be glorified through that life.
Kathryn Kuhlman, USA (1907–76)

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

Botroseya Church (2016)
Cairo's Heavenly Church

On 11 December 2016 a suicide bomber blew himself up inside St Peter and St Paul's (Botroseya) Church, beside Cairo's main cathedral. A church service was in progress when the bomber forced his way past the guard, Nabil Habib Abdullah, and in through a door at the back of the right-hand side of the church, the side where the women and girls sit. Because Nabil was following close behind him, the bomber detonated himself as soon as he was inside the building. Thus the 29 martyrs were all female except for Nabil. Most died on the spot but some succumbed later to their injuries, including Maji (10), the youngest martyr, and Demiana (14) who survived the longest, dying in February 2017. The oldest martyr was 78.

Cairo, the Egyptian capital, was shocked by the outrage, and citizens rushed to the hospitals to donate blood for the wounded Christians. A state funeral – called for by President al-Sisi – was held the following day. The coffins were draped in the national flag and had the word "martyr" written on them, both being important signs of honour and respect for the normally despised Christian community. On the president's instructions, the Egyptian army repaired the church building, working day and night to get it done in three weeks.

We may face death for our faith in Christ
And see evil increase and reveal its ugly face,
The one who kills thinks he is offering a service to You,
While forgetting that nothing can separate us from You for we are in You.
The Church does not fear death, it's a heavenly Church
The Church prays, forgives and always loves.
Lord light up the eyes, Lord open up the minds,
Let your love melt away the heart's hardness.
What can separate us from the love of Christ?
Shall trouble or hardship or even clear persecution?
You said that in this world we will have trouble
What can we fear when You are with us?

English translation of an Arabic song, written after the 2016 bombing

No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the Kingdom of God. Luke 9:62

David Barratt (1900)
Like an Ox – Ready for Work or Death

"I am like the ox, ready for either the plough or the altar," wrote David Barratt in the early months of 1900. As a white Australian missionary in China, he knew himself to be a likely target in the ongoing Boxer rebellion. He began making his way towards the relative safety of the coast, but on 29 June had to flee with a few Chinese Christians into the Liang-Ma hills in Shanxi province.

In his last letter, written during July 1900, he described a Bible study that he and his fellow travellers had had. "We took some of the half-hundred 'fear nots' of God this morning and had a blessed time indeed. I send you a few, especially helpful to Christians now. . ." Then a visitor arrived and told them of a massacre of missionaries, their children and Chinese Christians which had taken place that month in Taiyuan, capital of Shanxi. "The news nearly made me faint, but His peace filled, and still does fill my soul . . . We got together after he had left and prayed about matters, and sang 'He leadeth me'. I never knew its full meaning till this hour . . ."

David died there in the hills, from privation and hardship. He had been in China for three years, much of his ministry being amongst schoolboys and opium patients. Many letters had flowed from his pen to Christian young people in his homeland, Tasmania, appealing to them to come to labour in the vast harvest field of China. He was known for his earnestness in prayer, his readiness to help with anything, his cheerfulness no matter what discomfort he was enduring and his passion for souls.

Our blood may be as a true cement (for the foundation), and God's kingdom will increase over this land. Extermination is but exaltation. God guide and bless us! "Fear not them which kill," He says, "are ye not of much more value than many sparrows." "Peace, perfect peace," to you brother, and all at Lu-ch'eng. We may meet in the glory in a few hours or days, – a nearer way than to go to Lu-ch'eng . . . Let us be true till death.
David Barratt, Australia (1872-1900). From his last letter, addressed to Julius Hewett, another missionary in China

All the nations you have made will come and worship before you, Lord; they will bring glory to your name. For you are great and do marvellous deeds; you alone are God. Psalm 86:9-10

Gottschalk, Ansuerus, John Scotus and Wendish Christians (1066) Slavic Christian Resistance

The Wends were a group of Slavic tribes who migrated to what is now eastern Germany and had settled there by the fifth century. Christianity was brought to them by Frankish and Germanic peoples, most often by conquest and subjugation. This made many Wends very resistant to the Gospel; nevertheless, there were some who sincerely put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the eleventh century a Wendish Christian ruling family emerged among the most westerly of the Wends. Prince Gottschalk (reigned 1043-1066) was very active in propagating Christianity, and even preached to his subjects in church, wanting to make clear to them in their own language the meaning of what the clergy were preaching in Latin. His life's mission was to unite the Wendish tribes as one Christian kingdom. Many thousands of pagan Wends were baptised and churches were constructed. But in 1066 some tribes who clung to their pagan religion rebelled against Gottschalk and killed him on 7 June at Lenzen.

On 15 July pagan Wends stoned to death the young abbot Ansuerus and 28 monks. Ansuerus was famed for his learning and piety and had devoted himself to preaching the Gospel to the pagan Wends around Ratzeburg, where his monastery was. As the Wends attacked, he begged them to kill him last, so he could comfort and encourage the monks, and help them to endure their suffering without denying the Lord.

On 10 November John, an elderly Scot who was Bishop of Mecklenburg, was seized by pagan Wends and beaten with rods. Then, because he remained faithful to Christ, he was cut into pieces. His head was impaled on a spear and offered to Radegast, the Slavic pagan god of hospitality.

I have but one passion – it is He, it is He alone. The world is the field and the field is the world; and henceforth that country shall be my home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ.
Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, Saxony, modern Germany, (1700–60)

If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. Hebrews 11:15-16

Haim and His Family (some time between 1975 and 1979)
The Killing Fields of Cambodia

Tied up together under a tree, Haim, his wife and children spent the night comforting and praying for each other. Having been seized by the Khmer Rouge that afternoon, they knew they were likely to die, for Christians were classed by Cambodia's Communist rulers as "enemies of the glorious revolution".

Next morning the teenage soldiers returned and led the family to the nearby *viel somlap* ("killing fields") and ordered them to dig a grave for themselves. When the task was done, the family held hands and knelt together around the gaping hole. While Haim prayed loudly for the Khmer Rouge to repent and believe the Gospel, one of his young sons broke away from the family and ran into the nearby jungle. Haim persuaded the Khmer Rouge not to hunt the boy down but to let him call his son back to die with his family. He called out, "What comparison, my son, stealing a few more days of life in the wilderness, a fugitive, wretched and alone, to joining your family here momentarily around this grave but soon around the throne of God, free forever in Paradise?" The boy walked back in tears to his family and his father said, "Now we are ready to go."

But now there was another hindrance: not one of the young soldiers watching was willing to raise his hoe and kill the family members with a blow to the back of the head. In the end this task was performed by the Khmer Rouge commune chief.

More than a million people – Christians and many others – were killed and buried in Cambodia's "killing fields" between 1975 and 1979, while the Khmer Rouge (the name popularly given to members of the Communist Party of Kampuchea) were in power.

They travel lightly whom God's grace carries.
Thomas à Kempis, Germany (1380-1471)

Daughters of kings are among your honoured women. Psalm 45:9

Santoukhd (1st century)
Armenian Princess

Unknown to King Sanadroug of Armenia, his 15-year-old daughter Santoukhd converted to Christianity. The Armenian Church has a tradition that it was the Apostle Judas Thaddaeus who led her to faith (see October 26). Curious to hear for herself the man whose preaching and miracles were having such an impact in the town of Shavarshan, the beautiful princess one night changed out of her royal garments and dressed herself in ordinary clothes. A servant led her to the house where the early Christians met for worship. Thaddaeus explained the faith to her; she believed and was baptised.

When the king heard what had happened, he was enraged and ordered his troops to kill all the Christians. Terrifying signs in the earth and the sky caused the soldiers to abandon their task. Later, however, Princess Santoukhd was arrested and imprisoned. Meanwhile the number of Christians continued to grow and even some of the soldiers were converted.

The king summoned his daughter from prison, and gave her one last chance to renounce Christ and return to the pagan religion of her forebears. But she chose Christ and rejected her father's gods. She was tortured and eventually executed on 15 December.

One account of her death says that, as the soldier thrust his sword into her heart, a sweet fragrance filled the air. At the same time a light shone from heaven like a fiery pillar that hovered over Santoukhd's body for three days and nights. It is said that more than 2,000 people witnessed this and all became Christians.

There is One greater than the earth, more wide than sea-waves run,
Higher and vaster than the heavens, and brighter than the sun.
There is a formidable King whose power no bound has known;
The royal maid Santoukhd shall be for Him, and Him alone.
Her halls of light are all prepared, and for a footstool meet
The azure sky adorned with stars awaits her dove-like feet.
Leo Alishan (1820-1901), Armenian poet born in Erzerum

Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the spirit of God?
Genesis 41:38

Bao Zhi Ying (1958)
Used His Position for Good

Bao Zhi Ying was in the unusual position of being a Christian pastor and at the same time a district deputy of the Communist Party of China. The latter was an elected position and Pastor Bao, who had been a postman for many years before going into Christian ministry, was greatly respected amongst his fellow Biyo tribespeople.

The Gospel had been brought to the Biyo, who live in Yunnan province, by a Danish missionary called Axel Jensen. Soon afterwards, in 1949, the communists gained control of mainland China and all the foreign missionaries left the country.

Pastor Bao used his position to help the fledgling Biyo Church survive persecution. He often disobeyed province-level orders to crack down on Christians, and it was said that "his word carried ten times more weight than that of the district Party secretary".

Pastor Bao's example emboldened Biyo Christians to write to the communist authorities in Beijing demanding the right to worship freely. There was continuing revival and church growth, described disapprovingly like this in a government report on Mojiang county: "Nearly all the churches are beginning to liven up, conducting services and holding meetings opening without official approval … When a service or meeting is conducted, the congregation is always overflowing."

Biyo Christians were challenging the communist authorities: "The district deputy [Bao] is allowed to keep his faith, so why not we?" Persecution grew more severe. At Christmas 1957, when Pastor Bao's parents and sisters attended an unregistered church meeting, they were fined and made to do forced labour. In 1958 Pastor Bao was falsely accused and condemned as "an anti-government bourgeois rightist". He suddenly disappeared and was never seen again. He is thought to have been executed. But the Biyo church he had nurtured survived and grew.

Looking back one can see how God in his wisdom has joined one link to another, until it became an unbroken chain.
Alfred Jensen, writing about his missionary parents Axel and Christine Jensen who brought the Gospel to the Biyo people

Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6

Sixty Martyrs of Gaza Garrison (638) and Sophronius of Jerusalem (639) The First Ten Inspire the Last Fifty

After the death of the Islamic prophet Muhammad in 632, Muslim armies began to move out of Arabia, conquering as they went. In 634 they besieged the Christian city of Gaza, in the Holy Land, which held out for three years until surrendering in 637. It was the following year that 60 Byzantine prisoners of war, part of the Gaza garrison, were martyred for refusing to convert to Islam.

The soldiers executed by the victorious Arab Muslim forces were in two groups. The first group, consisting of ten soldiers, were beheaded at Jerusalem (which had also fallen in 637) on 11 November 638. The Muslim commander hoped the execution of ten would persuade the other 50 to save their own lives by converting to Islam. Instead it had the opposite effect. Callinicus, the first of the ten to be martyred, had been daily urging the others to be like Christ who had died for them.

When faced with the choice of a life of betrayal to their Lord or death and to be with Him forever, the 50 remaining soldiers responded: "No one is capable of separating us from the love of Christ … we are servants of the living God and we are prepared to die for him who died and was resurrected for us."

As a result they were executed at Eleutheropolis on 17 December. Sophronius, Patriarch of Jerusalem, had also urged the 60 to stay faithful to Christ. He himself was executed shortly thereafter on 11 March 639. An ancient manuscript entitled *The Passion of the Sixty Martyrs* describes their beheading, names all 60 martyrs, and states that they belonged to military units called the Scythi and the Voluntarii.

It is God, who is merciful and grants everyone what he needs, who is building him up when He gives him more than he needs; in doing so He shows the abundance of His love for him and teaches him to give thanks. When He does not grant him what he needs, He makes him compensate for the thing he needs through the working of the mind and teaches him patience.
Dorotheos of Gaza (505-565)

'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. Jeremiah 29:11-13

I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days. Joel 2:28-29

Damascus Martyrs (1870-71)
A Presence that was not Theirs

About 40 Sufi Muslims called the Shadili (Shazlis), led by Abd el Karim Matar, used to meet in Damascus, Syria, in the 1860s to pray and seek God. They became conscious of a "presence amongst them that was not theirs" and one day, as they slept, exhausted by long hours of prayer, each one dreamed of the Lord Jesus saying, "I am the Truth whom you seek. I am Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

They woke agitated and afraid, for leaving Islam to follow Christ is punishable by death according to sharia. As they looked round nervously at each other, eventually one spoke up and described his dream. "I also saw Him," responded all the rest. Filled with joy, love, faith and gratitude, they longed to rush out into the streets of Damascus and share Christ with the Muslim community, but restrained themselves.

They began praying for a guide to direct them. In another shared dream they saw an old man with a long white beard dressed in brown, and searched for him in the city, eventually finding him in a monastery. He was Fray Emanuel Förner, who discipled them in their new faith.

In 1869 a secret meeting of the Muslim members of the municipal council passed a death sentence on the converts. This was in line with sharia but went against an imperial Ottoman edict from 1856 guaran-

teeing life and liberty to all converts. The authorities therefore dared not implement their death sentence but severely persecuted the converts in other ways. Fourteen were arrested and imprisoned, most of them later being sent into exile. Abd el Karim Matar was released because he was sick but then beaten to death by his Muslim relatives as they tried to force him to return to Islam.

The Shadili converts continued to meet, but more discreetly, and the number of new Christians grew rapidly. At the end of 1869, the male converts in the city numbered 500; in 1870 it had risen to 4,100; and by 1871 there were 4,900 with the total number of converts across Syria estimated at 20,000 to 25,000. They were longing for baptism.

The British consul, Richard Burton, tried to buy land near Damascus for the converts to live on, he asked the British government to intercede with the Ottoman authorities for them and he asked the Patriarch of Jerusalem to baptise them. The Patriarch immediately consulted the Ottoman authorities, thus bringing to their attention the vast scale of the conversions.

Twelve of the Shadilis who experienced the most intense visions were arrested and imprisoned, and Fray Emanuel mysteriously died.

Then the converts vanished from the pages of history and are presumed to have been martyred.

We believe not simply through your teachings of the Word, and through our reading the religious books which you gave us, but because the Lord Jesus Christ has vouchsafed to visit us and to enlighten us Himself … How could we without such a miracle have so easily become Christians!

Shadili converts when asked by Fray Emanuel if they could be unwavering in their new faith

With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Matthew 19:26

Karen Christians (1948 to present day) Strong Faith Withstands Long Years of persecution

Soldiers setting fire to the church, school and houses, looting the clinic and destroying it, burning the crops, and killing everyone who does not escape into the jungle. This was how the Myanmar (Burmese) army would typically attack a Karen Christian village in the latter decades of the 20th century. Sometimes the troops would plant landmines around the village to maim or kill survivors who later tried to return to their homes. They even used Karen Christian children as minesweepers, making them walk ahead of the troops through the undergrowth; every time an explosion occurred, another child died. The courage of this Christian community, who just want to maintain their faith, live freely and serve the Lord Jesus Christ, is a testimony to the sustaining grace of God.

When Burma gained independence from the UK in January 1948, the Burman were the majority ethnic group. Ethnic minorities, such as the Karen (the second largest ethnic group in Myanmar), Chin and Kachin, expected to be given self-rule. The 1947 Panglong Agreement gave "full autonomy in administration" to the areas where the minorities lived, but the promised autonomy never happened, and ever since they have suffered cruel oppression, ethnic cleansing and a potential genocide.

On Christmas Eve 1948 hand grenades were thrown by a local Burman militia into a church in Palaw during the service, killing 80 Karen Christians. From then on the Karen Christians have suffered, partly for their ethnicity and partly for their faith.

The Karen people were evangelised by missionaries in the early 19th century and were the first ethnic group in Myanmar to accept the Gospel. Their churches are vibrant. Their faith is truly remarkable, having weathered massacre, mayhem and disaster, and still it shines brightly.

All in this world is misery. Sickness and pain, fear and anxiety, wars and slaughter, old age and death, abound on every hand. But hearken! God speaks from on high: "Children, why take ye delight, and seek happiness in that low village of mortality; that thicket of briars and thorns? Look up to Me; I will deliver you, and give you rest where you shall be forever blessed and happy."
Ko Thabyu (c. 1778-1840), first Karen Christian convert

Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Romans 6:11

Mannar Christians (1544)
Sri Lankan Island of Martyrs

A grave with more than 340 human skeletons was discovered on Mannar Island in 2018. Based on carbon dating, some historians link them to a massacre of Christians by Cankili I (reigned 1519-61), King of Jaffna (in the north of modern Sri Lanka).

In 1543 the Portuguese brought Paravar Tamil people from the coast of South India to work in the Mannar pearl fisheries. Many of them were Christians and, through the preaching of an Indian missionary, vast numbers in Mannar also turned to Christ. King Cankili ordered the military garrison in Mannar to control the conversions, but was shocked to learn that his own commander, Ilavarasn Ilansigham, and soldiers had embraced the Christian faith and would not obey the royal decree.

A Portuguese invasion was feared, and it was widely believed that the Mannar Christians would support the invaders. Cankili personally led an army of 5,000 soldiers to Mannar. An edict was published that, unless the converts returned to Hinduism, they would be severely punished. But the Mannar Christians remained faithful to their Saviour. In December 1544 Cankili ordered his troops to attack, and 600 to 700 unarmed Christians were killed. Each one was asked in turn if they were a Christian, with parents answering for infants too young to speak for themselves. Whole families, including small children, were slaughtered together. Many who had only recently been born again in Christ now died for Him.

Mannar was later called in Portuguese *Illa dos Martyres* – the Island of Martyrs. The subsequent rapid growth of Christianity in Sri Lanka was attributed to these martyrdoms.

My heart, do not worry
Do not forget the
Saviour of Mount Zion

Do not worry – by
Thinking what shall I do
Even if enemies turn hostile
Even if unexpected danger comes

Vedanayagam Sastriar (1774–1864), an Indian Tamil hymn-writer. This is the chorus of a hymn written after he had lost all his belongings during a ministry tour to Jaffna, Sri Lanka, in 1811 (translated by Jude Simion)

So they set out and went from village to village, proclaiming the good news.
Luke 9:6

Tang and Pan (1926)
Intrepid Chinese Colporteurs

It was hard and dangerous work to be a colporteur in rural China, carrying God's Word door-to-door. Four colporteurs lost their lives in Guangxi province in 1926: Lin died of smallpox, Yang perished in the mountains, Tang and Pan were probably murdered.

Two years earlier Tang was robbed by bandits who beat him so badly he took months to recover. But as soon as he was well, he headed out with the Gospel again. One day in 1926 he set off on a two-to-three week journey. When he did not return, others went out to trace his steps. Initially they found it easy to follow where he had gone from the tracts given to families along the way. They found the inn where he spent the first night but after that there was no sign of him and no one would give any information. The investigators concluded that Tang had been killed.

In November Pan went to evangelise in territory inhabited by the Zhuang people. At the end of December he had still not returned, so a search party set off, but the trail grew cold and the Zhuang tribesmen seemed determined not to give the searchers any help. It was assumed that he too had been killed.

A few months later, a Zhuang tribesman called Wei visited a church and said that Pan had come to his remote mountain village and left some books. A tribesman who could read told the other villagers about "a Way by which they might obtain a happy life beyond the grave". When missionaries later visited Wei's village, they found two men wearing bamboo crosses on their backs in obedience to their Saviour's command to take up their cross and follow Him.

Kneeling before the cross of my Saviour, I constantly trust and will never depart from Jesus Christ. With my whole heart I will bear the Lord's cross, and fear not the world though it heap contempt and cursings upon me.

Words found on a little bamboo cross that Wei carried with him

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. John 15:18

Eritrean Christians (2011-12)
Dying in Military Camps

Passionate believers in our Lord Jesus Christ, Hiwet Gebremichel Tesfu (23) and Zemame Tesfayesus Mehari (27), were arrested for attending a prayer meeting in 2009. Lover of God's Word, Seble Hagos Mebrahtu (27) was arrested for merely reading her Bible in her bedroom. Convert to Christ from Islam, Adris Ali Mohammed (31), was arrested in 2010 because of his conversion and endured much pressure to give up his new faith. All were imprisoned without trial for varying lengths of time in Eritrea's notorious military camps, in harsh, squalid and suffocating conditions. All were tortured during their imprisonment to such an extent that their health was so severely affected that in the end they died. None of them received medical treatment, even though two had contracted malaria. All were buried in the camps in 2011 or 2012. All of this for just being a Christian and choosing to follow their Lord wholeheartedly.

Many other Eritrean Christians are believed to have died in such military camps, as well as in shipping containers in the desert (see November 19), since a government crackdown in 2002 banned all religions apart from the state-approved Orthodox, Catholic and Lutheran denominations and Sunni Islam. Persecution may be fierce in Eritrea, but the courage of the Christians, who remain faithful followers of Jesus to the end, is even greater.

Where is the blessing of being hated for the cross? You love the Lord, and not carry the cross after you; you love the Lord, and not be hated as your Lord was? I don't say all are hated alike; poor ministers are set in the front of the battle; in proportion to our successes we shall be hated. There are numbers of ministers now sleep in whole skins, that were formerly in a worse plight; the devil disturbs them not because they are quite civil, and do not trouble and contradict him; but if you oppose the world and the devil, the world will hate you; and no greater proof of being beloved of the Lord, than the world hating you, but it must be for Christ's sake…for it is a blessed mark of their belonging to God, when they are honoured to suffer for him, and we are never right till we are bearing the cross.
George Whitefield, England (1714–70)

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms... John 14:1-2

Regina Rosenberg, Jakob Dyck, Vladimir Golitsin, Sergey Yushkevich and Luise Hübert Sukkau (1919) Murdered by Anarchists in Dubovka Barn

When someone gave Regina a New Testament she decided to read it to see how evil it was. Like most other Jews in southern Russia, she deeply distrusted Christians, having known only discrimination, treachery and pogroms at their hands. But she found nothing anti-Jewish in the book and noticed that Jesus seemed to appreciate the Law. Before long she believed in Him as the promised Messiah.

Her furious family threw her out. World War One was raging, and so was the Russian Civil War as the Red Army fought against the White Armies. Regina lived rough on the streets until she met a Christian couple, Jakob and Tina Dyck, who were travelling around with some other Christians, sharing the Gospel. Wanting to live as Jesus' first disciples had, Regina joined them.

The situation in Russia grew even worse, with anarchists burning, robbing and killing. On 25 October 1919 the Christians read John 14:1-2 together, then separated to visit villages. Regina, Jakob and some others went to Dubovka. The next morning a group of anarchists walked into the home where they were staying and sat down at their breakfast table. Jakob welcomed the alarming visitors, who stayed until noon while the Christians fed them and witnessed to them.

Then the Christians went to minister at the Dubovka school, but here too anarchists burst in, this time very hostile. They led the Christians to a nearby barn from which shooting was soon heard. At one point Regina stepped outside followed by an anarchist. She was seen to speak earnestly to him and point to heaven. Then they returned to the barn.

When the bodies of five Christians were found in the barn, Regina's was kneeling, as if in prayer. The anarchists had slashed her neck and cut open her head.

Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Germany (1906–45)

There were shepherds living out in the fields near by, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people…' Luke 2:8-10

Filipino Christians (2015)
Christmas Raids on Mindanao Island

While shepherds were out in the fields with their sheep one night, little knowing it was the night when the King of kings was born and laid in a lowly manger, an angel told them "Do not be afraid" as the glory of the Lord shone around them. These humble shepherds, attending to their normal duties, were chosen by God to be the first visitors to see the Saviour of the world.

Over 2,000 years later, five Filipino farmers – Ramonito Estoque, Empe Bocaes, Mario Estonote, Mark Anthony Templa and Henry Tuazon – were on their way to tend the crops in their fields early in the morning on Christmas Eve, 24 December 2015. Suddenly they were attacked by Islamist militants who shot them dead.

This attack in the Muslim-dominated southern island of Mindano was the first of many on that Christmas Eve. At least eight Christian villages were raided by the militants, killing a total of nine Christians including the five farmers. Having been alerted to the impending attacks, the army warned villagers not to venture out, which prevented a larger number of casualties.

Midnight, Christians, it's the solemn hour
When God-Man descended to us
To erase the stain of original sin
And to end the wrath of His Father.
The entire world thrills with hope
On this night that gives it a Saviour.
People, kneel down. Wait for your deliverance.
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer,
Christmas, Christmas, here is the Redeemer!

Placide Cappeau, France (1808-77). An English translation of his carol "Minuit, Chrétiens"

To God's elect, exiles, scattered throughout … Bithynia, who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance. 1 Peter 1:1-2

20,000 Martyrs of Nicomedia (around 303)
Churches on Fire on Christmas Day

Nicomedia, in the Roman province of Bithynia, was the capital of the eastern Roman Empire under Emperor Diocletian (now Izmit, in modern Turkey). Tradition records that 20,000 Nicomedian Christians were martyred in the "Great Persecution" that Diocletian instigated. Some of the first were Christians of the imperial household who refused to sacrifice to the Roman gods when all the servants were ordered to do so. The first to be exposed as a Christian was Diocletian's valet, Peter Cubicularius, who was hung up and his flesh torn off. Dorotheus, an imperial chamberlain, and Gorgonius, an army officer, protested against this treatment and revealed themselves to be Christians: "It is also our faith. We have always been faithful to you, but from now on we will only serve the God who created us." All three were martyred.

Many Nicomedian Christians died in the churches where they gathered for Christmas worship. Diocletian ordered his troops to command the congregations to sacrifice to idols or be burned to death. Thousands perished, singing, in the flames. Perhaps they sang, like the heavenly host at the first Christmas, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:14)

Anthimus, Bishop of Nicomedia, survived and fled to Omana to care for his remaining flock, but the emperor sent soldiers to find him. They encountered Anthimus without recognising him, and he promised to show them the bishop they sought. He fed them as his guests and then revealed his identity. Amazed, the soldiers offered to report back that they had failed to find Anthimus, but the bishop insisted on returning with them to Nicomedia. On the way he shared the Gospel and the soldiers were converted and baptised. Anthimus was beheaded.

Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King!
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."
Charles Wesley (1707-88) and George Whitefield (1714-70), England

Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth,' for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

… I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp…

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.

Revelation 21:1-3, 22-23; 22:1-3

Martyrs of Songkhon (1940)
Opening the Doors of Heaven

"We beseech you to open to us the doors of heaven," wrote Agnes Phila (31) in a letter to the Chief of Police in Songkhon on Christmas Day 1940, after a police officer warned her, "You must not mention God in Thailand, otherwise I'll kill you all."

Christians in Thailand were persecuted during the Franco-Thai War (1940-41) because they were assumed to be siding with the "Christian" French. In late 1940 the police moved into the Christian village of Songkhon and went door-to-door ordering the villagers to abandon their faith. The village pastor had already been banished by the police, but a 33-year-old lay leader called Philip Siphong Onphitak had taken on some of his tasks. Philip also went door-to-door, following where the police had visited, giving spiritual support to each family who had been threatened.

Before long Philip received a letter asking him to visit the sheriff. Villagers warned him that the police intended to kill him. If that was the case, said Philip, he was ready to die for his faith. On 16 December, thinking a police escort was taking him to visit the sheriff, Philip was taken instead to the forest and shot dead.

Other Christians now felt that the time to sacrifice their lives for the Lord was drawing near. They must use their time wisely as that day approached. Agnes Phila and Lucia Khambang (23) resolutely continued to teach Christianity to local children, despite police harassment and orders to stop.

On Christmas Day police gathered the villagers in the church and said they had orders to kill whoever would not renounce their Christian faith. Cecilia Butsi (16) stood up and said, "I am willing to die for my faith!" That night Agnes wrote a letter urging the police to carry out their orders without delay: "We rejoice in giving back to God the life that He has given us…We are well prepared … You are acting according to the orders of men, but we act according to the commandments of God."

Agnes, Lucia, Cecilia and Agatha Phutta spent the night in prayer. The next day, two young girls, Bibiana Khampai (15) and Maria Phon (14), came voluntarily to die as martyrs with them. The six sang and prayed as they walked to the cemetery, which they had chosen as the place where they would die for Christ. Before they were shot by the police, Agnes said, "You may kill us but you cannot kill the Church and you cannot kill God. One day the Church will return to Thailand and will flourish more than ever."

Oh, my hope is sure and certain
For I hope in Jesus Christ
Who has conquered death and Satan
And will bring me home at last.
And there'll be no pain or fear
Or sorrow in that place,
And God will dry our tears
And we shall see His face
And its trees will heal the nations
And the Lamb will be its light.
This my hope is sure and certain
For I hope in Jesus Christ.

Yes, my hope is sure and certain,
Yes, I hope in Jesus Christ,
For He takes our sins and burdens
And He gives eternal life.
There'll be glory, glory, glory,
For God lives in that place.
His name is on our foreheads
And we shall see His face.
It's a feast, a holy mountain,
It's a city like a bride.
This my hope is sure and certain
For I hope in Jesus Christ.

Caroline Kerslake, England (born 1961)

They saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh … they returned to their country by another route. Matthew 2:11-12

Naimans (c. 1370–1405)
Descendants of the Biblical Magi

The Naimans, a tribe of pastoral nomads who lived in the Mongolian plateau, are believed by some descended from the Biblical Magi. A Naiman called Kitbuqa, commander of the Mongol army that invaded Syria in 1259, is recorded as having "loved and honoured the Christians, for he was a descendant of the Three Kings who came to the Nativity to adore the Lord."

The Gospel came to the Naimans through their eastern neighbours, the Keraits (see February 24). According to an ancient source, the Naimans were mostly Christian in the 13th century, but some still practised shamanism. Many are thought to have accompanied Kublai Khan on his conquest of China around 1271 and a number held prominent positions at the Mongol court.

After the collapse of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), the Naimans assimilated into Mongol, Tatar and Kazakh tribes and their Christian faith eventually vanished. There must have been many thousands of Naiman Christians martyred for their faith during the wars of conquest of Timur (Tamerlane, reigned 1370-1405), given his known treatment of Christians in other areas as well as his brutality to conquered peoples in general.

In the 16th century many Mongolian Naimans converted to Tibetan Buddhism, but those in the more western khanates of the Mongol empire converted to Islam. Descendants of the Naimans are to be found amongst the mixed-origin people-group called the Kazakhs. More than two million of the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan are thought to be Naiman descendants and there are others in China's Ili Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang (see June 13).

As with gladness men of old did the guiding star behold,
As with joy they hailed its light, leaning onward, beaming bright;
So, most gracious Lord, may we evermore be led to Thee.
Holy Jesus, ev'ry day keep us in the narrow way,
And, when earthly things are past, bring our ransomed souls at last
Where they need no star to guide, where no clouds Thy glory hide.

William Chatterton Dix, England (1837-98)

For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave.
1 Corinthians 7:22

European Christian Slaves (16th-18th centuries)
Barbary Slave Traders

According to classical Islam, Muslims must not enslave fellow Muslims, so Christian nations were raided to provide slaves. It is estimated that between 1530 and 1780 up to 1.25 million Europeans were captured by North African Muslim slave traders from Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers and Morocco. The slaves were taken from coastal communities in Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, England, Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland and Iceland. It has been said that a Christian cross was branded on the soles of the feet of some slaves, forcing them to tread on the cross with every step they took, a great insult and humiliation in the North African culture. Charging exorbitant ransoms to free the slaves was a key part of the slave trading enterprise.

But many died without being freed. Often they were worked to death. Some were killed on the whim of the ruler or on some minor pretext. An American sailor, John Foss, captured at sea off the coast of Portugal in 1793 and enslaved in Algiers for several years, recorded that more than 98,000 Christians had been buried in the city since the beginning of the 17th century. Before that, the corpses of Christian slaves were thrown into the sea, if near enough, or just left unburied.

It was rumoured that many Christian slaves were buried in the 40 km of walls of the vast and magnificent new palace complex built at Meknes by Moulay Ismail, the Sultan of Morocco (reigned 1672-1727). Christian slaves were the main labour force for the palace construction, which the Sultan intended to outshine the palace at Versailles that was being built simultaneously by King Louis XIV of France. He took control of Morocco's corsairs, ordering them to bring him every Christian they could capture. A historian has estimated that when the corsairs were "fully mobilised at harvesting Christians, the population of European captives in all of Morocco may well have topped 25,000. Of these, at least a fifth were at work building Moulay Ismail's grand palace in Meknes."

In 1627 Barbary pirates (as the North African slave traders were often called) raided Iceland seizing over 400 men, women and children. Many came from

the small island of Heimaey in the Westman Islands, and included the island's church minister, Ólafur Egilsson, his pregnant wife Ásta Þorsteinsdóttir and their children. The Icelanders who survived the long sea journey, during which Ásta gave birth, were sold at auction in Algiers, except for Ólafur, who was appointed to arrange ransom payments from the King of Denmark. Iceland was at that time a Danish territory.

Leaving his family enslaved in Algiers, Ólafur set out, penniless, across the Mediterranean. After six months he reached Denmark, but the impoverished king refused to provide any money for ransoms. Ólafur went on to Iceland, arriving in 1628. Ten years later, when the necessary funds had been raised, Ásta and 33 other enslaved Icelanders were freed and returned home. The three Egilsson children never returned and their fate is unknown.

When we came to the market place, we were placed in a circle, and everyone's hands and face were inspected. Then the King [sultan] chose from this group those whom he wanted … His first choice amongst the boys was my own poor son, eleven years old, whom I will never forget as long as I live because of the depth of his understanding. When he was taken from me, I asked him in God's name not to forsake his faith nor forget his catechism. He said with great grief, "I will not, my father! They can treat my body as they will, but my soul I shall keep for my good God."

I have to say with Job: What is my strength, that I should hope? (Job 6:11). Were one to try to weigh my misery and suffering altogether on a scale, they would be heavier than all the sand in the sea.

The other Icelanders were moved from there to another place… I and my wife and our two younger children, a one-year-old and a one-month-old, were taken from that place up to the King's hall… From that time on, I do not know what became of the rest of the Icelandic people. Ah! I would like to comfort and strengthen the people with my words, but I cannot. And whether I speak of such things or not, my suffering does not lessen.

Whatever happens, we are the Lord's.

Ólafur Egilsson (1564-1639). In this extract from his memoir about his experiences in 1627-8, Ólafur is describing how the Icelanders were divided into groups on arrival in Algiers and then auctioned in the market place. He records that the system of sharing out the prisoners was explained to him "by those who had been there a long time (and were and are still Christians)".

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.
Philippians 3:7-8

Jakob Aron Rempel (1941)
Prison "the Pinnacle of My Life"

"[I] thank God that I may suffer for His name's sake… that we may experience such an opportunity to prove that our faith in God is not concerned in any way with earthly goods." Jakob was writing in 1929, just after his entire property had been confiscated by the communist authorities in the USSR. Shortly after penning these words he was arrested.

From an impoverished boyhood working as a stable-boy, Jakob became professor of German at the University of Moscow in 1920. He was also appointed an elder by the Mennonite church in Neu-Chortitza. Unable to perform both roles simultaneously, he chose the church and gave up his academic career.

In 1929 pressure on churches began to increase, and many Christian leaders were arrested. Mennonite church activities were labelled anti-revolutionary. Preachers were denied any way of earning a living but taxed exorbitantly. In 1929 a tax bill for 800 roubles was imposed on Jakob whose annual income was less than 360 roubles. Unable to raise the money, his property was taken instead. A few weeks later he was arrested. Despite torture and lengthy interrogations aimed at making him renounce his faith, Jakob never wavered.

In 1930 he was sentenced to ten years exile. During a transfer in 1932 he escaped custody by jumping off the train. He lived as a fugitive under a different name until he was betrayed and re-arrested in 1936. Another ten-year prison sentence in the Orel region was meted out to him.

As the advancing German troops approached Orel in 1941, Soviet orders went out to execute spies and counter-revolutionaries. On 11 September Jakob along with 157 prisoners were shot in the Medvedevskiy Les forest. The bodies were buried and trees planted on top.

You can put me in chains, hit me, cut off my head, but no one can take my faith… away from me. From a stable-boy to professor… and now [in prison] I'm at the pinnacle of my life.
Jakob Rempel, Russia (1883-1941) in one of his last letters from prison

Open your eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest. Even now the one who reaps draws a wage and harvests a crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together. John 4:35-36

Martha Myers, William Koehn and Kathleen Gariety (2002) Stayed on God's Course in Yemen

On 30 December 2002 Martha (57), a missionary doctor serving at the Jibla Baptist Hospital in Yemen, William (60), its administrator, and Kathleen (53), its purchasing agent, all from the USA, were shot dead by an Islamist extremist. The Yemeni man, who smuggled his gun past the hospital security by disguising it as a sick baby, said he carried out the attack to "cleanse his religion and get closer to Allah". He also expressed his belief that the Americans were sterilising Muslim women and trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. According to reports, his wife had been treated by Martha, and told him that she had never before been treated with such love and compassion.

For 25 years Martha served as an obstetrician-gynaecologist at the remote hospital, treating thousands of patients every year. She had survived an earlier kidnapping. Her father said, "She just depended on the Lord to take care of her. This is what she felt she ought to be doing and she did it."

Yemen had a great need of medical care. Even in 2002, only one in four women received antenatal care; only one in eight women gave birth in a health-care facility; one in 13 women died during childbirth; and the infant mortality rate was 62 per 1,000.

According to Martha's own desire, she was buried in Yemen. Many Yemenis crowded the streets to pay their respects at her funeral, for she was greatly loved.

Martha's missionary colleagues said, "The gunmen did not take her life. She lost her life to Jesus Christ years ago when she trusted him. Martha was not living for herself, but to serve others."

I would say that no prayers are wasted on Yemen or the other countries because the needs are so great. And I would say that the fields are white unto harvest and we need to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send out folks to help.

Martha Myers (1945-2002)

This is my body given for you … This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you. Luke 22:19-20

Marash and Zeytun Christians (1915)
Acts of Kindness Led to Execution

The terrible suffering of the Hamidian massacres (1894-96, see July 17) was followed by a spiritual awakening among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. "The Holy Spirit did a special work in grieved hearts, bringing people into new touch with the heavenly Father." In 1901-4 there were revivals in Marash and Zeytun (modern Süleymanlı, Turkey) and again in Marash in 1907. It was as if God were fortifying His people for what lay ahead.

A few years later the Ottoman authorities began their programme to exterminate the Armenians and other Christian minorities. Zeytun was one of the first places to be targeted, followed by Marash. Most of the able-bodied Armenian men were killed and the rest of the population were forced to set off by foot for Deir al-Zor, more than 500 kilometres away in the Syrian desert.

Many perished en route from weakness, hunger or violent attack. Some of the few men in the group tried to alleviate the suffering of the women, children and elderly. Their efforts angered the Ottoman troops who said, "We drove you out here, and now you are trying to save lives?" Orders were given for the men involved to be executed.

One of the condemned Armenian men, known as Mavy, read from the New Testament he still carried, sharing comfort from God's Word to the others awaiting execution. Then they all spontaneously broke into singing a hymn (see below). Mavy bent and picked up a handful of sand, and distributed a few grains to each man in a service of Holy Communion. After this, with a radiant smile, Mavy said, "We are now ready to be offered."

They were shot dead. As they fell to the ground, each dipped his finger into his own blood and this was their communion cup.

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand and cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land, where my possessions lie.
Filled with delight, my raptured soul would here no longer stay;
Though Jordan's waves around me roll, fearless I'd launch away.
Samuel Stennett, England (1727-95). This was the hymn sung by the men as they awaited execution

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