

THE VOICE OF THE MARTYRS

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From behind **BARS**



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“Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them.” Heb 13:3



Tajikistan: Mentored by a Martyr's Widow

During her husband's imprisonment, a pastor's wife was helped and encouraged by the widow of a Christian martyr.

With a satisfied smile, Gulnora Kholmatov set a large plate of steaming osh, Tajikistan's national dish of lamb and rice, in the center of the table. From her seat at the table, Gulnora's friend and mentor, Tamara, noted the changes she has seen in the family. "I remember when I came to Gulnora the first time, she was afraid to even open the door," Tamara said. "Now I see that she is very different."

Two years earlier, Gulnora was living in Tajikistan's second largest city with her husband, Bakhrom, who pastored the Sonmin Sonbogym (Good News of Grace) Protestant Church in Khujan. The church had been established by South Korean missionaries years earlier, and Bakhrom had been its pastor for about 20 years. He also led

smaller gatherings in surrounding cities and taught at a discipleship school.

Although Tajikistan guaranteed its citizens religious freedom after gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1994, it retains a Soviet-era flavor with a strong police force and long-standing dictator. And in 2009, a new religion law decreed mandatory registration for all religious groups; banned unregistered activity and proselytization; and placed strict controls on the content, publication and importation of religious materials.

Eventually, authorities decided the evangelical activities of Pastor Bakhrom Kholmatov and the Sonmin Sonbogym Church had gone far enough. In February 2017, officers of the State Committee for Religious Affairs interrupted worship at a smaller church Bakhrom pastored and proceeded to beat those in attendance. Insulting and swearing at church members, the officers demanded they renounce their faith.

Then, on April 10, agents raided the Sonmin Sonbogym Church and arrested Bakhrom. Citing as evidence the Christian songs found on his computer and the Josh McDowell book *More Than a Carpenter* found among his possessions, authorities sentenced Pastor Bakhrom to three years in prison for his "extremist" views.

Following Bakhrom's imprisonment, Gulnora and their children suddenly found themselves in a situation they never expected. "When he was first arrested, I couldn't even sleep," Gulnora said. "I just walked around the house. For two weeks we did not eat; we were just so stressed and worried. We were afraid of everything."

Gulnora and Bakhrom were the first in their respective families to leave Islam and place their faith in Christ. Their families did not understand why they chose to follow Jesus, and Bakhrom's arrest seemed further proof that the couple was doing something wrong. With no support

from extended family, Gulnora had become the sole provider for her three teenage children.

Thankfully, she did receive support from some of the few thousand believers in Tajikistan. When her husband was moved to a prison eight hours away and health problems prevented her from visiting more than once every couple of months, a team of believers from all over Tajikistan visited Bakhrom regularly to provide food and encouragement.

And God provided Gulnora herself with support from one of the few Christian women in the country who could truly empathize — Tamara Besarab. Tamara's late husband, also a pastor, had been shot and killed in their home in 2004 while Tamara was in an adjacent room.

Tamara was compassionate but firm with Gulnora. "The first time [Tamara] came here," Gulnora recalled, "she told me, 'Your husband is alive. He will come back. Mine is gone.'"

As Gulnora struggled with her own emotions, she was also trying to help her children understand their father's imprisonment. "We had a lot of questions at first," said their oldest son, Firdavs. "Why our family? Why our dad?"

When the kids were able to accompany Gulnora on a visit to see Bakhrom, they asked their questions directly. In response, Bakhrom told his children to look up Acts 20:24, which says, "But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God."

In his three-minute phone calls home, Bakhrom urged the children not to feel ashamed of his imprisonment. "I did not kill anybody," he reminded them. "I did not steal anything. When I stand up in front of God, I will not be ashamed."

Firdavs said his father's example has had a profound effect on his faith. "Our God is great," said Firdavs, "and we believe we will come out of this

"It was not just us; we had people with us going through that. So praise God for our brothers and sisters. I don't know how we would feel without their prayers and support."

situation with a strong spirit."

The family suffered another discouraging setback when the government confiscated the Sonmin Sonbogym Church's facilities. Authorities argued that the church was not legally registered, even though it had registered in 1994 and again in 2009 when the religion law was passed.

Despite the government's attempt to shut them down, church members found a creative way to continue their worship and work. Since authorities had locked the sanctuary doors but not confiscated the property, the believers made a temporary sanctuary out of a shipping container and continued to worship. They also continued serving weekly meals to anyone who needed them, an important ministry in the economically underdeveloped country. "They took the building, but they didn't take the church," Gulnora said.

More than two years into her husband's imprisonment, Gulnora was eagerly anticipating his expected release in six months. "We have passed through the most difficult time already," she said. "It was not just us; we had people with us going through that. So praise God for our brothers and sisters. I don't know how we would feel without their prayers and support."

Gulnora and her family received letters from all over the world, further evidence that the worldwide body of Christ was standing with them in their trial. Although they weren't allowed to bring the letters to Bakhrom, they sometimes shared the sentiments of their fellow believers. "It [was] a big encouragement for him," Gulnora said.

Bakhrom received an unexpected early release in December 2019 and returned to his family. The government, however, has threatened to revoke the residency permits of two of his children who attend university in another country because of their affiliation with an "extremist." Both the children and their parents remain committed to their faith and to serving the Lord.



After Bakhrom's surprise release, the family had a joyful reunion by phone, as their two older sons are studying outside the country.

India: Wedding Day in Jail

Struggling with addiction and out of money, Rabish was ready for a new beginning.

While wandering down a street one day in early 2018, he came across a wedding party. He soon found himself mingling with the guests, and by the end of the night he had met a girl named Summandi. The two became close friends and began dating, and a short time later Rabish asked Summandi to marry him.

"If you want to marry me, you have to follow the Christ that I am following," Summandi told him.

The two discussed Jesus and the Bible, but their talks often ended in arguments. Rabish didn't believe any of it. Then, after contracting malaria and experiencing healing through prayer, he changed his mind about Jesus.

"From that day onward I was a believer," he said.

Finally united in their shared faith, Rabish and Summandi prepared for their wedding. They set a date with village officials and eagerly anticipated their big day. But they couldn't have guessed where they would end up spending it.

Targeted for Their Faith

After the couple set their wedding day for May 30, 2018, a member of the village planning committee asked Rabish about the religious tradition in which he and Summandi would be getting married. Many in the village practiced a mix of Hinduism and animism. Without hesitation, however, Rabish replied that they would be married as Christians.

Three days later, when the couple asked Summandi's father for permission to marry, he grew angry. Although his wife and children were

The planned marriage of two Christian converts angered their local community.



Christians, he remained Hindu. Summandi's father told her and Rabish that if they didn't follow the rules of the village, they could be killed. He threatened Rabish and let them know that he strongly disapproved of their Christian marriage.

"I argued with my father that if he wants to sacrifice me, sacrifice me for the Lord," Summandi said.

Soon, the couple started hearing rumors of a planned attack on them. "I got the news from a villager and other outside people that they were planning to kill us on our marriage day," Rabish said. Concerned about what might happen, Rabish tried unsuccessfully to meet with their pastor. Then, on May 28, he and Summandi went to the police station to inform them of the plot and request protection. But upon arrival at the police station, they were both arrested.

The next day, their pastor, Subarshan, and an elder at their church, a woman named Neelam, went to the police station to get them released. But they, too, were arrested.

Rabish had a good idea of what was going on. "They had already planned with the villagers that they are not willing to have people in the Christian religion get married there," he said.

Summandi's relatives had falsely accused the four believers of beating Summandi's 60-year-old father with a bamboo stick for refusing to convert to Christianity, so authorities charged them under Jharkhand state's anti-conversion laws. States throughout India are adopting anti-conversion laws meant to protect the country's Hindu identity.

"The police officer said it is only happening because I had decided to marry according to Christian rules," Rabish said. "If we didn't marry according to Christian tradition, then nothing would have happened."

After two weeks behind bars in individual cells, the men were moved into a larger cell with other men, and the women were moved to an all-female cell. "I spent my time in prayer only," Summandi recalled of her time there. More than 80 other prisoners were in their cell, so she and Neelam had an ever-present audience with

whom to share the gospel. "Some of them had a positive attitude and some had a negative attitude," Summandi said. "It was a mixed reaction."

For Better or for Worse

Six weeks later, the four Christians were anonymously bailed out of jail and released on the same day. A group of pastors and Christian lawyers has since handled their court case.

Following their release, Rabish and Summandi revised their wedding plans. They were quietly married in court on Oct. 4 and had a church ceremony on Nov. 9 with 40 people from their church. The newly married couple and their guests celebrated with prayer, worship and a big lunch.

While they didn't fear retaliation for their decision to marry as Christians, the couple had no desire to invite additional trouble. They told their mothers about their wedding but not their fathers, and few villagers were aware of their marriage. "We have completed the marriage in our people group and all, but we haven't thrown any party," Summandi said. "In our village, it is a rule that when you have a wedding you have to conduct a party or reception [with the village], and we have not done that."

In addition to the persecution they suffered because of their Christian

wedding, the couple and their church have faced ongoing persecution since forming a house church in 2010. Villagers will not sell groceries or land to Christians, nor allow them to draw water from their well. Angry villagers have also attacked church gatherings, beating Rabish, Summandi and other members of the church, and they destroyed the home where the Christians meet.

Today, Pastor Subarshan continues to actively serve the community and share the gospel, despite the persecution. And Neelam and other women in the village have started a sewing center near her home. Neelam wept when a VOM worker showed her a post about the four believers on VOM's icommittoprayer.com. She was moved to learn about the prayers her Christian brothers and sisters in the United States had offered while she and the others were in prison.

Rabish and Summandi have moved to a new city, where Rabish has started a house church. When they visit their home village, they still face opposition from those who remain angry at them. But the legal case against them was nearly concluded just before the Covid-19 outbreak, and they're hoping to soon be declared innocent by the courts.

Whatever the outcome, they know they have each other and that God will always be with them.



Church elder Neelam was deeply touched to learn that Christians around the world prayed for her while she was in prison.

January/February 2020

Prayer Diary

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