



# THE Voice OF THE Martyrs

April 2021



NORTHERN NIGERIA

**“WHERE OUR FAITH IS STRENGTHENED”**



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

A close-up, profile view of a man with dark skin looking through a metal grate. His hand is pressed against the grate. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and shadows.

# Seeing His Enemies in a New Light

*Ibrahim Izang Aziobo tried to rescue as many Christians as he could during an attack by local Muslims. Although he lost his eyesight as a result, he gained a clear vision of how to love his enemies.*

**A**t about 4am on the morning after a local election in Jos, Nigeria, Ibrahim awoke to someone banging on his apartment door. “They have come!” his niece cried out. “They have started!”

The 2008 elections had been particularly divisive. Before results were even posted, members of the city’s predominantly Muslim Hausa-Fulani majority began protesting the Christian candidate’s expected win.

Ibrahim jumped out of bed. He knew his niece’s warning meant Christians were under attack in the town where he was serving as an election worker. Thankfully, his wife, Ana, was safe at home in a different city.

By the time Ibrahim came out of his room, his niece had already left and he noticed that the neighbouring tenants were gone, too. Hearing gunfire, he looked around and saw people running away. Ibrahim, however, ran *toward* the gunfire to see the attackers for himself.

“What I saw was dreadful,” he said. A parade of militant Islamic Fulani armed with sticks, machetes and guns were chanting, “Allahu akbar! Come! Let us fight Jihad!”

Ibrahim ran back toward his apartment to help protect his neighbours. Along with other Christians, he helped women hide in a church, barricaded roads with whatever he could find and threw rocks at the approaching mob to slow them down.

“We tried to curtail them,” Ibrahim said. “I thought to myself, ‘With this number of people, can’t they just overrun us?’ I knew that God was with us.”

As he passed a burning house, Ibrahim heard the sound of children’s voices. He pulled the hood of his jacket over his mouth and entered the smoke-filled structure. But as he walked through the house, he noticed the silhouettes of two men crouched in a corner. One of the men, who had been waiting in ambush, shot Ibrahim in the face. “I heard a loud sound and found myself on the ground,” Ibrahim said.

In severe pain, he covered his face with his hands. A young man who had heard the gunshot soon came to his aid. Unable to carry Ibrahim, the young man dragged his nearly lifeless body until three other people arrived to help carry him to a medical clinic, where physicians began work to stabilize him.

After losing hope that he would survive, the doctors turned to other attack victims who appeared to have a better chance. But one nurse, realizing Ibrahim was still conscious, gave him medication, stopped the bleeding and treated his wounds. He and three other gunshot victims were later transported to Jos University Teaching Hospital, where Ibrahim’s sister caught up with him.

Then they got the bad news: A CT scan of Ibrahim’s skull revealed that he would never see again. Ibrahim burst into tears,

but his sister quickly reassured him. “Have you forgotten God?” she asked.

Lying in the hospital bed, Ibrahim surrendered his life fully to Christ. “I was not born again before the attack came and I lost my sight,” he said. “I gave my life to Christ after the attack happened. Since then, I have not looked back.”

## Looking to God

The riots in Jos ended when the Nigerian government deployed the army to restore order. But at least 761 people, both Christians and Muslims, had been killed and hundreds more injured. And about 10,000 people had fled their homes as they were burned along with churches, mosques and schools. To this day, Ibrahim doesn’t know what happened to the children he tried to save in the burning house.

After a month in the hospital, he was finally discharged. And as soon as he was able, he went to church. The first sermon Ibrahim heard was on bitterness and how we should forgive those who hurt us. He had felt vengeful since the attack but changed his mind after hearing the sermon. “The message really gave me insight,” he said. “I saw that the best thing was for me to forgive, so I forgave.”

With mounting medical bills, Ibrahim and his wife struggled financially after the attack. They had little help from family, and relief organizations ignored their requests



for help. "Not getting assistance was a low point for me," Ibrahim said. "I had organizations coming to interview me. Many people came and went, and I never saw them again."

Ibrahim learned Braille during this time and found encouragement in a Braille version of the Bible. "I strongly relied on it," he said. "I did not understand anything in the Bible before then. That's what was giving me peace of mind."

When VOM met Ibrahim in 2019, he and his family lived in a dilapidated house and his children were unable to attend school because Ibrahim couldn't work and couldn't pay school fees. VOM has helped

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them with housing, school fees, clothing and a monthly amount to buy food and other necessities. We are also planning to help Ibrahim and his wife start a business so they can support themselves.

Ibrahim asks that people pray for his continued healing and for perseverance in faith. He knows another Islamist attack could occur anytime, but now he knows

he's not alone. He was touched to learn from a VOM worker that Christians around the world are praying for him.

"The larger body of Christ cares about me?" Ibrahim asked. "Wow. I'm extremely glad, incredibly happy. I just find joy being a part of the family of Christians."

▼ Ibrahim was confronted by militant Islamic Fulani a second time, but they let him go when they realized he was blind. Learning Braille enabled him to read the Bible.



## MALI: Swiss Missionary Executed

Swiss missionary Beatrice Stockli was killed by Islamists last October, after being held captive for more than four years. Beatrice arrived in Mali in 1998 as part of a missions team and, after growing close to a local pastor's family, decided to stay in Timbuktu. While her ministry work was not affiliated with a church or missions group, she continued to distribute Christian tracts around town and was often seen talking with traders and others from the local market.

In April 2012, she was kidnapped by Islamists and held for 10 days before being released. She returned to Switzerland for a short time after the kidnapping but went back to Mali a few months later, against the wishes of her family and the advice of the Swiss government. In explanation for her return to Mali, she

cited Galatians 2:20 — "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, ..."

Beatrice continued her independent ministry work until 8 June 2016, when she was abducted from her home and held hostage by members of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. In early October 2020, the militants released several hostages, but Beatrice was not among them. One of the released hostages reported that Beatrice had been executed just weeks earlier by members of the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) terrorist organization.

"Her death, in our opinion, is that of a martyr who resisted through her Christian faith and surely refused to reject faith in Jesus," said a Christian contact in Mali.

# Choosing to Remain

**T**hroughout the night and morning of 11 March 2019, Pastor Timothy Umaru and several other men stood guard at an entrance to their Nigerian village. They were watching for any sign of the Fulani Islamic militants who had attacked a neighbouring village days earlier.

Then, as the sun rose shortly after 6am, they began to hear screams and gunfire in the village behind them. Villagers were running in every direction as the air filled with smoke from burning homes.

The militants had attacked the village from another entrance, and Timothy felt helpless as he thought about his family, his church and his predominantly Christian village. "In all honesty," he said, "even though the Bible has told us that these things would happen, the first question I asked was, 'God, where are You?'"

Timothy's wife, Rifkatu, and their 3-year-old granddaughter, Uma, had just finished praying with their lead pastor's family at the church when the attack



occurred. Rifkatu heard the gunfire and screams when she stepped out with Uma to get some fresh air.

After scooping Uma up in her arms and running back inside to alert everyone, Rifkatu and the others hurriedly left the pastor's home, which they knew would be a target of the radical Islamists. Running as fast as she could while carrying the toddler, Rifkatu stumbled repeatedly. And the more tired she grew, the more afraid she became. Seeing another villager get shot only added to her terror.

"The fourth time I fell, I could not get up because my body was weak," she recalled. "I could not carry Uma."

When a young man, also fleeing from the militants, saw Rifkatu struggling, he took Uma from her so they could both run to safety. But the young man soon grew tired from carrying the child and decided to hide her in the bush and continue running on his own. Rifkatu had run on ahead until reaching cover in the bush. "I do not know how God did it," she said of her escape. "I found a place and hid. I lay down there till morning."

Rifkatu had run so far that she lost track of how to get home. When she felt it was safe, she started the long walk back, arriving at 10 a.m. the next morning. Once home, she asked if anyone had seen Uma.

That's when she learned that Uma had been killed, her body discovered along with those of others shot by the militants. The lead pastor's wife, with whom Rifkatu had been praying, was also killed as she fled. She and Uma were among the more than 70 villagers killed in the attack.

Thankfully, Timothy and Rifkatu's four children, including Uma's mother, were not in the village at the time. The family's home, located on the outskirts of the village, was also unharmed.

▼ Timothy was the assistant pastor at this church until the 2019 attack. When the pastor left, Timothy replaced him.





## Picking Up the Pieces

About a week later, the family travelled to another village, where they spent three months mourning Uma's death and recovering from the trauma of the attack. Rifkatu suffered nightmares and anxiety as well as deep grief. But through prayer, reading God's Word and spending time with family, she grew stronger and her grief became more manageable.

At the end of June, they returned home to help their church recover. Much of the church building had burned, along with all of the musical instruments inside, and the parsonage had been completely destroyed by fire. In addition, the lead pastor had left the village, grief-stricken over his wife's death and overcome with guilt that he had survived.

Timothy has since taken over as lead pastor, but he has struggled with his mentor's absence even as many in the church have continued to struggle with their own painful losses. Several church members lost their spouses, and many are now living in poverty. "People are tense and very scared now," Timothy said. "If something small happens, people will start running. But we are encouraging them."

Through it all, Timothy, his family and the church have found encouragement through Christ. "He helped us understand that these events are things that will pass," Timothy said. "Whatever is happening today will pass tomorrow. What strengthened us in these events will become our story. We have faith that one day Christ will avenge us."

► Prayer, Scripture reading and rest helped Timothy's wife, Rifkatu, recover from her grief.

Timothy's family still grieves for those lost in the attack, but they're also grateful for what they have gained. "Honestly, before this attack our faith was broken," the pastor said. "Hearing about the attacks happening in other places shook our faith. But after it happened to us, our faith increased. Even if it happens to us again, we will not be afraid."

They have no intention of leaving their home, despite the risk of another attack. "We stay here because this is where our faith is strengthened," Timothy said.

## Not Backing Down

Recently, another pastor from Timothy's church was killed while visiting a neighbouring village. Timothy knows that working to advance God's kingdom isn't always safe, and he's OK with that. In fact, the risk assures him that he is on the right track. "If you are in a peaceful

place without any challenges, you will be far from God," he said. "But if there is persecution, you will be close to God."

VOM has helped pay his children's school fees and provided his family with additional financial support since the attack. Timothy has used some of the support to start a farm, where he grows corn and rice for his family and also to sell for additional income.

"It is not by our doing, but it is the grace of God that this help has come to us," Timothy said. "If not for this support, we do not know what we would have done. We are incredibly grateful. All the help and support mean so much to us. We are full of joy that we are part of a family who loves us and is praying for us."

Pastor Timothy asks that we pray for his family's courage and strength as well as for his village as they all continue to recover from the attack.



## Be Angry and Do Not Sin

Romans 12:17-21

17. Repentance to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men.
18. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.
19. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.
20. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.
21. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

# Prayer Diary

April/May 2021

## APRIL 2021

S 18	KAZAKHSTAN	<b>Pray that all church members will grow in faith.</b>
M 19	KYRGYZSTAN	Pray for President Sooronbay Jeenbekov and the government.
T 20	EGYPT	Pray for a family that faced intense pressure from other family members after turning to Christ.
W 21	MEXICO	Pray for teachers reaching out to children from minority ethnic groups.
T 22	BHUTAN	Pray that more Bhutanese Christians will share the Gospel with the unreached.
F 23	PAKISTAN	Pray for the widow and daughter of Sulaiman and for others like them.
S 24	UZBEKISTAN	<b>Pray for President Shavkat Mirziyoyev and the government.</b>
S 25	TURKMENISTAN	<b>Pray for creative ways to share the Gospel.</b>
M 26	OMAN	Pray for Leila who disappeared after her faith in Christ became known.
T 27	ALGERIA	Pray for unity among Algerian church leaders.
W 28	SOMALIA	Pray for secret Believers who are unable to fellowship with other Believers.
T 29	MYANMAR	Pray for Christians caught in the crossfire of the ongoing civil war in Shan state.
F 30	COLOMBIA	Pray that Christian leaders will face the enemy with wisdom and courage.

## MAY 2021

S 1	YEMEN	<b>Pray for Believers who are imprisoned for their faith.</b>
S 2	MYANMAR	<b>Pray for Believers living in refugee camps in Rakhine state.</b>
M 3	CUBA	Pray for a recently demolished unregistered church and the more than 2,000 others at risk.
T 4	COMOROS	Pray for wisdom in how to best reach the Comorian people.
W 5	NIGERIA	Pray for the many widows forced off their land by Muslim terrorists in recent years.
T 6	CHINA	Pray that brothers "P" and "V" will trust in God's provision as they enter full-time ministry.
F 7	PHILIPPINES	Pray for evangelists who are committed to planting new churches in Muslim dominated areas.
S 8	IRAN	<b>Pray for Ebrahim Noroozi who is in internal exile after being released from prison in 2019.</b>
S 9	INDONESIA	<b>Pray that church leaders and mission organizations will work together for the sake of the Gospel.</b>
M 10	AFGHANISTAN	Pray that our brothers and sisters will persevere through difficulties and persecution.
T 11	BURKINA FASO	Pray for unity and wisdom among those facing persecution.
W 12	BAHRAIN	Pray that persecuted Believers will continue to find strength in Jesus Christ.
T 13	TURKEY	Pray that God will raise up a new generation of bold, wise Christian leaders in Turkey.
F 14	SAUDI ARABIA	Pray that Saudi students at U.S. universities will hear and respond to the Gospel.
S 15	BANGLADESH	<b>Pray for a Front-Line Worker who conducts retreats for persecuted Bangladeshi Christians.</b>

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