



The Voice of the Martyrs *South Africa*

NIGERIA SPECIAL EDITION

Rejoice, Allison's husband was killed in 2017, shortly before she gave birth to their son, Destiny. Although he never got to know his dad, when Destiny sees his picture he smiles and shouts, "Daddy! Daddy!"

NIGERIA **CHRIST IN THE CRISIS**

ESCAPE THROUGH
THE BUSH

NO TIME
TO MOURN

SHE HEARD
GOD SPEAK

ORPHANED BY
BOKO HARAM



The Other Promises of Christ

Christ's promises fill us with joy and give us hope for eternity. In John 14:1-3, He promises "to prepare a place" for us in His home and to come again and gather us to Himself. This inspires us, and I have seen its power of encouragement after reading it with persecuted Christians who, because of their faithfulness to Christ, had been driven from their earthly homes.

While Christ's joyful promises for eternity should remain foremost in our thoughts, we must not overlook His other promises, including those about our plight in this world:

- "I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves" (Luke 10:3).
- "I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:19-20).
- "In the world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33).

In eternity, we will be Christlike. Having received His righteousness in exchange for our sin, we will be eternally without flaw and never have reason to sorrow again (2 Corinthians 5:21). But being Christlike in this world is another thing entirely — we are Christlike when we bear His shame, put to death our worldly desires and take up our cross daily to follow Him (Hebrews 13:13, Colossians 3:5-10 and Luke 9:23). We go forth loving, but rejected; forgiving, but abused; serving, but slandered. We weep as He wept, even while we overcome as He overcame.

Our bold and faithful Christian brothers and sisters in northern Nigeria exemplify this truth. It is important that we recognize their example not only so that we may serve them in their time of great need but also so that we may draw inspiration from their lives of faith. They remain as Christ's witnesses in a place where they suffer extreme violence at the hands of radicals among their own neighbours. Even after many years of serving them, I cannot fully understand what it must be like for them to live in a place where they are surrounded by Islamists who may kill

them with impunity. I can only stand in awe of the Holy Spirit's power made manifest in them.

At VOM, we are providing assistance to more than 1,400 Christian widows and their more than 4,000 children, all of whom have lost their husbands or fathers to Islamist attacks in northern Nigeria. Many of them still live with the trauma of having witnessed their husband's or father's killing firsthand. We know there are more than 6,000 such widows in total and, because so many have been displaced and we cannot locate them all, estimate that there are more than 10,000.

These widows and children will see their husbands and fathers again in heaven. In the meantime, they — and all of us who follow Christ and faithfully serve as His witnesses in this fallen world — will be hated and bear reproach for His namesake. We are not called to a life of comfort; we are called to embrace living as lambs among wolves while we follow in our Saviour's footsteps. Let us remember that He was "like a lamb that is led to the slaughter" (Isaiah 53:7) for our sake, for the sake of our Nigerian Christian brothers and sisters and even for the sake of their Islamist attackers whom we call to repentance.



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Top, center right, bottom left: Persecuted Believers throughout northern Nigeria receive relief goods and Gospel booklets. Center left: A home destroyed in 2018 attacks.





Forgiving Her Husband's KILLERS

Like many Christians in northern Nigeria, Alice has suffered multiple attacks from Muslim extremists, but she is not disheartened because she knows that Christ told us His followers would suffer.

Though it has been nine years since her husband was murdered by militant Islamic Fulani herdsmen, every time Alice Bulus hears about a new attack she re-lives the pain of the day he died. “When I hear the sound of a gun, I panic,” Alice said.

Alice and her family were asleep when men with covered faces stormed into their home around midnight on 13 January 2011, in Nigeria’s Plateau state. After calling her husband by name, the men shot him as he opened the bedroom door. Alice, who recognized one of the attackers as a Neighbour, tried to stop the bleeding as her husband lay crumpled on the floor and their five terrified children cried in the corner. When the Nigerian military arrived in their village about an hour later, they took Alice’s husband to

the hospital. But it was too late; he died on the way to surgery.

Crisis upon Crisis

In Nigeria, they call it a crisis. Attacks by Boko Haram terrorists and nomadic Fulani militants are so common that everyone understands “crisis” to mean a village raid or a terrorist bombing. More than 35,000 Nigerians have been killed in the fighting between rebels and government soldiers since 2011. While many of those killed were militants or soldiers, a good number were Christians who were targeted in raids on Christian villages or churches. And like Alice, many of the victims knew their attackers.

The conflicts have widowed an estimated 10,000 Christian women in northern Nigeria, and these women

are often completely disregarded after losing their husband. In Nigerian culture, married women become the responsibility of their husband and his family, receiving little to no support from their own family.

This was Alice’s experience as well. She found it difficult to provide for her children as a single parent, but she persisted, staying in the home she had shared with her husband and continuing to farm their plot of land. Then, a year and a half later, Fulani militants struck again.

The Nigerian government dispatched police to help control the violence, but after a policeman was killed they retaliated by burning Neighbouring Fulani homes. Then, the enraged Fulani militants burned Alice’s entire village. As she and her children fled on foot, they

managed to evade attackers who were blocking the road intending to kill those trying to escape.

Alice and other survivors took shelter in one room of a home in a nearby village, but living conditions were tight. Alice looked for another place to stay, and the only place she could find for her family was the hallway of an elderly woman's home. They lived there until another Christian family offered them a small studio apartment behind their house.

Alice was overwhelmed by the burden of raising her children on her own. Oblivious to everything around her, she said she spent a lot of time crying, sleeping and waking at odd hours. Then, one day in 2013, she re-assessed her life. "I am not dead yet," she thought. So she prayed and asked God to give her wisdom.

She began working odd jobs to support her family, making sure to save a 10 percent tithe before buying food, clothes for the children and fertilizer for the farm. She used the proceeds from her farming to fund her children's education, until 2015 when Fulani militants destroyed all her crops.

Alice replanted her fields and continued to scrape by for two years, until finally meeting some VOM workers who provided monthly living expenses and helped her relocate and rent a simple home. "If not for you," she told a VOM worker, "either I would have died or I would have abandoned the faith and become an unbeliever."

After so much suffering, Alice was ready for a fresh start. But before she could settle into her new home, she faced yet another crisis.

Loving the Fulani

On the night of Friday, June 22, 2018, Fulani militants attacked villages, including Alice's, in the Barkin Ladi area of Plateau state. As they burned Christians' houses and killed villagers, an 86-year-old imam in Nghar village sheltered about 200 Christians in the mosque, saving their lives. Still, at least

86 people died and many more suffered serious injuries. Alice and her family, along with several other VOM-supported widows, were among the 7,500 people displaced by the violence.

VOM workers again helped Alice's family relocate to another area. Although she has experienced one trial after another, Alice sees how God has carried her through each catastrophe. "The Word encourages me all the time because it says the Lord gives and the Lord takes," she said. "We are just here for a time. Right now, I am no more afraid; I am not afraid because of my God. Anything I ask for, He gives abundantly."

And even after all she has experienced at the hands of Fulani militants, she doesn't resent them or want revenge. "Until today, even with the recent crisis that happened, I have never felt anger toward them," Alice said, "because the Bible already said that this would happen and said we should watch and pray."

When she saw the Neighbour she had recognized as her husband's killer, Alice summoned the courage to approach him and greet him kindly. She tries to do the same with any Fulani person she meets.

This willful act of love has helped her find peace.

During the two years that VOM has supported her, Alice has saved some of the funds she has been provided; she wants to wisely use and multiply the gifts she receives. She has managed to buy a small piece of property and, after more saving, is slowly building a home. When it is finished, she and her five children will again have a home of their own.

"One of my prayers is that I do not live a useless life, because I have suffered a lot," she said. "But even in my suffering, let me not take advantage of what I am given."

Alice is gradually regaining her stability, but life is not easy. The responsibility of raising her children, especially her sons, without a father is still overwhelming at times. And each time another crisis erupts, as they frequently do, her fear and sadness return. But she has learned to turn to the Lord in those moments, trusting that her life is in His hands. And she is committed to following God no matter how much more she suffers. "Following Christ hurts — a lot!" she said. "You have to be ready."



A STOLEN Future



Weeks before his wife's death, James had a casual discussion with her about whether either of them would remarry if the other died. James told her he wanted to die first so their two daughters would have a mother to care for them, and his wife, Mary, teased him by saying she would remarry. But then she grew more serious, telling him she had a sense that she would die first. James didn't think much of the conversation until later, when Mary was killed in an attack on their Christian village in central Nigeria.

James was in the city donating blood at a hospital on the day of the attack. When he called home around noon, Mary told him not to come home because they had heard gunshots in a nearby community and she wanted him to avoid traveling through an area of conflict.

She was not yet aware that Fulani Islamic militants were attacking the entire region of Barkin Ladi, outside Jos. Beginning at 7 am that Saturday, 23 June, 2018, the heavily armed militants swept through the area, using plastic garden sprayers to spray gasoline on houses before setting them ablaze. Mary called James back a little later, crying and telling him the attackers had entered their village.

When the militants arrived, Mary gathered their 2-year-old daughter, Melody, in her arms and ran with their 6-year-old daughter, Marvelous, for the safety of the surrounding bush. But they immediately encountered militants. Marvelous was hit on the head and knocked unconscious, while Melody was shot in the stomach. The bullet passed through Melody's body and lodged in her mother's chest, killing Mary instantly. The girls lay near their mother's body through the afternoon and evening, until someone found them.

James heard nothing from or about his family until the next morning, when his sister called to tell him that Mary had been killed but their two daughters had survived. He had no time to mourn his wife, rushing to the hospital to be with Melody, who was being taken into surgery. He stayed in the hospital with her for two months while she underwent

two surgeries to repair her intestines. And he missed his wife's funeral, when the 86 people killed in the Barkin Ladi massacre received a hasty mass burial under the protection of Nigerian security forces.

James was filled with grief and questions: "If I'd known I would be a widower at age 29, would I even have gotten married? Why did the God we serve allow this to happen to us? Why me?"

While many women have lost husbands in the violence in northern Nigeria, it is less common for men to lose their wives. Islamic militants usually target men because they know men are often a family's sole source of support. In this attack, however, James said he knows of five other men who lost their wives. One of the men lost 11 family members in one day. James is thankful he still has his daughters. His parents help care for the girls while he works.

James's grief was compounded by losing his home. He and his family lived in a camp for internally displaced people for eight months, but they still could not return home. The neighbouring Fulani, the same ones who had attacked the village, moved into the Christians' homes and took their land.

James's older daughter, Marvelous, later told him that the man who killed her mother used to visit their house and eat dinner with them. "He was one of the men who took mommy to see Jesus," she said, naming the man. James also learned that the attackers had chanted "Jihad is compulsory!" and "We have killed the infidels!"

For many weeks, James seethed when he thought of the men who killed his wife. "I didn't even want to see them," he said. As a Christian, he knew about persecution, but he never thought it would happen to him.

He felt like his future had been stolen. James had recently graduated from college with a degree in environmental health, and he had just finished the two-year national service required of every college graduate. Their farm had supported the family, and he had considered going back to school for a master's degree in public health. But now

his farm was gone, his wife was gone and he had two young girls to support.

Last January, VOM began assisting James with rent, school fees, clothing and medical care. Though he earns an income as a tin miner, housing prices in the city have risen sharply because of the influx of Christians displaced by militant attacks. In addition to receiving financial help, he is also meeting with a specially trained VOM worker who functions somewhat like a social worker for the many persecuted Believers VOM serves in Nigeria. The worker meets weekly with each persecuted Believer to check in on his or her progress, which has been a great help in moving traumatized people out of shock and into a place of self-sufficiency.

After several months in the programme, James's outlook on life began to brighten. "I feel like I have people who care for me," he said. Being reminded that he is supported by his Christian family has restored his faith in God, and he says it is even stronger than before. "God is good!" he told a VOM worker. "I feel I have a God, a living God who will never forsake me."

He still finds it difficult to interact with the militant Fulani villagers who attacked his village and killed his wife, but he intentionally greeted them on a recent trip to check on his farmland. Forgiveness will take time.

James still wonders why the Lord chose to take his wife and not him, but he sees God providing for him as needs arise. "I feel loved," he told a VOM worker.

He asked for prayer for himself and his two daughters, Marvelous and Melody, as well as for all Nigerian Christians who have lost family members, homes and land. "Pray that God will strengthen us and make us strong in our faith and provide for our desires," he said, "because as it is now it's like we don't have a heritage, we don't have a land."

James and our other Nigerian brothers and sisters who have been scarred by this violence may have lost their loved ones and land, but they have not been lost to the Lord. They are His portion and His inheritance, and not one will be snatched from his hand.

Created to Be His Follower:

A Fulani Woman Finds Christ

Aisha Granger is not your typical seminary student. She's 43, a divorced mother of two children, and she's Fulani, a member of the predominantly Muslim nomadic tribe spread across West Africa. Her journey started with a desire to learn.

"I really wanted to go to school," Aisha said, "but growing up in a Muslim environment as a Muslim girl, your orientation is toward growing up and being a good Muslim, a good mother."

Aisha followed cultural norms by marrying at age 18 and giving birth to her first child a year later. As a young woman, she studied at the College of Islamic Studies in Bauchi state and became a state representative for the Federation of Muslim Women. She even converted her living room into a mosque where women could pray, since Islam does not allow women to mix with men for prayer at the community mosque.

"I used to be a very fanatical Muslim," she said. "We were taught that Christians are infidels and we should not befriend them; we should not listen to them because they are not worshipers of Allah. We were always encouraged to stay away from Christians because they will make

us turn away from our faith."

Then she heard God speak.

When Aisha was in her 20s, she suffered from debilitating migraine headaches. She tried all the remedies offered by traditional healers, but nothing helped. As a last resort, she was told to recite a Quranic passage four times before slaughtering four rams. If that did not work, the healers said, she would die.



When the sacrifice failed to help, Aisha concluded that she was about to die.

When the sacrifice failed to help, Aisha concluded that she was about to die. In desperation, she decided to perform one last prayer, so she went to the bathroom to perform her ritual washing.

Before she could complete this final work, however, she dropped to the floor. Aisha sensed a voice saying, "I want you to worship Me." She knew enough about the Christian faith to realize this still

small voice had to be the God of the Bible, who interacts on a personal level.

The supernatural encounter sent Aisha on a four-year search. She gradually stepped away from the leadership positions she held in Islamic women's groups and began spending a lot of time in her living room seeking God. Although she knew how much she stood to lose if she chose the infidels' God over the

religion of her people, she could see that Jesus Christ offered something different.

"I had never heard of salvation before in Islam," she said. "There's nothing like that. Your salvation is only by your good deeds. Even then, Allah will decide whether you go to paradise or not. There is no assurance."

As she studied the Bible and attended church, Aisha discovered that Jesus Christ had already

accomplished everything necessary for her salvation on the cross. She simply needed to place her faith in His righteousness to gain freedom from the curse of the law. Soon, Aisha was ready to tell her husband about her new faith.

It didn't go well — her husband sued her in Sharia (Islamic) court, demanding all her possessions and both of their children. While both civil and criminal



When Aisha's Muslim husband divorced her, the court granted her custody of their children. It is highly unusual for a judge to grant custody to a Christian parent.

matters are decided by Sharia courts in nine northern Nigerian states, Aisha's pastor, doctor and several others advocated for the case to be transferred to the magistrate court, and it was. "If the case had gone through Sharia court," a VOM worker said, "they probably would have ruled against her and she would have lost her children."

The magistrate gave Aisha the choice of recanting her Christian faith or divorcing her husband. And since she would not give up her faith, her husband divorced her and relinquished custody of the children to her.

Aisha and her son moved out, but her daughter chose to stay with her father. It was a difficult time for Aisha, as even other Christians didn't want to associate with her. They were afraid they would be accused by her husband of playing a part in her conversion, and they also feared that the Muslim community might turn against them if they were seen with her. "If you are a Muslim and you come out of Islam, you are to be stoned to death," she said.

In addition, Aisha's parents accused her of neglecting their needs by leaving her influential husband and his money. "They insulted me, said all kinds of things to me," she recalled. "They were in support of him."

She endured continual pressure from her family and the community, and her ex-husband even burned down her house. The persecution became too difficult for her teenage son, Abdullahi, who soon moved back in with his father. Aisha was ready to give up, even contemplating suicide. "I wanted to just pack up and leave the town," she told a VOM worker. "That was when you people came into my life."

VOM arranged for Aisha to move to another neighbourhood, where the community would not know she had left Islam. "I moved into this house with a lot of fear and tension," she said. But the tension gradually eased, and Abdullahi, who had accepted Christ through his mother's influence, came back to live with her in the new house. Without a safe place to live, Aisha fears he would have returned

to Islam. Aisha's daughter, Faiza, who remained with her father, was introduced to Jesus Christ through friends at school. After Faiza placed her faith in Christ, her father beat her and told her, "Leave my house before I kill you." Faiza now lives with her mother and brother.

Aisha is attending seminary so she will have a firm theological foundation from which to teach others. She hopes to work with other women who have left Islam and to reach out to the Fulani with the love of Christ. Abdullahi is 25 and studying at a discipleship school, while Faiza is 16 and in high school.

Aisha lives with the stress of knowing that her ex-husband and his family are still searching for her to kill her. She receives regular text messages exhorting her to return to Islam or threatening to kill her. Yet despite the difficulties and uncertainty, she has no regrets. Coming to know the living God has given her whole life purpose. "God created us to be His followers," she said, "to be worshipping Him and being obedient to Him."



ORPHANED

AT THE HANDS OF BOKO HARAM

How a young woman overcame the pain of losing her father and forgave his murderers.

On the evening before Easter Sunday 2012, Comfort Jessy sat in the enclosed courtyard of her home chatting with her parents, older siblings and some Neighbours. Around 11 p.m., they heard bombing in the distance, and in less than an hour Boko Haram militants were burning the church next door and pounding on the gate in front of their home.

Comfort's mother, Juliana, helped her husband hide in one of the back bedrooms, covering him with clothes. "God, we are in Your hands," she prayed. Several militants entered to search the house while others dragged Juliana into the courtyard, striking her with their guns and taunting her about her faith. "You Christians say God has a son," they said. "Call on that son! Today is your last day; your own life is over."

They then forced her to kneel. "They said that if they don't get their man, they

will kill her," Comfort said. "My mother said, 'Even though I see your gun, I will not fear you.'"

One of the men gave a shout from inside the house — he had found Comfort's father. They dragged him out to the courtyard and instructed him to renounce Christ. He remained silent, while Juliana's mother shouted, "Jesus!"

The militants ordered Comfort's father to lie down, and then they shot him four times. Before leaving, they ransacked and burned their home. Juliana pulled her dying husband into her lap and prayed; he uttered a final "amen" at the end of her prayer, before dying. Comfort, who was 13 at the time, sat by her father's body with her eight siblings, crying in the early morning darkness.

Campaign Against Christians

The Boko Haram fighters attacked the town in Adamawa state that night as

part of their campaign to establish an Islamic government across northern Nigeria. Ever since the 2011 election of Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian, as president, the Islamist group had staged frequent attacks against both political targets and Christians throughout the northern states. In January 2012, Boko Haram issued a warning for all southern Nigerians (meaning Christians) to leave the north. Comfort's family was among the first to pay the price for staying.

She and her family took her father's body to his hometown to bury him, hoping his family would help them. But instead, his family rejected them. Comfort, her eight siblings and their mother were homeless until her mother managed to scrape together enough funds to build a simple shelter. But within a few months, Boko Haram attacked again, burning their rebuilt house.

This time the family fled the area,

walking through the bush for three days to reach a camp for displaced people. They stayed in the camp for more than a year, but they struggled to buy food and none of the children were able to attend school. Finally, they were referred to a VOM-supported training center for widows and orphans.

Working Through Anger and Forgiveness

Juliana received training and spiritual guidance, while Comfort and her siblings joyfully enrolled in school. But Comfort carried scars from the trauma and losses she had suffered. If a family member shouted at her, she would spend the entire day in her room and refuse to eat. “I slept with so much anger and pain in my heart,” she said.

Children of Christians who have been killed in the ongoing violence struggle emotionally and spiritually to recover from their losses. While their physical needs can be quickly addressed, the deeper emotional and spiritual needs are more difficult to resolve. “A generation of Christians is growing up with hatred, unforgiveness and a desire to take revenge,” a VOM worker said.

In 2018, Comfort and three of her siblings attended a youth camp that VOM hosted for teenagers who had suffered similarly traumatic experiences. Many of the young people had suffered not only persecution but also rejection, either from family members or a community that despised them because they were poor or parentless. The teens were disciplined by mature Nigerian Believers who taught them what the Bible says about forgiveness, hatred and their worth as children of God.

Some of the teens said it was the first time in a long while that they had felt like equals. Comfort met a girl her own age whom she now calls her best friend, and she does not feel alone anymore. The weeklong retreat gave Comfort a Christ-centered perspective on forgiveness. On

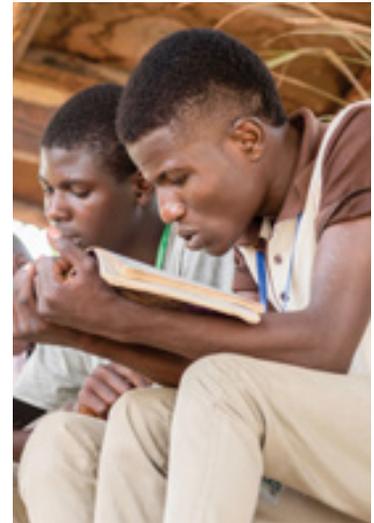
one of the final nights of camp, many of the teens gave testimonies of how God was working in their lives. Some were in tears as they surrendered their anger and hate toward Boko Haram.

In the year since attending the youth camp, Comfort has been able to let go of her anger and even to pray for Boko Haram. “I begged God to forgive them, because they did not know what they were doing,” she said.

With VOM’s help, the family has moved into a new home in the same

city as the training center. The children are doing well in school, and Comfort, now 19, is working toward university admission. She hopes to one day work in banking.

Every morning, Comfort and her family gather for devotions and to thank God for the help they have received. Comfort said she loved God before but has grown in faith through her trials. “I didn’t really hold onto God as I am right now,” she said. “I love God now more than in the past.”



A new youth-camp programme has helped transform the lives of many teens.



A
PRAYER
FOR

Nigeria

Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before the killing and suffering in Nigeria will end? How many more of our brothers and sisters will lose their lives for the sake of Your great name?

Father, may their witness be vibrant, as a lamp set on a hill. May their lives and actions demonstrate Your goodness. Give them hearts for reconciliation and forgiveness instead of revenge.

We thank You for healing the brokenhearted, comforting the mourning, binding up the wounded and being a father to the fatherless.

We ask that our brothers and sisters will know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge, that they may be filled with all the fullness of You. May they be rooted and established in Your love.

Oh, Lord, empower with new strength those who minister in the most difficult areas. Refresh their inner spirits and fill their cups to overflowing. May the Gospel of peace that they share bring peace to this place of turmoil.

As You are able to soften the hardest of hearts, work in the hearts of every Islamist leader and fighter in northern Nigeria. Impress them with Your love so they, too, may long to know and serve You.

May Your kingdom come in Nigeria.

Write a note of encouragement to
Nigerian Christians



Let your Nigerian brothers and sisters in Christ know that Christians around the world have not forgotten them by writing them a note of encouragement. Children's Sunday school classes can write a note or draw a picture to encourage kids their age, or you can get your small group or church involved by asking each person to write a note to a widow or a pastor.

Visit persecutionsa.org to get started.

