Iranian authorities routinely detain and interrogate Christians at local police stations.

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Unsure at times of where their next meal will come from, Iranians have grown more and more desperate. Drug abuse and crime have increased significantly, even in previously safe areas, while the Islamic government has further demoralized its citizens by tightening controls on basic freedoms. All unregistered cellphones and SIM cards (i.e., “burner phones”) have been turned off, and the government can monitor all calls and text messages made with registered, legal cellphones.

Christians are specifically targeted, making outreach, discipleship and even arranging a meeting incredibly challenging. More than 150 Iranian Christians were arrested in the weeks leading up to Christmas 2018, and agents from the Ministry of Intelligence arrested eight more on July 1 in the city of Bushehr. The eight arrested include a husband and wife, three of their relatives and three other Christian converts from Islam.

Students at the Qom Islamic Seminary, the largest in Iran, are indoctrinated with hard-line Shiite ideology.

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Baptism is one of the most subversive acts a Muslim can take, usually irreversibly severing ties to family and community.

Iranian Christians know that arrests or raids on their meetings can come at any time, and yet the church in Iran is the fastest growing in the world. As one church leader in Iran said, “Don’t pray for regime change. This is where the gospel is flourishing!”

Amid increasing difficulties and risks, God is drawing people in Iran to Himself through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. A young woman named Mariam exemplifies how God is saving Iranians from sin and despair.

Mariam was in desperate need of salvation. She was engaged to a violent, abusive man and was so depressed that she took 12 pills a day just to keep going. She had tried unsuccessfully to take her own life five times, feeling worse each time, thinking, “I couldn’t even kill myself!”

When overdosing on medications didn’t work, Mariam decided to hang herself. She took a length of strong wire from some electrical supplies belonging to her brother, who was an electrician, and hid it in her room. Then, one afternoon she locked the door and twisted the wire into a noose.

“If You actually exist,” she told God as she prepared to hang herself, “I want to touch You.” In her mind, she expected to touch God after she was dead. Mariam swallowed all the pills she had left, wrapped the noose around her neck and stepped off her bed.

“For four seconds I called out to Jesus, to God,” she said. “And all of a sudden, just like a little baby is held over the shoulder of the father, I felt like I was over the shoulder of Jesus. I always desired to have been held like that by my father.”

“I told [Jesus], ‘Please don’t put me down on the ground. I am scared to have my feet touch the ground.’ I wasn’t even embarrassed, even though this was a man I didn’t know. Somehow I knew that
He was Jesus, and He recited Psalm 91 to me. Of course, I didn’t even know what Psalm 91 was.

“He told me, ‘I won’t even let your foot hit a rock, a stone; I am going to protect you. Trust Me.’ At this point I woke up lying on my bed.”

Mariam got off her bed, wondering if the whole thing had been a dream or drug-induced hallucination. But when she looked down, she saw the wire that had been around her neck lying on the floor; the noose had been undone. And when she looked in the mirror, she saw a dark bruise encircling her neck.

Mariam began to cry, understanding that Jesus loved her and had saved her life. She knew, then, that she would follow Him anywhere and do anything He asked of her. Then her tears turned to laughter, as she was overwhelmed with the joy of salvation.

Her family was in shock; they hadn’t even seen Mariam chuckle in many months. As she shared her story of a God who had rescued her and held her close, as a father holds his child, others in her family and even others in her apartment building soon began to follow Jesus Christ.

God is working in Iran not only in miraculous ways, through dreams, visions and miracles, but also through the faithful efforts of Iranian Christians. Thousands risk arrest by meeting for worship and studying Scripture together, and dedicated teams are finding creative ways of meeting with those who want more information about Jesus Christ and the Bible.
The Blessing of a Failed Theocracy

Modern-day Iran is the land of the Persians, historically one of the most powerful, successful and influential people groups in the world. The first Persian Empire factored importantly into biblical history when its leader, Cyrus the Great, released God’s people from captivity so they could rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 36:23). Persian power and influence lasted more than 1,200 years, coming to a violent end in A.D. 651 when adherents of Islam — a new religion whose prophet had recently died, in A.D. 632 — conquered the Persians, dismantled their culture and forced them to become Muslims.

The story of Islam’s oppression of the Persian people has repeated itself in modern history. By the mid-1900s, Iran had again become a successful nation known for its kind and generous people. But in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a small Islamist segment of the populace violently overthrew the ruling monarchy, promising prosperity through the subjection of every aspect of life to Islam. Since then, the country has been ruled through a council of mullahs (Islamic clerics).

After oppressing the Iranian people for decades, the country’s Islamist theocracy is now on the brink of becoming a failed state. The government violently restricts its citizens’ freedoms — with a vengeful focus on those who choose to leave Islam and follow Christ. Suicide, drug addiction and other societal ills have reached staggering rates. Still, God has been faithful to bring eternal good out of this temporal harm. Iran’s failed theocracy has provided the country’s Muslim people with the blessing of clarity. They have seen that Islam does not succeed, as it claims, when given full sway over spiritual, economic and governmental destinies.

I have had the blessing of working closely with Iranians for many years and of traveling inside the nation. While I have met some Muslim clerics and devout Muslims in Iran, they are a small minority. Most Iranians have now rejected Islam, and hundreds of thousands have come to faith in Christ in the last decade. Let us never cease praying for them as they faithfully witness for Christ in one of the world’s most restricted nations.

Cole Richards

GET INVOLVED

■ PRAY
   Pray that gospel seeds will be planted in the hearts of Iranians and that God will bring forth fruit. “Pray for Holy Spirit inspired strategies for us,” requested one church leader, citing the difficulty of gospel work under increasing restrictions.

■ SMUGGLE BIBLES INTO IRAN
   Be a part of getting God’s Word into a highly restricted country, where Bibles cannot be legally imported or printed. We continue to develop innovative ways to help Christians obtain digital Bibles.

■ ADVANCE THE KINGDOM AMONG IRANIANS
   Provide tools to Christian workers who broadcast gospel and discipleship programs into the country via satellite and who find other secret ways of spreading the gospel to Iranians living both inside and outside the country.

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