

Today's Martyrs – Pastor Saeed Abedini



There had been days when Pastor Saeed Abedini awakened to find a knife being waved in his face. There were many days when he was been beaten and even tortured. There were many days, in fact most days, when he suffered internal pain and bleeding from the effects of beatings and torture, and when he also dealt with being infested with lice. The reason for these tribulations was that he has been imprisoned in the Islamic Republic of Iran for the crime of evangelizing Christianity. He had been scheduled for release after serving a sentence of eight years – if he lived that long.

There was a real possibility that he would not survive his incarceration. His transfer to Rajai Shahr Prison in Karaj – the most violent in the country - at the beginning of November 2013 was most likely done with the intent that he not survive. He was placed in a hundred square foot cell with five convicted murderers facing execution. These men continually threatened him with knives and stole his personal possessions. Finally in January 2014 Pastor Saeed was transferred to the political prisoners' wing.

In early March he was sent to a hospital for his chronic internal bleeding; on March 12 Revolutionary Guards invaded his hospital room, shackled him and roughed up an elderly relative. The Guards tried to return him to the prison but the warden intervened: he remained there and received medication (but not needed surgery) for his bleeding until May 20, 2014, when the Guards returned, severely beat him, and then returned him to prison.

It is obvious that the Iranian government viewed Saeed Abedini as one of the most dangerous men in Iran. Why? Because he has helped establish over 100 underground churches, and help convert over 2,000 Iranians to Christianity. In their eyes he had subverted the national security of the Islamic Republic.

Saeed Abedini is himself a convert from Islam, having become a Christian at age 19. He left Iran, attended divinity school in the United States, and married Naghmeh Shariat Panahi, a U.S. born citizen and Christian of Iranian descent. Saeed and Naghmeh travelled to Iran and were very active in underground house church activities until 2005, when a major government crackdown began. They left Iran and returned to the U.S., where together they became the parents of Rebekkah and Jacob, and Saeed became an ordained minister and a U.S. citizen. Saeed continued to return to Iran to visit his family and to aid an orphanage they had helped start.

In July 2012 Pastor Saeed was making another visit when he was arrested by Revolutionary Guards. He was tried for charges that were never made public and sentenced on January 27, 2013 to eight years imprisonment, apparently for his church activities of a decade earlier. He was 32 years old.

The response of the U.S. government, which has had no official relations with Iran since the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis of 1979, had been contradictory in Pastor Saeed's case. On one hand, the State Department officially condemned his arrest and conviction, and the highest levels of the U.S. government have made personal appeals for his release. On the

other hand, the U.S. government in April 2013 freed an Iranian nuclear physicist, Mojtaba Atarodi, who had been arrested two years earlier on espionage charges related to nuclear and missile technologies. The release of Mr. Atarodi was apparently made in an attempt to restart the stalled nuclear talks with Iran, and no attempt was made to link his release to the release of Pastor Saeed or to the other two U.S. citizens then held in Iranian prison. This unilateral action by the U.S. government told the Iranian leadership that these men's freedom was not a high diplomatic priority. The outcome was a prime example of the failure of Western governments when they place their grand strategies ahead of their citizens: these men remained imprisoned, and the nuclear talks have continued to stall again and again.

Of course, there are limits to what other countries can do to influence Iran, since the country largely follows its own internal dynamics. The economy is in poor condition, not only due to Western sanctions but also corruption, cronyism, and incompetence. The oppression of the Basij, the morality paramilitaries, has taken its toll: drug addiction is rampant, and prostitution (including via mut'ah, the Shia Islamic temporary marriage) is widespread. The underground Christian churches have continued to grow despite persecution, perhaps because they offer a new and different hope. Meanwhile the uranium centrifuges have continued to spin, purifying their fissionable product for an end known only to God and the Iranian leadership. That leadership has occasionally slipped and revealed geopolitical aims that are clearly informed by Islamic eschatology – the end times of the Shia tradition. Inside this maelstrom sits a Christian pastor who has been protected from further evil only by prayer and the grace and power of God.

An objective evaluation of the actions of the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran would seem to show they fear Pastor Saeed Abedini and the dozens of other imprisoned Iranian Christians more than they fear the military might of the West. They are probably right. Pray that they be proven right in the end, and that the Gospel proves triumphant for the good people of Iran. Please pray for the safety and freedom for Saeed Abedini, for all Christians, and for all the innocent.

Postscript: Saeed Abedini was been freed and arrived in Germany on January 17, 2016. Thank God!

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