

22 August 2017 / Open Doors

NIGERIA: A FULANI CHRISTIAN CONVERT IN PRISON

Summary:

The Fulani in Nigeria are 99% Muslim. A Fulani man from Bauchi state learned the cost of discipleship soon after his conversion, including unjust imprisonment.

Original title: Suffering & Grace Collide in NG Prison

Bulus (pseudonym) shares his home, a cell in a Bauchi prison, with many more people than is healthy. At night it is a battle to find enough room to lie down comfortably on the cold and dirty floor among the other bodies emaciated from terribly insufficient nutrition and regular bouts of diarrhea. He does not know when this ordeal will end and dares not fuel any expectations of a speedy release.

But Bulus has committed no crime. He was arrested on a whim by policemen notorious for brutality and corruption, despite the fact that there was no evidence to support his family's claims that he had stolen livestock. But officers gave his family the benefit of the doubt and arrested him. He knows it could be as long as ten years before there is significant progress in his case. These developments suit Bulus' family just fine. It is exactly what they intended as punishment for leaving Islam.

Until the age of 25, there was not much outside of the routines of the semi-nomadic life of the Fulani that Bulus, now 32, knew. He tended his father's livestock and learned to hunt, respect his elders and fear Allah. Five times a day he joined the other men in his community in the customary ablutions that precede prayers. He faithfully rolled out his prayer mat towards Mecca and went through the motions, although none of those rituals stirred his heart.

That was until a group of Christians visited his village. "An outreach team came to our village. After I heard their message I gave my life to Christ," he tells Open Doors staff visiting him in Bauchi prison for a precious few minutes. It was no surprise that his relatives were greatly offended. In their minds being Fulani means being Muslim. The two are inseparable and they had an obligation to do whatever they could to make him return. When he did not heed their initial warnings, his father threatened to disown him. Bulus lost his inheritance, support from the extended family circle for everyday life, the status of the clan and the privilege of an arranged marriage – from their perspective this was his entire future.

When this did not work, they threatened to kill him, and Bulus knew it was time to go. He fled to Jos, where no one knew him and enrolled in theological training. "I completed the training in four years. In that time I learned a lot about Christ and experienced His provision in my life. But it was a very lonely time. I had no friends, no family and no support network. I was angry at my family for how they had treated me. But during the course I learned a lot about forgiveness. After I graduated I wanted to go home to see if there was any way my parents and I could be reunited."

But it was an ill-fated visit. “Their hatred had increased, especially when they heard I had become a pastor. Before I could leave, relatives trapped me and started beating me. I thought I was going to die, but they dragged me to the police station and accused me of stealing some of their goats. Despite the fact that there was no proof, the police locked me up. Five days later they took me to court. I did not have the opportunity to defend myself but was kept in prison anyway.

“I wasn’t happy when I first got here. The allegations of theft against me were very disheartening. But then I remembered that even Jesus, who didn’t sin, suffered. He died a painful death on the cross alongside criminals. I realized I had to live as He did and take up my cross. From the moment I decided that, my burdens were lifted and I saw the sufficiency of God’s grace in my life. “I decided to use my time in prison to preach the gospel. Many people don’t like it, but I continue anyway. I have received hope and strength from God to keep doing the work which He has called me to.”

Open Doors has provided a lawyer to defend Bulus’ case. As an ex-Muslim there will be a lot of pressure on the system to have Bulus tried in sharia court, and Open Doors’ appointed lawyers will work to have this case heard in secular court.

Nigeria’s Broken Justice System

Nigeria is notorious for its broken justice system. Police can arrest people on a whim. Brutality and corruption in the processing are common. Those arrested can wait years to be convicted. For instance, in 2014 only about 30% of inmates in local prisons had been convicted of any crimes—the rest were awaiting trial. Prison conditions are terrible. Hundreds of prisoners have died from neglect or mistreatment. Congested cells and poor living and sleeping conditions cause immense suffering¹.

This lawlessness coupled with the vices and with the application of sharia law in 12 of Nigeria’s northern states has brought untold suffering to Christians who often find themselves illegally subjected to sharia hearings.

¹ See: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2015/07/nigerian-justice-boko-haram-buhari/>.