



A LONG DISTANCE

A Covenant pastor meets his brothers in Christ in an Egyptian jail.

DAN JOHNSON



JACOB



MARTIN

FAMILY REUNION

I passed through the small opening in the imposing steel gates of Kanater Men's Prison outside of Cairo, and heard the heavy door clang shut behind me. An Egyptian guard abruptly put his hand on my chest and demanded that I hand over my passport—even though he had the copy I had already presented at the registration area.

I tried to reason with the guard, feeling terribly anxious about letting go of that precious document, but he was insistent. I finally gave it to him, wondering if I would ever see it again. Then he pushed me forward, around the corner toward the visiting area.

Before I knew what was happening, I heard a shout: "Daniel! Daniel!" There came Jacob, a huge bright smile lighting up his face, and his eyes full of joy as he threw his arms around me, embracing me in a big bear hug, rocking me back and forth, with tears running down his cheeks.

Over and over he kept repeating: "O my good God! Daniel! You do so much! You do too much!"

All I could do was hold on and hug him back. Martin, another prisoner, joined us.

I could tell they hardly believed this was happening. I couldn't believe it either. I had traveled from Hilmar, California, to this Egyptian prison, and now I was face to face with these Christian brothers who our church has been encouraging for many years with letters, financial support, and prayer. After all these years, I was actually seeing and touching and talking to them—I was physically present with them. It was an absolute miracle of God.

How this all came to be is, indeed, quite a story. It began a number of years ago, before I ever met Jacob and Martin. In November 1997, after viewing a video about persecuted Christians, I felt compelled to do something. Others in my church felt the same way, so we formed a prayer and advocacy group, the Hilmar Covenant Friends of the Persecuted Church. Since that time, an average of twenty people have continually been involved in this unique ministry.

In the fall of 2002, I found a list on the Internet of imprisoned Christians in various countries. The organization sponsoring the website asked people to send Christmas greetings to these persecuted believers. I sent cards to prisoners in Egypt, and for the first time in all my years of writing to world leaders, ambassadors, government officials, and imprisoned Christians, I received a reply. A letter arrived from Jacob, a Nigerian Christian who had been incarcerated in Cairo for sixteen years.

Originally I thought that Jacob and Martin were imprisoned because of their faith in Christ. Later I learned that as young men they had moved to Cairo to make a fast buck selling drugs. They were caught, sentenced to twenty years, and in this bleak, oppressive prison met Christ in a dramatic way. Their commitment to the Lord has sustained them throughout these years of incarceration—powerful testimony to God's faithfulness in the most horrendous conditions imaginable. I answered Jacob's letter, and we began an ongoing correspondence as brothers in Jesus.

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A year passed. During this time I learned that prisoners in Egypt must pay for their own food, clothing, personal items—everything they need for living. To pay for these necessities, they rely on family and friends, or raise money by selling things that they make in the prison workshop. One day a package arrived from Jacob. Inside were some of the most beautiful beadwork and handcrafted items I had ever seen, sent as a gift.

After showing them to people in our Friends group, we decided we could raise money for the Christians in this Egyptian prison by selling their art and handcrafted items here in Hilmar. Jacob was delighted with the idea. In the summer of 2004, a number of boxes arrived from Egypt, full of elegant beaded handbags, purses, and necklaces, deco-

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rated pens and key chains, hand-painted greeting cards, and original oil paintings. We sold nearly \$3,000 worth of this merchandise and mailed payments periodically to Jacob and Martin, with the help of Bea, an American missionary who regularly visits the prison.

Last March, I went to Israel to begin a four-month sabbatical, volunteering with a Christian group in Jerusalem called Bridges for Peace. Before leaving for Israel, I started to consider the crazy idea of traveling to Cairo to visit Jacob and Martin in prison. I emailed Bea to see if there was any possibility of me getting in to see them. She responded, saying if I could get to Cairo, not only could she get me into the prison, but I would be welcome to stay with her and her family while I was there.

It seemed clear to me that God was making a way for me to follow through on my idea. On May 25, I arrived at the Cairo airport where Bea met me and hosted me for three days.

On Saturday morning, Bea and I loaded the car with groceries, clothes, and things I had brought from Jerusalem for the men in prison, and we

started out on our adventure. I was nervous, wondering what to expect and anticipating a long day because it takes at least eight hours to complete the visit.

The drive takes over an hour, and Bea instructed me on what to do once we entered the prison. After leaving the main road and passing through towns and along waterways for what seemed like forever, we arrived at Kanater Men's Prison. Police were everywhere, so I didn't even dare take a photo of the front of the jail. (Photography is forbidden inside the prison.)

We collected our things and walked to the main entrance, a narrow walkway between concrete guard towers. A wave of apprehension spread over me as we passed through. A woman guard took Bea to a curtained area to frisk her and

I continued to the screening area where everyone's bags and possessions were x-rayed and searched. I also got patted down by a guard to be sure I didn't have anything forbidden hidden in my clothing.

We continued down a dusty road to the registration area, a large, dirty, dilapidated building with open windows, packed with people waiting to see their friends and loved ones. It was noisy and smelly, with people standing, sitting on benches, lying on the floor, children running around and crying—a general hubbub everywhere. Bea and I went to the registration desk and met the officials who signed us in.

We found a place to stand and wait, next to the filthy, stench-filled bathrooms known as “squatty potties,” and there we met Hanan, a Coptic woman who also visits Jacob and Martin regularly in the prison.

All of a sudden, we got word that it was time to get on the tram that takes visitors to the prison visiting area. We were surprised—only an hour had passed and usually there is a two- or three-hour wait before going to see

the prisoners. Everyone grabbed their things, pushed through the single door outside and crowded onto the tram. It was pulled by a tractor and made the long trek to the visiting area much easier than it used to be, when everyone had to walk.

The tram delivered us to the imposing steel gates, set into the high prison wall. It was there that the guard took my passport and I got to finally meet Jacob and Martin.

They took me to an outdoor patio area where prison visits take place. We sat down and had an amazing, delightful, powerful hour and a half together—which was also a miracle, because the usual visiting time is only twenty to thirty minutes.

Jacob kept his arm through mine the entire time, holding tightly to me, grinning with pleasure and with tears continuing to flow from time to time. Martin sat on my right, and I put my arm around his back, sensing the need that these guys have for physical touch.

Jacob pulled out two photos of his seventeen-month-old nephew. Before he was born, Jacob had asked his brother to name the baby “Daniel” after me, if he was a boy, because of what I mean to him—and his brother did so! I was deeply touched, and humbled. Now I have a namesake—a godson—running around somewhere in Nigeria, all because of our Friends of the Persecuted Church group.

Then Jacob took out a pen, wrapped with colorful threads and the words “Bridges for Peace” woven into it. I was happy to receive this gift from him. Then he took out a bag with thirty more pens, all with the “BFP” name designed with thread. He insisted that I give them to everyone at the organization as a thank you from him, for it was because of my opportunity to volunteer with Bridges that I was able to make this journey to Egypt and visit him and Martin in person. I was overwhelmed by his generosity.

Martin told me about the theological degree that he had just completed through a correspondence course. Then he said that he and Jacob want to spend the year after they get out of

prison as missionaries, testifying about Jesus and how he saved and sustained them through their twenty years of imprisonment. They realize that they will have no money, no paperwork or visas, no connections to mission groups or agencies, plus the stigma of having been in prison for drugs, but they are trusting God and want to give their first year of freedom to witnessing and evangelizing for the Lord.

Jacob asked me to assist them in these hopes and desires, and I promised to do so. How, I don't know—but God is great and awesome and delights in working miracles in every situation that we think is impossible. I told them we must pray for this miracle, for direction, and for the right doors to open for them.



Martin and Jacob also described life in the prison. Three hundred foreign prisoners live in their part of the jail, while another 400 Egyptian prisoners are housed in a separate building. Among these prisoners are twenty-four Christians who meet in a fellowship group. These men study and pray together, support one another, and encourage each other during the week. Then they all come together on Sundays for worship and to share what God has been doing in their lives. Imagine, sharing what God has been doing in their lives, when they live in the confines of a prison!

They also bring their food and make a meal, which they eat together, sharing with as many as eighty prisoners and their Egyptian guards, too.

Martin said that the Christians keep their cells clean, they are respectful and obedient (even to the guards who are brutal to them), and they do their best to be a positive witness for Christ. He also said that he and Jacob give the guards gifts at Christmas, which they

eagerly anticipate each year.

All of this was mind boggling. I wondered how I would do in their situation, confined in a foreign prison, under oppressive living conditions, facing years of confinement, surrounded by walls, guards, depressed and angry prisoners. I could only shake my head in amazement. I was filled with admiration, respect, and awe at the way these men were living with purpose and meaning in the midst of such horrendous conditions. They are living gospels!

At one point, Jacob put on his glasses, the ones that Covenant optometrist Ruth Bonander had donated to him. We talked about her, and he was very concerned about her daughter's medical problems. It seems that every detail of life that we share with these brothers in Christ is precious and important to them. They remember everything, care about our concerns, pray for us, and want to know more about our situations. We who live free and comfortably should be as concerned and mindful of one another.

As the end of our time drew near, Jacob said that he wanted my phone number—because as soon as he walks out of the walls of the prison, he wants to call me immediately and shout “I'm free!” Then he leaned close and said, “Daniel, you have brought me out of death. Today I am free! I am not a prisoner anymore. Yes, I am in prison still, but I am really free!”

What could I say to such words of thanks and love and appreciation? I know that my coming to these guys in prison was powerful, meaningful, and a huge blessing to them, but I could not fully comprehend the impact of my visit to them. I do not have the perspective they do—as incarcerated human beings living in depressing conditions day after day, languishing without freedom, often hopeless, devastated, and forgotten.

I do realize how important it is to these guys just to be remembered, known, acknowledged to be alive. Yes, they have God, and Jesus is their most important source of hope, joy, and purpose. But here is where the deep meaning and reality of incarnation

HOW CAN I HELP PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?

- 1) **Be informed.** Pay attention to the news, articles, documentaries, and reports that focus on persecution. Subscribe to newsletters and updates from organizations that minister to the persecuted.
- 2) **Write to imprisoned Christians** to encourage and support them, to leaders of countries that persecute, and to our elected officials with requests and concerns about religious freedom.
- 3) **Keep current.** Sign up for weekly prayer updates and monthly prisoner alerts from Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Voice of the Martyrs.
- 4) **Take action.** Speak out, make phone calls, write editorials, send financial help to persecuted church organizations or to Christians who need assistance.
- 5) **Pray.** This is the number one thing that persecuted believers ask for. Pray that they have strength to endure the trials they face. Encourage your church to participate in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church on November 12 this year.
- 6) **Organize a friends of the persecuted church advocacy group** in your congregation. It can be a powerful prayer ministry and outreach group for your church.

FOR INFORMATION ON PERSECUTED CHRISTIANS?

The Bible League

PO Box 28000, Chicago, IL 60628
(866) 825-4636; info@bibleleague.org
www.bibleleague.org

Christian Solidarity Worldwide USA

PO Box 50608, Casper, WY 82605
(877) 450-4516; information@cswusa.com
www.cswusa.com

International Christian Concern

2020 Pennsylvania Ave NW, #941,
Washington DC 20006
(800) 422-5441; icc@persecution.org
www.persecution.org

Open Doors USA

PO Box 27001, Santa Ana, CA 92799
(949) 752-6600; usa@opendoors.org
www.opendoorsusa.org

Voice of the Martyrs USA

PO Box 443, Bartlesville, OK 74005
(918) 337-8015; thevoice@vom-usa.org
www.persecution.com

Voice of the Martyrs Canada

PO Box 117, Port Credit, Mississauga, ON L5G 4L5
(905) 670-9721; thevoice@persecution.net
www.persecution.net

comes alive: these men need a tangible, physical, human connection with people. They need to feel the immediate touch of human concern, interest, and love. This is, after all, how God expressed his love to us—concretely, tangibly, coming enfleshed in the person of our Savior, Jesus.

Congolese Covenanters have a saying that speaks of the power of presence: “We know you care about us because you sent money. We know you love us because you came. When you come, hope comes!”

Physical presence carries incredible power and meaning for people. Matthew 25:36, “I was in prison and you visited me,” and Hebrews 13:3, “Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them,” have become much deeper realities for me because of my experience of being physically, tangibly, incarnationally present to Jacob and Martin.

After we had talked and laughed and cried together, suddenly the guards entered the visitors’ area and, with-

out warning, began pushing people toward the exit. I couldn’t believe our time was over already. I didn’t want to go; to leave the presence of these dear friends so soon, after all it had taken to bring me to them. Would I ever get to see them again?

Jacob asked me to pray quickly. We joined hands, and I choked with tears while praising God for the blessing of this experience and for his protection and guidance in these men’s lives. I held each one of them and sobbed, and Bea had to practically tear me away from them—my brothers in Christ.

Looking back, I waved one final goodbye, picked up my passport (it was, thankfully, still there), passed through the little door again, and onto the tram that returned us to the main prison gates. My long-anticipated meeting with Jacob and Martin was over.

As we drove home, Bea and I reflected on the numerous miracles that had taken place that day. It had taken just six hours to make the round trip to the prison instead of eight or more, and

we had ninety minutes to visit with the prisoners instead of the usual twenty to thirty minutes. I recounted everything that God had brought together to make this experience possible for me: airline reservations, extra financial help from my congregation, visas, paperwork, contacts and accommodations through Bea, transportation, prison logistics, and of course the opportunity through BFP to live close enough to Egypt to make the journey to the prison possible in the first place. Miracle after miracle—I was overwhelmed, thankful to God, and for the powerful, effective petitionary prayers that so many people had offered on my behalf.

Jacob and Martin hope to be released soon. They have fines to pay and financial needs for their transportation home to Nigeria. If they are indeed going to travel as missionaries during the coming year, they will have many expenses to make this possible too. Hilmar Covenant will continue to support them, as well as the Christians who remain in the Cairo prison. □



Q: Where do you call when you don’t know where to call?

A: Covenant Resource Center

The Covenant Resource Center connects individuals with resources and information, including books, brochures, displays, “how-to” materials, curriculum resources, sample job descriptions and mission statements, information on ministry trends, Covenant statistics, recommended ministry practices, and much, much more. Our courteous and knowledgeable staff are waiting to help you find what you’re looking for.



Phone 800-338-IDEA (4332)
Email resource.center@covchurch.org
Website www.covchurch.org