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The Voice of the Martyrs Canada

CENTRAL ASIA

Overcoming “Worldly-Mindedness” with a Heavenly Perspective



What Does it Mean to Follow Christ in UZBEKISTAN?

By Floyd A. Brobbel, CEO for The Voice of the Martyrs Canada

"...but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

~ Matthew 6:20-21 ESV

The Uzbekistan government has made gradual changes over the years to lessen restrictions on religious freedom. While many applaud these changes, sharing the Gospel publicly or converting to Christianity remains prohibited. In fact, conducting *any* religious activity without government registration is illegal. Further compounding these challenges, the approval process for registration is slow and many applicants get rejected.

Although the country's Orthodox churches experience less governmental interference, and thus can enjoy greater freedoms than other denominations, those that are evangelical frequently encounter discrimination. Believers belonging to such churches are considered extremists because their religious activities move beyond the private sphere and into the public square. This has resulted in penalties being administered through the legal system. Since the government considers worship services and the evangelizing of others illegal religious activities, evangelicals are

frequently subjected to fines and detainment.

Converts from Islam also endure significant persecution from their opposing families and communities, as well as government officials. And while acquiring a Bible is difficult for most believers, for converts it can be very dangerous to own one. This was the case for Zana who came to know Christ as her Saviour and Lord when she was 30 years of age.

When the wife of a male friend died, and the widowed man begged Zana to become the mother of his five children, she agreed to marry him. However, upon discovering Zana's Christian faith, her mother-in-law reported it to the community's chief leader. The chief, who personally admired Zana because she was a good wife and mother,

implored the Christian woman to keep her faith private. After pleading with him to at least return the Bible her mother-in-law had confiscated, the chief agreed on one condition; that she not share it with others.



Photo: VOM Canada

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After some time of enduring a difficult marriage, Zana silently suffered from the abuse of her alcoholic husband. She became weary of his ill-treatment and the constant antagonism she also encountered from members of their family and community because of her faith. While attending a women's retreat that was sponsored by VOMC, Zana finally shared her difficulties with a small group of other attending Christian women. These women encouraged her to remain faithful to God, her children, and even her mother-in-law. Zana asked the Lord to forgive her for only fixating on her problems and not keeping His eternal promises in view.

As Christians, we all must daily battle against the things of this world that threaten to steal the hope and security we have in Christ. If allowed, the infiltration of "worldly-mindedness" will eventually erode one's righteous convictions and sincerity of faith. Thankfully, this dangerous mindset can be overcome by asking for the Holy Spirit's help with the building of a "heavenly-minded" outlook.

When Zana began to view her challenging situation from God's perspective, she discovered that the members of her family were actually 'gifts from God,' and she desperately wanted them to be freed from the burden of sin and false religion. Acknowledging the blessings of her Heavenly Father, who so willingly provides needed strength, wisdom, forgiveness and favour... Zana asked Him to restore her faith so she could be a light in the lives of her family and friends. In this way, the "treasures" that Zana is laying up in heaven are her loved ones – precious lives that are of far greater value than all the material things in this world.

I pray God will bless, spiritually prosper, and keep you in His providential care as you faithfully serve Him and make Him known to your family and community by sharing His love and, in so doing, brightly shining His light!

Grace and peace,



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The Voice of the Martyrs Canada

P.O. Box 608
Streetsville, ON L5M 2C1
Tel: 905-670-9721
Toll Free: 1-888-298-6423

Email: thevoice@vomcanada.org
Internet: www.vomcanada.com

Founders: Klaas and Nellie Brobbel
with Pastor Richard Wurmbbrand
Chief Executive Officer: Floyd A. Brobbel
Editor-in-Chief: Karyn Marianne
Editorial Assistant: Sarah Gabrielle
Communications Intern: Sarah Yvonne
Magazine Design & Layout: Ampersand

Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise indicated.

Calendar and "Table Talk" pages
Plus, Art Gallery and Retreat ads:
Vanessa Brobbel, Manager of Special Projects,
and her creative team.

The goals of VOMC are expressed in our "Ministry Purposes" as follows:

1. To encourage and empower persecuted Christians to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).
2. To give practical relief and spiritual support to the families of Christian martyrs (Matthew 25:36).
3. To equip persecuted Christians to love and win to Christ those opposed to the Gospel (Romans 12:14).
4. To help believers rebuild their lives and Christian witness in countries where they have formerly suffered oppression (Nehemiah 1:3; 2:5).
5. To promote the fellowship of all believers by informing the world of the faith and courage of persecuted Christians, thereby inspiring believers to a deeper level of commitment to Christ and involvement in His Great Commission (Hebrews 13:3; Galatians 6:2).

Spending of funds is confined to board-approved programs and projects. Each restricted contribution designated towards a board-approved program or project will be used as designated with the understanding that when the need for such a program or project has been met, or cannot be completed for any reason determined by the board, the remaining restricted contributions designated for such program or project will be used where needed most. Gifts from individual donors of \$10 and more are acknowledged and receipted with an official receipt for income tax purposes.



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“Central” in Asia

Report by VOMC’s Regional Ministry Partner

Like most Central Asian countries, Christians in this particular undisclosed nation not only must contend with persecution from the government, but also hostility and ostracization from their opposing family members and communities.

While positive advances have taken place recently relating to politics and religious freedom in some Central Asian nations, life remains hard for many followers of Jesus throughout the region. This is particularly true of more rural areas, which are heavily influenced by folk Islam and administrations that dictate how life should be lived within families and communities. Choosing to follow Jesus under such circumstances is almost always costly.

During a recent ministry trip to one of these Central Asian countries, our mission team travelled extensively, visiting small house church groups in three locations. We found that each of these committed Christian communities shared a couple common denominators: 1) their unquestionable love for Christ, and 2) a tremendous thirst for Biblical knowledge through further teaching. Their steadfast faith and hunger for the Gospel demonstrated to us that Jesus is truly very “central” in the lives of believers residing within this undisclosed Central Asian nation.

Before leaving the capital city to visit those in rural communities, our mission team was given an update on one of our collaborative key projects: providing specialized ministry to persecuted Christian women.

It was encouraging to witness the passion of the dedicated leaders who were facilitating this project, and heartwarming to be reminded of how much they appreciate the help of our partnering organizations in the fulfillment of their vision.

This particular International Ministry project started in 2016 with a small grant which allowed our ministry partners to hold the first two retreat events for women from across the nation. The leadership team has grown substantially since then. By the end of 2023, these ministry workers were able to organize a total of 34 retreats, making it possible to provide Biblical training and discipleship to over 900 registered women.

Bear in mind that due to the nature of this training, a remarkable cascade effect took place – reaching a significantly higher number of people who ultimately benefitted from these retreats. This occurred because the attending participants eagerly shared their newly acquired knowledge when they returned to their home areas. We wholeheartedly believe in the great impact of this project and, therefore, plan to continue supporting it as long we have the resources to do so.

While travelling along the famed “Silk Road,” which passes through this Central Asian land, we stopped to

“Dilfuza’s primary prayer request is that [her family members] would all come to know Jesus as their Lord and receive His blessings in their lives.”



These Christian women must meet discretely to study God’s Word.



“More testimonies from this group confirmed the truth that, although life may be difficult, God is always good.”



Times of worship, teaching and fellowship are necessary in Central Asia for the spiritual growth and discipleship of believers and spiritual seekers.

visit the first of the three house church groups included in our itinerary. Despite meeting in a larger town, which offers some anonymity, security remains a constant concern. We had to approach the location with great care to avoid being detected by local authorities or any suspecting neighbours of the community. Once inside, we were warmly greeted by a group of very enthusiastic women who all wanted to share a little of their life experiences with us.

One woman, whom we'll refer to as "Dilfuza" (not her real name), explained that since her Christian faith was discovered by an unbelieving daughter-in-law, she has become a prisoner in her own home. Dilfuza had been pressured by her son and other family members to renounce Jesus and return to Islam. Because she refused to do so, Dilfuza was forced to remain within the confines of her home. She was only able to come to our meeting by slipping out of the house for an "errand." Still, even though her family members treat her so cruelly, Dilfuza's primary prayer request is that they would all come to know Jesus as their Lord and receive His blessings in their lives.

Next, we embarked on a four-hour train journey, followed by a short flight and a few miles by car. This took us to the second house church. Once there, we were immediately reminded of what it means to know "the joy of the Lord" and live faithfully for Him. It was also an overwhelming reminder of the powerful bond that we all as fellow Christians share, regardless of which part of the world we are from.

While partaking of the Lord's Supper together, we sat crossed-legged around a low table. Pastor John prayed over us before the symbolic bread and wine were passed from hand to hand. Sharing this commemorative ordinance in remembrance of Christ's sacrificial life was a profound and moving moment. Only the Spirit of God can orchestrate such times of rich blessing and unity that transcend beyond our differing national borders and cultures. Indeed, the only culture evident in such moments is that of heaven; something all committed followers of Christ around the world yearn for while awaiting His Second Coming.

More testimonies from this group confirmed the truth that, although life may be difficult, God is always good. Some of those who were present at the meeting had walked with the Lord for many years; others only for a few months. Remarkably, we were the first Western Christians to have visited them, and they encouraged us to return soon!

The next day, a two-hour drive took us to the location of the third and final house church group. Again, it was both challenging and refreshing to hear from these Christians as they spoke of the persecution they encountered from opposing members of their families and communities. Some of these believers had also been subjected to raids by police officers who forcibly shut down their meetings. One of the group participants was previously arrested and fined an entire month's wages. Despite the persecution these believers

experienced, they remained steadfast in their determination to serve Jesus and tell others about Him.

The continuing mandates of our shared ministry to persecuted Christians require that we listen carefully to their stories, and then do our utmost best to equip them with the necessary tools so they can flourish wherever the Lord has appointed them to serve. This is also our focus when providing resources and training opportunities to our in-country ministry workers and the members of their various networks.

Leaders of the underground church often feel poorly equipped for the considerable task before them, and many are also geographically isolated. Apart from the occasional phone call that must be conducted with extreme caution, or visits from more experienced Christian leaders, believers in Central Asia are in danger of becoming dependent on teachings found on the Internet. Unfortunately, not all of them are credible.

To better understand the extent of their challenges, we spoke with “Otabek” who leads a small fellowship in a particularly remote area of the country. Despite being a follower of Jesus for many years, he has had no opportunities to receive any formal theological education. Consequently, Otabek has been left grap-

pling with many difficult questions. After hearing about some of the difficulties facing these leaders, we responded by facilitating three training sessions during a second visit a few months later.

As this teaching visit approached, our ministry partners requested that we specifically address topics relating to “contentment,” “fear,” “tithing” and “the ministry of the Holy Spirit.” The requested topics highlighted the fact that the training needs of persecuted Christians in Central Asia don’t differ from those of believers living in the world’s so-called “free nations.”

As our time with this precious group of Jesus-followers was nearing an end, one of the ladies around the table captured the very essence of our hearts to serve. She joyfully declared, “Through you, we know that we are loved by God!” Indeed, they are very much loved by our Heavenly Father. In fact, each of us are loved immeasurably by Him. To prove this, He sent His Son Jesus to demonstrate the ultimate expression of His sacrificial love. And when we faithfully serve Him by partnering together, we are not only fulfilling His great Kingdom purposes, but also duly exalting Him as our glorious Saviour! 🌍

ART GALLERY SHOWING

THEME: **HEART HEALTH** Matthew 5:8 & Proverbs 4:23

BEST IN SHOW: YOUTH (13-18 YRS) \$250

BEST IN SHOW: ADULTS (19+) \$250

Please send your original artwork submission depicting the theme “**HEART HEALTH**” by 5 PM (EST) on June 10th, 2024. Find more Art Gallery details at: www.vomcanada.com/ArtGalleryShowing.



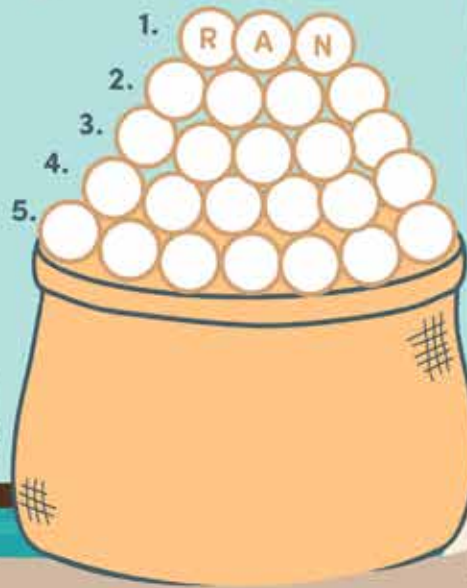
Table Talk UZBEKISTAN

MARKETPLACE MYSTERY!

How to play:

To complete the missing words in each fruit basket, use all the letters of the previous word, plus a new letter. Use the corresponding clue to solve the puzzle. An answer key and printable resources are available at: vomcanada.com/TableTalkUzbekistan

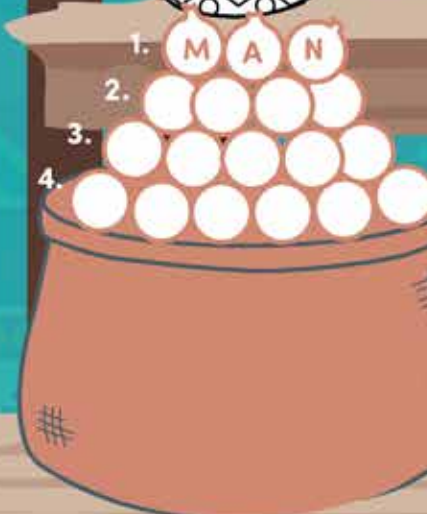
Colour Me!



Fruit Basket 1:

ORANGES
1,000 CŪMs EACH

1. Moved fast.
2. To obtain payment for labour or services.
3. An intense emotional state.
4. Both a fruit and a colour.
5. A common culinary herb.

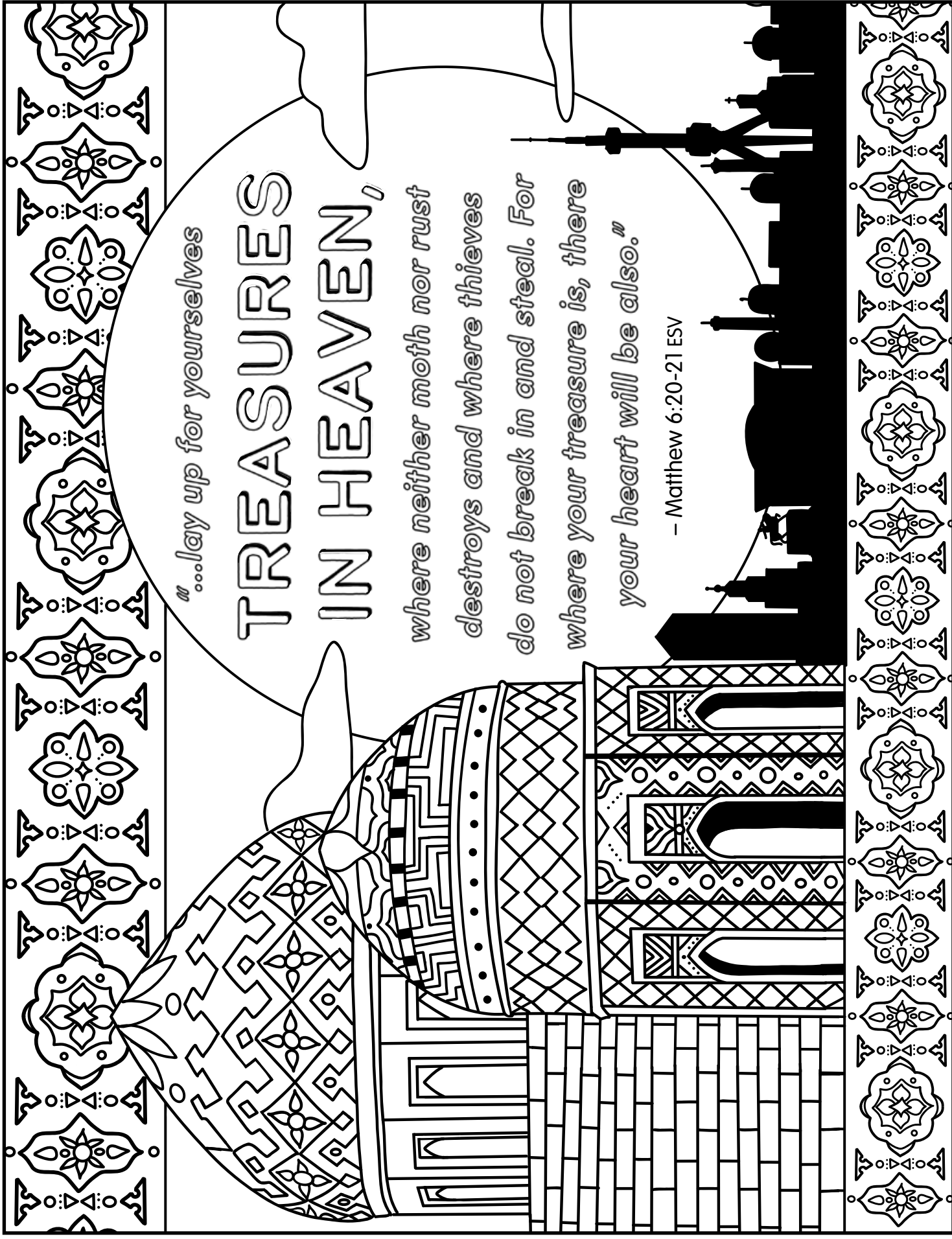


Fruit Basket 2:

POMEGRANATES
1,000 CŪMs EACH

1. The opposite of a woman.
2. A long, low sound.
3. A traveller with no permanent home.
4. A nutlike seed.





"...lay up for yourselves

TREASURES IN HEAVEN,

*where neither moth nor rust
destroys and where thieves
do not break in and steal. For
where your treasure is, there
your heart will be also."*

— Matthew 6:20-21 ESV

His Way "...lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Matthew 6:20-21 ESV

FEBRUARY 2024

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
4 UZBEKISTAN People in this country view Biblical Christianity as extremism. Pray that the conduct of Christians will change this perception.	5 ETHIOPIA Pray for believers like Makda, whose husband and family rejected her for embracing Christianity.	6 CAMEROON Pray that effective evangelistic outreaches will touch the hearts of members from the Boko Haram terrorist group.	7 JORDAN Pray that Christian converts from Islam will be able to worship openly without encountering persecution from their family members.	8 TANZANIA Pray that Bibles will reach people living in the remote Muslim-dominated areas of this African nation.	9 COMOROS Pray that Christians who are imprisoned for sharing the Gospel will be emboldened in their witness.	10 VIETNAM Pray for the healing of Anh, a Vietnamese teenager who was attacked with a machete because of her Christian witness.
11 SRI LANKA Pray that local authorities will grant favour to Christians seeking permission to construct church buildings.	12 SAUDI ARABIA Pray for those who face imprisonment or the threat of death for following Jesus Christ.	13 MALAYSIA Pray for Susanna, whose husband Raymond was mysteriously abducted on this day in 2017 and remains missing.	14 MALI Pray for Jacques, a Christian ministry worker who helps distribute Bibles to pastors in Mali, where God's Word is in great demand.	15 KYRGYZSTAN Pray that the church will provide loving support to those who have experienced rejection because of their faith in Christ.	16 SUDAN Pray for a pastor who was arrested for allegedly "disturbing the peace" after Muslim militants attacked his church.	17 BHUTAN Pray for a spiritual breakthrough to take place in this predominantly Buddhist nation.
18 TAJIKISTAN Pray that as corruption and the opium trade compound the country's difficulties, Tajiks will seek freedom and stability in Christ.	19 COLOMBIA Pray that Christian workers ministering in the country's "red zones" will be refreshed and strengthened at the pastors' conferences.	20 NIGER Pray that Christians who are unable to read will have access to audio Bibles in their native languages.	21 INDONESIA While it is illegal to evangelize in this nation, pray that Christians will courageously share the hope of the Gospel.	22 ERITREA Pray for Meron, Mussie, Kiflu, Kidane, Haile and the hundreds of other believers who remain imprisoned for their faith in Christ.	23 YEMEN Pray that Christians will find ways to help their neighbours who are suffering from the nation's food crisis.	24 CUBA Praise God that the members of Pastor David's church will continue to gather for worship despite their building's destruction.
25 PAKISTAN Pray for the protection and encouragement of Christian converts from Islam, who are often rejected by their families.	26 UGANDA Praise God that Biblically based churches have responded to the rise of radical Islam by reaching out with the Gospel message.	27 SOUTHERN MEXICO Pray that the Chiapas Outreach Bases will continue to bear good eternal fruit in the lives of children.	28 NORTH KOREA Pray for the estimated 30,000 Christians who are serving sentences in prisons and labour camps because of their faith.	29 INDIA Pray for Christian leaders in India, including those whose ministries have been shut down due to new governmental regulations.		



Scan to access
Digital Calendar

Table Talk UZBEKISTAN

WEIGH IN

In the 1960s, the Aral Sea was the world's fourth largest lake. However, because of excessive irrigation, it soon began losing a significant volume of water. Today, the sea is extremely salty and a fraction of its former size.

People in Uzbekistan are known for their hospitality. Guests sit on floor cushions surrounding low-lying tables that contain a variety of food on platters. The small individual plates used by guests are not meant to be loaded, but to function like a party napkin.

The government of Uzbekistan, in an attempt to appear diplomatic, permits religion but requires individual groups to register. Unregistered churches are deemed illegal and, if discovered, attending believers risk severe fines and imprisonment. However, applying for registration exposes Christian groups to the likelihood of being denied and further persecuted.

In Uzbekistan, Christian converts from a Muslim background are commonly ostracized by family members. Ostracism is the intentional act of excluding someone from a social group or activity.



In the past, the area surrounding the Aral Sea hosted a vibrant economy, providing numerous Uzbeks with income. Since the lake all but disappeared, many people have sought jobs elsewhere. What effects would a receding lake have on the life of an Uzbek residing in the region?

Compare the hospitality demonstrated in Uzbekistan versus that which is typically practised in Canada. During your discussion, define and address the implications of individualism and collectivism. How comfortable would you feel eating a meal in either of these ways?

The members of most churches in Uzbekistan meet secretly under the guise of attending a social gathering in order to conceal their Christian activities from the authorities. Yet, despite governmental interference, the Uzbek church continues to grow. Why do you think Christianity is expanding in the midst of such hostility?

Being ostracized is extremely painful for many believers in Uzbekistan. Imagine having to face rejection from your family for following Jesus. Even if you chose to abandon your faith to appease your family, how would this influence your familial relationships in the future, knowing the conditions of their love? Compare this with the value of God's unconditional love.

ONE WAY

The Quran is the holy book of Islam. It affirms the first five books of the Bible, the Psalms, and the four Gospels as the inspired Word of God. However, Muslims believe that the modern copies of these books were corrupted and, therefore, no longer contain their original messages. What is unrealized by Muslims is that strong archeological evidence proves the Bible has not changed. Of all the ancient documents found, 99.5 percent of them confirm the accuracy of the Bible. Any minor differences are obvious slips of the pen, such as slight errors in spelling or grammar.

Inspired by God, the Bible was written by more than 40 different authors over a span of 1,500 years; those encompassing three continents and three different languages. Remarkably, considering these variables, the authors all support, agree and testify to the same unifying theme of God's redemption plan for humanity. While the Bible does warn people of God's coming judgement, it also offers hope and salvation in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Those who trust in Jesus are free from the fear of judgement and can enjoy inner peace (Romans 8:1).

WAY OUT

In the upcoming month, we challenge you to host a dinner party. At the gathering, you can share a cultural dish (*recipe to be featured in VOMC's March issue!*), explore the similarities between Islam and Christianity, and engage in a time of thoughtful discussion. The goal of this evening is to give you a launching point to share the Gospel with your friends and/or neighbours.

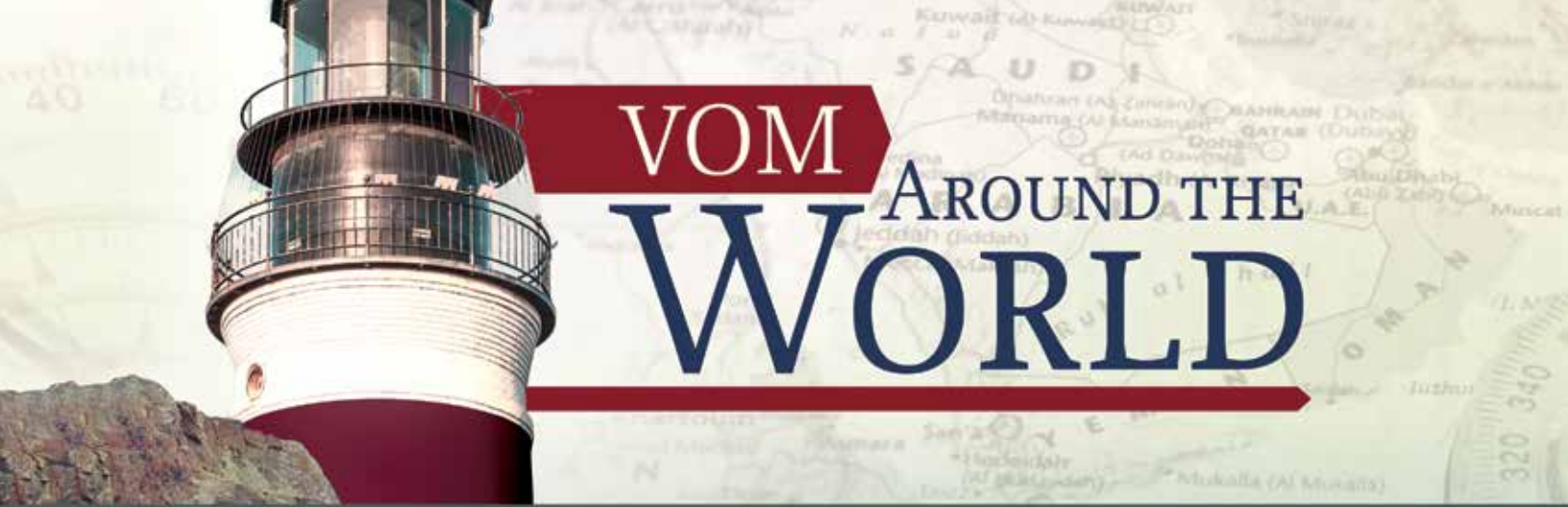
As the first step for this month, we encourage you to create a guest list and send out the invitations. To download a printable invitation, visit: vomcanada.com/TableTalkUzbekistan. In next month's issue of VOMC's magazine, there will be further instructions on how you can make this evening a success.

Recommended Reads:

- *Uzbekistan – Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs & Culture* by Alex Ulko and Culture Smart!
- *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus* by Nabeel Qureshi
- *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh and Sean McDowell

Sources:

- <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/uzbekistan/>
- <https://uz.usembassy.gov/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom-uzbekistan/>
- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/uzbekistan/>



VOM AROUND THE WORLD

“iBIBLE”: Taking God’s Entire Story to the Whole World

Report by Sarah Yvonne

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.”

~ Romans 10:17 ESV

Many people in today’s world do not have access to the entirety of God’s Word. Although there are an estimated 7,000 languages being used globally, the complete Bible has only been translated into 736 of them thus far. In order to distribute Bibles to persecuted Christians residing in many restricted and hostile nations, and to help evangelize their communities, VOMC has partnered with various credible organizations over the years.

We are now pleased to announce one of our more recently developed ministry partnerships which involves the launch of an exciting new innovative distribution project: RevelationMedia’s digitally produced *iBIBLE*! This technically astounding presentation of the entire Bible combines visually stunning animation with the narration of Scripture. Designed as a tool for missions, the digital *iBIBLE* has already been translated into multiple languages with the goal of eventually being distributed to as many of the world’s unreached peoples as possible.

The Story of the *iBIBLE*

In 2016, founder Steve Cleary had a dream that God was calling him to produce a major project for missions: a visual representation of the Biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation. Two years later, Steve launched RevelationMedia. Originally beginning with a small creative team, together they produced the initial episodes of the *iBIBLE*. By the end of 2022, the team had grown to encompass the talents of more than 25 artists who worked from all over the world to assist with the production of further *iBIBLE* episodes in two-dimensional animation style.

In September 2023, a nine-minute video presenting the Biblical story of salvation, titled *The Real Story of Jesus*, was additionally produced. This powerful story was sponsored for translation in over 100 languages – with the goal of completing the entire project by 2033. RevelationMedia’s

vision is to provide the world’s first visual and interactive presentation of the entire Biblical narrative to the global missions community for free.



Article Photos: VOM International

“The next generation is being influenced by social media and online videos, whether we like it or not,” states Steve Cleary. “The only question is, will we provide an alternative to what the world (and Satan) is already offering?”



...continued from page 11

A Visual Bible for a Digitally Connected World

When ministering to people groups that are illiterate or functionally illiterate, or whose language is mostly or solely oral, sharing printed copies of the Scriptures is not always effective. Creators of the *iBIBLE* realized that when there is only an emphasis on the distribution of printed Bibles, many populations of the world are left without any comprehensible access to the entire story of God's Word.

Since over 65 percent of the world now has access to the Internet,¹ and an estimated 85 percent benefit from the use of a smartphone,² providing a visual and audio presentation of the Scriptures is an effective way to reach people who are actively engaging with the digital world. “The next generation is being influenced by social media and online videos, whether we like it or not,” states Steve Cleary.



“The only question is, will we provide an alternative to what the world (and Satan) is already offering?”

Accessibility to the Complete Gospel

The Good News of the Bible spans beyond the four books of the Gospels, as the many individually recorded historical events in both the Old and New Testaments reveal the comprehensive story of God's plan to redeem humankind and restore His creation. Many missionaries are in need of an effective evangelistic tool that will present the entirety of the Bible with the com-

munities they are reaching; those that would otherwise miss out on experiencing the fullness of Scripture.

The *iBIBLE* is an ideal tool for global mission outreaches. It presents the Bible as one cohesive story in approximately 280 seven-minute episodes. Each script has been taken from credible Bible translations,



“The question must be asked, ‘Does God care about the whole Bible?’ And if the answer is yes, then what are we willing to invest to present it to the world?”

~ The *iBIBLE* ministry team



meticulously reviewed by a team of professionals and authenticated by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) as legitimate sources of the Biblical narrative. Altogether, the completed series contain over 10,000 Bible verse references that collectively reveal the full story of Scripture.

A Means of Reaching All Nations

Translating the printed Bible into a different language can take anywhere between 12 to 20 years to complete and could cost upwards of \$1,000,000. And yet, despite all the time and resources spent on the translation work, if the language has a high illiteracy rate, then the translated printed editions will seldom be read. On the other hand, the *iBIBLE* voiceovers can be translated in as little as one year for a fraction of the cost. In addition, through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) technology, subtitles are immediately available in multiple languages. The Internet makes the episodes easily accessible and free to replicate, plus they can be stored and shared via DVDs, micro-SD cards, projectors and more....

Distributions will include the accompanying *iBIBLE* web app, which is to be released this Easter. It contains many additional resources, such as a trivia game, discussion questions, Sunday school materials, maps, timelines, historical details, and other interesting and

helpful features. To increase its expansive impact globally, RevelationMedia is partnering with Christian organizations that are ministering around the world, such as VOMC. These partnerships involve the prioritizing of new translations and the assurance that effective distribution networks are well in place by the time they are released.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit....”

~ Matthew 28:19

Since Jesus commanded His disciples to preach the Gospel to *all nations*, we need to keep in mind that today these nations represent people of about 7,000 different languages. In a rapidly evolving digital age, the *iBIBLE* is a comprehensive tool that will enable spiritual seekers throughout the world to encounter God’s life-changing Word. It is our prayer that as they hear His story of salvation in engaging ways – and in their own language – many souls in restricted, hostile and unreached areas of the globe will place their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and, as a result, experience remarkable transformation and new life in Him! 🌐

A FAMILY — ON A — MISSION



Article Photos: VOM International

After examining a family photo that was hanging on the wall of their home, the invading policeman turned to Zamira with a sneer. “You look pale and skinny,” he curtly told her. “You have to be sick.” Just minutes earlier, the officer and his colleagues had pounded on the door of the Christian family’s home and brandished a search warrant. Ignoring Uzbekistan’s custom of courteously removing their shoes when entering a house, they trampled through the apartment without any previous notice, rummaging through the family’s drawers and closets, as Zamira and her three sons covered in the living room. This wasn’t the first time the police had raided their home, and it never got easier – especially when Zamira’s husband, Atamurat, was away.

By this time, Pastor Atamurat and his family had endured years of intense government scrutiny because of their faith in Jesus and dedicated ministry work. And the continuous stress deeply affected Zamira, causing her depression and the significant weight loss cruelly noted by the policeman. Once again, after making a mess of the apartment, the officer warned Zamira to stop practising Christianity. “All you have to do is be like everybody else,” he reminded her. “Nobody would come and disturb you like this.”

Transforming Lives

As Christians, Zamira and Atamurat stood out from other Uzbeks in their community, most of whom were Muslim and had considered Biblical Christians a fringe sect. Several years earlier, Zamira surrendered her life to Christ through the witness of her mother, who had come to faith in Christ while working in Russia. When Zamira made this decision as a teenager, she knew of no other believers in her town. So, she prayed for a Christian husband, having no idea where she might meet a suitable young man.

During her second year of university, Zamira met Atamurat, who considered himself a Muslim at the time. For two and a half years, Zamira continued to share the Gospel with him, regularly praying for his salvation – right until the time he finally placed his faith in Christ. “I married him the week after he became a believer,” Zamira adds.

After graduating from university, the newly wed couple spent a year attending Bible school before returning to their hometown. Atamurat then began translating the Bible from Russian into their native language of Karakalpak. “All things opened for me when I was thinking how best to translate,” he explains. “It is the best Bible study, in a sense, when you translate [the Scriptures] to another language. When I started to understand [God’s Word], I wanted to immediately share what I had just learned.”

By sharing the Gospel, Atamurat and Zamira were able to lead several of their friends and family members to Christ. Eventually, they formed a small house church that had seemingly gone unnoticed by the authorities for the first four years. However, by 2007, when their church had grown to include about 30 people, the persecution of Christians began to increase.

Police raided the Christians’ meetings with growing frequency, confiscating the cellphones and laptops of participating members before hauling them to the police headquarters for hours of interrogation. The increased scrutiny caused Atamurat and other church leaders to change their strategies. Instead of gathering regularly in the same place, they changed their meeting locations each week, announcing where the next meeting was to be held by word of mouth.

One Sunday morning, when they had no place to meet, Atamurat prayed, “Lord, where do You want

to meet Your bride [referencing their house church] today?” Soon he received a phone call from a woman of the church. Using their code language, she said, “I had a birthday three days ago; please come.” That day, 18 church members met in the home of the hosting woman who also kept track of the church’s accounts. No sooner had their worship and sharing time begun when the police suddenly burst in. As the intruding officers thoroughly searched the home, they found a Bible lesson on the tray of the computer printer. Subsequently, the believers were hauled to the police headquarters and questioned one by one.

As each of the detained Christians waited for their turn to be interrogated, they decided to continue their interrupted worship service while at the police station. “We started singing *Jesus Will Overcome* in our native language,” Atamurat recalls. “We even took an offering because we didn’t have time to do it earlier. I remembered how I had prayed in the morning, ‘Lord, where do You want to meet Your bride?’ It became obvious that [the police station] was the place He had prepared for us.”

In Prison for Christ

That was the beginning of a ten-year stretch of persecution. Then, in 2017, the church faced a major crisis. On the morning of January 5th, police raided their church meeting and arrested the four families that were present. Because prayer requests were posted on the apartment walls, the local authorities fined everyone 40 times the normal amount for an illegal meeting, and then also sentenced the men to 15 days in prison.

Atamurat’s cellmate, who was a member of a banned Islamic group, had never before met an Uzbek Christian. Whenever Atamurat shared stories about Jesus, the man would stand up and pace the cell, asking questions as if he was awakening to the truth for the first time. And when the two prisoners received their only meal for each day, Atamurat thanked God for the food and the person who prepared it. Then, by the third day, his Muslim roommate volunteered to pray, repeating Atamurat’s prayer and closing with the words, “In the name of Jesus.”

The prisoners worked in the fields almost every day,

and at night Muslim teachers came to preach Islam to the four Christians. After determining which one of the four believers would be the easiest to convert back to Islam, the warden had prison guards beat him until his arms and legs were blue with bruises.

On the concluding day of Atamurat’s sentence, the warden called him into the office and showed him three Bibles: one in Russian, the other in Uzbek, and the third in the local Karakalpak language. “You guys say Jesus is the Son of God,” the warden challenged. “This is not in the Bible....” Atamurat thoughtfully replied, “It is!” Then he began reading from First John, chapter 1. When he finished reading the chapter, the warden announced: “This is why we won’t give church registration to you. If we do, many people will want to join you.”



A New Era

The day after Atamurat was released from prison, he met an in-country VOM ministry worker who had arranged for him and his family to travel to a neighbouring country for a greatly needed rest. Years later, Atamurat told the Christian worker how that time away had helped him, Zamira and their three children to recover from the trauma of the ongoing persecution and his imprisonment. Atamurat was one of the last Christians in Uzbekistan to be imprisoned for their faith. Since the country elected a new president, restrictions on Christianity have decreased significantly. Thankfully, Atamurat’s church received official registration in 2020, and can now gather for services in their own building.

Today, Atamurat and Zamira serve as steady, faithful witnesses. In addition to their church work, Atamurat leads a sports ministry in which the players pray before each match, in the name of Jesus. While proclaiming the Gospel in their city is still dangerous, Atamurat and Zamira remain dedicated to sharing God’s truth with their neighbours. Each family member, including their three boys, injects the Gospel every time they interact with others in the community, and their work is bearing wonderful fruit throughout Karakalpakstan. 🌍

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