



# For Me to Live is Christ

COURAGE AND PEACE AMID PERSECUTION

BY JAN BRUNETTE

Nearly suffocating from the intense, 140° heat, university students from Eritrea, Africa, sat in box cars, chained and imprisoned by the government — prisons that held those who deserved no imprisonment. Aster\* was one of those students. Her crime? She belonged to the University of Asmara Christian Students Fellowship (UACSF) which helped sustain the faith of students by organizing events of fellowship, worship, Bible study, and discipleship — training students to tell of the love and grace found only in Christ and His Word.

Aster's story is beyond belief for most of us in America, where religious freedom, although sometimes challenged, does not carry such a harsh sentence. As we walk Aster's journey, we will discover the life which many in today's world encounter.

## HER STORY

In Eritrea, there are two major religions, Christianity and Islam. The Eritrean government recognizes the Eritrean Orthodox Church, the Eritrean Catholic Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Eritrea, and Sunni Islam. Swedish and Eritrean missionaries of the Lutheran Church of Eritrea translated the Bible from Ge'ez (a language only understood by higher clergymen) into local languages. Their main goal: reach, educate, and enlighten as many as possible.

Aster grew up as an Eritrean Orthodox. This "Christian" religion, however, is entirely based on the Ten Commandments — basically no study of God's Word and little taught of Jesus Christ. While in high school, some friends, Lutheran students, shared their faith and love of the truth in God's Word. She began reading the Bible but still had many questions.

While at Eritrean University, God used the UACSF to open doors for Aster to hear the Good News: salvation by grace and the sacrificial love of Jesus.

Like the Ethiopian eunuch Philip met while traveling (Acts 8:26-40), she asked, "*How can I [understand] ... unless someone explains it to me?*" Hungering to know more of Jesus, she began faithfully attending Bible studies. The Holy Spirit enlivened her faith, and His passion became hers. Having walked from darkness to light, she couldn't contain the joy and peace she felt.

Sadly, however, the government began to punish those trying to alter their Orthodox beliefs. Resisting the



*Aerial view of Asmara, Eritrea, an Islamic mosque in the foreground with the Eritrean Orthodox Church behind.*

truth of Scripture, the government closed UACSF, placed their leaders in prison, and listed other members as threats. In time, those on the list were placed in the box car prisons, enduring excruciating heat and dehydration. All were kept in iron chains. Some died. Even with the threat of wild animal attacks, the only positive experience happened in the evening when they were allowed outside — where temperature and air movement were more tolerable.

Spiritual comfort came from each other — an open window of light in the midst of terrible circumstances. *For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account* (Philippians 1:21-24).

Aster knew eternal life was hers. She was comforted by these verses from Philippians, even as she was experiencing them for herself. At the university, she knew learning the Bible was worth the challenges and outcomes. God's love was something she needed to share, even if it meant prison or death. She held fast to 1 Corinthians 15:57, *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ*, and was able to take that comfort to others.

"Sometimes when we pray, we doubt that God is listening," Aster says. "Yet during even our most difficult times, someone in the group would bring us back to reality. We were enduring horrible circumstances, and some were dying around us. Yet, through it all, God was teaching us. We understood Jesus knew our circumstances — the unfair treatment — and He would comfort us and give us strength."

Aster and her companions endured this treatment for about two months. After the international community and the United Nations discovered their plight, the government released them on the condition that they would not hold fellowship meetings. Many members moved to safer locations, while some remained underground, continuing their ministry of revealing the truth of God's Word. It is their passion to do so; therefore ... they do it at the risk of imprisonment or death.

Once released, Aster was forced into the military. She spent the next two months in intensive training, followed by two more months on the battlefield, six months of "proper" military training, and one year in national service. Even during this time, she never failed to witness her faith and love for Jesus.

After this service ended, a brother helped her obtain the exit visa needed to go to South Africa where she continued her education,

completing her M.S. and Ph.D. degrees in agricultural science. The freedom of religion she experienced in South Africa showed her the blessing of Christian friends — even in a different country and culture — when sharing a common faith.

Therefore ... *let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith* (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Through it all, Aster kept her focus on Jesus, recognizing how God's planning and guidance — and even those extreme trials — prepared her to do the work she was, and is, to do. Although frightened many times, she always asked for God's will to be accomplished. She moved forward, knowing her path was dependent on His peace which, like a flood, often overwhelmed her.

Aster was granted asylum in 2017 and now resides in the U.S. with her husband and three children. She will always see herself as an ambassador for Christ, and her story continues to influence many for Him. To God be the glory! **Q**

\*Sometimes showing the Heart of LWML means to provide protection when it is needed. Aster's actual name, as well as photos of her, are being withheld to protect her identity.

Jan Brunette is a Christian author, speaker, and a frequent contributor to *LWQ*. She has written a Bible study (page 20) for this issue which may be used in conjunction with this article.