

Days spent in prayer enabled Brunson to endure Turkish prison

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP)—Two years in filthy Turkish prisons reaped for pastor Andrew Brunson a spiritual “hunger, desperation and running after God” that he hasn’t felt since his release.

“I find that I don’t miss prison. I wouldn’t want to go back,” Brunson told Baptist Press after nearly a year of freedom. “But the conditions there drove me to seek God with such desperation. And now that I’m out, and I don’t have those things driving me, then there’s a lessening, a slackening of that hunger and desperation and running after God, and I actually miss that from prison.

“I prayed a lot more because of that desperation, and I ended up structuring my day around prayer.”

His newly released book, *God’s Hostage: A True Story of Persecution, Imprisonment, and Perseverance*, chronicles his 735-day ordeal that began after 23 years of spreading the gospel in Turkey.

Brunson was arrested in October 2016 solely because of his faith and American nationality, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention concluded nearly two months after his Oct. 11, 2018, release, he noted.

‘A matter of spiritual survival for me’

“The conditions of my imprisonment—the fear and the isolation and the anxiety—they really tested me,” Brunson said. “But what they also did is they tested me to seek God as never before. I was just running after him with desperation, because it was a matter of spiritual survival for me.”

Brunson and his wife Norine had been arrested under false pretenses  that they were being deported to the United States, but their anticipated departure turned into a prison sentence for him on false charges including espionage and undermining the constitutional order of the state. She was released, but his ordeal intensified with 50 days of solitary confinement.

“When they want to break people, they isolate them and they deprive them of sleep. Isolation and sleep deprivation are very potent weapons,” Brunson said. “My body deprived me of sleep because I was so stressed out that the adrenalin and cortisol were just rampaging through my body all the time and I couldn’t sleep. So, I was exhausted and isolated and just going crazy.

“And what saved me in those 50 days of solitary confinement was structuring my day around prayer.”

Brunson used a prayer and Scripture booklet guards mistakenly allowed him to keep, *Prayers to Strengthen the Inner Man* by Mike Bickel.

“Those were like gold to me, those Bible verses, because I didn’t have a Bible with me,” Brunson said. “I would just memorize those and repeat them and pray those Bible verses and then pray the prayers ... and structure my whole day around them.”

Daily battle to conquer fear and anxiety

Brunson encourages pastors and other struggling Christians to hold on to their faith and their calling.

“No matter how restricted you are and how terrible the situation, you have a choice to make with your will, not your emotions,” he said. “But with your will, you make a decision to turn your face toward God and not away from him.”

It was a battle for Brunson that began anew each day, he said, each evening’s hard-fought victory slipping away the next dawn.

“I’d wake up in the morning with fear and grief and anxiety, and I would begin to focus in, fighting through hours and hours,” he recalled.

Recounting his daily struggle, he recalled praying often to God: “I want to serve your purpose and not mine. If your purpose is for me to be in prison for whatever reason, then I want to submit to your purpose and embrace you, even in the midst of the difficulty.”

“And by the end of the day,” Brunson said, “I usually had reached the point of submission and that would bring me the greatest sense of peace that I had in prison.

“Then the next morning I would wake up with the same fear and anxiety and grief. The previous day’s victory did not carry over to the next day, and then I’d begin that fight again, until the end of the day when I’d reached that point of submission, day after day after day.”

Standing on the promises of God

His wife endured the ordeal by standing on promises God had given the couple through years of spiritual service.

“I realized that this was a situation that was beyond me, and I really needed to be pressing into the Lord,” she said. “There are promises in the word (of God), and then sometimes God would highlight some of those for us specifically. I tried ... to claim them, to proclaim them, to keep speaking them out. That’s one of the ways to pray.”

On the week of their arrest, the couple sensed God telling them it was time to come home.

“We didn’t know what it would look like. We didn’t know how, when. But I took that and I kept saying, ‘Lord, you said it’s time to come home, so take us home,’” Norine Brunson said. “Because as Andrew says, when it comes to persecution, there are no guarantees.”