

‘I needed a miracle,’ living Christian martyr recalls

October 29, 2024

As the young Sudanese child of a Christian mother and Muslim father, Mariam Ibraheem never planned to end up in the United States one day, but God had other plans, she said.

Ibraheem addressed a Dallas Baptist University gathering to pray for all persecuted religious minorities, Oct. 24.

In 2014, Ibraheem’s imprisonment and impending death sentence drew international attention and prayer, before Christian Solidarity Worldwide and other religious freedom advocates aided in her release and eventual resettlement to the United States.

Ibraheem was born in a refugee camp in Sudan. Her father died at the camp, before she and her mother left to settle in a small town.

She described her childhood as happy, despite the difficulties. Her mother was warm and generous and well-loved in the community, even though she was a Christian, Ibraheem explained.

Though she was reared in her mother’s Ethiopian Orthodox faith, her father’s Muslim surname created problems for her down the line.

The small town they’d settled in was under Islamic sharia law. She didn’t mind honoring social customs to cover her hair and wear a long dress. But she said what the school taught about Islam didn’t sit well with her, when she looked at the kindness of her Christian mother. During Muslim prayer times tensions increased.

They decided it would be better for her to attend a Catholic school. So,

Ibraheem moved to complete her studies.

A Catholic priest became her legal guardian, a requirement in order for a young woman to secure a dormitory.

The nuns at the Catholic school made an impression on her, Ibraheem said, because they were there not for their own benefit, but to serve the Lord. She said she wouldn't describe herself as converting to Catholicism, but rather as "growing in that space where she was."

It was a formative time in her faith. The Roman Catholic Church was open to anyone who had need, not just Catholics. Ibraheem noticed this openness.

She went on to one of the top universities in Africa to study medicine, graduating in 2010, but she never became a doctor. Doing so would have required her to become Muslim, as Christians faced discrimination and weren't allowed to practice medicine.

Her mom died while she was away at school, but Ibraheem went back to the small town where her mother had lived. Women generally were not allowed to own a business. But townspeople helped her acquire land and set up a farm and a business at the market, she said, because they had respect for her mother.

The day her life turned upside down

She was content in that life, until her husband, an American citizen, returned to Sudan for a visit. While he was there, Ibraheem was summoned one day to the police station.

She thought maybe something had happened to one of the workers at her farm. Instead, it was her half-brothers, who she didn't know, there to challenge her life choices. They claimed she was Muslim and charged her

with committing adultery.



Ibraheem shows the audience the Bible she smuggled into prison, at great cost. She took pages out to hide them as she read. (Photo / Calli Keener)

Ibraheem explained because her father was a Muslim, she was considered Muslim, and it was illegal for Muslims to marry Christians. Because she was considered illegally married, her son was considered illegitimate and under threat of being taken from her to be placed in an orphanage or with Muslim family members.

She tried to explain to the judge she was never Muslim, but the judge would not listen.

She had been advised to say “yes” to everything the judge said, but she couldn’t.

He told her she faced execution for being a Christian, when in the eyes of the law, she was Muslim, she explained. But the judge said he wanted to save her life.

She responded: “I’m already saved in Christ. He saved my life.”

In response to her perceived insolence, the judge ordered her to jail on adultery charges, Christmas Eve 2015. It was her son Martin’s first Christmas, and she had been looking forward to celebrating together as a family.

To prevent the government or her half-brothers from taking custody of her son—because it was illegal for a Christian to be his father—the toddler, Martin, went with Ibraheem to prison, but he would only be allowed to stay

there until he turned 2 years old.

Ibraheem also discovered she was pregnant again during the prison intake process.

She described games she played with Martin in prison to disguise the shackles on her legs, because seeing her in chains upset him. She said she still has marks where the shackles cut into her ankles when pregnancy made her ankle swell.

She also explained people frequently were sent to her in jail to try to convince her to denounce her faith. They would threaten her with taking Martin away and putting him in an orphanage. She constantly was told all she had to do to go back home with her son was renounce her faith in Jesus.

Other inmates knew of her Christian faith due to local media coverage. They threatened to kill her and Martin. Ibraheem said she barely slept in prison, out of vigilance for their safety.

The priest who was her guardian encouraged her to remember she was none of the terrible things they were saying about her. She wasn't there because she was an infidel or a bad person, he assured her. "You're there because you love Christ."

"I knew there was a purpose for what I had to go through," Ibraheem said. She described feeling a peace no matter how things might turn out.

Death Sentence

Her refusal to recant resulted in another charge, apostasy, which carried a death sentence.

Finally, she was given three days, she said. "This is your last chance," she

said they warned her. "After that, you have to face your sentence."

She was near the time for her baby to be born, and the sentence was 100 lashes and death by hanging.



Randel Everett, senior fellow for DBU's Institute for Global Engagement, takes a moment to pray for Ibraheem after DBU chapel services. (Photo / Calli Keener)

"I needed a miracle," she said. "I was praying for a miracle."

She was at peace with whatever happened. But she knew Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and Jesus was in the tomb for three days, so she prayed God might grant her a similar miracle, Ibraheem explained.

At court she was held in a cage, while Martin sat with her lawyers. Ibraheem recalled a crowded room and the fear on her lawyers' faces.

But when the judge told her to stand, "I was looking into his eyes. I wasn't scared," she said.

"The room was very comfortable," Ibraheem noted. And she didn't know why, but "he was sweating. He was scared."

When the judge read her sentence, he said because Islam is a religion of mercy and she was pregnant, her sentence would be suspended to give her two years once the baby was born.

"I got my miracle," Ibraheem observed.

She returned to prison, where her daughter Maya was born. She received no medical care. No one believed she was in labor, so Ibraheem delivered

the baby in shackles—alone except for Martin who was beside her when his sister was born.

When she was imprisoned, Ibraheem did not know about the prayers for her taking place around the world, though at times, she said, she'd felt their power.

Advocates helped gain Ibraheem's release and her eventual resettlement to the United States, where she now lives with her family. She speaks publicly about her experience, continuing to advocate against religious persecution.

Dallas Baptist University's Institute for Global Engagement hosted the two-day Praying for ALL the Persecuted event.

UPDATED Oct. 31, 2024, to note the host and event name.