

Along the way

WRITTEN BY
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"If I were in a persecuted country, how would I live? Could I stay strong? Would I be able to follow Jesus – no matter what?" Lina couldn't help but ask herself these questions as she stared down at the magazine in her lap.

She had just read the story of a young girl named Aashna who was just like her in many ways – 12 years old, parents who loved her and taught her about Jesus, and two younger brothers. Except Aashna lived thousands of kilometres away in the nation of Afghanistan, a place where she and her family are forced to keep their Christian faith a secret.

In fact, Lina read that Aashna's father had been imprisoned for nearly two months by the Taliban (the Islamic militants who rule Afghanistan) after a Bible app had been discovered on his phone. Aashna's father was fortunate to have been released from prison, as many Christians have been detained and executed for merely having a Bible.

Due to severe restrictions on the country's women and girls, Aashna faces many other daily challenges. She's forbidden from attending school, leaving her home without a male relative, and even speaking aloud in public spaces. Most

of all, the lives of Aashna and her family are at risk if they speak out about their faith in Jesus.

While the Taliban seeks to eliminate those who don't follow their strict Islamic teachings, Aashna says that she doesn't feel any hatred towards them. Instead, she knows that the Bible teaches us to love our enemies. Aashna and her family have decided to continue clinging to Jesus, believing that – behind the terror and darkness – there is light and hope.

As Lina thought about her life here in Canada, she couldn't believe the struggles this young Afghan girl was going through. Magazine in hand, she left her bedroom and descended the stairs to her family's kitchen. As she entered, her mother looked up from the book she had been reading and noticed Lina's troubled face. After sharing Aashna's story with her mother, Lina expressed the worries that had suddenly flooded her heart. "I've never been persecuted, endangered or imprisoned for my faith," she said. "If I were Aashna, would I follow Jesus so faithfully?"

With an outstretched arm, Lina's mother motioned for her to sit next to her at the kitchen table. "The Bible tells us in 2 Timothy 3:12 that all followers of Jesus can expect

to be persecuted for their faith," her mother explained. "But God assures us that those who trust in Him can live fearlessly. In fact, isn't it amazing how Aashna and her family have been protected and given the courage and hope they need for each day? Psalm 27:1 points to the Source of this hope: *"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"*

"If I were in a persecuted country, how would I live? Could I stay strong?"

Encouraged by these words, Lina felt a sense of peace wash over her. "Mom, what can I do to help Aashna?" she asked. Opening her Bible to Hebrews 13:3, Lina's mother explained that, as one body in Christ, we are called to remember those who suffer because of their faith in Jesus. "The church is larger than our own congregation and country," Lina's mother said, "and we are spiritually one body with this enormous family of Christ's followers. We can care and pray for believers around the world, including Aashna and other children, who are dealing with persecution on a daily basis."

"Can we pray for Aashna right now?" Lina asked. Taking each other's hands, together they prayed:

"Heavenly Father, we pray for believers like Aashna and her family in Afghanistan, asking that You would protect them from harm, encourage them, and help them to not lose sight of the eternal hope we have in Jesus Christ. May they sense the prayers of their brothers and sisters in Christ around the world and know that they are remembered and loved by their global Christian family. Help them as they endure constant pressures and dangers, so they would know how to best live out their faith in their communities. And help us here in Canada to live out loud the faith that many Afghan believers must practise in secret. Amen."

TABLE TALKS DISCUSSION

- 1. If you could live anywhere in the world, where would you go?**
- 2. What is the country of choice like? How is it different from where you live now?**
- 3. Do you know what it is like to be a Christian in that country?**

WAY OUT

The young girls in the *Along the Way* story have two very special names: Lina and Aashna. Lina's name means, "united, light, a ray of sunlight, beautiful girl." Aashna has several meanings across different cultures: "familiar, beloved, devoted to love, friend."

Think of ways that you can shine your light for Jesus in your school or with your friends. What practical ways can you express your devotion to God? Is there anything He may be asking you to do that would take you out of your comfort zone?