## CONTENTS

Dedication ......................................................... vii
Acknowledgments ............................................... ix
Introduction ..................................................... xiii

CHAPTER 1
Arrested for Preaching Christ ......................... 01

CHAPTER 2
Central Prison of Sofia ........................................ 13

CHAPTER 3
A Father’s Faith .................................................. 35

CHAPTER 4
His Righteousness to Their Children’s Children ...... 61

CHAPTER 5
Enough of That Gospel of Yours ............................ 81

CHAPTER 6
Transfer to Kremikovtzi ....................................... 99

CHAPTER 7
The Search for Truth and Justice .......................... 129

CHAPTER 8
Worthy of Suffering for His Name ........................ 153

CHAPTER 9
A Proposal and Its Price ...................................... 193

CHAPTER 10
Release! ............................................................ 225

CHAPTER 11
Nozharevo ......................................................... 249

CHAPTER 12
The Greatest Reversal of All! ............................... 271

Epilogue ........................................................... 291

Bibliography ....................................................... 293
CHAPTER ONE

Arrested for Preaching Christ

It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

PHILIPPIANS 1:29-30

The only sacrifice is to live outside of the will of God.

AJITH FERNANDO, SRI LANKA

On January 9, 1985, the steel door of Sofia’s Central Prison closed behind me with resounding finality. I would soon be locked in a cell with men who were common criminals. This was the beginning of three and one-half years when every movement and activity, indeed my very life, was rigidly controlled by the agents of a repressive atheistic regime. Arrested for preaching Christ and the freedom to worship under his authority, those years were a difficult time for me as well as for my family. But in the midst of the difficulties, God sustained us with his grace and taught us some of the most valuable lessons of our lives.

Enemies of the State

Let me assure you from the beginning that my imprisonment was not because I had done anything immoral or illegal. As is often the case under totalitarian regimes, Bulgaria’s prisons and mental institutions were used routinely to hold “prisoners of conscience.” A prisoner of conscience, very simply, is anyone who holds views that are different from the state’s and has the temerity to talk about those views.

As pastor of the First Evangelical Church of Sofia and president of the Union of Evangelical Churches, I was someone whom the government was eager to replace with their man. They wanted someone who would cooperate with their plan to keep religion under control and out of sight.

My brother Dimitar was also arrested because he was the treasurer of the Union of Evangelical Churches and because he supported me. Our “violation” was that we criticized the government when they tried to control the pulpits of our evangelical churches. This made Dimitar and me “enemies of the state.”

1 In Eastern Europe, “Evangelical” is used to describe not a theological position but all those churches that are from the “free church” tradition.
The Communist government of Bulgaria had established the Committee for Internal Religious Affairs. In spite of what the Bulgarian constitution says about freedom of religion, this committee removed any minister or church leader it disliked and appointed another in their place. The Committee worked hard to maintain absolute control of the churches. There was nothing it disliked more than our belief that Christ—rather than the totalitarian state—was the head of the church.

The Committee on Internal Religious Affairs had been watching my brother Dimitar and me for many years. We had been routinely detained for harsh and lengthy interrogations by government agents. Repeatedly the hours of questioning ended with accusations and threats of dire punishment. Although the interrogations were stressful and a terrible inconvenience, Dimitar and I were nonetheless able to continue our ministry. But not for long.

The government officials were obviously frustrated that we were not intimidated by their tactics. For some time it appeared that they were hesitant to imprison us. Claiming to be the great protector of the people, it was hard for the government to justify arresting us when we had the overwhelming support of our church members. But seeing that intimidation would not work with us, the Committee ended up sending its agents to force their way into the church and put us under arrest.

Article 274
My arrest took place on the morning of January 9, 1985. Chavdar Penkov was the name of the agent assigned to my case. He was a tall man with black hair and a thick mustache that made him appear older than his forty years. Each time I saw Penkov he was dressed in a two-piece suit, usually black. It appeared that he chose his attire to reflect the higher office to which he undoubtedly aspired.

Penkov separated me from my brother and kept me in the interrogation area of the prison for three grueling hours. His goal was to intimidate me into agreeing that the Committee had the right to replace me. Penkov and I sat opposite one another. He busied himself with some paperwork on his desk, but I could see him watching me out of the corner of his eye to see if I was becoming nervous. I sat motionless, fixing my gaze upon him and waiting for him to begin. Finally, Penkov spoke.

“You will be staying here in connection with your activities at the church located on Vasil Kolarov Street in Sofia.” He paused, watching me intently, hoping to see some sign of panic, looking for some weakness he could use to break me. Other agents stood near the door, huddled in the hallway, listening to our exchanges.
Penkov finally looked away, still shuffling through the papers that lay on the desk between us. “Before me I have the notice from the Chief Prosecutor ordering us to hold you. I want to warn you, Comrade Kulichev, that signing this protocol does not necessarily mean you are guilty; it only states that we have informed you of the charges for which you are being detained in accordance with Article 274, section II of the criminal code.”

Article 274 was unfamiliar to me. Mention of it came as a surprise since I had been threatened with arrest under a different law. During the many long interrogations of the previous few years, one of the agents who questioned me had been Deputy Chief Prosecutor Staikova. Staikova had threatened to charge me with impersonating a minister, using Article 324, which states that it is illegal to impersonate professionals. But now Penkov made no mention of Article 324, which I thought was significant. Perhaps he was aware that my call to preach at First Church was legitimate.

Penkov read Article 274 slowly and deliberately. “It says that anyone who ‘willfully undertakes activities as a representative of society, when not properly authorized to do so . . . and in this manner illegally affects public or personal interests, will be deprived of their freedom for one year or given corrective labor.’” He watched to gauge my response.

Christ Is the Head of the Church
The charge Chavdar Penkov was making against me was very general, focusing upon my being “properly authorized,” which is not as specific as “impersonating a professional.” But I still found this charge surprising in light of the fact that I had been properly authorized as pastor by the church congregation.

Finally I spoke. “I will sign that I have been informed of the charges but not that I am guilty. There is no conceivable evidence you can bring against me that will stand up in an open and honest court,” I asserted confidently.

Penkov smirked. “All that we’re asking is that you recognize the authority of the Committee on Internal Religious Affairs,” he reasoned. I sensed that he was playing to the other agents present.

“They want to remove me and put someone else into the pulpit, someone who will help bring the church under their control,” I countered. The Committee had been attempting for some time to put their own man, Pavel Ivanov, into the pulpit of the First Evangelical Church of Sofia.
“That is their right,” Penkov argued.

“Christ is the head of the church,” I insisted, “not the government. You are well aware that our constitution promises freedom of worship. The Committee wants to use Pavel Ivanov to control the church politically, not to encourage it spiritually.”

“You have been interfering with the life of the church,” Penkov insisted. “Promise not to interfere with Pavel Ivanov and the church, and we could agree to release you!”

“The church has called me to preach God’s Word and to encourage the people in their spiritual beliefs. That is precisely what I have been doing. The vote of the congregation, not the vote of the Committee, authorizes me to be their minister. I will never renounce that call because of your threats. That would be to put my own convenience ahead of my call to ministry.”

Penkov was not at all interested in the evidence to be used against me. His primary concern was to go through the motions of filing a charge. He wanted to satisfy the procedural requirements so that I could be held while Pavel Ivanov was moved into the pulpit. It was obvious we were at a stalemate.

Orientation to Prison
Seeing that I wasn’t going to capitulate and put myself under the Committee’s control, Penkov began the orientation to prison life immediately. “You will be put on a special regimen here in the prison,” Penkov informed me. “You’re to have no contact whatsoever with your family. You will receive no gifts or parcels from them. This applies especially to food. The only food you will receive will be the food served within these walls.”

It had long been my practice to maintain a vegetarian diet, not for religious reasons but simply because I felt it was healthier. I told Penkov, “Please bear in mind that I do not eat meat at all.”

He seemed very surprised and said to me, “Well, I don’t want you to look as if you are on a hunger strike. I will allow you to use the canteen.” Penkov told me that my family, though they could not see me or receive mail from me, would be allowed to mail thirty leva (about $2.50 U.S.) to my prison account each month. This canteen account would enable me to order a small amount of food to replace the meat that I would not eat. Through it all Penkov watched me to see if I was weakening, but I was resolved never to compromise my beliefs or my principles.

Knowing how sensitive the government could be when it came to
the national image presented to the outside world, I informed Penkov
that I had performed a marriage ceremony for a couple the previous
Sunday. I was scheduled to meet the groom that evening to give him
the marriage certificate. Obviously, I wasn’t able to keep the appoint-
ment because of my arrest. Making the point that this man was a for-
eigner, I suggested to Penkov, “If he doesn’t receive his marriage
certificate and learns why I’m being detained, problems could arise.”

This new information caused consternation among the other agents
present, and Penkov huddled briefly with them outside of the doorway.
He finally reentered the room, trying to appear confident and in con-
trol. He announced, “You won’t have to worry about that. Someone
will see to it that the certificate is given to the proper person.”

Everything was taken from prisoners upon admission to the
prison. The only clothes allowed were nondescript prison clothing—a
shirt, jacket, trousers, and underwear—though we were allowed to
keep our own shoes after they were inspected. To prevent suicide, the
prison officials did not allow any type of metal instruments or even a
piece of clothing with a zipper. They also confiscated my belt, which I
wore to treat a herniated disk.

As my clothing and personal articles were taken, I turned over
what little money I had. It was only about thirty lev, but I asked if I
could use it to pay for a telephone call to my wife. “I would appreciate
it if you would call her to tell her that I am being held but am in good
health. I know she must be worried since I’ve been gone for several
hours.”

He’ll Be Staying Here
The agents had obviously anticipated my request to call my wife. One
of those listening in the hallway spoke up. “Your brother has been re-
 leased. I warned him that you would be held. He’ll be in contact with
your wife.” Penkov watched to see my response. The agent’s word
could not be trusted, but I later learned that my brother had indeed
been released—only to be arrested again later.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Yes,” the agent replied. “In fact, I took such great pains to in-
form him about you that I neglected to warn him not to continue his
illegal activities lest he wind up back in here with you!” The other
agents chuckled.

Overlooking his attempt to sound threatening, I pursued the mat-
ter of my wife’s anxiety. “My wife will be leaving for work soon, and
my brother may be late in getting there. Please, won’t you consider
my request again? If regulations don’t permit me to call her, I would
be grateful if you would call her. It’ll take only a minute, and I’m of-
fering to pay for it.”

Since it was already a little past noon, Penkov relented and called
my wife. As he hung up, I thanked him. Penkov drew himself up ever
so slightly in stature and for just a moment seemed pleased. Something
in his demeanor told me he wasn’t as confident as he tried to appear,
that he was a man who desperately wanted to feel appreciated and im-
portant.

No sooner had I thanked Penkov than the telephone rang. As he
began to speak, I realized he was talking to someone familiar with my
case. “Yes, he’s here with me right now. I was working on his case
when you called.” There was a pause. “He’ll be staying here,” Penkov
said with finality before hanging up.

My guess was that Staikova, the Deputy Chief Prosecutor who
had interrogated me on so many previous occasions, had called. He
was undoubtedly interested in finding out if I was going to be coopera-
tive or not. If it was Staikova, and if he was expecting me to agree to
their plans for taking control of the church, he must have been disap-
pointed.

The Questioning Begins in Earnest

When the conversation on the telephone concluded, the agents who
had been standing around the doorway decided to leave. That left only
Penkov and another agent named Vladimir Nikolov in the room with
me. I had thought that the previous round of questioning was the ex-
tent of my “interview,” but there was a surprise in store for me. The
questioning was about to begin in earnest.

“Do you mind if we speak informally for a little while, just as
friends?” Penkov began, trying to charm me with his dark eyes. I took
note of his use of the informal address, only used in the Bulgarian lan-
guage with someone familiar. Until that point he had used only the
formal address. “That would allow us to know one another better and
perhaps become closer,” he wryly suggested.

“I certainly don’t object to talking with you,” I replied, using the
formal construction again. “But I sincerely doubt it will close the dis-
tance between us. At any rate, I certainly hope it won’t bring us closer
than the distance of the desk between us.” Government agents had a
reputation for beating and torturing people, and Penkov couldn’t pos-
sibly have missed the point in my remark.

Penkov looked intently at me, and the atmosphere in the room
changed noticeably. His tack in questioning me changed also. Abandoning the soft-spoken, subtle approach, Penkov decided to get directly to the heart of the matter.

He stood and leaned across the desk, his white knuckles pressing upon its surface. “Do you admit your guilt?” he asked.

Dressed in the faded and ill-fitting prison clothes, with Penkov looking condescendingly down upon me, I was conscious of being at a disadvantage in many ways. It was exactly the way he wanted me to feel, but I wasn’t going to be intimidated.

“No, I am not guilty,” I asserted.

Feigning surprise, Penkov turned to Vladimir Nikolov. “Did you hear that, Comrade? He thinks he’s not guilty!” Chuckling, he turned to face me again, then spoke seriously, “But you know that you’ve been conducting illegal activities in the church.”

“My church activities are all related to preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ,” I insisted, speaking respectfully yet firmly. “We’ve been conducting the same ministries for many years, and I’ve not been alone in leading these activities. There are many fine Christians involved, all of them upstanding citizens in the community. We’ve done nothing illegal.”

As I concluded, the two men glanced at one another. Nikolov had apparently heard enough. Looking knowingly at Penkov, his hand on the door, Nikolov said, “I’ll see you later.” Nikolov closed the door behind him.

Penkov sat back down. Now he and I were alone.

Your Rights as a Pastor Have Been Taken
Penkov suddenly exclaimed, “You don’t have the right to preach from the pulpit!”

“Yes, I certainly do,” I said. “The congregation has recognized me as an ordained minister and has called me to be pastor. Besides, our church is a part of the free church tradition, which recognizes the right of a congregation to invite any member of the church to preach if they feel called of God to do so. The Bible tells us that Christ commands us to ‘preach the gospel to every creature’ (Mark 16:15, KJV).”

Penkov snorted with sarcasm and countered, “I’d be willing to wager that the Bible doesn’t say ‘to every creature’!”

“Do you think I would be so foolish as to twist the words of Scripture?” I said. “Or make up things that aren’t actually found in the Bible? I respect the Bible as God’s Word. I can assure you that those are the words used in the Bulgarian translation of the Bible.”
Penkov paced back and forth. “But you know that your rights as a pastor have been taken from you.”

“No,” I stated. “My ordination has never been revoked, and Pavel Ivanov’s appointment goes against the constitutions of both our country and the church.”

Pavel Ivanov was well known to me. He had been defrocked by his own denomination some years before for adultery. Unscrupulous and ambitious, his servile cooperation with the atheistic government’s agents was the only way he could reenter the ministry. Pavel Ivanov was an uneducated but gifted speaker, exactly the kind of person the government could use in controlling the churches. With the government supporting him, he was transferred to first one church and then another—trouble inevitably following him. Ivanov was serving a congregation in Assenovgrad when I became acquainted with him. We had known for months that he was working with the Committee in hopes of being relocated to the larger First Church, where I was minister. In order to ensure that I was doing what the congregation wanted, I offered to step down as pastor when I heard of Ivanov’s ambitions. My offer was flatly refused by the church. The people of our congregation not only knew of Pavel Ivanov, they ardently opposed his being in ministry—especially in First Church.

**What You Are Saying Is Not True**

“What you are saying is not true!” Penkov asserted.

Now that Penkov had brought up the subject of the Committee’s conduct, I was more than willing to discuss it. The details of their unscrupulous behavior would press home the point that they were violating my religious liberties and those of the church.

“What you are saying is not true,” I said confidently. “My church recognized my calling to preach, and it is a calling that comes from God, not from a government committee. Only the church that has called me can dismiss me or question my right to preach the gospel. That would happen only if I failed to maintain the ethical and moral standards that evangelical churches require of their pastors.”

Penkov fidgeted and adjusted his approach once again. “Is it not true that Mr. Tzvetkov called you and your brother before the Committee to tell you they wanted you to step down in favor of another man? Didn’t he tell you that he wanted Pavel Ivanov because he is more reasonable and cooperative?” Tzvetkov was the Chairman of the Committee on Internal Religious Affairs, which had been investigating our church.
Penkov was forcing me to walk a fine line. I knew that I dared not show anger, which could bring a harsh reprisal. At the same time, I could not appear to be afraid. Penkov would pounce on any show of weakness and probe relentlessly. The best course was to speak respectfully, choosing words that conveyed an understanding of my rights and a firm commitment to maintaining my principles.

“It’s true that we were called before the Committee, but that does not mean that I have lost my rights as a pastor. No written order forbids me to preach. Besides, I will continue to be a minister of the gospel for the rest of my life because God has called me to preach.”

Penkov didn’t respond, and I continued, “When Tzvetkov told us not to return to the church building, it was only an expression of his own will. His personal wishes do not define a standard of justice by which the congregation can be deprived of its rights! The congregation has the right to call a pastor of their own choosing.”

Penkov was growing impatient. “Are you going to force us to document your removal by the Committee?”

“No one has done so up to this point,” I insisted. “But even if you were to give me a written order right now demanding that I cease to preach, that would not be right or just. The church has ordained me, and only the church can rescind my right to preach. Put anything you want on paper; we must still talk about justice. We have very clear laws in our country guaranteeing the freedom of conscience and religion.”

I’m Asking the Questions Here!
For each point that I made, my antagonist had a rejoinder. It made no difference that his reasoning went far beyond the limits of the constitution itself. “Just because we promise freedom of conscience and religion, does not mean that you can violate the spirit of the laws in Bulgaria,” Penkov said forcefully. “And let me say another thing: you can be sure we’re never going to allow your churches to be a country within a country. If we accepted your interpretation of the constitution, it would make it illegal for us to interfere with activities of which we do not approve! Don’t you know you’re living in an atheistic state? By now you should know we consider you ‘believers’ to be enemies of the state!”

“In exactly what way are believers enemies of the state?” I asked Penkov. “Is it by being honest citizens and not lying? We Christians are not thieves or murderers. We seek God’s help in building strong, healthy families. Do you really have any evidence that this is causing problems in our society?”
Penkov didn’t reply, so I answered for him. “No. It’s just the opposite. Since the absence of religious faith has been encouraged by the government, the crime rate has risen steadily all across the land. Your own statistics will force you to admit that there are more people in prison today than at any time in our history. On the other hand, these people called believers, at whom you scoff, are doing their best to fulfill their obligations as good citizens. And you call this enemy activity?”

“I’m asking the questions here!” Penkov loudly interrupted. “You studied at the University and know the teachings of Marxism! Religion and the church have always taken the side of the ruling class. None of you can prove that God even exists!” Penkov was clearly agitated. “In fact, I challenge you to tell me of one person God has been able to help. Can he help me drive a better car than the Mosvich I’m driving? Can he give me more money or a better apartment? You say that you believe in God and that he loves you. If that’s so, why has he put you here in these miserable circumstances? Why is your God allowing you to be separated from your family if you serve him so well? Look at yourself, man! Your family is suffering out there by themselves, and you’re going to suffer here in this prison!”

**Turn Your Life Over in Faith to God**

Knowing there is great power in Scripture, even when speaking to someone who has no faith, I turned to God’s Word in formulating my answer: “The Bible says, ‘It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him’ (Philippians 1:29). In another place Jesus Christ himself said, ‘Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me’ (Matthew 5:11).

“You know that I’m not here as a common thief or murderer. You know I’m not a threat to society. I’ve been arrested solely for preaching the gospel. It frustrates the Committee because I trust faithfully in the teachings of God’s Word even in the face of threats against the church, my family, and myself. As a Christian, I’m willing to suffer for Christ—even die for my faith if necessary. I’ll gladly bear suffering that comes as a result of preaching Christ as Lord. My purpose in living is to bring glory to God.”

Penkov had a strange look of disbelief on his face, but he said nothing.

I continued, “The reason I have no fear of your threats is because

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2 Mosvich was the name of a popular Soviet-made automobile in Eastern Europe, a very common and economical model.
the Bible promises that when Christians witness in Christ’s name, even in the presence of powerful leaders or kings, God will give us the words to say. He will also give us the courage to speak those words.”

To my amazement Penkov allowed me to continue. Expecting him to stop me at any second, I decided to risk speaking to him about his own personal responsibility before God.

“Perhaps God has brought me here before you today to speak with you about eternal life. From the depths of my heart, I feel an urge to say this: someday each one of us will be asked to stand before God and give an account for our lives.

“How will you answer? Whether you believe in God right now or not, the Bible says there will come a time when you will stand before him as he judges you. There will be no excuse for your unbelief, because I’m giving you an opportunity right now. I’m asking you to turn your life over in faith to the God who created you and loves you. Why would you want to continue in your unbelief and risk spending eternity in hell?”

Finally Penkov spoke. Rather than being belligerent, as I expected, he was almost philosophical. “Do you really believe in a life after death?”

“Oh, yes, I do,” I replied. “It would be easier for me to doubt that I’m here before you now than to doubt the promises of God’s Word. The Bible tells us that eternal life is given to those who believe. God wants to call everyone into relationship with himself, but he has given us free will and does not force us. When we die our decision will stand for eternity, and I know that I will go to be with God in what the Bible calls ‘heaven.’”

**Pavel Ivanov Is Our Man**

Perhaps some seed of faith was planted by my attempt to witness to this man. Only God knows what happened in his heart. It was interesting that he didn’t try to refute what I said but suddenly changed the subject away from faith and back to the Committee. “Listen, Christo. Why are you complicating this matter? Why don’t you just make it easy on yourself and agree to allow Pavel Ivanov to take your place in the church as the Committee has decided?”

“The decision of who may best serve the church as pastor is not mine to make,” I responded. “That’s a decision that must be made by the people of the congregation. Churches of the free tradition are guided by democratic principles. It’s been that way for over a hundred years, since the first day the free churches were established in Bulgaria.
Why have you and the Committee on Internal Religious Affairs suddenly decided that it’s time to destroy this time-honored principle? By forcing this man Ivanov upon us, you’re not only attacking these highly respected principles that have guided us well, but you are also raising a question of trust. As a result, our people are asking, ‘Can our own government be trusted to treat us with proper respect?’”

“Do you really believe that?” Penkov responded.

“That’s precisely where the conflict lies,” I answered. “I’ve been preaching the gospel for thirty years, and the people have respected my leadership. I’ve been held in esteem in this church for ten years. My conduct has not changed. Now you’re trying to convince me, after all of this time, that I’m somehow breaking the laws of the country?”

“We’re protecting the public interests,” Penkov insisted.

“Be honest!” I shot back. “Your only concern is that I’ve become an obstacle to the Committee because I don’t believe their propaganda and won’t cooperate with their political objectives. The Committee professes to be concerned about the will of the people, and yet I’ve been removed and Pavel Ivanov appointed without an election! All of this is against the will of the people.”

“Still, Pavel Ivanov is our man,” Penkov said. “We trust him. He will cooperate with us, and you don’t want to do that.” He stood and moved toward the door.

“Certainly not,” I said. “As a Christian pastor, it is not my job to cooperate with you. My responsibility is to do the will of Christ, who is my Savior and the Lord of the church. That is why Jesus said, ‘No man can serve two masters’ (Matthew 6:24, KJV).”

Penkov motioned for me to leave. Finally the long interrogation was over.