Signs of Hope
'Look – in the sky!
A light in the darkness.
A star hanging over Bethlehem!'

Imagine what it was like to be one of the wise men following the star. It was a sign that something amazing was happening. A sign of hope.

In Syria, hope has been hard to find. War has destroyed towns and cities. Power shortages leave people in darkness, unable to cook or heat their homes. With no jobs, parents struggle to buy food and medicine for their families. Many Syrian children are so poor they have had to leave school and become beggars or live on the streets.

Christians have been especially targeted. Many had to leave their homes and live in refugee camps. Some have been attacked or kidnapped. Extremists are trying to destroy the church, so church leaders are in danger.

But Christians have not given up. Open Doors supports persecuted Christians in over 60 countries around the world. In Syria, Open Doors is helping churches to distribute food parcels, fuel and blankets, coats and medicines, provide trauma care and even employment training. Like that star long ago, these ‘Centres of Hope’ are shining in the darkness, and showing where Jesus can be found.

Like the Bible says: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it, (John 1:5).

This Christmas, despite everything, Christians in Syria will gather together to celebrate and sing. Shall we join them?

__ONCE IN ROYAL DAVID’S CITY__

Once in royal David’s city
Stood a lowly cattle shed,
Where a mother laid her baby
In a manger for His bed:
Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little child.

He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all,
And His shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall;
With the poor, and mean, and lowly,
Lived on earth our Saviour holy.

And our eyes at last shall see Him,
Through His own redeeming love;
For that child so dear and gentle
Is our Lord in heaven above,
And He leads His children on
To the place where He is gone.

Not in that poor lowly stable,
With the oxen standing by,
We shall see Him; but in heaven,
Set at God’s right hand on high;
Where like stars His children crowned
All in white shall wait around.

__SILENT NIGHT__

Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon virgin, mother and child,
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar.
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia.
Christ the Saviour is born!
Christ the Saviour is born.

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God, love’s pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth,

__A prayer for Syria__

Lord Jesus, we pray for Christians in Syria.
May the wounded and traumatised know your presence and healing. May Christian communities shine as lights of peace and hope. May peace be established in Syria, and the rule of law be applied equally for all citizens, irrespective of ethnicity, religion or other status. And may all people of violence respond to the love of God and the gift of new life through Jesus.

Amen.

Based on prayer requests from Syrian Christians following a car-bomb in their community.

‘Milad Majid’ means ‘Merry Christmas’ in Arabic, the main language in Syria.

Did you know?
Jina’s husband, Rober, was kidnapped by extremists because he was a Christian. “They told Rober to convert to Islam,” says Jina. “Rober refused and said: ‘I have my God and that’s it’.”

Jina and her son Abraham are supported by the Alliance Church, an Open Doors partner in Aleppo. They receive food aid and fuel for heating.

Jina doesn’t know if Rober is still alive, but she has not given up hope. “My faith in God is very big. I say to Him ‘O Lord as you like, may Your will be done, O Lord, I just ask you to return my husband safe and sound.’”

On our website you can watch a video of Jina and Abraham. You could even spend a day living like them, by using our ‘Be a Sign of Hope’ activity sheet. Watch the video and download the activity sheet at www.opendoorsuk.org.

\[\text{IN THE BLEAK MIDWINTER}\]

In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone; Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow, In the bleak midwinter, long ago.

Our God, heaven cannot hold Him, nor earth sustain; Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign. In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed The Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

Angels and archangels may have gathered there, Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air; But his mother only, in her maiden bliss, Worshipped the beloved with a kiss.

What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; If I were a wise man, I would do my part; Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

\[\text{O LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM}\]

O little town of Bethlehem, How still we see thee lie! Above thy deep and dreamless sleep The silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting Light; The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in Thee tonight. O morning stars, together Proclaim the holy birth! And praises sing to God the King, And peace to men on earth. For Christ is born of Mary And gathered all above, While mortals sleep the angels keep Their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently, The wondrous gift is given; So God imparts to human hearts The blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin, Where meek souls will receive Him still, The dear Christ enters in. O holy child of Bethlehem, Descend to us, we pray! Cast out our sin and enter in, Be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels, The great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.

Luke 2:1–7: Jesus’ birth

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.
WE THREE KINGS

We three kings of Orient are;
Bearing gifts we traverse afar,
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.

Chorus
O star of wonder, star of light,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.

Born a King on Bethlehem’s plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again,
King forever, ceasing never,
Over us all to reign.

Chorus
Frankincense to offer have I;
Incense owns a Deity nigh;
Prayer and praising, voices raising,
Worshipping God on high.

Chorus
Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Chorus
Glorious now behold Him arise;
King and God and sacrifice:
Alleluia, Alleluia,
Sounds through the earth and skies.

O COME, ALL YE FAITHFUL

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant!
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him
Born the King of Angels:
O come, let us adore Him, (x3)
Christ the Lord.

God of God, light of light,
Lo, He abhors not the virgin’s womb;
True God, begotten, not created:
O come, let us adore Him, (x3)
Christ the Lord.

Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above!
Glory to God, glory in the highest:
O come, let us adore Him, (x3)
Christ the Lord.

Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;
Jesus, to Thee be glory given!
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing!
O come, let us adore Him, (3×)
Christ the Lord.

SEND A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE OF HOPE TO SYRIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

1. Cut out the star below
2. Write a Christmas greeting to Syrian Christians (If you want to say who it’s from, just use your first name. And don’t put your address – just put ‘UK’)
3. Hang it on your tree.
4. Take a picture of the message on your star and send it to inspire@opendoorsuk.org

Time for the family

Christmas is a time for the family, they say. But in Syria, families are important every single day. And with so many parents dead or missing, grandparents are especially important. “Abraham is so attached to his grandfather,” says Jina. The pair go together to pick up the food packages at the Good Shepherd Centre. “He always walks with his grandfather,” says Jina. “When he goes to work in the workshop, Abraham goes with him. He also goes with him to church.”
Pastor Abdalla is one of many brave Christian leaders who chose to stay in Syria. His church is a Centre of Hope, supported by Open Doors, and provides much-needed relief aid and medical care.

“We try to focus on the lonely and sick elderly people, the larger families without a breadwinner, widows with no family members around, and families where members have chronic diseases,”

The Centres of Hope also give business training and loans to help Christians. Vartouhi had to close her takeaway business during the war. When she returned she found the building damaged and her cooking equipment stolen. Now she has been able to restart her business.

Vartouhi believes it’s vital that Christians stay in Syria and demonstrate love and forgiveness. “Our attitude must be completely different,” she says. “We as Christians are making a difference in the country.”

“I want to say thanks to you who supported us during the period of war,” says Pastor Abdalla. “We still need your help; we need people to stand with us.”

You can see a video of Pastor Abdalla and Vartouhi at www.opendoorsuk.org
Why follow Jesus?

In many countries around the world you might be attacked, arrested or even killed for becoming a Christian. But, if it’s so dangerous, why do so many people still choose to follow Jesus?

Because we all need love
Magid from Egypt lost his wife, his brother and other relatives when a suicide bomber blew himself up at their church. “It’s not easy to take care of two children on my own, but God gives me peace,” he says. Magid’s faith shows that love is stronger than bitterness or anger. “He is very kind, forgiving and peaceful,” says his daughter. “He has a lot of love inside, and he teaches me how to love others too. I want to be like him when I grow up.”

Because we all need joy and peace
Lina in Syria became a Christian after reading the Bible. “The Bible speaks of forgiveness and healing,” she says. “I’ve always been afraid, alone and angry. After I became a Christian, my heart was filled with joy and peace.”

Because we all need God with us.
Rachel* was arrested for leading an underground church in Iran. In prison, she dreamt of a Bible verse: ‘He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him.’ (John 1:10). After that, she says, “I felt that God went with me everywhere I went.” A fellow prisoner asked her, why she was making life so hard for herself and why she didn’t just give up. “Jesus is real, and he changed my heart,” Rachel replied. “He is worth everything.”

We all need love, joy and peace. The message of Christmas is that God is with us. So wherever you are, whatever the darkness surrounding you, this Christmas, may you see a sign of hope.

*name changed for security reasons

Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King.
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing

Joy to the world, the Saviour reigns!
Let men their songs employ
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat the sounding joy,
Repeat, repeat, the sounding joy.

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness
And wonders of His love,
And wonders of His love,
And wonders, wonders, of His love

Could you be a star?

“We need to encourage the Christians to stay in this land,” says Pastor Abdalla. “We want to stand next to the people and help them.” Will you help to bring hope to those in need in war-torn Syria?

★ Every £7 could give a supplementary food pack to a Syrian believer that will feed them for a month.
★ Every £24 could provide medical care for a believer in Syria for a month.

Christians in Syria need our help to survive. You can give online at www.opendoorsuk.org/syria.

ABOUT OPEN DOORS

Open Doors supports persecuted Christians in more than 60 countries around the world, supplying Bibles, training church leaders, providing practical support and emergency relief, and supporting Christians who suffer for their faith. In the UK and Ireland, Open Doors works to raise awareness of global persecution, mobilising prayer, support and action among Christians.