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TÜRKIYE

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TÜRKIYE

IF THE APOSTLE JOHN WERE STILL WRITING LETTERS

Written by teeth, Amy, Enoch, Tess, Yein Yein Edited by Joan

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Buried So It May Sprout Again

Türkiye has never been simply "another" Muslim-majority country. It is not part of the Arab world, yet for more than six centuries, the Ottoman Empire ruled over vast stretches of the Muslim world across Europe, Asia, and Africa. Türkiye no longer holds the position of leadership it once did, but it continues to see itself as an influential voice in the Muslim world, speaking out for Palestine and taking an active role in issues affecting Muslims in the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Africa.

The country is like a doorway. At the Bosphorus, Asia lies on one side and Europe on the other. This narrow strait divides Istanbul between its European and Asian sides, making it a metropolis that straddles two continents. Its unique geography reminds us not to view this land through a single lens.

Yet beneath the strong Islamic character of Türkiye today lies another, older and deeper layer of its past. This is a land that once witnessed the beautiful feet of those who brought good news, the urgency of apostles defending the truth, the fear of Christians fleeing persecution, and the declaration of an old man before his martyrdom, words that still echo today.

Where the Faith Has Deep Roots

It would be a mistake to think of Türkiye simply as a place in need of the gospel. Take İzmir, for example. While traveling there, you may meet local Christians and find yourself asking, "There are Christians in a country as strongly Islamic as Türkiye? How unusual. How long has your church been here? Which missionary first led you to faith?"

The brothers and sisters you meet might exchange a smile and reply, "The apostle John or Paul, depending on how you look at it. Polycarp, one of our early spiritual forebears, was a disciple of the apostle John, and the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where Paul taught, is only about fifty kilometers from here. And by the way, İzmir was once called Smyrna. It was the church in Revelation that Jesus exhorted to 'be faithful, even to the point of death.' We have suffered greatly, and we are still suffering, but we have remained faithful. How long has your church been around?"

Türkiye's Deep Connection with Christianity

Türkiye is also a land where the Christian faith took shape. All seven of the early church's major ecumenical councils were held within the borders of present-day Türkiye. Followers of Jesus gathered here to articulate clearly that the Christ we believe in is not merely a great prophet or a moral example, but "true God from true God." The creeds that generations of Christians would go on to recite were not abstract theological statements. They were shared confessions of faith, gradually forged through debate, persecution, confusion, and worship.

If, even after reading this far, you still find it difficult, as I do, to associate "Türkiye" with "Christianity," don't worry. That is perfectly understandable. If we imagine the history of the church in Türkiye as alternating between seasons above ground and seasons underground, then we simply happen to be encountering it in an underground season, much as Christians here have experienced before.

Amo Journey on Unsplash

When the Church Worshiped 'Underground'

There was a time when hiding was part of life for the church in Türkiye. Christians really did gather beneath the ground to worship God. There were no grand church buildings, no freedom to raise their voices in worship, only hushed sounds echoing softly against walls of stone. Much like today.

Then the church emerged above ground.

In Constantinople rose magnificent domed churches that still inspire awe today. Christianity moved into the heart of the city, into imperial ceremony and public life. A faith that had once waited quietly underground suddenly stood at the center of the world, with the cross raised high beneath the dome. It was a moment of splendor that could never be recreated, but also one in which the boundaries between faith and power began to blur.

Then history turned again.

Empires came and went. Cities took new names. Beneath those same domes, a different form of worship began to be heard. Christian communities gradually diminished, and in many ancient cities, little remained but ruined walls and newly erected signs telling visitors what had once stood there. The church seemed to have disappeared, leaving behind history for tourists to explore and ruins for them to photograph.

But perhaps ruins are not the end.

Perhaps the story of the church in Türkiye has simply gone underground once again. Not into the same caves or behind the same stone walls, but marked by the same quiet faithfulness: small, hidden, and easily overlooked.

Musa Ortac on Unsplash

The gospel traveled from Jerusalem to Antioch, from Antioch into Asia Minor, and from Tarsus toward Rome. And the gospel can also remain quietly beneath the surface, like a seed buried in the earth, waiting to sprout again in the very places where we thought it had disappeared.

Perhaps the churches that remain in Türkiye are not fading remnants of the past, but a hallelujah whispered ever so softly before revival comes again.

The First Time We Had a Name

Antioch

My dear children, I sit in the fading light of Ephesus and think back to the stones that flew in Jerusalem many years ago. Stephen fell, and his martyrdom scattered us like a sudden wind from our homes. We fled to Phoenicia, to Cyprus, and to Antioch, the city known as the "Queen of the East." Our feet had carried us beyond the city gates, yet our hearts were still confined by the boundaries of "clean" and "unclean." It was only when unnamed believers came from different places to Antioch and proclaimed the Lord that we began to understand: the life God gives makes no distinction between Greek and Jew.

Have you ever seen Antioch? Its markets bustle with noise, the fragrance of spices fills the air, and beneath your feet are intricate mosaics of red ochre and olive green. Yet to me, the most beautiful mosaic is not the one beneath our feet, but the faces gathered in the Cave Church of St. Peter. Once, people mocked us as "the Nazarene sect" or "those followers of Christ." But there, whether Jew or Greek, we were given one name to share: Christians.

Centuries passed. Then the devastating earthquakes of 2023 left the city scarred. Historic places of worship were reduced to rubble, and communities were scattered. The city once called the "Queen of the East" is now struggling to rebuild amid the roar of excavators. After the earthquake, the few remaining members of Antioch's ancient Jewish community left the city, bringing to a close a Jewish presence that had endured there for more than two millennia.

Heavenly Father, thank You that it was in Antioch that Your people were first given the name "Christians," and that from there You opened the way for the gospel to go out among the Gentiles. We ask You to pour out Your grace on this land once again. Amid the dust of rebuilding, may its people hear Your call and receive life from above. May the people of Antakya[1] see more than history among the ruins. May they truly encounter the Lord who became flesh and came near to us. Watch over those scattered by the earthquake. May Your Holy Spirit cross every boundary, keeping them united in Christ and enabling them to continue being salt and light wherever they now live. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

1 The ancient city of Antioch is now known as Antakya.

A Letter from the Apostle John

Ephesus and the Seven Churches

My dear children, I stand on the rocky shores of Patmos, gazing across the sea toward Asia Minor. The seven golden lampstands that once shone in my vision can still be traced across the map today.

Ephesus, you were once a thriving port, but silt has long since turned the land around you into an inland plain. The acropolis of Pergamum still rises high above the streams of visitors below, while the broken columns of Thyatira are now surrounded by the bustle of a modern city. Do you three cities still remember the Lord's words to you? Even amid hard work, do not forsake your first love. Even amid freedom, do not compromise with the world.

I look toward Sardis, where the prosperity that once rang with the sound of gold coins has long since returned to dust. I look also toward Laodicea, near the thermal springs of Pamukkale, and think of water that is neither hot nor cold. As I look at you both, I see how easily spiritual life can fade, whether into lifelessness or lukewarm complacency, and still Jesus stands at the door and knocks.

Smyrna, beneath the modern city and its bustling harbor, I still remember how precious you were in the midst of affliction and poverty, and the Lord's promise to give you "the crown of life." And Philadelphia, the Lord once set before you an open door that no one could shut because you had remained faithful. Are only a few massive stone columns left now, keeping lonely watch beneath the blazing sun of Alaşehir?

This is not a land disconnected from the Bible. It is a land that was once warned, comforted, rebuked, and encouraged. Two thousand years ago, seven letters crossed the sea to reach these churches. Two thousand years later, when the knock sounds once more, who will open that long-closed door?

Heavenly Father, You are the One who walks among the golden lampstands and searches every heart. Send Your Holy Spirit to awaken Your church today. Help us return to our first love and remain faithful even in the midst of suffering. May Your word, like a double-edged sword, cut away worldliness and compromise from Your church. Wake us when our faith has grown lifeless, and free us from the complacency that makes us lukewarm. Open our eyes so that we may seek from You gold refined in the fire and discern Your heart. Strengthen also the churches that are facing trials today. Help them hold fast to Your word with patient endurance and become victorious, sharing in the victory You have promised. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Praise Among the Rocks

Hidden Believers

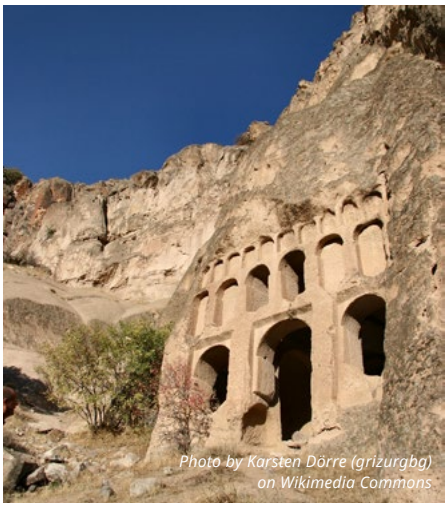


Photo by Karsten Dörre (grizurgbg) on Wikimedia Commons

Candlelight flickers across the walls, casting shadows over the rough-hewn rock and tracing the faint outline of a cross. There is no choir, no organ, only voices kept low, drifting softly through the depths of the cave. This is no church building. It is simply the one place where they can worship. Scenes like this unfolded in Cappadocia more than a thousand years ago. And somewhere beyond our sight, something similar may still be happening today.

Cappadocia lies in central Türkiye, a landscape filled with volcanic tuff, soft when first carved but gradually hardening once exposed to the air. Beginning around the fourth century, Christians carved homes, churches, and shelters into the rock. In later centuries, as Byzantine and Arab forces repeatedly fought over the region, Christians retreated underground for safety, carving out hidden cities with their own hands. There they worshiped, lived, and sought refuge from danger. These underground spaces continued to be used at different times over many centuries, preserving traces of Christian life deep beneath the earth. Long after many of them had fallen out of use, entire underground complexes were brought back to public attention, revealing chambers, passageways, frescoes, and Christian symbols that had remained hidden for generations.

Christians today make up only 0.2% of Türkiye's population. Some practice their faith quietly, and in places with no established church community, even gathering with other believers may be difficult. Their hiddenness can feel strangely reminiscent of those small flames once sheltered within Cappadocia's stone walls.

Heavenly Father, remember our brothers and sisters in Türkiye who seek You quietly and out of sight. Some may have no place to gather. Some may not feel free to speak openly about their faith. Some may face pressure from society, family, or friends. Be their refuge and their stronghold. Set before them that "open door that no one can shut," and let them behold Your glory even in hidden places. Strengthen their faith and give them courage, so that the praises that once echoed through caves of rock may continue to rise from this land. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

The Imperial Dome Still Stands

Constantinople

Hagia Sophia

Push open the heavy Imperial Gate and step into the main hall of the Hagia Sophia. At the base of its 55-meter dome, forty windows are set close together. When sunlight pours into the building, the light blurs the structure holding up the dome, as if a "golden chain were hanging down from heaven."

When Hagia Sophia was completed in AD 537, it stood as the crowning glory of imperial Christianity in Constantinople. Every shaft of light pouring through its dome seemed to proclaim the kingship of Christ on earth. Resounding chants, silk vestments, clouds of incense: here, imperial power, architectural ingenuity, and sacred faith were woven together on a breathtaking scale. Yet the tides of history never stand still. Constantinople fell in 1453, bringing the Byzantine Empire to an end. Centuries later, the city came to be known officially and internationally as Istanbul.

Today, the Muslim call to prayer sounds where ancient hymns once rose, while golden mosaics that lay silent beneath layers of plaster for centuries still bear witness to another age. Istanbul carries within it the glory and loss of successive empires, and with them something of what Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk calls hüzün: a deep, shared melancholy that seems to linger over the city. Yet God is not confined to weathered stone or to chapters of history long past. Amid the noise of the streets and the rhythms of worship, this city still needs to hear His voice.

Heavenly Father, we have seen empires rise and fall, but the promises of Your kingdom never fail and never change. Have mercy on those who pass Hagia Sophia each day. May they see more than a magnificent monument and be stirred by Your Spirit to seek the Lord behind the light that fills its dome. In this city, where history, tourism, religion, and politics overlap at every turn, may people still truly encounter Christ. Strengthen and protect the small, often hidden communities of believers who gather here today. Give them wisdom and courage to live faithfully amid the many voices around them, bearing witness to the eternal hope they have in You. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

When Debate Became a Shared Confession

The Nicene Creed

An icon depicting the First Council of Nicaea, with the church fathers gathered around Emperor Constantine, who holds the creed.

In AD 325, under the summer sun of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine summoned bishops from across the Roman world, men who did not all see the questions before them in the same way. They gathered for an intense and serious debate over one of the deepest questions of the Christian faith: Who is Jesus, and what is it that we believe about Him?

Those who defended what would become the Nicene position confessed that the Son is truly God, "true God from true God," of one being with the Father. Arius and his supporters taught instead that the Son, though exalted above all other creatures, was himself created and therefore not equal with the Father. The controversy continued for decades and became so intense that theological debate spilled into everyday life. In an Eastern Roman world deeply shaped by Greek philosophy and passionate about debate, even an attendant at the public baths might earnestly ask, "Do you believe the Son was created?" To modern eyes, the debate may look like theological politics. Yet only a generation earlier, many bishops had suffered persecution for refusing to worship the Roman gods. For them, this was a faith worth dying for, not one to be blurred or compromised.

In the end, nearly all the bishops accepted the Nicene Creed, though the debate continued for decades. Through those years, the church distilled its love, reverence, and trust in Christ into a confession believers could speak together. Each "I believe" carries immense weight. It reaches beyond reason, beyond a single lifetime, beyond time itself, and becomes part of an enduring act of worship in which believers across generations join in loving and confessing Christ as Lord.

Heavenly Father, teach Your church today to remain rooted in both truth and love. Do not let us become people who know how to defend a position but have lost our love for Christ, nor people full of passion without truly knowing You. Like the early church, teach us to know You more deeply as we discern what is true, and as we come to know You, give us the courage to confess together: "We believe." Remember also this land where the church once wrestled to put its confession of faith into words. May those who live here today encounter more than the memory of ancient councils. May they encounter the Lord whom generations of believers devoted themselves to knowing, confessing, and loving. And amid pressure and loneliness, may the small community of believers in Türkiye still say with love and faith: We believe. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Called to the Nations

From Tarsus to the Nations

Photo by Minamie's Photo on Flickr

Tarsus rarely stands out among the great cities of Christian history. It does not carry the sacred significance of Jerusalem, the missionary fervor of Antioch, or the historical prominence of Constantinople. Yet in southern Türkiye, God was preparing a man who would one day go out to the nations and leave a lasting mark on the history of the church: Paul.

Paul was born in Tarsus, a Greek-speaking Jew shaped by more than one culture and carrying more than one identity. He thought he knew who he was and where he belonged, until God met him on the road to Damascus and called him beyond the world he knew, toward the Gentiles. From then on, Tarsus was more than just his hometown. It became the starting point of a life that would carry the gospel far beyond its borders.

Türkiye still bears a rich Christian heritage today, but we cannot look only at what once existed here. We must also ask: Who might God send out from this land today? The church in Türkiye may be small, but our hope is that this will not remain merely a land of Christian history. May it once again become a land that sends. May the church here do more than remember that Paul came from this land; may it take its place in the mission story God is still unfolding today.

Heavenly Father, Your Spirit once moved powerfully in this land, and we ask You to move again. Stir hearts once more with Your call, and raise up a new generation willing to respond, whether they come from great cities or small towns, from places marked by the remains of ancient churches, or from among those who have never heard Your gospel. When they hear Your voice, send them out. Like Paul, may they not be defined by where they come from or confined by their circumstances, but by Your grace go to the nations You have prepared. Strengthen the church in Türkiye today, so that it may not only hold fast to the faith, but also become a church that sends, supports, and intercedes, joining You in Your work. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

The Street Cats of Istanbul: Right at Home in Every Alley

Get a "Cat's-Eye View" of Istanbul

In Türkiye's largest city, some 16 million people make their lives in a crowded urban landscape. But they share the city with another large population of "residents." Unlike the people rushing to make ends meet, these residents seem completely at ease, wandering freely through streets and alleys as though they own the place.

They are Istanbul's street cats. Estimates range from around 125,000 to 250,000, and with household pets included, the city's feline population may reach as high as one million. Wherever they go, they are welcomed, cared for, and often thoroughly spoiled. They are simply part of the fabric of Istanbul, which is why some affectionately call the city "Catstanbul."

This time, we've invited one of Istanbul's well-known street cats, Tombili, to be our guide through the city's past and present. As we follow him through streets and alleys, we'll move from history and historic sites to religion, markets, bathhouses, and even the family dinner table, getting a closer look at the lives and needs of the people who call Istanbul home. May our prayer walk be a blessing to this city and its people.

Cats Know These Alleys Best

Istanbul Through a Street Cat's Eyes

I'm one of Istanbul's street cats. In the morning, I wander around Topkapı Palace. By noon, I'm at Hagia Sophia. In the afternoon, I slip into the Grand Bazaar, then sneak across to Çemberlitaş Hamamı, a bathhouse that has been here for nearly five centuries. By evening, I'm sitting in Sultanahmet Square, thinking about the Hippodrome of Constantinople that once stood beneath my paws. Nearby are the Mausoleum of Ahmed I and the Sultan Ahmed Mosque, better known as the Blue Mosque. A little farther away is the Basilica Cistern, where two enormous Medusa heads sit beneath columns, one sideways and one upside down. I don't like them.

One cat's life is not much compared with Istanbul's nearly 2,700 years of history. Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, all those empires have come and gone. I don't really understand any of that. What I do understand is dinner. By nightfall, the shops may be closing, but I have no intention of competing with Istanbul's thousands of other street cats for mice. People have already fed me all day. Cats have long held a special place in the city's culture, shaped in part by Islamic traditions that regard them as clean animals and encourage kindness toward them. In Ottoman times, there were even professional animal feeders known as mancacı, who regularly fed stray animals such as cats, dogs, pigeons, and horses. Animals were also protected through various laws and charitable practices.

There is also an old saying in Istanbul that if you kill a cat, you would have to build a mosque to earn forgiveness. Whether or not anyone takes that literally, I think it proves my point: cats may be Istanbul's most enduring residents.

Heavenly Father, through the rise and fall of Istanbul's empires, may the people of Türkiye see that even the strongest kingdoms eventually collapse and even the most glorious ages fade. May they come to understand that nothing in this world endures forever, and turn to seek You, the everlasting God. Drench the furrows of Türkiye, level its ridges, soften the earth with rain, and bless what springs from it. May the wilderness and the dry land rejoice; may the desert be glad and blossom like the rose. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Words Light Up the Night

Istanbul's Mahya Lights

Photo by Uğur Başak on Wikimedia Commons

It's Ramadan. Night has fallen, and I'm out wandering again. Between the minarets, the mahya[1] lights are glowing. What a sight!

Mahya is an Ottoman tradition that goes back centuries. During Ramadan, strings of lights are hung between mosque minarets to form words and phrases about fasting, prayer, charity, unity, and compassion. Some read, "Welcome, Sultan of Eleven Months," a traditional way of honoring Ramadan as the most important month of the Islamic calendar. Others simply say, "Ramadan Is Sharing."

The older cats tell me that mahya messages have changed with the times. In the early years of the Turkish Republic, they sometimes displayed words and slogans such as "Atatürk,"[2] "Save Money," "Gambling Ruins Lives," "Buy Local Goods," "Care for Orphans," and "Morality Is the Foundation of Religion." Once formed with rows of oil lamps, mahyas are now made with electric bulbs and LEDs, shining brighter and farther across the night. They are lit at sunset, when the day's fast comes to an end, and remain glowing until dawn, quietly reminding the city that Ramadan is a sacred month.

On the final night of Ramadan, the words Elveda ya Şehr-i Ramazan appear between the minarets: "Farewell, O Month of Ramadan." The sight stirs many emotions. The craftsmen who hung the lights feel they have completed a sacred task. Passersby look back on what the month of fasting has meant to them. Devout worshipers enter the mosque feeling renewed strength from Allah. With gratitude and peace, they prepare to welcome Eid al-Fitr.

1 Mahya refers to illuminated words or designs hung between mosque minarets, sometimes poetically described as "writing in the sky."

2 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was the founder of the Republic of Türkiye, established in 1923.

Heavenly Father, You are the Light of the world, and the nations will come to Your light. When darkness covers the earth, when deep darkness covers the peoples, shine upon them. May the people of Türkiye see more than the lights of a sacred season and encounter the true Light who shines in the darkness, Jesus Christ. May Your word run freely throughout Türkiye, unhindered and unbound. Open the eyes of their hearts by Your Spirit, that they may receive the salvation and eternal glory found in Christ Jesus. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Stay For Tea

The Warmth of Turkish Hospitality

Photo by Ankara'dan on Flickr

It's cold today, and I'm curled up outside a shop. Then I see the owner wave someone in, bring out the tea, and settle down for a long conversation. In Türkiye, there is hardly a wrong time for tea. It comes with breakfast, after meals, in the middle of a busy day, or whenever two people happen to meet and feel like talking. Somehow, a cup of çay (Turkish for "tea") always seems to bring people together.

I love watching people make tea. At home, black tea is often brewed in a double teapot called a çaydanlık. Water boils in the lower pot, while the smaller upper pot, the demlik, holds a strong tea concentrate. Each person can then make their tea as light or as strong as they like. Turks like their tea freshly brewed and piping hot. It may be served in tulip-shaped glasses[1], enameled ceramic cups, porcelain cups, or silver cups, often with sugar, lemon slices, jam, or dried fruit.

Tea is part of Istanbul's street life too. In the Grand Bazaar, young servers weave between shops carrying round trays of steaming glasses. Along the streets, tea shops offer all kinds of flavors, from apple and bergamot to cinnamon and pomegranate. And in a çay bahçesi, or tea garden, people sit beneath the trees, away from the rush of the city, talking for hours. Not a bad life, if you ask me.

The moment tea is poured, the mood seems to soften. "Come, have some tea first." It is a small gesture, but it carries warmth, welcome, and hospitality. Tea can ease a business conversation, open the way for friendship, or simply give people a reason to linger a little longer. Refusing an offered glass may even feel impolite. No wonder tea has become such a strong part of cultural identity in Türkiye.

1 The tulip, or lale, is the national flower of Türkiye.

Heavenly Father, You tell us to "offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:9), because hospitality is one way we learn to love. Your word also reminds us that some, by welcoming strangers, have "shown hospitality to angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). Teach us to build genuine relationships with the people of Türkiye through hospitality, and to receive their warmth with gratitude as we sit and share tea together. Help us cross barriers of ethnicity, language, and culture so that Your love may be made known through the way we welcome, listen, and share life with one another. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Cleansing, Reflection, and Connection

Turkish Hammams

Photo by smkays2 on Flickr

A Turkish hammam is more than a place for steam, scrubbing, bathing, and massage. Bathing also carries religious and spiritual significance in Islam, where physical cleanliness is closely connected with ritual purity. After sexual intercourse, menstruation, or postpartum bleeding, Muslims perform ghusl, washing the entire body before returning to prayer.

From the early centuries of Islam, public bathhouses became an important part of Muslim cities, often built near mosques, caravanserais, and religious schools. In many places, establishing a bathhouse was considered nearly as important as founding a school. At the height of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century, Istanbul had around 230 hammams; today, roughly 60 remain.

Whenever I sneak into a hammam, I find myself staring up at the domed ceiling. Tiny star-shaped openings let in light and air, while the high dome helps carry moisture upward. But what I notice most is the atmosphere: warm mist hanging in the air, the rhythm of hot and cool water, the sound of droplets falling, and steam loosening every muscle. Bathing slows everything down. People relax, grow quiet, and have space to pause and reflect.

Hammams also have a long history as places of community. Men and women traditionally bathe separately, either in different sections or at different times. For women especially, the hammam offered a place beyond the home to gather, talk, and spend time together. Men also traditionally visited before Friday prayers, often on Thursday, making the bathhouse a place not only for cleansing but also for companionship and family time.

Heavenly Father, You are holy, and Your law and commands are holy, righteous, and good. May Your people be holy and dearly loved, wholly devoted to You, faithful in obedience, and steadfast in love. May the fruit of Your Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—be evident in their lives and bear witness to the people of Türkiye that You are the true source of the holiness they seek. Make a way for the people of Türkiye to enter the fold of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and find rest in Him. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

"Do You Want This Carpet, My Friend?"

Old-School Hustle at the Grand Bazaar

"My friend, you want this carpet?"

"No."

"I have a smaller one."

"I don't need a carpet."

"Which one do you like?"

"I told you, I'm not buying."

"Tell me, what do you like?"

Photo by espiritu_protector on Wikimedia Commons

The shopkeepers of the Grand Bazaar never seem to tire of drawing customers in. Make eye contact for just a moment, and the sales pitch begins. Before you know it, you may find yourself walking away with a bag or two.

After Mehmed II conquered Constantinople in 1453, he ordered the construction of the commercial complex that would grow into the Grand Bazaar, helping generate income for Hagia Sophia. Today, the Grand Bazaar spans 61 streets, with around 4,000 shops and 24 entrances, creating an entire world of old-fashioned trade and bargaining.

For visitors who do not speak Turkish or know the local rhythm of bargaining, shopping here can feel like entering unfamiliar territory. A salesman may call out from across the walkway, "My friend! Hello! Where are you from?" Step inside a shop, and he may stay close by, thinking he is being attentive while you feel increasingly pressured. He may greet you with a huge smile, then become brisk the moment the sale is finished. Or you may browse for a long time, decide not to buy, and suddenly find the warmth has disappeared.

It can feel intense if you are not used to it. But much of this is part of the Grand Bazaar's highly expressive, relationship-driven style of selling, where bargaining is expected and emotions are rarely hidden. I've seen it all before. Spend enough time here, and you start to get used to it.

Heavenly Father, Your gospel brings freedom to the captive, sight to the blind, and release to the oppressed. Help the people of Türkiye understand the good news. Remove the veil that keeps them from seeing Your glory, and open the eyes of their hearts so that they may join people from every nation in crying, "Abba, Father!" Where there are barriers to openly sharing the gospel, open doors that no one can shut. Give Your workers opportunities to sow the seed of Your word. Work with them, and confirm the message they proclaim according to Your will. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Istanbul's Byzantine Splendor

Following the Footsteps of Early Christianity

Many Christians come to Türkiye eager to visit its ancient Christian sites. Whenever I sit around Hagia Sophia, I often hear visitors sigh, "How did a church end up becoming a mosque? And now it costs 25 euros to visit, while tourists can only access the upper gallery instead of most of the main floor. It's kind of sad!"

But Hagia Sophia is far from Istanbul's only trace of its Christian past. In the Kumkapı area stands Küçük Ayasofya, the "Little Hagia Sophia" Mosque, where echoes of Byzantium remain. It was originally the Church of Saints Sergius and Bacchus and was later converted into a mosque during the Ottoman period. Even today, traces of its earlier Christian identity can still be found around the building.

About ten kilometers away, on Derviş Ali, Kariye Mosque was once the Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora. Its extraordinary mosaics and frescoes depict scenes from the Bible. The church was converted into a mosque in the early 16th century.

Near the Aqueduct of Valens, in the Saraçhane district, lie the ruins of the Byzantine Church of St. Polyeuctus. Commissioned by the noblewoman Anicia Juliana in the 520s, it was once among the grandest and most lavishly decorated churches in Constantinople. Today, only its ruins remain.

And there is another irony in the city's history: one of Constantinople's most devastating episodes came not at the hands of outsiders to Christianity, but during the Fourth Crusade in 1204, when Christian crusaders sacked the city.

Heavenly Father, Jesus said that His kingdom is not of this world. He came to testify to the truth, and everyone who belongs to the truth listens to His voice. May the fall of Constantinople be a mirror for us, reminding us that it is Your steadfast love that endures, not the things of this world. Even the greatest and most magnificent churches can one day become ruins. Teach us, then, not to place our hope in earthly glory, but in You alone. Those who oppose You will one day bow before You, but those who love You will remain in Your love forever. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

A City of Islam, an Empire Rises

Istanbul

A well-known hadith attributed to the Prophet Muhammad speaks of the conquest of Constantinople[1]: "Constantinople will surely be conquered. What an excellent commander its commander will be, and what an excellent army that army will be!"[2]

For nearly a thousand years, Constantinople stood at the heart of the Christian Byzantine world. Then, for almost five centuries, it became the capital of one of history's most powerful Muslim empires. The older cats never tire of telling me just how grand Istanbul once was. Early hadith and Islamic writings encouraged Muslims to conquer Byzantium, promising great material and spiritual rewards to those who succeeded. The Byzantine Empire was seen as a stubborn barrier to the westward spread of Islam. From the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad through the era of the four Caliphs, Muslims remained determined to bring the Byzantine Empire under their control.

Constantinople endured centuries of war, siege, internal rivalry, and political decline. Then came the decisive blow. On May 29, 1453, the young Sultan Mehmed II led the Ottoman army into Constantinople, bringing the Byzantine Empire, more than a thousand years old, to an end.

After Constantinople fell into Ottoman hands, people continued to call the city by its old name, Kostantiniyye. But to many Ottomans, this great city was also Islambol—a city filled with Islam, a gift from Allah to the Ottoman Empire. Over time, this name gradually developed into the Turkish Istanbul, the name still used today.

1 Istanbul was once Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine Empire.

2 This well-known "conquest hadith" was accepted as authentic by a number of classical Islamic scholars, though its authenticity has also been disputed by later hadith scholars.

Heavenly Father, we are strangers and sojourners on this earth, and our days are like a passing shadow. You are the Light of the world, and the nations will come to Your light. Shine upon the people of Türkiye, that they may see Jesus Christ as the greatest gift of all. In Him are righteousness, mercy, grace, and every good provision. May all who are weary and burdened come to Him and find rest. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

A Symbol of Constantinople's Conquest

Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque

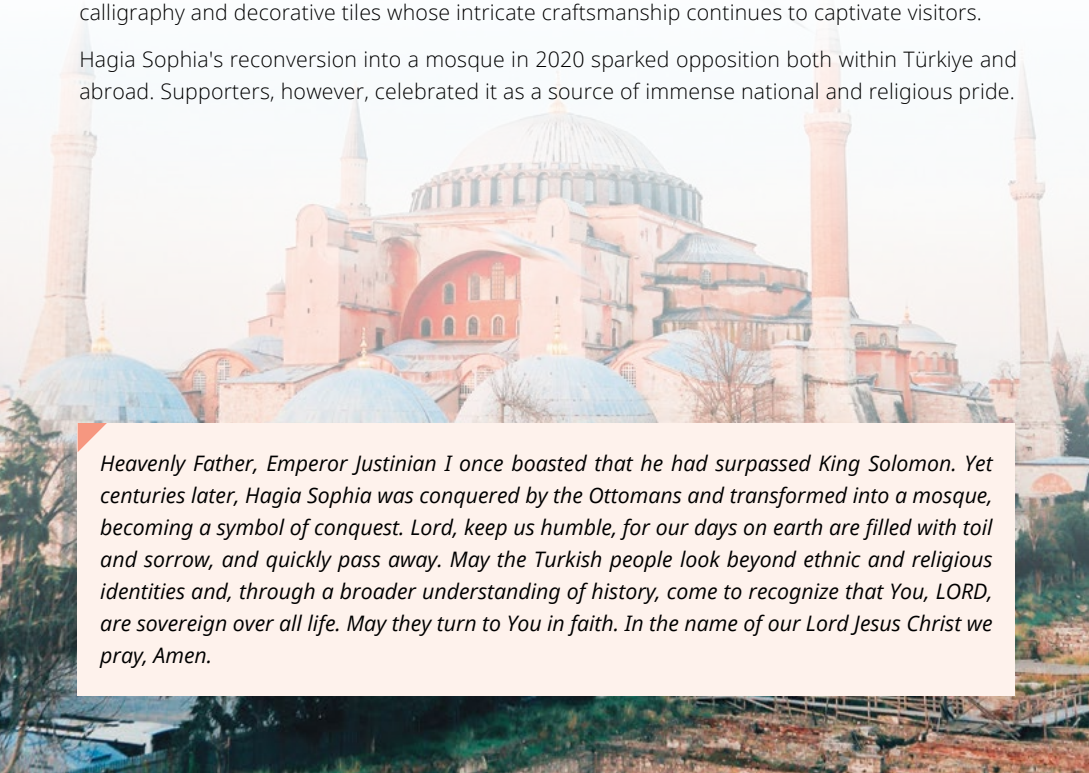
On July 24, 2020, my feline friends and I had plenty to talk about. That was the day Hagia Sophia officially reopened as a mosque after decades as a museum. As imams recited the Qur'an, curtains concealed the Christian mosaics and images of Jesus, Mary, and other figures.

Hagia Sophia means "Holy Wisdom." In 532, Emperor Justinian I ordered the rebuilding of Hagia Sophia, after its two previous structures had been destroyed in riots. When the magnificent church was completed five years later, he is said to have exclaimed, "Glory to God! O Solomon, I have surpassed you!" He was referring to King Solomon, who built the first Temple in Jerusalem.

I imagine Justinian had good reason to be proud of the achievement. He had enlisted experts in mathematics and engineering who used an ingenious system of curved triangular supports, known as pendentives, to raise an enormous dome above four massive piers. Through sophisticated geometry, structural engineering, and the clever use of light, they created the illusion of a dome floating in midair. The effect is breathtaking.

After the Ottomans conquered Constantinople in 1453, successive sultans worked to beautify Hagia Sophia, adapt it for Islamic worship, and expand its facilities. They added a mihrab (prayer niche), minbar (pulpit), minarets, ablution fountains, religious schools, a library, kitchens, and more. They also adorned it with exquisite examples of Turkish artistry, including elegant calligraphy and decorative tiles whose intricate craftsmanship continues to captivate visitors.

Hagia Sophia's reconversion into a mosque in 2020 sparked opposition both within Türkiye and abroad. Supporters, however, celebrated it as a source of immense national and religious pride.



Heavenly Father, Emperor Justinian I once boasted that he had surpassed King Solomon. Yet centuries later, Hagia Sophia was conquered by the Ottomans and transformed into a mosque, becoming a symbol of conquest. Lord, keep us humble, for our days on earth are filled with toil and sorrow, and quickly pass away. May the Turkish people look beyond ethnic and religious identities and, through a broader understanding of history, come to recognize that You, LORD, are sovereign over all life. May they turn to You in faith. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

When Even Bread Comes at a High Price

The Struggling Turkish Lira

A 100-lira banknote lies on the ground. Looking down, I see the confident smile of the formidable Atatürk printed on it. In 1923, Atatürk led his people through the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and established a new nation: the Republic of Türkiye. Between 1946 and 1960, one US dollar was worth approximately 2.8 Turkish lira. But by 2004, it took 1.35 million lira to buy a single dollar. The currency had depreciated so drastically that it needed to be redenominated.

In 2005, the government introduced the New Turkish Lira, removing six zeros so that one million old lira became one new lira. Yet the currency continued to lose value, repeatedly hitting record lows. By 2026, the exchange rate had reached approximately 45 lira to one US dollar, equivalent to 45 million old lira. Over the past two decades, the lira has lost more than 95% of its value against the dollar, becoming one of the world's weakest currencies in terms of exchange-rate value.

Years of high inflation have taken a heavy toll on Türkiye's economy. For many Istanbul residents, the cost of living has become increasingly difficult to bear. In April 2026, a meal at an inexpensive restaurant cost at least 500 lira per person (nearly US$11), while the monthly rent for a three-bedroom apartment in the city center was around 88,133 lira (nearly US$1,965). Even simit, the traditional Turkish bread ring sold on Istanbul's streets, has become a symbol of rising prices. In less than five years, its price climbed from 3 lira to 20 lira (about US$0.45). No wonder so many residents lament, "Even with a full-time minimum-wage job, we can't make ends meet."

What Is Currency Redenomination?

Redenomination involves replacing an existing currency with a new one by reducing its face value at a fixed ratio, without changing its purchasing power.

Why Do Countries Redenominate Their Currencies?

To address hyperinflation. Prolonged price increases can cause banknote denominations to become excessively large. When buying a single apple costs millions, people face the inconvenience of carrying large amounts of cash, and the figures may even exceed the digit limits of ordinary calculators or cash registers.

Heavenly Father, years of severe depreciation of the Turkish lira and high inflation have driven up the cost of living. Lord, have mercy on the Turkish people, who must tighten their belts just to get by and often struggle to make ends meet. When they worry about their finances, make a way for them. When their days are filled with anxiety, shine Your light upon them. May they come to know Jesus Christ and find peace, joy, and the abundance of Your grace. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Voices Still Rise from the Square

The 2025 Protests

Photo by Mocmuk on Wikimedia Commons

On March 19, 2025, unrest swept through Istanbul when police suddenly detained Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu on allegations including corruption and supporting terrorism. Outraged citizens took to the streets, demanding his release. With İmamoğlu just days away from being nominated as a presidential candidate, protesters saw his arrest as an act of political repression.

At 55, İmamoğlu is President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's main political rival. Since becoming Istanbul's mayor in 2019, he has earned praise for his pragmatic approach to governing, winning support across ethnic, religious, and political divides. His reelection in 2024 came as a major setback to President Erdoğan and his party. Since his imprisonment, İmamoğlu has faced more than 140 charges, with prosecutors seeking a prison sentence of up to 2,430 years. On March 18 this year, the eve of the first anniversary of his arrest, thousands gathered in Istanbul, chanting for justice and a fair judicial system. Political analysts, however, have raised doubts about whether İmamoğlu will be able to run in the 2028 presidential election.

Turkish political scientist Salim Çevik believes Türkiye has become increasingly authoritarian in recent years. İmamoğlu is far from the first opposition figure to be arrested and imprisoned. Kurdish politicians, in particular, have long faced detention and imprisonment. Government control over the judiciary and media, the detention of dissenters, and restrictions on freedom of expression have become deeply entrenched features of Turkish politics. Yet one institution continues to preserve a degree of democracy in Türkiye: elections.

Heavenly Father, guide all those in positions of authority in Türkiye, from the ruling party to the opposition, from the nation's highest leaders to local council members. May they fear You and do what is right in Your eyes. Keep those in power from corruption, selfishness, and ambition. May those who have been unjustly persecuted and imprisoned receive fair trials and be released. Lord, lead Türkiye along the path of justice and mercy, bringing stability to the nation and peace to its people. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

The Wounds That Have Yet to Heal

Rebuilding After the Earthquake

Photo by Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office on Flickr

In February 2023, the ground shook violently across southern Türkiye in the cold of night. Buildings collapsed, homes were reduced to rubble, and countless families lost the places they once called home overnight.

To the outside world, the earthquake may seem like a distant memory. But for survivors, the disaster is far from over. They are still on a long and difficult road to recovery. In the immediate aftermath, the government quickly established tent camps and container settlements to provide emergency shelter. Yet what were meant to be temporary refuges gradually became long-term homes for many.

Two years after the earthquake, more than 600,000 people were still living in container settlements, waiting for safe, permanent housing. Reconstruction continued, but for many, returning home was still a distant hope. By 2026, officials reported that hundreds of thousands of homes and commercial units had been completed and allocated, yet more than 360,000 people were still living in container settlements.

Survivors need more than just houses. They also need safe neighborhoods, roads, schools, hospitals, and other essential infrastructure. Beyond these physical needs, many continue to carry the grief of losing loved ones, the fear that jolts them awake at night, and uncertainty about the future. They are waiting not only for homes, but also for the strength to rebuild their lives and find hope again.

Heavenly Father, have mercy on those still waiting for a safe and stable place to call home. Provide homes where they can find security and stability, so they may soon leave their temporary shelters and return to normal life. Father, draw near and comfort those who have lost their loved ones and the places they once called home. You know their grief, fear, and exhaustion. Restore the devastated cities and heal wounded hearts. Send Your church to be salt and light, reaching out to those in need with care, companionship, and practical help. May those who are suffering experience the love of Christ and witness Your grace and faithfulness. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Between Here and Home

When Hospitality Becomes a Burden

Photo by woodleywonderworks on Flickr

For years, Türkiye has welcomed large numbers of refugees and migrants. What began as an act of hospitality has become more than a temporary gesture of kindness. It has grown into the long and complex reality of living alongside one another. At first, people opened their doors out of compassion. But over time, mounting pressures, exhaustion, and competition for resources have brought growing tensions.

Yet the gospel continues to remind us that even in our weariness, we must not forget that we are still neighbors, each one remembered by God.

Amid these challenges, Türkiye's small Christian community, despite its limited resources, has continued to stand alongside those who are suffering. They serve refugees from different backgrounds, including Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis[1], without regard to religion or ethnicity. Some churches have opened their facilities to welcome Syrian refugees, while others help families from Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan settle into new lives. Still others distribute clothing, baby formula, diapers, and food during the bitter winter months.

Over the years, many Turkish Christians have gradually earned the trust of refugees, camp administrators, and even local officials. People have come to see that their commitment goes beyond short-term relief. They have remained faithfully present, offering genuine care and support over the long term.

1 The Yazidis are an ethnoreligious minority with historical and cultural ties to the Kurdish people. In the mid-2010s, ISIS committed genocide against the Yazidis in the Sinjar region of northern Iraq, forcing many to flee their homes and become refugees.

Heavenly Father, comfort all refugees living with uncertainty and displacement, and provide people who will welcome and care for them. Strengthen the local residents who have extended hospitality for years but now feel exhausted and overwhelmed. Grant them compassion that overcomes fear and resentment, so that even amid growing tensions, they will continue to welcome and support those who are vulnerable. Strengthen the local churches so that they will not grow weary or feel alone in their long years of service. Provide them with the people, resources, and wisdom they need to continue walking alongside refugee families, becoming channels of Your grace and the gospel. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

John's Letters Did Not End in the First Century

From the Seven Churches of Asia to Türkiye Today

The words John wrote to the seven churches of Asia—words of warning, comfort, correction, and promise—were not meant only for a handful of ancient cities. They continue to speak to the church in every generation.

Photo by Vera Izrailit on Flickr

The seven churches were located in what is now western Türkiye. Most have long since become archaeological sites or lie tucked away amid modern cities. Smyrna, however—modern-day İzmir—still carries a small but resilient Christian presence.

Martin Kmetec, the Catholic Archbishop of İzmir, has said that the church in İzmir is the only one of the seven churches of Revelation to have survived as a living Christian community to the present day. Today, Catholics, Anglicans, Orthodox Christians, and Evangelicals still gather for worship in the city. Their congregations include local and long-term residents, as well as students, visitors, migrants, and refugees.

In recent years, churches in İzmir have also welcomed Christian refugees and migrants from Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere. For many, church is more than a place to worship. Far from home, it becomes a place where they can hold on to their faith and identity, find community, and care for one another.

Long ago, the Lord commended the church in Smyrna for remaining faithful through suffering. That witness has not disappeared. The churches may be small and their resources limited, but through welcoming, gathering, walking alongside others, and faithfully caring for their communities, they continue to keep the light of faith burning.

Heavenly Father, may Türkiye be more than a land that preserves the ruins of the seven churches. May it once again be a land that hears Your voice. May the words spoken to those churches long ago speak again today to Türkiye's small communities of believers, to those searching for truth, and to a society weary from uncertainty and unrest. Remember the churches that continue to hold fast to their faith while living as a small minority under pressure. Strengthen them, and even with limited resources, help them live out the love and truth of Christ. Remind us that You still walk among the lampstands. You have not forgotten Türkiye, nor have You forgotten the people of this land. May the gospel once again spread throughout its cities and villages, so that more people may see the light of Christ in the midst of darkness and turmoil. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

An Overlooked People

The Laz People

Photo on Wikimedia Commons

When people think of Türkiye, President Erdoğan may be one of the first names that comes to mind, especially given his prominent role on the international stage. Yet the Laz, a people rooted in the same northeastern Black Sea region from which Erdoğan's family comes, receive far less attention. That relative invisibility reflects how easily this people and their distinct identity have been overlooked.

The Laz are concentrated mainly along Türkiye's northeastern Black Sea coast near the Georgian border. They are a South Caucasian people closely related to Georgians and have their own language, Laz. Yet as Turkish has increasingly become the language of younger generations, both the Laz language and aspects of Laz culture have gradually declined. Their historical roots lie in the ancient region of Colchis, along the eastern Black Sea coast. Over the centuries, under Byzantine and later Ottoman rule, the Laz gradually became Muslim and were increasingly absorbed into Turkish culture.

Today, the Laz are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. For many, Islam is not simply a matter of personal belief but is deeply intertwined with family and communal identity. They are not a people who have never encountered Christianity. Rather, familiarity with Christianity has often been accompanied by distance or resistance, while cultural and social boundaries can make deeper engagement difficult. For this reason, they remain a people who need to be understood more deeply and reached with patience and care.

Heavenly Father, open the hearts of the Laz and break down their misconceptions about the Christian faith. May they come to know You not merely through religious labels, but through a personal encounter with who You truly are. Protect those among the Laz who are seeking You, and give them courage and steadfastness amid pressure and struggle as they enter into new life in Christ. Thank You, Lord, that You love and care for the Laz whom You have created. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Fading Through Assimilation

The Pomak People

Within Turkish society is a people who are now rarely referred to by their own name. They may appear no different from those around them, yet they carry a distinct history. They are the Pomaks.

Photo by Ali Eminov on Flickr

The Pomaks originally lived in the Balkans of southeastern Europe. Amid the upheavals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many migrated to Türkiye. Today, their population there is estimated in the hundreds of thousands, making Türkiye home to one of the world's largest Pomak communities.

Most Pomaks are Sunni Muslim. Over time, through the influence of institutions, education, and mainstream culture, many have gradually assimilated into Turkish society and come to identify simply as Turkish. Only a minority continue to maintain a distinct Pomak identity. The shift in language is especially noticeable. Older generations may still speak Pomak, while many middle-aged and younger people understand only some of it and now use Turkish almost exclusively in daily life.

Some Balkan traditions, such as hand weaving, still survive in certain areas, though they have gradually become local crafts. Festivals such as Ederlez are still observed, while other customs continue more quietly within families and local communities. In this way, Pomak traditions have not entirely disappeared, but they have become less visible in public life.

With few outward markers distinguishing them from the wider population, the Pomaks have become an almost invisible people. They remain very much a part of society, yet their distinct identity is gradually fading through assimilation.

Lord, we pray for the Pomak people. Through the currents of history, they have gradually been absorbed into the wider society, while their language, culture, and ethnic identity have begun to fade, leaving them a largely unseen minority. Yet we thank You that You see them from heaven and have not forgotten them. Through the festivals and traditions still preserved within their families, remind them of their heritage. As they search for their history and roots, may they also encounter the gospel and discover their true identity and belonging in the light of Christ. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

The Mountains Remember Their Name

The Kurdish People

Photo by Levi Clancy on Wikimedia Commons

The Kurds are one of the Middle East's ancient peoples, numbering around 35 million. Their traditional homeland stretches across the mountainous borderlands of Türkiye, Iraq, Iran, and Syria.

Over the past century, the Kurds have made repeated attempts to secure autonomy or an independent state. In 1920, after World War I, the Treaty of Sèvres provided for the possibility of Kurdish autonomy. Three years later, it was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne, which contained no such provision. Kurdish populations were left within the borders of several newly defined states. In Türkiye, Kurds endured periods when the public use of their language was legally restricted, while their distinct ethnic identity was for many years officially denied.

Their responses have varied. Some chose resistance, forming the Kurdistan Workers' Party and launching an armed campaign. Others entered politics, with Kurdish political parties in Türkiye long seeking legitimate space at the margins of the law. Still others left the mountains for the cities, doing business, working, and studying in Istanbul, Baghdad, and Cologne while preserving their language and community far from home.

During the Syrian civil war, Kurdish forces were a major ground force in the fight against ISIS and suffered heavy casualties. After the war, the areas under their control once again came under military pressure from Türkiye. For the Kurds, who have long lived on the margins of shifting powers and borders, this has become an all-too-familiar reality. A saying among them puts it this way: "We have no friends but the mountains."

Heavenly Father, remember the resilient Kurdish people and let them see the abundant feast You have prepared for them. No matter how much the world around them may shake, You have prepared a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Comfort weary and lonely hearts, and let them know You as the Father who is merciful, loving, and never abandons them.

Continue to lead them so that, in their search for belonging, they do not lose hope. Soften hearts hardened by power, and grant governments wisdom and compassion to receive the Kurdish people with respect, empathy, and humility. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

A People Marked by Tragedy

The Zaza People

The Zaza live in the mountainous regions of eastern Türkiye, with an estimated population of two to four million. They speak Zaza, a distinct language belonging to the Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family. It still lacks official recognition under national law and has no single standardized writing system. For many years, Türkiye placed its minority peoples within a broader "Turkish" national identity, leaving little room in the official narrative for a distinct Zaza identity.

The Zaza traditionally made their living through mountain farming and livestock herding, with stone villages scattered across rugged terrain. Many Zaza are Alevi Muslims, whose beliefs and practices include strong mystical elements. Community life centers around the cem, an important Alevi gathering in which men and women worship together. Accompanied by the saz, a long-necked stringed instrument, participants sing or recite mystical poetry and perform the semah, a series of sacred, rhythmic movements expressing their devotion to their god.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the government pursued strong policies of national and cultural homogenization in the name of unity and security. Communities that did not fit the dominant Turkish-speaking Sunni Muslim identity often came under pressure. In 1937 and 1938, government forces carried out a violent military campaign in Dersim, a region with a large Alevi Zaza population. Thousands of civilians were killed and many others were displaced. For decades, this chapter of history was rarely discussed publicly in Türkiye.

In 2011, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan offered an apology on behalf of the state and described Dersim as "one of the most tragic events of our recent history."

Heavenly Father, through the mountains and rivers You have created, reveal Yourself to the Zaza and lead them to know that You alone are the true God, the Creator of all things, and that all creation belongs to You. Lord, although the Zaza have often gone unrecognized as a distinct people in Türkiye's official narrative, You know them, and You have already prepared a place for them in Your kingdom.

Send Your workers among them to proclaim the gospel. May they gladly receive the new life made possible through the blood Jesus Christ shed for them. And for this people who have endured deep wounds and trauma, may they find healing through the wounds of Christ and be built anew upon Him, the sure cornerstone. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

A People Who Remain

Armenians in Türkiye

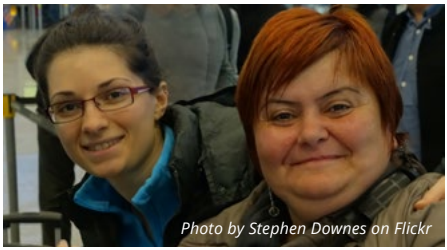


Photo by Stephen Downes on Flickr

Walk through the streets of Istanbul and you will see the Rococo-style Dolmabahçe Palace and the graceful Ortaköy Mosque. These landmarks blend Eastern and Western aesthetics and have helped shape the visual character of the city. Yet few people know that both buildings were designed by Armenian architects.

Armenians are one of Türkiye's indigenous peoples and have lived in this land for more than four thousand years. Ancient Armenia was the first country in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion, and the Armenian alphabet was originally created for the translation of the Bible. Today, Armenians in Türkiye still teach Armenian in their schools, publish magazines in Armenian, and sing Armenian hymns in their churches.

In 1915, the Armenian Genocide began in Istanbul and reduced a population of nearly two million Armenians to only tens of thousands. Armenian communities that had once been spread across Asia Minor were almost completely destroyed, leaving Istanbul as the last major "island" of Armenian life in Türkiye. Today, many Armenians prefer to keep a low profile in public, and some even use Turkified names to avoid discrimination. At the same time, in eastern Türkiye, a growing number of descendants of Armenians who had concealed their identity and lived as Muslims are beginning to openly reclaim their Armenian identity.

Heavenly Father, we see the wounds Armenians have carried through history. Heal hearts still marked by sorrow and fear, and let Your love shine upon them. Through the new identity You give in Christ, help them stand firm wherever they are.

Lord, You also see the resilience of the Armenian people across generations. Continue to preserve their identity, culture, and language, and bless their communities and schools. May they encounter You personally in the ordinary rhythms of life and work. Give them wisdom and strength to carry their ancient heritage forward and to be an enduring witness to You in this land. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

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Once One People, Now Worlds Apart

The Hemshin People

Photo by CharlesFred on Wikimedia Commons

The Hemshin are broadly divided into two groups: the Eastern Hemshin around Hopa and the Western Hemshin around Rize. It is almost as if they live on opposite sides of the same mountain, their paths having split at some point in history.

The Eastern Hemshin speak a dialect of Armenian, while the Western Hemshin speak a Turkish dialect containing many Armenian words. The two groups cannot readily understand one another. Western Hemshin women wear a distinctive headscarf known as the puvi, while this tradition is absent among Eastern Hemshin women. The Western Hemshin celebrate a highland festival called Vartevor, while many Eastern Hemshin are unfamiliar even with the name.

The Hemshin are of Armenian origin and, like most Armenians, were originally Christians belonging to the Armenian Apostolic Church. After the Ottoman Empire took control of the region in the fifteenth century, Islam gradually spread among the Hemshin, and over time many became Muslim. As the centuries passed, their ties with the wider Armenian world weakened, while the Eastern and Western Hemshin developed increasingly different languages and cultural traditions.

Walls that once seemed to have fallen have risen again in other forms, sometimes higher and stronger than before. The Hemshin have become separated from one another, and it can seem as though they have also become separated from Christ.

Heavenly Father, the Hemshin once shared the same roots, but the winds of history carried them in different directions. Today, they speak different languages, follow different traditions, and have become separated from one another's history and culture. Have mercy on this people divided by culture and faith, for You are our peace, the One who makes the two one. Break down the barriers between them, and also the barrier between them and You. Let those who have grown apart see one another again, and let those scattered by history find connection in You. Lord, between these mountains and the Black Sea coast, establish once more a way of peace that leads to Your cross. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Home Is Never Far from the Heart

Abkhazians in Türkiye

The Abkhazians have an extraordinary traditional sport called Aimtsakiachara, something like a combination of rugby and baseball. At the start of the game, two players are lifted high by their teammates. The ball is tossed into the air, and the two players use wooden sticks to strike it toward their teammates. Whoever catches the sheepskin ball grabs it and races toward the goal line. The ball cannot be dropped or kicked, and the runner keeps going until an opponent tackles them. Then it all starts again.

Photo by Apsuwara on Wikimedia Commons

Anyone can join in, so a team might have ten players or grow to hundreds, even thousands. The size of the playing field changes with the number of participants, ranging from a few dozen meters to two or three kilometers. Imagine hundreds of people charging, diving, and wrestling for the ball across a valley. It looks almost like a small battle, except the mountains echo with cheers and shouts.

That long run also echoes something of Abkhazian history. The Abkhazians are a Northwest Caucasian people. After the Russian conquest of the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, many Muslim Abkhazians who resisted Tsarist rule were forced into exile, migrating in large numbers to the Ottoman Empire.

Abkhazians in Türkiye still feel a deep attachment to their ancestral homeland. Many choose Abkhazia as a favorite place to visit, and some actively call on the Turkish government to recognize Abkhazia as an independent sovereign state.

Heavenly Father, we cry out to You for the Abkhazians, a people forced from their homeland by the tides of history, yet still full of strength and vitality. Their ancestors once ran through mountain valleys and later lived in exile across the shores of the Black Sea. Be their strength, for You "heal the brokenhearted and bind up their wounds." Heal the scars left by war and displacement, and let them find peace in the land where they now live. Strengthen them so that those who run will not grow weary. Lord, as they run, may they run toward You, and may Your cross be the one goal before them. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

The Road Is Part of Who We Are

The Yörük People

Photo by Gunes AKDOGAN on Flickr

The name "Yörük" itself suggests movement. In Turkish, it is associated with walking and traveling. Today, being Yörük is no longer defined only by a nomadic way of life. It has become a deeply rooted sense of identity passed down through generations. Even if you no longer move from place to place, you are still Yörük.

Reuters once followed a Yörük family, offering a glimpse into the life of modern nomads. They spend six months of the year on the move: sheep graze ahead, children doze in the pickup truck, and tents, cooking pots, and milk pails are strapped to the back. They travel by day, set up camp at night, and move on again at dawn. The truck helps carry the heavier loads, but pasture and water are what ultimately determine where they go.

Some Yörük live a semi-settled life. They have permanent homes, but in summer they take their livestock up into the highlands and stay in tents or temporary shelters. Men tend the sheep, women milk the animals and make yogurt and butter, and the children help as well.

Many more Yörük now live in cities, running shops, working regular jobs, and using smartphones, while their children study English and do homework at school. But when a wedding or festival comes around, and the music begins and the cheese is set out, the memory of tents, the sound of mountain winds, and stories passed down from their ancestors seem to fill the whole space again.

Heavenly Father, comfort the Yörük with Your rod and Your staff, for they are not people forgotten by the changing times. They are sheep You are seeking. Their lives are shaped by movement, caught between settling down and moving on. Each person must find their way through these changes. Watch over this people as they search for their place in a changing world. Teach them to trust in You, for You will guide their paths. Lord, be their true direction, and lead every step they take into Your loving care. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

A Dance for You

Circassians in Türkiye

Every May, Circassians in Türkiye carry bright red carnations in solemn procession to the Black Sea. They gently set the flowers on the water, hoping the current will carry them back across the sea, toward the coast their ancestors last looked upon before they were forced to leave.

Circassians in Istanbul commemorate the expulsion of their people from their homeland in the North Caucasus.

The Circassians originally lived in the North Caucasus. In the late eighteenth century, as Ottoman power began to decline, Russia expanded southward into the Caucasus. The Circassians, together with other Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus, used the mountains as their stronghold and resisted fiercely. The conflict lasted for a century. After Russia emerged victorious, many Circassians were killed, while the survivors were forced to leave the valleys their families had inhabited for generations and begin a life of exile.

Most of the survivors were driven toward the northeastern coast of the Black Sea and crowded onto ships bound for Anatolia. The journey brought another wave of suffering. Hunger and thirst claimed many lives, while others died in shipwrecks, leaving the Black Sea as the final resting place for countless exiles.

Today, Türkiye is home to the largest Circassian community in the world. And still they dance, just as generations before them did. The men's steps are sharp as blades; the women's movements light as clouds. With every turn and every step, they seem to dance in memory of those who died more than a century ago. It is also a declaration: We were uprooted, but here we have taken root again.

Heavenly Father, comfort this people who were torn from their homeland, for You are near to the brokenhearted and save those who are crushed in spirit. Heal the wounds the Circassians still carry through generations, and let them find peace in this land. May every carnation set upon the Black Sea become a reminder that You have not forgotten them. Lord, may those who have wandered find belonging in You, and may those who mourn find renewed strength in You. Bring justice and healing to the Circassian people. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

Where Is Home?

The Almancı

In Türkiye, there is a group of people jokingly called Almancı, literally someone associated with Germany. But the word often carries a teasing edge: too German, not Turkish enough. In Germany, they may be seen as Ausländer, foreigners; back in Türkiye, they are Almancı.

The story begins in the 1960s, when tens of thousands of Turks were recruited to work in German factories. The plan was to stay for a few years, earn some money, and return home. But work permits became residence permits, residence permits became passports, and the road home grew longer and longer.

Over the past forty years, some Almancı have returned to Türkiye, often carrying German accents with them. They may expect coming home to feel easier, only to discover that they are still treated as outsiders. Speak in a way that sounds too German and people may laugh; behave too rigidly by local standards and people may complain. Their identity falls somewhere between the two countries, and because the category itself is difficult to define, there are no clear official statistics. Some studies estimate that around half a million people have returned.

Many Almancı continue to live between two worlds: a home in each country, relatives on both sides, unwilling to give up their ties to Germany yet equally unwilling to lose their connection to Türkiye. Their stories are not dramatic. More often, they are marked by a quiet sense of alienation, moving back and forth between two places called “home” while never feeling completely accepted by either.

Heavenly Father, be the true refuge of the Almancı, and let them know: “You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household.” Heal the sense of alienation in their hearts, and comfort them in the weariness of living between languages, cultures, and homelands. May they find in You a renewed sense of identity and belonging, and may Your church become a place where they are welcomed and can find rest. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we pray, Amen.

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CROSSROADS PUBLICATIONS

+6 018 315 7707 missionpathwaykl@gmail.com

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Chief Editor
Jacky

Editor
Enoch Lee, Isa Hsu, Joan Chang

Translator
Cindy Wu

Proofreader
Keith Carey

Administrative Coordinator
Priscilla Pua, Novia Lu, Sukin, Maritza

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Layout
GF Howe

Publishing
Crossroads Publications
P. O. Box 3356
Los Altos, CA 94024-0356 U.S.A.
+1 (650) 968-1866
info@missionpathway.org
missionpathway.org

CANADA
CCCOWE Canada
+1 (437) 216-6085 (Ps. Enoch Lee)
missionpathway.ca@gmail.com

TAIWAN
UMOT
(02) 2321-2915
service@umot.org.tw

HONG KONG
HKSTM
+852 52822747
info@hkstm.org.hk

SINGAPORE
CNEC
+65 6280 0312
cnec@cnecintl.org