Second Place Winner
Division II – 10-12th Grades
Imprisoned for Our Beliefs
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Handcuffs chafe at my wrists, rubbing my skin raw. Ropes are lashed about my body, restraining my limbs, slicing through my thin, worn clothes. A roar fills the space around me, the sound of a thousand voices ricocheting from the walls of the courtroom, reverberating through the clammy air. I am sweaty, my palms moist, my breaths shallow. I can sense their eyes upon me. I can see them flicking back and forth, hunting me through the crowd. Feeling their whispers sliding across the floor, curling about my ankles and wrists, I roll my shoulders back and just keep walking.

Traitor.

Rebel.

Deserves it.

I am returning to Prison, the place I have resided for the past fifteen months. I pleaded with them: as a conscientious objector, I deserve an alternative "punishment" to being imprisoned. My claims, my pleas, my hope, was rejected. And now, as I exit the courtroom, led by guards, my fingers numb with lack of circulation, I can only feel despair consume me. A living beast inside of my stomach, clawing at me from the inside. I know this is wrong. And it's not just about me.

I have been punished for my beliefs. For my morals. And hundreds of my brothers are suffering the same fate.

Jeon Seong-Jin finished his prison sentence three months after his court appeal (Associated Press 4). However, as of January 2015, there are 597 Jehovah's Witnesses still imprisoned in South Korea for conscientious objection to military service. Jehovah's Witnesses are guided by and believe in Bible principles, and as one well-known scripture says:

They will beat their swords into plowshares
And their spears into pruning shears.
Nation will not lift sword against nation,
Nor will they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:4).

Therefore, as a group, Jehovah's Witnesses do not participate in war. This is our strong belief; one of our morals. And for this, 597 people are being punished.

Not only is it unjust to be punished for one's beliefs, it is also unjust to be punished for beliefs that one has the legal *right* to have. People across the world have protested the unjust treatment of these

men who are standing up for what they believe in. For example, the UN Human Rights Committee explains that:

> "The right to conscientious objection to military service inheres in the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. It entitles any individual to an exemption from compulsory military service if this cannot be reconciled with that individual's religion or beliefs. This right must not be impaired" (UN Doc).

Along with the United Nations, as individual countries, America and Germany have reacted with disapproval to South Korea's methods. In the 2012 Universal Periodic Review, the United States of America wrote that they are "concerned that the Republic of Korea does not provide alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors." Germany "recommends abolishing imprisonment and establishing a non-military service for conscientious objectors."

Despite the unfairness of the situation, it is incredible that these young men have stood up for their beliefs in the face of such a terrifying injustice. They have displayed extreme moral courage: bravery and strength to stand up for what is right. Moral courage is sacrifice of self for others, for truth and justice. It is the strength to withstand opposition from great forces, to be seen as different, strange, even dangerous. And that is exactly what these young men have done.

As one of Jehovah's Witnesses myself, I also believe in Bible principles and follow the Bible's guidance. I have a strong relationship with God, and because of my love for him I would do anything he asks me of. One of his greatest commandments is that "you love one another; just as I have loved you" (John 13:34). I believe strongly in this principle, and I have been raised to view every other person in our world as a friend, as someone I need to love. War is an atrocity, a horror, and in its face all human morals and beliefs are disregarded. I cannot even imagine killing one of my fellow men in warfare, or the unbearable guilt and torture of conscience that would ensue.

Despite my strong morals and beliefs, I am not immune to fear. The threat of imprisonment is not only daunting to me; it's horrifying. I have always wondered if I would have the strength and courage to stand up for my morals in the face of such extreme punishment. The stories of each of these men, my brothers, possessing the moral courage to do what I have always been afraid I could not do is inspiring and strengthening. I now know that my brothers in South Korea have been given the bravery to do what is right no matter the consequences, and that I will be given that courage, too.