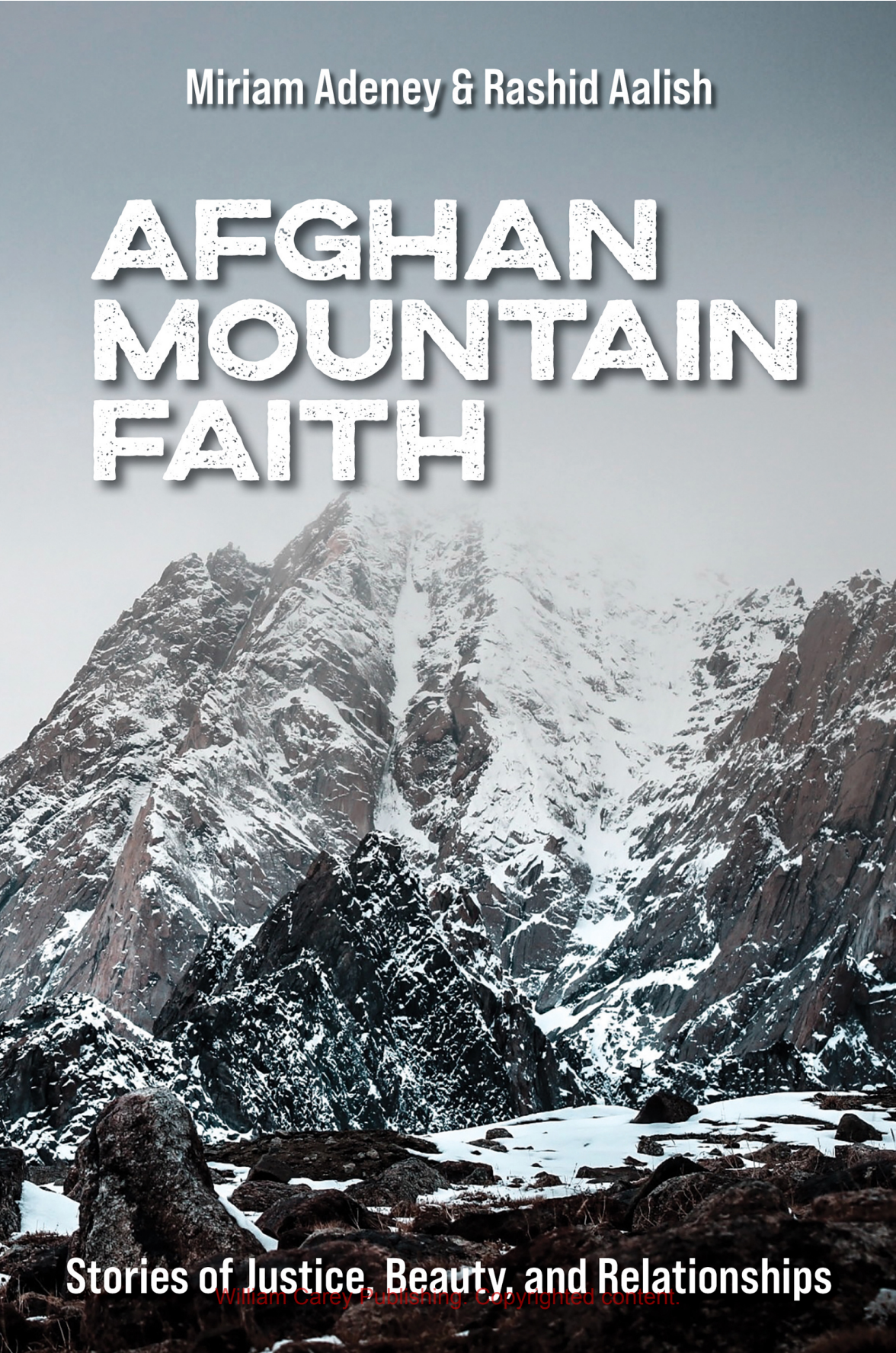
Miriam Adeney & Rashid Aalish

AFGHAN MOUNTAIN FAITH



Stories of Justice, Beauty, and Relationships

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Afghan Mountain Faith: Stories of Justice, Beauty, and Relationships

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— Chapter 1 —

The Toughest Country in the World

"Are you willing to renounce the claim that Jesus is God?"

Qazi Abdul Karim stood alone in a court of law. Over by the wall was a swordsman, blade at the ready. What would Qazi answer?

He was not raised poor or ignorant. His father was a judge, and his home was comfortable. When Qazi became an adult, he had traveled across the boundary that divides Afghanistan from Pakistan, a barrier that many Pashtun people feel is artificial. In Pakistan Qazi had found a job on the staff of a hospital.

There he discovered that many of his colleagues cared for the sick because they were motivated by the love of God expressed in Jesus. As Qazi heard more about Jesus—his life story, his teachings, his death and resurrection, his magnificent kingdom, and Jesus's personal love for him—Qazi's heart opened. Jesus became his Lord.

This was such a transforming experience that Qazi couldn't keep it to himself. Wherever he went, in markets, on buses, or in coffee shops, he talked about Jesus. He spread the story up and down the frontier that Pakistan shared with Afghanistan. Qazi became well known for his witness.

Back home, religious leaders were alarmed. "A disgrace!" they stormed.

Why? What was wrong with witness to Jesus? After all, Muslims consider Jesus a holy prophet.

Worshipping Christ as God is forbidden, and Muslims must not convert to other faiths. Conversion introduces chaos, the religious leaders believed. A totally Muslim community is the best environment for human flourishing. By contrast, a community with diverse faiths opens the door to ethical relativism and moral looseness. When Qazi talked about Jesus as Lord, that is what the religious leaders pictured.

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"Something must be done to stop this before it goes further," they decided. So men were sent to arrest Qazi and transport him back across the border.

"Are you willing to renounce the claim that Jesus is God?" they challenged him. Qazi was not.

A seventy-pound chain was looped around his neck. A bridle was put in his mouth. Then Qazi was forced to march, pulling that chain three hundred miles from Kandahar to Kabul. People threw insults and mud and stones at him along the way.

In the Kabul courtroom he was again invited to return to Islam. When he refused, a ghastly scene unrolled: the swordsman lifted his weapon and slashed off Qazi's right arm.

As Qazi reeled from the shock and pain, and as blood dripped onto the floor, the judge challenged him again: "Recite the creed, 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet.' That is all you need to do."

But Qazi would not deny Jesus as Lord. Jesus was the center of his life. He would not swear loyalty anywhere else.

The swordsman sliced off his left arm. When Qazi still continued to affirm Jesus as Lord, he was beheaded.

Twenty-five years later, an Afghan man traveling in Iran met a Christian there. He wanted to talk about Qazi. "I was there in the court that day," the Afghan remembered. "I was a boy of ten or twelve at the time, but I have never been able to forget it. I saw a man tortured and hounded to death for his faith. He was a Christian. The remembrance of the light of peace on his face remains with me to this day. I can never forget it. Tell me the secret of it."

That Afghan became a follower of Jesus, and eventually returned to Afghanistan. Even a quarter century after his death, Qazi's life was still speaking.[1]

Through the centuries, many people have been punished harshly in this land, and not only Christians. Islamic law's most extreme version calls for cutting off the hands of thieves, stoning adulterers, and beheading other criminals. The powerful nations that wrested control here often had reputations for cruelty. Whether Mongols, Central Asian tribes, Russians, Chinese, Pakistanis, or, most recently, Americans flailing through twenty years of war, none have had outstanding reputations for gentleness and humaneness. The current ruling party, the Taliban, grew from orphaned boys and young men raised without the civilizing and softening influences of home and family. Even more extreme than the Taliban are the violent members of ISKP.

It is in this volatile context that Jesus's people have been killed for their faith. According to the *2022 World Watch List* published by Open Doors, Afghanistan is the hardest country in the world in which to be a Christian.

1 Wilson, *Afghanistan*, 122.

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But times are changing. Millions of Afghan people are moving out of their homeland. Eighty thousand Afghan immigrants are expected in the US in 2023.

Many Americans would like to forget about Afghanistan, particularly the long years of war and the shabby end to that conflict. "Thank God that's over!" we may murmur with a sigh of relief. Yet as Afghan immigrants walk down our streets, shop in our malls, and send their children to our schools, it becomes apparent that Americans cannot wipe Afghanistan off the slate of our minds. The people are here—fellow human beings living together with us.

The people who remain in Afghanistan have not fallen off the map either. They wake up in the morning, wash their faces, slip on their sandals, open the door to go out and use their skills and resources to earn something and bring home food, and meanwhile stay as safe as they can. Children who are lucky enough to have a school nearby will wrestle with reading and math, polishing skills and general wisdom. Life spirals on. Afghanistan is not "over." The Afghan people are not finished, whether here or there.

What Is This Book About?

This is a book about relationships, justice, and beauty.

Relationships

There are many things seriously wrong with the world and with the church. There are many dangerous elements and flash points that could lead to disaster. And human beings are just as short-sighted and self-centered as ever, despite our educational and technological progress. On some days the future looks dystopian. At a more mundane level, gas prices are up. Egg prices are up. Housing costs are up. Whatever the long-term future may be, just now we are scrambling to stay in place.

Yet God has blessed us with friends, family, music, food, nature, sports, free schools, clinics and hospitals, pets, and our local churches, with their worship and teaching and fellowship and service opportunities.

Right in the middle of the complex reality where we find ourselves, God calls us into relationship with Him and with people. We have been born and set here at this point in space and time for God's purposes. We are not made for small things. We are meant for more. We have been empowered to bless the nations.[2]

2 God has called and empowered his people to bless the nations. Abraham received a commission: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:3). During the exodus, God told Moses: "You are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (Deut 10:19). David sang, "May all the peoples praise You. May the nations be glad, for you rule the peoples with equity." Following Jesus's time on earth, Paul, John, and Peter were equally emphatic about God's care for all peoples and our responsibility to share the good news with them (See Acts 26:17; Rom 1:16; Eph 2:12, 13, 19; 3:6; 1 Pet 2:9–10; Rev 7:9–10).

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At the heart of the universe there is a center. Ephesians 1:8–10 speaks of the ultimate mystery of the ages—that God will bring all things in the cosmos together in Christ. He is the cosmic fulcrum. God hears each of our groans, and from his eternal center he is drawing all of us, from all peoples and all dimensions of life, lifting us together, smoothing the sharp edges, weaving a pattern, tuning a harmonious symphony, nourishing a flourishing ecosystem in which every person finds a place. In Christ everything in the cosmos is being knit together.

This is the mystery at the core of reality. And although it is unfathomably large and incomprehensibly complex, it is also personal. In God's grand unity, we do not lose what makes each of us unique. Individual persons have a purpose, according to Ephesians 1:12, and that is to live for the praise of God's glory. We are not robots. We are not statistics. We have a sacred calling, a vocation, an anointing—to live with all of our gifts and quirks for the glory of God. Whether citizens or refugees, we are not marginal. Related to God and to each other, we experience empowerment to pour out our life's energies as we love our neighbors and work toward the kingdom of God.

But why Afghans? There are many other "neighbors" who need attention. Why focus on the people of Afghanistan? That question leads to the next section: justice.

Justice

This is a book about justice. At this moment in history Afghans are vulnerable, and God loves the vulnerable. Back home, most Afghans lack food. Some are starving to death. Yet, while the land is largely treeless, it is not barren. Wheat grows well. In fact, this may be the place where wheat was first domesticated. Gardens and fields are enriched by topsoil blown in annually on strong winds from Central Asia. Still, the temperature is cold and there are many mountains.

More devastating than the weather and topography is the collapse of international aid.

Russia invaded in 1979. Then came the Taliban, then the Americans, and now again the Taliban and another terrorist group known as ISKP. Given all this turmoil, the infrastructure and economy have been blown up repeatedly. Badly damaged, Afghanistan came to rely on foreign aid. Until mid-2021 it was receiving $8.5 billion a year. This made up 40 percent of its GDP.[3] When the Taliban seized power in August 2021, the aid ended abruptly. Since then, hardly any nations have recognized the Taliban as the legitimate government. As a result, foreign banks balk at doing business here, and international trade has dried up.

3 "The Next Crisis," *Economist*, 46.

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Afghans are vulnerable not only economically but also socially. Women who previously ran their own businesses, taught, or studied now find themselves shuffled to the margins. The current regime has imposed a strict, fundamentalist version of Islam that limits women in public life. That means that half the population is largely shut down. This is particularly hard on widowed mothers whose income may make the difference between life and death for their children.

Most of all, Afghans are vulnerable because they have had so little chance to hear the good news.

Yet new things are happening. Because of the internet and because many Afghan people have fled their country and spread across the earth, it is easier than ever to share the gospel of Jesus with them. Human barriers never have controlled God, of course. God has spoken to people everywhere throughout time by means of nature, conscience, and dreams and visions. As Psalm 19:1–4 says, "The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

In our time, however, Afghans have fresh opportunities to learn about Jesus, the center of the cosmos. This is their moment. We are privileged to be part of it. Focusing on Afghans at this point in history is fair. It is justice. Can we hide behind excuses like "I have other concerns"? Will we dribble out our lives for selfish goals, or will we stretch, genuinely bless the needy, and count for something?

Beauty

This is also a book about beauty. When God made the world, he set in motion a kaleidoscope of cultures, dazzling in their diversity. From the very beginning God said that it was not good for people to be alone (Gen 2:18). We were designed to live in communities of meaning. So God gave his blessing to human culture, and specifically to cultural areas like the family, the state, work, worship, arts, education, and even festivals. He gave attention to laws which preserved a balanced ecology, ordered social relations, provided for sanitation, and protected the rights of widows, orphans, foreigners, the poor, and debtors. He affirmed the physical world, out of which material culture takes shape. This does not mean God intended all cultures to be the same. No, he made us creative in his image so we could shape unique and varied lifeways, resulting in the mosaic that adorns his world.

Afghan culture is novel. Afghan people are not just producers, consumers, or victims who are interchangeable with everybody else in the world. They have their own heritage. In this context they live and laugh and cry and love.

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