Where There Is Now A Church

2nd Edition

DISPATCHES FROM CHRISTIAN WORKERS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD



JAMES NELSON, EDITOR

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Where There Is Now a Church:
Dispatches from Christian Workers in The Muslim World
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Chapter 1

A Message of Peace in a Place of Violence

by Mallie Jane Kim

"As-salamu alaykum," said the shaykh, addressing the crowd with the common Arabic greeting of "peace be upon you."

He looked out at nearly 600 people, including many political and religious leaders, who were gathered for a solemn day of remembrance. The event commemorated the day, decades earlier, when thousands of their people were stripped of their land and homes. Their lives and identities had changed that day. Most of the shaykh's people lived in communities wracked by poverty and violence, and they longed for justice—and revenge upon enemies for their misdeeds.

The frustration led to a continuing cycle of anger, violence, and retribution in the ramshackle community. Peace remained elusive.

"What is peace?" Shaykh Jamil asked. "What is true peace?" Then he turned to the main topic of the day: the suffering of the people.

"On this day we remember what happened to our forefathers," said the shaykh, "and we remember how they suffered."

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Many in the crowd nodded or shouted in agreement. They knew plenty about suffering.

Shaykh Jamil, the leader of one of his community's religious-political organisations, was among a string of leaders speaking to the crowd this day. His speech, though, would not match the crowd's expectations. They had been counting on a speech that would rile up their frustration and desire for vengeance. He was about to surprise them, even as he had been surprised when he heard a similar message from a brave younger man two years before.

Conversations over Coffee

Years before the shaykh's speech, a team of Western and indigenous Christians had arrived in the city. They hoped to share Jesus' message of salvation with native and immigrant Muslim communities that knew little about the Saviour.

One of the Westerners was Curtis, who regularly made himself available for conversation at a coffee shop located on a busy street.

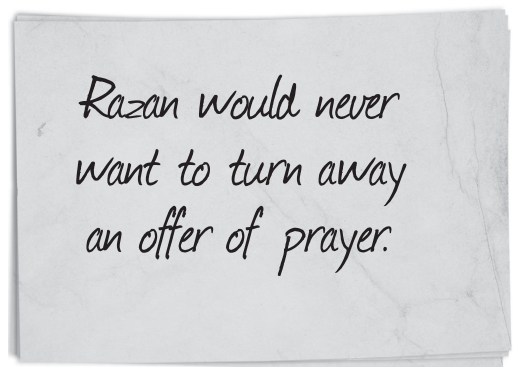
He would sit for hours listening to people's problems and praying for them, often pointing out relevant Bible passages along the way. In some cases, people came back to Curtis, telling him that God had answered their prayers and wanting to know more about this God. In these cases, Curtis would begin teaching them more from the Scriptures, showing them what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.

Razan, a young call centre worker who lived in the shaykh's community, met Curtis and was drawn to this quirky man.

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Even though Curtis was not fluent in the local language, he had a way of nudging Razan to share his problems.

Curtis had sympathised with Razan's financial frustrations. Razan repeatedly took out high-interest payday loans to cover his own expenses while supporting his aging mother and ailing sister. As a Muslim, Razan would never want to turn away an offer of prayer. He went to see Curtis several times each week after work.



During their conversations at the coffee shop, Curtis would open his well-worn Bible and share verses that spoke directly to Razan's challenges. Step by step, this biblical wisdom helped Razan overcome feelings of hopelessness, sadness, and impatience.

"Well," said Razan one day, "What is this grey book that has an answer to everything?"

Curtis smiled and gave Razan his very own Bible. Week after week, the conversations continued, and Razan learned even more about Jesus' life and message, drawing ever closer to him.

After many months, Curtis paused in one of their conversations to ask his friend an important question.

"Razan, do you accept Jesus as your Saviour?"

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"I don't even have to think about the answer to that," Razan said, "Yes! Yes, of course."

"Do you confess that he died for you, to wipe away your sins?"

"Yes," Razan said

"Then I have one more question for you. Do you feel that you are ready to commit your life to Jesus?"

"Yes," said Razan, smiling. "I am."

The Example of a Transformed Life

As Razan studied his Bible and grew closer to Jesus, people could see the changes in his life. Most dramatically, his anxiety about caring for his family members was transformed into gratitude.

"Yes, I have an old mom and a sick sister," he told Curtis one day. "But instead of making me more hopeless, they are making me more holy."

Soon, people noticed these changes. "I wish to become like my friend Razan," said Shukri, a long-time friend and a trainer at the call centre. When Shukri asked about the changes in his life, Razan was ready to share what he'd learned about Jesus.

"After reading the Bible for a few months, I found it had an answer to all my problems," Razan said.

Slowly, Shukri learned more about Jesus. Before, he had always believed Jesus was just a prophet. Now he understood that Jesus was something more.

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Some six months later, Shukri saw a foreigner chatting with his friend.

"Who was this man?" he asked him later.

"This man was the gate for me," Razan explained. "He didn't push me, but he opened the gate to the Kingdom of God for me, and that's why my behaviour changed."

"I think I should meet with this man, too," said Shukri, after mulling it over.

Later that week, the three men sat around a table at the coffee shop as Shukri eagerly asked Curtis many of the questions he and Razan had been discussing. His certainty grew, but something held him back.

Finally, he came out with what was truly nagging at him: "What happens to my family, then?" he asked. "They are Muslim. They don't know Jesus. Will they go to hell?"

"Shukri," Curtis said, gesturing to his little grey book. "God is all-compassionate, all-merciful. He will hear your prayers for your family and give them the chance to choose."

Shukri thought of Matthew 11:28, a verse he and Razan had studied a few days before: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

He felt a burden lift from his shoulders. He'd been feeling like a lost person, and now he saw a path before him, one that would allow him to join his good friend Razan in following Jesus.

"Jesus takes all of my yoke," he said later to Razan. "The heavy and light yoke, he takes it over and releases it for me."

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