Where There Was No Church

POSTCARDS FROM FOLLOWERS OF JESUS IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

2nd Edition



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Where There Was No Church:
Postcards from Followers of Jesus in The Muslim World
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Nabil reclined on a mattress on the floor with his mother and his six-year-old nephew, Ahmed. Nabil was trying to make funny faces to lighten their mood, to counteract the gloom that spilled over them as bomb blasts filled their ears. Nabil's sister, Sarah, came in with a sandwich and a cup of milk for her son, Ahmed. She had mixed up the milk powder with more water than usual. Who knew when they'd be able to get to the supermarket again? Or whether there would be any milk on the shelves when they did. Ahmed didn't seem to mind. He gulped down the milk in spite of its watery taste.

"Allah!" Sarah exclaimed as a nearby explosion rocked the building.

Although many families were trying to escape the bombing by fleeing to another town, most of Nabil's neighbours had nowhere to go. Even if they did, they couldn't afford to leave. It was rumoured that taxi drivers, the only ones who really knew the roads well enough to navigate the hazardous route

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quickly, were charging ten times the normal fare to drive people out of the city. That would be almost a month's salary for Nabil.

Sarah felt overwhelmed. She flopped down on the cushions and began to weep loudly. "Pull yourself together! Be strong for the sake of the child!" her mother told her.

Sarah sighed and sat up against some cushions, burying her head in her hands. Earlier that day, Nabil and Sarah had pulled all their mattresses and blankets into the tiny hallway that led to all the rooms in the flat. By shutting all the doors, they made a little room that had no windows, except for the opening that led to the kitchen, but they had covered the kitchen window with tape to protect themselves from flying glass. It was safer, they hoped, but it was also darker, and the electricity had been off for a while.

Ahmed finished his sandwich and milk and reached for Nabil's mobile phone. The light that came on when Ahmed began to push buttons randomly gave Nabil an idea. He opened the door to the guest room and brought back a wooden stand with a Bible on it. He took Ahmed into his lap and showed him how to point the phone towards the words on the page. Nabil turned to the section called the Psalms of David and located Psalm 23, one of his favourites. The imagery of shepherds and sheep evoked images of the fields outside his grandparents' village. Though he'd never been to their village, he felt he knew it as well as the town where his parents had come as exiles and where he had been born.

"The Lord is my shepherd," Nabil began in Arabic.

Sarah looked up. "What is this?" she interrupted.

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Nabil drew himself up. "These are the Psalms of the Prophet David, peace be upon him." His sister propped herself up against some cushions and listened. She closed her eyes and let her mind wander to her grandparents' village, to the ancient family home and the fertile orchards. If only we could return to that paradise now, she thought. But in her heart, she knew it no longer existed. Perhaps all the houses had been destroyed by those who had driven her grandparents and the other villagers out, or maybe settlers now occupied the ancient houses. Either way, if she ever got a chance to go back there, it would not match up with the stories her grandparents had told. For a moment, her fear turned to hatred toward those who had driven her grandparents from their home and were now trying to destroy her own generation. "God, where are you? Why don't you destroy our enemies?" she wondered.

Nabil turned to another Psalm and continued reading:

> Though a thousand fall at your side,
> Though ten thousand are dying around you,
> These evils will not touch you.

More explosions sounded nearby. "I take refuge in God," their mother mumbled, fingering her prayer beads.

> If you make the Lord your refuge,
> If you make the Most High your shelter,
> No evil will conquer you;
> No plague will come near your dwelling.

Sarah continued to listen as her brother read from the Psalms of the Prophet David. She was strangely comforted by the ancient words. For almost an hour, Nabil read Psalm after Psalm. Now it was dark outside, and Ahmed was asleep.

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His grandmother laid him gently on a mattress and covered him with a thick blanket. Even though it was the middle of summer and the weather was hot and sticky, she didn't want to put her grandson at risk to catch a cold by sleeping uncovered. Sarah laid herself down next to her son and tried to rest.

Nabil slipped quietly into the kitchen and filled a glass of water from the tap. His voice was hoarse from reading, but he was thankful that God had shown him a way to comfort his sister. And he thanked God that he had let himself be convinced to start reading the Bible in Arabic instead of English. What if there had been only an English Bible in their home? How much would his sister have understood? Even if she had understood the words, would the Psalms in English have comforted her? And what about his mother? She wouldn't have understood any of it.

Nabil thought back a few years to the time when he first started talking to Pete and Dave, the Americans he worked with, about God and the prophets and about their respective holy books. He enjoyed getting together with them. Although they were fun-loving and ready to joke, they also seemed respectable and God-fearing. They didn't fit his previous image of Westerners. So it wasn't long before he started asking them questions about their spiritual practices, such as prayer and fasting. He also had some questions about the Bible. Because they worked in English and his fluency in English far exceeded theirs in Arabic, these early conversations had been in English. Soon, however, Pete and Dave began to improve in Arabic to the point that most of their conversations shifted into Nabil's language.

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One day, Pete and Dave introduced Nabil to their friend Terry. He wasn't in the country for a long visit, but he and Nabil hit it off, so they spent a lot of time together. They visited each other and had long conversations about Jesus over thick Turkish coffee and then read the Bible together. Since Terry spoke no Arabic, they always read from the English Bible and spoke English together. Nabil loved Jesus and he loved reading about Jesus and the apostles in the Bible. Eventually his love for Jesus grew into a desire to serve him, and Nabil began to count himself as one of the followers of Jesus.

Nabil was well-respected in his work place, and many of his friends and co-workers were eager to hear what he had to say about his encounter with Jesus. After about a year, one of his close friends, Sami, also decided to become a follower of Jesus. Together, Nabil and Sami would invite their friends to



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