

Real Life Stories

I Laid Down My Islamic Privilege to Preach Jesus Around The World



I was born in a Sunni Muslim home in Bangladesh where I learned the meaning of stern discipline from my father, a major general in the military with responsibilities in the intelligence service. We lived on different army bases in elaborate quarters reserved for officers and their families. Servants catered to our every need. The business and political elite of Bangladesh and Pakistan frequented social events in our home.

I grew up attending an Islamic madrasa (religious school), where we studied the Qur'an and learned classical Arabic from an imam. My father could trace his lineage back to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan (the name derives from Hashem, grandson of the prophet Muhammad's great-grandfather). His heritage qualified me as a direct descendant of Islam's founder.

I was respected for my holy ancestry. Yet my childhood was often painful, especially after my parents divorced and my father remarried unexpectedly. I was eight years old, feeling abandoned and missing my mother.

My stepmother regularly abused me mentally and physically. Screaming curses, she would hit me with a cricket wicket or dig her sharp fingernails into my ears, which caused them to bleed. Sores peppered my body. My father ignored my pleas for help and beat me for supposedly lying about the abuse.

When I turned 13 I joined a prestigious air force college as a cadet aiming at a career like my father's. However, I left the military in 1975 when I was 21. Unhealed wounds from my childhood sent me into a downhill spiral. Suicidal thoughts haunted me. Then a seemingly random incident changed my life forever.

Willing to die

While walking in Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city, to buy an electric water heater, I noticed a Caucasian man on a street corner giving out gospel tracts. Wearing scruffy jeans, he looked like a hippie. He was well over six feet tall and stood out from the normal rush of shoppers, honking autos, weaving motorbikes, three-wheeler taxis, donkey carts, and pungent aromas from food vendors. Curious about his demeanor, which radiated inner peace, I approached him and asked, "Who are you, and where are you from?"

He said he was a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ from England. He belonged to a street evangelism team from the Jesus People movement, known for traveling around the world during the 1970s. From my Muslim upbringing, I had only encountered Jesus as a prophet who appeared before Muhammad, and I didn't believe he had died on a cross—the Jews, we were told, had crucified Judas instead.

After exchanging a few words with this English man—later, I learned his name was Keith—I walked away, about 50 yards or so, before returning. Although I believed in Islam, I wanted to know more about his own faith. Keith told me Christ would set me free and give me a new life. Though I doubted his God was interested in my despair, or even existed, I bowed and prayed to receive Christ on the crowded sidewalk in front of a shoe store.

I sensed this was what I had been waiting for all my life. It felt like a huge boulder had been lifted off my back. I saw everything in technicolor, and I wanted to sing and laugh.

Keith and I arranged to meet the next morning at the Lahore YMCA so I could learn more about the Christian faith. I waited there for several hours, but he never appeared—and he didn't show up the next day either. Returning to the YMCA on the third day, I sat in the lobby for a while before spotting a couple sorting and arranging the same tracts as Keith had. They were from the same evangelism team, I learned. When I asked about Keith, they told me he had left the country straightaway because of a family emergency. I never saw him again.

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After I related my encounter with Keith, we enjoyed a wonderful conversation. They encouraged me by reading from a burgundy leather Bible and asked me to hold it. Initially, I refused because Muslims cannot touch a holy book with unwashed hands.

The couple stressed Luke 9:23–25, where Jesus explains the meaning of denying yourself and taking up your cross. They challenged me: “If you are not willing to die for Jesus, then you are not fit to live for him. He wants you to take up your cross every day.”

I did not realize that within a few weeks, those verses would seriously test my new faith.

Under house arrest

As a new convert, I joined the evangelism team. They disciplined me and gave me a pocket-size New Testament to study. I sensed their love and genuine concern. While alone one afternoon, amid a grove of trees away from the congestion, I heard an audible voice: “This is what you will do for the rest of your life. I will take you around the world and you will tell people about Jesus.”

Although fear gripped me, I believed it was God speaking.

By denying Islam, I knew I was courting disgrace from my family and risking an honor killing. At the time, I lived with friends in Lahore who turned furious when I admitted I had accepted Jesus into my life. They wrote to my father, a devout Muslim who prayed five times daily facing Mecca and was disciplined by a holy man. Enraged, he rushed to Lahore to confront my apostasy. He enlisted friends to harass me and force me to recant. When that didn't work, they committed me to a mental facility.

Isolated in the hospital's psychiatric ward for two weeks, I was sedated and guarded by soldiers. Even so, I gained comfort from covertly reading my smuggled New Testament, and I was able to lead several people to Jesus. God intervened when a psychiatrist verified my sanity and discharged me.

My father was furious. He kept me under house arrest at his home in Multan, in Pakistan's southern Punjab region. While armed sentries stood guard outside, I was confined for several weeks before I could escape by bus to Christian friends in Lahore. When I learned the police were searching for me, I fled to Karachi to join an evangelism team. Even under duress, my faith grew as I devoured the Bible, memorized Scripture, shared my testimony, and distributed tracts.

Our street evangelism flourished until my father demonstrated his political power in early 1976. The police arrested five of us for anti-Islamic activities. Jammed into a tiny, filthy cell, we slept on vomit-caked blankets on a brick floor and shared a small can for our toilet.

Four of my Christian brothers were from other countries, and they were released within a few days and deported. But my ID card and passport were confiscated. I was warned, “You will leave a Muslim or die.”

The jailers moved me to a ward for political prisoners where I spent almost one year. Despite the shame and isolation, the Holy Spirit sustained me along with the New Testament I had smuggled in and hidden. The glory of God filled my cell many times. I felt especially encouraged while reading Acts 16:25, which recounts Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns in prison. It was mind-blowing that God counted me worthy to suffer for Jesus.

After threatening my father with litigation in Pakistan's supreme court, I was released to his control. Under the terms of the settlement, I remained a political prisoner and could not leave the country, own a Bible, or associate with Christians. Living with my father wore me down, especially after getting arrested again for hiding the New Testament under my mattress. (I had occasionally managed to sneak out for fellowship with Christians, despite fearing retribution.)

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In 1977, with my father's pressure to renounce Christianity as relentless as ever—he would threaten to have me beheaded for apostasy—I made the fateful decision to flee Pakistan. There was no other choice.

Underground Christians risked retaliation by hiding me and providing travel funds (I was penniless at the time). They helped me obtain a new passport and visa to Afghanistan. Although the army and police were tracking me, I was able to pass through the Afghan immigration checkpoint, aided by an army officer and two Iranian diplomats. I walked across the border in old jeans, lugging a backpack and guitar. The generous Iranians drove me to Kandahar and paid my bus fare to Kabul.

During my seven-month escape journey, God always provided. Openhearted brothers and sisters supported me generously. From Kabul I passed through Turkey, Russia, Belgium, Holland, and finally to Sweden. After I endured some bureaucratic hassles, the government finally granted me political asylum.

Call to missions

Sweden became my new home. I learned the language and joined an evangelical Lutheran church where I met my wife, Brita, whom I married in 1979. I attended Torchbearers International Bible School in Holsby before moving to Uppsala, where I ministered to Muslim immigrants. Brita worked as a nurse, and I found a janitorial position in an office building. I learned God could use me even while I cleaned bathrooms and floors.

All the while, he was preparing me to fulfill the mission he had revealed back in Lahore, to preach Jesus all over the world. We moved to America for further Bible training and returned to Sweden a year later, after which I taught at the Word of Life Training Center in Uppsala for four years.

I was also active in the church and with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, doing street evangelism and praying for the sick. My call to missions solidified in 1983 in Poland. I accompanied two couples driving a van there loaded with food for needy families. I was asked to preach at Catholic youth camps. Invitations to return followed, setting the stage for large audiences and many young people making commitments to Christ.

Shortly thereafter, I founded Dynamis World Ministries, a precursor to conducting mass evangelistic meetings in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In 1993 we moved our headquarters to Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Over the past 40 years I have been privileged to preach in more than 75 nations and plant churches in Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa.

In the account from John's gospel of Jesus miraculously feeding the 5,000, the original loaves and fishes come courtesy of an unknown boy (6:9). The story reminds us that God can use even the smallest things—and the unlikeliest people—to dramatic effect. When I first became a Christian, my only ambition was doing street-level evangelism and giving out tracts. I'm humbled to see how God has multiplied these efforts, ensuring that more and more people can taste the Bread of Life.

Gleaned From Christianity Today