

An Iranian Refugee's Terrible Journey to God

Acts 22:6-21

We are certainly no match for the Apostle Paul's testimony. But humility aside, every follower of Jesus' spiritual history is filled with poignant reminders of God's grace and mercy. It's important to not live in that past. But from time to time we must take our bearings from it as we move forward on a path that may not be clear. We need to remind ourselves of who we are and what the Almighty has done in us.

Paul's testimony of his personal encounter with Christ demonstrated the power of the approved gospel. Paul knew in his heart and was fully convinced that this message was true. And it is essential that every Christian share this conviction borne out of experience. It's a way of sharing who we are, what Jesus has done for us, and a way of rebooting ourselves. We must remember, however, that this proof cannot be based solely on a mystical encounter with God; it must be backed up by a changed life.

Can the false teachers with their version of the gospel make the same claims as Paul? No! People can be rude to us and not believe logical arguments. But it's harder to refute our own personal experiences with Jesus. Salvation is linked solely to the Christian gospel. It requires faith and produces a new manner of life. And testimonies always lead to worship, joy and awe. This is why they are important to share.

The Apostle Paul shared his conversion story more than once. In I Timothy, chapter one, he ends his witness with these wonderful words. (1:12-17) It's a section titled, the Lord's Grace to Paul. Or it can be titled, Gratitude for Mercy.

I am grateful to Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because he judged me faithful and appointed me to his service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is

sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the foremost. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display the utmost patience, making me an example to those who would come to believe in him for eternal life. To the King of the ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

The source of Paul's life and ministry was the eternal God. He went back to that source regularly. So must we. To serve and follow Jesus well, being able to put into words is a key tool to help us stay faithful and fruitful.

Today's testimony has the title of the sermon and this subtitle: I survived snowy mountains, a filthy prison, and an abusive husband. Then I discovered who had protected me all along.

When Arif marched up to me in church, it was obvious that he was angry. With his eyes narrowed in hate and his long beard trembling with rage, he was incensed that I, a Christian woman, would be trying to convert Muslims.

Within seconds Arif was flat on his back as if God had acted supernaturally to get his attention. (This is not an uncommon experience when I witness to Muslims.) It didn't take long for Arif to break down and start crying, and once he'd opened up his heart to God like that, it was only a matter of time before he turned his back on Islam and gave his life to Jesus. All I had to do was stand to the side and pray.

But not everyone meets God this way. For some, the journey to seeing Jesus as Savior is sudden and dramatic like it was on the road to Damascus. But for others, the journey to faith looks more like the road to Emmaus: a gradual realization that Jesus is closer than the air we breathe.

I know, because that's exactly how it was with me.

Subtitle - **Robbed of Joy**

I was born in Iran—beautiful, peaceful Iran. My life was good, and it got even better when I fell in love, got married, and gave birth to my son, Daniel. I was 18 years old with a husband who loved me and a newborn baby we both adored. Even the fact that my country was being overtaken by Islamic revolutionaries couldn't dampen my joy. Like so many people whose lives feel perfect, I had little appetite for God. But all that was about to change.

Death came like a thief one morning soon after Daniel was born. My husband was killed in a traffic accident, and in an instant my life was robbed of joy. I was in shock. I was in denial. And for the first time in my life, my mind turned to God. I asked, **What have I done to deserve this?**

In time the pain dulled a little, and I devoted myself to Daniel. I remarried, but from the first night we were together, my new husband revealed himself to be a violent, abusive man. My life was once more plunged into pain and sorrow. Only this time, there was no end in sight.

I gave birth to a daughter, Roksana, but my husband's beatings continued. And when he got in trouble with the authorities, I had no choice but to join him as he fled across the mountains into Turkey.

It was a terrible journey. We weren't equipped for the snow, and soon my fingers, mouth, and toes were black with frostbite. And when I realized that Roksana was no longer breathing, my thoughts once more returned to God. **Why are you punishing me this way?**

Crouched on the cold ground, my baby's tiny body hanging limply in my arms, I was at my lowest point. I had nothing left with which to fight. I wanted to die. I had no idea that God was right there with me.

Hours later, as we sat by a fire in the custody of Turkish police, I got my first real glimpse of God. Roksana was alive. It was a miracle. Throughout the next four months that we spent locked up in a filthy Turkish prison, God was right there. He kept me safe from many dangers, and I know he was there too in the kindness of a stranger: a businessman, once imprisoned alongside us, who helped secure our release through Amnesty International.

But it wasn't until I was far away from Turkey that God started to reveal himself more clearly. One day two men knocked on my apartment door. They wanted to talk about Jesus, but I was too scared of my husband to talk to strangers. They returned the next day and handed me a Bible. I knew I should have thrown it away, but something made me want to keep it.

So I hid it where my husband could not find it. The next time he beat me until my body was bruised and sore, something compelled me to give the Bible a look. It was a strange thing for a Muslim like me to do, but I felt better somehow. It spoke to me, and I started to speak to God. **If you really are there, God, please help.**

Eventually, with the help of the police, I was able to leave my husband. My children and I were relocated to another city and offered emergency shelter by nuns. As I listened to them talk and sing about loving and following Jesus, something awakened within me. **Could I ever learn to love and trust you too, Jesus?**

Years passed before I had an answer. I was back in Iran, having returned to visit a dying relative. I tried to keep away from trouble, but I fell afoul of the regime. The authorities were suspicious as to why I had left Iran in the first place, and I knew I couldn't tell the truth about my escape without facing a return to prison. After three months of court hearings and interviews, I stood before a judge, waiting to hear his verdict. Powerless and desperate, I turned fully to the one who had been beside me

throughout it all. I promised God I would give my life to Christ if he could deliver me from this ordeal.

Right then, as I prayed, he freed me from the enemy's grip. The judge, who saw that I was crying, had mercy on me and let me go free. The very next day, I was back in Sweden - God had rescued me and brought me safely home. From that day on, my life has been his.

Subtitle - **He Will Call**

Today, at my church in Sweden, I have the privilege of seeing God powerfully at work in the lives of so many Muslims. All over the world, God is appearing in dreams and visions to men and women who have previously followed Allah.

But God continues to work at a slower pace as well. Two summers ago, as the news brought constant stories of refugees climbing on boats and hoping to make it to Greece, I was asked to pray with a man who had walked into my church.

His name was Fiaz, and he told me about the night that he, his wife, and two daughters stood on the shore in Turkey and watched the boats approach. The flashlights were weak, and the waves crashing on the rocks were strong. He scooped up his little girls and called to his wife to follow.

Only when they had pushed away from the shore did Fiaz discover that his wife had not made it on board. There were other boats, he told himself. She could have gotten on one of them. When they landed he searched frantically, up and down the coast.

It took nine months for Fiaz to discover the truth. His wife had fallen down in the push to climb on board. She had drowned right there, just a few feet away. She was age 23.

"Only God can heal you," I said, as Fiaz and I stood before the cross. "Open up your heart to

him." He let out a cry so raw, so loud, and so full of the deepest, darkest pain. It was like my own cry in the mountains - a raging against evil.

The next week, Fiaz and his daughters moved in with a family from church. There will be no quick fixes and no simple solutions. But God will be with them, guiding them, leading and loving them. He will call them back to him again and again. All they have to do is say yes.

Annahita Parsan shared her story in the February 20, 2018, Christianity Today magazine. Today she is an ordained minister in the Church of Sweden. She is the author of Stranger No More: A Muslim Refugee's Harrowing Escape, Miraculous Rescue, and the Quiet Call of Jesus.

The prophet Isaiah tells us: "And you will say in that day: 'Give thanks to the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples, proclaim that his name is exalted. 'Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let his be made known in all the earth. Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, of Drake, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.'" (12:4-6)

The author of Hebrews reminds us: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (4:12)

And may we follow the instructions of the psalmist: "Oh give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, who he has redeemed from trouble." (107:1-2)