

INSIDE
the
REVIVAL

GOOD NEWS & CHANGED HEARTS SINCE 9/11

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Inside the Revival: Good News & Changed Hearts Since 9/11

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THE BIG, UNTOLD STORY

*The greatest spiritual awakening in the
history of the Middle East is under way.*

YOU RARELY HEAR about it on the news.

You rarely even hear about it in churches in the West, in the East, or even in the Middle East. But the big, untold story is that more Muslims are coming to faith in Jesus Christ today than at any other time in history.

For many Muslims, despair and despondency at what they see as the utter failure of Islamic governments and societies to improve their lives and give them peace, security, and a sense of purpose and meaning in life are causing them to leave Islam in search of truth. Some have lost their way entirely and become agnostics and atheists. Others have

sadly turned to alcohol and drug abuse. But millions are finding that only Jesus Christ heals the ache in their hearts and the deep wounds in their souls.

For other Muslims, it is not depression but rage that is driving them away from the Qur'an and the mosque. They are seeing far too many Muslim leaders and governments and preachers both advocating and acting out cruelty toward women and children and violence even against fellow Muslims.

And as their anger has risen, so too has their determination to disassociate themselves with Islam and find the truth someplace else.

In my travels through the epicenter I have personally witnessed—and been blessed by—God's love for Muslims and for nominal Christians. He is reviving them both. He is awaking Muslims to the truth of the Scriptures, and Muslim Background Believers ("MBBs") are finding hope in Jesus Christ. He is also breathing new spiritual life into Nominal Christian Background Believers ("NCBBs"), who were raised in churches but were long unaware of the life-changing power of Jesus Christ.

And He is doing so in numbers few could ever have imagined.

REVIVAL IN IRAN

“If you are working in Iran, you feel like you are working with God,” a top Iranian ministry leader told me. “He is with us in Iran. Jesus Christ is revealing Himself to people in Iran. A big revival is under way and more is coming. Friends keep telling me to leave the country for my own safety. ‘The government will arrest you,’ they say. ‘They will kill you.’ But if you leave, you are losing a big, historical chance. If you stay and serve, you will see a big revival and see prophecy fulfilled. You feel so small. But God is so big!”¹

At the time of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, there were only about five hundred known Muslim converts to Jesus inside the country. By 2000, a survey of Christian demographic trends reported that there were two hundred twenty thousand Christians inside Iran, of which between four and twenty thousand were Muslim converts.² And according to Iranian Christian leaders I interviewed, the number of Christ followers inside their country shot dramatically higher between 2000 and 2008.

“In Iran,” one Iranian Christian told me, “you don’t go after people with the gospel. They are coming to you to ask you about the Lord. Let me

give you an example. I went to the doctor's office because I was feeling very ill. I asked the receptionist if I could see the doctor right away, but she was a veiled woman and a fanatical Muslim. She had no intention of making life easier for an 'infidel,' and she told me I would have to wait for two hours. 'You will regret that,' I said with a smile, and then sat down in the crowded waiting room. A few moments later, the doctor walked by to pick up a file. 'Hello, Reverend,' he said to me. I greeted him back. Then everyone in the waiting room asked me, 'Are you really a reverend?' I said I was. 'How can I know Jesus?' they asked. I told them and five Muslims prayed with me in the waiting room to receive Christ as their Savior. 'See how you will regret making me wait?' I told the receptionist, again with a smile. She has never made me wait again."³

Ultimately, I'm told that what is bringing these Iranians to Christ are dreams and visions of Jesus himself. Several years ago, an Iranian pastor I know met a twenty-two-year-old Iranian Shia woman who had become a Christian after seeing a vision of Jesus Christ. She just showed up in his church one day, hungry to study the Bible for herself. The more she studied God's Word, the more deeply she loved Jesus. Soon, she discovered that God had given her

the spiritual gift of evangelism. That is, not only did she have a passion to share her faith with others; the Holy Spirit had also blessed her with a supernatural ability to lead Muslims to Jesus. Today, she leads an average of fifteen people to Christ every day—that's right, *fifteen a day*. She told my pastor friend that Iranian Muslims are so desperate for the gospel that typically it takes about five minutes to share the story of her conversion and how God has changed her life before the listener is ready to also receive Christ. "Difficult" conversations, she says, with several questions or concerns, take fifteen to twenty minutes. Her prayer: to lead seven thousand Iranian Muslims to Christ over the next five years.⁴

REVIVAL IN AFRICA

Senior pastors and ministry leaders in Egypt estimate there are more than 2.5 million followers of Jesus Christ in their country. Many of these are Muslim converts, and there is also an enormous revival going on among nominal Christians inside the historic Coptic church, whose members number about 10 million.⁵

On a trip to Cairo, I visited the famous "garbage church" planted in 1978 by a Coptic priest with a burden for reaching the people who lived

among literally thousands of tons of trash—people Paul called “the scum of the world, the dregs of all things”^{*}—to share the Good News that they could be adopted by the King of kings. Now, on an average weekend, some ten thousand new and growing believers from the garbage community come to worship and grow as disciples of Jesus Christ.

In Sudan, meanwhile, one of the biggest stories in modern Christendom is unfolding—a spiritual awakening of almost unimaginable proportions amid civil war, radical Islam, rampant persecution, and outright genocide.

In *Epicenter*, I reported that one million Sudanese had turned to Christ since the year 2000—not in spite of persecution, war, and genocide, but *because* of them. “People see what radical Islam is like,” one Sudanese Christian leader told me, “and they want Jesus instead.”⁶

Since the fall of 2006, more than a quarter of a million additional Sudanese have given their lives to Christ, bringing the estimated total number of believers in the country to more than 5.5 million.⁷

The number of believers in Libya is not currently known. In Tunisia, I am told, there are less than a thousand Muslim Background Believers

^{*} I Corinthians 4:13.

(“MBBs”). But in neighboring Algeria, more than eighty thousand Muslims have become followers of Christ in recent years. The vast majority of these believers are young people under the age of thirty.⁸

The surge of Christianity has become so alarming to Islamic clerics that in March of 2006, Algerian officials passed a law banning Muslims from becoming Christians or even learning about Christianity, and forbidding Christians from meeting together without a license from the government.⁹

On a 2005 trip to Casablanca and Rabat, I found the Moroccan media up in arms about the “phenomenon of Moroccans converting to Christianity,” suggesting that between 20,000 and 40,000 Muslims have become Christ-followers. Local pastors and ministry leaders have told me that the kinds of numbers cited in these stories may be overstated, but they readily acknowledge that God is on the move in their country. Many MBBs are now evangelists, disciple makers, and church planters overflowing with exciting stories of how other Moroccans are coming to Christ. Let me share just one with you.

A young Muslim woman from Morocco—let’s call her Abidah (which means “worshiper”)—saw the *JESUS* film while living and working in Europe and became a follower of Jesus. After two years of

being disciplined in the faith by an older and wiser believer, Abidah went home on vacation to visit her family in Morocco. For five days she prayed about how to tell her family that she had become a Christian, but she was too scared. On the sixth day, her sister also returned home from Europe. “Hey, look what I got for free!” the sister said to her family, showing them a copy of the Injil (New Testament) and the *JESUS* film a Christian had given her as a gift on the ferry ride across the Mediterranean.

“Hey, look, the film is about Isa!”* exclaimed the father, a traditional Muslim. “He’s our prophet. Let’s all watch it.”

Abidah was in shock.

The family sat down together in front of the television. About halfway through the film, the whole family was asking one question after another, trying to understand who Jesus was, why He taught the way He did, and how He could do miracles and show such love and compassion to everyone, including His enemies.

Abidah saw her opening. She started answering the questions. Now it was her family who was in shock. “Why do you know all these things?” asked her father.

* Isa is the Arabic name for Jesus.

“Because I saw this movie two years ago and I became a Christian. But I’ve been afraid to tell you.”

A cloud covered her father’s face. He looked angry. But when he spoke, he did not yell at Abidah. Instead, he said, “What! You made us wait five days to hear about Jesus?”

REVIVAL IN IRAQ

Without a doubt, the hunger for Christ inside Iraq is also at an all-time high, say the numerous Iraqi pastors and ministry leaders I interviewed. Several million Arabic New Testaments and Christian books have been shipped into Iraq since the liberation. Millions more are being printed inside the country, and pastors say they cannot keep up with the demand. What’s more, Iraqis today are turning to Christ in numbers unimaginable at any point during Saddam Hussein’s reign of terror.

Before 2003, senior Iraqi Christian leaders tell me, there were only about four to six hundred known born-again followers of Jesus Christ in the entire country, despite an estimated seven hundred fifty thousand nominal Christians in historic Iraqi churches. By the end of 2008, Iraqi Christian leaders estimated that there were more than seventy thousand born-again Iraqi believers.¹⁰

Why such spiritual hunger? Every Iraqi Christian I have interviewed has given me the same two answers: war and persecution. Though the security in Iraq was deteriorating from 2003 to 2007, one of the top leaders of the Revivalist movement there told me he had never seen so many Iraqis praying to receive Christ and wanting Bible teaching.

I asked him how he accounted for such developments.

“It’s not that complicated really, Joel,” he replied. “When human beings are under threat, they look for a strong power to help them—a refuge. Iraqis look around and when they see believers in Jesus enjoying internal peace during a time of such violence and fear, they want Jesus too.”¹¹

REVIVAL IN THE HOLY LAND

In the heart of the epicenter itself—Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and Gaza—signs of revival are finally noticeable after centuries of spiritual drought.

Just since 2007, nearly one thousand Muslims have come to Christ in the West Bank alone, most of them converted through dreams and visions of Jesus.

One of the most influential Revivalists I have ever met is a Palestinian Arab. Born to a nominal

Christian family in Jerusalem in 1947, Taheer was barely six months old when the first Arab-Israeli war broke out. His mother died soon thereafter. Nevertheless, God was incredibly gracious to him, bringing him to saving faith in Jesus Christ at the age of eighteen as he wept on his knees with repentance after finally reading the New Testament for himself.

“I will not leave you as orphans,” Jesus said in John 14:18-19. “I will come to you. After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also.” These verses were suddenly coming true in this man’s life, and he soon developed a passion for reaching Muslims and nominal Christians with God’s amazing grace.

REVIVAL IN SYRIA, LEBANON, AND JORDAN

In 1967, there were no known born-again followers of Jesus Christ from a Muslim background in the entire country of Syria. Today, there are between four and five thousand born-again believers in the country, both MBBs and NCBBs combined.

Does more need to be done? Absolutely. But as one Arab ministry leader there told me: “I am so excited because God is doing a miracle in Syria.”

God has been reviving the Jordanian Church in

the last four decades, and particularly in the past few years. Conservative estimates say the number of believers in the country is now between five and ten thousand. The head of one major Jordanian ministry, however, believes there may be as many as fifty thousand believers in the country.¹² Again, the precise numbers are not as important as the trend, and the Church is definitely bearing fruit again after centuries of spiritual barrenness.

In Lebanon, sources tell me, there are about ten thousand truly born-again followers of Jesus Christ today, though nearly four in ten of the country's 4 million residents describe themselves as "Christian." Most of the believers are NCBBs, but Muslims are starting to show an openness to the gospel that has been lacking for centuries.

As the Second Lebanon War erupted in July of 2006, Lebanese Revivalists huddled together to fast and pray for their country, even as rockets and bombs were falling all around them and the mood of the people was quickly darkening.

The believers soon found themselves drawn to Matthew 5:14-16, in which Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to

all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”

They decided they needed to spring into action, not wait for the war to be over. They mobilized dozens of teams to begin doing relief work among the Shia families from southern Lebanon who had fled to the Beirut area for safety. In just a few short weeks, with financial help from the Joshua Fund, they delivered forty thousand packages of food, cooking supplies, New Testaments, and the *JESUS* film on DVD to these displaced and terrified families. They also drove trucks filled with relief supplies and gospel literature to Shia families hunkered down in the south as well as those in the Bekaa Valley, near the border with Syria.

“Food they need, but Jesus they need more,” said an Arab Christian ministry worker. Through that outreach alone, more than 1,100 Lebanese Muslims prayed to receive Christ as their Savior.

REVIVAL IN SAUDI ARABIA

In Saudi Arabia—the epicenter of Islam due to its status as the home of Mecca and Medina—a dramatic spiritual awakening is taking place. Arab Christian leaders estimated there were more than

one hundred thousand Saudi MBBs in 2005, and they believe the numbers are even higher today.

Consider one example. A Saudi woman—let's call her Marzuqah (which means “blessed by God”)—secretly converted to Christianity. But she had a brother who was dying of a terrible disease, and Marzuqah was deeply grieved. She prayed fervently for God to heal and to save her brother.

One day, Jesus appeared to Marzuqah in a dream. “Your prayers have been answered,” He told her. “Go tell your brother about Me.” She did.

To her astonishment, her brother prayed with her to receive Christ. Though the rest of her family has not yet followed her lead, Marzuqah has become a devoted disciple. She studies her Bible two hours a day. She has found other secret believers to meet with for prayer and Bible study. And she is sharing the gospel with her Muslim friends. “There are so many people I must tell about Jesus!” she says.¹³

REVIVAL IN CENTRAL ASIA

Is God moving powerfully in Afghanistan? He most certainly is. Some sources told me the number of Afghan believers is now between 20,000 and 30,000. That could be true, but I honestly did not

see evidence that there are even 10,000 at present, and persecution of the believers is intense.

The enormous controversy over the case of Abdul Rahman, a Muslim convert to Christianity facing execution by a court in Kabul for apostasy, shone a huge spotlight on the fact that Afghans are turning to Christ in such numbers that Islamic leaders are furious. It also showed the fledgling Afghan church that fellow believers around the world are praying for them and eager to see them grow and flourish.

Evangelical leaders in Kazakhstan report that there are more than fifteen thousand Kazakh Christians, and more than one hundred thousand Christians of all ethnicities, and the stories I hear from Kazakhstan today are extraordinary.

During the summer of 1986, I had the privilege of traveling to Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. At the time, there were only a few Uzbek believers in a country of 27 million people. Today, there are some thirty thousand Uzbek followers of Christ, and hunger for the gospel is at an all-time high.

Senior Pakistani Christian leaders tell me there is a “conversion explosion” going on in their country. There are now an estimated 2.5 million to 3 million born-again Pakistani believers worshipping Jesus

Christ. Whole towns and villages along the Afghan-Pakistani border are seeing dreams and visions of Jesus and are converting to Christianity.

One young Pakistani Muslim who converted to Christianity became a bold minister of the gospel to Taliban refugees. Over the course of two to three years, the thirty-one-year-old evangelist personally led eight hundred Taliban extremists to faith in Christ before he was captured and murdered and his car set ablaze by a bloodthirsty mob.

My friend Dr. T. E. Koshy, a senior elder in one of India's largest evangelical church-planting movements, began traveling to Pakistan in 1993 to preach the gospel and strengthen the local believers. "Today, with so many Christians in Pakistan, many are seeing the believers demonstrate Christ's love in real and practical ways," he said. "The restlessness of the masses is created by the Enemy, and Pakistanis are coming to realize that they can only find rest and healing and forgiveness through Jesus Christ."

ENDNOTES

THE BIG, UNTOLD STORY

1. Author interview with an Iranian Christian leader on the condition of anonymity in 2007.
2. Patrick Johnstone et al, Operation World (Waynesboro: Authentic Media, 2001), p. 353.
3. Author interview with an Iranian Christian leader on the condition of anonymity in 2007.
4. Author interview with an Iranian pastor on the condition of anonymity in 2007.
5. Author interviews with Egyptian pastors and ministry leaders beginning in 2005 and continuing through the fall of 2008.
6. Author interview with a Sudanese evangelical leader, name and date withheld.
7. Author interviews with numerous Sudanese Christian leaders in 2008.

8. Author interview with an Arab pastor, name and date of interview withheld.
9. "Algeria bans Muslims from learning about Christianity," www.ArabicNews.com, March 21, 2006.
10. Interviews with Iraqi and Jordanian Christian leaders in 2008.
11. Author interview with Iraqi evangelical leader, name and date withheld.
12. Interviews with several senior Jordanian Christian leaders on the condition of anonymity in 2008.
13. The story was relayed to me by an Arab ministry leader who has interacted with this woman personally; name and date of interview withheld.

AIR WAR, GROUND WAR

1. Cited by Raymond Ibrahim, "Islam's 'Public Enemy #1,'" *National Review*, March 25, 2008.
2. Hormoz Shariat, interview with the author, January 2007.