

# *Face to Face with Jesus: A Former Muslim's Extraordinary Journey to Heaven and Encounter with the God of Love*

by *Samaa Habib*

*And they overcame him because of the blood of the Lamb and because of the word of their testimony, and they did not love their life even when faced with death.*

*Revelation 12:11*

Death was not on my mind when I awakened that sunny fall morning in the capital city of my Middle Eastern homeland. Terrorists and bombs that would tear my world to pieces were as far from my thoughts as east is from west.

I was nineteen years old. Life and joy and the ordinary hopes of a young woman filled my heart.

Light streamed through the window of my bedroom and penetrated my eyelids. I opened my eyes and lay quietly listening to the stirring of life in my home. Birds sang outside my window. I was happy that it was Sunday, my favorite day of the week. From the kitchen I heard my father's hearty laughter. My mother was visiting my grandmother for three days, so my sisters took over the tasks of preparing breakfast.

"Samaa," my sister called, "are you awake?"

"Almost." I sat up on the edge of my bed. "Good morning, Lord," I whispered. "Thank You for this beautiful autumn day. I give every moment to You."

As if to interrupt my sweet conversation with Jesus, the loudspeaker on the minaret of the local mosque broadcast the insistent call of the muezzin, summoning the faithful Muslims of our neighborhood to prayer.

My father was a lawyer, a respected Ph.D. professor of philosophy at the university and also a Mullah, a religious leader and teacher. That morning, as I dressed, I heard him go to his room and pray the ritual prayers to Allah. I knew he tried to ignore the disgrace he felt that some of his family had converted from Islam to follow Jesus Christ.

My father knew I would be going to church. Six of his ten children, as well as my mother, had accepted Christ. My mother was well educated, knew three different languages and had been a professor of language at the school before giving all that up to marry my father and become the honored mother of ten children. I was the youngest daughter.

Our conversion to Christ was deeply troubling to my father. As Muslim prayers penetrated my door I quietly prayed for him, "Lord, I ask that You lift the veil of spiritual blindness for my dear father so that he, too, may truly know the joy of salvation through Your Son, Jesus. Reveal to him that Jesus is not only a Prophet but the Son of the Living God."

I decided to wear high heels and a new ankle-length green and gray dress that had been a present from a friend. I brushed my long brown hair, making sure I looked my best for the Lord. I didn't want to be late.

Those good shepherds who had founded our church courageously chose to stay with their flock.

I hugged my brothers and sisters good morning and kissed them. "I have to be at church

early.”

“You need to eat breakfast,” my sister said firmly, offering me a cup of tea.

I drank it quickly before grabbing a pomegranate from a bowl. “No time for more. I’m singing in the choir and want to visit with Adila before practice.”

Father entered the kitchen. “Give your sister Adila my love. Bring her home. Why should she stay at the church when she has a home and a mother and father?”

“I will tell her, Papa. But you know it’s part of her schooling.”

Adila was only a year older than me. Tall and beautiful, she had returned from Bible school in Europe and was living at our church while receiving practical training.

“Tell her I love her. And I love you, too, my darling daughter,” Papa said.

I blew him a kiss as I ran out the door.

“Be safe, my precious girl,” he shouted after me. At that moment, did my father somehow sense the ordeal that lay ahead?

Only two days earlier, the U.S. Embassy had evacuated its personnel in response to “a confirmed terrorist threat against foreigners.” Some resident foreigners had been informed of the threat by Islamic extremists, but those good shepherds who had founded our church courageously chose to stay with their flock.

I did not personally feel a threat from terrorists. Instead, my church had been the target of harassment by government officials. The Committee for Religious Affairs threatened to revoke the church’s registration because we held evangelistic outreaches in the capital. Three times in the previous year police had raided worship meetings and arrested people during services, confiscating our literature and handing down punishments for “illegal missionary propaganda.”

Yet we were all unafraid. The joy and peace of Jesus, which passes all understanding, filled our hearts and minds. We were convinced of the Lord’s promise to never leave us or forsake us. Though my mother and father might have been afraid for us, their children, I felt no fear. If God was for us, who could be against us? I hurried out the door of our apartment and raised my face to the sunlight. “Lord, show my dear father how much You love him and how much You love us, Your children. Let Papa experience the joy of salvation we do.”

As I walked, heels clicking on the pavement, I felt that Jesus walked beside me. The air was scented with the aroma of cooking breakfast and the muskiness of autumn leaves.

## **My Island of Hope**

After several long blocks I spotted the three-story complex of dormitories and offices housing our rented building. This was my spiritual home, an island of hope in the midst of a sea of spiritual darkness.

My nation was 98 percent Muslim, and though we were a land that aspired to democracy, freedom of religion was an idea, not the reality of our lives. We had only recently survived

a brutal civil war, which ended up as a religious war between the two main denominations of Islam—Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims—who had divided after the death of the Prophet Muhammad over issues of who should be the next leader. The word *Sunni* in Arabic comes from a word meaning “one who follows the traditions of the Prophet.” The Sunni believed their leader should be elected from among those capable of the job and thus the Prophet Muhammad’s advisor, Abu Bakr, became the first caliph of the Islamic nation. The word *Shia* in Arabic means “a group or supportive party of people.” The Shia believed leadership should have passed directly to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali (in other words, people in Muhammad’s household). As a result, the two groups had slaughtered one another for years, leaving over 100,000 dead and many more crippled for life. The civil war was supposed to be a war for freedom, but only one thing united the Sunni and Shia Muslims: hatred of Christians and Jews. One could be “born” a Christian and that was tolerated, but those Muslims who converted to Christ and turned from the Qur’an to the Bible were considered by radical Muslims to be traitors, worthy of a horrible death.

As I stepped onto the holy ground I smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. I always felt safe there because of the presence of the Lord.

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Hurrying to my sister’s dorm room in the complex I was surprised to find her still in bed. Her dark eyes were cloudy with fever. “Adila? Are you sick?” I sank beside her and put my hand on her forehead. She was burning up.

She blinked at me and replied weakly, “I’ve had a terrible night.” “What’s wrong?” The color had drained from her beautiful olive skin. I laid my hands on her head and prayed for her healing. Then I gave her the pomegranate I brought from home.

She whispered, “Don’t tell Mother or Father I’m ill. They’ll worry.”

“All right, darling. I’m so sorry. Just try to sleep awhile. I’ve got to go to choir practice. After the service I’ll come back, bring you tea and pray without ceasing for you. I’ll ask the choir to pray for you, too.”

My sister nodded and lay back on the pillow, closing her eyes. “Thank you. Yes. Keep praying, please.”

Hurrying across the courtyard to the adjoining building, I outran the fallen leaves swirling on the breeze. Dashing into the basement practice room, I grabbed my choir robe from the rack and pulled it on.

“Samaa! You’re on time!” called my friend Wafa, meaning “Faithful,”\* a cheerful boy about my age. He had been to Bible school with my sister Adila and was a good friend. Because he was an only child and did not have sisters, he was like a little brother to us.

Embraced by my friends, I was laughing as I straightened the purple cross embroidered on the front of the white gown. I laughed again as the futility of my actions became clear. Greeting friends and family on the cheek with the traditional three kisses, as well as hugging them, rearranged every pleat and fold.

Arriving even later than me, my sister Iman joined me in the middle of our section. She came in time to begin our warm-up exercises. I also asked the choir to pray together for Adila’s recovery. As two or three gather in the name of the Lord, He is in the midst of us and will grant us what we ask in agreement.

We left the basement and climbed the narrow stairs to the third-floor sanctuary. The choir seats were at the front, beneath a large wooden cross mounted on the wall, and ahead of wooden benches occupied by nearly five hundred people.

### **A Riveting Message**

Our pastor was away, so an assistant pastor would be preaching while my good friend Missionary Johnny, meaning “God Is Gracious,” would lead the worship.

\*In my culture, as well as in Bible times, the meanings of names are important. That is why I will be mentioning these throughout this book.

We sang “Hallelujah,” “God Is So Good” and “Praise the Lord!” We sang about His love and His glory and His majesty. My spirit soared with joy and shivered with the intensity of it. There was delight on the faces of those gathered together. “The joy of the Lord is my strength, and my light and my salvation,” we sang, and I knew it was true.

In between songs Missionary Johnny told inspiring stories of God’s faithfulness and blessings poured out on believers around the world. But when a shadow crossed his face, I knew something was troubling him.

When he spoke again, he related a story about a missionary in China. The man had been persecuted for his faith and then physically attacked. When he finally escaped to go home, it was in a wheelchair. The man’s nose had also been cut off.

My sister Iman, next to me, gasped in horror.

Missionary Johnny went on: “It’s not a happy message, but the Lord has told me that persecution is going to come. We need to be ready for it. Jesus was persecuted in His life. He suffered, and so will we. Are you ready to be persecuted for Him? Are you ready to die for Him?”

There was such urgency and anguish in his voice that I wondered if he had been tormented by a dream or vision, pressuring him to deliver this question with fervor. He certainly held the attention of everyone in the room. It was so quiet I could hear birds singing through the glass of the windows lining both sides of the packed sanctuary.

When Missionary Johnny sat down, the assistant pastor approached the lectern. He began his message with a Scripture reading.

“When Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi,” he quoted from Matthew 16, “He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’

“And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’

“He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’

“Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

“And Jesus said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. I also say to you that you are Peter

(which means 'rock'), and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven' (verses 13–19)."

The preacher paused before he asked, "When someone says to you, 'Who is this Jesus you speak of? Who is He?' will you be brave enough, even if you think you might be persecuted, to say, like Peter did: 'He is the Christ, the Son of the living God'?"

Setting the idea of persecution against the promises we had heard, I pondered the notion that hell cannot triumph over us and cherished again the remembrance of Christ's victory over death. I felt a return of the joy and contentment with which the morning had begun.

After the sermon, we took an offering. I happened to glance at the wall clock at the back. It was a few minutes before midday. Iman left the front of the room to get the flowers we always give to welcome newcomers.

"Will you be brave enough, even if you think you might be persecuted, to say . . . 'He is the Christ, the Son of the living God'?"

At the director's signal, the choir stood for the next hymn and began to sing "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." The words "Glory, glory, hallelujah" rang in the chamber as we lifted our voices in my favorite hymn. I found such power and confidence in the marching beat, the stirring chords and the praise-filled words.

My soul was once more back in the grip of the joy of worshiping my Jesus when suddenly there was a flash of light and a deafening roar!

The whole building shook, as if there had been an earthquake, and I grasped the back of my chair to keep from falling. I was deafened by the noise, like a thousand trumpets blasting together. . . .

## **Pandemonium**

The entire auditorium was suddenly cloaked with dense black smoke. There was a commotion in the middle of the room, but I couldn't make out the cause or the result. It felt as though I was under water or my ears were stuffed with cotton. The stench of the fumes made me cough and caused my eyes to burn.

All around voices babbled, "What happened? Is anyone hurt? What do we do?"

Trying to peer through the cloud of debris and fumes, I shouted for Iman: "Are you all right?" Then I remembered she was no longer nearby. Like many others, I kept asking, "What was that?"

"I don't know," each person replied.

I thought, *Maybe this is the Second Coming of Jesus?* Could it be? Could this clamor be the Lord's return? As I peered into the unnatural gloom and strained my ringing ears, the words of Revelation came to my lips as a prayer: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'" (22:17). Then, without thinking about it, I started singing the hymn. When I looked around,

many in the choir were raising their hands and singing with me, too. They joined me in saying, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus, come!"

Maybe this was the Second Coming of Jesus?

Was it possible? Was Jesus calling us home right now? I felt no fear and had no sense of danger, only confusion. If there was no spiritual explanation, then perhaps it had been an accident.

The air began to clear a little, and I noticed windows had been shattered. I heard shouting but could not comprehend the words.

Ever since the civil war my country had experienced many electrical and mechanical equipment problems. Maybe what had happened was merely caused by an electrical fault. That notion was dispelled when a member of the congregation, who was in our country's military, ran toward the front, waving his arms and shouting, "Get out. Get out, now! It was a bomb! There may be more. Hurry!"

Pandemonium struck. People screamed in fear. The only exit, at the back of the room, was jammed with church members trying to fight their way out. Five hundred bodies tried to exit through a doorway barely big enough for two at a time.

Caught in the surge, I felt myself carried toward the rear of the chamber. Even if I had wanted to turn, I couldn't have done so. My other siblings were not present, and Adila was sick in her room, but where was Iman? She had gone to get the flowers, but now I couldn't see her anywhere!

When I got to the middle of the auditorium, I gasped. There was a hole in the floor over three feet wide! Benches and chairs were splintered from the blast, and bodies lay atop the sticks. Everything near the explosion had been completely destroyed. There was a hole in the roof.

"God help us," I whispered. I sensed an answering breath of supernatural peace.

When the fumes cleared still more, I witnessed other people lying wounded and bleeding amid the wreckage. Groans and cries for help mingled with the noises of panicked worshipers trying to escape. Others began the grim task of aiding the injured.

Aishah, a dear friend who danced with me on the worship dance team, clasped her hands to her stomach. She was trying to walk, but blood seeped out between her clenched fingers. She did not speak, but her eyes flashed me a terrified appeal.

Grabbing her around her shoulders, I helped her toward the stairs, but it was like dragging a weighted sack. She could not make her feet move, and she swayed as if she would collapse any second.

It looked as though my friends were dying all around me, and there was nothing I could do!

I stumbled toward a wooden bench, now broken in two and propped up at a crazy angle. Blood was spattered everywhere like scarlet paint. I had to get my friend out, had to get her help, but the exit seemed no nearer than before. Were we moving at all? I began to think I was never going to be able to leave the building.

"God help us," I whispered. I sensed an answering breath of supernatural peace, but my

body still shook from the shock of the horrifying sights and sounds.

Oily black dust settled on shattered furniture and shards of window glass. I choked and coughed, trying to cover my mouth with one hand and support my friend with the other. Nightmarish images of death, blood and horrible wounds crowded in, and I could not shut them out.

I needed air. Easing my friend onto what remained of the bench, I moved toward the fragmented remains of a windowsill. A voice in my ear urged me to lean over and look at the sidewalk below.

“Jump,” the voice whispered. “It’s best. If you stay here, you’ll choke to death . . . or burn to death . . . or be trampled. Jump!” I knew it was the devil, tempting me to commit suicide. The building was so high that a fall of three stories would kill me instantly. But since God had given me life, I knew only He had the right to take it from me. I took authority over the spirit of suicide. *Satan, I rebuke you. Be gone in the name of Jesus!*

At that moment I spotted Missionary Johnny’s wife trying to climb out an adjacent window. Her face was streaked with soot and blood, and she looked terrified. She wavered on the brink, with one foot already on the window ledge.

I caught her just in time. “Don’t!” I said gently. “We’ll be okay. We can get down the stairs now.”

Falling into my arms, she cried and nodded. Already two others were helping my friend Aishah with the stomach wound, so I continued to assist Johnny’s wife. We made it to the exit, stumbling over lost shoes, discarded purses and backpacks as we descended to the second floor.

Nodding her thanks, Johnny’s wife, now calm, turned to help someone else.

On the landing to the second floor someone called my name. “Samaa! Help us!” An arm waved at me through a partly open door that led to the dark corridor. “There are lots of us in here. Our clothes were burned off by the blast.”

In my culture it is shameful to be seen unclothed. The women would not allow themselves to be seen in that condition, even if it cost them their lives.

“Samaa, please save us! Get us something to cover our bodies,” one woman pleaded on all of their behalf.

Stripping my choir robe off, I thrust it into the closet. “This will do for one,” I instructed. “I’ll get more and be right back.” I thought of Adila’s room in the adjacent building. There I could borrow more clothing and check on her at the same time.

Once outside I spotted Adila running toward me. “Thank God, you’re all right!” she cried, hugging me fiercely.

“I’m fine,” I replied, “but I can’t stop. There’s no time.” Briefly I explained, and together we ran back to her room to swoop up an armload of clothing. Kicking off my high heels, I tied my hair back and slipped on flat shoes so I could run faster. “There are lots more in need,” I said.

“Next door,” Adila urged. “Blankets and sheets and towels.”

Toting large bundles, we sprinted back toward the bombed building. Wounded, bleeding

and broken bodies were being carried outside the wreckage and laid in rows alongside the walls. Then I saw Iman! She was fine. She was helping. There was only time enough for a quick hug.

“I will stay and help the injured,” Adila said.

“I’ll take the clothes and come back,” I told her.

When Iman saw me go back into the building, she wanted to go, too, but felt the Holy Spirit tell her not to go. At first she ignored the prompting, but then felt Him caution her one more time. This time she obeyed and stayed outside, helping Adila with the wounded.

Now I felt I was fighting my way upstream. So was my friend Wafa, who was helping to evacuate the wounded. So many panicked people were still struggling to escape from the building that it was impossible for us to get back up to the second floor. We got stuck in the stairwell between floors, waiting for the downward crush to subside.

The bundle of blankets, sheets and towels was so heavy that I leaned against a wall box containing a fire extinguisher. Catching my breath, I glanced at my watch. It had been thirty minutes since the detonation. Sabir, another friend, stepped toward me. He had been helping carry the wounded outside, and his shirt was covered with blood.

“Are you okay?” I asked and reached to touch his shoulder in comfort.

At that instant another bomb, hidden inside the fire extinguisher cabinet, exploded.

I was thrown ten feet into the air and smashed against the opposite wall. All the air was knocked out of me. I was deafened and blinded, yet at the same moment my entire body felt like it was on fire—like I had an electric shock coursing over me and through me.

The pain was excruciating. It felt like the angel of death was choking me. I was fighting for my breath.

The Bible says in Romans 10:13 that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. I could not speak, but my heart cried out, *Jesus! Jesus, help me! Jesus, save me!* I gasped, and then I breathed my last.

Then all went black as my spirit left my body.

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