

Away from Islam and into the Light

Story by Christa Kinde

In some ways, it was a perfectly normal day—just another Sunday in just another small church. As the recently established congregation took their seats, a young man slipped through the doors. He stood in the back as Pastor Matt introduced the topic of his message—Islam.

“Many people think that the problem with Islam is that [some of] its followers are radical fundamental extremists, but that’s simply not the case,” Matt began. He explained through an analogy that the problem with Islam is not a matter of extremism; the very foundations of the Muslim religion needed to be questioned.

As Matt outlined some of the Koran’s teachings, the young man in the back quietly slipped into a chair. This might have been just another sermon, and at that moment, their visitor was just another face in the crowd, but it would not be long before Joseph’s story would come out—a story that is nothing short of miraculous.

When Matt first encountered Joseph at a gym and invited him to visit his church, he knew nothing about the young man’s past—just that he was a Palestinian believer. As the congregation welcomed the newcomer in, pieces of his story began to surface, and his closest friends soon realized that Joseph’s decision to follow Jesus had come at great personal cost. In fact, his very life could well be in danger.

Wanting to be open about his situation, Joseph asked for the opportunity to share his testimony. “Everyone was expecting to hear that maybe he was coming out of drugs or something like that, but once Joseph started telling his story, jaws were dropping,” said Matt.

Joseph’s Chronicle

Mosab Hassan Yousef—who now prefers to be called Joseph—was born in the village of Bir Zeit, near Ramallah. Joseph is the

eldest son of Sheikh Hassan Yousef, one of the most popular Palestinian leaders of the Islamic Resistance Movement, better known as Hamas. This political, social, and paramilitary organization’s ultimate aspiration is to eliminate the nation of Israel and replace it with a Palestinian Islamic state. It is blamed for numerous attacks in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Many nations, including the United States, consider Hamas to be a terrorist organization.

Joseph grew up during turbulent times. Protests and raids were commonplace occurrences, and funerals for rebels killed in the uprisings took place almost every day in the cemetery next door to his childhood home. Like all the other children in his hometown, he demonstrated his bitter hatred for the Israeli soldiers who were their enemies—throwing stones, burning tires, and shouting insults. As a teenager, Joseph was appointed president of the Islamic Student Movement. Following in his father’s footsteps seemed his life’s natural course.

Then, Joseph was taken in a raid by the Israelis—arrested, blindfolded, hurried to a transport, and locked in a tiny prison cell. He spent 18 months in Megiddo Prison, and during his incarceration, he witnessed corruption, torture, and abuse of Hamas members. The suffering he witnessed, however, was at the hands of their own people, the leaders of Hamas that were incarcerated. He had been prepared to give his life for his beliefs, but as he watched these men turn on one another, Joseph’s faith in Islam and Hamas was shaken to its very foundations.

Soon after his release, Joseph walked down the old, narrow streets of Jerusalem. He noticed a young Westerner approaching people. The foreigner offered Joseph a tract about Christianity and invited him to attend

a Bible study. Curious, Joseph accepted the tract and began reading the Scriptures. One verse in particular turned Joseph’s world upside down. **Love your enemies** (Matthew 5:43-45a). This was something he had never heard before, but it was something he wanted to understand. Joseph attended the meeting and began to read the Word of God.

For months after that initial encounter, Joseph studied the Bible in secret, comparing its teachings side by side with the Koran. Convinced that Christianity held the truth, Joseph placed his faith in Jesus Christ and became a secret believer. Only a handful of other Palestinian Christians knew of his conversion, and as he became increasingly committed to his faith, he knew that he needed to make a difficult decision. Muslim men who convert forfeit their lives, so Joseph would have to give up everything—his heritage, his homeland, and his family. He came to America seeking religious freedom.

Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.

Philippians 3:8

Solidarity in Christ

As Joseph finished telling his story, the members of his new church in America were stunned, yet their response was unanimous. Surrounding the young man, they laid hands on him and prayed. They celebrated with him and cried with him, and every single one of them committed to stand with him, even if it put their lives in danger too.

From that day forward, the members of his new church considered themselves Joseph’s adopted family and began to look out for him. Even though they could not possibly relate to this young man’s experiences, they could show him the love of God.

Matt said, “He’s not just out there on his own anymore; he’s at the heart of the daily life of a small, growing church.” Joseph is often at his pastor’s house, spending time with Matt’s family. The Palestinian is always ready to help when a church member needs assistance moving furniture and is an active part of the prayer chain.

Matt continued, “We baptized Joseph in the Pacific Ocean, and not many weeks later, a young woman in our congregation was also baptized. She was an Orthodox Jew, and her parents disowned her that day. It was really amazing to see those two—one a former Palestinian Muslim and one an Orthodox Jew—getting along, caring for one another as family. If that’s not a demonstration of God’s peace, I don’t know what is.”

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name’s sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.”

Matthew 19:29

The church’s vision statement is to, “Boldly challenge the false faith of the unbelieving world with the truth that Jesus is the only Way, Truth, and Life.” Joseph’s presence in the church seemed to be a challenge from God. They sensed that the Lord did not want them to hide Joseph’s testimony, as if it were a light under a bushel. After Joseph agreed to go public, steps were taken to attract the media’s attention.

“Going public with Joseph’s story would do two things,” explained Matt. “First, it legitimized his conversion. We wanted to stand with him and state that we recognized the fruits of his walk, we baptized him, and we continue to fellowship with him. Second, we didn’t want to hide. As Americans, we have the freedom to openly practice our faith, and our vision statement says that we’ll **boldly** challenge the false faith of an unbelieving world. Even if it wouldn’t be an easy road, we needed to go out with the story.”

Exposed to the Light

When the *FOX News* special, “Escape from Hamas,” was aired a few months later, Joseph was suddenly the focus of the international media’s attention. His interviewers were amazed that he was openly declaring where he could be found. Rumors of death threats were already circulating, but Joseph takes Paul’s words to heart. **But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life**

dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24). In one of his television interviews, Joseph boldly stated, “I don’t want to die, and I don’t want to pretend that I like to die. I love to live. I love to serve my Lord, but if this will be how I prove my faith, I ask God to give me patience to do it.”

Matt says that the church receives emails from Muslims all over the world who have secretly converted to Christianity. His hope is that these individuals will find the courage to stand up and declare their faith, even if it means they’ll lose everything. “It would shake the very foundations of Islam.” Matt asks that Christians everywhere join Joseph in praying for his father, his mother, and his younger siblings—that they would come to faith in Jesus Christ as well.

Matt’s vision is that other Christians will find the confidence to invite Muslims to read the Bible, just as that one Christian tourist with a missionary heart offered that invitation to Joseph. “Christians don’t have to totally understand Islam to reach out to Muslims. God is opening doors, and many are ready to receive Him.”