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Love Your Enemies and Pray for Them: My Life as a Christian in the Middle East

I grew up in a wonderful Christian home in Nineveh, Iraq (the modern name of that city today is Mosul). I had two brothers, who were younger than me. My parents loved us and did their best to care for us and make sure that we would have a bright future. My father was a businessman who dealt with many things. When I was three or four years old, he moved us to Baghdad to pursue better business opportunities. We lived in a Christian neighborhood and associated with Christian friends even though we were a very small minority and lived in a city that was prominently Muslim.

My family belonged to the Syriac Orthodox Church of the East. There were about 500,000 Orthodox members in Iraq in the late fifties and early sixties when I was growing up (about 30,000 lived in Baghdad at that time, the rest lived in and around Mosul). My father was very secular. I do not ever remember him going to church, not even at Christmas or Easter. My mother was somewhat more devoted and went to church a few times a year. But there was one thing clear about both of them. Though we lived in a Muslim city, we did not have one single Muslim friend. My parents were very much into socializing and very often invited people to come over to our house. But not one of them was a Muslim. It was as if they did not even exist. My father told me over and over that there was nothing good that could come out of Islam or from Muslims. My mother drilled in my mind saying, "Be careful of all Muslims. Do not ever associate with them. They are out to get you. They are our enemies. They want to harm us." So, I grew up not being able to see anything good in Islam.

My parents insisted that the aim and purpose of Muslims was to convert us and make us one of them. They said "Be careful of Muslim, they have ulterior motives in associating with you." I also remember my dad often saying, "Do not date or marry any Muslim girl. Once a Christian

marries a Muslim the Christian will have to become a Muslim. The Christian will be forced to convert to Islam. Thus the Christian will lose his faith, identity, and heritage.”

Though I grew up in Iraq and lived there for about twenty years and went through the educational system from elementary school all the way to the university level in a public school where the vast majority of the people were Muslims, I never had a Muslim friend. In fact, I did my best to avoid any association with them. I actually grew up thinking that all Muslims were bad and wanted to harm me. That is what I heard all my life.

Later on I learned that almost all Christians (Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant) in Iraq and all throughout the Middle East and the other parts of the Muslim world have the same attitude. It seems to me that this is the one thing that almost all Christians agree on and have in common.

When I became an Adventist I discovered that Adventists in Iraq had the same sentiment about Muslims. I do not recall any effort to reach them with the gospel or dialogue with them or even pray that God would draw them to himself.

There was no attempt from the Christian community, no matter how committed they were, to reach out to their Muslim neighbors and befriend them. They did not want them in their churches or in their homes. This, I believe, has affected the work of evangelism in the Middle East. I personally cannot remember one conversion of a Muslim to the Syriac Church or the Adventist Church.

Historical and Present Conditions in the Muslim World

There are several reasons for these attitudes. Christians in the Middle East have been under persecution for hundreds of years and that persecution continues until today. This persecution takes many forms such as giving government jobs to Muslims and not to Christians even if the Christians are more qualified. Muslims dominate the political arena, but often give some token positions to Christians so they can appear to the West as being fair and democratic. Job promotions go to Muslims before Christians. Inequality in salaries is also practiced, always favoring Muslims. Scholarships in the school systems usually go to Muslims. Christians pay taxes, while Muslims do not pay or pay less.

There are additional ways oppression takes place in the Muslim world. I remember the TV in Baghdad had two stations and each one of them devoted several hours each day to Muslim indoctrination. The call to prayer sounds five times every day while the ringing of bells in Christian churches is often forbidden. There is a class every year in the school system on Islam, and Muslim classmates often pressure Christians to convert to Islam.

Christians also remember vividly the various Muslim persecutions in

history such as the Arab invasion in the seventh century that turned the Christian countries in the Middle East into Muslim majority countries, killing in the process hundreds of thousands of Christians who refused to become Muslims. They still remember the Armenian and Assyrian genocides at the beginning of the last century that took the life of more than one million Christians and destroyed many thousands of Christian villages. They, moreover, are living through the persecutions that are taking place today in Egypt, Iraq, Indonesia, and Nigeria to name just a few places where Muslims are killing Christians and burning their churches.

Another reason for the negative attitudes that many Christians have towards Muslims is that they have used such attitudes to build barriers in the hope of preserving faith, identity, culture, and heritage. Many Christians living as minorities in Muslim majority countries feel that if they do not preserve their identity, under the circumstances they live in, that Christianity will cease to exist in a few generations. Many of the Christians who live in the Muslim world have been there for thousands of years and have developed a rich culture and heritage. But today much of that richness is in danger of disappearing.

Love, Pray, and Associate with Muslim

Though I understand this kind of mindset and even sympathize with it, I see a higher principle that has to influence and color the attitude of Christians and the church in the Muslim world. That principle is love.

Love as Jesus Loves

We need to come to the point of loving as Jesus loves; he commanded us to even love our enemies. "Jesus said, 'You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, '*love your enemies* and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous'" (Matt 5:42-48, emphasis mine).

We need to bypass our prejudices and love Muslim people in spite of what they have done and continue to do. The love of God transcends everything, even the horrible events of history and the terrible persecutions of today. Love is stronger than hate or apathy. Jesus is calling us to a higher ground, the salvation of all people. God's love is bigger than me and what people do to me. God's love is bigger than the protection of my little world or my local church. God's love is a transforming power that can take my heart and makes it like the heart of God.

When we lived in Mosul our house was about ten miles from the grave of Jonah. I loved to hear the story of the conversion of the Ninevites. Later

on, I discovered the meaning of the ministry of Jonah. God loved Nineveh and sent Jonah to convert them. But Jonah was filled with hatred for them because they had often invaded Israel and had done horrible things to his people. Jonah thought of Nineveh as his enemy. He saw them in a negative light. He wanted their destruction, not their salvation. God had to reason with him to show him that God's love and concern was even for a wicked city like Nineveh. I believe that this is a model for us to emulate today. God still loves the Ninevehs of the entire world and wants us to love them too, including Muslims. Notice how God tried to change Jonah's heart. "But the LORD said, 'You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?'" (Jonah 4:10-11).

When we accept Jesus as Lord and King and Savior he does something wonderful in us—he gives us the ability to love that transcends culture, history, persecution, and he even changes us so we can love our enemies. It was an amazing thing for me to discover that God loves Muslims in spite of what they did or continue to do. They matter to God and they should matter to me.

Pray for Their Conversion

It has not been easy to change my attitude towards Muslims. I immigrated to the USA because of persecution and the freedom to keep the Sabbath. One day in my private worship, God convicted me that I should pray for Muslims. This was a strange idea. I had never in my life prayed for them. It just was not something that a Christian who had grown up in a Muslim majority country did. I knew that God loved Muslims, but I never thought that I should love them and pray for them. I even thought that since the conversion of Muslims is so hard, why should I even bother? I felt I should leave that work to God.

I had to overcome those negative attitudes towards the people who had pressured me to become a Muslim and who had ridiculed me for being a Christian. Every time I think of the massacre of my ancestors, I feel the blood boiling inside of me. But, I have to stop and ask God to take that anger and resentment away from me and give me love for Muslims. In the last few years I have been praying for Muslims on my prayer walks from time to time. I pray for myself to have more love for them and that God will help me find ways to reach them. We cannot reach people unless we love them and wish them the best and pray for them. My prayers for Muslims have changed me radically. I have become much more passion-

ate about reaching Muslims. I pray for different Muslim countries on a rotating basis. I pray for peace, and I always pray that they will come to know Jesus as their Savior.

Associate with Them

Wherever I have lived in the USA I have done my best to get to know the Muslims who live nearby. One time I built a relationship with a Muslim student from Egypt who was working on his doctoral in the area of nuclear physics. Another time I built a relationship with a man from Saudi Arabia. I also have Muslim friends from Kuwaiti, Jordan, and Lebanon. We dialogue with each other. We respect each other and have been in each other's homes. I have told them why I am a Christian and they have shared with me why they are Muslim. We have come to love and appreciate each other. It is a long and involved process, but it is worth it because that is what Jesus wants us to do.

I have even had some evangelistic success with Muslims. One time I built a relationship with two brothers from Lebanon who eventually wanted to know more about Jesus. We started a form of Bible study that led to their baptism after a few years. That was a wonderful and joyous day, and really helped me know I was on the right track.

Personal Appeal

My journey of moving from apathy and hate to becoming deeply invested and involved in the salvation of Muslims has not been easy. I have had to overcome my prejudices and feelings of resentment, and have asked God to change my heart and attitude and make me more passionate about his work of saving them. I have had to learn to love them since the first step needed in working with anyone and reaching anyone with God's grace is to love and accept that person.

I appeal to all my Christian friends in the Muslim world and, for that matter anywhere, to pray that God will give them love for their Muslim brothers and sisters. Pray that God will allow you to see them as human beings created in the image of God and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. God does change us when we pray. Then build relationships with them. Pray passionately for them to know Jesus Christ; pray that they will accept him as Lord and Savior. Knowing and loving Jesus is a matter of eternal life or death. If that is true, then we need to build relationships with Muslims and to consider them as our friends and fellow travelers in the journey of life where we are all in need of God and his grace. This will take time and energy, but it will be worth it. God will bless you and you will see great results. So, let us love, pray, and associate with Muslims.



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Following more than 20 years of successful pastoral work S. Joseph Kidder has been teaching in the areas of spiritual growth, church growth, evangelism, and leadership. He also travels extensively, teaching churches how to have a vibrant and authentic walk with God that will draw the world to His Kingdom.