

Φιλοξενία

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A NEW LIFE

As a young man in Afghanistan, I knew something about Jesus. Like other Muslims, I thought He was a special prophet and an amazing person. I respected Him and even believed that He rose from the dead, but I didn't believe that He was God.

Gradually, my interest in Jesus grew and my ideas changed. This began when I had a dream about Jesus. I'd been thinking about my future, and told my parents that I wanted to change my religion and leave Afghanistan. They told me I was crazy. I had been a very religious Muslim so they couldn't understand my change of heart; but they loved me and didn't forbid my pursuits.

Then I had a second dream: I dreamt that I left Afghanistan, converted to Christianity, and was being baptized in the sea. This dream was really outrageous since I had little hope of escaping Afghanistan and no reason to change religions. But that dream never left me and it kept my interest in Jesus alive.

When I was 17 years old, I rejected Islam and began searching for another religion. Some of my friends who knew of my search called me an atheist.

But Afghanistan is not the place for religious experimentation. I knew that if I wanted to learn more about Jesus, I would need to leave my country. To prepare me for the journey, I began learning English. My parents, who had never learned to read their own language, cheered me on.

As I studied, something wonderful happened: I met an American family of Christians in Afghanistan. They welcomed me like a son and soon I could see that their lives were different. They were honest, gracious, and full of hope. I was attracted to their optimism and wondered how I could find the same joy. In those days, as I dreamt about the future and tried to find the truth, I felt as if there might be a door through which I could walk to begin a new life. I didn't know how to find that door, but I felt that these Christians were closer to it than anyone I'd ever met before.

From Afghanistan, I went to Pakistan, and then on to Iran. There, my curiosity about Jesus grew. How could I find out more about this forbidden faith? I found my answer in an unlikely place: on the street. As I wandered in the markets, I saw a vendor selling Bibles. I bought one and marveled that I hadn't been caught, since buying Bibles is illegal for Muslims in Iran.

I began to devour that Bible. Much of what I read mystified me but I continued my search. I tried to attend a Christian church in Iran, but the Christians feared that I was a Muslim and wouldn't let me enter the building. I waited outside, tried to listen to the message, and then went on my way.

As I traveled west, other significant events helped me to understand more about Jesus. In Iran, I saw a movie that claimed that He was the Son of God, and that He died on the cross to pay the price for the sins of the world.

When I arrived in Athens, my search took on a new urgency. I slept in Alexandras Park for two months and was relieved when someone there told me about Helping Hands in Omonia. At Helping Hands, I ate soup and met other guys my age who were traveling west. I went to the English and Bible lessons, and I liked the friendly Christians who ran the center.

I especially liked the Bible teacher. I learned many good things about Jesus and got a clearer understanding of the Bible by attending his classes. The teacher told us often that Jesus could give a person a new life. He read from the New Testament: "When someone becomes a Christian he becomes a new person inside. He is not the same any more. A new life has begun!" (II Corinthians 5:17). I wanted a new life, but I wasn't ready to become a Christian. Still, I continued coming to classes because the Christians were nice and the lessons were encouraging.

But I had another incentive for attending the Bible classes: I wanted to go to America. One day after class, I boldly asked the Bible teacher if he could help me get there. He shook his head and said that he couldn't. He encouraged me to study the Bible and learn more about Jesus. He said that while going to America might give me a better life, knowing Jesus would give me the best life.

That wasn't the answer I wanted to hear, so I took matters into my own hands. I joined a group of men who planned to go to Italy. As we waited for the ferry boat in Patra, a woman approached me and handed me a book about Jesus. I was stunned. "There are hundreds of people here in the crowd," I thought to myself. "Why did she give this book to *me*?"

Meanwhile, passengers were boarding the ferry boat and my friends urged me to follow them. But I realized that I didn't want to follow them, and felt an urge to return to Athens. I was sure that an important encounter awaited me there, and so I returned alone as my friends sailed west.

When I got back to Omonia, I marched into Helping Hands. I told the Bible teacher about the woman in Patra and said that I wanted to become a Christian. The Bible teacher listened patiently and then asked me why I wanted to change my religion. "Do you want to become a Christian to go to America, or to know Jesus?" he asked.

That was a hard question, and I didn't know the answer. I realized that my motives were mixed. I asked God to show me which religion I should choose. "Oh God," I prayed, "Show me the way!" Soon I had a third dream: I dreamt of the cross of Christ, and I heard Jesus say, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but through me." (John 14:6).

Shortly after that, as I was reading the passage describing Jesus' birth, I became convinced that Jesus wasn't only a prophet, but the Son of God who came to earth to die for my sins and to give me a new life.

That moment of belief was the important encounter that awaited me in Athens -- the most important encounter of my life. Soon I was baptized in the sea, thus fulfilling my boyhood dream.

What have I gained from following Jesus? First, joy. I'm very happy because I know that Jesus has saved me from the sins that should have condemned me. I'm also happy because through Jesus, I can know God, and can talk to Him like a son. God also encourages me during the hard times when the realities of the world bring me pain. Last year, for example, I had a bad accident in Athens and I was tempted to doubt God. But I learned that suffering builds my faith.

Trusting Jesus as my Savior has also helped my attitude. Before I was a Christian, I was a good, hard worker who minded the law. But I was also very proud and I judged other people harshly. Now I am humbled that Jesus took the punishment for my sins and that I am only saved by His grace. God has given me love for my enemies, patience, and the peace that my life is safe in His hands.

I feel like a new man! Jesus has given me a new life, and He can give you a new life, too.

As you read this, I am somewhere in Italy, or perhaps I am even further in my journey. I don't know if I'll ever see America, but that isn't important to me now. I have found the Door to a new life, and His name is Jesus.

MINISTRY FOCUS—Tea House

Due to the huge influx of refugees in recent days, our programs have slightly changed in order to effectively deal with the new challenges. Rather than providing a hot meal on Saturdays and a snack two other days a week, we are now serving a cup of hot tea and a sack of food (1/2 loaf of bread, a fruit, a hard-boiled egg, and a vegetable) on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 10 AM to 4 PM. This is our "Tea House" ministry.

The refugees (mostly Muslim Kurds and Afghans) are free to come and go as they please, watch evangelistic videos, read Bible literature and New Testaments, play ping-pong and table games, attend Seekers Classes, Greek and English classes, and participate in discussions with our staff and volunteers.

OTHER WEEKLY MINISTRIES

On Sundays, various ethnic and international fellowships use our facility for worship services. Among these is the *Persian Christian Fellowship* which is primarily made up of Afghan and Iranian *seekers*. The attendance fluctuates but averages about 70 each week. Afterwards, a meal is served which HELPING HANDS pays for. Additionally, there is an English class prior to the PCF.

Wednesdays are days of praying, planning, and fellowshiping among the Helping Hands staff. In the evening the rooms are used by ethnic fellowships for prayer meetings.

On Fridays, Shower Ministry, Clothing Room, the Russian Tea Room, and small group Bible studies take place.

On Tuesday and Thursday evenings, the Basic Discipleship Lessons are taught. And on Saturday and Tuesday evenings the International School of Ministry has classes.

We are now ministering to about 3,000 refugees a week!

We thank God both for the privilege of sharing Christ with these needy and open people, and for the adventure of experiencing God's power and provision in these days when it is so desperately needed. We are so grateful to everyone who has responded recently in generous and loving ways that reflect the heart of God for the foreigners in the land.

If you need someone to paint your house, work in your garden, wash your car, or any other odd job, please call us at 32-24-216 and leave a message on the answering machine.

Thank you for helping us share God's love in this way!!!

IMMEDIATE NEEDS

- Men's WINTER clothing
- Men's shoes
- Blankets
- Bath Towels
- Toiletries such as soap, shampoo, razor blades, shaving cream, etc.
- Laundry detergent

Myths About HELPING HANDS:

MYTH #3: Ministries like *HELPING HANDS* only encourage the flow of illegal refugees into Greece, adding to an already growing mountain of problems both for the Greeks and the refugees.

The TRUTH: *HELPING HANDS* neither assists nor encourages refugees to come to Greece, but rather seeks to discover ways we can introduce to Christ the refugees who are already here. No matter why or how they come, they need Jesus. Our purpose is to demonstrate the love of Jesus in practical ways to them before they move on to other countries (as most of them do). Whatever temporal problems they (or Greeks) may face due to their presence in Greece, they are nothing compared to facing eternity without Jesus.