

June 22, 2012

Dear Praying Friends,

We have been in the U.S. for 3 weeks now and have had several ENCOURAGING speaking engagements which have allowed us to share more personally about what God is doing among the nations through Athens. However, of all the scheduled opportunities we have this summer only THREE are with new groups. We would LOVE it if you are able to open some doors for us to share with some folks who are not familiar with our ministry in Athens. All of our Sunday mornings are booked for the rest of the summer but most weekdays are free. We know GOD is our Source, and we ARE trusting in HIM, but if He wants to use some of you to help us meet up with others He wants to use, we will appreciate it.

Many of you financially invested in, and/or prayed for the refugee camps this summer. The first one was for single men. Here is a portion of Lisa Dirrim's report about that one:

They took about 40 men out of the city to a beautiful, rustic camp along the sea. If you saw our ministry video, there were pictures of camp last year in it and it is the same place. This past week about half the men spoke Arabic and the other half spoke Farsi.

The story that touched my heart was the one of a young man who as an 8 year old boy was bribed by the Taliban in Afghanistan with sweets to betray his family's secret hiding place for the gun they kept to protect themselves. It was illegal to own a gun, so when they seized the gun, they shot his parents and his siblings, leaving him an orphan. They patted him on the head for being a good boy and left. He has carried this guilt into adulthood. He had dream that he did not understand about climbing a mountain. He was climbing a mountain. He left his parents half way up the mountain and was encircled in light when he reached the top. On the top of the mountain he had joy and was no longer burdened with guilt.

At camp he was touched by the words of Isaiah (chapter 53) that the messiah "took up our pain and bore our suffering...was pierced for our transgressions, ..was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him (Jesus) the iniquity of us all. He knew he could never be a good enough Muslim to make up for the bad he had committed in his young life. What he did not understand was that none of us can. No one is pure enough to approach a holy God. His dream became clear as he understood the forgiveness available because of the sacrifice of God's own son and that it was Jesus who met him on that mountain in his dream. He is now a follower of Jesus and was baptized in the sea along with 4 other new believers on the last day of camp.

In all, there were 7 new public decisions to follow Jesus during that week at camp.

I have also attached one of the reports about the summer FAMILY (refugee) camp outside of Athens last week (excellently written by HH staff member Tasha Hayes; includes photos).

Also copied below is a more detailed report of "J" 's story (who I mentioned two updates ago and gave a summary testimony after baptizing him). If you would like to read some similar stories and see great pictures of some of our refugee friends in Athens, you can find them at:

<http://namingtheworld.org/>

I have been surprised to learn that there are still people on our knee-mail list who don't know about our book "Kingdom Beyond Borders" or who didn't realize that it is a book all about the lives of refugees in Athens who have been transformed by the power of Jesus. All profits from these books go back into I.T. refugee ministries. You can order it from:

<http://www.amazon.com/Kingdom-Beyond-Borders-Finding-Refugee/dp/1449715664>

or

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/kingdom-beyond-borders-helena-smrcek/1106678368>

One more thing for now...Ellie will be going to Camp Smile (<http://www.campsmilemobile.org/>) next week, June 26-30. We would appreciate your prayers for her (and us) during this new and stretching experience for all of us (including their staff).

Thanks for your continued prayers on our behalf. We will write more in a couple of weeks.

Grateful,

Scott and Vicki

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[Video Promo for book
"Kingdom Beyond Borders"
Family/Ministry Website
Ellie's Blog
Refugee Testimonies](#)

"J" 's story (he is assigned the pseudonym "Ahmad" in this article):

Ahmad* will tell his son the story that he was never told. Not the wanderer's tale that he knows so well, the one marred by hopes dashed on foreign shores and an endless search for belonging. Ahmad will not dread the end of this story because borders, papers, and prisons will not extinguish its light. One day, Ahmad will sit down with his son, look into those expectant eyes, and smile. Because on that day, Ahmad will tell his son the story of how they came home.

It has been eight months since Ahmad last saw his wife and son. 1,806 miles stand between them, but on May 5, 2012 it must have felt like light years. Standing at the front of a small church in the middle of Athens, Greece, Ahmad was further away from his family than ever before. A distance measured not by miles but understanding. His wife, Najla, had understood, even encouraged him when he left Iran seven months earlier. With nothing more than a backpack, Ahmad had escaped those borders in search of a foreign land where his son might be more than just another Afghan refugee. A land that he and his family might call home. But this was something altogether different. The ground he stood upon that afternoon was not just foreign. It was forbidden.

Ahmad stepped into the water-filled basin at the front of the dim sanctuary and it seemed to carry him an ocean away from his family and the Islamic heritage he had always known. The man awaiting him in the water smiled warmly as he reached out and clasped Ahmad's hand. In a room filled with stillness, the two exchanged soft words and nods with the water around their waists. And then the stillness was broken as the man looked at Ahmad and announced to the small group gathered, "Because of this, I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." As Ahmad's head slipped beneath the surface, so too did the small silver necklace he has worn for years, bearing his wife's initials. And Ahmad felt the cool water washing away 30 years of a painful and broken past.

An expression of sadness crosses Ahmad's face as he closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. That's how you know he is remembering, sifting through his past as if dredging polluted waters in search of a few, precious items. People tend to tie their memories to the anchors of familiarity and belonging that ground their sundry experiences. But Ahmad has no such anchors. Ahmad has never known what it feels like to

belong.

“There is this feeling of identity crisis,” explains Ahmad, a solemn look on his face. “Somehow, I think it will last forever for me.”

Ahmad was just one year old in 1983 when his parents fled the growing violence in Kabul and resettled in Mashhad, Iran. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan created a flood of refugees in the early 1980’s that filled the dusty roads leading to the borders of Pakistan and Iran. Ahmad’s parents hoped that Iran might be a sanctuary for all Muslims, given the country’s recent Islamic revolution. But they were bitterly disappointed.

With his head held high, Ahmad will tell you today that he is Afghan, not Iranian. And yet, he has spent less than five of his 30 years there. Mashhad was no home for Ahmad’s family because the colors of racial stigma painted a bleak backdrop to that stage of their lives. They did not belong, the Afghan refugees, and with caustic sneers, the Iranians would never let them forget it.

“‘Oh look at those Afghans,’ they would say. ‘They stink.’ They would call us dogs. They still call Afghans that today...that was the identity they gave us.”

Ahmad cried for two hours on the day his mother was forced to pull him out of the third grade. It was the day the government cracked down on immigrants throughout the country, but 8-year-old Ahmad struggled to understand, watching through windows that seemed like jail bars as smiling Iranian children walked to class. The blood that made his crying eyes red also made Ahmad and his family worthless in the eyes of the Iranian government. It would be years later before he understood that. But on that day, little Ahmad began to understand the feeling of inferiority.

Those ten years in the slums of Mashhad left Ahmad anchorless and adrift. A budding tree with no roots. For a brief time his family moved back to Afghanistan, but the shadow of violence and ethnic strife followed them. By the time Ahmad was 13 his family had resettled in the ghetto of Qom, Iran, a desert city south of Tehran where his family still lives today.

Ahmad frowns as he remembers his early years in Qom. Those were dark years, defined by uncertainty. “We never knew what was going to happen,” Ahmad says with a shrug. “There was no clear policy. We never knew if or when we would get kicked out.” What Ahmad did know was the feeling of injustice. Every day, he would pass seemingly carefree Iranian teenagers as he sprinted to work at the nearby carpentry shop, clutching his small lunch in a brown paper bag. “Why am I not like them?” he would ask. “Why me? Why us?” Those were the answerless questions that weighed on Ahmad every day. “It all felt so unjust. Some Afghan refugees got used to it, but I never did.”

As a teenager, Ahmad found studying English to be an escape from the pain of every day life. Perhaps those days and nights he spent studying were a silent rebellion of sorts, a way to spite the inequitable system that declared him unworthy of education. But practicing English became more than just an escape on the day that it led Ahmad to a Christian chat room online. It was the first time he had ever heard of someone named Jesus Christ, and Ahmad was intrigued. At the end of the conversation, the people in the chat room, people on the other side of the world whom he had never met, prayed for him. That was the first time anyone had prayed for Ahmad and he never forgot it.

Islam was all Ahmad had ever known; yet somehow, all he knew seemed wrong. “Muhammad said there is no such things as borders. That we are all Muslim brothers. But I saw borders. I saw my Muslim ‘brothers’ call us Afghans dogs.” Ahmad shakes his head with disgust. “By the time I was 16 I was sure this was all wrong.”

There are many days Ahmad wishes he could forget, but one most of all. He wishes he had never stepped into that taxi with four Iranian soldiers back in 2004. He wishes they had never asked him where he was from as they drove the hour from Tehran to Qom. He wishes he could forget the terrible things they said to him; the mordant jokes and the cruel stories. “That drive, it felt like a year to me. They did things I just can’t tell you about.”

If Ahmad ever had a 'normal life' in Iran, it all came to an end in 2006 on the road from Qom to Mashhad. Police checkpoints were common enough, but they were also dangerous for Afghan refugees, especially those with no identification. Over and over Ahmad told the police that he was a legal refugee, but they didn't listen as they dragged him toward the vehicle that would carry him to an infamous refugee camp near the border. "I spent two days and nights there," Ahmad remembers, almost as if the thought itself is a bitter taste. "During those two days and nights I thought a lot about my life in Iran. And I knew I had to put an end to it. It felt like hell to me."

When Ahmad was finally able to return home, he knew it was not for good. But leaving would be costly and for six months he worked to earn the two million Toman necessary to procure fake documents that would take him to Turkey, and hopefully beyond. The journey to Turkey was simple enough, but entering Europe proved a more difficult feat. Three times, Ahmad tried to pass into Greece, paddling a small raft in the dead of night toward the nearest Grecian island. And three times he was caught. The last of which landed him in a Turkish prison for over one month.

Two options for deportation, that was all the Turkish government gave Ahmad. And both ended in Afghanistan. Rather than to be left at the border, Ahmad chose to be flown into Kabul where he knew family and friends that could help. But it was not family or friends that greeted Ahmad as he stepped off the plane. It was chaos. A massive explosion shook the ground before Ahmad had even touched Afghan soil. An explosion he later found had been a suicide attack that killed 35 people. "I lived in constant fear of being killed during those two months," remembers Ahmad.

But amid the chaos, Ahmad found something else: the love of his life. He had met Najla once before, but this time was different. Something blossomed as they stole time together, talking eagerly for hours on end in her parents' kitchen. Under Islamic law, it is forbidden for unmarried males and females to spend time together alone, but that was of little consequence to Ahmad. "Come what may, I told her. I wanted to talk to her because I liked her. But she was so scared." Ahmad eventually left Afghanistan to return to Iran, but not before Najla looked into his eyes and promised him that she would wait, no matter how long it took. Just one year later, Ahmad's parents traveled to Kabul according to Islamic tradition, and returned to Qom with the glowing Najla, who soon after became Ahmad's wife. The happiness Ahmad felt that day could only have been surpassed three years later when he held his newborn son for the first time. Ahmad smiles as he remembers. These are his treasures.

His son was nearly one year old when Ahmad thought again of leaving Iran. The notion of his boy living the restless, inferior life of an Afghan refugee was simply more than Ahmad could bear. "His father grew up an illegal refugee, his grandfather worked as an illegal refugee and now he was born an illegal refugee," says Ahmad, the pain of those words more than evident. "That was tearing me apart."

Eight months ago, Ahmad again set his sights on the shores of Greece. And this time, he found them. The system had changed since 2006, and rather than deportation, this journey ended on the streets of Athens. But those streets were not the place of hope and promise that he had imagined. The illusion of endless opportunity died a quick death upon the cold, hard ground of Alexander Park, where Ahmad was forced to sleep for one week. Greece was never meant to be the final destination, but Ahmad quickly found himself ensnared in a broken system like so many other refugees. With no papers and no money, the borders of Greece loomed large.

But Ahmad doesn't believe it was chance that brought him to Greece. Nor was it chance that brought him to the doors of the Helping Hands refugee ministry one day. A hot meal, that was all Ahmad was looking for the morning he turned into the alleyway in the district of Omonia and up a flight of concrete stairs that lead to the Christian ministry. Yet in the small, white-walled entry room at the top of the stairs, he found something else: a table full of Bibles.

"It was the first time I had been able to just read a Bible without fearing for my life." That was when Ahmad began asking questions, something he had never been able to do within the walls of Islam. And with joy, the team at Helping Hands answered those questions.

For months, Ahmad kept his new Bible tucked safely away inside his backpack; a treasure that was still dangerous for him to carry, even in Greece. During that time, he lived in a crowded flat downtown with other Afghan refugees. Shaking his head, Ahmad remembers trying to fall asleep many nights as his radical Islamist roommates talked together about their hatred for Christians. Little did they know that the sacred object of their hatred rested mere feet away, beside Ahmad's head and pounding heart.

Ahmad continued to study, to search, and to learn. And slowly, he felt his heart changing, or perhaps coming alive. "The thing that touched me deeply was when I heard that Christianity was not about a long list of rules, but about a relationship." For months, Ahmad wrestled with the idea and the significance of that relationship. But one day, he knew he had wrestled enough. It was the day he eagerly called two of his mentors from Helping Hands to tell them one simple, beautiful thing: "I decided to put my faith in Jesus Christ."

Ahmad emerged from the water with a smile on his face, the small sanctuary coming alive with cheers and clapping. But they were not the cheers of his wife and son. As Ahmad stepped out of the large water basin, he was handed a towel. Not papers of documentation. And after scores of hugs and handshakes, he stepped back onto the streets of a foreign city that will never be home.

Ahmad's journey is far from over. And yet, he smiles now. Because after 30 long years, Ahmad finally knows who he is and where he truly belongs. It is a place far beyond the reach of borders, papers, and laws. A home that no capricious earthly entity can snatch from him; a treasure of eternal citizenship that he holds with his heart.

But the water in that basin did not change the fact that Ahmad remains an Afghan refugee; his needs remain real and the road ahead, uncertain. Ahmad still longs for a country of his own. A flag to wave with pride and a land that his son can call home. He prays for discernment as he considers his next steps. He fights for papers that will validate his name. He clings to the hope that one day his wife and son will know the joy that he has found in Christ. And above all, he fights for the day he will see them again. Because on that day, Ahmad will tell his son the story of how they came home. And with that hope, he presses on.

Please pray for Ahmad, that he would cling to Christ and grow in his faith during this time. Also, pray that Ahmad would have wisdom and discernment as he prepares for the day when he will tell his wife about the Lord, that she would have ears to hear and a heart to receive. And pray that they will be together again soon, in a place they can call home.

-Ryan

 **Letter summer camp 12.pdf**

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