

the voice of the martyrs

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*Inspiring Stories of Christians
Facing Islamic Extremists*



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The Day ISIS Arrived in Mosul

Abu Fadi

Iraq

The June 2014 day broke like almost any other day in Mosul, Iraq: hot and dusty and teeming with people, traffic, and trade. People flocked to marketplaces in Iraq's second-largest city (population 660,000). Horns honked amid the pent-up traffic. As the day progressed, the din of street-side chatter rose appreciably. By noon, it sounded like a cacophony of blackbirds chattering among themselves.

That's when Abu Fadi, a sixty-five-year-old Mosul native living just miles from the city, received the phone call that changed everything. For some, the phone call marked the beginning of the end of life as they knew it—and in some cases their very lives.

"Abu," said a friend in Arabic, "ISIS is coming. We have heard from someone we trust. Today is the day."

For weeks the rumor mill had been churning that self-proclaimed ISIS terrorists who had been ravaging cities elsewhere in Iraq would take Mosul next. That's where Abu's mother, Sara, and sister, Dleen, still lived. As Christians, they would be in grave danger. ISIS hated

many people in the world, but especially Christians. The ultimatum to followers of Jesus? Convert to Islam, pay an outlandishly high tax, leave, or be killed.

“How can we hope to get my mother and sister out?” asked Abu. Both women were disabled and in wheelchairs.

“It will not be easy,” his friend stated. “And if Mosul falls, can your city be far behind? We must pray very hard, Abu. We must—”

Baroom.

An ISIS military water tanker, rigged with explosives, blew up near the Mosul Hotel, where government security officers were stationed. Abu’s friend hung up the phone. Chaos descended on Mosul.

Armored vehicles rumbled down streets. ISIS troops began freeing the first of what would be about one thousand prisoners. Gunfire broke out. A woman who had planned to celebrate this day as her wedding day died in a blast.

ISIS fighters ripped down the cross on the Syriac Orthodox cathedral of Mar (meaning “saint” or “martyr”) Afram. They replaced the cross with loudspeakers proclaiming that Islam, not Jesus, was the way.

Everywhere chaos reigned. People dragged possessions to cars. Traffic jams closed roads. Screams of panic echoed. Amid it all, Abu received sporadic phone reports from his friend in Mosul, who at one point said, “The Iraqi army is now fleeing the city.”

During the following weeks, Abu secured permission from an ISIS judge to permit his mother and sister to stay in Mosul. A few weeks after taking Mosul, ISIS swept into Abu’s city, just as he had feared. More Christians hastily packed and fled, but Abu and his wife, Rukia, could not leave Sara and Dleen in Mosul.

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For sixteen days, ISIS occupied the area where Abu lived—sixteen days that to Abu seemed like sixteen years.

“Please come get me, Abu,” pleaded his mother during yet another phone call from Mosul. “It is not safe here. You must—”

A man’s hardened voice cut in on the line. “Let me state it more clearly,” the ISIS soldier declared. “If you do not come get these two infidel dogs, they will either be converted to Islam with guns at their heads or thrown onto the street.”

Abu had no chance to get his mother that day because he’d be going against the surge of frantic people escaping the city. Both women were allowed to stay with a Muslim neighbor for the night, but the ISIS soldier confiscated their house, pulled a can of spray paint from a bag, and tagged the front of the house with ن—an Arabic *n* for “Nazarene”—*Christians live here. Property of the Islamic State.*

Unable to go to his mother and sister, Abu arranged for a Muslim friend to drive the women to him. Once they arrived, Abu and the women could flee from there. Like almost forty thousand others who fled the purge in Mosul and the surrounding area, they crammed the few possessions they could fit into the car and headed east for relative safety in the city of Erbil, sixty miles away.

Soon Abu and his family arrived at the first checkpoint. Cars weighed down to their struts with people and their possessions inched forward in dozens of lines. Exhaust stained the air. ISIS guards stood with firearms and swords. Abu had prayed about this moment—for courage to stand for his beliefs.

“Who are you?” a guard asked.

“We are Christians leaving Mosul, because we are not permitted to stay in this Muslim land,” Abu replied.

The guard, now joined by others, refused to let the family pass. Instead, they placed a call to superiors. Thirty minutes later, two shiny SUVs arrived. Young men brandishing new, expensive firearms stepped out and began peppering the family with questions.

Abu answered honestly: “Yes, we are Christians.”

“Leaving is no longer an option for you and the rest of your infidel family,” said the leader. “Convert to Islam or be killed. It is that simple. It is an easy choice, no?”

Abu pleaded with the men to let his family proceed. He referred to passages in the Quran that allow Christians to live if they pay the *jizya* (Islamic tax). For ninety agonizing minutes, the discussion continued, as if a bomb were ticking and destined to go off any second. As they talked, an ISIS fighter wielding a sword circled Abu, ready to strike if he tried to run.

“Enough,” declared the leader. He grabbed Abu by the arm and led him away as his wife, mother, and sister wept, pleaded, and prayed. “Prepare to die,” he said, pushing Abu to his knees. “Last chance. Will you convert to Islam?”

Abu looked back to the three women, then heavenward. He prayed for strength, wisdom, and courage. Even though he felt weak and expected the sword to plunge into him at any moment, he sensed God’s peace strengthening him. “No, I will not be a Muslim,” he stated. “I do *not* denounce Jesus.”

The man raised his sword. Abu bowed his head, closed his eyes, and prayed. Then he heard another vehicle arrive and exhaled. Another black SUV. Out came another ISIS official, who inquired about the situation and then walked over to Abu.

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“I have a message for you to deliver to your church leaders as you leave our land,” he said. “We are victorious. And we will follow you Christians all over the world. We will reach the Vatican and convert the pope to Islam if we have to.”

Abu didn’t know what to say but reminded himself not to utter anything disrespectful toward the Muslims. *Simply be honest*, he told himself. “We wish no harm on your people,” he said. “Only to practice our faith as we please.”

The official looked at him and spit. “Get out of here, you dogs,” he said, turning and walking away.

At a second checkpoint, ISIS soldiers again detained the family. They called officials at the first checkpoint and were instructed to check the car for valuables. Abu surrendered all he had. When a guard found money that Abu’s wife had hidden beneath a seat, he ordered the family out of the car.

“If you convert,” said one guard, “all that we took from you will be given back. You will even be protected. So, tell us you embrace Islam.”

“I am a Christian,” said Abu.

As before, a long round of verbal volleys ensued. Each time the ISIS guard asked Abu to convert, and each time Abu politely but firmly said he was a Christian and would not.

Finally, another guard—a supervisor—came from the booth and fired questions at Abu. *This man*, Abu thought, *is different from the rest, almost like an actor playing a part but deep down not that character himself.*

“So, you have left behind a home and would be willing to pay the tax?” the supervisor asked.

Abu nodded. Yes, the previous checkpoint had taken substantial money that could be used for the tax. And yes, they did own a house.

The supervisor instructed the interrogating guard to make a call. After the guard left, the supervisor turned to Abu. “Begone,” he said. “Fast.”

Abu felt like a fish that had been hooked and fighting for its life when suddenly the fisherman cut the line. He nodded his thanks and returned to the car.

Upon reaching Erbil, they saw that the city was already overpopulated with Syrian war refugees. Because of the ISIS purge in Iraq, the city was expanding even more each day. What did most of these refugees have in common? They were Christians whose lives had been pulled out from underneath them. Students who had been ready to graduate from the University of Mosul now had no records to show they had even been enrolled. Young people engaged to be married now didn’t even know where their fiancées were. Adults who had jobs now were jobless.

They sacrificed it all. They left behind their homes, the lives they had lived, and their hopes for the future, choosing instead to trust in God and serve him wherever he would lead.

The conditions in Erbil were miserable. Nauseating smells rose from garbage and raw sewage. People curled up beneath makeshift tents made of blankets, towels, or scrap materials—anything to protect them from the relentless sun and oppressive heat. They searched desperately for water and food.

Amid all this, Abu set up a lean-to tarp for his family. “Now,” he said quietly, “we thank God for a safe journey.” And they bowed their heads to pray.

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As Abu and his family did, we must remember that the God we serve is with us wherever we go. We must place our hope in him, not in a place or circumstances.

God is far less concerned about where we live than where our hearts are. He cares most about where we place our trust, what we value, and whether the desire of our hearts is to focus our eyes on him. He is pleased when we are so focused on him that we, as the writer of Hebrews did, can affirm our hope and trust with these words: “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city” (11:16).

From Persecutor to Persecuted

Abdulmasi
Nigeria

After bombing a church, Abdulmasi liked to return to relish his work. To learn the body count. To bask in the glory of killing Christians. This was, after all, a major focus of the fanatical group Jama'atu Nasril Islam in which he participated.

Decades ago, his comrades began calling him “Mr. Insecticide.” He earned this nickname because he was, as he explained, “the only one who could organize the killing of insects—the killing of Christians. When you were looking for someone to get rid of insects, then call me. This was my life.”

Whenever Muslims in northern Nigeria felt Christians were encroaching, they would call him. He specialized in car bombs, riot planning, and infiltrating Christian organizations, the last of which proved to be his undoing—or, from a biblical perspective, his redemption.

Abdulmasi had known no other life than absolute adherence to Islam. At age five, his family forced him into *almajiri*, an antiquated

Islamic practice popular in West Africa. Muslim families send their young sons away to a local imam. A boy doing *almajiri* might join forty or fifty other young boys in the imam's instruction. Their days are as rigid as those of prisoners.

In the morning, the boys recite the Quran in Arabic, a language they do not understand. They recite it for hours, and literally for years, until they memorize the Quran. The task is not unlike an English-speaking child memorizing the Bible in Chinese.

At midday, the boys walk the streets and beg for food, which they share first with the imam. Afterward, they might study the Hadith, a collection of sayings ascribed to the prophet Muhammad, written by Islamic scholars beginning in the ninth century. In fundamentalist Islamic sectors around the world, the Hadith is the source from which young boys learn the concepts of jihad, paradise, and killing enemies of Allah.

Having lived on a steady diet of this for a decade, Abdulmasi said, "Islam is a teaching of hatred, hatred and nothing more than hatred." And, "If there is any evil in society, they will relate it as a result of Christians." His only solace in this life? A promise of "paradise" if he would kill enemies of Allah.

At age seventeen, wanting desperately to escape a life he hated, Abdulmasi became involved in his first jihad against Christians in the city of Bauchi, Nigeria. The jihadists did not touch women or children, but they did beat and slash men. During this attack, Abdulmasi spotted a man known to be a Christian coming out of his home.

"I began beating his legs so he couldn't run away," recalled Abdulmasi. "He fell down and my boys attacked him, trying to kill

him. A seven-year-old boy was the one who slaughtered the man with a knife. Pressing down on his neck, he cut the man. They called the boy ‘Chief Slaughterer.’”

After the killing, Abdulmasi rejoiced. “You see, when you do this, when you kill a mosquito,” he said, clapping his hands together, “you have achieved something. You smile even though you see blood on your hands. I have gotten rid of the enemy of God, my enemy too.”

Years passed. The killings continued. One day Abdulmasi returned to a church he had just bombed only to find something odd happening. Church members who had survived the attack were singing songs.

This infuriated Abdulmasi. When he returned to the mosque, he lamented what he had seen. “They are rejoicing.” He huffed. “They are happier.” *Why couldn’t I rid these mosquitoes from the church?* he wondered.

In frustration, he decided to use a new tactic. He would infiltrate the church as an impostor and look for ways to kill Jesus followers. The next day, he went to the church and told the pastor, “I’m a Muslim, but I want to become a Christian.”

The pastor and his congregation eagerly embraced him. “The love I was shown,” he later said, “surprised me.”

He began attending services regularly. He joined the young adult group, went to baptism class, and was baptized. All the while, he was secretly returning to the mosque to pray and fast.

For six years, Abdulmasi lived this double life. He might bomb a church across town one day and lead a Bible study the next. He was even appointed the young adult leader. But when the church planned a conference and invited a prominent pastor to talk, Abdulmasi was

furious. *Why not me? Am I not the young adult leader? Why wasn't I asked to speak?*

He attended the conference, anger churning inside. He specifically prayed that the speaker would fail and that he would be asked to take over. But God had a different plan for Abdulmasi. During the last day of the conference, the pastor spoke on 1 Kings 18, Elijah's challenge to the prophets of Baal.

"How long are you going to waver between two opinions?" the pastor thundered. "If God is God, worship him. If Baal is god, worship him."

Abdulmasi perked up.

"Who are you deceiving?" the pastor continued. "How long now since that day you said you have accepted Christ and you have not been serious? Why are you playing this double game?"

Abdulmasi squirmed inside. *This man knows about me! Who told him? Soon he will call out my name.*

"Just humble yourself," the pastor continued. "Just stand up. Let me pray for you, and the Lord will forgive you for all you have been doing. Forget that you are an armed robber. Forget that you are a killer. Forget all those things. Stand up!"

Abdulmasi stood up. His double life ended. When he went forward to profess his faith in Christ—this time for real—he began a new life in God's grace. He also opened himself up to retribution from the jihadists with whom he had previously aligned.

"Don't go near the mosque," one of his "boys" later warned him. "They will kill you."

Meanwhile, the church elders were delighted to hear of his commitment but stunned at the revelation of his double life. "What do

we do with this man?” they debated. “Oust him? Embrace him?” They prayed for three days.

Their decision? They would hide him to save his life. “My son,” the pastor told Abdulmasi, “God is going to use you mightily.”

And God has used him. While hiding at the home of another pastor, Abdulmasi could not help but share his faith with Muslims. He always looked for opportunities to introduce Muslims to Christ—and always looked over his shoulder.

Many men credit him with introducing them to Christ. He secretly counseled teachers of the Quran. He built bridges to persecutors of Christians.

Months became years. Years became decades. Abdulmasi married. He and his wife had children. But his jihadist past would not be forgotten. He was still a marked man. On one occasion, when Muslims surrounded his house, he narrowly escaped death by slipping out a back way. Three years later, Muslims confronted his college-age son.

“We have not come to rob you,” one said. “We have come to kill you because you are your father’s son.” And they slit his throat.

“It was very difficult,” said Abdulmasi, “but there is no sacrifice that is too big for God.” And no hurt too deep that God’s grace cannot cover.

Demonstrating great courage, Abdulmasi reached out to share Christ with the man who had helped plan his son’s death. The man rebuffed Abdulmasi; however, the man’s son heard about what happened and showed up at Abdulmasi’s house.

“Please,” he said, “tell me about your Christ.”

It is never too late for God to redeem us. Looking back at a life in which he persecuted Christians, lived a double life, and then

was persecuted himself, Abdulmasi can only shake his head. “If you want to win Muslims,” he said, “you have to love them, not with the human type of love, but the love you, yourself, have experienced through Christ. People are seeing me share my real heart now. If it were not for the grace of God, I would not be who I am.”

The change in Abdulmasi from persecutor to persecuted reflects a step of courage that makes a powerful impact. As the apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 1:23–24, “They only were hearing it said, ‘He who used to persecute us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy.’ And they glorified God because of me.”

It is never too late for any of us to run into God’s arms. Pray that others who have known nothing but a life of hatred will be introduced to the God of love and forgiveness. Pray that they, like Abdulmasi, will have the courage to embrace Christ and leave the killing behind.

An Unexplainable Escape

Farid
Afghanistan

It was 5:00 a.m. Inside the apartment, a handful of bearded men, heads wrapped in white or beige turbans, sat in a circle as if gathered around a campfire. What drew them together? Not the warmth of a fire, but the light of God's Word. Positioned on the floor in the middle of their circle, like the hub of a wheel, were hand-drawn illustrations of Bible stories. Nearby, a turquoise pitcher of water and matching basin had been prepared for foot washing. This was a Bible study.

In a tone just above a whisper, Farid, the group leader, prayed, "We thank you, God, for your willingness to meet with us this morning. We thank you for your presence here among us."

Outside the apartment, Afghanistan's harsh and rugged landscape awakened with first light. The city's buildings blended in with the steep, rising mountains beyond, all colored in sandy shades of brown. It was difficult to tell where humanity ended and nature began.

Farid had just introduced the book of Acts when someone pounded on the door. Before anyone could react, dark-clothed intruders burst in brandishing rifles and knives. Farid was slammed to the floor. His hands were tied behind his back, and a knife was placed just inches from his neck. None of the six men resisted.

Amid the panic and confusion came clarity in prayer. “God,” Farid prayed, “if this is the time for me to die, I forgive these people who want to kill me.”

Farid believed it was an honor to die for God’s glory. If he died, he didn’t want the intruders’ blood on his hands. “I wanted God to forgive them, and I wanted them to come to Christ as a result of my death,” he said later.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the prick of intense pain and the end. When nothing happened, he sensed God wanting him to stand up and leave the room. So he stood. His hands were no longer tied. The straps simply fell to the floor. He walked toward the door, which was guarded by two armed men.

“Sit down, dog,” one commanded. “You’re not leaving—alive.”

The other pointed his AK-47 rifle at Farid and squeezed the trigger.

Click. Nothing. The rifle had jammed.

Click. Again.

The rifle’s failure to fire diverted both guards’ attention, and Farid fled. As he raced down the stairs three or four steps at a time, he heard gunfire. He saw bullets chip the wall beyond him, but he escaped unharmed.

The story of his escape is even more amazing in light of the fact that none of his five companions were injured. Only the leader of the

An Unexplainable Escape

terrorist group was hurt when he was shot accidentally. In addition, the police made a chilling discovery during their investigation: inside a bag they found an al-Qaida flag, two swords, and a video camera.

According to police, the terrorists had planned to videotape the beheading of all six men and show it on the Al Jazeera television network. Evidently, the attackers knew Farid was winning Afghan Muslims to Christ. The videotape would warn missionaries, evangelists, and former Muslims that they would be killed if they didn't stop their evangelism and discipleship. Although the Constitution of Afghanistan reads, "Followers of other religions are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the provisions of the law," violence trumps the law.

"This is a Muslim country, and men fighting for Islam have issued these threats for twenty-five years," Farid explained. As Jesus followers in Afghanistan know all too well, "they don't like non-Muslim people coming in to preach. In the Quran, it is written that if somebody rejects Islam, you must kill them."

What terrorists wanted to accomplish that morning did not happen. Heads did not roll. Blood was not spilled. The only casualty was one of their own, even though none of the six Christians resisted with force.

Instead, followers of Jesus experienced yet another reason to rejoice in the awesome power of their sovereign God. No wonder the apostle Paul rejoiced in his suffering and wrote of his desire to "know him [Jesus] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10).

The power of the resurrection gives all who follow Jesus reason for great joy. That power is at work in the lives of every Jesus follower

who risks persecution and suffering in order to walk faithfully with him. What a gift to know and believe that our God is without limits and that he is in control of everything that happens to us. Let us join with our persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ and rejoice in the power and faithfulness of our sovereign God. May our joy in Christ ever increase as we grow in trust and faith in him.