

T O M D O Y L E

WITH GREG WEBSTER



STANDING IN THE FIRE

COURAGEOUS CHRISTIANS LIVING  
IN FRIGHTENING TIMES

# STANDING IN THE FIRE

COURAGEOUS CHRISTIANS LIVING  
IN FRIGHTENING TIMES

**TOM DOYLE**

WITH  
GREG WEBSTER



W PUBLISHING GROUP

AN IMPRINT OF THOMAS NELSON

© 2017 by Tom Doyle

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, scanning, or other—except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published in Nashville, Tennessee, by W Publishing Group, an imprint of Thomas Nelson. W Publishing and Thomas Nelson are registered trademarks of HarperCollins Christian Publishing, Inc.

Thomas Nelson titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fund-raising, or sales promotional use. For information, please e-mail [SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@ThomasNelson.com).

Scripture quotations marked NKJV are taken from the New King James Version®. © by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

[[to come]]

ISBN 9780718088620

*Printed in United States of America*

16 17 18 19 20 RRD 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To Dad.*

*You're my hero. Watching you I learned what it's like to live courageously, even joyfully, on the front lines. As an FBI agent for more than thirty years, and an organized crime specialist, you never backed down to the Mafia. The other agents admired you and often told me, "Jim Doyle always gets his man." I pray for a generation of believers with the same courage that only Christ can give in the dangerous spiritual arena that we live in today.*



# CONTENTS

<i>Introduction: Time for a Change in Direction</i> . . . . .	xi
Chapter 1: The Syrian Firing Squad . . . . .	1
Chapter 2: There's NO Place Like Homs . . . . .	25
Chapter 3: Married to an Imam. . . . .	51
Chapter 4: The Muslim Woman at the Well . . . . .	71
Chapter 5: Just the Usual Damascus Death Threat . . . . .	93
Chapter 6: The ISIS Recruit from Iraq . . . . .	123
Chapter 7: The Secret Police Secret. . . . .	143
Chapter 8: The Jerusalem Peace Plan . . . . .	171
<i>Conclusion</i> . . . . .	199
<i>Acknowledgments</i> . . . . .	207
<i>Notes</i> . . . . .	209
<i>About the Authors</i> . . . . .	213



# INTRODUCTION

## Time for a Change in Direction

**T***error*-ism. The very word is rooted in fear—mind-numbing, blood-chilling, heart-stopping fear. What could be worse than facing a person dedicated to indiscriminately destroying human life of any kind—men, women, and children? The target of terror can be anybody.

The influences around us—whether news reporters, politicians, or commentators—seem to want nothing more than to deepen our fear of the violent forces in a world that appears to be coming apart at the seams just a bit more each day. In today's world, if we're not careful, we can easily succumb to fear, and when we do, we can become a slave to it. The problem with living in fear is that—besides flying in the face of more than two hundred biblical admonitions to *not* fear—it can cause us to do the very thing we should *not* do. Let me explain.

## PRIDE BEFORE THE FALL

My good friend Dan Hansen loves Jesus, and he loves Africa. He's dedicated his life to serving people on the world's second



## INTRODUCTION

largest continent. He also loves Africa's backcountry and once told me a fascinating story about lions, roars, and *fear*.

Lions have an especially pernicious way of hunting their prey. It seems that they terrorize their victims into making the worst possible choice about how to protect themselves from being eaten.

The hunt begins when a pack of lions spies a stray animal such as a zebra that has wandered away from its herd, or is sick, or is at the back of the pack. In a remarkable division of labor, male lions line up on one side of the lone animal while lionesses deploy on the opposite side. Once battle lines are in place, the roaring begins.

Male lions possess a singular capacity to discharge a thunderous, spine-chilling roar. In an inevitable fit of terror, the zebra bolts away from the horrific sound—and into the claws of expert killers, the lionesses. Death for the confused victim is certain. If the doomed creature had only understood the real situation, it would have overcome its impulse to flee the noise and instead to run *toward* the male lions who sound like death itself but lack the drive and energy to be the actual killers of the pride's next meal.

We should learn the lesson. The only hope for the zebra is to refuse to run away, and to run *to* the roar.

## FEAR FORWARD

Could it be that, for many believers in Christ, the secular news now shapes our outlook on life more than Jesus' words do? We in the West, in particular, seem to have forgotten the Lord's

promise: “In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33 NKJV). We have let fear set us running in the wrong direction.

Yet, there are many who live differently. Why? Because they understand who is roaring.

The apostle Peter pinpointed the source: “Your adversary *the devil* prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world” (1 Peter 5:8–9 ESV, emphasis added). *Satan* roars at us from the headlines and the frontlines. Yet he is weak and cannot win the fight when believers turn toward him in the power of Christ, the Victor.

The people you’ll meet in *Standing in the Fire* are believers who have caught on to the devil’s strategy and won’t fall for it. They’ve seen the worst his minions can throw at the world, and they are not leaving the scene no matter how hot the fire gets. Their courage and faith through unthinkable confrontations with radical Islam is inspiring.

*Standing in the Fire* is a collection of true accounts of courageous Christians facing down the enemies who appear in today’s top news stories. As with my two previous books, *Dreams and Visions* and *Killing Christians*, names, locations, and other identifying details have been changed to protect these current-day heroes of the faith. But their stories are real. So real that you will likely evaluate your own life by comparison, and maybe discover that you have been running in the wrong direction and need to make a U-turn.

Jesus predicted the mess the world is in, so the current state of things should not really surprise any of us. Christian

persecution is at an all-time high. Yet, if you are like me, the reality continues to shock you.

As a new believer in high school, I fell in love with Jesus and began to devour His Word. One of my first stops was the book of Acts. As I read, I envisioned myself as one of the disciples, spreading the gospel around the known world, and I vividly remember thinking: *I'm glad the Roman Empire collapsed and we live in a more civilized world now. Thank You, Lord, that all the persecution is over and done with.*

But whatever made me think that persecution is off the table? Jesus clearly promised it to His followers. Even secular news now regularly covers the growing inhumane treatment of Christians around the world.

But, as followers of Christ, the message of love He has given us to take to the world should never be daunted by fear. If it is, we're running instead of standing.

I believe it's *time for Christ followers to stand firm and no longer run away*, because our enemy is the one who wants us to run. During the Babylonian captivity, Meshach, Shadrach, and Abednego stood confident before King Nebuchadnezzar whom they refused to worship, even though he threatened to send them to a horrifying death. They had no guarantees that God would intervene.

Yet, just knowing “the God we serve is able to deliver us” (Dan. 3:17 NIV) was enough for them. And their trust in the God of Israel, while at the same time having no fear of the king of the great Babylonian Empire, caused Nebuchadnezzar to lose it and unravel before their eyes. In a raging fit, he had the three young Hebrews bound with heavy clothes, tied up, and thrown

into a fire that killed the soldiers who tossed them into a blazing incinerator.

*But soon the king would see that the three men were not alone.*

Neither are the Jesus followers of today, who right now stand in the fiery furnace of Islamic terrorism in the Middle East. Jesus is with them, and He gives them the reason—and the courage—to stand. They have learned in the fire, and they have much to share with you. Jesus has made available to you the same courage to face down your fears.

Today's world is violent and pitted against those who follow Jesus, and it's not going to change in our lifetime. But we know the end of the story, and in order to live life full throttle for God we must say good-bye to fear and look with hope to the future. After all, Jesus is coming back, and how do you want Him to find you: shaking like a leaf or standing strong in Him, come hell or high water?

In *Killing Christians*, I introduced you to Farid, who lives in Syria in the midst of the world's most feared killing machine, ISIS. Yet, if you met him today, you would be shocked because he appears to live with less stress than you and I do in the relative safety of America. His heart overflows with peace, and a contagious, memorable smile always shines despite his overwhelming adversity.

Farid doesn't merely survive—he *thrives* in Syria. He should be dead by now. Yet, he is not standing alone, and he tells of how he has never felt the presence of Christ more than when he wasn't sure if he would live to see the end of the day. ISIS and other Islamic terrorist groups are stoking the fire perhaps hotter than it has ever been for followers of Christ in the Middle East. Apocalyptic Muslims like ISIS and the regime in Iran hold to an

“end-times” scenario, which involves an annihilation of America and Israel. Christians are to be erased if they refuse to convert to Islam.

Recently, Farid told me that thirty threats were spray-painted on the front of his apartment. Terrorists wanted to make sure he got their message. To be sure, he understood the threat, but he stayed, and an astounding array of others are doing the same. You’ll meet one of them in our first story. He’s a friend of Farid’s, and the danger he faced is chilling. In places like Syria, Christians face a fiery furnace.

But Jesus is there, and that’s why today’s heroes of our faith in the Middle East don’t run away in fear. Instead, they *choose* to stay. Despite the cost, they serve God wholeheartedly.

The flames of persecution are blazing. But new heroes of the faith are not afraid, and they are not leaving. Their stories will inspire you, refresh your hope, and show you a way to face your own fears.

The courageous Christians you are about to meet have learned valuable lessons in the midst of their relentless trials. But above all, they have seen time and time again that they are not alone, and will never be, for they are with Jesus, standing in the fire.

Then King Nebuchadnezzar was astonished; and he rose in haste and spoke, saying to his counselors, “Did we not cast three men bound into the midst of the fire?”

They answered and said to the king, “True, O king.”

“Look!” he answered, “I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire; and they are not hurt, and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” (Dan. 3:24–27 NKJV)



# THE SYRIAN FIRING SQUAD

Osama knew the execution position well—captive kneeling, head bowed slightly forward, hands behind his back. He had led his share of hostages and prisoners to the crest of the sandy hill five miles east of the rebel-held city of Idlib in northern Syria. But this time, he was the one struggling for breath under the black hood cinched tight over his head in the blistering desert sun.

From behind the three members of his firing squad, Commander Mahmoud Ramadan shouted the list of crimes Osama al-Jihadi had committed against Islam. He punctuated each judgment with vicious laughter. Ridicule was standard procedure in the execution of an apostate, and Osama imagined that his cousins on the other side of Idlib could hear the man bellowing. A year earlier, Osama could never have imagined he would be kneeling before an executioner.

The commander's monologue ended abruptly in a single gunshot, and Osama crumpled to the ground. A half dozen rapid-fire shots followed, and blood once again soaked into the sandy hill.

But it was not Osama's.

At precisely 3:00 A.M. one night the previous year, in the basement of a spacious suburban home not far from the bloody mound, a cold-eyed, twenty-ish man raised his hand toward a group of comparably aged males gathered in the underground room. The assembly honored his silent request for their attention.

“When Bashar Al-Assad dies, we will crush the Alawites and slaughter all Christians!” The young man spoke resolutely, confident of his cause.

Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian version of al-Qaeda, was now a grim threat to the Bashar Al-Assad regime that had looked so invincible just months before. Still maintaining discretion about its movements, though, the group planned its business a safe forty miles from al-Nusra’s primary target, one of the oldest cities in the world. Continually inhabited for more than four thousand years, Aleppo boasts more residents than its slightly older but more well-known sister city and capital, Damascus.

“America will help us overthrow this evil regime. They hate Assad. But *we* are the ones who owe him and his father for what they did to our families in Hama. I will never give up the fight to liberate Syria from this illegitimate infidel. I will die in this fight, because I have no doubt this is what Allah created me for.”

The young man returned the nods of his listeners. They, too, hated Assad. The bully of the Levant<sup>1</sup> had too long oppressed them with his massive military and by way of his despicable alliances with Russia and Iran. Shameless flaunting of power only enflamed the hostility against him.

Life was good in Syria—at least for the family of Bashar Al-Assad. The president’s wife looked as if she walked into the royal palace straight off of a fashion runway in Paris. The Assads

loved the good life in Damascus. President Assad slept well at night—that is, until the Syrian civil war started.

“The one who has the plan for overthrowing the government will speak to you now.” The upstart leader smiled and gestured with his right hand toward the basement’s side entrance. “You didn’t know you would have the pleasure of hearing from our spiritual mentor tonight, did you?”

Fifty men leapt to their feet as Osama al-Jihadi marched through the door and replaced the younger man as the focal point of the room. The straight-backed leader turned powerful shoulders from side to side and surveyed the room for half a minute before speaking.

“So these are my warriors?” The hint of a smile crossed Osama’s face. “I like what I see—not only in this room, but also in Syria’s future. We will take what is rightfully ours as Sunni Muslims. We outnumber Assad and the filthy Alawites nearly five to one.

“So tell me, how have we let this trifling Alawite tumor control us for so long? How can *he* cause us to live as exiles in our own country?” Osama glared at his audience.

“I’ll tell you how: it’s because cowards have led us! But those days are over. Many of us here will die in this holy fight. But by Allah’s strength, *so will Bashar Al-Assad*. We will see that he gets what is coming to him.”

Osama al-Jihadi stood motionless. His eyes shifted from cohort to cohort until he had personally acknowledged nearly every man in the room. Finally, he nodded toward the one who had introduced him, and the meeting was over.

*Jamal* al-Jihadi filed slowly out of the basement with the other men but briefly caught his older cousin’s steady eye. He



smiled and bowed his head toward his leader and uncle's son. The strong man of al-Nusra had no idea that every time his favorite cousin grinned, he was praying for Osama.

"Jamal, you have to get out! My sister in Lebanon is ready for us." Jamal's fiery wife, Safa, slammed both hands flat on the kitchen table, her words and eyes pleading with the man seated across from her. "I don't care if Osama is your cousin. You're playing with fire. Surely he suspects something. Osama recruited you, so the two of you could be 'freedom fighters.' But these people of his are nothing but cold-blooded terrorists. How can you even go to the meetings anymore in good conscience? You're a believer!"

Jamal closed his eyes, sincerely considering the fears of the wife he so adored—and the mother of his three young children. Barely five feet tall, his lovable stick of dynamite was also by far the best cook in either of their extended families. Her Lebanese heritage added literal and figurative spice to every family gathering.

Their passionate dialogue had begun the instant he entered the kitchen, groggy from too little sleep after the late-night meeting. Jamal mainly listened, and after just ten minutes, he felt as if the talk with his wife had been in progress for hours.

He picked up a serving dish from the center of the table and scraped the last fava beans onto a piece of pita. Studying the pale green objects, he smiled softly, and raised his hand like a school-boy waiting to be called on at the madrasa.<sup>2</sup>

"I would like to say something."

Safa accepted the interruption and with flair slapped her right hand across her mouth.

"My dear Safa, when Jesus came into my life, I knew He

called me first to our precious family, yet my heart is in agony for my larger al-Jihadi family as well. Some people are called to take Jesus to foreign lands, but I'm to stay here. This is my calling. It begins for me in my house, but I am willing to tell everyone else about Him too."

"Yes, I know that, Jamal, and I love you for being such a brave man. But you were raised a Muslim—we both were—and your family is involved in *terrorism*. Many of them are! Do you think they will not notice the change in you? It's all over your face. The Holy Spirit has marked you. Please let someone else reach out to Osama—anyone but you!

"We may play the game in front of them, but I'm telling you, somehow they know what's happened to you. Somehow, somehow they *know*! And besides, Sharia Law is a cruel master, and I just don't think I can take it anymore. Please, can we go to Lebanon?"

"My love." Jamal shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I promise you . . . they don't know. Not even Osama. We have been best friends since I was five. I love him like a brother. I know everything about him, and he knows everything about me—except the most important thing. But that is coming soon.

"When he believes, we will have a modern-day Paul. Something good will come out of Syria. When Osama accepts our Lord, he will shake the world. I feel this in my heart."

Jamal pushed back from the table and crossed his legs. "How are the children this morning?"

Safa scowled. "Jamal, habibi,<sup>3</sup> you are very good at changing the subject when I have you cornered. And don't 'remind' me that you've had lots of practice either!"

"Of course not, my love. Let me conclude our conversation

properly.” Jamal smiled broadly at his spritely bride. “This was a wonderful breakfast.”

Jamal slowly coiled the black hose of a *nargila* (hookah) onto the floor between them. Osama rested his cup of intensely black Arabic coffee on his right knee and with his left hand reached for the mouthpiece Jamal had just relinquished. Well into their third cup of coffee, the cousins neared the end of a long night of deep conversation. The exchange with Safa that morning played in the back of Jamal’s mind, but he determined that his wife’s legitimate fears would not stop him from doing what he could to bring his cousin into God’s light.

Jamal cradled the coffee cup in both hands. His eyes drifted up to his companion. “Osama, you are a great leader. But do you ever worry about the future? I mean, for your family? Honestly, do you?”

Osama looked at Jamal as if he had not quite understood the question.

“Osama. When Assad is gone for good, what next?”

The older cousin nodded. Excitement flitted in his eyes. “Israel, of course.” He smiled at Jamal. “And, no, I don’t worry—because we will win. We *have* to win this war, no matter how long it takes. There is no other way this can end, Jamal. It may take ten more years, but losing is not an option. Our families will be slaughtered if we fail.”

Osama paused, considering his next words. “So, to be clear: I suppose from time to time I do worry about my children, and especially my sons. Our evil president will no doubt try to kill them all. Yes . . . that part does worry me.”

Energy drained from Osama’s face, and expressionless eyes focused on his friend and cousin. “That’s why we’re fighting,

Jamal. It may be for Syria, but it is also for our families who will have the best life possible when we defeat this contemptible Assad regime once and for all. When we're done, we'll make sure there will be no heir to ever challenge us. Syria will be a Sunni-led country again, and once we join with Iraq, we will be strong enough to level Israel. My family—*our* family—used to enjoy vacations in the Golan. And now the filthy Jews have had it for far too long! That must end.”

Osama paused to sip his coffee. “Jamal, one of my goals in life is to see the Assad family suffer a slow death. Won't that be pure joy for us? Can you imagine watching him die just like Khadafy did? Justice *is* coming.”

Jamal stared at his cousin in silence for several seconds. “Actually, Osama: No, I can't imagine that.” Jamal looked down at his cup of black liquid.

Osama watched as his cousin drank the last of his coffee, but said nothing more until he bid Jamal good-bye at the front door. Before stepping through the courtyard gate of Osama's house, Jamal checked the street and surrounding rooftops several times for movement. Al-Nusra had secured the neighborhood last month, but the Syrian Army infiltrated every so often, which meant that death by sniper fire was possible at any time.

Well past midnight, Jamal entered his kitchen through the back door. Finding the light on, he had hoped Safa was still up, cooking, but he discovered her asleep in their bedroom. Jamal undressed, pulled a sleeping shirt over his head, and slipped into bed beside his wife. As he slid his right hand past the curve of Safa's hip and around her waist, she startled and sat up. Her eyes found Jamal's form in the mostly dark room.

“Is everything all right, Jamal? How was Osama? Did he start screaming about Assad or Israel again?”

Jamal reached for Safa’s hand. “Maybe you’re right about him, Safa. He has so much hate in his heart. When he started to talk about seeing Assad die a slow death tonight, something sinister took over. The evil in his eyes truly scared me. I’ve seen it in his speeches to al-Nusra recruits as well.

“If he knew my secret, that evil would consume me in an instant. He is *ruled* by hate.” Jamal paused, and then whispered, mostly to himself. “How long can I keep up this game? Lord, we need a miracle.”

Safa leaned toward her husband and laid her head softly on his chest. The two Jesus followers drifted to sleep in each other’s arms.

Shockwaves nearly threw Jamal to the floor. Instantly awake, he heard Safa gasp as he jerked upright beside their bed. The explosion couldn’t have been more than a block away.

*Are the children okay? His mind raced through the possibilities. Was it the Syrian Army? The Americans? Russia?*

Three al-Jihadi children sprinted into their parents’ room and scrambled under the bedcovers. A smaller noise focused Jamal’s attention. His cell phone was ringing. A second later, Safa’s added its familiar notes. Safa flicked on the bedside light just as Jamal fished a cell phone from the pocket of pants he had left on the floor.

As he answered, a familiar voice—one of the men from al-Nusra—blurted at Jamal, “It’s Osama!”

“Osama? Is he dead?”

At the word “dead,” Safa froze. She gave up looking for her phone and stared at Jamal.

“Okay. How bad is he hurt?” Jamal’s eyes scanned the room, looking at nothing. “Where did it land? Are Amal and the children safe?” He paused again for an answer. “I’ll be right there.”

Jamal squinted past the blinding red lights flashing beside the courtyard entrance he had walked through on his way home four hours earlier. With each red pulse, he could see that little remained of the entry portion of Osama’s house. Jamal darted up to the ambulance just as two paramedics lifted a stretcher through the open back doors of the white van.

“Where will you take him?” Jamal screamed. He had maintained control of his emotions until the moment he spotted his cousin and best friend under the blood-soaked sheet.

“The al-Watani hospital.” The lead attendant spoke as he jumped into the van and pulled the stretcher on board.

Jamal looked at Osama and read the agony in his barely open eyes. The younger man forced a smile and prayed silently, *Lord, is this it for Osama?* As the ambulance door slammed shut, Jamal wondered if he would ever again see his cousin and best friend alive.

Although surgery to remove shrapnel and stop internal bleeding should have taken no longer than two hours, four hours later, the al-Jihadi family sat in the al-Watani hospital waiting room with no word from medical personnel on Osama’s condition. Jamal had a bad feeling.

Osama al-Jihadi’s wife, Amal, sat at the center of a circle of ten women. Tears spilled down the front of her niqab.<sup>4</sup>

Jamal stood outside the group of black-clad females, listening as Amal choked out her fears. "I've dreamed that Osama would soon be dead. I wake up crying almost every night. I think he is cursed and condemned to die already."

The two women closest to Amal—her sisters—each touched one of the sobbing woman's shoulders, as a voice from across the room called out, "Are you Osama al-Jihadi's wife?"

Amal stood slowly, braced on each side by the two sisters, prepared to receive the feared news, and turned toward the voice. A man in surgical clothes stood in the doorway of the waiting room.

"Osama survived the surgery and has been moved to intensive care. There was more damage internally than we picked up on the X-ray. He has many injuries and an infection. If it goes septic, he could easily die. Even if he makes it through the next few days, he will be here for several weeks, perhaps a month." The man in green shrugged. "Maybe more. I am sorry. We had the best doctors in the area, and his case was challenging even for them. Osama is in a medically induced coma to stabilize him. We can thank Allah that he is alive."

Amal howled, and her black form crumpled toward her sisters. The woman's body slipped through their arms, and the two helpers, caught off-guard by Amal's faint, managed only to soften her drop to the floor.

Amal revived, and, unhurt from her fall, stayed with Osama that night and through the next two days. When she at last broke from keeping watch beside her husband, Jamal took her place in the hospital room. He sat alone next to Osama. A handful of nurses came and went, ignoring Jamal, and for nearly an hour, he said nothing. Finally, he leaned close to his comrade's ear and spoke quietly.

“I kick myself that I never told you. Here you are in a coma, and no one knows if you will survive or not. Your house is destroyed, Osama, but at least Amal and your children are safe in my home. Safa cooks all day, and there is much noise in the house. You should see it, Osama.”

Jamal paused and covered his face with his hands before continuing.

“Well, I know you can’t hear me, but here I go.” He laid his left forearm on the bed beside the comatose figure.

“Osama, I began following Jesus last year. I found a Bible, and I could not put it down. I don’t even know where I got it. Initially, I wanted to find out where it had been corrupted. Every night in bed, I read under the covers by the light of my phone. I waited until after Safa was asleep, and sometimes I would not even sleep myself. But that didn’t matter. This Jesus was more than I could handle, Osama. I mean He *loved* people who were suffering—little children, the helpless, the marginalized, and the poor. He took time for people—*especially* the *sinners*. The worst ones were drawn to Him, and He never turned them away. Did you know Jesus caused such a stir that news about Him traveled all the way *to Syria* from Israel?” He paused, suppressing the urge to feel foolish at talking so intimately with an all-but-dead body, then pushed on.

“Seeing this loving Jesus, I had to come to grips with the depths of hate in my heart. I realized it was an acid destroying me on the inside. And then I read where Jesus said, ‘Love your enemies.’ This made no sense to me at all. *Is Jesus majnoon?*<sup>25</sup> I wondered. That sort of thinking in the Middle East is ludicrous.

“This is what I could not shake, though: His message of love. Even sinners could receive Jesus’ love. In fact, the *only*



people Jesus condemned were the religious people who weren't living the way they forced others to. And I asked myself, *Are the Pharisees Muslim imams in disguise?* They are so similar!

"So, Osama, I have my Bible, and every time I come to see you I'm going to read it to you. I'll start now . . . 'I have come that they might have life—'"

"And that they might have it more abundantly."

Jamal's head jerked toward the door at the sound of another man's voice.

"My apologies if I startled you. You may remember me—Dr. Ahmad. I didn't know you were a believer, Jamal. When did this happen?"

Jamal stood up. "Of course I remember you! When my father died in this hospital, you were remarkably kind to him—and to us. To answer your question: I haven't exactly told my family yet . . . other than my wife."

The doctor nodded, smiling. "Join the club. Not exactly the safest message to be spreading around Syria these days, is it? But we can pray, and we can slowly draw people into their need for Jesus. Today people are empty inside. They walk down the streets like robots without any emotion."

Relief washed over Jamal that his secret was safe with at least one other person. He listened as Dr. Ahmad became more animated.

"How much more killing can we take? Religion is just a dead-end street. You work so hard to keep the rules, and for what reason?" Ahmad shook his head. "I wasn't any closer to God—even though I made the Hajj!<sup>6</sup> I've lived here my whole life, and I have never had inner peace like I received as a gift from heaven when I gave myself to Jesus. My family soon followed, but, of

course, we have to keep that to ourselves. Our secrets are safe between us, right Jamal?" The doctor paused again, formulating his next words.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Jamal nodded. "Sure."

"Your cousin is one of the most feared men in this region. Jabhat al-Nusra has leveled villages and instituted Sharia Law. Do you not find it remarkable that Jesus called *you* to reach him? Who would he listen to, other than you, his best friend and cousin? Do you think he is open to anything about Jesus?"

Jamal looked at the floor. "I really don't know. I was hoping to . . ." He choked on his words. "I wanted to tell him . . ."

Dr. Ahmad rested a hand on Jamal's shoulder as tears dripped from Jamal's face to the tile floor.

"Jamal, if Osama survives, let's both tell him. We may live in Syria, but it's time to be bold. Am I right, or am I wrong?"

Jamal brushed his cheek with his right hand and looked this fellow believer in the eye.

Dr. Ahmad took Jamal's cue. "Yes! We can do this together. Agreed?"

"Agreed! Now we must pray. And perhaps you heard me when you came in the room: My goal is to read the New Testament to Osama every time I'm here."

For the next two and a half weeks, Jamal visited Osama each day. He read most of the New Testament to his cousin.

"Safa!" Jamal turned his face from the cell phone and nearly shouted at his wife, beside him in the front seat of their car. "It's Dr. Ahmad!"

He listened again to the voice on the phone.

“Jamal, he’s awake! I found Amal eating lunch in the waiting room with the children, but she is now with Osama. He’s alert, asking questions, and is quite emotional. Can you come down here right away?”

“I’m actually on my way to the hospital right now, and Safa is with me.”

Syrian artillery had renewed its abuse of Idlib that morning, and Jamal raced through the streets, avoiding the seemingly random explosions only by God’s grace. When he and Safa finally scurried into Osama’s hospital room, the first words from the man in the bed astounded him.

“Jamal! My wonderful cousin! Thank you for coming to see me so many times.”

Jamal walked slowly to the bed. “But, Osama, how did you know? Did Amal tell you I’d been here?”

“No. She didn’t have to. I often heard you. You prayed over me, and the words you read were like nothing I’ve ever heard before. I want to hear more.” Osama grinned at his younger cousin.

That night, Jamal and Safa knelt in their living room, bent forward with their faces touching the floor, and prayed for Osama. Thirty minutes into their prayer vigil, Jamal straightened up and opened his eyes. Safa sensed the change in her husband’s position and raised her face from the floor. She looked at Jamal, trying to read his thoughts.

“This is *face time*, habibti.”<sup>7</sup> Jamal chuckled. “It’s the real thing, not just what we do these days instead of connecting with someone online or over the phone. I can imagine that true

believers have been doing this for centuries when they plead with the God of heaven to intervene in some special way.”

Jamal raised his eyes and arms toward the ceiling. “Lord, we call on Your name, for Osama!”

The next day, Jamal joined Osama again at the hospital. No longer in ICU, Osama now had more time to himself, with fewer medical staff hovering around. Alone with only Jamal, Osama hungered for more information from his cousin about what he had heard during the coma.

“The words were from the Bible, Osama. It is the true Word of God, and that’s why I read it to you.” Jamal watched to see if Osama would flinch at his explanation. “The very words of God contain life. And when *I* first read them, I felt complete inner peace for *the first time in my life*.” Jamal paused again. “You know, as I do, that the Bible is considered a holy book by the religion we were raised in.”

Osama cocked his head. “What do you mean, ‘the religion we were raised in’?”

Eying the man in the hospital bed, Jamal drew a long breath and continued, “Osama, I gave up religion . . . a while ago. I follow Jesus now.” There, he had said it and wouldn’t—couldn’t—retreat. “The more I studied Islam back when I was preparing to be an imam, the more questions I had. But they were never answered by our clerics. I was ridiculed, sometimes even beaten, just for asking them.

“Yet Jesus said, ‘Ask, and it shall be given to you. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and it will be opened to you.’ He *welcomes* questions, and His answers are . . . amazing.

“Osama, this book—the Bible—will turn your life around. I know you could have me killed for talking to you like this,

but, my dear cousin, I challenge *you* to read it too. It will change everything.”

Osama’s face hardened briefly. “I don’t want change. I am happy the way I am.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Osama ignored the challenge. “Jamal, reading the Bible here is out of the question. What if someone sees me?”

Jamal smirked. “Are you *afraid*, Osama? Afraid someone might object? Afraid I might be right? This is new for me to see you—”

Osama cut him off. “No! I am *not* afraid! I will do whatever I want.” His eyes narrowed. Then he continued quietly. “I will read the Bible for myself.”

Jamal nodded but said no more. He had what he wanted. The two men sat in silence for several minutes until Jamal stood up abruptly, kissed his cousin on both cheeks, and left the hospital room.

That evening, Jamal and Safa fed the children an early supper, tucked them in bed, and spent several hours praying for Osama’s Bible-reading time. The husband-wife team agreed to fast on behalf of the al-Nusra leader.

For ten days, Osama remained in bed and did nothing for entertainment except read the Bible Jamal had given him. Jabhat al-Nusra members had begun once again to visit, and each time, he slipped the Bible under his pillow.

Well into his second week of Scripture reading, Osama returned to the Gospels. *What would it profit a man to gain the*

*whole world and forfeit his soul?* This time, the words from Mark 8 shot through Osama's heart, and he could not read on.

Osama laid the open book face down on his chest, closed his eyes, and spoke softly. "I don't want to forfeit my soul. What does this mean? The words haunt me. Give me a sign, Jesus, if You're real."

A voice interrupted Osama's prayer.

"Good morning, Osama. I must say that you have improved dramatically in the last week."

The patient opened his eyes. "Marhaba,<sup>8</sup> Dr. Ahmad!"

The physician stepped close to his patient's bedside. "Osama, you've been on a long road, but I'm happy to say you will be released soon." He glanced at the floor, then looked his patient in the eye. "You have been given a second chance at life. We thought we might lose you when you were brought here after the bombing, but *He* has a path for you. Seek, and you will find it.

"Soon, you will no doubt be called back into this dreadful war. Al-Nusra is waiting for you, but I wonder, how long can the city be held with all the foreign invaders that have gotten involved?"

"Now, here is your physician's prescription for full health. My recommendation is for the long run, Osama. I ask you: 'What would it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?'"

Ahmad couldn't interpret the stunned expression on Osama's face but sensed he had said enough. The surgeon touched his patient's right arm, then turned and walked out of the room. Osama stared after the doctor, paralyzed by his final sentence. Six words formed in his mind: *I have to talk to Jamal.*

Three months later, familiar faces surrounded Osama once again at a meeting of the Jabhat al-Nusra. It was the third day in a row the group had assembled, but Osama no longer stood at the front of the room. He was not in charge of this meeting.

Osama sagged in a chair circled by a dozen men, including the young man who once felt pride in his job of introducing Osama for a surprise appearance. Half dead from nearly three full days of beatings, Osama prayed silently that his newfound Lord would simply take his life.

*Jesus, keep dear Amal, and my children safe in Lebanon. Please keep the al-Nusra killers from finding them. And thank You for Safa and Jamal. Oh, how You used them to rescue me. I will not deny You, Jesus. You have my word on that.*

Rahman al-Awani, the new group leader, spat out a command, interrupting Osama's thoughts. Two thugs wrestled Osama from the chair and dragged him down a dank hallway. They slammed him, face down, on the floor by an office door.

The commander stepped close and bent over. "This can all end today, Osama." He hissed at the prisoner. "And I don't mean your death. Tell me who gave you the Bible, and give up this foolish, treacherous conversion story of yours. Say the Shahada,<sup>9</sup> and freedom can be yours again.

"Oh, and how it would benefit others! Surely you don't want anything to happen to your family in the Druze village where they're hiding in Lebanon, do you? Rashaya is not very far from here, you know. Would you rather see them yourself, or should *we* pay them a visit?"

Osama opened his left eye and cocked his head up, in the direction of Rashaya's voice. He whispered his answer. "I do not accept your offer. You can kill me, but I will not deny Jesus."

An hour later, Osama drifted into consciousness. He had passed out after being deposited on the floor of a prison cell, but now another voice he did not know was speaking to him. The smell of cigarette smoke helped Osama determine the direction the sound came from. Someone in the hall outside his cell was smoking, and talking to him. The man seemed to be preparing some sort of proposal for the prisoner.

Mahmoud Ramadan leaned his back against the wall just beyond Osama's range of view from the cell. "I must say I'm impressed by your faith. I have learned from you, and I sometimes wonder if you are persuading me." The voice paused to drag on his cigarette. "You were a rising leader in al-Nusra, and you threw it all away for *Him*. Why did you even tell them in the first place about leaving Islam?"

"I cannot say that I have ever seen this much resolve in a man. With the beatings you've been given, a typical prisoner would confess to anything we charge them with. What's more: we *need* you, Osama. Now that Russia has entered the war, we cannot spare even one leader, especially one with your abilities and influence.

"All you have to do is say the words. You don't even have to believe them in your heart. Just say it. Confess that you have returned to Islam. I'll even tell them that you've reconsidered. Don't you see? I'm trying to help you and—of course you know—this could get me killed. But I see something in you I admire. Please, Osama, just say the words."

The monologue seemed to be over. The man's silence suggested that it was Osama's turn to speak.

"I won't deny my Savior who did not deny me. I won't deny Him in my heart. And I won't deny Him with my lips."



The man outside let a dozen seconds pass before speaking again. “Osama, do you even know who I am? Let me tell you. I’m the man in charge of your firing squad tomorrow. Your execution is scheduled for 8:00 A.M. You have no more chances. But . . .” The voice paused and a new wave of smoke filtered into Osama’s cell. “This is how it will go: Tomorrow you will be taken in a van to the execution site outside of Idlib. You’re familiar with it, aren’t you?”

Osama nodded, and then said, “Yes, I’ve been there.” The scene of executions he had administered flitted through his mind.

“After you’re put in the death position, I will say a few words. When you hear the first shot—it will miss you—hit the ground like a dead man and *do not move*. Do not move a muscle in your body, and breathe shallow breaths.

“When you hear the van drive away, take off your mask, get up, and walk east. Within a few miles, you will come to the Syrian Army. Hold up your arms toward the lookout hill and surrender. They will not kill you.”

Osama let the man’s words register. “Why are you . . . how can you do this?”

No one answered. The voice was gone.

At 7:35 the next morning, Rahman al-Awani stood in the doorway of Osama’s prison cell, relishing the chance to mock him one more time. “You are foolish, and what a pity to think of what will happen to your family now!”

Osama faced his captor but did not listen to the words. His mind raced with questions: *Who is the captain of the squad? Why would he favor me? Will he really do as he said?*

He heard Rahman’s final, terse words: “Take him away.”

As he stumbled out of the van and marched to the crest of

the hill, black hood in place over his head, Osama could see nothing, but the stench of death and rotted blood told him where he was. The voice from his prison encounter the night before—much louder now—railed at the prisoner, laughing maniacally as he read the charges against *the Christian*. Osama still wondered if Mahmoud Ramadan would follow through. His theatrics—if that's what they were—sounded convincing.

*For me, to live is Christ, thought Osama, and to die is . . .*

A single shot from an AK-47 stopped his silent proclamation. Osama crumpled to the ground . . . just as he was told.

#### A WORD FROM OSAMA

*I never saw Mahmoud Ramadan's face because his plan worked exactly as he said it would. After the first shot, I heard several more. I continued to lie still until I heard the van drive away. At that point, I rose up, looked around, and saw the other members of the firing squad lying dead around me. I hadn't realized that he planned to kill them so I could go free. He risked everything to save me, and my heart breaks for the lost men he killed so I could live. They have families and were just following orders.*

*I fled the scene of the execution and surrendered to the Syrian Army stationed several miles away. After questioning me for two days, they set me free! I was astounded and still cannot understand why, other than that God did a miracle. Even this, though, is just one of many. That I am alive after the bombing of my home, the life-and-death surgery, my commitment to follow Jesus, the beatings, and the firing squad—all say that God is using me. His miracles keep me alive until my work here is complete—whenever that may be.*

*For the moment, I am safe in a monastery in Syria. I spend my days memorizing verses and chapters of the New Testament and praying for my family, who are still alive and well in Lebanon. Although they now know I am safe, for several days they endured the pain of thinking I had been executed.*

*I called Amal when I arrived at the monastery, but when she heard my voice, she couldn't say a word. Jamal and Safa were with her, and Jamal took the phone from her.*

*"My dear cousin, I am alive," was all I said.*

*I think he wondered if my call was a dream, but then the shouts of celebration from everyone with Jamal were so loud, I thought they would wake up their whole village. Even before my "execution," they knew I had been in trouble.*

*After I began following Jesus, Jabhat al-Nusra came to find me. I had failed to show up for meetings, and they suspected I was a traitor of some sort. They took me prisoner, but not before I convinced Amal and my children of Jesus' love.*

*My family had spent weeks trying to comprehend the transformation in my life. My love for them had changed, and they could tell. I asked Amal to forgive me for how I had treated her not like a wife but more like a servant to meet my every need. I began to love her with the love I had experienced from Jesus, and, thanks be to Him, she could not turn that down.*

*I long to see her, my children, Jamal, and Safa, of course, but for now it is not safe for me to travel in Syria, let alone try to get to Lebanon. When others from al-Nusra arrived at the execution site and found the bodies of the firing squad, they went on a manhunt to find me, assuming that somehow I was responsible for the deaths.*

*There's also another reason I'm not yet ready to leave Syria. I have some unfinished business. Somehow I must meet the man I*

*have never seen. Before I go anywhere else, I have to find Mahmoud Ramadan.*

## A WORD ABOUT OSAMA

*Jesus has given Syrian believers fresh hope because of Osama. His transformation shows how much Jesus loves us and that He has not forgotten us.*

*Osama was willing to die, even though he began following Jesus only a couple of months before his arrest. His life makes us answer a question I ask myself every day, and I think all believers should do the same: "Am I ready to die for Jesus?" He did not even try to hide from Jabhat al-Nusra although its following of Sharia Law is every bit as diabolical as ISIS. Osama knew word of his conversion would reach his al-Nusra followers, and they would come for him. It's not an exaggeration to say that the group's favorite entertainment is to torture victims while reciting Suras from the Quran. But Jesus in Osama was more than a match for them.*

*Osama al-Jihadi is my new hero of the faith.*

—Farid Assad from *Killing Christian's* "The Only Empty Graveyard in Syria"

