

Life in the Underground

For anything to last well and bear much fruit, it must grow strongly underground first. The roots of our lives are the most important elements of our beings. Too many people try to change the aboveground or exterior things of their lives first - the location of their home, lifestyle, job, or even the size or shape of their bodies, before looking inward and changing the dispositions of their hearts. God cares most about our inner thoughts and desires - the Bible talks constantly about these matters. It is not important how much money we make, the amount of land we possess, or the number of times we appear on the tube or in the local newspaper. You are going nowhere until the inner workings of your life are in alignment with the Spirit of God.

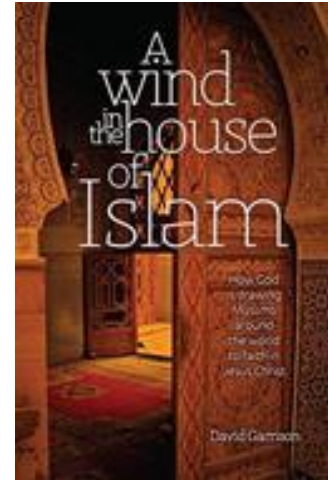


In the past half-year, numerous people have sent me articles describing the decimation of Christianity in the Middle East or Arab world. Often panic or dismay characterizes their worrisome notes to me. Indeed, there is nothing more awful, evil or troublesome than reading a report on what ISIS is currently doing to innocent people. Ten years ago, the world was shocked when it began to learn what fundamental Islam looked like when the Taliban successfully took over Afghanistan. But now, ISIS and affiliate groups have taken it to new extremes. They not only want to eliminate all other religions; they are murdering all other Muslims who do not believe in their vision of reestablishing the Caliphate in the Middle East. As a result of these radical and other Islamic fundamentalist movements, the aboveground church in the Arab world has indeed been shrinking greatly in the last 50 years. However, at the same time, as unbelievable as it may sound, the underground Church in the Middle East has been exploding with a force and growth that will eventually change the face of the Arab and Persian worlds.

Sadly, many very sincere American Christians allow themselves too often to be captive of the American media for information related to world events. As modern consumers, they have gotten farther away from what used to be the most vital source of information for Christians and churches - live reports from missionaries living and breathing on the ground in foreign countries around the world. Today, we must be careful to not allow a secular-leaning American media interpret reality for us. The true state of the Kingdom of God, and therefore the world which he created, can only be properly understood and described by people of faith who are

fighting first-hand the forces of darkness in the places and countries where they have been sent.

In this regard, I encourage you to read a very important new book, *A Wind in the House of Islam* by David Garrison. In excruciating detail, Dr. Garrison describes how more Muslims worldwide have come to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior in the last 40 years than in the previous 1,400 years combined, leading back to the time of Muhammad. Years and years of missionary activities are finally bearing phenomenal fruit throughout the Muslim world. The fastest growing church in the world right now is in Iran. In my own recent trips to the Middle East, I have been face-to-face with new Iranian believers, who are leaders in the underground church in Iran. Experts estimate there are now over a million Iranian Muslims who have given their lives to the Lord. They worship, have fellowship and study the Bible in their homes as a part of a vast network of cells, which together comprise one of the largest Jesus movements in the Middle East. Egypt, too, has over a million members in its underground, Muslim-background church.



So, what is going on? A number of factors are causing waves of Muslims to leave Islam altogether. Chief among them is modernity itself. Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Indonesia, can now boot up computers, turn on satellite televisions or radios, and be instantly connected to religious information previously closed to them. As you know, Christianity promotes freedom, freethinking, and unrestricted criticism, which now is very attractive to Muslims, especially younger Muslims. The Muslim mind is exploding with new ways to look at the world; they now seriously question if Islam is capable of meeting the current demands of modernity. In addition, Osama Bin Laden, the harsh rule of the Ayatollahs in Iran, the Taliban and now ISIS have driven millions of Muslims to leave Islam to become followers of Jesus, agnostics or atheists. Millions of moderate Muslims believe these radically militant Muslim movements rampant in the world today, are exposing the true and more ugly side of Islam, and its tendency towards violence. The Prince of Peace, Jesus of Nazareth, has become more attractive to many who see him as their Savior.

The same thing happened in the First Century. Many of the original followers of Jesus were of Jewish background. To put it mildly, it was not easy for them to publically declare their belief in and allegiance to Jesus. In the initial years of Christianity, the Church was driven underground by harsh oppression from Roman and Jewish authorities. As a result, Christians worshipped and had fellowship in catacombs and hidden areas underground. There the Holy Spirit dwelled in the

hearts of sincere seekers of the Messiah and the seeds of a powerful movement were sown, which eventually turned the world upside down.

Perhaps the most famous of underground seekers, and eventual followers of Jesus, was a leading Pharisee named, Nicodemus. He purposely chose the middle of the night, when darkness had fallen on the earth, to approach Jesus, alone. He did not want to be seen by his peers or the authorities of the day. The book of John records this conversation: "There was a man named Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader who was a Pharisee. After dark one evening, he came to speak with Jesus. 'Rabbi,' he said, 'we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are evidence that God is with you.' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, unless you are born from



Jesus meets with
Nicodemus

above, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" What Jesus was saying to Nicodemus was that unless your heart is renewed, born again through faith in the Messiah, you will not be able to please God and bear fruit for the Kingdom of Heaven. This statement is as true today as it was back then.

The next time you read the daily newspaper or turn on the nightly news, ask yourself how much you think the Wall Street Journal or CNN knows about the underground church in Iran, Egypt, or Algeria. Ask your local church, too, if it is supporting mission work in the Muslim world. Few times in history, in my opinion, has it been more important to put tithing, prayers and support into frontier missions, especially in the Middle East. Encourage and support the flourishing underground Church in the Arab and Persian worlds; there are few more strategic things an American Christian can do right now. It puts all other diplomatic and military exercises of our government in proper perspective, as important as they may be.

True change in our lives is the result of being transformed from the inside out. The Berlin wall eventually fell, not because of bombs dropped on it, but because the hearts of the Soviets eventually grew tired of chasing the dream of a "utopia" that excluded God. Many fundamentalist Muslims are discovering the same thing today - that the letter of the law without the grace of Jesus will always produce a constant whirlwind of anger, brutality and death, and that dreams of an Islamic utopia will never be realized.

It is fruitless to try and effect real change in our lives apart from the workings of the Holy Spirit. Give God your most important treasures - your time and attention. Seek a sincere, daily and vibrant relationship with the Creator of the world. He will

change you from the inside out; and these changes will be everlasting and joyful. They may not make the headlines of the daily newspaper, but they will be written in the Book of Life; and you will become a member of the greatest underground movement the world has ever known.