

Cries of Freedom Being Heard

December 2022

Jesus came to earth 2,000 years ago to set people free from their chains of captivity; the captivity of sin being the greatest of all imprisonments. However, there were numerous other injustices and oppressive forces prevalent in his day; chief among them was the abuse and neglect of women. Jesus was a radical when it came to advocating for women and elevating their status higher than it had ever been in human history. In his Sermon on the Mount, he told his Jewish audience that a husband could no longer just dismiss and divorce his wife at will, but that marriage was to be elevated to a much higher plane with divorce being permissible only under extreme conditions. Jesus even socialized with women and men of ill repute, the obviously rejected members of society. As a result, he outraged the morality police of his day, the Pharisees and Sadducees. They once said to him, "Why do you eat with such scum?" Jesus answered, "Healthy people don't need a doctor – sick people do. I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent." (Luke 5:31b-32)

Jesus knew the slippery slope of self-righteousness. The moment a morality police force is set up in society and enforced by religion, the risks of spiritual and physical abuse skyrocket. This is what we are witnessing in Iran today. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, women have been harshly oppressed, ignored, and abused by Ayatollah Khamenei and his Islamic Republic of Iran. Iranian women must entirely cover their bodies, disappear in significance, and subject themselves to the superiority of their husbands and other major male figures in their lives, allowing them guardianship over everything they do and decisions they make. Iranian women have been in spiritual prison since 1979 and they are now ready to break out. A 22-year-old Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini, recently died of abuse in the hands of the Ayatollah's morality police in September after being jailed for having too much hair exposed from her head covering. For three months, women and other demonstrators have flooded the streets of major cities in Iran crying for not only for greater justice for women, but for toppling of the entire government of the Ayatollah. They no longer want radical or political Islam to rule their lives.



In early November, I was blessed to travel to Saudi Arabia for the first time. Three friends and I visited numerous Christian families living and working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). These new acquaintances were excited to tell us of numerous changes taking place within their country. The new ruler of the country, Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman Al Saud, known as MBS, recently instituted new laws giving women much greater personal freedoms. MBS has eliminated the Saudi morality police and guardianship laws regarding women; he has allowed women to drive, vote, own a passport and their own businesses, and even divorce husbands under certain conditions. He is trying to steer his country in the opposite direction of Iran. He wants a more modern state with greater tolerance, though he still presides over an absolute monarchy. He is wanting Saudi Arabia to be less influenced by the more strict, fundamentalist Wahhabist interpretation of Islam which has enjoyed far more power in the past. As a result, new opportunities are abounding for the Christian friends and workers we met in KSA to

engage hungry Saudi souls looking to exercise and explore greater personal freedoms. MBS knows that 70 percent of his population is under the age of 30, are plugged into the internet and social media and are seeing firsthand what greater personal freedoms are being enjoyed in other parts of the world.

Nonetheless, the effects of radical Islam in the Middle East for the past half century have been devastating. As we all know, tragic pain and death have visited many corners of our world because of militant and terrorist activities emanating from Islamic Middle Eastern countries. At the same time, under the cloak of secrecy an even greater amount of suffering has been taking place in the lives of Muslim women in the Middle East. Islam as a religion fails to lift women to the level Jesus taught and espoused. And radical Islam makes things even worse. According to the Holy books of Islam, women are regarded as inferior to men. Muslim men can marry as many women as they like, but Muslim women can marry only one man. Men can wear whatever they want, but a woman needs to be totally covered. In a court of Islamic law, a woman's testimony is worth only a fourth of a man's. A "good" Muslim man awaits many virgins in paradise for his pleasure, whereas a "good" Muslim woman after death awaits none. These imbalances have caused great pain in the lives of not all but many Middle Eastern women.



Unfortunately, the strict division between men and women in many Middle Eastern Muslim countries has resulted in great trauma within families. Many marriages are still arranged, and dating is frowned upon if not prohibited. During our trip, we were told about the astonishing amount of incest and other unhealthy sexual imbalances and abuses that occur within families. Men still have incredible power in many Muslim families and too often this reality results in great trauma for young, vulnerable women. The women you see on the news in the streets today in Iran represent thousands of Muslim women around the world who are oppressed, alone, trapped, and crying for recognition and freedom.

During Jesus' time, a crowd of Pharisees, Sadducees, and other morality police crowded around a woman caught in adultery and intended to stone her. She was caught in her sin and trapped by the authorities. But Jesus saw into her heart and realized how contrite and sorry she was. Jesus said to the crowd, "All right, but let the one who has never sinned throw the first stone!" And with that statement, the crowd left because they realized they were all sinners in need of forgiveness, not just the woman caught in adultery. Jesus was a champion for the rights of women in his day.

Jesus had a wonderful way of befriending all people and treating them equally without prejudice or distinction, especially women. He empowered the lowly Samaritan woman at the well and gave her new life despite her life of ill repute having married five men. He forgave and encouraged Mary Magdalene even though she had spent much of her life as a prostitute living and working in the lower rungs of society. And Mary of Bethany anointed Jesus with oil and washed his feet with her hair before his crucifixion. A woman's hair was a central element of Jesus' anointing, not something to be hidden and shamed as it is in Iran today.

The Apostle Paul carried on Jesus' message of a new respect for women, especially in the context of marriage. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul said, "For husbands, this means love your wives, just as Christ loved the church. He gave up his life for her to make her holy and clean, washed by the cleansing of God's word." (Ephesians 5:25,26) Taking a page from the

teaching of Jesus, Paul knew the spiritual and physical havoc that awaits any marriage or family life that gives men inordinate power and unnatural superiority over women. A woman was to be cherished, not dismissed, or ignored.

Middle Eastern women and many women worldwide are crying out for justice and equal respect before the law or within the context of religion or family life. Women suffer trauma too often because of unhealthy imbalances of one sort or another in our world today. May we always be in prayer for them, sensitive to their plight, and aware of their struggles, as Jesus wants us to do. This is an incredibly special time in the Middle East right now. Changes are underway and the Good News of Jesus Christ is making more sense and touching more hearts than ever before with the citizens of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Middle Eastern countries. If you or your church would like more information on how you can help the Good News heal and empower more lives in the Middle East today, please contact me.



Jesus is indeed our Savior. He is the Savior of the whole world. We celebrate his birth this month and he hears the cries of all who want to be free. This is the central message of Christmas. Hallelujah and amen!