

God's Word Is Removing Barriers to Meeting Jesus Christ in MENA



"Can He take me as I am?" Fatima asked.

Fatima is a young Muslim woman searching for answers. She wonders what it might look like to honor her Islamic family while responding to the seeds of faith that are taking root in her soul. She asked this question while attending a CBSI study in a North African country. She regularly comes to this group—and she is sincerely seeking answers to questions like:

"Can Jesus really love me without me working hard to please Him?"

"How does He see me?"

"Can I follow Jesus and keep my hijab on—will He see a Muslim woman who is covered, or will He see a heart longing for Him?"

The last question may seem puzzling to those of us who are unfamiliar with Islamic culture, but it is a very important one to those who are raised within it. Since childhood, Fatima's father has taught her that the traditional dress of women in her country (called the *hijab*) is more than just an article of clothing—it is part of who they are as a people and as followers of Allah.

The literal translation of *hijab* is "cover, curtain, partition or barrier." Many Islamic women are taught that the enjoyment of their beauty is for their husbands only. So many Muslim women consider the hijab a way to honor their husbands, as well as show devotion to their religion.

"I have never felt the peace I feel when I am with my brothers and sisters in the church; I feel at home there more than anywhere."

— Fatima

However, the hijab also is strongly connected to Muslim faith, culture, and family identity. Fatima is considering the cost of choosing to no longer wear the hijab as she puts her Islamic faith behind her. To do so would be to abandon her Muslim family's identity as well, and she fears that there will be no hope for her family to know Jesus as she desires them to.

Family honor is a huge matter in Muslim cultures. Leaving the Islamic faith affects the perspective of everyone in the community toward the convert and also his or her family and clan. The convert can be ostracized (or worse), and that person's family often also suffers criticism for not preventing the conversion.

Our MENA Regional Director, Abdel*, told us that when Fatima comes to the Bible study, she enjoys the entire experience. Yet when the call to prayer is broadcast over the loud speakers from the local mosque, she leaves the room and goes outside. He shares, "I don't know exactly why, but when she

*Abdel is a pseudonym.

Young People Want to Know What Bible Says

Among young people in MENA—especially among those coming from non-Christian homes—interest in Christianity is growing.

Abdel shares, "For many years they were told things about the Word of God, but now they want to know the Word and learn it themselves."

Six new youth study groups came out of a recent workshop Abdel held. One young man, Mohammed, stated that after he shared among his network of friends that he was studying God's Word, many of them expressed strong interest in the Bible as well. So Mohammed has begun three groups who want to be involved in CBS studies.

Abdel is excited to take Mohammed deeper into CBS training, so that this young man can help others.



comes back, I can see her heart is seeking after the truth, and at the same time, all within her knows that her world is shaken.”

Family honor and cultural values are frequently the greatest barriers to people from the Islamic faith accepting Jesus. This is the tension Fatima feels, and it is clearly shown by her statement: “If God is after my heart ... it is all His. But when it comes to my family, I don’t want to shame them.” Only through the study of God’s Word and the freedom that comes through Christ can former Muslims see these barriers removed.

Reaching people in this context can be complicated. Many followers of Jesus struggle with decisions about how to navigate cultural practices that are also sometimes religious. Wrestling with these questions requires wisdom, understanding, and grace.

For ministry to be effective in this region, we need to see people as Jesus saw them and take people as they are—just like Jesus did. Then, we can trust that they will receive the answers they seek, as God’s Word and Spirit work within them.

This is why the ministry of Community Bible Study is so critical in MENA. God is after the hearts of people in MENA. He wants them to know that He loves them without them having to work hard for it, because Jesus has completed all of the “hard work” of salvation on the cross. It is now up to them to read and study God’s Word so they can grow in their relationship with Him and see their lives transformed.

Reaching people in MENA requires prayer and, as you might anticipate, financial resources to conduct CBSI leader trainings in MENA countries. Your prayers and financial support also enable Abdel to bring under-resourced brothers and sisters who live in high-risk areas to locations where they can be safely trained, such as the Syrians who were trained in Lebanon. (Read their story to the right.)

Thank you for your prayers and your heart to give.

Grateful for you!



Keith Spartzak, International Director



Syria Team (blurred to protect identities)

Seeds of Faith Grow in Syria

Since the beginning of the civil war in 2011, positive news from Syria has been rare. But today that is changing—in part because of CBSI.

Earlier this year, Abdel facilitated an effort to bring 26 leaders out of Syria—under very challenging circumstances—to a CBSI workshop in Lebanon. The training went exceptionally well, and those leaders went back home with full hearts and a passion to tell everyone within their circle of relationships how to study God’s Word.

As a result of this training, many groups now meet every week in Syria. And their numbers are consistently increasing.

Also growing are the number of participants in two deaf Core Groups who gather for CBSI studies in Syria. Abdel describes their appreciation for the story of Jesus healing the leper man. They were not as excited about the healing as much as the fact that Jesus touched the outcast sufferer. They resonated with the message that Jesus loves those whom the community rejects.

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