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SEEKING ALLAH, FINDING JESUS

A Devout
Muslim
Encounters
Christianity

THIRD EDITION
WITH BONUS CONTENT,
NEW REFLECTIONS

NABEEL QURESHI

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REFLECTIVE

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Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus

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FOREWORD

WHAT WOULD YOU DO if someone challenged the very core of your deeply held beliefs? How would you respond if your most cherished traditions were called into question?

This is the riveting story of one man's quest to set aside his preconceptions and pursue answers to the most pressing issues of life and faith, despite enormous pressure to maintain the status quo.

When his world was being rocked twenty centuries ago, Pontius Pilate simply scoffed, "What is truth?" and chose to wash his hands of the matter. But my friend Nabeel Qureshi was courageous enough to chase down the truth with intellectual integrity, no matter the personal cost.

I'm thrilled that you'll meet Nabeel in the following pages as he describes his circuitous—and, yes, even supernatural—journey to satisfy his mind and soul. You'll experience what it's like for someone immersed in Islamic culture to risk everything to determine the true identity of God. It's a personal story of family, friends, and faith, intertwined with insights into Islam that will help you understand the Muslim world in new ways.

I've seen Nabeel's formidable intellect up close. (He was a medical doctor, had two master's degrees, and was working on a PhD.) And I also came to know his empathetic and compassionate heart. He had an uncanny ability to ask probing questions that bore down to bedrock. But I never saw him use his intelligence to intimidate or bully anyone; invariably, Nabeel extended a helping hand to anyone who was intent on discovering which road of faith really leads Home.

I know what it's like to have the legs kicked out from under my foundational beliefs. As an atheist, I was challenged to use my

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journalism and legal training to investigate whether there's any credibility to Christianity. What I found turned my life upside down.

So I can relate to Nabeel's journey as he asked uncomfortable questions and resisted easy answers. He carefully sifted through the evidence of history and adroitly navigated the mazes of philosophy and theology. He was persistent and unflinching, even in the face of discoveries that eroded the beliefs that had ruled his life from childhood.

Regardless of where you are on your pathway of faith, I predict you'll benefit deeply from reading Nabeel's account. You'll come to see Nabeel as a friend who cared deeply enough to share what he learned and to coax you forward in your spiritual journey. I'm convinced that Nabeel's saga needs to be read far and wide, by all people who value truth and who ache to know God personally.

So read on and see how God uses Nabeel's story to shape your own.

—Lee Strobel, author,
The Case for Christ and
The Case for Grace

INTRODUCTION

THE PAGES THAT FOLLOW contain my most powerful memories and personal thoughts, my very heart poured out on ink and paper. By reading this book, you will enter into the circle of my family and friends, take part in the bliss of my Islamic youth, and struggle with me through the culture clash of being an American-born Muslim. By looking over my shoulder, you will be privy to the offensiveness of Christianity to Muslim eyes, begin struggling with the historical facts of the gospel, and feel the ground that shook beneath me as I slowly learned the hidden truths about Islam. By reading my personal journal entries, you will encounter the visions and dreams that gave me the spiritual confidence I needed to approach the Bible as the Word of God.

By reading this story, you will travel with me through life and know me intimately, and I pray you will be transformed as I was by an encounter with the living God.

THE PURPOSES OF THIS BOOK

But this book is more than just my story. It is designed with three purposes in mind:

1. To tear down walls by giving non-Muslim readers an insider's perspective into a Muslim's heart and mind. The mystical beauty of Islam that enchants billions cannot be grasped by merely sharing facts. By entering into my world, I hope Christians will understand their Muslim neighbors and begin to love them as Jesus loves them. The first two parts of the book are designed for this purpose, and if they

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seem pro-Islamic, they are serving their purpose of conveying a past love for my former faith.

2. To equip the reader with facts and knowledge, showing the strength of the case for the gospel contrasted with the case for Islam. History powerfully testifies to the foundational pillars of the gospel: Jesus' death on the cross, His resurrection from the dead, and His claim to be God. By doing so, history challenged my Islamic theology, which was grounded in the foundational pillars of Islam: the divine origin of the Quran and the prophethood of Muhammad. As I studied Islam carefully, what I learned shook my world: there is no good reason to believe that either Muhammad or the Quran speaks the truth about God. Since this book is far too short to share all the facts and arguments I learned over the years, I have written another book for people interested in the details, *No God but One: Allah or Jesus?* In this book, I provide only the broad contours of what I came to grasp in parts 3–8, and how this led me away from Islam toward Jesus.
3. To portray the immense inner struggle of Muslims grappling with the gospel, including sacrifices and doubts. As you will see in parts 9 and 10, it is in the midst of this struggle that God is known to reach people directly through visions and dreams.

HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

Glossary

There are many Islamic terms that you will come to know as you read the book. I have defined them for you upon their first instance in the text, and you will find all these terms defined once again in the glossary.

Expert Contributions

The expert contributions are truly the hidden treasure of this book. Ranging from prolific evangelists to a distinguished Quran scholar, learned experts who are passionate for the gospel and compassionate

toward Muslims have graciously added their voices to this work, lending their academic credibility and experienced insights. Three of these experts played personal roles in my journey to Jesus. There is one contribution for each of the ten parts of the book, and I recommend that you read each immediately after its related part. You will find them in the “Expert Contributions” section in the back of the book.

A Note on Narrative Biography

Since we have entered the digital age, it is unfortunately and increasingly true that people exact inappropriate standards on narrative biographies. By its very nature, a narrative biography must take certain liberties with the story it shares. Please do not expect camera-like accuracy. That is not the intent of this book, and to meet such a standard, it would have to be a twenty-two-year-long video, most of which would bore even my mother to tears.

The words I have in quotations are rough approximations. A few of the conversations represent multiple meetings condensed into one. In some instances, stories are displaced in the timeline to fit the topical categorization. In other instances, people who were present in the conversation were left out of the narrative for the sake of clarity. All of these devices are normal for narrative biographies—normal, in fact, for human mnemonics. Please read accordingly.

FINAL INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I am genuinely grateful that you have decided to read this book. There are many views of God, and the differences matter. There is nothing like the one true God! If I had known just how boundless is the love of God, just how transformative His grace and mercy, just how liberating His exemplary life and death, I would have run to Him years sooner with all my might. It is my prayer that this book will release readers to run with abandon toward their Father. That is why Jesus came, that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). I am honored that you would allow my story to be part of your journey.

PROLOGUE

SEEKING ALLAH

I LAY PROSTRATE in a large Muslim prayer hall, broken before God. The edifice of my worldview, all I had ever known, had slowly been dismantled over the past few years. On this day, my world came crashing down. I lay in ruin, seeking Allah.

Fading footsteps echoed through the halls of the mosque as the humid summer evening drew to a close. The other worshipers were heading back to their homes and families for the night, but my thoughts were still racing. Every fiber of my being wrestled with itself. With my forehead pressed into the ground and heart pounding in my chest, my mind scrutinized each word my lips whispered into the musty carpet.

These were not new words. I had been taught to recite this Arabic phrase 132 times, every single day, from a time before I even knew my name. It was the *sajda*, the portion of the ritual prayers in which Muslims lower themselves before Allah, glorifying His loftiness. The words had always flowed with ease, but this day was different. As my lips exercised their rote rituals, my mind questioned everything I thought I knew about God.

Subhana rabbi al-ala.

Glorified is my Lord, the Highest.

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“Glorified is my Lord ... Who is my Lord? Who are You, Lord? Are You Allah, the God of my father and forefathers? Are You the God I have always worshiped? The God my family has always worshiped? Surely You are the one who sent Muhammad ﷺ¹ as the final messenger for mankind and the Quran as our guide? You are Allah, the God of Islam, aren’t You? Or are You ...” I hesitated, fighting the blasphemy I was about to propose. But what if the blasphemy was the truth?

“Or are You Jesus?”

My heart froze, as if indignant at my mind for risking hell. “Allah, I would never say that a man became equal to You! Please forgive me and have mercy on me if that’s what I said, because that’s not what I mean. No man is equal to You. You are infinitely greater than all of creation. Everything bows down before You, Allah *subhanahu wa’tala*.²

“No, what I mean to say is that You, O Allah, are all powerful. Surely You can enter into creation if You choose. Did You enter into this world? Did You become a man? And was that man Jesus?

“O Allah, the Bible couldn’t be right, could it?”

As if on parallel timelines, my lips continued to pray in *sajda* while my mind relentlessly fought with itself. The Arabic phrase was to be recited twice more before the *sajda* would be complete.

Subhana Rabbi al-ala.

Glorified is my Lord, the Highest.

“But how is it conceivable that Allah, the highest being of all, would enter into this world? This world is filthy and sinful, no place for the One who deserves all glory and all praise. And how could I even begin to suggest that God, the magnificent and splendid Creator, would enter into this world through the birth canal of a girl? *Audhu billah*,³ that’s disgusting! To have to eat, to grow fatigued, and to sweat and spill blood, and to be finally nailed to a cross. I cannot believe this. God deserves infinitely more. His majesty is far greater than this.

“But what if His majesty is not as important to Him as His children are?”

Subhana Rabbi al-ala.

Glorified is my Lord, the Highest.

“Of course we are important to Him, but Allah does not need to die in order to forgive us. Allah is all powerful, and He can easily forgive us if He chooses. He is *al-Ghaffar* and *ar-Rahim*!⁴ His forgiveness flows from His very being. What does coming into this world to die on a cross have to do with my sins? It doesn’t even make sense for Allah to die on the cross. If He died, who was ruling the universe? *Subhanallah*,⁵ He cannot die! That is part of His glory. There is no need for these charades. He can simply forgive from His throne.

“But how can Allah be just if He ‘simply forgives’ arbitrarily? God is not arbitrary. He is absolutely just. How would He be just if He forgave arbitrarily? No, He cannot ‘just forgive us if He chooses.’ The penalty for my sins must be paid.”

Rising from the ground and sitting on my heels, I recited the *takbir*.

Allah-hu-akbar.

God is great.

“God, I know that You are great in reality, but some of what the Holy Quran teaches is far from great. I am having a very difficult time understanding it, Allah. Please, have mercy on me. I don’t mean to doubt You, and I ask for Your mercy on my lack of knowledge and understanding. Please, Allah, may all this doubt not anger You. I must have misunderstood something, but there’s no way You, being good and loving, would have given some of the commands found in the Quran. I have found so much violence and contempt in its pages, the pages of a book I have read and loved every day because it is Your word.

“But maybe You are showing me that the Quran is not Your word after all? So much of what I’ve been taught about it has turned out to be false. I was taught that it has never been changed, but *hadith* and history show that it has. I was taught that it has supernatural knowledge of science and the future, but when I asked You to help me see it with my own eyes, I could find none. So much that I thought I knew about the Quran simply is not true. Is it really Your book? O Allah, have mercy on me.

“Who are You?”

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At-tahiyyatu lillahi, was-salawatu wat-tayyibatu. As salamu 'alayka ayyuha n-nabiyyu wa rahmatullahi wa barakatuh. As salamu 'alayna wa-'ala 'ibadi llahi salihin.

All compliments, prayers, and good things are due to Allah. Allah's peace be upon you, O Prophet, and His mercy and blessings. Peace be on us and on all righteous servants of Allah.

"I praise You, Allah. All homage is certainly due to You. But there is so much I do not understand. Why am I speaking to Muhammad ﷺ in my prayer? He cannot hear me. He is dead! I should not be praying to any man, even if it is the Prophet. And why am I wishing peace upon him? I am not his intercessor. I know these words were first recited when he was alive, but why does Your greatest prophet need anyone to pray peace over him? Could You not have given him assurance and peace? If he cannot have peace and assurance as the Prophet, what hope is there for me?"

Following the traditions of the Prophet and the guidance of my parents, I pointed my forefinger skyward while reciting the proclamation:

Ashhadu alla ilaha illa llahu wa ashhadu anna Muhammadan 'abduhu wa-rasuluh.

I bear witness that there is none worthy of worship except Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His servant and messenger.

"O Allah, have mercy on me. How can I bear witness that Muhammad ﷺ is Your messenger? It used to be so easy! Ammi taught me to love Muhammad ﷺ because he was the greatest man who ever lived, and there was no close second. She taught me that his generosity was abundant, his mercy was incomparable, and his love for mankind was beyond measure. I was taught that he would never wage war unless he was defending the *ummah*,⁶ and that he fought to elevate the status of women and the downtrodden. He was the perfect military leader, he was the ultimate statesman, and he was the exemplary follower of Allah. He was *al-Insan al-Kamil*, the perfect man. He was *Rahmatu-lil alameen*, God's mercy personified for all the world. It was easy to bear witness that such a man is *Rasul Allah*, the messenger of God.

“But now I know the truth about him, and there’s too much to sweep under the rug. I know about his first revelation, his raids on caravans, his child bride, his marriage to Zainab, the black magic cast upon him, his poisoning, his assassinations, his tortures, and ...”

My thoughts slowed as they arrived at the one issue that I simply could not overlook. “And how could Muhammad ﷺ, my beloved Prophet, have allowed ... *that*?”

Awash in empathy, my mind drifted from the prayers. I was still grappling with what I had come across while investigating the Quran. How could he? I envisioned the horror from the vantage point of the victims. What if that had been my family? Where was the Prophet’s famed mercy?

I imagined that I was there, under the red sky of the desert, at that very moment. Anger quickly swelled within me as I surveyed the ruins of my people. Blood and death. A few young soldiers hungrily made their way through the corpses and approached Muhammad. They made their barbarous desires known and asked Muhammad for his guidance. Muhammad’s face flushed and began perspiring. He was receiving revelation from Allah.⁷ When he announced it to his soldiers, an evil glee spread across their faces. They disappeared into their tents, eager to proceed. Allah had sanctioned their activities. For a moment, all lay calm.

Suddenly, an unbearable noise pierced the desert sky and my soul. It was my mother, screaming.

My eyes shot open as I snapped back to reality. I was still in the mosque, still praying the *salaat*. My overwhelming revulsion toward Muhammad suddenly met with immediate contrition. I had been impudent before Allah. Muhammad ﷺ was still my Prophet. I still swore allegiance to him. I had gone too far.

How could I continue like this? *Astaghfirullah*.⁸

Quickly, I finished the rest of the ritual prayers, ending by turning my head to the right and the left:

Assalaamo alaikum wa rahmutallah.

The peace and mercy of Allah be upon you.

After a pause, I let my face fall into my hands. Tears blurred my sight. The ritual prayers had ended, and now it was time for my heart’s prayer.

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“God, I want Your peace. Please have mercy on me and give me the peace of knowing You. I don’t know who You are anymore, but I know that You are all that matters. You created this world, You give it meaning, and either You define its purpose or it has none.

“Please, God Almighty, tell me who You are! I beseech You and only You. Only You can rescue me. At Your feet, I lay down everything I have learned, and I give my entire life to You. Take away what You will, be it my joy, my friends, my family, or even my life. But let me have You, O God.

“Light the path that I must walk. I don’t care how many hurdles are in the way, how many pits I must jump over or climb out of, or how many thorns I must step through. Guide me on the right path. If it is Islam, show me how it is true! If it is Christianity, give me eyes to see! Just show me which path is Yours, dear God, so I can walk it.”

Although I did not know it, that peace and mercy of God which I desperately asked for would soon fall upon me. He was about to give me supernatural guidance through dreams and visions, forever changing my heart and the course of my life.

Part I

CALLED TO PRAYER



The edifice of my worldview, all I had ever known . . .

PRAYERS OF MY FATHERS

AT DAWN ACROSS THE ISLAMIC WORLD, sonorous voices usher the sun over the horizon. The core beliefs of Muslims are repeatedly proclaimed from rooftops and minarets, beginning with the *takbir*:

Allah-hu-akbar!

Ashado an-la illaha il-Allah!

Ashado an-na Muhammad-ur-Rasool Allah!

Allah is Great!

I bear witness that there is no god but Allah!

I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah!

It is the start of the **adhan**, the call to prayer. The call reminds Muslims to dedicate their lives to Allah the very moment they awaken. From memorized occasional prayers to elaborate daily rituals, devout Muslims are steeped in remembrance of Allah and performance of Islamic traditions. The adhan calls the Muslims, resonates within them, rallies them, and brings them together in unified prostration before Allah.

Adhan: The Muslim call to prayer

To the alien observer, it might seem that the adhan is the very

thing that rends the night sky, separating dark from day, infusing life into the Muslim lands and people.

It is no surprise, then, that Muslims use the adhan not just to awaken one another for the day but also to awaken one another into life. It is a **hadith**, a tradition of the prophet Muhammad, that every Muslim child should hear the adhan at birth. When I was born, my father softly spoke the adhan into my ear, echoing the words that his father had whispered to him twenty-eight years earlier. They were the first words ever spoken to me, in accordance with tradition.

My family has always paid particular attention to following the hadith. We are Qureshi, after all, and the Qureshi are the tribe of Muhammad. When I was old enough to realize the prestige of our name, I asked my father if we inherited it from the Prophet.

“*Abba*, are we the real Qureshi, like Muhammad ﷺ?”

He said, “*Jee mera beyta*,” **Urdu** for “Yes, my son.” “Muhammad ﷺ had no sons who survived childhood, but we are descendants of Hazrat Umar.” Umar was one of the four **khalifas**, the men that Sunnis consider the divinely guided successors of Muhammad. Our lineage was noble indeed; it’s no wonder my family was proud of our heritage.

When my father left Pakistan in the 1970s, love for his family and heritage was his motivation. He was driven to provide a better life for his parents and siblings. When he came to the United States, he joined the navy at the instruction of his older brother. As a seaman, he sent money from every paycheck back home, even when it was all he had. It would be a few years before he briefly returned to Pakistan, once his marriage to my mother had been arranged.

Ammi, my mother, had also lived a life devoted to her family and her religion. She was the daughter of a Muslim missionary. Her father, whom I called *Nana Abu*, had moved to Indonesia with her

Hadith: Muhammad’s words or actions recorded in tradition

Urdu: The language of Pakistan

Khalifa: The position of supreme leader over Muslims; usually the title is used to refer to one of Muhammad’s four successors

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mother, *Nani Ammi*, shortly after their marriage to invite people to Islam. It was there that my mother was born, followed by her three sisters. With Nani Ammi working to help support the family and Nana Abu often absent on mission, my mother had a large role in raising her younger siblings and teaching them the way of Islam.

At the age of ten, Ammi returned to Pakistan with her siblings and Nani Ammi. The community received her family with great respect for dutifully performing the call of missionaries. Since Nana Abu was still an active missionary in Indonesia and returned to Pakistan only on furlough, Ammi's caretaking role in the home intensified. Ultimately she had five siblings to manage and care for, so although she graduated at the top of her undergraduate class and was offered a scholarship for medical school, she declined the offer. Nani Ammi needed the help at home, since she invested much of her day volunteering as a secretary at the local *jamaat* offices.

Jamaat: The Arabic word for assembly, usually used to mean “group” or “denomination”

Nani Ammi herself had spent virtually all her life sacrificing in the way of Islam. Not only was she the wife of a missionary but, like Ammi, she had also been the child of a missionary. She was born in Uganda, where her father served as a physician while calling people to Islam. Raised as a missionary

child, transitioning into the role of missionary wife, and living her last able years serving the jamaat, she had garnered great respect and prestige from the community. Through it all, Nani Ammi was perhaps Ammi's greatest role model, and Ammi wanted nothing more than to carry on the legacy through a family of her own.

And so, though I did not know it at the time, the man who whispered the adhan into my ears was a self-sacrificial, loving man who bore the noble name of Qureshi. The woman who looked on was a daughter of missionaries, an experienced caretaker with an ardent desire to serve Islam. I was their second child, their firstborn son. They were calling me to prayer.