

We died
before
we came
here



A TRUE STORY OF SACRIFICE AND HOPE
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NAVPRESS 

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INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK IS A TRUE STORY of real people and real places. Although names have been changed to protect the workers and the ongoing work in North Africa, this hasn't been done out of fear or a desire for safety. I absolutely believe that every true follower of Christ should be willing to give his or her life for Jesus' sake and his purposes, but to do so for the sake of a book would be a waste of precious life.

Writing this book has been an extremely vulnerable experience for me. I was against the idea in the beginning. Though my journey with the Lord has been a rich one full of blessing, I just wasn't sure I wanted to relive the most difficult and painful parts of my life. Eventually, I felt prompted by the Holy Spirit to give an account of our experiences and ultimately of God's faithfulness. My family has learned much about the nature and character of God through scary and uncertain times living in a 100 percent Muslim country—and also through the fun, exciting, and blessed times of discovering the beauty behind the facade of the Islamic

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reputation. Through ups and downs, sickness and health, dangers and security, the sum of our experiences recounted in this book is God's faithfulness.

I hope this story will shed light on the realities of taking the risk of living cross-culturally as a family in an Islamic context. And I hope the reader will find faith and inspiration through my family's journey—and perhaps even find some wisdom in “what not to do.” It was a seven-year learning curve for us to grow in our understanding of what goes on in the minds of our Muslim friends. Most of all, I want the truth to be told—truth that culture and our Western fears have modified for the sake of safety. May God break our hearts for those his heart breaks for.

Emily Foreman

PROLOGUE

the butcher

JUNE 25, 2010

THE OLD GATED mosque stood deserted, its beautiful slender minaret piercing the vast blue desert sky. The faithful followers who had come to the mosque for their early morning prayers had returned home. As the wind picked up, dust began rolling in from the distant dunes, creating whirlwinds of trash from the market street. Most of the businesses were quiet—no one had yet opened the doors of their clothing boutiques or set up their phone-credit stands. All was quiet except for the sounds of rusty old taxis in the distance and the barking of stray dogs. A few goats moseyed about the mostly empty dirt streets, picking through the trash for something edible.

As usual, the butcher was one of the few people out this time of day. After the morning call to prayer, he had gone straight to his stand and began sorting through the bloody, fly-covered carcasses of the two goats he had slaughtered earlier. He hoped it would be Allah's will that he'd sell enough meat to provide for his wife and five children today.

As he began sharpening his carving knife, the butcher absently noticed the lone red car still parked on the other

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side of the dirt street. It had been there since dawn, when everyone had come for prayers.

He heard the familiar rumbling of a truck as it pulled up outside the training center across the street. The tall American, Stephen Foreman, climbed out and walked around to the passenger door to retrieve his things. He greeted the butcher with his usual friendly grin, shouting, "*As-salamu alaikum!*" across the street.

The butcher was always struck by the kindness of this American, who treated him with as much respect as he did those of the upper class. He smiled back and waved. "*Wa-alaikum asalam!*"

It was 8:20 a.m. Stephen was always early, the first to arrive at the center.

The doors on the red car opened. Two young men emerged and walked toward Stephen. The butcher paused as the three began talking back and forth, their voices getting louder, the conversation becoming heated.

Then the two young men grabbed the American by the arms and tried to pull him toward their car.

Stephen resisted and overpowered the first man, holding him to the ground with his foot while struggling with the second man. Another man emerged from the red car to help in the attempt to overcome the American.

The butcher saw the danger and began to run to Stephen's aid—but before he could take three steps he stopped, frozen in his tracks by the sound echoing between the cement walls of the mosque and the training center.

POP! POP! POP!

CHAPTER 1

the Prison

SEVEN YEARS EARLIER

THE PRISON COMPOUND squatted on a dismal, dusty street a distance from the main paved road. We pulled up outside a crumbling, gray cement wall. The prison guards let us in through a large metal door and led us across a grungy cement courtyard toward the entrance of what had originally been an old house. A small shack with what seemed to be the only window in the place stood at one end of the courtyard, and inside guards were lying about on thin mats on the floor, watching an old dusty TV and drinking hot mint tea out of a shared shot glass. A rusty steel-barred gate creaked in welcome as we stepped nervously into the main building.

Nothing in my past experience prepared me for this

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prison. I had seen heart-wrenching documentaries on life in US prisons, but nothing, save the documentaries on concentration camps during World War II that we were forced to watch in high school, could compare to what we would encounter in the prisons of this country in North Africa.

We were spending five weeks in this desert land, working with an NGO as part of the practical phase of the missions school we had been training with for six months. We believed this would be good preparation for a call to long-term missions somewhere. My husband, Stephen—accompanied by our four-year-old son, Joshua—worked every day in the ferocious sun, building a home for a mother of nine whose make-shift shack had collapsed. I and some other women on our team—as well as my three-year-old and six-year-old daughters—were working at a women's prison.

We wondered who and what we would encounter. What were these women in prison for? Were they dangerous, hardened criminals?

Evidently the inmates had heard we were coming. They were not confined to cells as we'd imagined, but were grouped in a communal living area. As soon as they saw us they started clapping, singing, and dancing in excitement. In true hospitable African fashion, they wanted to celebrate the arrival of their unusual visitors.

But the celebrations were quickly cut short. As we watched in horror, the guards got their whips out and began thrashing the women to shut them up.

I quickly tucked my girls behind me, trying to shield them

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from what was happening. I whispered under my breath, “Oh God! What have I gotten myself into? What have I gotten my babies into?”



We were probably not the people you'd expect to be doing this, Stephen and I. Sure, we'd started out starry-eyed and full of passion. I'd been that kid who was determined to tell all my friends about Jesus and who couldn't sleep the night after a missionary doctor had told our church stories about children in Africa. Stephen had gone on a mission trip to Mexico in high school and heard God whisper, *This is what I have for you.*

But when we met, I was a part-time college student working three part-time jobs, trying to support myself and wrap my head around being a single mom. During the four years my ex-boyfriend and I dated, I allowed my relationship with God to fade—at least until the wake-up call the day I took the pregnancy test. I was immediately broken and longed to make my life right again. Not only for my sake, but for the child's. My boyfriend wasn't interested in my renewed relationship with God—and he definitely wasn't interested in marriage and raising our child together. So there I was, alone and certain I had lost my right to dream of a relationship with a man who would love me and my child and have an all-consuming, red-hot zeal to glorify God.

At the same time, Stephen was facing the death of his first marriage—and of his dreams of serving God on the mission

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field. He and his wife had married right out of college, full of plans to serve God anywhere he would lead them. But as they started their missionary training, she pulled the plug on their dreams, deciding she wasn't comfortable with a life of what she called "begging" for the financial support to go. And Stephen accepted it. He wanted nothing more than to keep his marriage together. But despite his efforts, they began to drift apart, and she eventually filed for divorce.

Stephen had caught my eye at church camp a decade earlier, but I'd never even known his name. He was the manager at one of my part-time jobs, and in the midst of our individual dream-dashing moments, we became friends. I was sure it would be nothing more than that—I was pregnant, after all. But as the months passed, we both sensed it—we were falling in love. Stephen's acceptance of my situation, and his unconditional, fatherly love for this child I was carrying, was one of the most incredible expressions of God's provision and faithfulness I would ever experience. And not only were we being redeemed from our individual places of devastation—we were also being drawn into a united life of restoration.

Even so, we both felt that the call we'd heard from God was fraught with obstacles from the start. Would a divorced man be allowed to become a leader in the church or in service overseas? Would a young woman who'd become pregnant out of wedlock be permitted to go?

But God, of course, was not troubled by our pasts. He kept bringing to my mind the adulterous woman in the

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Bible, waiting for Jesus' response as the crowd hovered over her with stones. As Jesus stooped down, he didn't reach for a stone but began to write in the dirt. For Stephen and me, the ground was our hearts, and Jesus was beginning—or, rather, continuing—to write his story. Not a story of condemnation, but a story of redemption.

Shortly after we started dating, Stephen handed me *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, a daunting volume that chronicles the persecution and suffering of Christians throughout the centuries, starting with the biblical account of the apostle Stephen. "I feel it is only fair that you understand my level of commitment to God and his call on my life to take the gospel to the ends of the earth," he told me, an unusually serious look on his face. "No matter the cost."

As I read the stories of martyr after martyr, I felt overwhelmed as I attempted to calculate that cost. Was I really that serious about following Jesus? What would I have to give up to do this? How far would I be willing to go with God? What would I do if I were in a situation of choosing whether to deny Christ and live, or refuse to deny him and die? Was I willing to give my life for Christ? Was I willing to support Stephen's willingness to give his life for Christ?

Stephen's *yes* was already on the table. Was mine?

Five years into our marriage, with three very young kids and Stephen now heading up a branch of a large supply company in our town with great job prospects ahead, I could no longer avoid the question. In our marriage we were dedicated to loving God and loving others, not just

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in word but in deed. But as this passion had grown, so had the agitation in our spirits—a sense of holy discontent. The comfortable was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. The two great commands had to be linked to the great commission in a more concrete way. It was not, after all, the “great suggestion.” God’s hand beckoned to the unknown—an adventure of faith. Stephen and I had a tough choice, and yet, in the mystery of God’s sovereignty, we didn’t. We began to burn with an intense desire to do the impossible. We needed to “go.” We didn’t know where. We only knew it had to be somewhere difficult because all of the easy places were taken. There were far too many people in the world who had never heard that God had provided a way to him through his Son, Jesus Christ. Stephen often quoted a phrase in church and youth group, which his own youth leader had used to inspire him and his peers: “If not you, who? If not now, when?”

As we shared our burden for overseas ministry with our church leadership and close friends, many of them, with good intentions, tried to help us be more logical. “But there is so much need right here at home!” they would argue. “And anyway, it’s too dangerous to go trekking across the world with such small children!”

Despite their most sincere efforts to convince us to be reasonable, we couldn’t shake God’s call on our hearts. We kept thinking about Oswald J. Smith’s words: “No one has the right to hear the gospel twice, while there remains someone who has not heard it once.”

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And yet now, standing in this prison, all I wanted to do was flee back to the airport. God's mission for us here was to tell captives about his true freedom—but how was this going to impact my children? My heart was in conflict. A “good mother” wouldn't subject her children to this.

But a “good daughter” to the heavenly Father would.

About forty women were housed haphazardly in the communal prison quarters, all sharing the three small rooms that led off the commons. Everything was extremely dirty, and the walls were in serious need of a coat of paint. We saw a few rats, and roaches were everywhere—on the floor, in the walls, and in the mats where the women slept. But the women seemed completely oblivious to the rodents and pests.

There were only two women working with us who could occasionally help interpret, so for the most part we were left to our own devices. We did our best with made-up sign language. The women seemed so excited that we were there and anxious for outside attention that they didn't mind the lack of verbal communication.

We learned many of their stories through the translator. Many of the women were imprisoned for the crime of *Zina*—sexual misconduct. Shockingly, a few of them had been imprisoned because they'd been raped. In this society, where women had very few rights, a woman took the blame for sexual relations outside of marriage, whether she'd been involved willingly or not. An illegitimate pregnancy sealed

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her guilt. According to sharia law, pregnancy could only be achieved through a consensual act, so the woman could make no defense.

A few of the women in the prison had been impregnated by the guards. While some were angry and sensed the injustice, most seemed resigned to their fate, believing it was “Allah’s will.” Other women seemed to care little about their own dignity and would even sell their bodies to the guards in exchange for cigarettes or sweets.

A couple of the women were in prison for drug dealing. One rich, upper-class woman had murdered her husband. By law, it was up to the closest male relative to decide how long she would stay in prison. Her closest male relative was her son, who wouldn’t get to make the decision until he turned eighteen. If he forgave her, she would be set free. But if he chose not to, she would remain in prison for life.

The whole judicial system seemed so screwed up. If a woman had connections, she could simply pay her way out even if she was actually guilty of a crime, but many others in the prison seemed to be held unjustly. They might be locked up for several years before their cases would be heard. Because of the culture of shame and honor, their families would often disown them, leaving them with no resources for a lawyer.

The guards, all of them men, treated the women very harshly. Their whips came out at the slightest provocation. If two women argued, they’d be shackled at the ankles in the courtyard and weren’t allowed to participate in our activities.

How could we show these women God’s love—especially

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in a land where our faith was forbidden? We couldn't do much spiritual work in the prison for fear of harming the long-term ministry in the country. So instead of obvious evangelism or church planting, we ministered in the quiet, patient work of building relationships. A few of us volunteered to help with sewing classes that were being run in the prison. I'd taken home-economics classes at school and had quilted with my grandmother—that was as far as my skills went. But I knew that whatever I had, God could use.



In one of our last weeks of short-term ministry in the country, we experienced our first sandstorm. While it was reportedly a mild storm (lasting “only” a few days), we felt like we were under house arrest. The sun was a ten-watt light bulb in the sky, hidden behind a haze of dust.

When the water reservoir at our team house began to dry up, we began to feel the muted panic of providing for our family in this desert land. I started compulsively counting down the days till we could leave. *Four more weeks, God. I can't make it!*

Two more days . . . I can't make it!

After five weeks in the desert, I was ready to get back to some air-conditioning and cookie-dough Blizzards.

One more day, God. I can't make it . . .

Before we had come here, I had laid my *yes* on the table. *Wherever you want us to go, God.* Wasn't that all I had to do? But now, here, with my babies in this hot and sandy great

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unknown, I was extremely uncomfortable. Was this what Paul meant by “dying daily”?

As I prayed, the Lord gave me a glimpse into my own heart. What I saw made me even more uncomfortable. What I had considered “courage” in leaving everything to serve him was really just pride. I had even fooled myself. I had loved the identity of being radical and being willing to do something that few even dared. In his loving sovereignty God also showed me what was behind me, that the door I had stepped through to set out on this incredible adventure was still standing open. I had an out. If I chose to turn back, he would still love me and even use me.

I had a choice to make. The door behind opened to a short path leading to a shiny new minivan and a comfortable three-bedroom house and white picket fence. It was a lovely path with perfectly shaped stepping-stones of self-preservation. And the door ahead? That door opened to a narrow, scary, and uncertain yet far more fulfilling and purpose-filled path that didn't end—it led all the way into eternity. I didn't have the courage it would take, nor the strength. But God assured me that my own courage and strength is not what he wants. He wants only my willingness.



If I called you back here, would you come?

The five weeks were finally over. We were on our way out. I was on cloud nine.

But then, on that last day, our team leader, Lucia, decided

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to give us one last tour of the entire city. My joy sank underneath the reality we encountered. The weight of the need in this land was as clear as day.

As we passed through downtown, everything looked old and dirty—the cars, the buildings, the people. We were still in disbelief at the madness of third-world traffic: trucks with only the suggestion of previous paint; minibuses without bumpers; battered cars with duct tape for windows; donkey carts and bicycles; buses with people hanging out the windows, tightly clutching their sacks and baskets; pedestrians making the life-risking dash across six-way traffic in a four-lane intersection. Traffic signals were optional. Stop signs were mere suggestions. Everybody made up his or her own rules of where and when to drive, and right of way came down to who was the bravest.

More difficult than dodging other vehicles and pedestrians was dodging the swarm of beggars. Some were in wheelchairs. Others crawled or pulled their shriveled bodies—little more than skin and bone—along the dirty ground, trying to shield their hands or knees with worn out, mismatched flip flops. I had been exposed to some poverty on church trips to Mexico, but this was on another level entirely.

Boys ranging from the ages of three to sixteen or seventeen would spend all day standing on the burning pavement, holding out their large empty tomato-paste cans and begging at car windows. Most of them, Lucia explained, were sent by their poor families in distant villages to the imam—the holy man—to learn the Qur'an. Usually the families had no

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idea the desperate situation they'd sent their children into. The boys spent only an hour or so each day memorizing the Qur'an with the teacher before being sent out to beg for the rest of the day. If they didn't meet their quotas by the end of the day, they were beaten or left outside for the night. Sometimes a car would hit one of the boys and no one would come to identify him. Other times, boys would just disappear—possibly into the dark realm of human trafficking. My throat tightened as I looked at their malnourished bodies, callused feet, and hopeless faces smeared with dirt and sweat.

Those faces lingered in my mind as we arrived at the airport two hours before our flight, or so we thought. By 2:00 a.m. we were still waiting for our rustic North African airline to grace us with its presence. I was about ready to curl up on the dirty, sand-colored tile floor. But because all three kids had decided to sprawl themselves over me, I couldn't move. I didn't know why they weren't lying on Stephen—he had a lot more cushioning, though he had lost a bit of weight during the strenuous outreach.

Had it really been only five weeks? It felt like five months. All of us were well and truly spent. How could anyone get used to life in the desert?

The images from earlier that day rolled over and over in my restless mind. The need in this place was overwhelming. I felt hopeless as I thought about the poor we'd seen and tried to reconcile the abject poverty I had witnessed with the overabundance of comfort I was now headed back to.

Suddenly I sensed a prompting in my spirit.

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If I called you back here, would you come?

Really, God? You're asking me that now? Perhaps if I tried hard enough, I could fall asleep sitting up and not have to answer.

But the quiet question persisted.

Will you come back here? Are you willing to truly trust me with your life, your children, and your future?

I looked down at little Joshua, stroking the hair from his closed eyes. *God sacrificed his own Son for me and my children. Will I not trust him with their lives, our future?*

I was tired of the struggle in my heart. I prayed for deeper faith and trust and exhaled slowly. *Yes, Lord. I surrender. Again.* And I prayed for grace to face the daily inevitabilities—the temptation to back out, to play it safe, to escape death. Day after day I would once again have to “die” to that, to myself, to my right to have full control over my family’s life.

After we’d all finally settled into our seats on the plane, I glanced at Stephen. He seemed lost in deep thought, and exhaustion was written all over his face. He looked as though he’d just walked off a battlefield.

He stared out the window as we took off. The sparse lights of the city disappeared as our plane ascended.

“You look a million miles away,” I observed. “What’re you thinking?”

He looked over at me, his expression both amused and concerned. “You might not want to hear this.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to tell me now.”

He looked down at Ellie, who was lying peacefully across

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his lap, then back up at me. “While we were waiting in the airport, God asked me if I’d be willing to come back here . . . long term. If he called us back . . .”

I let out a laugh. “God was asking me the same thing! I thought you were sleeping.”

“God works in mysterious ways.” Stephen chuckled. “I admit, the outreach wasn’t a bed of roses, and I didn’t exactly love the country. I know you and the kids didn’t have the easiest time either.”

“I was counting down the days.”

Stephen sighed. “I know . . . but I told God we’d go wherever he asks us to.”

As I stared out into the night sky, I thought, *Well, Lord, this was just a test, right? You just wanted to make sure our hearts were right. You’re really gonna send us somewhere easier . . .*