

SEEKING ALLAH,
FINDING JESUS

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FINDING JESUS

A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity

THIRD EDITION WITH BONUS CONTENT,
NEW REFLECTIONS

NABEEL QURESHI

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Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS.

Ammi and Abba, your undying love for me even when you feel I have sinned against you is second only to God's love for His children. I pray you will one day realize His love is truly unconditional, that He has offered forgiveness to us all. On that day, I pray that you would accept His redemption, so we might be a family once again. I love you with all my heart.

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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

Called to Prayer

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.

A MOTHER'S FAITH

I LIVED A VERY PROTECTED CHILDHOOD, physically, emotionally, socially, and otherwise ineffably. I was sheltered in ways I am still trying to comprehend. The few scars I have from those days are all physical, results of minor mishaps, and they come with vivid memories. The largest scar—no more than two inches, mind you—was from an open window that fell on my hand when I was three. That day is emblazoned on my mind because of what I learned about my mother's faith.

At the time, Abba was stationed in Norfolk, Virginia. He was in his eleventh year with the navy, having spent the past few working by day and studying by night for a master's degree. After officer commissioning school, he was promoted from petty officer first class to lieutenant junior grade, and he was deployed shortly afterward. Of course, I didn't know much of that at the time. All I knew was that Abba worked hard for us, and though I never felt a lack of love, I didn't get to see him as much as I wanted.

Ammi, on the other hand, was an ever-present ballast and encouraging influence in our lives. She always seemed able to do everything. From making our food to preparing our clothes to teaching us the *aqeedah*, she never seemed to fatigue or complain. She had only two hard and fast rules for her sanity: no whining after nine o'clock at night and no interrupting her while she was drinking chai, which she did quite often.

Aqeedah: Deeply held Islamic beliefs

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When we had visitors, she exemplified the highest caliber of hospitality, considering it an honor to receive and serve our guests. More food would be prepared than the visitors could hope to eat, the house would be cleaner than the day it was built, our clothes would be crisply pressed, and our calendar would be cleared for the day of the visit and the next, in case the guests chose to stay. It was normal for us when she deeply apologized for the lack of food and our unkempt appearances anyway. It was part of the protocol. The guests knew to assure Ammi that they had not had such wonderful food in years, that homes in heaven couldn't be much cleaner, and that her children were role models for theirs. At this, everyone would be quite content: the guests for being so honored, Ammi for being so praised, and we kids, just for being mentioned in grown-up conversation.

Sometimes the guests would stay with us for months at a time, Ammi's hospitality and diplomacy never waning. When I consider the array of people who stayed at our home, two of the most prominent are Nani Ammi and her older sister, whom we called Mama. Mama was a delightful woman, a big heart with a big laugh in a tiny body. She was always ready to play board games with me, unending in her patience for three-year-olds and always willing to look the other way when I cheated.

On the day of the mishap, Mama was at our home. She and Ammi were upstairs, and I was playing with my Hot Wheels, little toy cars that Ammi would buy me so I would stop annoying her in grocery stores. *Baji*, my older sister, and I had a mutual understanding. She would play with me and my Hot Wheels if I played with her and her My Little Pony collection. She'd choose the cars she wanted, and I'd pick the ponies I wanted. I chose my ponies brazenly, spending the rest of my time convincing Baji that I had picked the best one. She'd always pick the Lamborghini, and I'd spend the rest of my time convincing her that the Pontiac I was left with was better.

Baji had just finished playing with my Hot Wheels and had gone to get the ponies while I continued playing with my Pontiac, racing it along the floor and in between the couches. I looked up and saw the window, the kind that slides up to open. On a whim, I decided it was time for the Pontiac to crash. I raced the car along the windowsill with a gust of finality and slammed it against the pane.

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To this day, I cannot recall the window actually coming down. I just remember the piercing pain, the immense amount of blood, and my scream for Ammi amid gasping sobs. And I recall what happened next.

When Ammi came downstairs and saw the accident, she almost began to cry herself, but in the very next instant she stayed her emotions. Being a navy wife, she had learned to play the roles of both mother and father, and now was not the time for tears. She chose instead to act swiftly and give her fear to Allah.

She raised the window, wrapped my hand in a towel, and deftly donned her *burqa*. Leaving Baji under Mama's care, Ammi lifted me into the car to take me to the clinic. The whole way there, Ammi recited **du'aa**. She offered du'aa from portions of the Quran, from sections of hadith she had memorized, and by impromptu prayers of her own. Her dependence on the sovereign care of Allah gave her strength, firmed her resolve, and allayed her fears.

When we arrived at the clinic, I had a rude introduction to the concept of stitches. The doctor tried to dismiss Ammi so she would not have to watch, but I refused to be separated from her.

As they stitched my hand, Ammi continued to pray audibly, indifferent to the questioning looks of the doctors and nurses. American Muslims were not common in those days, much less a naval officer's Muslim wife who was wearing a full burqa and murmuring aloud in Arabic and Urdu.

Her resolute du'as and her steadfast reliance upon Allah, even in the face of a screaming child and judging eyes, was a testimony of her faith that I have never forgotten. Throughout the rest of my childhood, she taught me many du'as from the Quran and hadith, and I guarded them close to my heart because I knew their power. I had seen them strengthen her in a time of fear and need, and that left a mark on me far deeper than any physical scar.

Du'aa: Muslim prayers recited at specific occasions, as opposed to the ritual prayer called *salaat*; these may be memorized or improvised

A COMMUNITY OF FOUR

AS I GREW, I felt like my family and I never really fit in with the people around us. I have always felt disheartened thinking about it. Aside from the Islamic traditionalism, my life was a mix of 1980s cartoons, plastic toys, and temper tantrums. I should have fit in with the other boys just fine. Unfortunately, people are afraid of what they do not know, and my Muslim heritage was a deterrent for many would-be friends and their families. I was very lonely.

What made it even worse was that the navy moved my family fairly regularly. We never had time to develop any roots. Most of my early memories are snapshots of either moving out of a house, traveling to a new one, or settling in and learning to call a new place “home.” But these memories are still dear to me, and I vividly remember, for instance, our move when it was time to leave Virginia.

As strangers took our furniture, I stood by the screen door on the front porch crying. I cried inconsolably, not understanding who these men were or what I had done to deserve this fate, but Ammi was there to comfort me. True, she chuckled at times, and I do remember some teasing when my favorite chair was taken away by a

My Muslim heritage was a deterrent for many would-be friends and their families. I was very lonely.

stranger. But I also remember her consoling caress and her comforting voice.

“*Kya baat hai?*” she asked, as she took my face into her hands and drew it close in embrace. “*Kya baat hai, mera beyta?*” “What’s the matter, my son?”

“They took the chair! The one with strawberries!”

“And is the chair more important to you than your Ammi? I’m still here. And so are Abba and Baji. Allah has given you everything! What more do you need, Billoo?” Billoo was the nickname that only my parents used for me, and they used it specifically when they wanted to express their love. They rarely said “I love you” directly; that is too crass for traditional Pakistani ears. Love is implicit and understood, expressed through provision by the parents and obedience by children.

That implicitness is one reason why a child’s obedience is paramount in Muslim culture. In my teen years, Ammi would often reprimand my obstinacy by saying, “What good is it to tell me you love me when you don’t do what I say?” Later still, when I was considering following Jesus, I knew I was contemplating the one choice that would be far and away the greatest disobedience. Not only would my parents feel betrayed, they would be utterly heartbroken.

But at the sheltered age of four, heartbreak and family strife were the farthest things from my mind. I just wanted my strawberry chair back.

When everything was packed and we were ready for our journey, Abba gathered the family and said, “Let’s pray.” I raised my cupped hands to waist level, copying Ammi and Abba. We all prayed silently, asking Allah for a safe and swift journey.

When we finally arrived at Abba’s new duty station, we were in Dunoon, Scotland. Looking back, I still feel like Dunoon was my first real home. It wasn’t that I built any friendships at school or that I knew many boys in the neighborhood—even the strawberry chair went missing in the move—it was that I grew closer with my family and deeper in my faith during those years. I had my Ammi, Abba, and Baji. I did not need anything besides them.

THE PERFECT BOOK

BY THE TIME I ARRIVED IN SCOTLAND, I had not yet learned English well. We always spoke Urdu at home, and if we were going to learn any script, it would be Arabic. The reason for this was simple: the Quran was written in Arabic, and it was imperative that Bajji and I learn to recite it.

Muslims believe that every single word of the Quran was dictated verbatim by Allah, through the Archangel Gabriel, to Muhammad. The Quran is therefore not only inspired at the level of meaning but at the deeper level of the words themselves. For this reason, Muslims do not consider the Quran translatable. If it is rendered in any language other than Arabic, it is not Quran but rather an interpretation of the Quran. A book can be a true Quran only if written in Arabic.

This is why it is such an important belief for Muslims that the Quran has always been exactly the same—word for word, dot for dot. Imams and teachers regularly declare that the Quran was perfectly preserved, unchanged from the moment Muhammad heard it from Gabriel and dictated it to his scribes. Of course, Muhammad had nothing to do with composing the Quran; he was simply the conduit of its revelation to mankind, and he dutifully preserved its exact form. Had he not, and had the words been even slightly altered, the Quran would be irretrievably lost. But such a tainting of the

words was unfathomable. No one doubted the perfect transmission of the Quran. The words must be perfect.

In fact, the emphasis on the words themselves leads many Muslims to neglect the meaning of those words. Muslims who recite the Quran regularly are regarded as pious, whereas Muslims who only contemplate the meaning of the Quran are regarded as learned. Piety is the greater honor, and most Muslims I knew growing up could recite many chapters of the Quran from memory, but rarely could they explain the meaning or context of those verses.

Imams and teachers regularly declare that the Quran was perfectly preserved.

Ammi had it in mind to teach us both the recitation of the Quran and the translations, but recitation was first. Every day as far back as I can remember, Ammi would put a traditional Muslim skullcap on my head, sit me down beside her, and teach me to read Arabic. We began with a book called *al-Qaeda*, “the Guide.” It taught us Arabic letters in their various forms with their respective sounds. Right after moving to Scotland, I “graduated” from the *Qaeda* to the Quran.

I remember that moment vividly because my momentary elation was curtailed by horror. After finishing the last page of the *Qaeda*, Ammi reached next to her, picked up a Quran, and presented it to me. It was my Quran, the very first book I was ever given.

Thrilled, I ran to Baji to show it to her. Baji was playing on the floor near Ammi and Abba’s room, so I got down next to her and placed the Quran on the ground to show it to her.

All of a sudden, I heard Ammi emit a heart-stopping scream while running in my direction. “Nabeel!” I was too shocked to respond. I had never heard her scream like that, nor had I ever seen her run. In a flash she picked up the Quran. “*Never* put the Quran on the ground!”

“Okay.”

“Always raise it high. Put it in the most honored place, wash your hands before touching it, and only touch it with your right hand. This is not just any book, it is the word of Allah. Treat it with the respect He deserves!”

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“Okay.”

“*Jao*, go.” She was deeply disturbed, and I did not hesitate to leave.

From then on, whenever I carried the Quran, I raised it high. Baji also learned from my mistake, so the next time Ammi called us to read the Quran together, we came holding our Qurans as high above our heads as we could, arms fully outstretched. Ammi was smiling. This was not exactly what she meant, but she was pleased.

Baji was the elder, so she went first. Ammi pointed to each word Baji was to read, slowly moving her finger across the page from right to left. Baji was not so much reading the words as singing them. We were taught to read the Quran melodically, making the sound of the recitation as beautiful as possible. Some men dedicate their lives to this practice, perfecting their pitch, tempo, pronunciation, and melody.

But Baji and I were no experts. She had a few years’ head start on me, and she had only just learned to recite the Quran acceptably. When she finished, it was my turn. I had never read the Quran before, and I was terribly excited.

“Billoo, what do we recite before we start anything?”

“*Bismillah-ir-Rahman ar-Raheem.*”

“And what does that mean?”

“In the name of God, the Most Gracious, Most Merciful.”

“Why do we recite this prayer?”

“So that we remember everything belongs to Allah, and so that we do only good things.”

“*Shabash*, good job. Do you know where this prayer comes from?”

“No.”

“It is found at the beginning of every *surah* in the Quran.”

“Every *surah*?”

“Every *surah* except one.”

“Why did Allah leave it out of one *surah*, Ammi?”

“Allah was very upset with people in that *surah*, *beyta*, so He didn’t give us the blessing of the *bismillah* there. But He loves us very much, so He put an extra one into another *surah*. And how many *surahs* are there?”

“114.”

Surah: A chapter of the Quran

Called to Prayer

“Shabash. And you will read them all soon, *inshallah*. Baji finished the Quran when she turned seven, and I want you to do it by the time you are six. Let’s go.”

As the days progressed, I became increasingly familiar with the Quran. I learned that there were two ways the Quran was divided: one was into 114 chapters, and the other was into thirty parts. The latter is a system that Muslims devised long after the Quran was compiled, mainly so that the entire Quran could be easily recited during the thirty days of *Ramadhan*. But the thirty parts were important to me for another reason: whenever I finished one, Ammi bought me a congratulatory gift. The Mario Bros. trash can was my favorite.

By the time I reached an acceptable pace, Ammi and I had developed a rhythm. We would sit down with my Quran, open it to the last page we had read, and Ammi would point to my ending spot for that day. For some reason I preferred to recite exactly eighteen verses. If Ammi picked more for the day, I would complain, and if she picked less, I would consider reading a few extra to make her happy.

And so the days went on. I ultimately finished the Quran just before I turned six, much to Ammi’s delight. Concurrently, Ammi had helped me memorize the last seven surahs to recite during the daily prayers. My favorite was *Surat al-Ikhlās*, number 112, because it was short, melodic, and memorable. Plus it was the first surah I memorized, and I repeated it many times a day during salaah. It was one of Ammi’s favorite chapters as well but for a different reason: in a hadith, Muhammad told his companions that *Surat al-Ikhlās* is so weighty and consequential that reciting it is like reciting one third of the whole Quran in one sitting.

What was the message that Muhammad considered so important? Essentially this: God is not a father, and He has no son.

For much more detail on the Muslim view of the Quran, read part 4 of No God but One, titled “The Quran or the Bible: Two Different Scriptures.”