



A gripping tale of escape from Egypt—the true story of one young man’s journey out of Islam into new life in Christ. The book examines three ways believers harden their hearts towards the stranger and suggests three remedies that help us cast a wider net for discipleship.

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## CHAPTER 1

# FEAR

If anyone thinks they have reason to be afraid of Muslims, I likely have more. I would be far within my rights to make this book into a story about the evils of Islam. It isn't that kind of book, just so you know.

After I moved to America with my mother and younger sister, Joy, my mother became the target of an honor killing<sup>1</sup> that forced us into hiding for ten years. (Yes, honor killings happen in the United States too.) She had dishonored the family by converting to Christianity and leading her two children “astray.” The extended family’s plan was clear: kill her and bring Joy and me back to our home country, where we would once again practice Islam. Later on, because of my mother’s growing Christian ministry to Muslims, she became one of the top names on Al Qaida’s<sup>2</sup> hit list, with a price of millions on her head. Like my mother and my maternal grandmother before me, I also converted from Islam to Christianity and

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1. See Glossary for definition of *honor killing*.

2. See Glossary for definition of *Al Qaida*.

faced certain hostilities. My family is Egyptian, and to give you an idea of the culture, in my birth country, when citizens were polled by the Pew Research Center about what the punishment should be for conversion from Islam, 86 percent responded “death.”<sup>3</sup>

Some readers may be shocked by this statistic, but to me, this sentiment is not an exclusively Egyptian phenomenon but a human one. The majority of people in my birth country have rejected the ideology of Christianity, and therefore, the temptation is to reject Christian people as well. But I can see how Westerners have the same tendency at times, not only to reject the ideology of Islam, but also to reject Muslim people. I do not provide this statistic to incite conflict or instill fear, but only to help the reader understand that the threats to our family over the years have been very real.

But even more shocking to my family than the danger we’ve experienced is the disbelief we’ve heard expressed at times by many Muslims, who can’t conceive of a person *converting* from Islam to Christianity.<sup>4</sup> For instance, I frequent a certain Middle Eastern restaurant in my city and, over time, I’ve built relationships with the Muslim people there. When they learned I had converted, they repeatedly voiced their confusion: “But you must mean, you were *born* a Christian . . . so you mean you’re a Coptic Christian.”<sup>5</sup>

They could understand if I had been physically *born* into a Coptic family (after all, 10 percent of Egyptians are Coptic, or Egyptian Christians), but they couldn’t seem to wrap their minds

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3. Pew Research Center, “The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society,” April 30, 2013, <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/04/30/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society-beliefs-about-sharia/#how-should-sharia-be-applied>.

4. A day is coming when this statement may no longer ring true as conversions become more common.

5. See Glossary for definition of *Coptic Christian/Church*.

around the idea that I actually *converted* from Islam. Conversion is simply not an option in their world. When the Coptic pope passed away, these same Muslim friends expressed their condolences to me—which was very kind of them—even though I had communicated on many occasions that I was *not* Coptic. It's possible their worldview did not allow them to compute this information—but it's more likely they might be pretending I'm Coptic so they can keep up our friendship.

Whatever the case may be, the reality is that conversion can be an enormous risk for an Egyptian-born Muslim like me and for millions of Muslims around the world. When I have shared my story of conversion with other Muslim friends in America, they immediately respond with statements such as: “Don’t worry, I will *NEVER* tell anyone this story,” or “*Please* don’t share this story with anyone else ever again!” It’s not that they want to harm me—after all, we’ve built a solid friendship—but they simply assume there may be others in the community who might want to harm me, should they find this information out. On occasion, local mosques would send people to observe the church services I led, wanting to keep tabs on me, and see if there were other Muslim people there being converted.

I also cannot forget the heartbreaking stories I’ve heard from so many of my Middle Eastern brothers and sisters in Christ. I recently attended an Arabic-speaking church, filled with many refugees and immigrants, most of them seeking asylum from religious persecution in their country of origin.

**America was our  
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And the American  
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when we had nothing.**

They discussed how difficult it was for them not to hate Muslim people. Most had terribly traumatic stories to tell—stories like, “They killed my brother. They killed my daughter.”

As immigrants from Egypt, my mother, Joy, and I lived in hiding—and at times, in great fear and desperation—for ten years in the United States, leaving the comforts of our home and family behind us. America was our refuge, our safe haven. And the American church in particular provided a new home and a new family when we had nothing. I am reminded of our nation’s beloved Statue of Liberty, standing tall and mighty at our Eastern shores, welcoming the world’s downtrodden by upholding her torch of freedom, along with these poetic words engraved in bronze:

*Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand  
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame  
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name  
**MOTHER OF EXILES.** From her beacon-hand  
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command  
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.  
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she  
With silent lips. “**Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!**”*  
—Emma Lazarus<sup>6</sup>

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6. Excerpt from the sonnet, “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, 1883. Cast onto the bronze plaque of the Statue of Liberty, Liberty Island, New York, New York, 1903.

I first came to America as a young, tempest-tost stranger on this shore. I am so grateful to have entered through the golden door. And now, I am a full citizen—not only a full citizen of the United States of America, but more importantly, of the kingdom of heaven—now proclaiming the gospel of Christ with my life. I am a product of both American religious freedom and the church's love for my family. Here I am today, by the grace of God, now serving the church by preaching the gospel and welcoming others. My heart in these following pages is simple: to help the church repeat this process—whether specifically with other Muslim citizens, immigrants, or refugees . . . or more broadly, with any outsiders in your own community.

My name is Joshua Sherif, and this is my story. When you read my story, you will fully understand—despite all that my family has endured—the reason why I still love Muslim people and do not fear Islam or its many followers. You will also fully understand why the church cannot miss out on one of the greatest opportunities of the century.





## CHAPTER 2

# OUT OF EGYPT

### *My History*

**M**y story begins in Giza, the large Egyptian city where I grew up.

My family on my father's side were ordinary working people—teachers, doctors, middle-class. But my family on my mother's side were the sort of people you would see on the news. They were tremendously wealthy and successful—businessmen, celebrities, and governors. I remember my maternal grandfather owned an amusement park (picture something in between Six Flags rollercoasters and a county fair carnival). On any day I would visit the park, my grandfather would bring me to his office and present me with a gift of some kind. And then I would go find my horse at the stables—I named him “Hunter”—and an employee would lead me on a pony ride through the park. I could go anywhere in the park by myself as I wanted to, because each of the employees knew who I was and would look out for my well-being. I never once had to wait in line—I could go right to the

front every time, and I could ride any ride as long as I wanted. I especially remember riding the Ferris wheel over and over again—every time I went up, I could see the pyramids in the distance. To this very day, I *still* have difficulty waiting in lines! I have this ingrained mentality from childhood that “lines are for other people.” Like a little prince, I would walk around that amusement park like I owned it.

My family was quite nominal about Islam at first. I remember thinking, as a young boy, that this was very strange because we were clearly surrounded by so many devout people. Islam was simply woven into the fabric of daily life. I remember hearing the call to prayer, five times a day. And yet my family did not pray or visit the mosque regularly like most other people seemed to do. In fact, I distinctly remember visiting our local mosque for the first time on an Islamic holiday, just as nominal Christians will sometimes attend Easter and Christmas services in Western countries. I was shocked by the bathrooms. The toilets there were an open trough along the wall. In my rich and elitist life, I had never seen anything remotely like this. But then I noticed that others were going about their business as if this was routine, and I thought, “Oh, this must be normal.” I was entirely unaware of my own privileges. I tell you these stories, not to brag, but to help the reader understand the great disparity between the life I once lived in Egypt and the life I would later be living as an immigrant in America.

I remember being scolded once by an older Muslim man for picking my nose while on the prayer rug. Muslims go through strict ceremonial cleansing before entering a mosque. Picking your nose is an obvious taboo. (So taboo, in fact, that when my mother read this book, she asked me to change the wording to

“wiping my nose” to soften the blow for any Middle Eastern readers!) Well, this was all obvious and taboo to everyone but me. My family was not religious, and I simply didn’t know any better at the time.

However, all of this took place before my father’s first heart attack. After that event, everything changed.

## MY FATHER

I feel a sense of caution in my own heart because I do not want to fuel the stereotype that all Muslim men are violent and domineering figures. Some are—just as some Christian men are—but I also personally know many Muslim men who are gentle, kind, and caring fathers to their children. And despite what I am about to describe, I do know my father loved me deeply.

The thing I remember most clearly about him was how fast he ate. My father had been taught this practice in the Egyptian police: when you’re in a combat situation, you may have time to eat, or you may not—so you learn to eat fast. The police in Egypt have a tremendous amount of power—so much that Egypt is considered a police state. My father was a high ranking officer in the police and also a medical doctor, one who led an entire unit in the main police hospital in our city, where all the officers would go to be treated.

For my mother’s family, however, my father’s social status was definitely considered “marrying down”—but still an acceptable choice, because after all, he was a Muslim by heritage. It didn’t even matter that he didn’t practice the faith; marrying a Muslim was one of life’s non-negotiables.

At first, my father was not so concerned with religion—he simply wanted me to be tough. When we were with friends, when we would go on vacation, even when we were with strangers in public, he would always want me to wrestle or race the other boys, particularly ones who were older or bigger than me. He constantly placed me in competitive situations, wanting me to grow up strong and fearless.

I have a distinct memory of attending a private school, where we would sing the Egyptian national anthem every morning. We'd all go out to the yard and gather around the flag. It wasn't an organized system, but whichever student happened to grab the flag first would be the one to hold it up during the anthem. And *everybody* wanted to do it. I complained to my father one day, saying, "I *never* get to hold the flag." His advice to me was simple: either get there first or take it from the other student who had gotten there first: "Just go and do it . . . just take it." So the next morning, when another student had again reached the flag first, I just took it out of their hands. And I remember thinking, "Oh, this is how life works. I can just do whatever I want by force."

My father often took things by force. If there was anything "going down" in the neighborhood, he would come home with bloody fists. But I always had the sense that he was not the type of man who only got into some occasional fist fights. Due to his position, he could potentially enforce laws without judicial processes, have people thrown into jail, or physically hurt people without any repercussions. I remember he always carried a gun. Once, when we were home alone, he took out his gun and pointed it at my face. I was terrified. He then asked me, "Are you afraid?"

I was old enough to know what guns did. I said, “Yes, I’m afraid.”

He kept asking if I was afraid, and I didn’t know what answer he was looking for. I grew more nervous and started crying. He finally pointed the gun down an empty stairwell—I remember the loud echo of the shot in our concrete building. “The bullets are blanks,” he said, “There was no reason to be scared.” He seemed so disappointed in me. I felt that I had done something wrong, that I had failed the test—I did not even tell my mother about this event until years later when we were living in America.

I know this seems cruel. Many things my father did seem cruel. Once, after I had been playing with a particular goat at my paternal grandmother’s house, my father forced me to watch it being butchered for our meal. He even made me hold the heart in my hands—a heart that was still beating at the time.

But now, when I recall these harsh memories of him, I understand that these are likely the same sort of memories that he had endured as a child. It’s easy for me to forgive him now. It’s easy for me to see that he was trying to do these things for my benefit—trying to teach me to be strong for this difficult world. In some ways, he succeeded in this. Of course, certain events were not helpful to me as a child, but I have no doubt he was sincerely hoping they would be.

My sense of honor tells me that it is dishonorable to allow my father to be memorialized in these ways. He gave me life and did what he could for me. Culturally and personally, it is difficult for me to share these things about my father. I tell these violent stories, not so that anyone will feel sorry for me, nor to dishonor my father, but rather so that the reader will understand the reality of the fear our family felt when we left Egypt.

## THE FIRST SEEDS OF DOUBT

I wanted to become  
an imam, a Muslim  
religious leader. I was  
deeply devoted to Islam  
from a young age.

After my father's first heart attack, he became increasingly, devoutly religious. He made the haj, a traditional pilgrimage to Mecca; he took me to the mosque every week; he enrolled me in Muslim after-school classes.<sup>1</sup> We began praying as a family in our living room. I remember kneeling on my little red prayer rug and watching my reflection in the blank TV screen over and over again—as the TV faced west and we all faced east toward Mecca, the direction all Muslims are supposed to face when they pray. I enjoyed this sudden spike in religiosity, because I had a deep desire to seek after God and had wanted to be religious from a young age. I didn't like the fact that my family was not devout, and I saw myself as being a person who could lead them back to their faith. People often ask children what they want to be when they grow up. I wanted to become an imam, a Muslim religious leader.<sup>2</sup> I was deeply devoted to Islam from a young age.

I remember going to visit my cousins often and playing different games with them. But there was one game I would always force them to play with me, even my cousins who were much older: I wanted to play “mosque.” I would pretend to be the imam and lead them in religious practices, in the odd way that children sometimes think religious things should go. I invented one game I called “laughing at the devil.” We would take turns casting insults at the

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1. See Glossary for definitions of *haj* and *mosque*.

2. See Glossary for definition of *imam*.

devil, and after each insult, we would roar with laughter. Once, after we had been playing this game for about ten minutes, I suddenly had a very chilling sense that the devil was laughing at me. Perhaps he truly was laughing at me, a young child trying to seek God, yet feeling very far from Him. I genuinely don't know, but the experience was so unnerving that I immediately made everyone stop. And we never played that game again.

There were other strange glimpses I had of the spiritual world, even from a young age. I remember one night I couldn't sleep, and I can vividly recall waking and seeing unusual things flying across the windows—all sorts of lights and shapes and shadows. In my child's mind, I concluded that these could be spirits circling and battling outside. I had no frame of reference for this idea whatsoever, and even at that young age, I tried to tell myself it wasn't real. But all night, I continued to be awakened by this chaos just outside my window.

Eventually, other seeds of doubt about the truth of Islam were planted in my heart. My father began reading the Quran to us every single night before bed—as a kid who wanted to become an imam, I *loved* this. There was never a moment when I doubted the authority of Allah or the precepts of Islam. Until one evening while my father was reading, the first true seed of doubt was planted. My sister, who was maybe six years old at the time, abruptly burst into tears, saying, “I feel like we're all going to hell!” I don't know why a six-year-old would suddenly become so emotional during this practice, especially when this was all she had known for her entire life, but I remember how her words hit me like a ton of bricks. At the time, I had limited knowledge of Christianity and other “false religions” as we called them in my

youth—but in my mind, I had never even once considered the possibility that we could be *wrong*.

Looking back, I can see how these childhood spiritual experiences may have been indicative of the spiritual conflict going on within my home. I had also never considered the possibility that anyone in my family was a Christian. I just assumed we were all Muslims. Little did my sister or I know, but my mother was secretly a Christian.

## HOW MY MOTHER MET CHRIST

My mother came to Christ through her mother, my grandmother, Annette. Annette was a wealthy actress and business woman, who preferred her glamorous, wild life to parenting—and soon became an unstable alcoholic. And thus, it was my mother's grandmother (my great-grandmother) who raised my mother. However, after my grandmother met Christ, my mother noticed a drastic change in her. She gave up the partying and the alcohol, and became an involved parent. She was even willing to put her life in danger on many occasions for this Jesus.

My mother felt deeply concerned at first—from a young age, she had been taught the Bible was corrupt, that Christianity was corrupt. And so, she secretly took my grandmother's Bible into the bathroom and began reading it, in order to disprove it. This was how she first encountered Jesus—in the bathroom, through the gospel of John. And for *years* afterwards, my mother clung to her new Christian faith in secrecy.

After her initial meeting with Christ in Scripture, my mother was hungry to learn more. She and my grandmother were able



to connect to a group of Christians, but soon after, my grandmother was called to go to the police station for questioning. This was a frequent occurrence—Christians would go to the police for “questioning” and never return. A few friends of my grandmother arranged for my grandmother to leave, to escape to the States, leaving my mother behind in the care of her father. (My grandmother eventually divorced him and remarried my step-grandfather, Baba Raouf, an Egyptian Coptic monk who left Egypt for the United States with the intention of starting the first Coptic monastery in America. He ultimately decided he was passionate about reaching out to Muslims and so left the Coptic church to plant a nondenominational church instead. My grandmother left Egypt with him, fleeing persecution, and they were later married in the United States.)

Between the ages of 16 and 20, my mother faced great persecution, often from her own father. Eventually, she was forced to flee her own home and did not see him for two years. My grandfather was well-connected in the government, and during those two years, he put most of her Christian friends in jail. To protect them, my mother stopped going to church and tried attending a smaller group. However, she simply could not remain quiet about her faith at that time, and so the persecution and isolation she faced increased.

Though she eventually reconciled with her father years later, my mother still refused to marry because she did not want to marry a Muslim man. The only reason she married my father was because of his promise to allow her to continue practicing her Christian faith. My grandfather was just happy his new son-in-law was a Muslim, even if he was not a religious one. Though at

first, my father would attend Christian prayer meetings with my mother, eventually, he returned to his roots in Islam. And not only this, but after my parents had us children, he became adamant that my mother would not raise us as Christians, threatening that she would lose them completely if she continued to practice her faith. The law of the land fully supported this—if he had gone to court and said, “She’s a Christian. She’s an apostate. I don’t want her raising my kids,” he would’ve won the case, hands down. My mother would never have seen us again.

And so, she became isolated and began to live in deep depression for years while raising her children. My mother says she has very few memories of this time and lost hope completely.

## ESCAPE FROM EGYPT

My mother had all but given up on her faith. In her own words, each time she was forced to read the Quran, she felt as if she was feeding her children “poison.” She was a young woman trapped in despair. However, even though she had begun to close her heart to the Christian faith, she could not possibly close herself off from the work of God’s Spirit.

My grandmother, who was still in the States living on the West Coast at the time, called my mother often on the phone. One day my mother told her that she believed God had simply given up on her . . . and that she’d given up on Him. She told my grandmother that she was especially worried for me, as she watched me daily becoming increasingly more devout to Islam. After this phone conversation, and after spending some time in prayer, my grandmother believed God was telling her to get on a plane, fly back to Egypt, and bring her daughter out.

I remember as a child that my parents would often discuss the idea of coming to America, starting a medical practice, and raising their children here. After all, America has a reputation for being the “land of opportunity.” But each time the idea was floated, my father would eventually put an end to the conversation. When my grandmother came to visit us, I remember the usual arguments—“there are so many opportunities . . . it’s a great place to raise a family”—which I fully expected my father to put a stop to. But this time, he didn’t.

This time he said, out of nowhere, “Yes. Let’s go.”

I can’t imagine how my mother or my grandmother felt in that moment; and yet, they remained *completely* silent. My grandmother went straight away and bought three extra tickets—for my mother, my sister, and me. The plan was that my father would follow after, tying up loose ends in Egypt before heading our way. The very minute he said yes, these women both recognized internally that God had done this thing. Neither of them dared to say a word—to my father or to each other. They simply purchased the tickets in complete silence, barely able to contain their joy, in fear that my father would change his mind. In Egypt (and in many Middle Eastern countries), if you’re considered a minor or if you’re a woman, you must have a release from the male responsible for you to leave the country. This would be your father if you’re not married or your husband if you are married. This is common practice. If my father had revoked his release, we never would have been able to come.

I was seven years old at the time, just about to turn eight, and I remember it well. I remember riding in the car on the way to the airport, and my father kept repeating himself: “I don’t know why I agreed to this. I’m not going to let you guys go.” My mother

didn't speak a word; she continued to remain completely silent. And though he protested again and again, still, he continued to drive toward the airport.

I remember waiting in the terminal, watching the planes through the glass—not comprehending exactly what I was getting into, but feeling a great sense of anticipation. I thought my father was acting a bit strange, but we were also very busy saying our goodbyes—the entire family showed up to say farewell because we would be leaving for a long while. I remember my father also saying goodbye, but at the same time, he kept repeating over and over again: “You guys aren’t going. I don’t know why I agreed to this.”

And yet, we climbed the stairs and got on the plane.

As soon as the wheels lifted off the tarmac, I looked over to my mother. To my horror, I saw her removing her hijab, with tears in her eyes.<sup>3</sup> I had never seen my mother without her head covering in public. In complete shock, I exclaimed, “Mom, what are you doing!?! You’re going to go to hell!”

She replied, “No. I just got out.”

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3. See Glossary for definition of *hijab*.

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