Unveiled

ESTHER AHMAD

with J. CHESTER
Contents

1. A Journey Yet to Begin ........................................... 7
2. From a Piece of Property to a Cherished Daughter ........ 27
3. From the Shame of Being Unclean to the Purity of Grace ... 45
4. From Silent Rituals to Intimate Prayer ......................... 63
5. From Allah’s Wrath to the Father’s Love ....................... 85
6. From Silence to Answered Questions .......................... 105
7. From Dead Letters to the Living Word ....................... 125
8. From Despair to Hope ............................................. 145
9. From Invisible to Present ......................................... 163

Notes ................................................................. 183
A Journey
Yet to Begin
I suppose you could say that this all started with a search. It was not a physical search, you understand—I did not even have to leave the house. My daughter, Amiyah, was at school, my husband, John, was studying opposite me at the kitchen table, and I had completed my chores for the morning. All I had to do was open the laptop, make my way to the Facebook search bar, and type.

Why was I doing this? It was a feeling, a vague notion that had been on my mind for days. Like a compass needle swinging north, my thoughts had returned to it constantly. When I was sleeping, when I was reading my Bible, when I was reading Amiyah’s bedtime story or talking with John about his day, the same idea returned again and again: there was someone out there to whom I needed to talk in Urdu, the language of my birth. Someone I needed to find and start a conversation with about what it means to follow Jesus.

So after praying about it, talking with John, and then praying
some more for almost another week, I was finally ready. Even though I had no idea where the search would take me, I knew exactly what I was looking for: someone who would identify themselves by two simple words—“Pakistani” and “Muslim.”

For my first eighteen years, I was also defined by those two words. I know they are powerful enough to direct every single aspect of your life, from what you wear and what you eat to everything about your work and marriage. And I know how these words can even dictate the manner of your death.

But what I did not know, as I stared at the endless page of results, was what I was supposed to do next.

“Him,” said John from behind me, taking a sip of his chai as he pointed to one of the first results. “You should click on him. He looks…” John’s voice trailed off. It was hard to say what the man in the picture looked like. In some ways, he looked like a typical conservative Muslim from my homeland, with his long beard and beige _shalwar kameez_, a traditional garment common in Pakistan. But he was holding the hand of a little girl, who I guessed was his daughter. His smile was almost as big as hers. It was unusual to see a man identify as the father of a girl like that.

“Different?” I said.
“Lost.”

I sent a friend request with a simple greeting. He was online and replied within minutes.
“I don’t know you. Who are you?”
“My name is Esther. I am living in the US.”
“Yes, I can see this. Why are you messaging me?”

It was a good question. He deserved an honest answer. “I used to live in Pakistan. I like the picture of you holding your daughter’s hand; it reminds me of my childhood.” He went silent after
that. I checked my watch. It was after midnight in Pakistan. Had I found the right person? I had no idea.

There was a message waiting for me the next day: “I have a question I would like you to answer. Esther is a Christian name and Ahmad is Muslim. Why do you have two different types of name?”

Another good question, but this time the truth would be a little more complicated to explain. I decided to tell him what I could of my story without scaring him off. “One of my parents converted, but they both liked both the names.” I paused before hitting send and added a final line: “I am a Christian.” That was one bit of my story I had no intention of skipping over. If it ended our conversation, so be it.

It did not. He came straight back to me.

“Do you know about Islam?”

“Oh, I’ve had some experience, but I’d like to ask you some questions about it. And maybe if you have any questions for me about Christianity, you could ask me.”

I was not surprised that he ignored my offer, but he started telling me about his life. His name was Mustafa, he was thirty-seven, and he was from a city in Pakistan I’d visited a few times. He was married with four children—two girls and two boys—but he was not living with his family. Mustafa explained that he was actually living in Qatar, working with some friends on a start-up.

“It must be hard to be separated from your wife and children like that,” I wrote. “Your kids are cute, by the way. But tell me, Mustafa, why didn’t you put a picture of your wife up?”

“Most people I know don’t allow their wives to be on Facebook. And if ever they do, they don’t let them share their own
pictures. We are very strict about this. We would only ever let them put up pictures of their husband, other family, or places. Never of themselves.”

Nothing about his words surprised me, but his response reminded me so much of what it meant to be a Muslim woman in Pakistan. Back when I was growing up, there had been no Facebook or sharing of photos online, but the rules were just as strict. Almost every decision I ever faced was made for me by my father, and for almost two decades, I was a slave in so many senses of the word.

That is why, whenever I got to the end of one of Mustafa’s messages, I started to believe that he was precisely the person with whom God had planned for me to talk. Beneath his name, he would always write the words “slave of Muhammad.”

“Look, J,” I said, pointing it out to John. “I don’t know that he’s lost. But I do know that he’s trapped. Maybe God’s going to set him free.”

Over the next few days, Mustafa and I carried on trading messages with each other. I told him a bit about my family, about John and Amiyah, and about how in 2016 we had been granted asylum by the United States. I did not explain where we had been living before or why we had been forced to leave in the first place, and Mustafa did not ask. I was glad about that. I wanted to tell him my full story one day, but not yet.

He was happier talking about himself anyway. He told me about
life in Qatar and about how he was loving his work, earning a good wage, and enjoying life. He did not seem to mind that his wife and four children were almost two thousand miles away in Pakistan or that he was only able to see them twice a year when he returned.

I was interested in his wife, especially when Mustafa told me that she was eight years younger than him and that he had been twenty-one when they married. It saddened me, even though when I was growing up in Pakistan, it wasn’t at all unusual for a thirteen-year-old girl to be married off.

The way he described her life was familiar too. She was living with his family, taking care of the kids, doing chores, and not working or studying. It was not difficult for me to imagine what her life was like. I imagined her living as a second-class citizen in her mother-in-law’s house, an unpaid extra servant with almost no freedom or rights. I had known so many people like this when I was in Pakistan that I was only ever surprised when I met someone who was treated well.

The more Mustafa told me about his wife, the worse I felt. Even though he was happy to boast to me about how much he was earning each month in Qatar ($2,500), he told me that he only ever sent $200 back to his wife and that he had never told her what his actual salary was.

“Why?” I asked.

“I am saving up for my future wives.”

At first, I did not know how to respond—again, this arrangement was not unusual. I had known many women who had been forced to share their husbands with other wives. But it still made me sad.

“After we had been married for two months, I told my wife that I would take another wife,” Mustafa carried on.
I tried to imagine what that thirteen-year-old girl would have felt. “I’m a woman,” I wrote back. “If my husband did this, I can’t imagine how bad I’d feel. Why did you break her heart like this? She was newly married and looking forward to life together. What was her reaction?”

“She cried all day. She didn’t want to talk to me. She was badly upset. But I told her this was my right, which Allah has given me. I read her the verse from the Qur’an that said if you have enough money, you must have four wives. I told her I wasn’t going to have just one more—I’d take three more. I want four wives to fulfil the order of Allah.”

“Do you think you can do justice to all four? It is a big responsibility.”

“It’s not a question of justice. This is a law that we have to fulfill.”

“What if your wife decides to get another husband? How would you feel?”

He got really angry and wrote, “She can’t do that. She’s not allowed.”

I had grown frustrated by this point. I did not like the hypocrisy of it all. “Mustafa, please answer me this: Why can you talk with me, but your wife cannot talk with another man or even go on Facebook?”

“She’s my wife, and I decide what to do and not to do.” And with that, my conversation with the “slave of Muhammad” ended. I thought, *This is the biggest difference between Islam and Christianity*. Not only did John “allow” me to talk to Mustafa; he encouraged it because God might be able to work through me.

A few weeks passed in silence, and I wondered whether Mustafa would ever write to me again. When he finally messaged me, he explained that he had been busy with work and that he did
want to carry on our conversation. Even so, there was something
different about his tone this time.

“You write that you’re a Christian, Esther. But do you know
that Christians and Jews are bad people?”

I decided to play dumb. “Really? I thought that Muslims said
that Christians and Jews were ‘people of the book.’”

“No. Christians and Jews changed Allah’s book. And we are
ordered to kill every person who doesn’t believe in Islam.”

I was not expecting that. I backed off and did not reply for
some time. But Mustafa clearly did not want to let me go.

“I have taken another girl here in Qatar,” he wrote a couple
of days later. “I want to make sure that she is a good girl before
I marry her.”

I knew that he was trying to see if I would get angry again.
This time I decided to bite.

“Mustafa, it looks to me as if you don’t really care about what
your wife or this new girl wants or how they feel. Why is Allah
so unfair? Why does he treat women so much worse than men?”

“You’re wrong,” he replied. “This is how Allah desires it. We
Muslims are not like you Christians who only have one wife.
That’s why your wives are doing all this bad stuff.”

I have to admit that I got a little angry. “Here in the US women
are free, they are responsible for their own lives. The Bible tells
us not to judge people, but I’m telling you as a woman how your
wife could feel. You’re imposing yourself on her. You treat her like
a piece of property. You tell her what she can and can’t wear, who
she can and can’t see, what she can and can’t do online. You treat
her like a child, and then you betray her with another woman.”

“If my wife even spoke with someone who wasn’t part of our
family, I have the right to beat her and then to lock her up.”
“Who gives you this right?”
“The Qur’an.”
“And yet it lets you speak to me?”
“Yes. I am in charge of my wife. Whatever I want, I can do.”
“This is so unfair. I don’t agree with your Allah. He’s unfair.”
“We can’t question Allah.”
“Really? What if the Qur’an said that a woman should treat a man like this?”
“That would never happen. Allah is a male.”
“Mustafa, why do you want to live in slavery? Do you know that God can set you free?”
“No, we cannot be free. We are in slavery to Muhammad, our Prophet, and I am proud to be the slave of Muhammad.”

I thought that I had definitely said too much this time, and so I was not surprised when another few weeks passed by with no word from Mustafa. I prayed for him, though, and for his wife and children. Every morning, I woke up while John and Amiyah were sleeping in the predawn darkness. I would kneel on the thick carpet and plead with God to help change this poor family’s life.

When Mustafa finally did make contact again, he sent me a picture of Ayesha, his first-born, with a note explaining that it was taken when she was just a few months old. Apart from his profile picture, this was the only picture he had shared, and I was curious to see it.

The moment I opened it, I wanted to cry.
Ayesha was dressed in black and was wearing a green headband, on which were written the words of the *kalimah*, a sentence that every Muslim recites during every prayer: “There is no god but Allah, Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.”

I wanted to cry because I knew exactly what it meant for him to dress his child up like that. Even so, I still asked him why he had put her in such an outfit.

“I have decided for her that she will fight for Islam. One day she will be a jihadi and die a martyr’s death.”

“And what about your son? Have you made the same decision for him as well?”

“No. My daughter is not going to school but my son is. When he is an adult, he will be able to decide for himself and for his family.”

“Why?”

“He needs to study because he will have to go out and work. But my daughter does not need to study. It is not important for her because she will have to stay home. Maybe I will send her to school, but only to a madrassa where she will be taught more about Islam. My prayer is that Allah calls her and that she will go to fight.”

“And die?”

“Inshallah,” he wrote. “If Allah wills it.”

I wrote back and told him that I was praying the exact opposite. I told him that my prayer was that his little daughter would instead hear the call of God in her life—the loving, welcoming, life-giving call of her Father in heaven. I said that I hoped he would experience it too, that he would know what it is to be forgiven, to be accepted, and to be loved. And I told him that I prayed he would meet with Jesus and know for himself what true grace, mercy, and love look like.

I did not hear from him again.
The life that Mustafa wishes for his daughter—one where she is held back, denied an education, and treated at best like a second-class citizen and at worst like an expendable military asset in the war against the West—is not unfamiliar to me. I knew many fathers with attitudes just like his when I was growing up. And I knew many girls whose lives were controlled as a result. I even heard the call to jihad myself. For a time, I was determined that I too was going to sacrifice my life in the act of killing others.¹

I was born Zakhira Ahmad, in Pakistan, to two parents who at first would have laughed at the idea of any children of theirs being encouraged to martyr themselves in the name of Islam. My father was a wealthy businessman who owned his home and had many servants.

Something changed in our city when I was too young to understand politics or religion. I was old enough, however, to notice that my father stopped wearing the Western pants and vests I saw on TV. He stopped shaving and grew a beard, which I and all my siblings thought was funny at first. He started to invite people to attend meetings in our large room downstairs, and worst of all, he got rid of the TV, saying that it was forbidden and that we did not want to spend any more time in hell than we had to. None of us laughed then.

There was a lot of talk about hell in those days, and not just from my father. My mother often described the two angels that were constantly watching me, one on each shoulder. She explained that one was counting all the good deeds I did while
the other was keeping a record of all the bad deeds. On the day of judgment, they would tell Allah my totals, allowing him to calculate the amount of time I would spend in hell as a result. I was terrified and did everything that my mother and father told me I should do to be a good Muslim: I prayed five times a day, studied the Qur’an, and when I was thirteen, happily joined the militant group that my father had joined—a group that talked openly about building an Islamic state in Pakistan and implementing sharia law.

I decided to become the model student. I listened intently whenever the Islamic leaders taught about the evils of the West. I stared wide-eyed at the weapons they showed us—AK-47s and hand grenades—and nodded vigorously when they explained that these were the tools Allah had given us to fight the holy war. And when I was eighteen years old and attended a meeting in which a cleric asked for volunteers to become jihadi fighters, I held my hand up high.

My parents were delighted. Christians or Jews—it did not matter to them who I killed. What counted was the fact that by giving my life in the holy war, I would not only earn myself a place in heaven but also secure their immediate entry as well. None of us would have to spend one moment in hell if I died a martyr’s death.

A few days before I was due to say goodbye to my family forever and attend the training camp from which I would be deployed, I woke up at 3:30 a.m., in time to offer the extra prayers that I had been saying for years. I discovered, however, that I was beginning my menstrual cycle and was therefore unclean and not allowed to touch my prayer mat or offer any of my usual ritual prayers. This was bad news. Would Allah accept me if I had not
been praying in the days before my death? I lay on the ground next to my prayer mat and drifted off to sleep.

The dream I had that morning was the strangest dream of my life. I was in a graveyard and feeling terrified until I saw a man approaching. He was bathed in light, and he asked me to follow him. “I am the way, the truth, and the life,” he said before leading me away.

From that day on, my life was set upon a wholly different course. Things changed so quickly for me that there were times when I almost thought the dream had never ended. Through a chance encounter, I met a man named John, a Christian who was as fearless in his faith as I had been in mine. I had never met a Christian before, and everything about him was different from what I expected. He did not seem depraved or evil or desperate to kill me. Even so, I tried to convert him to Islam, and he tried to convert me to Christianity. It was I, however, who went home perplexed and unsure. And it was I who returned to John and asked him to give me a Bible.

He refused, knowing the punishment that would await him, and he instead suggested that I look for untruths in the Qur’an. The more time I spent reading it and asking questions, the more I found that did not make sense to me. Eventually, John invited me to visit him at work each day after college and read the Bible. I did, and the two of us became study partners: a would-be suicide bomber and a Christian—one of the very people I had vowed someday to kill.

As much as the Qur’an now confused me, I found that the Bible made sense. And when I read John 14:6 and found the words Jesus had spoken to me in my dream, I made the decision to accept Jesus as my Savior. I was no longer Zakhira. I was now Esther.
For two years, I lived the life of a secret believer. I was praying and reading the Qur’an fervently, so my parents did not question me when I said I needed more time before going for jihad. In fact, I was praying only to God and studying the Qur’an to further appreciate how flawed it is. John was the only person on the planet who knew about my conversion, and he was the only Christian with whom I ever spoke.

But soon I grew restless. I wanted to meet others who shared my faith. I wanted to go to church. I wanted a Bible. I wrote to a Bible society asking them to send me one, but the postman intercepted my letter and told my uncle. Pretty soon a mob had gathered outside my home and was discussing whether to kill me right there on the street or take me to the mosque to see what the imam said. The cleric ruled that I had done nothing wrong—that believing in Jesus as a prophet was not forbidden and neither was studying the Bible if it was used to defend the Muslim faith. I was cleared of any wrongdoing.

When I finally told my mother that the rumors were true and that I was a Christian, she beat me with a hose, a cane, her shoes, her hands—she threatened to kill me, but her threats only made my faith stronger. I remembered the stories I had read in the Bible about Jesus healing the sick and loving those who wanted him dead, and I decided to pray for my mother. Her health problems disappeared, and when my brother was healed through prayer as well, my mother became a Christian.

My father was less forgiving. On the day he discovered the truth about me, he called more than a hundred men to our house and discussed burning me alive. I was sure that this was to be my last day on earth, and I accepted death willingly. I’d read the book of Acts and knew what happened when God’s people died. So I
told the crowd that many of them would see the face of the Lord in the flames and that they would follow him as a result.

One imam had a different idea. He suggested that since I had clearly been brainwashed or bribed by Christians, the damage could be undone. He suggested that I be allowed to live for one more month, but I would have to listen to the arguments against Christianity. If I didn’t repent within a month, then I could be killed.

So began a month in which clerics, famous scholars, and leaders of fanatical organizations from across the region—and Pakistan—visited with me in order to reason me back to Islam. I prayed, fasted regularly, studied the Bible and Qur’an (as well as other Islamic texts), and had a clear sense of God guiding my thoughts and words. Some of the visits were public, in front of large crowds; others were private. In each one, I was able to debate with so much more clarity and power than I’d ever thought possible. I—or rather, the Holy Spirit working through me—consistently exposed the flawed thinking behind the Qur’an, disproved the arguments against Christianity, and revealed to all who visited the lies of Islam and the truth of Christianity.

After the twenty-third and final debate, the imam suggested that I be killed after all. In what appeared to be a final twist of fate, he persuaded my father that to do so would be an act of jihad: if he killed me himself, my father would get the free pass to heaven that he had hoped to receive back when I was a dutiful daughter ready to die.

With forty-eight hours left to live, I embraced the news. The way I saw it, I would soon be seeing Jesus. What was there not to like about that?

My mother did not agree. She told me that she thought God
might have more for me to do—more people to tell about Jesus, more lives to lead to him. She told me that she would help me escape but reminded me that as a single woman, I would be vulnerable. I needed a husband, fast.

So I called John. I had no idea that years earlier, John had vowed not to marry until he had brought at least one Muslim to Christ.

My mother helped me escape into the night, and John rescued me. A few days later, we were married. My father heard about our marriage and tried to lure us to the house so that he could kill us both, but again my mother warned us and helped us escape. We fled almost one thousand miles south before we were spotted and forced to go into hiding. For two years, we were on the run, relying on the kindness of Christians who heard our story and took us in. I had never known people who were so poor, and I had never met people who were so kind or so brave.

I became pregnant and gave birth to our daughter, Amiyah. And when it became clear that my father would stop at nothing to find and kill us all, we escaped the country and fled to Malaysia, where we claimed asylum. We lived in poverty and faced new challenges. We lived with the constant fear of deportation back to Pakistan and the terror of police asking for our visas. Furthermore, refugees were not allowed to work, so John didn’t have a stable job, and later my daughter was not allowed to go to school. We had no option but to rely on God. Time and time again, he provided for all our needs, often at the last minute.

We joined a large church in Kuala Lumpur and received the support of mature Christians who discipled and nurtured us. Neither John nor I had lost our passion for talking to Muslims
about Christ, and many we spoke with became Christians. Others, however, did not. But after twice being threatened with death at the hands of an angry mob, being spat at and shoved was nothing.

Even though we were surrounded by Muslims and had so many opportunities to talk about our faith, we both knew that we would one day leave Malaysia. John had dreamed one night that he and his family would one day live in America. Despite my former membership in a terrorist organization, we chose to trust that God would find a way.

And God did. Eight years after we arrived in Malaysia, our application for asylum was accepted, and we moved to the United States to begin our new lives.

When I looked at the photo that Mustafa had sent me of his daughter Ayesha, and when I read of his hopes that she would one day become a jihadi, I felt so many different emotions. I felt sorrow and fear and frustration and anger that an innocent life would be so damaged this way. But that was not all. I felt hope—hope that this little girl, like me, might one day make a journey that would change everything about how she sees the world, herself, and God.

I hoped she would make a journey that would take her from seeing herself as property to understanding that she is a cherished daughter of God, a journey from feeling unclean to knowing the purity that flows from God’s grace, a journey from blindly
accepting what she is taught to meeting the God who can answer all our questions.

I hoped she would make a journey that would transform prayer from an empty ritual into a conversation with a loving God, a journey from punishment to mercy, a journey from dead scripture to the living Word, a journey from despair to forgiveness, and a journey from serving a god she cannot see to a God made manifest in Jesus.

I hope that if she ever reads this, what follows will help her along the way.