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Hicham's Testimony: From a Muslim Extremist to a Follower of Jesus

Early Childhood

Born in 1960, in Lebanon, since my early childhood, I became aware that the country I lived in was divided along sectarian lines, between Christians and Muslims. Also I was aware that my family is one of the biggest in Lebanon, and that we have descended from the tribe of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Historians say that we came as warlords with the Arab conquests to Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine. Nowadays, the Chehabs numbered in Lebanon around 11000 people. Playing in the few green fields left among the growing "forest of cement" (i.e. Beirut in the early 1960s), I realized that those boys who had different names, like Pierre and Elias, were Christians. And boys like me, with Arabic names, or a name that sounded, or combined words like those that the Muezzins chanted from the minarets (Muhammad and Allah), were Muslims. I also became aware of the words used by the older generations of Muslims to describe Christians (terms we describe today as stereotypes). I heard that "they eat those filthy animals;" pigs, drink those "stinky liquids;" whisky and Arak (Lebanese wine), get drunk and lose their composure, their women were loose, and have neither honor nor chastity (even though I did not know then what chastity meant)." I could see then that their women dressed in revealing clothes, unlike my mother and our female relatives, who covered their heads, and wore skirts or overcoats that went way below their knees.

Those boys, with French or Western names, used to side with each other, in any quarrel that took place, irrespective of what was right or wrong. In those days, a brawl over marbles used to lead to a fight between the Muslim boys, and the Christian boys. Two incidents I remember clearly. The first, was when a cousin of mine chased a Christian boy to beat him up. In his attempt to escape, the "cowardly" Christian scampered across the street and was run down by a car.

We did not see him back then for weeks. No body was sorry for him.

"Allah has punished him", we thought, "He had it coming". The second incident was when Pierre, the youngest brother of the wounded boy, appeared from nowhere and banged me on the head with a piece of wood that had a protruding nail, and ran away. I could not remember why he attacked me then. But I still remember how a teenage cousin of mine dragged me home, weeping with blood trickling down into my eyes and my cheeks. I was six or seven then, and did not understand the reasons behind the animosity between us; Muslims and Christians. But I still have the scar of that attack on my forehead.

In the Ranks of a Muslim Militia

I was only thirteen when an extremist Muslim group recruited me, two years before the Lebanese civil war broke out in 1975. I was "able" then, as I thought, in the ranks of that faction, to "comprehend" the big picture of the sectarian community we were living in, in the 1970s.

My late eldest brother (who was then less than 15) and I were first attracted to that Muslim faction by a group of teenagers studying the Qur'an in the mosque in our neighborhood. In addition to hearing its call for prayers five times a day, the mosque was only three minutes walk from

home, and was built jointly with our school. So we did not have to go far to get there. Kamal, the young man who was leading the discussions in a corner of that mosque, was around 20. He was bright and educated, and drew our attention to the political privileges that the Christians, the

"minority," had in Lebanon, and the grievances of the Muslims; the majority. He asserted how "shameful it was for the descendants of the Caliphs who once ruled the world, to have a Christian president."

Before Ta'ef agreement that officially marked the end of the civil war in 1989, the president of Lebanon actually headed the executive authority, but was unaccountable to anybody. The prime minister, who was decreed by tradition to be a Muslim, was a puppet, but took the brunt of all the political and economical crises in the country.

Kemal said that the Christians were put into that superior position (to the Muslims) by the French colonizers in the 1940s. We understood then that we were second-class citizens in our homeland, and deprived from our full rights. We were denied the top positions in the government and had no clout in any public sector. We felt that our rituals and holidays were not respected. Christmas and Easter were celebrated in the official media, while our holidays went unnoticed. Even we were denied the right to have Fridays off for the weekly Muslim ceremonies in mosques. In addition, we felt that most Arab Christians or Armenians could be naturalized and become Lebanese, because churches and the official authorities helped them in order to tip the demographic balance to their favor, while more than 250, 000 Muslim Palestinian refugees, and 200, 000 Kurds living for decades in Lebanon were refused naturalization. All the circumstances around us smacked of a "conspiracy" by the West, Israel, and the Lebanese Christians.

Kamal blamed many Muslim politicians for "our miserable situation," but overall he blamed the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdul Nasser. Kamal said that "Nasser was merely a demagogue who led the Arabs and Muslims astray or to defeat, and lost Palestine to the Zionists." "Nasser, a double agent for the West

and the Soviet Union, crushed the Muslim movements in Egypt and pressured other Muslim groups in the Arab world because they had the solution for our dilemma, and collaborated with foreign powers to keep us backward and defeated, in order to exploit us, and drain our resources," he added. "But Allah has revealed his treachery, and let him suffer that shameful defeat in 1967, because he was following the way of the world, not the path of Prophet Muhammad," Kamal asserted. But he often strongly argued that the solution was in doing what the early Muslims did; re-establish the Caliphate that was abolished by Kamal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. "We tried Pan-Arabism, Communism, Socialism, and Capitalism, but failed. The answer lies in Islam. It is not impossible. We have a good example in Saladin, and how he defeated the Crusaders," argued Kamal.

After two weeks, Kamal added to the Quranic reading assignment from books written by Sayyed Qutub (Osama bin Laden's master philosopher), and the late founder of Pakistan's Al Gamaa Al Islamiyyah (The Muslim Group) Abu Al Aala Al Mawdoudi. Kamal said that Qutub was able to explain what Allah wanted from us in this age of defeat and shame. We understood from reading Qutub's works that the world is divided into two realms: The realm of Islam and the realm of unbelief.

International borders are set-up only to keep the Muslims divided. Muslims, if they were real Muslims, have to work for the foundation of a global Muslim state.

Kamal and other mentors in that faction taught us that the Christians were "unclean infidels, Crusaders, and an appendage of the morally corrupt West in the Middle East; that they were spies among us, and their hostile presence should be taken care of. Kamal confirmed that Muslims groups in Lebanon were part of an international revival movement that would topple the regimes, overturn the tables of history, and reunify the divided Muslim countries.

The situation in Lebanon was aggravated by the presence of the Palestinian refugees and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), which found in the "wronged" Lebanese Muslims "natural allies." Especially that, after the death of Nasser in 1970, the Lebanese Muslims lost a major ally against the Christian Right.

The PLO started arming, or helping in arming Leftist parties and Muslim movements. Those parties (allied with the PLO), formed a "National Movement" that mobilized the indignant Muslims, organizing nation-wide strikes, rallies, and demonstrations against the Lebanese government which was often accused of being biased to the privileged Christians and extreme Rightist Christian militias. Those Christian factions seized every opportunity to engage with the Palestinians and their allies in street fights or armed skirmishes, and get away with it unscathed, because of their clout with the Lebanese authorities.

Most Muslims believed then that some Christian parties had been training since the late 1940s to mow down the Muslims, with Israel as their main ally.

In 1973, I was invited, together with my brother, to military training camps. We felt that we were following the path of Muhammad, or Saladin. We climbed the distant desolate mountains of North Lebanon in shabby buses. The age groups in those vehicles ranged from 13 to 60, with the majority under 20. But we were all chanting "Islamic songs" written by Muhammad Iqbal (a Pakistani Muslim poet and thinker), Qutub, and others with great zeal:

"China is ours, India is ours.

Islam is our religion.

The world is our homeland"

"Muslims.. Muslims..Muslims.

Wherever there is Justice and Right, you find us.

We prefer death to humiliation.

Sweet is death in the Cause of Allah"

In that training camp in the distant mountains, we learned how to use rocket launchers, mortars, and rifles. We were told: "if you want to shoot straight, imagine that there is a Christian in your sights" (a statement that puts in a nutshell all the hate we had for our Christian compatriots).

Verses from the Qur'an were often invoked to prove that Jihad was an obligation. Preachers often supported their views with fatwas (verdicts) that dated to the Middle Ages, and argued that all Muslims were sinners if they give up the path of Jihad, especially with Muslim lands, like Palestine, the Muslim republics of the former Soviet Union, and Kashmir were under occupation.

The Lebanese Civil War

In 1975, as soon as the civil war in Lebanon broke out, I participated in most of the aspects of the war, from shelling Christian neighborhoods to laying in ambush for Christian militias.

It was a terrible war. Everyone lost somebody -- from a population of three to 3.5 million, there were 150,000 dead" -- almost five per cent of the populace, and there were over 100,000 injured and 17,000 disappeared.

It was so insecure. There were over 200 militias, with the alliances always shifting and the enemies changing."

Beirut was divided into a Christian part and a Muslim one, with a green line separating between them. Both parties perpetrated atrocities by killing civilians. However, Muslims felt that they were taken by surprise when one of the most extremist Christian militias massacred hundreds of Muslim civilians on their way to work at Beirut's harbor in September 1975.

It was an ugly war. A friend of mine, once a leader in that militia, but now a Peacemaker whom I have worked with for national reconciliation, used to phone bomb threats to Muslim theatres, so that he could mortar the crowds as they fled onto the streets.

In the late 1970s, I was given a long-range rifle with a powerful telescope and sniped at people in the Christian part of Beirut.

It was a moment of truth when, through my telescope, I saw three people running for cover: An old woman and two boys. One of them looked like a cousin of mine. The old woman reminded me of my grandmother. I could even see the wrinkles in her face. I did not shoot. My conscience told me that they were people like us. I refused to follow orders and decided to quit. "No causes are worth the bloodshed," I thought.

Later, I decided to focus on Muslim religious studies, and took a course in order to become a Muslim preacher. Just a few days before I was supposed to give my first Friday sermon, I had a car accident and broke my legs. It was a compound fracture. I was hospitalized for 50 days and bed-ridden for a year. However, it gave me time to reconsider what I want to do in life. In order to pass the time, I started reading comics in Arabic and English. It was expensive to devour those comic books, so I switched to reading novels. After a year in bed, I was able to read unabridged English novels. When I was able to walk on crutches, I went back to high school and kept reading novels. I stumbled over a Western novel written by Louis L' Amour who wrote around a 120 novels. I read them all. I got really better in English and passed the American University of Beirut English Entrance Exam.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace

During my first semester in college, in 1980, my only brother and sibling, by this time a militia captain, was killed by a Christian militia while he was trying to negotiate a truce. My brother and I were very good friends, not only brothers. We used to do everything together. We learned how to swim, how to bike, had the same friends, and went to school together.

Two of my brother's comrades and I vowed to kill all our enemies. I got a silencer and two pistols, and I started stalking my enemies in the streets at night. Some of them were my classmates; I would befriend them so I could learn their movements simply in order to kill them.

I led a double life: assassin at night and student in the classroom in the daytime. It was not an easy life.

Meanwhile, as a student at the American University, I had to take a course in cultural studies, for which I had to read selections from the Bible. The course included the Qur'an and the Bible. Then, I had known the Qur'an by heart, but the Bible was a new thing to me. I read the Sermon on the Mount at the climax of my hate and thirst for vengeance. Christ's exhortation: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:45) struck me with full force. I felt that I heard the voice of God in stereo. I, who knew what is an enemy, and sought to kill my enemies, felt that Jesus' exhortation was superhuman and cannot emanate from an ordinary human being, but from a divine source.

Even though I was taught by Muslim clerics that the Bible was distorted by Rabbis and bishops, Christ's words "Love God from all your heart, and love your neighbor" sounded authentically divine. Even through the loss of my brother, I thought: "There is another way, a way of forgiveness."

I was touched by Jesus' parables, especially that of the Good Samaritan. I discovered that my countrymen who were fighting us were not good Christians, were not Good Samaritans, and as if they were reading a different Bible.

I stopped my night activities, and decided to reconsider things and see if it were possible to follow this Jesus.

At the same time, I found it "odd" that Lebanese Christian militias used symbols such as crosses with dagger-points, or crosses dripping with (presumably Muslim) blood -- "it was like they weren't reading the same Bible."

I realized that many Lebanese Christians changed the symbol of Love and Salvation into a symbol of hate and murder. Muslims saw in them what some Western Christians saw in the Ku Klux Klan.

I told myself then if I was really seeking truth, I should follow up on my readings of the Bible, irrespective of "my bad neighbors," and walk in the shoes of Christians. So I started to sneak into churches in order to listen to what believers say about Jesus.

It was very difficult to go into Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches because of two things; the figures and icons they had for Jesus that reminded me of idolatry

and the liturgical language they used. Hence, I preferred to attend Protestant churches with English services, especially because I read the Bible at college in English, mostly King James Version.

By 1990, when the international community and the Syrians imposed a cease-fire on Lebanon, I vowed to work for peace and reconciliation.

Together with the Muslim mayor of a Beirut suburb, I founded an NGO dedicated to Muslim-Christian dialogue and gradually recruited a hundred community leaders.

In addition to my jobs as an educational advisor and a journalist, I took on a lot of work. By the 1998 elections, my group could form a National Unity ticket and elect a Christian mayor to a predominantly Muslim area.

It was not easy to work in a sectarian community against the tide of popular prejudices and bigotries. Even though I kept a low profile, as a Muslim follower of Jesus (even though it sounded as a contradiction in terms), sometimes I paid dearly for my openness, and was labeled as a Christian-lover. Being a human rights activist and a peacemaker, I was suspected of being a CIA agent who worked to promote peace (Arabs usually call it surrender not peace) between Arabs and Israel.

When a Christian Western NGO called the Reconciliation Walk (RW) came to Lebanon, I stepped in and helped its members bring different Lebanese communities together. The R.W.'s original goal was to apologize for the Crusades, but its members soon discovered that there is a lot to be done in Lebanon, and I did their public relations and arranged their meetings.

The National Prayer Breakfast

Being an activist in Christian-Islamic dialogue and a Muslim follower of Jesus, I was invited in 1999 to the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. It was a memorable trip in many ways.

First, I was threatened by my boss to be fired if I went there. His hostility towards my public work in Lebanon started to surface when I wrote an article in Beirut's leading daily defending Christians in Egypt and their right to build churches. The article was based on first hand information I gleaned at an international conference I attended the previous year. I did not heed his threats, made the trip, and lost my full-time job. Second, it was a big spiritual boost for me. Four thousand people from 160 nations were there praying in the name of Jesus. Third, I stayed for a few days at the house of a good Christian in Virginia, even though a new acquaintance then, he became a friend for life. Preston showed me in actions, not in words, how a Christian could be a Good Samaritan. Fourth, towards the end of that trip, I lost my animosity towards the sign of the cross, a

bigotry acquired from the ugly years of the civil war. I met in Washington a young man from Alabama- Richard, a "Promise Keeper." We spent three days together. We prayed and had meals together. At the end of that trip, Richard drove me to the airport. At the terminal, he went out of his car crying, as if he was parting with a close relative or a dear friend, and took out a silver cross from his wallet with the words:

May the angels of God guard thee. It was his personal cross given to me in Love. I cried like a baby, accepted the cross, and hugged Richard good-bye.

I went back home, a father of three without a job. Usually, in Lebanon, if someone loses a good job, it would take years to find another one. I found a better job in two weeks. Later, I found out that some of my Christian friends-members of the Reconciliation Walk and other missionaries sent a prayer request for me by email. It was unbelievable. Later, I met people from different countries and discovered that they prayed for me then.

Jesus, the Savior

But the biggest turning point was in August 2000. I was invited to an international conference in Switzerland on conflict resolution and Christian-Islamic dialogue.

I gave a speech on my work in Lebanon and how I was transformed from a sniper (or a terrorist) to a peacemaker to around 500 people from 54 nations.

I was presented there as a Muslim working for reconciliation and Christian-Islamic dialogue in Lebanon.

I was given a standing ovation, with tears in the eyes of many. Scores of people lined up to shake my hand.

I went back that night to my room thinking of the glorious moments of the day, and the big promising future in representing Lebanese Muslims in international conferences.

I decided that night that when I go back to Lebanon, I will tell my praying partner, Carl, an American missionary living in Lebanon, that I do not want any part of Jesus or the Bible anymore, and that I am satisfied in the way I am. I had been wrestling to know Jesus then for 19 years with nothing but shame and headaches in my Muslim community.

I thought that I would tell him that I had the full respect towards the teachings of Jesus the peacemaker, not the Savior.

I went to bed that night with this determination in mind, and saw Jesus Christ in a vision. Until today I am not sure if I was awake or asleep when I saw the Lord.

Two huge slabs of rock parted and He came out from a huge grave the size of a castle, fit for the King of Kings, in shrouds, and pointed his finger at me and told me to keep on praying. When I denied Him, He came to the rescue. I looked at my roommate, a Norwegian journalist, and found out that he was awake too. I told him about the vision. I did not know that he was a believer too. He pulled out a pocket Bible from his luggage and we read and prayed until sunrise. I decided that morning to give my life to Him.

At seven o'clock that morning, a Lebanese Evangelical Christian and a Briton who lives in Switzerland came to pick me up and drive me to the main conference. I was then still filled with the Holy Spirit and told them about last night's events. The Lebanese Christian's attitude was cynical, like that of a Jew towards a Gentile when Jesus walked the earth. "I have served Jesus all my life and did not have such a dream or vision... You of all people ... a Muslim would see Jesus," she snapped.

I was on cloud nine for many days. I emailed my praying partner, Carl, and told him to buckle up for a big event. He was then in the States. I went back to Lebanon, picked him up at the airport and started the next day planning for a National Prayer Breakfast in Lebanon.

It was October 2000. We held a prayer event for Lebanon, with the participation of 150 people from all sects.

I started the meeting with readings from Isaiah where he prophesied that Lebanon will become a fertile field (Isaiah 29:17). Five speakers spoke and prayed at that event, two of them in the name of Jesus.

That year I planned with Carl and other believers to start prayer groups in the Lebanese parliament.

The Lutheran Ministry

That year I met a Lutheran pastor who became my best friend in Beirut. Dr. Bernhard Lutz used to come to Lebanon as a missionary. I had stepped in an elevator going up to my credit card company when I saw a friendly face. The gray-haired man shook my hand and gave me his business card. As soon as I arrived home that afternoon I called him, and the evening that day we were visiting together and planning a Bible study.

Bernie and I worked together as if we had known each other for ages. I introduced Bernie to a Palestinian soccer coach and his team, located at the Palestinian refugee camp near Beirut where Bernie visited and made friends with many refugees. Later we were able to help in supporting some of their soccer games, things that kept them off mischief, and away from Palestinian militias.

Bernie and I helped in distributing Lutheran publications in the poor Shiite suburb of Beirut. We had an instrumental Syrian couple. This couple held Bible studies in their house for Muslims and distributed Christian literature to their neighbors. They have a ministry of faith and do not belong to any church.

I took him to meet Beirut's notables, cabinet ministers and MPs. We went to Bedouin communities and shared the Gospel with them in the Bekaa valley, a plain stretching between Mount Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon. I took Bernie to an orphanage run by a Muslim Follower of Jesus, a Bedouin chief who was converted by a Lutheran missionary in the 1950s (we discovered this piece of information later). This Bedouin chief was teaching Muslim Bedouins the Bible in the heart of

Hezbollah land (Hezbollah is the Lebanese Shiite extremist militia backed by Syria and Iran). At a point, we met a Hezbollah leader and his group, and shared with them the Gospel. They were scary moments (for Bernie, as I learned later) as we waited for them to finish their prayers. But our strength was in the Lord. Bernie talked for 90 minutes and answered all their questions over dinner. Later this Hezbollah group invited us to their annual ceremonies. Unfortunately, I had to go alone because Bernie's time was up in Lebanon, and he had to go back to the US.

Bernie came only four months a year, so I was in charge of the Middle East Lutheran Ministry office in the Muslim part of Beirut the rest of the year.

Also, during my annual vacations, I worked with an editorial board of the Sharif Bible, a version translated and contextualized for Muslims.

Earning a living in Beirut with four children (I had a new baby by then) the last two years was not easy. I had to work full time in two newspapers, and work part time as a university professor to put bread on the table. I was working 16 hours a day. Even though I was thirsty for the Word of God, I was not able to read the Bible and lead a study but once a week. I even worked weekends.

I prayed to God to provide me with work that puts me at His service, because I felt that my spiritual life is deteriorating.

Trying to start a Lutheran church in Lebanon, Bernie and I discovered that there is a law in Lebanon against planting new Protestant churches. This does not mean that Muslims have clout over the Lebanese government, but Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches were wielding their clout against Protestants. The latter are attracting young people from other denominations, something old churches are against.

Bernie called me last October (2004) and told me that there is no way the Lutheran church could help me in Lebanon, and that the only way is to join

POBLO. I responded: Even though it means that I have to be uprooted from my homeland, so be it. I told Bernie and POBLO staff that I am ready to serve God, whether it is in America or Afghanistan. Above all, I am excited about going to Concordia seminary to study theology and become an ordained pastor.

God works in mysterious ways. Until now I do not understand all those developments in my life. But I can say that He has carried me from glory to glory, in my walk with Him. He is the Father who has never let me down.

Baptism

I was baptized after I accepted the Lord as Savior. I finished work at the newspaper early one night, and had an appointment with my praying partner. I headed towards his house at 9:30 pm, feeling that my friend had something important in store for me, because it was not our habit to meet at such a late hour. I arrived at his house that night and saw towels in the living room, and knew what he had in mind. My friend asked: "Do you know the story of Philip and the Eunuch?" I answered: "Sure." "Would you like to go to the seashore for your baptism?" I responded: "It is cold, but if you are willing to take it I am ready." "We've better do it in the shower." I put on his swimming trunks, and was baptized, with him praying for me."

I went back home around 10:30 pm. I was shaken and tired. I had until then told my wife everything about my walk with God, but was like crossing the last red line in my Muslim community.

My wife and I used to have a bite before turning in. So, she asked: "Are not you hungry?" "Yes, but I am tired," I answered, "Let me lie down a few minutes and I will get up for supper."

"I slept for a while, and saw Jesus in the most wonderful dream in my life. Jesus grabbed me from my arm and we flew together over a wide, abundant, and thunderous river. We flew from a drab riverbank to a lush green one, exploding with green foliage and trees. He left me there and disappeared.

I opened my eyes, and was ready to tell my wife about both the baptism and dream.

God the Father

By the time I was baptized, I had only three children. Mona and I thought that three is fine and we did not plan for more children.

A year back then, Mona had some gynecological problems and her doctor told her that she may not have children again unless she got medical help. Being satisfied with what we had, we did not try anything and we neglected contraceptives.

Once, Mona who used to take a few medications for her diet, was taking a new one, when she read on its label that pregnant women should avoid it. So she decided to run a test, and she discovered that she was three month pregnant. It was a shock, because the doctor told her that she could not have children, and

because all those medications could be harmful to a baby.

Mona ran a test in order to see if the baby was normal. The test showed that there was a 50 % possibility that the baby was down syndrome.

We decided to run another test that was more sophisticated and more reliable. It was a test that was supposed to give the exact count of the chromosomes and reveal any congenital deformities. It had to take two weeks for the results to be out, because the blood sample had to go to France for analysis.

They were difficult times of waiting on the Lord and prayers. Mona wept a lot, and wanted to take measures in order to face the worst scenario- abortion. By then, the baby was five months old and even such a procedure would have been very painful, ethically and emotionally.

Praise God, the test showed that the baby was normal.

I told Mona then that I feel that this baby has a different destiny, and one day I might be like Paul who was a Roman citizen, and no borders could stop.

I had a feeling that one day I would have a Western passport that would relieve me from visa applications and their long waits, both in the East and the West. I told her that I did not think that the baby would be born here, but in the West. Even though Mona is usually very cautious in family matters, she did not argue the inspiration I had.

By then, it was September 2001, and the 9/11 catastrophe occurred.

It was October 2001 when I started planning to come to the United States in order to give birth to Yahya (Arabic for John the Baptist).

Most of my friends said that I was crazy to think about it after 9/11. A childhood friend, a Lebanese American who lives in Colorado hang up after many international phone calls, and had shunned me since. No American friend in my "church" was willing to help, even in information.

I had put together a budget then, borrowed money equal to two salaries from the bank, and had two credit cards. In addition, two friends (one of them is not a believer) offered to help with \$ 500 each when they found out that I am determined to go to the States.

In Mid November 2001, I received an email from Preston, my friend in southern Virginia (Chesapeake). Preston offered a house and a car, and said that he will check with his family obstetrician about the cost of a cesarean section in Virginia. When the other Americans heard about Preston's generous offer, they tried to discourage both, him and I. "What if Mona had complications? You have neither social security nor insurance," Carl said. "Preston may be forced to sell his house to help you out," he added. Mona was not happy with those comments. She said that such talk meant that Carl did not trust God one bit. I am not saying that she was right, but it shed some doubt in her mind about his faith in the principles he taught, the teachings of Jesus. This was a drawback in her walk with Jesus. Encouraged by Preston's offer, I bought air tickets for Mona, my youngest daughter Nour, and myself to Dulles airport, in Virginia.

The night of the flight out of Beirut, Ed, Preston's son who lives and works in Lebanon, visited me.

Ed said that I should cancel my flight and my whole plan to go to the US, because his mother was sick. He added that she was bedridden, and if I went,

she would be forced to take care of us, something that might make her sicker, or might even lead to her death. "If you care about our friendship Hicham, do not go," Ed added.

I told Ed that everything was set, whether Preston is going to host me in his neighbor's empty house or not. I had already bought the tickets and that there is no turning back.

Ed then suggested that I go to Virginia for three days, stay in a motel, and then go anywhere in the States, adding that he did not care where I went with my pregnant wife and little daughter as long as I did it away from his parents.

It was not a nice attitude on Ed's part, but I understood his concern. Ed thought that I am abusing my friendship with his family, even though I was not planning to ask Preston for any financial help.

That night, Preston called and said that he would follow Ed's advice. I respected his decision and told him that I am coming the next day.

We arrived at 6:00 pm to Dulles airport, three tired people. Preston and his wife Bettie were waiting for us there. Bettie had a bad knee, but she was alright. Preston drove us to Chesapeake, where he had booked for us a room at Holiday Inn motel. It was a very nice room with gifts waiting for Mona and Nour.

Preston and Bettie treated us like kings for a few days, and then we were on our own.

Before coming to the US, I heard that there was a Lebanese American obstetrician in Brooklyn, New York, Dr. Ayman Chahine, who charges half the cost in Virginia. A distant cousin of mine whose wife was treated by that doctor gave me Ayman's phone number.

In addition, I had a very distant cousin, Salim, who lives in Manhattan, and works at the United Nations. After getting his number from a friend, I called him and asked him to look for an apartment for rent in Brooklyn.

It took ten days and so many long distance calls to find an apartment there, in Brooklyn.

The landlord asked for \$ 1100 a month. We had been eating for many days out of a microwave in that motel and wasting our little precious amount of money. On December 5, we took the train to New York Penn Station. It took eight long hours, with five bags that had to be carried on board, with no help.

Arriving at the Penn Station, we did not find Salim. I went and tried to call him from a telephone booth in vain. He had an answering machine. But after an hour of tenseness, he appeared. Being a very distant relative who barely knew me then, he did not recognize me but from my pregnant wife and Nour.

After a short rest at his place and a pizza for the family, we set out to Bayridge, Brooklyn.

We arrived at a dusty and unfurnished two-bedroom apartment at 10 p.m. The landlady refused to lease out the place less than \$ 1300 a month. I told her that we could not afford it, because we were supposed to pay the doctor and the hospital.

She was also suspicious and insisted to take our passports to the police station to check on us. She then decided to let us stay till we got another place.

It was one of the most difficult nights in our lives. We had to sleep on the floor

and face the unknown the next day. We cried a lot and prayed as Nour slept. Mona suggested that we should back to Lebanon. I told her to trust God and that we had better see the doctor the next day before taking any decision.

Next day, early in the morning, I called the doctor's clinic from a phone booth. His secretary told me to come without an appointment at 12:00 noon and that she would squeeze us between two patients.

The clinic was packed with patients. We waited until 2:30 pm., when we were ushered to his office. I opened his door, and I was surprised with a direct question in Lebanese Arabic: "Hicham, what are you doing in New York?" Unable to understand the situation, I answered: "We took an appointment from your secretary and my wife is in her 8th month." He asked again using my full name: "You.. Hicham Chehab.. What are you doing in New York?"

Then he lunged at me, hugged me and kissed me the Arab way. Which added to my embarrassment. Then he asked: "Do n't you remember how we used to walk together on campus? You used to go to teach English, and I used to go to the medical school."

Then I remembered him and asked for his forgiveness.

I knew him as a medical student at the American University of Beirut in the 1980s.

He was a thin young man. Now he is a big fully grown man with a double chin. Ayman wanted to chat about the old days. I told him that I am in a fix, and need to sort out that problem. Given the expensive rent in New York, I added that the amount of money we had then could take care either of the hospital or the rent. Ayman responded that he won't charge me a penny, and took out a Medicare form, signed, and told me to go to the healthcare authorities, after explaining that New York state policy is to take care of any pregnant woman irrespective of her legal status in the country.

Just imagine that out of 12 million people in New York, I would meet a friend I have not seen in 17 years at the right time and in the right place, to help me out of this dilemma. God is certainly the Father who do not let us down.

We went back to the apartment with a happy face, and told the landlady that we could pay the rent. Then, her husband, Stanley, brought us a table, a few chairs, and a wall clock with the picture of Jesus. Stanley said that Jesus watches over us. "I guess so," I commented.

After a few days, I flew back to Lebanon to work for 20 days, resign from my work at the newspaper, and bring more money. My flight back to New York was scheduled on December 30. At Heathrow airport in London, I checked my email, and discovered that Mona gave birth to my son Yahya three weeks prematurely. Ayman took care of everything. He even took Nour out for lunch, and kept her company all day until Mona recuperated from her cesarean section operation.