

## The Story of Zia Nodrat

In Kabul, Afghanistan, during 1964, a fourteen year old boy, Zia Nodrat, enrolled in the NOOR Institute for the Blind. He already knew the whole Qur'an by heart. In Western terms that would be like an English speaker memorizing the complete New Testament in Greek, since Arabic was not Zia's mother tongue. He completed the six primary grades of the Institute in three years.

While attending his classes in Braille in the Institute for the Blind, Zia also mastered English. He did this by listening and repeating what he heard on a transistor radio. With the help of a small ear plug, he heard programs coming into Afghanistan from other countries. He eventually started asking questions about what he had heard, such as, "What do you mean by the substitutionary atonement?" He had heard such theological concepts during Christian radio broadcasts like the Voice of the Gospel coming from Addis Ababa in Ethiopia, Africa.

Finally, he shared with a few persons that he had received Jesus the Messiah as his personal Saviour. They asked him if he realized that he could be killed for this, since the Islamic Law of Apostasy for anyone leaving Islam is death. He answered, "I have counted the cost and am willing to die for the Messiah, since He has already died on the cross for me."

Zia then became the spiritual leader of the few Afghan Christians. In the Institute for the Blind in Kabul, the students elected him as the president of their association. But the next year after it was known that he had become a Christian, he lost the election for this position. One of his Christian teachers told him how sorry she was that he lost. He replied, quoting the prophet John the Baptist who said of Jesus, "He must become greater, I must become less" (John 3:30). His goal in life was not to seek prominence for himself, but to be a humble servant of his Lord. Zia's father said that before he had entered the Institute for the Blind, he had been like a cold and unlit piece of charcoal. After his experience there, he had become like a red hot, brightly burning coal.

Once he borrowed the English Braille copy of the Gospel of John. He opened it and read with his fingers. He then returned it and said that his question had been answered. When asked what his question was, he replied that in John 13:34 Jesus said, "A new commandment I give you that you love one another." He wondered why the Lord Jesus called it "new," since the commandment "love your neighbour as yourself" had already been given to Moses, as recorded in the Old Testament Book of Leviticus 19:18. But now he understood. He explained that until the incarnation of the Messiah the world had never before seen love personified. He went on to state that the Bible reveals that God is love, and that Jesus as God in human flesh is love incarnate. This was what made the mandate new. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you." In his perfect life Jesus has now given us a new model to follow.

Zia was the first blind student to attend regular sighted schools in Afghanistan. There he had a small recorder with which he taped everything his teachers said, so that he could go over it and learn it thoroughly. He thus became the number one student out of hundreds at his grade level. Those who failed in their classes were given a second chance to take examinations after the three month vacation. He studied the next year during this break and passed the tests. In this way he completed high school, finishing two grades each year.

Zia wanted to study Islamic Law so that he could defend Christians who might be persecuted for their faith. He therefore entered in the University of Kabul, from which he graduated with his law degree. He also studied Calvin's Institutes on the side since he wanted to grasp the concepts of this Reformation leader.

The Christoffel Blind Mission in Germany gave the Institute for the Blind in Afghanistan an extensive library of Braille books in German. Since Zia wanted to read these, along with his other classes he went to the Goethe Institute in Kabul and learned German. As the top student there too, he won a scholarship to go to Germany to study advanced German. When the Germans found out that he was blind, they withdrew the fellowship since they did not have the arrangements or accommodations for a blind person. He asked them what he would have to do. They replied that he would have to travel alone and take care of himself. When he agreed to do that, they finally accepted him. While studying there with top students from Goethe Institutes around the world, he was number one in this advanced course as well.

Zia also translated the New Testament from Iranian Persian into his own Afghan Dari dialect. This was published by the Pakistan Bible Society in Lahore. Its third edition was published by the Cambridge University Press in England in 1989. He also travelled to Saudi Arabia where he won a memory contest on the Qur'an. The Muslim judges were so amazed and chagrined that a non-Arabic speaker had taken first space, that they also awarded another prize for the best Arab in the competition. Because different blind students like Zia had become Christians, in March of 1973 the Muslim government in Afghanistan sent a written order closing the two Institutes for the Blind, one of which was in Kabul and the other seven hundred miles to the west in Herat. All the expatriate teachers of the blind along with their families were ordered to leave Afghanistan within one week. As these dedicated teachers left, God gave them a promise from Isaiah 42:16, "I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them."

The Muslim Government then destroyed the Christian Church building in Kabul, after previously having given permission to build it. President Eisenhower had requested permission for construction of this building from King Zahir Shah on his visit to Afghanistan in 1959, since a Mosque had been built in Washington, DC for the Muslim diplomats there, and Christian diplomats and other Christians needed a place to worship on a reciprocal basis in Kabul. Christians from nations all around the world contributed toward its construction. At its dedication, the cornerstone carved in beautiful Afghan alabaster marble read: "To the glory of God 'Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood' this building is dedicated as 'a house of prayer for all nations' in the reign of H.M. Zahir Shah, May 17, 1970 A.D., 'Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone'."

When troops arrived and started knocking down the wall between the street and the Church property preparatory to destroying it, a German Christian businessman went to the mayor of Kabul, who had given the order, and said, "If your Government touches that House of God, God will overthrow your Government." This proved to be a prophecy. The mayor then sent a letter to the congregation ordering them to give the Church for destruction, since that would mean that the Government would not have to pay compensation. They replied that they could not give it to anyone since it did not belong to them. It had been dedicated to God. They also added that if the Government took it and destroyed it, they would be answerable to God.

Police, workmen and bulldozers were sent to destroy the Church. The congregation, instead of opposing, offered them tea and cookies. Christians all around the world prayed and many of them wrote letters to Afghan embassies in various nations. Billy Graham and other world Christian leaders signed a statement of concern and sent it to the King.

On July 17, 1973 the destruction of the Church building was completed. That very night the Afghan Government responsible for the destruction was overthrown in a coup. Afghans who are quick to see omens in events say that Jesus the Messiah came down from heaven and overthrew the Government because the Government had overthrown His Church. It had been a Monarchy for 227 years. That night it became a Republic, under President Daoud. In 1978 this Government was toppled by a Communist coup, followed by the Russian invasion just after Christmas in 1979. Millions of Afghans had to flee their country as refugees. One of them was heard to say, "Ever since our Government destroyed that Christian Church, God has been judging our country."

Under the Communists, the Institute for the Blind in Kabul was reopened and Zia was put in charge. He did a fine job of reorganizing it. Then pressure was brought on him to join the Communist party. He refused. One official told him that if he did not join, he might be killed. He replied that he was not afraid to be killed and asked the Communist if he were ready to die.

Finally Zia was arrested on false charges and put in the Puli Charkhi political prison outside of Kabul, where thousands were executed. There was no heat in the jail to protect the prisoners from the cold winter weather. He had to sleep on the freezing mud floor in his overcoat. A prisoner next to him was trembling with cold since he did not even have a jacket. Zia knew John the Baptist had said, "The man who has two coats should share with him who has none" (Luke 3:11). He took off his only coat and gave it to the neighbour. From then on, the Lord miraculously kept him warm every night. He slept as if he had a comforter over him.

In prison the Communists gave Zia shock treatments to try to brainwash him. The electric burns left scars on his head. But he did not give in. When he was offered the opportunity to study Russian in prison, he mastered this language also. The Communists finally freed him in December, 1985.

Following his release from prison Zia read Genesis 12: 1-3, in his Braille Bible, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I ... will bless you; ... and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' " Zia felt God was calling him to leave Afghanistan to go as a missionary to Pakistan. He therefore got in touch with a friend, a blind beggar. He then dressed himself in rags. On their way out of the country, he let his friend do all the talking, thereby concealing his identity or detection from the soldiers. They thus were able to get through the Soviet check points along the main highway from Kabul. It took them twelve days to travel the 150 miles to the Khyber Pass and then on into Pakistan.

After Zia arrived in Pakistan, he was offered an opportunity to travel to the United States to study Hebrew since he was also working on a translation of the Old Testament into his Dari language. He declined, saying he had so much to do among the Afghan refugees that he could not leave. He started an Institute for the Blind for them. He learned the main language of

Pakistan, Urdu, preaching in this language in Christian churches. He furthermore completed a book of New Testament stories in Dari for children.

On March 23, 1988, Zia was kidnapped by a fanatical Muslim group, Hisbe Islami, ("the Party of Islam") and was accused of being a CIA agent because he knew English, a KGB or Khad spy because he knew Russian and an apostate from Islam because he was a Christian. He was beaten for hours with rods. A sighted person can brace and flinch when the blow comes. But a blind person cannot see the club coming and thus gets the full force, even like the torture the Lord Jesus Christ experienced when he was blindfolded and then struck (Luke 22:64). His wife and three daughters had been able to get out of Afghanistan and were with him in Pakistan at the time he was kidnapped. Soon after his wife gave birth to a beautiful boy who looks much like his father. No one knows whether Zia ever heard that he had a son.

The latest word, though not absolutely definite, is that Hisbe Islami murdered Zia. Before he was kidnapped, he had told a friend that if this party ever captured him they would kill him. This same party caught two Pakistani Christians taking relief items to needy Afghans and tortured them. Before releasing them, one of the captors stated, "We are not going to kill you the way we killed Zia Nodrat." In addition, an Afghan news reporter on the Northwest Frontier of Pakistan claims to have evidence that Hisbe Islami murdered Zia in a cruel way.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 13 states, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; freedom to manifest one's religion or belief." The story of Zia is a story of infringement of human rights. Zia has been denied his freedom and has probably been martyred for his faith. Before his capture, he asked a Christian friend that if anything happened to him, his friend would take care of his family. The friend answered in the affirmative, not realizing that a short time later Zia would be kidnapped. He was able to arrange for Zia's wife and two of his children to be brought to North America.

God does not force a belief system upon people. He has given them liberty to choose. Therefore what right does an earthly regime or group have to impose a certain belief system? Our prayer is that the new Government of Afghanistan will respect the freedom of religion which is basic to all other liberties. In the Afghan language, Dari, there is a popular Afghan proverb which substantiates this truth as it states the following in Dari, the main language of Kabul, "Isa'i badin khud, Musa'i badin khud." ("Let the followers of Jesus practise their religion, and the followers of Moses theirs.")

Jesus prophesied, "A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). After His resurrection, He commanded His followers, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). If Zia has been killed for the Messiah, he has gone on to his eternal reward. And all of like precious faith will one day see him again; as the Bible promises, "and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17b). Then we will be able to learn the full story of Zia's dedicated life.

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