
Chapter 10

TOURING HISTORICAL CITIES OF PERSIA

I had already told my sisters in advance that I would like to take them sightseeing for a few days. I wanted to spend some quality time with them since we had not seen each other for such a long time. Therefore, we decided to make a trip by bus to Isfahan and Shiraz in Iran. We decided on a day, packed a few homemade sandwiches and departed early in the afternoon. The name of the bus we were traveling on was called “Seir-O-Safar”. We found it to be very comfortable and nice. There was a small television and video tape player available on board to keep us entertained. I utilized this way of traveling since it was more economical while at the same time we could see more of the country. It also gave us more time to spend with each other to relax and to share our hearts.

Our bus zoomed through town and headed toward Shiraz, which was about sixteen hours away. The bus drivers seem to own the roads by going and coming so often. At one point, I became very concerned when I noticed that our bus driver was maneuvering in a scary manner. A car was driving in front of us and was going faster than the posted speed limit, yet our driver wanted to go faster. Our bus driver attempted to pass him a few times but due to oncoming traffic he could not. Finally, when he was able to pass the car, he turned the bus hard to the right knowing the

car was there and forced him off the road! The driver of the car quickly used his brakes and got out of the way of our huge bus to prevent an accident. I felt so bad for the driver of that car and thanked God for protecting him and his family.

As we traveled, I took the opportunity to talk to each one of my sisters. I wanted to share my faith with them so badly. I wanted them to ask me any questions concerning my faith that they might have, but I wanted to make sure I was not disrespectful either. They were my sisters and I loved them dearly, so I was very sensitive as to what to say to them. I prayed silently, asking God to guide me as we shared our hearts with each other. I would recall some events from the Bible and the lessons from it, then apply them to our conversation. I was not shy about telling them what Jesus would do or say regarding the subject matter. This was one of the ways I shared Christ with them.

It was not an easy task though. They claimed that they understood what I was talking about, but instead of asking me more about Jesus, they would provide rebuttal by offering their own opinion from the standpoint of the Quran. It reminded me of this scripture: **Matthew 6:22-23**: *“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!”* In other words they acted and responded as they knew everything I was sharing with them yet they knew nothing at all. They were nodding their heads in agreement, but their minds were elsewhere!

The bus stopped for dinner at a roadside restaurant and for those who wished to have their evening prayers. We had

already traveled a few hours and stretching my legs sounded good to me. My sisters did not care for the food at those types of restaurants, and had already prepared some from home for all of us. We ate our dinner and after a short rest and walk around the premises, we boarded the bus and continued our trip.

The bus driver was replaced with a fresh and rested driver, which made me feel better knowing how long the trip was ahead of us. The temperature was getting cooler as we approached the evening, so we asked the driver to turn on the heater. We travelled all night toward our destination. We arrived in Shiraz (the province of Fars) at about eight in the morning. My cousin was there to greet us since he and his family lived there. We stayed at my cousin's house for a couple of days, and then traveled to Isfahan. Both cities are historical and beautiful places for tourists to visit.

SIGHTSEEING IN SHIRAZ

Shiraz is located in the southwest of Iran. It is the fifth most populated city in Iran and the capital of Fars Province. The province of Fars, with a population of four million, is 121,000 km wide, 7.5% of Iran. It neighbors in the north Isfahan and Yazd; Bandar Booshehr in the west; its southern neighbor is Bandar Abbas; and Kerman is the eastern neighbor. It has four seasons, the temperature varying from -7 to 2 degrees Celsius in cold days of the year, to 35 to 40 degrees Celsius in the warmest days of summer.

Shiraz was the capital of Persia during the Zand dynasty from 1750 until 1781, as well as briefly during the Saffarid period.

Shiraz is known as the “city of poets, wine and flowers.” It is also considered by many Iranians to be the “city of gardens”, due to the many gardens and fruit trees that can be seen in the city.

Shiraz has had major Jewish and Christian communities. The crafts of Shiraz consist of inlaid mosaic work of triangular design; silver-ware; and pile carpet-weaving in the villages and among the tribes. In Shiraz, industries such as cement production, sugar, fertilizers, textile products, wood products, metalwork and rugs dominate. Shiraz also has a major oil refinery and is also a major center for Iran's electronic industries. 53% of Iran's electronic investment has been centered in Shiraz.

The popular attractions of Shiraz include first and foremost the tombs of the poets Hafez, Saadi, and Khaju e Kermani. Kermani's tomb is inside the mountain above the city's old Quran Gate.

One of the most historical buildings is the Kian. This building was constructed around the time of Cyrus the Great, and has been a popular tourist attraction ever since.

There are over 200 sites of historical significance around Shiraz. Persepolis is located in the northwestern part of Fars, 40 km away from Shiraz.



Persepolis

Persepolis is an ensemble of ancient monuments and palaces. The palaces were built by Darius I (521 B.C.), but for more than 150 years, designers, stone worker, engineers and others worked hard to complete the whole palace. Later, Alexander the Great destroyed it. We also find Darius in the Bible. According to Daniel 5:31; Darius began ruling the Persian Empire when he was 62 years old. God's Word tells us that Darius decided to appoint 120 satraps over the kingdom. The word satrap means "protector of the kingdom" and referred to a governor over a province or district.

"Now Daniel so distinguished himself among the administrators and the satraps by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom." (Daniel 6:3)

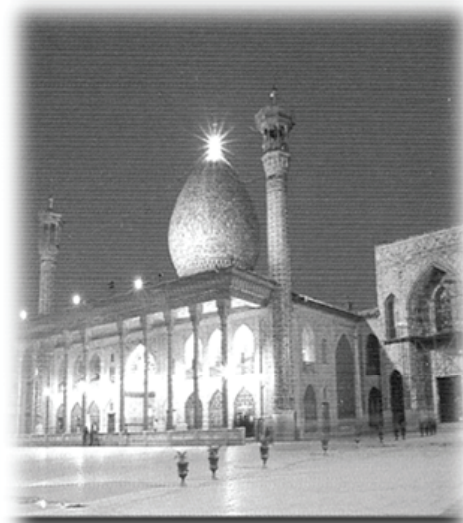
Daniel was indeed trustworthy, devoid of any negligence or corruption and he had favor in the eyes of King Darius. Persians were under a good king and trustworthy people like Daniel for many years until I believe Satan in the person of Alexander the Great came and destroyed the country and weakened the will of the people.

There are many tombs and shrines in the province of Fars that are either valuable for their historic past or are sacred as places of pilgrimage for Muslims. One of the most loved and dignified of all the shrines is **Shah Cheragh**, the tomb of the son of the seventh Imam of the Shiites. The tomb is also known as a tomb of two brothers 'Amir Ahmad' and 'Mir Muhammad', both of who were brothers of Imam Reza, the 8th Shiite Imam who took refuge in Shiraz, Iran during the Abbasid persecution of the Shiite Muslims.

I went inside the shrine for a closer look. I took my shoes off, as was required. They used this shrine as a

mosque and a place of prayer, and it must be kept clean at all times. The floors were covered wall-to-wall with beautiful hand-made Persian carpets and the tomb was covered by thousands of large and small beautiful glittery and shiny crystals. Many lights and chandeliers were used to beautify the inside while the outside dome was covered with gold plated roofing. For the Islamic faith, the splendor of this Mosque made it a marvelous place as a house of worship, and the people came with the expectation of having their prayers answered.

Inside, the Mosque was packed with many worshipers who were there to pray at every corner, or to request whatever they wished by touching the door-posts or walls of the tomb. Many would offer “alms” by throwing money toward the center of the tomb. All four sides of the tomb were covered by tall and decorative iron bars, fashioned with beautiful designs. You could see all kinds of coins and paper money inside the four iron walls and near the tomb. People would express their wish silently to the soul of the holy person who is buried there.



Tomb of Shah Cheraq

“Significant populations of Shiite Muslims can be found in Iran and Iraq, and large minority communities in Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and Lebanon but Sunni Muslims make up the

majority (85%) of Muslims all over the world. Shiite Muslims believe that the twelve Imams or (Disciples) of Mohammad and their close relatives are “sinless” by nature, and that their authority is infallible as it comes directly from Allah. Therefore, Shiite Muslims often hold the twelve Imams in the highest regard and as saints, and travel on pilgrimages to their tombs and shrines in the hope of divine intercession for their prayers. Sunni Muslims on the other hand counter that there is no basis in Islam for an inherited privileged class of spiritual leaders, and certainly no basis for the veneration or intercession of saints.

Sunni Muslims challenge that the leadership of the community is not a birthright but rather a trust that is earned, and may be given or taken away by the people themselves through election.”

(From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia)

Incidentally, since Sunni Muslims do not consider the leadership of an Imam as a birthright, they reject the twelve ‘Imamat’ of Shiites including ‘Mehdi’, the one who is expected to reappear, unless he comes through an election. But on the other hand fundamentally they do agree with the leadership of Iran, standing up to their rival, Israel, in favor of Palestinian rights!

My personal thoughts are a bit different from them in reference to the hidden Imam. I believe when Jesus Christ returns as expected by all three major religions, Muslims will call Him their hidden Imam, while the Jews recognize Him as their Redeemer. But the Christian acknowledges Him as the King of Kings, the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. This way the whole world would be united together under the direction of His Majesty, our Lord Jesus Christ. Every knee

should bow of those in heaven, of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!

As it has been promised by God through the words of the Prophet Isaiah saying:

*And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called
Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of His government and peace
there will be no end,
upon the throne of David and over His kingdom,
to order it and establish it with judgment and justice
from that time forward, even forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*

Isaiah 9:6-7

Saadi and Hafez also have their tombs in Shiraz. They are two very famous and well-known poets that have their books translated in many languages worldwide. “Fal-e-Hafez” is one of the famous books written and used by many in Iran as fortune telling based on Hafez poems. We had fun at my cousin’s house fortune-telling by reading “Fal-e-Hafez” for each other. We did this by wishing first, then randomly opening its pages to read what it says concerning our wish. The writings are sort of similar to our “Proverbs” in the Bible, full of good advice. One of my sisters later on purchased “Fal-e- Hafez” in the Persian language and gave it to me as a souvenir.

Back in my cousin’s house in Shiraz, we enjoyed several delicious Iranian dishes, which I will never get tired of!

One of my cousins opened up the conversation by wanting to know what I thought concerning the “soul and spirit” of mankind. She also wanted to know if I was a practicing “priest”, since she had seen me in a picture dressed up similar to one of the disciple’s attire (*I was dressed up for an Easter drama in our church*).



Tomb of Hafez

I shared with them what I had learned from the Bible as they eagerly listened. Then the subject shifted to Islam and I witnessed something unexpected. I asked a historical question about Muhammad and his disciples, which related to some disagreements they had with the Jewish tribes living in the same land nearby. This resulted in Muhammad and his companions killing the Jewish tribes, taking their wives and children as slaves, and stealing their belongings as booty (money or valuables seized or stolen, especially by soldiers in war).

Surprisingly this opened up a ‘can of worms’! The next thing I knew, I was reclining in my chair, watching a heated discussion between one of my sisters and my cousin’s

mother-in-law, arguing back and forth with no end in sight! I realized that they did not agree with the motives behind those wars. I decided I had better change the subject and move on to another topic, to prevent further arguments.

Recently, as part of my continuing research, I came across Dr. Khalid Zaheer, a Muslim scholar from Pakistan who through a written public debate with Ali Sina, admitted many other conflicts or problems from the message of the Quran as he was sorting them out. Here is part of what he wrote:

“I will tell you why I am saying that my quest, when I was reading the Quran then, was by large an academic one. I divided the passages I came across in the Quran into three categories:

- *There were passages that immediately struck me as the most outstanding I had ever come across;*
- *There was information in it that I told myself I would never accept;*
- *Finally, there were passages that I had reservations about.*

While the first category of passages kept me going, the other two were a continuous source of challenge to the possibility that I would accept the book as ‘divine’.

I ask everyone to go through the Quran with an unbiased approach and you are going to experience what I experienced.

If anyone is claiming that no part of the book, from cover to cover, is making any impact on him/her, he/she is talking nonsense and belying the experiences of millions of intelligent people. I have no hesitation in saying that the first category of the passages of the Quran – the one that struck me as simply brilliant – was the most dominant. It

always tended to undermine the other two categories. However, I managed to keep my wits intact and did not give in until the problems created by the other two were properly sorted out.

There were three ideas attributed to the Quran about which I had decided that I would not accept.

One of them was the understanding that Muslims were destined to enter paradise while non-Muslims were destined to hell-fire forever. This sounded so ridiculous to me and I told myself that I just could not accept any such suggestion.⁽¹⁾

The other idea attributed to the Quran was that it apparently seemed to be suggesting that whoever “becomes a non-Muslim” after having been a Muslim, ought to be killed.⁽²⁾

Note:(1)(2) Grand Ayatollah Yusuf Saanei who lives in Qom, Iran is now claiming and teaching the same thing as Dr Khalid Zaheer on the first two notes as he describes them in his own web site.

The third one was that the Quran apparently claims that only God knows what is in the womb of a woman when she is pregnant. I could not fool myself by believing that what apparently was mentioned was the truth given that, thanks to the recent advancement in ultrasound-based technology, the gender of the unborn baby could be identified unmistakably.

On later investigation, it transpired that what I had decided to be unacceptable claims in the Quran was never a part of the book. I later realized that what I had initially thought to be Quranic concepts were not in the Quran at all.”

Incidentally, a “non-Muslim” in the language of Islam is considered a “non-believer.” However, Dr. Khalid is correct when he says that some of the things that are being taught and are circulating among Muslims may not be part of the Quran. They came to surface either by the self-serving Mullahs or from other authoritative sources, such as the **Hadith of the Muhammad.**

Unfortunately, at the conclusion, this Muslim scholar (Dr. Khalid Zaheer) chose to ignore those passages that he rejected initially, considered them as holy, the infallible word of Allah!

I will talk more about why Dr. Khalid chose to remain status quo under “**Sharia**” or the Islamic Law at the conclusion of this book.

SIGHTSEEING IN ISFAHAN

We continued our trip to Isfahan after spending a couple of days of sightseeing in Shiraz and the surrounding areas. **Esfahan or Isfahan**, located about 340 km south of Tehran, is the capital of Esfahan Province and Iran’s third largest city (after Tehran and Mash-had). Esfahan is located on the main north-south and east-west routes crossing Iran, and was once one of the largest cities in the world. It flourished from 1050 to 1722, and particularly in the 16th century under the Safavid dynasty, when it became the capital of Persia for the second time in its history. Even today, the city retains much of its past glory. It is famous for its Islamic architecture, with many beautiful boulevards, covered bridges, palaces, mosques, and minarets. A “minaret” is a narrow tower of a mosque, from which the faithful are summoned to prayer. The call to prayer occurs five times each day.



Famous Naghsh-E Jahan Square, Isfahan

Iran is full of history and has many beautiful cities. Tourists from all over the world travel there to see these historical places. I love and miss Iran, and I am very saddened by the manner in which this new government has created so much distance between themselves and the rest of the world, especially America. I only saw a few foreigners as tourists there. However, the streets were packed with travelers and commuters from other cities of Iran.

In Isfahan, we stayed at a hotel close to the famous “Naghsh-e Jahan Square”. When we checked in at the hotel, we all had to show our identification such as birth certificates, passports or marriage certificates to prove that we were related as brother and sisters. Majid, my nephew, and his wife, were also with us and had to prove that they were husband and wife in order to be able to share a room.

According to the hotel attendant, police will occasionally check the books and identity of the people who stay there as guests to make sure that they follow the Islamic law, which states that no man and woman may stay in one

room unless they are married or blood related such as brother and sister.

I suppose that is why “temporary marriages” are even more popular now than ever before under this Islamic government. Strange as it is, as long as I can remember, Islam in Iran has always offered “temporary” or “convenience” marriage for men who may be away from their home or family. These types of marriages are common in Iran and the wives of the married men often understand it since the society has been dominated by men. But the same act by a married woman could bring harsh punishment. A mosque Imam can prepare these temporary papers or contracts which could last for a specific period of time and usually money is involved. Nevertheless, here is another report that puts a different twist in this despicable act.

TEHRAN, IRAN: “New talk from Iranian Interior Minister Mustafa Pour-Mohammadi, who is promoting “temporary marriages” to help curb the country’s social problems. Temporary marriage, or “sigheh”, is a practice unique to Shiite Islam and has been a disputed practice in Iran for many years because many consider it a license for prostitution. This may now be looked at as a solution to a societal problem as some are now advocating for this to be institutionalized to help fight illicit sex in a country where sexual relations outside of marriage are banned under Islamic law.(Paraphrased from televised news, June 2007)

Iran first started promoting temporary marriage as an alternative to living in sin, 15 years ago, but it quickly came under fire by the country’s hard line clerics. The President at the time, Hashemi Rafsanjani, proposed that this should be a way for men and women to satisfy their sexual needs and

that there should not even be a need for a cleric. A couple could read out an oath in private to each other to marry. In doing so, a couple could be married for any length of time from one hour up to 99 years. The opposition won out and this became a strong taboo in Iranian culture.

Temporary marriages are in direct conflict with “Sharia”, or Islamic law that has been in force in Iran since 1979. In Islamic law, extramarital sex is prohibited and punishable by flogging or stoning. Prostitution was banned at that same time, however, it has increased in recent years. Attorney Nemat Ahmadi said in relation to temporary marriages, “It will damage the foundation of the family. This will only promote prostitution.” Ahmadi further argues that “sigheh” gives wealthy men a religious cover to have affairs.”

Note: Iran became an Islamic republic in 1979, the year Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran from exile. Before then prostitution was legal under the Shah’s government.

VISITING A CHURCH IN ESFAHAN

There is a well-known church in Isfahan called “Armenian Vank Church” that includes a museum for tourists to visit. One of my sisters recalled the name of that church and asked if I would be interested in going there.

What an opportunity! God paved the way. I replied, “Yes, I would love to go!”

We hailed a taxi and were driven to that church, purchased tickets, and entered. The church was very old and was surrounded by tall walls like a citadel. Inside the four walls of the church grounds was a sizeable yard that divided

the sanctuary from the museum. At the entrance of the sanctuary, we saw a small platform with some mannequins dressed up with costumes similar to the early first century Christians, displaying their heritage. They also had a museum there showing their ancient Bibles and handwritings.

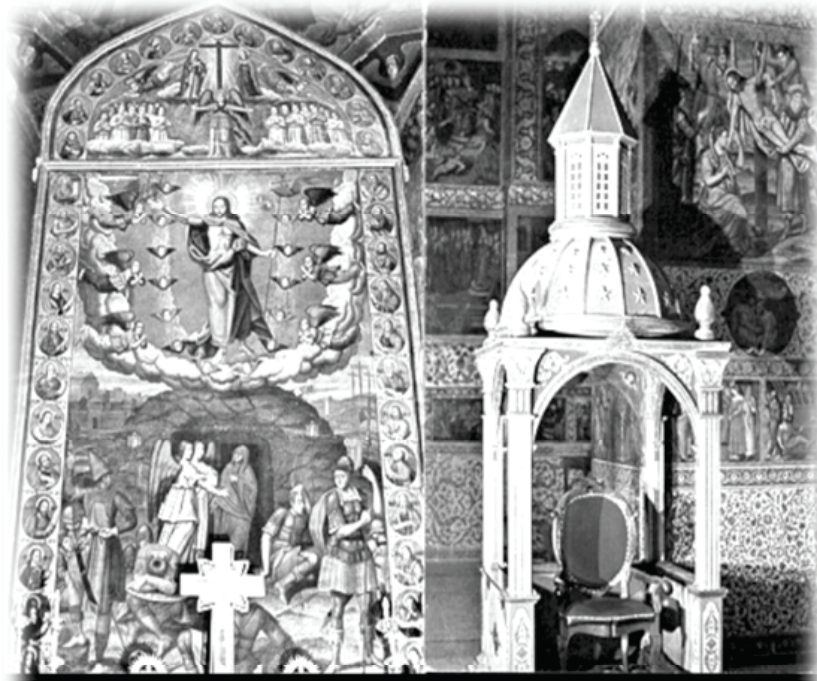
As we entered the sanctuary, a guide greeted and welcomed us. Photography was not permitted unless you paid in advance for that privilege at the ticket counter. Guides were present to answer any questions, but spoke only when spoken to.

The walls inside of the sanctuary had paintings with events in the order of Genesis to Revelation. I took that opportunity to explain the pictures and the events drawn in these paintings to my sisters. The guide who greeted us gave me his approval and confirmation with a smile as I was explaining the events.

Suddenly, a voice that I did not recognize asked: "Sir, may I ask you a question?" I was not paying attention to other people in the church, as my focus was on the paintings on the walls, and the explanation of them I was giving to my family. Unexpectedly, I found myself surrounded with many people, men and women, who were listening to my explanations. These people were all Muslims who were there inside the church to learn more about Christianity.

Frankly, I was not prepared to meet that kind of challenge there, especially with the group of people that I did not even know! But the Holy Spirit enabled me to continue to talk about His truth!

My sisters stood there with their mouths wide open in surprise as the group continued to ask me questions. When we left the sanctuary and headed toward the museum, the same group of people followed me! Again, God gave me another opportunity to share the good news of Jesus Christ, with people whom God put in my path; Praise God!



A scene of the interior of the Cathedral

The whole time that I was talking about Jesus, I emphasized His purity and love for mankind and that this was the most important thing. Then at one point, I offered a statement with a little hesitation and suggested that we shouldn't bring it up for discussion. They should search and study on their own. Afterward I told them that if they could see Jesus as being the best based on the examples He left behind for us, why would they want to settle for anything less? (Of course, I was referring to Muhammad as a lesser

person than Jesus, the Son of God). Then one person whom I did not recognize as being part of the first group started to challenge me with an argument that Jews considered their religion to be the best too. One of the guides, who were listening to us, picked up on our conversation and immediately stopped his argumentative rebuttal. For a short few seconds I feared for a heated dispute, which I was not ready for!

My nephew had warned me to be careful especially when I was asked where I was from, especially being from America. So, on that note we left the building. On our way out, another visitor approached me with a smile on his face, saying; “We know all of what you were saying” yet they could not expose themselves for the fear of their lives.

I was so fortunate that no harm came to me. I learned later that if you wish to visit Iran, you must not attract people to yourself. Because if the authorities see you giving speeches and attracting people to yourself, they consider it a threat against their government and you could be prosecuted for a crime of insurrection. If you travel there as a journalist or any other type of fact finding mission, you must inform the government in advance about your intentions. They will more than likely assign someone to be with you as guide or chaperon. The tricky part is if you stay beyond your assignment time frame in order to visit family and friends, it would be to your best interest to close the doors to any large gathering or photography in order not to be accused of spying. We are fortunate to live in a country where we can express our thoughts about religion or politics in an open forum.

I remember that on one occasion a Christian was stabbed with a knife when a small group was demonstrating peacefully in one of the streets of Tehran. In Iran, Christians may have rights but not freedom! Within the last year several Iranian men and women were put in prison because they were accused of spying, but after a few months they were let go. This demonstrates their love and compassion under the Islamic Republic!

Many people in Iran thought that an Islamic state type government would be more compassionate toward them. They hoped for prosperity along with spiritual and economic growth. However, after over two decades of Islamic leadership in Iran, people were losing their trust in their government; not only due to problems economically or with the lack of prosperity, but in spiritual issues as well. These subjects were the main concern in every home. The reason was because most were fed up with the lies and misleading words of their leaders who put so much fear in the minds of their people. They were not able to speak freely in the public forum without being criticized or pushed out of the way, and for that reason, people were searching for another kind of leadership in religion and politics. People still remembered the false promise of the late Ayatollahs, who encouraged the nation for their support, to have an Islamic republic in exchange for the nationalization of the nation's resource of oil, and that everyone in the country would benefit monetarily.

Iranians love their hot tea, and they use sugar cubes to sweeten their tea. Due to the lack of sugar imports, the Islamic government announced that the consumption of sugar-cubes was 'haram' (sinful), and encouraged people to eat 'dates' instead. Later after the Iran-Iraq war ended, their

relationship with neighboring countries was restored and sugar imports increased. Then the government announced that if you dip the sugar-cubes in the hot tea first before consumption, it would be 'hallal' (pure). These announcements became part of many jokes and much laughter among the people there.

As a result, when I was in the homes of different families, the subject almost always came up about their frustration with their religious leaders. They were eager to know about my belief and faith in God. They all listened carefully and with excitement and had many questions about Christianity.

My first trip to Iran was very promising, fruitful and without any problems. It gave me more encouragement and hope than ever before, and affected my decision to go back to Iran again the following year in 2005 and to continue my dialogue as before. But...