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Suffering seems a pertinent topic on which to base a webzine right now. There would be few people in the world who have not been touched by COVID-19 and the suffering it has brought upon individuals, families, communities, and nations. For some, COVID-19 has caused suffering on new and different levels. For others, however, as L.J.A. highlights in her article, the suffering from COVID-19 is of a lesser magnitude than that which they have already experienced. Suffering can be inflicted by events beyond human control, such as natural disasters, or it can arise from human actions. It is far more than simply physical pain as it encompasses mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of being a human. Thus, treating one aspect alone, divorced from the others, is unlikely to alleviate it.

While we are all affected by suffering in various forms and at various points in our lives, our responses to it differ individually, culturally, and according to our beliefs about God. These differences are represented in this webzine, which gives voice to the suffering of Muslim and Christian women not just in the articles but also through the inclusion of poems (by Miriam Dale and Deborah Warren) and a painting with short written reflection (by Setara). As both Hannah Johnson and L.J.A. highlight, art in various forms can be powerful and important expressions of suffering, particularly for women from cultures which prefer indirect forms of communicating lament and grief.

The poems thus follow in the tradition of the psalms of lament, where, as Maria Abara’s article shows, the psalmists cry out to God, question him, request justice, and even seek divine retribution. Yet the psalmists, and the poets in this webzine, do not wallow in their suffering, but rather turn their eyes towards God and the hope they have in him—God is their rock, their strength, their comfort, their saviour, their ever-present help in times of trouble (Ps. 46:1). Unlike in Islam, where questioning God is a sin, suffering is to be endured as a test of faithfulness, and where expressions of lament before God can be seen as disrespectful, the God of the Bible not only hears the cries of his people but is himself a God of feeling and emotion, ultimately fully identifying with us in suffering in the person of Christ.

Hannah Johnson’s sensitive exploration of cultural expressions of grief and suffering among Arab Muslims clearly shows how much we can learn if we are willing to listen, observe, and then biblically reflect on our own and other’s norms. She takes the reader on a journey of discovery through the kinds of suffering that are prevalent in the Middle East (the death of a family member, the refugee experience, and domestic abuse), and illustrates how the Christian community can learn from Arab communal responses in those times. She leads us to consider how Christians can offer comfort and courage, honour strength, and present scriptural truths about God which are culturally appropriate and allow for growth into a theology of suffering and lament.
The suffering of refugees is a theme taken up by L.J.A.'s article, in which she details the ongoing distress and hardship refugees experience even after their arrival in a 'safe' country. As she outlines, refugee women lack wider family and community ties in their new country, and the resultant loneliness and isolation can be exacerbated if they are shunned by their neighbours and restricted by their husbands. They also struggle with financial constraints, limited employment prospects, a loss of cultural traditions, and language barriers. The community centre in which L.J.A. works seeks to holistically meet some of the needs of refugee women, providing a safe space for them to share not just their struggles but also to honour and acknowledge their strengths, abilities, and resourcefulness. A pitfall which Christians from wealthier nations should avoid is to elevate ourselves to a position of 'saviour'; the one who has the wealth, skills, other resources, and answers who can 'rescue' women who are suffering as a result of displacement or issues associated with poverty. As an antidote to this, L.J.A. challenges us to become more vulnerable with the women we are relating to, allowing them to minister to us in our needs and times of suffering, learning from them, and thus growing in deeper relationships of mutual support.

From these two articles we move to a different experience of suffering in which the body of Christ, far from being a refuge and community from it, instead perpetuates it. This is the suffering of Middle Eastern women who are both persecuted as followers of Jesus within their cultures, and who suffer within the church context as well. Emma O.'s helpful article explores persecution that is gender-specific, detailing how she, along with a team of others, are seeking to address distorted beliefs within the Church about men's and women's identities, and to support, value, and enable resilience among women who are persecuted.

Suffering which is endured as a result of the actions of others brings with it the dilemma of forgiveness. E.B.'s article presents powerful stories of women who are dealing with great suffering, but who are unable to grant forgiveness to the perpetrators of their suffering, or to receive forgiveness from God for sin they have committed which has then caused suffering to others and themselves. E.B. examines the concept of forgiveness in Islam and Christianity and asks how a suffering Muslim's view of forgiveness affects the way she can be discipled. We read the personal story of how one lady grew to understand what it means to forgive through her growing understanding of God's forgiveness of us through Jesus—a journey of learning that E.B. concludes is a necessary step towards reconciliation with others and with God.

The final poem in the webzine is a fitting conclusion. It turns our hearts and minds towards the hope we have in the fulfilment of God's kingdom. This hope does not deny the suffering and groaning we and our world experience but sits with it and carries us through it. Ultimately, this is what we want our friends to grasp—that God, his promises, and the hope we have in him does not and will not disappoint us. Christ is the light in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome him.

*Louise Simon*
Does God have Feelings and Emotion? (Lament and the Mission of God)
Introduction

When the tsunami hit Anyer Beach in Jakarta on the 24 of December 2018, a famous band was performing nearby. Soon after the first song, the tsunami came and wiped away the stage.¹ Only the vocalist survived, and he even lost his wife. That vocalist described himself on his Instagram page as a proud Muslim and I was curious to see how he responded to his loss and suffering. His post is full of his expression of sadness and loss, but not even in one sentence did he dare to ask God “why.” Many of his fans commented on the picture of his wife and said that a good Muslim will never complain to God. It is a sin even to ask “why.” A good Muslim needs to submit to God and accept everything without question. Everything that happens in a person’s life is “takdir”—destiny. Everything has been ordained by God and human beings just need to live a life that is predestined for them without any questions.

A famous singer, Denada, found out that her 6-year-old daughter had leukemia. Full of sadness she said on television that she told herself not to ask God “why.” She said, “It is a sin to question God. I tried hard not to even ask ‘why?’”²

This understanding of God is common in Indonesia. Some Muslim preachers even say that if you make a heavy sound such as “ugh” or “agh” in your prayer, Allah will not hear you at all and he will cancel all your requests to him. According to some Islamic

popular teachings in Indonesia, there are 7 azab (punishments) for those who complain to God:

- He will die in a terrible way
- He will go bankrupt
- His face will turn black on the Day of Judgment
- His skin will burn
- He and his family will be humiliated
- He will get the lowest place in hell
- He will be bombarded with stones from the sky

**Does God Have Feeling and Emotion?**

January is National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, and it is sad that in 2020 the number of trafficked persons, especially women in Indonesia, is increasing. United Nations (UN) experts say traffickers are taking advantage of the COVID-19 pandemic by targeting migrants who have lost their jobs and children who have dropped out of school. The global economic slowdown is leaving large numbers of people out of work, desperate, and at risk of exploitation. In addition, victims of human trafficking are less likely to be found or receive assistance because attention and resources are currently being diverted to tackling the outbreak.³

I used to work with the poor, and some of the women who I met were human trafficking survivors. Apart from providing legal assistance and advocacy, I see the

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importance of helping victims to relate their faith to the suffering they are experiencing. Several years ago, I encountered two women who were trafficked as sex workers, and we had to collect money to free them from their master. After they came back, I saw they had changed their clothing and were now wearing hijab. I asked them, “why you are wearing hijab?” One of the women said, “I want to start a new life as a good Muslim woman. God destined me to be a prostitute. Maybe my parents did something bad in the past. Who knows, by wearing hijab maybe I will receive God’s mercy.” I asked her again, “don’t you want to ask God to punish the people who trafficked you?” She said, “they will have their karma, but I don’t want to complain to God, I will just surrender and try to do good.”

The God that they know is the God who has no feelings. The God who doesn’t really care about human pain and suffering. The God who expects us to just accept and be quiet—and that is not the God of the Bible.

**Lament and The Mission of God**

Many people think that the mission of God is only about redeeming sinners from the curse of hell to have a new destiny in heaven. However, when we read the Bible, the mission of God starts with the cry of his people. God responds to human cries about pain and suffering. In Genesis 4:10 the blood of Abel cries out to God from the ground demanding justice:

*The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.*

Many lands in Indonesia and other parts of the world have been silent witnesses to injustice that has happened to people who are weak and oppressed. God’s mission to
liberate the people of Israel in Egypt also started with lament. The oppressed people cried to God for help. They cried against violence and injustice from their oppressors and God heard their cries and responded to them:

During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. (Ex. 2:23-24)

Then the LORD said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings. (Ex. 3:7)

In the wilderness God reminded the Israelites to do justice to the poor and the strangers, for he will hear their cry:

You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry. (Ex. 22:22-23)

The God of the Bible is the only God who is angry at injustice, and we can see this all through the Bible. It is amazing that God not only allows his people to cry out, to question, and to complain to him, but he also provides us with the words to do it, as seen in the psalms of lament.

In the psalms of lament, we see the psalmists boldly enter the divine court and question him. Not only questions and complaints regarding personal matters such as sickness, loneliness, fear of death, and so on, the psalmists also fight against
oppression and injustice in society. In many psalms we read bold and harsh language that makes many preachers hesitate to preach or even to read.

The psalmists not only complain about their personal suffering but go deeper to also question the justice of God. Many of the psalms are a protest against the silence of God when evildoers persecute the poor and the oppressed. The psalmists appeal to God and question his character of justice and righteousness. They cry, “How long oh God?” “Why God?” “God, do you know what is happening down here?” “Will you help us?”

For example, Psalm 58 is a brutally honest prayer. The psalmist prays that God will powerfully bring justice for the oppressed. This psalm is a bold act of faith, taking the pain and anger of injustice to the one who can act powerfully. The psalmist says:

*Do you rulers indeed speak justly?*
*Do you judge people with equity?*
*No, in your heart you devise injustice,*
*And your hands mete out violence on the earth.*
*...*

*Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;*
*Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!*  
*Let them vanish like water that flows away;*
*When they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.*  
*May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,*
*Like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.*
*...*
Similarly, Psalm 10 is a prayer against political injustice; the wicked ruler who oppressed the poor. Psalms 7, 35, and 109 are prayers against the practice of injustice in the court. The psalmists complain about false accusations, false witnesses, wicked and arrogant oppressors.

All of these psalms are taking seriously the reality of social injustice. In some texts the psalmists even detail the intentions and motives of the oppressors. For example, in Psalm 10, the psalmist describes his enemies as greedy and arrogant. In Psalm 49, the psalmist describes the oppressors as the rich who trust in their money.

Commenting on Brueggemann, Derek Suderman says, “the contemporary tendency to drop lament language ensures that victims remain voiceless and the status quo unchallenged.” More than just dealing with painful emotions, through the eyes of the psalmists we can see that God is aware of the reality of evil and injustice; that he is against oppression, injustice, and tyranny. God is on the side of the oppressed, the needy and the poor. They are under his special care and concern.

Lament psalms reflect the dynamic relationship between God and humans. The psalmists are filled with complaints, anxiety, despair, and protest. Lament psalms teach us about God, a God who is open to protest. That is the very characteristic of God that we cannot find in Islam. In Islam there is no room for painful emotions in the presence of God. Muslims can pray and cry to God but not question him, not ask ‘why.’ Lament psalms teach that God accepts all kind of emotions. God understands human hearts and feelings.

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Grief's River Song
Grief
Is a song
We sing to God
And He sings back
To us.

An aching sonnet
A haunting duet.
A right joining in
With His heart for the world.

A deep running river,
Its colour changing,
Its nuance flowing,
The flow of grief,
Shrinking, growing.
Sometimes lonely, icy and blue.
Like a vein from the brutal Alps.
Sometimes a deep red, dark and sticky
Like Egypt’s ancient curse.
And always, always,
We are scared
We are so scared
Of drowning.
So we keep far away from it
Stay away from the shore of it
Terrified that if we dip-slip into it
We might never come out of it
We might struggle, to no avail,
We might sink in grief, and drown.

But grief is not the greatest
Force that there is
Grief is not the longest road
To traverse
Grief is not the darkness
It is made out to be
It's just another body
Of water.

So I,
I am learning
To swim and to sing
And I find comfort
In the sacred, prayerful aspects, of grief's
River Song.
And we choose
To keep singing
Our tears.
And we choose
To keep swimming
Along.
For we do not swim alone,
As we choose
To keep sharing
God's song.

Miriam Dale
Expressing Grief and Seeking Strength in Arab Culture and Scripture
Sitting in a guest room with sweeping desert scape to the south and a scrappy dusty village to the north, we sipped on coffee and asked two young Bedouin women, Fatima and Maryam, about how they pass the time. To our delight, Fatima shared that she loves reciting poetry. The poem she chose to recite for us may be translated:

Conceal your wounds. Do not bring joy to your adversary.

Persevere. You see, an excess of complaints is humiliation.\(^5\)

We asked them their opinion of the wisdom in the poem. Both agreed wholeheartedly that if you express pain you risk losing your dignity and become vulnerable to your adversary, so it is wiser to be strong and silent.

In my second year of language learning in the Middle East, my language tutor Khadija shared with me over many hours her deep grief at the tragic death of her husband, without even getting close to tears. Another time, she described when she visited a friend, Basma (also known to me), whose father had died. In her grief, Basma had become withdrawn and non-communicative. Khadija walked across the room towards Basma, and slapped her across the face, telling her, “This is life. We will all die. You need to be strong.” She proudly reported to me, “She came to, stood up and started helping her family.” I expressed my surprise at these things to Sabreen, another Bedouin friend, and Sabreen told me, “You are surprised because you’re not a

\(^5\) اكم حروحك لا تفرح معاديك / واصبر ترى كثير الشكوى مثلاً
strong person.” Displaying strength and despising weakness and sad emotions is a core value in Arab Bedouin culture.

On top of this cultural value of strength, there is a religious layer. It is often said among Arab Muslims that you must not complain because it is your duty to accept whatever God’s will is. In fact, by persevering without complaint in hardship now, you can pay off some of your bad deeds and make your entry into paradise faster. This belief is rooted in a theology that God created the world with evil and death in it, fully intending that we would suffer in our lives, and that this is a test, designed to show whether we are among those who persevere in faith, submitting to God and praising him in everything, or are among those who do not. In asking Arab women about hard things in their lives, it can require considerable probing to get beyond the answer, “alhamdulillah (Praise God).”

And yet, that day sipping coffee with the poetry loving Fatima, we discovered that her sister Maryam loves to sing. She sang for us a traditional Bedouin song (anshouda), which to our (unattuned) ears sounded mournful. She told us that she loves to sing sad songs much more than happy songs because they express things in your heart you can’t express otherwise. Is this difference merely due to personality? Or does it perhaps hint at some complexity in Bedouin expressions of grief?

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6 Surat al-Baqara 2:155-157
7 When we reviewed our recordings afterwards, we discovered the song she sang was actually a love song about mothers, with lyrics that are adoring rather than sad. “Oh mother, spring of tenderness, the fragrance of a place’s soul. / You are the treasure of remaining days and more precious than eyes.” It was interesting that she described it as a sad song. But if sung in a mother’s absence, of course, could be an expression of sadness.
The Dilemma of Walking Alongside Suffering

In both my personal and professional counselling life in the Middle East I hear many stories of grief and trauma. Beliefs about what may be expressed, and in what way and context, are crucial to understanding how to walk alongside people. But many of the answers still perplex me. As westerners, expression of grief and trauma and its acknowledgement by others is usually viewed as healthy. Often a counselling response to trauma will be to elicit descriptions of the emotions or the pain, to name them and validate them. Helping someone with post-traumatic stress disorder describe their confusing anger outbursts, or exaggerated startle response, for example, and then helping them see the connection with the traumatic event they experienced, is an important first step to recovery. 8 I often advocate to people the benefits of tears. However, some Arabs would judge my attempts to draw out a friend’s description of their grief as not just undesirable but damaging. Should I be encouraging clients and friends to “talk it out” in a culture where there such aversion to the idea? Or is this aversion less all-encompassing than it first seems?

Furthermore, it raises the question as to how these cultural perspectives on grief and comfort impact the ability of people to hear the gospel. A core message of Scripture is one of human inability. The Scriptures are full of the prophets’ failures, unapologetic depictions of the failures of God’s people, full throated laments about evil in the world, and God’s own grief over evil and death (Genesis 6:6; John 11:35). Then God himself is humbled in human form, humiliated by the powerful, and killed, before

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we see his vindication and victory. It would seem that an acceptance of one’s own weakness is an essential pre-requisite to receiving the gospel.

This article will consider some of the ways Arab Muslim perspectives on suffering affect their expressions of grief and their expectations of offering comfort. Then we will consider how Scripture shapes our comforting practices, our sharing of the gospel, and our planting of fellowships of new believers who become comforters. In order to do this we will consider three contrasting experiences of suffering that are prevalent in the Middle East; that of the death of a family member, the multi-layered suffering of a refugee, and the silent suffering of women who have experienced shame-evoking abuse. Throughout, I will make observations of Arab Muslim culture, by definition limited, drawn largely from my fairly conservative part of the Middle East, and filtered through my Western eyes.

**The Death of a Family Member**

As I sat in the funeral of my first real friend in this country, the women poured into a tent erected in the nearby laneway, and all uttered the same words of comfort, “May God have mercy on her,” “May God make her place in Paradise,” “We are all on the same path,” and “We belong to God and to God we will return.”\(^9\) Most conformed to the advice I have often heard here, to resist crying and mostly avoid mentioning the deceased. The words spoken convey clearly the Islamic understanding that death is part of the testing that God intended for our lives and that merit is earned by avoiding complaint and by praising God.

\(^9\) This last encouragement is a direct quote from the Qur’an, Surat al-Baqara 2:156
On small tables around the tent are booklets, sections of the Qur'an, that guests can recite from, playing their part in recitation of the whole Qur'an over the three days of the funeral. Along with helping to provide food to guests, or to the poor, and offering prayers for the soul of the deceased, this is part of increasing the deceased's merit with God (hasanat) and easing their route into paradise.

One of the Arabic words for solidarity literally translates “standing shoulder to shoulder.” This shoulder-to-shoulder presence of the community at a funeral, and later in visits, is essential for supporting the family. However, playing one’s part in earning merit for the deceased is also a highly practical act of support directly impacting the eternity of the deceased. Encouraging the family to praise and not complain is a form of solidarity with concrete spiritual benefit—merit. A Syrian friend described to me how important the particularity of these traditions are in sensing solidarity. For example, in her part of Syria after the funeral everyone visits the bereaved family every Thursday afternoon for weeks afterwards, offering prayers and standing with them. Now outside Syria, the absence of this Thursday tradition adds to her grief.

Yet despite the encouragement against expressing sadness, at one point in the funeral an older aunt began wailing, and the deceased's sister wailed in response. They continued to pause and then set each other off again in a sirening escalation of wails. Others sat around looking uncomfortable until a more religious sister came and physically pulled them away from each other. In my time in this country I have seen more intense expressions of grief than in my home country, even if they are a minority. One friend scratched her chest until it bled. Another friend fainted and was taken to hospital. I've heard numerous accounts of aggressive outbursts in hospitals after doctors informed a family of a death. It is common here to fear that bad news will
cause damage to health, including heart attack, stroke, or death. For this reason one friend’s sister has, months later, not been informed that her uterus was removed during a dangerous caesarean section, despite the family knowing. The violence of grief is feared, which perhaps strengthens the warnings against expressing it.

Is this focus on a communal, action focused style of comforting something we should learn from, or is it something that blocks Arab Muslims from the gospel? We will return to this question later.

The Refugee Experience
While bereavement is considered normal and family focused, the grief and trauma of the refugee experience is complex and widespread. It is, at the same time, a grief shared by millions, and yet community and trust is fractured. It brings a humiliation and loss of identity that bereavement does not. Family roles are lost as men are not allowed to work and widows carry financial burdens. Poverty is chronically stressful and frightening. Yet, one friend has said that among all the traumas of the war, the most significant thing is that people are separated from their families. In addition, many regional traditions that draw community together in celebration and expression of their solidarity are lost. The very connections that could strengthen in times of suffering are no longer available.

As in bereavement, Syrian Muslims view their refugee experience as a test in which they must persevere without complaint. In a group of women, if one complains too much, the phrase “alhamdulillah” might encourage her to move on. Some in poverty will not seek assistance from charities to guard their dignity. Yet others, with encouragement, will almost pour out their grief, visibly relieved at being able to speak. Sometimes sitting with a group of women, after one admits that she is “emotionally
exhausted,” others will quickly follow expressing a need for help. Is it the depth of loss, or some characteristic of Syrian culture that opens up this expression of weakness? In contrast to bereavement, in which the complaint is against God, perhaps a greater sense of being wronged by humans justifies the refugee complaint.

In contrast with Syrians, conversations with Palestinian refugees feel different. Obviously, theirs is a much older grief. Since 1948, the communal lament, anger, and protest has been diversely expressed in art and music, in the political sphere, and in the stories that are passed from grandparents to grandchildren. Sadness is expressed, such as in this postcard in a Palestinian shop, “If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them, their oil would become tears.” Yet, in the words of Eman, a Palestinian friend, Palestinians should be proud because they are “strong, courageous people, warriors, who have done what they can, thrown rocks as weapons, and most importantly, after all this time they have never given up fighting.” Various factors probably contribute to this greater anger and commitment to the fight for Palestinians compared with Syrians, including a hated external enemy and the conviction that God is on their side in this battle for the holy city. These differences seem to legitimate their protest, which is a call for the solidarity of others in the fight, a call that Syrians here do not express.

And yet the Syrian response is far from defined by weakness. Courage can be seen in the perseverance of a mother to provide for her children in leaky housing, winter after winter. Its fruit is a new skillset of networking with other Syrians to share

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10 One language tutor described to me how foundational these grandparents’ stories are passing on this sense of Palestinian identity for those living outside the land, and yet also how powerful they are in fuelling a hatred towards Jews. She acknowledged that “Even if I meet a Jew in Europe who has never set foot on Israeli land I cannot escape my feelings of hatred for him. That is how we are raised.”
the latest news of vegetable vouchers from this church, or heaters and blankets from that charity. Pride is on view as Syrian food is cooked, shared with neighbours, and declared to be the most delicious of Arab foods. Doggedness is seen in a mother of eight children chasing down doctors to get surgery to help her toddler with cerebral palsy walk, despite a disinterested husband. Glimpses of hope are seen in the tenderness of older brothers walking their little brother to school to protect him from the neighbourhood bullies. These family relationships remain the defining community and source of strength for people.

Are refugees more in need of hearing words of lament or of courage? How can lament be offered in ways that do not diminish people’s sense of dignity? How can words of courage be offered without feeding the message of stoicism and self-reliance? We will return to this question below.

**The Silent Suffering of Abuse**

Many Syrian refugee women experience an increase in gender-based violence because the refugee experience heightens their vulnerability. One woman I worked with was gang raped by soldiers in Syria. Many Syrian women in poorer areas are afraid of racist sexual harassment on the streets. I have met numerous teenaged girls who were (illegally) married by their families at 13, 14 or 15 years old, partly because it is Syrian tradition and partly because poverty convinced their families that marriage would secure their future. It is not unusual for mothers-in-law to teach their sons to beat their wives. The stressors of unemployment and poverty for men often create an unbearable loss of identity and sense of failure, to which some men respond with more violence.
The cultural route for challenging domestic violence is for a woman’s own family to step in and support her divorce or hold her husband accountable. However, women are often told by their family that a dutiful wife tolerates beating and keeps her husband happy. The family of many refugee women are not in the same country, making any action near impossible. If a woman does leave her husband, she will carry a stigma, because it is her duty to stay. Custody laws often leave women feeling there is no option but to stay and endure violence.

In the past few months I have worked with six unrelated young women who sought medical help and were referred for counselling. Three have undiagnosed bowel problems, one has muscle weakness with no physical cause, two cut themselves with razor blades to escape their internal pain (not to suicide). Of these six, four were married between 14 and 18 years old, and are now divorced, and each experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or torture from their husbands. The two others experienced child sexual assault from a relative. Each one says, “I cannot tell my family about the abuse.” Of course, in the West it is also profoundly difficult to speak about sexual abuse. However, for many conservative Arab Muslims, to share this with even the most trusted family member seems to be viewed as not only profoundly difficult, but self-destructive. Yet, if these physical symptoms are expressions of psychological pain it is likely that they are exacerbated by being unable to speak.11 As both an outsider and a professional I have the privilege of being a less threatening option.

One friend, who is a believer, explained the choice of silence like this:

The only thing that will enable someone to recover from that kind of abuse is to see herself as strong. The greatest threat to recovery is feeling weak. But from the time she shares that information with her sister or mother, they will always view her as weakened. And every time she looks in their eyes, she will remember that. However, if she keeps silent, in time she will recover.

For a long time, I was perplexed by the paradox that confiding about sensitive matters is so hard in this communal culture, while in my individualist culture vulnerable information may be shared quite freely. As I watch women navigate control in their own lives, I’ve learned that it is precisely because of the interdependence of communal cultures that sensitive information is risky. In a communal culture your marriage, travel, housing, and finances are all family choices. Therefore, guarding your family’s perception of you from weakness or shame is of utmost importance. The husband of a sexually spoiled woman has the right to divorce her. A divorced mother who hints at any mental illness may lose her children. The brothers of a sexually harassed young woman are obliged to beat up or kill the offender and she is left with a brother in prison. Sensitive information in western culture is far less damaging because family members have less control over one another.

So, how are women expressing hidden shame or pain? We began this article hearing about a Bedouin woman’s love for sad songs because “they express things in your heart you can’t express in other ways.” Sad songs seem to be a common love here. One of the six women above drew me a grey-scale sketch of a large eye with a single tear drop falling from it. A believing friend who was being beaten by her brothers for about two months changed her WhatsApp profile picture to a cartoon girl with
dishevelled hair and screaming. These are all indirect forms of expression which allow for a level of disclosure not possible in direct speech. It is likely some of the physical symptoms described in the women above are another, less conscious, indirect expression of trauma.

On top of these individual expressions is the growing communal voice opposing violence against women. The so-called honour killing of a 40-year-old woman by her father last July was followed with protests. Signs were carried saying, “This is for the ladies killed by the men who should protect them,” “There is no honour in crime,” and “Men of quality don’t fear equality.” Many poorer women could never attend these rallies, but social media means these voices now filter through the closed doors of many homes.

What kind of expression of this silent shame is enabled by Scripture? What place in community does Scripture grant to battling this shame?

**Scriptural Comfort**

Scripture clearly gives us an imperative to comfort, and a unique privilege that we can do so “with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” (2 Cor 1:4). As believers in the God-man who entered into brokenness and defeated death we are enabled to walk alongside people who have experienced horrific suffering in ways that others are not. His patience with our brokenness enables us to offer patience to those for whom evil has left messy wounds. His utter control and goodness enable us to be a

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non-anxious presence. His grace enables us to offer a non-judgmental space for others to share vulnerable experiences. Langberg explains how our worship enables us to “face things as they actually are in this dark world without getting twisted” and our repentance enables us to walk with the traumatized in “humility, patience, compassion and comfort” rather than “pride and superiority, impatient that people are not better yet.”¹³ Let us consider how scriptural comfort interacts with the cultural value of community solidarity in grief, with choices about expression of lament or courage, and with the expression of the hidden shame of abuse.

**Community Solidarity in Action**

Are there things for us to learn from the communal solidarity and action-focused comfort of an Arab Islamic funeral? The willingness of people here to have a house full of people at their most vulnerable moments, and the commitment of the community to drop everything and be there for the bereaved, humbles me. I cannot but feel the challenge for my individualist instincts. While I may prefer a more verbally expressive style, I am challenged to acknowledge the non-verbal acknowledgement of pain in the presence and activity of the community. For those new to faith, the need for a spiritual family to stand with them in bereavement will be crucial.

The loss of this community solidarity for Syrians, while we would not choose it for them, has been used by God to open door for faith. Family and community are powerful maintainers of religion. Syrians who have lost this are freer than before to

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explore alternatives, and seeing these alternatives enacted in communities is crucial. Among those who have come to faith through my church’s outreach a common story is being first impacted by Christians welcoming them as family and treating them dignity. While decisions about material aid in this ministry are complex, it is a practical outworking of the powerful experience of being family for each other.

Yet as we seek to offer comfort to unbelievers through action focused presence with them, we cannot offer solidarity in their merit earning or in their normalising the tragedy of death and suffering. Death and painful trials were not God’s intent for his creation, rather, they are horrific consequences of our sin and represent his judgment over us. Our theology compels us to invite people to lament suffering and death however uncomfortable it leaves them. When I tell the creation story, people do not notice that death was not present, until I draw attention to it. I love to then share the quote before the Noah account, “When God saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth... it grieved him to his heart.” (Genesis 6:5-6), and to share how when Jesus stood at Lazarus’ tomb, although he knew he would rise from the dead, he wept over the wrongness and pain of death (John 11:33-35). Until our friends can lament their helplessness in the face of death, our words of courage, based in the confidence of the resurrection will be meaningless to them.

**Words of Lament and Courage**

So, what will culturally appropriate and biblical expressions of lament and urging of courage look like?

My experience here is that for those who already feel broken by deep pain the indignity of lament is overshadowed by the sense of relief in expressing the pain, “How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?” (Psalm 13:1). Offering ancient biblical
voices validates their own lament and offers a new community to join, such as Hannah’s voice “I was pouring out my soul to the LORD,” (1 Samuel 1:15). I more recently noticed what follows, “Then she ate something, and her face was no longer downcast” (v18). Psalm 31 has many apt descriptions for the Syrian experience, “My eyes grow weak with sorrow... I am the contempt of my neighbours... terror on every side... I was in a city under siege.” (vv 9-13, 21), along with beautiful expressions of trust “My times are in your hands, let your face shine on your servant, save me in your unfailing love.” (vv15-16) Merely participating in lament is an act of trust in the God who did not intend this evil in the world.

Some refugees who have come to faith have testified that they needed an alternative way of understanding the evil that is done, rather than an angry God who is testing us. A crucial defining point for many is hearing of God as a loving father, whose testing of his children is always out of love, for our growth, with the promise of his presence and power and grace. In early stages of faith as a new believer it can be challenging to apply this practically, as they ask, “But if he loves me, why is life still such a battle?” A robust theology of suffering, and lament alongside confidence, is something that is grown into.

The constant urgings to be strong in a stoic culture tend to increase my leaning towards speaking of weakness. Yet, a biblical perspective values strength, and calls me both to honour the strength shown by those suffering and offer a way into courage for those feeling weak. Outside visitors to my church’s refugee outreach sometimes get stuck in expressing their sadness to refugees they meet. A significant moment of growth for our team was when we discussed how to honour refugees’ strength and dignity in our speech, such as asking them about their pre-war lives and their
successes in making life work here, not only their grief stories. This dignity is so important to give balance to lament.

As we offer a way into courage for those feeling weak, we cannot ignore how the biblical accounts of courage are so firmly rooted in the grace of God, not driven by the need to prove our faith. God’s promise to be with Joshua was behind the command to “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged.” (Joshua 1:9). God’s promise of blessing enabled Abraham and Sarah to be heroes of faith as they waited (Hebrews 11:8-12). God’s covenant promises for Israel emboldened Esther to put her life on the line for her community (Esther 4:12-16). Ultimately Jesus’ completed victory over death is what allows us to tread fearlessly into whatever is ahead. This stark contrast to the self-reliant stoicism that silences weakness is a truer, more glorious strength.

We cannot make the gospel appealing to people who seek strength through aggression, avoid all sense of weakness and who despise any suggestion that Jesus was humiliated. The humbling of a heart is the work only of the Spirit. But we can speak unashamedly of the courage of our Saviour, who did not hide his face from mocking and spitting and yet set his face like flint in full confidence that he would be vindicated from shame (Isaiah 50:6-7). He did not avoid being shamed, but despised shame itself (Hebrews 12:2) and now is able to remove our impurities and shame (Colossians 1:22) and given us the solidarity of being raised with him and hidden us in him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

**Expressions of Abuse**

How does the gospel enable expression of the silent shame of abuse? Being shamed is perhaps the ultimate threat to the solidarity so deeply prized in this culture. Dignity is
attacked at its core. How do we offer comfort without exposing people to greater hurt? Dale observes that it seems shocking to us how Jesus calls shamed women into the public eye, yet “rather than colluding with shame’s hiddenness, he exposes the situation for public vindication” and that this “allows the communal restoration of relationship and status.”

This is a profoundly beautiful description of the restoration Jesus offers, and yet, it is shocking. We cannot choose on a woman's behalf to expose her shame. We can introduce her to this Jesus who stripped shame of its power and offers us a place of honour. Yet how does this help us think about a shamed woman’s relationship with her community?

As we seek church fellowships to grow in a redeemed response to the shame of abuse, we take small steps with what is in front of us. For the many women stuck in ongoing abuse, rather than small steps it may be waiting on God. Sometimes I have wondered whether taking on the vague terminology women use, such as “that thing that happened” rather than “when he raped me,” is colluding with the shame. However, indirect communication is not silence and a black and white sketch of a crying eye may be a more profound expression of pain than what she can say in words. She may not feel able to tell anyone else in her family yet, but she might be able to listen to the testimony of a sexual abuse survivor on an Arab Christian women’s Facebook page. We can, and must, speak unequivocally of the evil and shame of the abuse and the abuser, which is not her own shame, and honour her ability to survive. We can offer a community of one safe person to speak with.

At the same time, we seek to grow gospel fellowships: communities with a renewed vision of what is shameful. We must not be naïve about the level of trust needed for women to share their stories. How do we disciple women to offer that kind of safety to each other? I quoted my believing friend above observing that the impossibility of sharing shameful stories comes from being seen as weakened (spoiled perhaps?). This ‘seeing’ of one another as disciples must be transformed according to how God sees us, restored and without shame. Those with a story to share will choose whether they trust their sisters’ changed perspective. In the meantime, communal practices offer opportunities for indirect expression. The Lord’s Supper may have a particular role in communally moving through sorrow, shame, cleansing and honour, and acting out the unity of Christ, even while some details cannot be shared.

One new believer has often told me of abuse by her husband. Recently he beat her severely when she was asking to go and visit her father. She was shaken by it but told me a week later, “I felt different than before, because I know that God is with me and loves me. For the first time, I told my husband’s family that it was not okay for him to beat me and that it is my decision whether I stay or leave.” This is her testimony of the Spirit at work in her, strengthening her in her new identity and rejecting the shame others placed on her.

**Conclusion**

We can learn from the role that community solidarity in Arab Muslim culture plays for strengthening in times of suffering. And yet the loss of this solidarity among refugees has opened doors for a new experience of community with believers. In place of self-reliant stoicism Scripture invites those who have experienced brokenness into a
community of lamenters; and offers the way into a courage founded on grace. For those silenced by the shame of abuse Jesus removed the power of shame over them and boldly restores women in community status. He gives us our own communities to learn together, one step at a time, offering each other the comfort that is without shame.
Waiting
When asked if I could paint a picture to accompany writing about ‘suffering’ I struggled. You see my journey with paints is a very recent one, and normally my hope is to bring life and joy with my dabbling. However, as I pondered and prayed about this given subject, the picture of specific dear women kept coming to mind. Yes, whilst I was working in Central Asia we were involved in a village quilt project. We distributed quilts to 200 of the poorest people; the process all carefully monitored by the local imam. There was one lady, around 100 years old, who didn’t have the required card—
she was so poor, but we made sure she did receive a quilt, blanket, and some coins. Goodness, to see the poverty and difficulties there was heart wrenching. It was freezing cold too, for everyone queuing, waiting their turn.

So, as I set about my painting, I added the dark grey cloud above the women sitting amongst the fallen leaves on the ground, indicating some of the suffering and oppression of life there. Remembering the precious ladies I encountered, their strength and determination was such an asset to behold. I painted rays of light, in the corner, as a heartfelt prayer for each of the ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Ps. 139:14) females I met—may they come to know, by some miracle, better times and true hope.

Yours, Setara
When you've lived through a war, why be scared of a virus?
Emerging tentatively from months of COVID-19 prompted lockdowns and restrictions, I sit with a small group of mainly Syrian and Iraqi ladies, who live as refugees in this city. We are masked and sanitised, gathered at a table around a pile of pictures, printed words, glue, and scissors. I myself am reeling somewhat, from the disappointments and uncertainties of the past confined months, where we traded in our ‘normal’ for this new online, home bound, health obsessed version of life in the large Turkish city where we live. The challenge in our woman’s group today is to represent some of the emotions—the challenges and joys of the past months— in collage form, then to share with each other. Some women represent and tell of financial worries, medical concerns, feelings of frustration, or impatience with situations beyond their control. There are veiled references to violence and fractured relationships in the home, longing and anxiety for family left far away in even worse conditions, and heavy, sighing silences which say almost as much. One woman speaks up, ‘Corona? When you’ve lived through a war like we have, a virus is nothing. Why would we be scared of that?’ Her statement holds the weight of undeniable truth—these women have experienced such trauma and suffering that even a global pandemic pales in significance.

Engaging with and listening to these women and others in similar situations for the past few years, I have had my eyes opened to some of the unique ways in which they have, and still do, experience suffering. While many of these have been exacerbated by the pandemic, they existed before, and will continue to exist once the world’s diagnosis has been downgraded.
For many of the younger women, war or civil unrest is all they can remember. Death has been a daily reality for many, and almost everyone we meet has lost a significant person, often multiple people, to bombings, violent attacks, or situations related to political unrest. The weight of their grief is immense and compounded in each subsequent loss. The trauma of witnessing violence and death up close from a young age has huge effects on neural development and has significant flow on effects into relationships, parenting, coping methods, and mental health. A six-year-old boy who comes along with his mother to our art club witnessed his own father’s murder. Another woman told us that her uncle was killed in the street near their home, but no one was able to leave the building to retrieve his body, for fear of their own safety. A bomb killed my friend’s father and brother in a single moment, when it landed on their family home. This is suffering on a level I struggle even to conceptualise, having never lived in a war zone.

Suffering that results from forced displacement is ongoing and does not end when the individual or family reaches the ‘safe country.’ One woman shared the story of how bombing in her town prompted her to go into premature labour with her third child. Three days postpartum, the family could no longer stay in that place, so carrying their children and what essential belongings they could (including a USB stick containing important documents and photos), they fled, paying a people smuggler to guide them and hundreds of others over the dangerous mountain ranges that separate their country from ours. This is a treacherously risky journey, especially in winter, with natural dangers, exposure, hunger, and military snipers all very real threats. When they reached the ‘safety’ of our country, border guards found their precious USB stick in a search and deliberately destroyed it. This kind of story is echoed again and again as we talk with refugee women. Even though this woman is now no longer in immediate
danger as she had been, she says she experiences headaches every day, as a result of her body’s remembrance and holding onto the stress and trauma she had experienced. We notice often as we talk to our refugee friends how the body’s ongoing response to trauma manifests in insomnia, headaches, other health problems, and PTSD symptoms.

Displacement also comes with the weight of guilt and anxiety that women feel for those left behind, or even the guilt of surviving crisis events when others did not. Often the elderly or those with pre-existing health problems are not physically able to make the journey over the mountains, for example, so the decision has to be made to escape for the sake of the younger family members, leaving the others in the dangerous situation. At a group picnic, sitting around with women on a clear autumn morning, one lady began to sing a beautiful song, and the women I was sharing a rug with began to cry. I asked her what the words meant, and she told me the song was about mothers. I know it has been seven years since the singer has seen her mum, likewise many of the other women have also been separated from or have lost their mothers. The emotional toll of this sits very close to the surface for many of the women we meet. In the moment-by-moment urgent pressing need to survive that these friends have come to experience as normal, I am sure that many have also, by choice or sheer necessity, done things which they would not otherwise have done and made moral or ethical compromises they wished they hadn’t needed to make. It is my guess that this adds additional layers to feelings of guilt, and further weighs down their hearts.

The refugee experience brings with it suffering as a result from loss at many levels. Not only have displaced women lost homeland, loved ones and community, but also many of the things which previously helped define their identity, such as language, being able to engage in specific cultural traditions, and employment. Coming into a
country with a different culture and language, they can feel overwhelmed by the challenge of so much new learning, and often cannot access classes or resources, because of financial limitations, family responsibilities or restrictions placed on them by their husbands. Many have neighbours who will not even talk to them. Some come with low literacy levels which makes this process even harder, but others face the challenge of being highly educated and qualified yet unable to find employment because of the language barrier, employment laws, non-compatibility of university qualifications, or a reluctance of the part of local employers to hire someone who is a refugee.

Loss of agency and sense of purpose also take a deep emotional toll. For women who are refugees in this country, many of their choices have been taken away, such as where they can live, how they can travel, how they can be employed, what kind of schooling their children can receive, if, when and to whom they marry, and many other choices that those of us not in their situation take for granted. This, combined with religious and cultural views about the nature of ‘fate’ or ‘the will of Allah’ in determining the events of their lives, often leads to a sense of resigned fatalism and helplessness. The women desire a better future but struggle to see a way that this could become reality, and sometimes seem to give up on being able to effect change in their own lives. The uncertainties and changes that COVID-19 has brought serve to add to the sense of life being beyond their control, and exacerbate the economic hardship, scarcity, and unemployment challenges that they and their families face.

According to the UNHCR, Turkey currently hosts the highest number of refugees of any single country (estimated to be around four million). However, this does not imply that they are welcomed here—quite the opposite is the case. The majority of Turks believe their Arab ‘guests’ bring with them crime, poor morality,
disease, backward and fundamental religious thinking, and are taking employment opportunities that should go to Turkish citizens. Arab refugees, therefore, are often excluded and ostracised by their Turkish neighbours, spoken to rudely, and treated as scapegoats for the problems of the moment. They desperately need and desire community and connection. Some women who are living here alone with their children without husbands or older male family members report that they regularly have local men come to their door, propositioning them, offering food or financial assistance in exchange for sex, or even approaching them on the street. They are fearful to go out, and fearful to be home. This is an incredibly traumatising state in which to live. Many women find themselves similarly fearful of the dangers that exist within their homes from violent male family members. It seems that when war-traumatised adults and children live in crowded situations with other similarly traumatised people, each acting, parenting, and relating out of their own trauma, the potential for volatile and harmful relational patterns is very high. Sadly, this is a huge factor in the suffering that refugee women here and around the world continue to face, even once they have left their ‘dangerous’ places.

In the light of this massive weight of suffering then, our team constantly finds ourselves asking the question—as followers of Jesus, how can we lovingly help people living as refugees move towards healing, connectedness, and integration? How can we be the eyes, hands, and mouth of the healer who sees and cares? When the needs, both physical and emotional are overwhelming, ‘what will actually help?’ is a question our team has been working through over the past few years, as we’ve listened to our refugee friends, read research, observed our context, and considered our position within it. Bruce Perry, a psychiatrist specialising in child trauma, asserts that at the
heart of effective intervention for trauma is safe relationship. While we have neither the physical or personnel resources to effectively meet every need of every person we meet, as the church we do have a powerful and effective gift— Jesus-shaped, loving community to offer our weary friends. This was the starting point we chose.

We established a community centre in an accessible location, renovated it to be a warm, beautiful, and welcoming place, as unlike a government office as we could manage, and opened the doors of our shared ‘home’ to refugees no matter where they came from. Our goal is ‘safety and life-giving welcome’—that those who experience the love and acceptance of safe community and relationships through the centre and team will begin to experience the kind of healing and a renewal of life, that can only be fully realised by encountering Jesus. We take a holistic approach, looking for how we can speak into the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual needs of refugee friends. We try to give people authentic and meaningful reasons to gather together, such as language practice groups, group counselling-style sessions, weekly therapeutic-focussed art making groups for women, table tennis, a small library, and on-tap tea. And we show up. The principles of consistency, predictability, and reliability—foundational elements of trauma informed practice—form a foundation for what and how we do things at the centre and helps to create a framework for safe relationship and community. Those who are genuinely seeking truth have the opportunity to engage in small group study of the Bible in Arabic. We visit with people in their homes, listen, cry, drink tea, hold their babies, and translate doctor's prescriptions. Tiny acts of love,

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which seem almost inconsequential, can have surprisingly deep relational and emotional impacts.

As these things happen we notice again and again that Jesus in community speaks to the suffering of the women we meet. Through shared prayers and seeing their answers, offering practical care and support when possible, and being available to listen, we notice as Robert Stolorow did that safe community means that suffering has a “relational home.” These women begin to feel not as alone, they can open up to tell their painful stories, and be heard kindly. Just as hurt and trauma have happened in relationship and community, healing can too. Indeed, Jesus himself experienced suffering in many of the ways refugee women do. He knew firsthand what it was to be displaced from his home, to be a refugee even. He suffered rejection, being unwanted in a place, separation, physical and verbal abuse, exhaustion, grief, loss of loved ones, and the weighty burden of carrying the consequences of the guilt and sin of others. At the same time, the gospel accounts of how Jesus cared so tenderly for suffering and marginalised women, speak powerfully into the situations where our friends find themselves. Sometimes we have opportunity to share stories of how, in gentleness, Jesus gave time and healing to women who were looked upon as second class citizens, who were sick, culturally unclean from bleeding, outcast, judged for adultery, and known prostitutes, and how he acknowledged the value of the lives of young girls. In the villages and Arab cultures where most of our friends from the centre come from,

17 Matthew 2:13-15
we are told that this kind of treatment is rare. Jesus’ compassion for women did not stop in the gospel accounts though, and we can see his work and hand in the lives of some of our refugee sisters.

For those similarly looking for opportunities to establish relationships and build community with refugees, no matter where they are located, the following observations, practical considerations, and implications for practice, may be helpful to consider as we have done over the past years.

Firstly, an effort must be made to avoid totalising refugee women as suffering victims, in the way we think or speak about them, or in the way we seek to help them. Among the women I have met, I have seen great strength, amazing determination, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, and even joy, all co-existing with their very real and present experience of suffering. We should be mindful of not feeding a potential cycle of learned helplessness by stepping in with ‘aid’ without considering ways which we can also help build and strengthen their own resilience and capacity to solve problems, and enable a sense of agency.

Secondly, while it may be widely agreed upon that our Christian response to people in situations of suffering must extend beyond ‘Go in peace. Keep warm and well fed’ (James 2:16), the way we go about helping alleviate suffering in the name of Jesus can be a source of debate, and it is a question we hold in tension daily as we run the community centre. For our gospel-centred philosophy to be authentic, we must consider the physical needs of the people we minister to, as Jesus did when he took time to heal the sick, give sight to the blind, mobility to the paralysed, and food to the hungry crowd. While miracles of healing may not be our calling, attending to the physical suffering of those around us still provides, as it did to Jesus, a powerful
context in which God can do his transformational work. It also serves to set us as Christians apart from a majority who would often prefer to look away and ignore, rather than touch and take time for those who reach out for help. We have found that this in itself is a powerful challenge to the preconceptions of our Muslim friends about what Christians are like, and leads the way to deeper conversations. Even though at our community centre the primary aim is not to distribute physical aid but rather to address emotional needs, the need for community, and spiritual questions people may have, all these facets are bound together. This is the root of holistic ministry—considering physical, emotional, and spiritual needs as we work with the refugees God brings across our path.

Part of how we do this is by checking in regularly and intentionally to gauge what people in the refugee community themselves say they need, and not just assuming we already know. This takes humility, but also discernment, especially when their stated needs are either beyond our capacity to help, or it may be actually unhelpful or unwise to give them what they say they need. For example, handing out large amounts of financial assistance, or promises of help to obtain visas would be detrimental to our community building efforts as equity is impossible, our resources are limited, and it does not empower long-term change. Instead we respond to stated needs, and these needs often come from conversations about the reasons why they are seeking refuge.

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20 For example, people we have spoken to have said that previously they thought Christians were hateful and immoral people because of narratives they had been told by religious leaders, and their observations of the ‘Christian West’ in media and military presence in their country. When they learn that we are Christian people, some have said they are surprised to see that instead of hatred we work hard to show love and welcome them, and that the women on our team dress and behave in a modest and culturally sensitive fashion. One woman said “I really love how you treat the people. As a Syrian, this is the first time I have seen Syrians treated like this.” Another said to my colleague from the US “Your country bombed and destroyed my home, but you are different. We like you.” Another person said “Here there is love. Our (religious) leaders never treat us like you do.” We have found that acting with genuine love and wholehearted concern for people opens up opportunities to answer questions about our motivation, values, and faith.
physical needs in other ways such as running conversation clubs to help people improve their English and Turkish, providing access to second-hand clothing and blankets in the winter, and helping people out with a bag of groceries or a supermarket voucher when we visit them in their homes. We aim to seat physical assistance firmly in the context of relationship, when we can more accurately know what would help the families we meet.

Also, it is worth considering that if suffering related to displacement is not static but dynamic—i.e. people’s vulnerabilities will change depending on their situation and what is happening around them—then an agile response does not refuse to provide material aid simply because it could breed dependence, but also takes the other factors at play into consideration. For example, at a time like the COVID-19 pandemic which has compromised a lot of people’s financial margins and income security, it does make sense to adjust the way we respond to people’s needs in this season in order to help alleviate suffering and demonstrate loving care.

In seeking to address the social, emotional, and spiritual needs of people living with the long-term effects of trauma, it is my belief that creative practice in the context of community is one of the most accessible and effective tools that we have. I run a weekly therapeutic-focused art club for women at our centre and have observed that when women sit in a group with their hands and minds creatively engaged, their mouths and hearts also seem to open more willingly. They can tell their stories with words and images; sometimes the pictures say what they struggle to articulate and give a visual voice to their painful unspoken suffering. Art making in community requires accepting a level of emotional vulnerability, but when their efforts and expression are met with kindness, listening, and encouragement, the healing effect can be powerful. We often see tears and laughter, grief, and gratitude intermingling at our
I remember the woman that I mentioned earlier who suffers from constant headaches telling my friend with enthusiastic amazement that the first time she came to art club was the first day in as long as she could remember when she felt relief from her headaches. Art making is also a conduit for play in its broad sense—something that was stolen from many of their war-affected childhoods. It is a luxury many don’t have time for amidst the demands of caring for others, but a practice that can be restorative and relaxing. Safe, accepting community and the openness that creative practice promotes is truly a gift from our Creator to the hurting hearts of our traumatised friends.

Developing an understanding of suffering from an Islamic theological and cultural perspective, while having a solid Christian theology of suffering, helps us who work with refugees wrestle with the big needs and big questions that arise from what we see, hear and experience. It provides a framework that guides our own decision making and helps us understand the areas of difference and similarity in how suffering is perceived by the refugees we work with, so that we can engage sensitively with them. For example, in a recent art session with a group of women, we were identifying particular emotions which may be experienced within the broader scope of ‘grief.’ The list included ‘hopelessness,’ but several of the women reacted strongly against the suggestion that they may feel this way, asserting that as long as there is Allah there must be hope, and to feel hopeless was tantamount to rejecting faith. There is also the constant overtone of ‘alhamdulillah’ which runs through our conversations like a kind of catch-all to the joys and sufferings of the women’s lives, verbally embalming their feelings with a fatalistic acknowledgement that all things are ordained by Allah and praise belongs to him. As we also share our own hard stories, griefs and vulnerabilities with our friends, and the ways in which God has led us through dark times, we can help
give language and permission to the expression of difficult emotions. Sometimes we can tell stories from the Bible about women and men of faith who cried out in lament to God and continued to trust him, despite feelings of hopelessness and desolation. Several Arab friends have told me that in their cultures an emotional vocabulary and how to talk about feelings is not something that is taught to children. It is understandable, therefore, that in adulthood exploring and verbally processing complex feelings can sometimes be challenging. Visual art, as mentioned before, can be helpful in this situation, as a non-verbal means of working through emotions that may not have an easy name.

Finally, I have noticed that the benefits and value of sharing our own personal stories of suffering and grief with our friends as we sit with them in homes, or at the centre, go far beyond linking vocabulary to emotion. It allows genuine relationship to form, builds mutual trust, and allows our refugee friends to minister in their own way to us in our moments of vulnerability. This gives opportunity for the ministry of safe relationship, presence and listening to flow both ways and values the women’s capacity to speak out of their wisdom and experience to our situations. For example, when I lost my grandmother last year and was not able to physically be with her to say goodbye or attend her funeral, I shared my feelings of sadness with the women at art club and received their genuine caring, comforting words. They know what it feels like to lose loved ones and to be far from home, and as such were able to respond with true compassion. Indeed, there is much I find we can be learning from the friends we sit with—valuing family, perseverance through great difficulties, the ability to be content with very little, and a commitment to hospitality, among many other things. Being openly honest about our own pain and vulnerabilities guards us too against falling into the trap of thinking of ourselves as the ‘saviours’ who have it all together and are
bound to assist the ‘helpless,’ and helps us see ourselves and our refugee friends in a more accurate light. However, when these friends can see that the words we speak of comfort and faith in the goodness of God even in suffering have been tested on real, difficult paths, it lends authenticity to our words and opens channels to further discussion, honest questions, and deeper relationships.

It has been said that sorrow carves into our hearts a path that joy will one day fill. As I grow to know and love some of the women of the refugee community in this city, it is my prayer that the deep grooves of sorrow that suffering has carved into their hearts will one day be filled with the healing joy that comes from knowing Jesus and his love for them. I hope that through their involvement in Jesus-shaped community and the safe relationships they encounter at our centre, that trickle of his joy will begin and bring with it transformation, enduring peace, and new life.
When the Church Exacerbates the Suffering of Persecution
In religious persecution, women suffer differently from men. The pressures that a woman faces because of her faith in Christ are directly tied to her worth or importance as a female in her culture. In most contexts where I work, the societal roles of men and women vary widely between genders. Whether she is a Believer from Muslim Background (BMB) or from a Christian background, her culture’s way of defining her worth as a female becomes her vulnerability in persecution. But what if, on top of the suffering she faces in persecution, her Christian faith-community reinforces those same patterns of behaviour and beliefs as the surrounding culture? What if identity and relational beliefs that are not based on biblical, godly principles shape our identity and relationships in church? When patterns of distorted beliefs about and behaviours towards men and women shape our relationships inside the church, gender-specific dynamics of persecution are enabled to continued inside the church. I invite you to reflect with me on the gender-specific nature of persecution and the complicity of the body of Christ in finishing the work of the persecutor\textsuperscript{21} as I have seen it in ministry work in the Middle East. Furthermore, how we can begin to address distorted beliefs regarding men and women’s identities in order to strengthen persecuted believers.

In 2018, I was co-leading a training for a group of women ministry leaders in a Middle Eastern country. The women were mapping out all the different types of persecution they face in various spheres of life, domestic, extended family, community

when they were systematically discussing and listing the pressures they face, often on a daily basis. When we started to analyse what they had written on large wall-sized posters I asked the lady why it was important for her to have added the category ‘church.’ It was as if a storm had blown into the room and a number of women literally stood up and started waving their arms about. They pointed around the room at all the posters they had filled with the types of abuse, manipulation, silencing, threats, physical violence that women experience. Then they explained: “Everything we’ve written about what happens outside of church also happens in church, except that on top of enduring it in the place where we shouldn’t have to endure any of this... on top of that we’re supposed to be perfect as well...!”

This experience brought home to me how complex religious persecution is—it’s not a linear narrative of an individual suffering at the hands of persecutors for Christ’s sake. We’ve been exploring this as a collection of practitioners, academics and advocates since 2016, when we drafted the first Call to the Church on the topic. Three elements of suffering in the gender-specific experience of religious persecution become apparent, as I have seen them in the Middle East over the past 25 years and as we are addressing them in our ministry today: firstly, that the experience of

persecution is very different for men and women; secondly, that false identity beliefs function as conduits of persecution; and lastly, how the effects of persecution are crushed in gender resilience.

**Persecution affects women and men differently**

Since 2018, annual research demonstrates and describes how men and women suffer differently in religious persecution. The 2020 Gender-Specific Religious Persecution (GSRP) Analysis catalogues the different forms of persecution and discrimination by gender; the top Pressure Points for men across 50 countries are physical violence, economic harassment, and incarceration by government, while for women top Pressure Points are sexual violence, forced marriage, and physical violence. The GSRP Analysis reports that when studying the recorded lists of pressures and violations believers suffer in persecution, a pattern emerges: persecution often blends in with structural or systemic levels of control or violence for a given context. This seems to be the case more strongly for women where most of the pressures are suffered in private, family, and domestic spheres of life, and therefore by nature invisible to an observer. The 2020 report underlines this as follows:

(...) *women and girls experience persecution – at its peak – as a kind of invisible “living death” (rape, forced marriage, house arrest). In these instances, sexual violence is used both as a form of control and punishment.*

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The goal is not to prove that women suffer more than men (how can we adequately measure the cost of suffering of an individual man or woman?), but to create awareness that the nature of suffering in persecution between men and women is often completely different, and, therefore, has implications for how we serve them. Where an unmarried male convert might get sent off by his family to another city to give him time to ‘come to his senses,’ a single female convert may get locked up by her family and treated like an animal, or married off quickly to make sure her bad, shameful decision is quickly forgotten in a forged family celebration.

Possibly the biggest strategic finding from uncovering the gender-specific nature of persecution is the fact that persecution plays into the definition of what it means to be a good, strong, or successful woman or man in any given cultural context. For a woman in a general Middle Eastern context, though there are regional differences, obvious indicators are: submissiveness; obedience; virgin at marriage; (reputation of) whom she marries; bearing many children, especially boys, and preferably the first one to be a son; raising her children in a way that brings honour to the family; speaks with a soft voice, etc. When I lived in the Middle East, I frequently encountered and experienced societal gender definitions. We had two small daughters, but I was asked nearly daily when I would ‘bring a son.’ And when our son was born, the first thing my neighbour said to me peering into the car seat as I came home from the hospital “now you need to bring him a brother.” In this context my duties were clear: a good wife and mother brings her husband sons, and her son a brother. After our son was born, simple daily routines like getting groceries changed completely. Our fun little outings to the local shops with the girls skipping ahead picking their way through the small, fully crammed stores became something of a nightmare. Where previously our daughters were met with smiles, kind words, a sweet or a piece of fruit, that all
stopped and the still nursing baby boy would be laden with lollipops, chewing gum, ice-cream, and whatever else could be laid upon the sleeping infant, much to the disgust of his sisters who were left bewildered at what was going on. The message to our young daughters was clear: boys count, you don’t!

Within the wide variety of regional and national Middle East and North Africa (MENA) cultures, I often don’t see much difference between women from Muslim or Christian background, so I’ve concluded that general culture is often stronger than religious denomination. As the top Pressure Point for women in persecution is sexual violence, it’s easy to see how targeting this prized possession of sexual purity, on which not only her honour, but more often the whole family’s honour depends, not only strips the targeted woman of her dignity, socio-cultural value and future prospects, but can also move a whole (family) community into action to hide the shame of her lost purity by locking her away, marrying her off, divorcing her, taking her children away, leaving her on the streets, or having license to abuse her even more now that she is considered damaged goods.

**The identity lies we believe in are conduits of persecution**

As we sit with groups of women around the MENA region analysing gender-specific religious persecution, they come to the realisation that the success of persecution lies in their belief in given identity norms and values. When a Christ-follower believes that her sexual purity is a defining factor of her God-given value, it becomes the focal point of her and her family’s protection. Many women tell me that when something bad happens, whatever or wherever, they are often blamed for that bad fortune; how easily will a woman accept the blame for persecution that happens to her and accept it’s her own fault! I first heard an explicit framework for how this was part of
persecutor’s strategy to destroy the church in 2017\textsuperscript{24} and this was the beginning of a close and vital partnership with the authors. Their work and journey had begun in 2015 in the Central African Republic\textsuperscript{25} and grew closely out of what they had observed there.\textsuperscript{26} I could see how closely it mirrored the gender dynamic I had lived with in the Middle East and decided that, together, we might just be able to untangle what seemed to be a hopeless, hurtful mess. The rest of this reflection shares insights from this work by Miller and Fisher, now called \textit{Restorations}\textsuperscript{27} (all italics below directly borrowed with permission), and how it is currently re-shaping our understanding of true and false identity beliefs, and redefining persecution resilience with our sisters and brothers around the region. This is the material we were piloting in the 2018 training which got the women so excited.

\textbf{The good…}

The God who created the heavens and earth and everything held between, created man and woman with specific identity truths: \textit{our value derives directly from us being God’s image-bearers; our purpose comes from our commissioning as allies – man and woman – to be fruitful, have dominion and not be alone; our limits are found in God’s good limits; we are given authority by God, in submission to him, to rule over the earth; our innocence comes from God who made us pure, naked without shame!} Just read Genesis 1 and 2. It’s

\begin{flushleft}
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all there laid out plainly, but over-and-over as I read it with women, it’s as if they hear
the God-given truths for the first time in their life, as if they’ve always been blinded to
these plain truths.

The bad...

When these God-given identity truths degenerate through the cunning tactics of the
father of all lies, death and darkness are at hand: by twisting the true words of God
and using blatant lies, the devil creates distrust and suspicion in Eve and Adam of God
and of each other, leading to utter destruction of beautifully crafted relationships.
Rejecting our creator has not only brought us broken identity areas, but it has left us
with broken patterns of relationship. Broken ways that we relate to one another in
everyday life.
Genesis 3 shows the result:

Our Value and Status distort from something that we are, to something that we
strive for. This results in some people achieving better status than others. Our
relationships become characterized by inequality.

Our Purpose and Unity distort from being allies with joint purpose to enmity. Our
individual roles become our purpose in life; it seems safer to be alone. Our
relationships become characterized by distrust.

Our Freedom and Limits distort from freedom with limits to freedom from limits.
We become judge of the good limits: adding new limits or rejecting all limits. Our
relationships become characterized by blame.
Our Authority and Submission distort from shared authority given by God to competition for authority. We compete for authority and try to force the submission of others. Our relationships become characterized by control.

Our Innocence and Acceptance distort from living without shame to rejection. We try to do anything to hide our shame and reject those who expose us to shame. Our relationships become characterized by shame.

The ugly...
One of the devastating discoveries fellow believers, men and women, make about themselves is realising that gender identity beliefs, and thereby relationships within the body of Christ, are often founded upon the identity lies that stem from Genesis 3. Consequently, one reads Genesis 3:16-19 as if God changed his mind about what he called ‘very good.’ We then end up with a ‘new normal’ for men and women in the five identity areas above:

**Inequality:** Women are a lesser, men a fuller, reflection of God’s image.

**Distrust:** Women cannot be trusted. Men are more trustworthy.

**Blame:** Women need additional limits to allow men to live in freedom.

**Control:** Authority is masculine. Submission is feminine.
Shame: His honour and acceptance is based on her sexual purity (sexual innocence).

When we believe these to be our identity truths within the body of Christ, the dynamics of persecution continue inside the church. In certain circumstances, the rejection a Christian woman might come to expect from the surrounding non-Christian community looks similar to the rejection from the Christian community. For example, an unmarried BMB who has been thrown out of her father’s house because of her conversion might be understood to be similar to a prostitute, and therefore up for grabs, by fellow Christians because she’s not residing under the roof of a male guardian. Or, a woman kidnapped and raped as an act of persecution can also be shamed and/or shunned by the Christian community upon her return to her Christian home. Or, a woman discriminated against in education or the workplace because of her Christian faith could also be viewed with suspicion by her Christian community, wondering what she has done (distrust) and believing she can only have herself to blame for this ill-fate. We’ve started to call this the ripple effect of persecution.

The consequences of an act of persecution against a believer are not limited to her or his personal sphere, but overflow into all areas of life, sometimes even with inter-generational effects. Here the complicity of the church becomes clear: instead of calling us to the foot of the cross of Christ where all shame, guilt and fear have been overcome, the place where we can freely minster healing to the ones broken in persecution for Christ’s sake, we often encounter stories that the shame continues, blame is cast, acceptance becomes conditional, and the love and unity of harmonious relationships within the body of Christ sometimes become irreparably damaged.
Crushing the effects of persecution through gender resilience

I’ve sat with groups of women who will all acknowledge that they know how to effectively ‘deal’ with any issues that bring shame, guilt or fear to their family or community—they are conditioned to hide it or somehow get rid of it. In the years I’ve been shaping my ministry using the framing of Restorations, Romans 12:2 has been our pivotal verse: Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will (NIV). How easily do we assume that we are transformed, and our minds are renewed? Yet how infrequently do we analyse where and how we are still conforming to the pattern of the world? I’ve sat with numerous groups of women from MENA to map out the pattern of their world with them. As we go through simple exercises pertaining to socio-cultural mindset about women and men, gently moving to the analysis of this mindset within Christian communities, the realisation sets in that, more often than not, we believe the lies of Genesis 3 within the church about ourselves, towards others and about God. I’ve spoken to countless women who do not know that God’s will is good, pleasing, and perfect towards them. When this is the state of a church in a context of persecution, they are utterly vulnerable.

I believe that in Christ our true resilience resides. When we turn to Christ and study how Christ restores relationship with our self, each other and God, a model of restoration for the body of Christ and all relationships held within it rise up, like cream on milk: rich, beautiful, and fragrant, and a memory of what is to come. When we read about the encounters Jesus had with women and men in the gospels, they breathe equality, trust, freedom, empowerment, and acceptance. These words are life-giving antidote to the lies from Genesis 3. The behaviour that results from these restoration
words restores honour and peace, the essence of harmonious relationship. When these healing words are practised within the church, our identity beliefs and then our behaviour towards each other changes:

Equality – our value is something we all receive in Christ, equally reflecting Christ in us.

Trust – in unity our purpose is to build the kingdom, entrusted with gifts by the Holy Spirit.

Freedom – freedom and life in Christ are offered freely to all men and women – no conditions necessary.

Empowerment – in submission to Christ, men and women are jointly empowered by the Holy Spirit, with Christ’s servant leadership as the model for both men and women.

Acceptance – We are radically accepted in Christ; men and women stand justified and give all honour to Christ.

The evil one's endgame of persecution is not just to persecute individual believers, but is to break the bonds of love and unity within the body of Christ – to smash the beautiful bride of Christ. When I look at the church in MENA, I hear this command of Jesus in my ear: A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my
disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34,35 NIV). Did Jesus give us an impossible command, or are we simply unwilling to lay down our own lives and take up our crosses daily to fulfil it?

Side by side in ministry, several colleagues and I have been on the journey for several years—feeling the pain of these distortions and seeking the freedom of Christ’s restorations. We’ve been seeking collaboratively, across organisations, to explicitly name the patterns of the world and live out transformed renewal of our minds as One Body. Living out this renewed view of our identity as a Christian male or Christian female in Christ frees us from the heavy burden of societal expectations—frees us from shame or guilt that Christ has already redeemed. It allows us not only to live as actually redeemed ourselves, but to gracefully chose to view fellow Christians, women and men, as new creations in Christ, without judgement, blame, shame, or control. In MENA we’re beginning to see the ripples of transformed minds and lives as churches rethink their calling to be restorative places for both men and women. This is our hope, which we pray will strengthen and preserve Christ’s bride as a true witness to the Father’s good and loving character, in every context where our faith is most acutely under attack.

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*Suffering*

*When Women Speak... Webzine*

*Vol 8, No 1 | March 2021*
The Grey, the Fury, and the Flood
Deborah Warren

Bowed under yet again.
Buried under what could’ve been ... and should’ve been ... 
now lost forever, leaving only shards of pain.

Moving through this grey ... this fog that never lifts ...
this wrap that pretended to be comfort. A weight that takes my breath.

If it were black ... or white ... I could see it. Name it. Fight it.
It’s strange how the stark intensity can sometimes make one more alert.
But this blanket of never-ending grey is a weight too heavy and it hurts.

I cannot lift my head too high to hope for the light, to see the sun,
to even lift my face to God, if perhaps he may see
and smile kindly on me.

If I lift my head too high, will those around me call me arrogant?
Or smug? Or blaspheme my longing for some solace from the chorus
of those in heaven, promising to restore us?
One degree too high and now shame avalanches on me
and I am enclosed once again within the sorrow.

Tumultuous is this pain.
I’m careening over the rocks in this river of tears,
after another and another and yet another current pulls on me
dragging me under the roaring flood.

Bent over in sorrow, arched back by the next wave.
   Rounded down and hounded up, prisoner to this cruel force.
      It circles and cycles me,
         over and over me,
            tossing me without mercy
               in this grey and fury and flood.

Clawing my way above the waterline and to the shore,
   barely erect now, trudging through sorrow,
      stumbling in the mud of it,
         struggling through the blood of it.
            It has undone me.

Wrapped around my feet. My legs. My torso. My heart. It’s now a second skin.

Strangling away my voice, rendering me silent.
   I can no longer hear my own heart.
      Everything in me feels dead. I fear it’s won.
         It has won.

On the wind comes a brief but welcome scent.

   One flash of a sweet memory.
One kind word that feels so shimmery, fresh from a secret treasury ... and awakenings come again.

I turn my face towards ...

My soul begins to unfurl, unwrapping the curl of hope I thought was dead.

I hear some kindness in The Voice that gently asks me:

*Where have you come from?*, then pausing as I answer,

“I have come from the grey and the fury and the flood.”

It asks me further: *Where are you going ... and may I come?*

In my brief pause, I hear The Voice again: *I see you. I hear you. This is not the whole of the story of you.*

*I see you,*

*not as you should be,*

*not as you would be,*

*but perfect, refined through all you’ve withstood.*

*Free.*

*But this new skin, it must remain and grow.*

*You’ll learn to wear it lightly*

*As it refines and defines and realigns you*

*And burnishes your heart more brightly.*

*It will teach you and equip you.*

*It will fit you.*
You’ll move gracefully … eventually.

It will shimmer with hope to the next soul lost
in the grey and the fury and the flood.

I watch as Life is being written on every shard of pain,
every single thing
that’s spilled out of this precious bag of mine,
scattered around, seemingly consigned
to loss and sorrow for all time.

I pick through the wreckage and find some remnants of former hopes and joys.
My heart is warmed.
I recognise them, for they are the same.
But wait, they’re greatly altered now.
Transformed.

The wind brings back The Voice to me:

Blessed are those who mourn …

Who have known the grey and the fury and the flood.

Deborah Warren
January 2021
Suffering, Forgiveness, and Restoration
Um Omar had taped newspaper to the windows to shield the room from the relentless sun. I was sitting with her on a thin mattress on the floor, drinking sugary tea. Some months earlier Um Omar had joined a self-help group that I was facilitating for Syrian refugee women who were struggling with trauma and depression. During a follow up visit she had told me how her son’s flight to Germany had left her bereaved and without hope. One day when she had been lying on the mattress too depressed to do her housework she had felt that Jesus came and sat beside her. His presence had given her peace. Since that visit we had met regularly, sharing our lives and studying the Bible together. This time, like so many other times, she talked about the day when she would be able to return to Syria with her husband and children. Everything would be well again. First, they would rebuild their house and would no longer be forced to pay outrageous rent for some tiny wretched flat in a foreign country. Second, Um Omar would plant her garden again and be able to feed her children with home grown vegetables. They wouldn’t go to school hungry ever again. Um Omar was wondering how long it would take until there would be functioning schools, or electricity. She knew that the beginning would be hard, but they would be home at last! I said: “The infrastructure can be rebuilt. But what about the hearts of the people?” I knew her story of suffering betrayal, violence and loss through her own community. How could everything be well again without reconciliation? But to me, reconciliation seemed an almost impossible dream. “That is easy,” said Um Omar. “We will simply forget all that has happened.”

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28 Conversation with um Omar, written down from memory afterwards, Dohuk, June 2016
My friend Jihan, a moderately devout Sunni woman in Damascus, was trying to get pregnant. She and her husband already had one son. Since I got to know her at a women’s gym in 2006, she had been relatively satisfied with her life, with a husband that she obviously respected and loved, and her son whom she spoiled. Her main complaints were about the difficulty of losing weight and once in a while the intrusion of her mother in law. This changed a few years later when she did not get pregnant. Her unfulfilled desire for a second child drained all the joy from her life. When we met she talked about the doctors she had visited and the different diagnoses she got for her infertility. She went through three cycles of IVF treatments, without success. After the third one she decided that she could not go through the cycle of hope and disappointment again. The treatments had eaten into their financial resources. During one visit Jihan told me: “Yesterday I had a huge fight with my husband. I was so angry. I screamed at him: Marry another woman, then you can have more children with her! But before you do that I want a divorce.” Jihan was washing big bundles of parsley and mint for salad. We were standing in her kitchen and preparing the food for when her husband would come home. After a while she said: “God is punishing me. He doesn’t give me another child because of what I did.” When I asked why she thought that, she explained: “After my son was born I got pregnant again when he was just six months old. My mother in law said: He is still so little, why don’t you wait until later to have another one? I was tired and I thought it would be best that way. So I had an abortion.” I tried to share about God’s forgiveness in Jesus, but Jihan shook her head. “God
is very forgiving. God willing he will forgive me on the day of judgement. But for now I am sure he is punishing me.”

“I know that God answers my prayers”, said Um Sami, another Syrian refugee I was reading the Bible with. It was the story of Sarah and Hagar that made her remember a particular answered prayer: “We used to live next door to my husband’s brother. But his wife was evil. She talked against me all the time, she told bad stories about me. I was very unhappy. I cried a lot because of her slander. And I prayed to God that he would punish her. Then she got pregnant. When she gave birth my mother said to me: ‘Come and see what you have done!’ Her son was disabled. I knew this was because of my prayers.” Um Sami wondered how God had vindicated her and answered her prayers. But she also shared that the experience made her feel confused and fearful of the consequences of her desire for revenge.

One of the subjects that has been on my mind for a while has been how we can disciple Muslim women, who are suffering, about giving and receiving forgiveness. In my experience forgiving others from the heart is a difficult issue for believers from all backgrounds. So I feel my inadequacy to share about this subject when the person sitting opposite to me has lived through events much more horrendous than anything that has ever happened to me—and yet I know that I sometimes struggle to forgive comparatively small offences. How can I talk to women like Um Omar about forgiveness? It may seem insensitive and uncaring, and so my natural tendency is to

29 Conversation with Jihan, written down from memory afterwards, Damascus, 2011
30 Conversation with Um Sami, written down from memory afterwards, Zahle, November 2014
shy away from this topic. Nevertheless I want to share some of my observations and thoughts because in my encounters with Muslim women I cannot ignore how interwoven these subjects are: I see the pain that many are living with, and pray that God will heal them and give them peace, knowing that the journey to healing has to be a journey of forgiving as well. In my observations of working mainly with Syrian refugee women, forgiving others is not a major topic of conversation among them. There is very little awareness among these women of the importance of forgiving as a step towards reconciliation and therefore the fulfillment of their dream of rebuilding their country in the future. Some like Um Omar apparently think that forgetting and denial of the hurt is the solution to peace of mind. Others, and in my experience by far the majority, tend to long—and pray—for revenge, like Um Sami, in hope of finding that peace.

On the other hand, as in Jihan’s case, suffering can also bring up the question why God is willing the painful events, and the answer that he is punishing unforgiven sin. While some women start to seek forgiveness through acts of compassion or religious devotion, the feeling of being deliberately punished can lead to even deeper despair when the path to forgiveness is not certain. Receiving God’s forgiveness in Jesus is of course at the center of all our evangelism and discipleship, but the aspect that I want to touch on in this article is the way that the question of God’s forgiveness affects women during times of suffering.

Seeking God’s forgiveness is a very prominent theme in the religious discourse among Syrian Muslim women. The hope that God will forgive is based on the Qur’an. It encourages Muslims many times to repent from their sins because God forgives (comp. e.g. S 25:70, 39:53 48:2). Three of the 99 most beautiful names of God describe his
character as “very forgiving” (al-ghafur, al-gaffar and al-‘afuw). At the same time, there is no certainty but only hope that God will forgive a specific sin (S 66:8) because God “forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will” (S 3:129; comp. 5:18, 48:14). However, repentance and good acts may be rewarded with God’s forgiveness. Accordingly any of the religious activities among women are aiming at this.

A few months after our conversation Jihan started to redirect her efforts from fertility treatments to supererogatory prayers, adding extra repetitions to her formal prayers (salat) and informal supplication (du’a). She explained to me that she wanted to gain forgiveness for her abortion through patiently accepting God’s will. She wasn’t certain that he would forgive her, but the explanation that she had found for herself helped her to accept her infertility as a result of her own action. While it was not in her power to get pregnant again, focusing time and thoughts on devotion to God and the possibility of avoiding worse consequences gave her new hope and made her feel at peace with her situation.

In contrast, although from 2006 to 2011 I spent many hours in public and private religious lessons in Damascus, and interviewing female preachers and their followers, forgiving others was rarely touched on in the religious discourse, and if so, only in passing. This is surprising because the Qur’an mentions forgiving others many times (e.g. S 2:109, 3:134, 42:37, 45:14). Sometimes the religious Muslim women I met brought up the priority of justice through retribution in Islam. They argued that Islam

31 quotes from the Qur’an as translated by Abdel Haleem
32 That said, outside of my personal experience, forgiving others sometimes plays a greater role among Muslims and is discussed on many online forums, see e.g. https://ayeina.com/forgiveness-in-islam/. A prominent recent example of Muslims forgiving others is the forgiveness shown to the perpetrator of the Christchurch massacre, comp. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/24/i-dont-have-hate-i-dont-have-revenge-stricken-mother-of-christchurch-massacre-victim-forgives-killer.
is superior to Christianity because there is no unrealistic command of forgiveness, but there is acknowledgement of the victim’s need for revenge. However, this apparently overlooks the Qur’anic choice of just retribution or forgiveness. In sura 5:45, e.g., it says: “In the Torah We prescribed for them a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a nose for a nose, an ear for an ear, a tooth for a tooth, an equal wound for a wound: if anyone forgoes this out of charity, it will serve as atonement for his bad deeds.” Just retribution is defined as a punishment of an exact equal to the crime. In Islamic jurisdiction this verse and its parallels have led to the categorization of *qisas* crimes. Different from *hudud* crimes, *qisas* crimes can be forgiven by the victim, which means that the wronged party does not demand that the offender would not be punished in equal matter, but would pay retribution money.

Parallel to the New Testament, the Qur’an draws a connection between God’s forgiveness of our sins and our forgiving of others, and calls Muslims to forgive because they want to be forgiving. In sura 24:22 it says: “Let them pardon and forgive. Do you not wish that God should forgive you?” Similarly, sura 64:14 affirms: “Forgive them, pardon them, then God is all forgiving, all merciful.” Forgiving others is mentioned in the lists of virtues of the believers and is highly recommended. However, there is no command that makes forgiveness a requirement for Muslims. Just as there is no certainty of forgiveness, there is no certain causality between not forgiving and

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33 *Qisas* crimes are defined as murder or intentional physical harm and punished through a sharia court by the same harm done to the perpetrator, unless the victim or their family pardons them. E.g. if someone knocks out someone else’s teeth, the victim can demand that their teeth are knocked out, too.

34 *Hudud* crimes are understood as crimes for which God has commanded specific punishments. They are adultery, false accusation of adultery, robbery, theft, and apostasy. According to sharia law, because *hudud* crimes are committed against God they cannot be pardoned but the punishments have to be executed once the facts has been established beyond doubt.
others and not being forgiven by God. Forgiving is not always the better choice; it isn’t intrinsically better, because God himself may or may not forgive.

How does this affect how I disciple a suffering Muslim? Ruba’s story of suffering and forgiveness highlights a couple of factors:

I am 32 years old Beduin from a Muslim background; of course I live with my parents. At home, like all Muslims, we pray, we fast, but we don’t talk a lot about the details of our religion. During the winter my parents would sell greens like thyme from the mountains to make a living. During the summer my father worked as a day labourer if he could find work. We were doing okay but sometimes we were in need. Like we couldn’t afford all the school books and things. I went to school until the second year of secondary school but didn’t continue.

At that time I was in a car accident. That was the reason why I stopped going to school. I had a problem, actually many problems. With my legs and my whole body and my eyes. I didn’t want anyone to see me because I’m not pretty. Nobody should meet me. That is why I didn’t want to meet any strangers so that no one would ask me: What happened to you? I didn’t want anyone to ask me about this issue. I didn’t have anything to do. I wasn’t at school, I didn’t have work, nothing. My situation was difficult. I was only at home; my life was very, very hard.

There were some people from a charity, they knew my family. They were looking for girls to come to their centre. They would teach them things because they didn’t have a chance at school, for example sowing, pedicure and manicure, even some of them teaching

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35 Excerpt from an interview through WhatsApp voice messages, my translation from Arabic. 11.1.2021.
Arabic. They helped them and they paid. And so they came to us: “Don’t you have someone who could come to our centre and we will pay?” Okay, there was me. It was very hard for me to go. I didn’t want to see anyone, I didn’t like people to see me. But I went.

In the morning we had to start with prayer and a Bible lesson. It was very hard for me because I was a Muslim. I didn’t like the thought that I would read the gospel. Because we say that God is one, no! Surely there are many things in the gospel different from our beliefs. I read but I didn’t accept anything I was reading. There was nothing that touched my heart, but because I had to I continued reading and going to the centre to learn new things.

But after a while, little by little I started thinking: All these events, how did they happen? The stories, how different they were from what I experienced in life. How the Lord loves everyone, how I as well had to have people who loved me no matter who I was because the Lord loved me no matter who I was. How he loves us all the same. Many, many things in the gospel made me feel: really, life has to be different.

There were many girls with me when we started but those girls accepted Christ more than me, maybe they got baptized, that circle of girls was [spiritually] open I was the one who took the longest. I was always thinking about all the things that happened to me. But step by step I accepted Christ, in every verse I was reading, in every story he was pushing me more so that I accepted that this was happening. And step by step I loved to read more. There were many people around me and I was supported by them. One time they were praying for me, and while they were praying I felt something very strange was happening to me. I felt someone was talking to me. For me that was something very strange, that I should actually hear the voice of the Lord. If someone was telling me: “We heard from the Lord” that was hard for me to swallow, but I really heard this inside of me.
and I felt that I am truly a daughter of the Lord who loves me and the Lord was calling me to be with him always.

What touched me again and again was the verse from Lk 6 that says, “love you enemies.” I wondered how the Lord could ask me to love those people because I was brought up that we don’t love those people: on the contrary, we hate those who hate us, and we don’t help them in any way. But the gospel says and the Lord says: “Do this.” It was something impossible.

The most difficult experience that happened in my life was the car accident. This was so difficult. A lot of things changed in my life because of that. Sometimes I was saying, “God, why did this happen? If you love me: why?” I had doubts, sometimes I really had doubts if God exists: if he saw me, why did he do this? I was isolating myself from others, from everyone, even from the family at home. It was very hard for me that anyone should see me. It is still a problem to meet new people who ask me: “What happened to you?” It is still hard. Always, always, always, always this is affecting me. This was a terrible ugly evil experience. The accident was for me the end of the world. I’m finished. Why do I live? What is the meaning of my life? There is no meaning. The girl or the woman, I don’t know, who hit me with the car, she didn’t stop to see what happened, she didn’t come to me, or ask about me, she left and we don’t know anything about her. This was hard for me and I never wished her anything good. I was always saying, “for sure, God will take from her what is my due. God will hold her accountable for sure.” I couldn’t forgive her. I was very, very upset about her. Always I was thinking: That is the person: she did this to me, she ruined my life, and never ever will I forgive her.

At the centre the people around me were praying for me. I felt there is someone who helps me. Not with money but morally. I was healing. I was feeling that the Lord loves
me. That he loves me as I am. Before, I felt: it’s over, I am not loveable, no one loves me, I am different. But with the Lord I felt: Really he loves me and he wants me to be with him. Feeling this was very beautiful, and I started to love to pray. I was praying and he was answering.

At the centre they were from time to time teaching us about reconciliation and forgiveness. It wasn’t just me alone with this topic, the girls who were in my group and started at the same time as I at the centre, a lot of them were in a similar place like me. At the beginning nobody was talking with each other, we weren’t friends, we didn’t love each other. But through everything we were reading together, through all the activities at the centre, I feel that the relationships grew very strong; I even feel we have become like family and more than family to each other.

There are many references in the gospel telling us that the Lord wants us to forgive. The thought that really made me think was: If I want God to forgive me, why do I not forgive? I ask from the Lord: Please forgive me everything. So do I not want to do the same? Why can I not do the same? This thought always takes my breath away: If we ask forgiveness from the Lord, why do we not forgive? We have to do this. If I want to be a disciple of the Lord, others need to see this in me. If I don’t love others and I don’t forgive or help them, or if I don’t live reconciled with those around me, how can the people around me who see me, how will they know that I am a daughter of the Lord? How will they see that I have Jesus in my life?

Ruba’s story is a story of restoration in process through discipleship. The voice messages convey the effect that the car accident still has on her emotionally and spiritually. These parts in the story were difficult for her to tell, her voice sighing and breaking up a number of times. Some of the brokenness she experienced will possibly
not be restored in this life: the brokenness of her body, maybe the prospect of marriage broken by the disfigurement that she alludes to, as a woman in her thirties who still lives with her parents. Yet restoration is happening in other aspects of the social, emotional, and spiritual brokenness that were the result of her accident.

Socially, her suffering had made Ruba isolate herself not only from strangers but even from her family. She stopped going to school. She also didn’t want to go the centre. Again and again she recounts how she went against her will because she did not want to mix with others.

Emotionally, her judgement on herself as “ugly” made her feel unlovable, hopeless for the future, and void of meaning. Because a change of the physical results of the accidents didn’t seem feasible, change of her life in general was unimaginable and therefore she didn’t show any desire herself to do anything to facilitate change. Apparently she didn’t even have the strength to stand up against having to go to the centre and read the gospel against her will. Spiritually the pain that she lived with made her question and doubt God’s love and care for her and even his existence.

In the process of discipleship, social, emotional and spiritual restoration are happening hand in hand. The role of experiencing discipleship in a community stands out clearly in Ruba’s story. Meeting a group of believers who came to look for her and who opened up new possibilities through including her in a group of girls learning different skills led her to be reintroduced into human fellowship. When she started to actually understand what she was reading about Jesus and his love for everyone, she simultaneously realized her need to be loved. Far beyond being only a group that met to learn and earn some money, this community filled Ruba’s emotional needs to be cared for and loved. And it slowly transformed into a spiritual fellowship. It was during a time of prayer for her that she had a personal encounter with God, hearing his
invitation to no longer be separated from him but to live with him as his beloved daughter.

Her emotional and spiritual brokenness was also addressed through the teaching of forgiving others. Ruba describes her feelings of anger, her desire for revenge and her vows never to forgive the woman who was responsible for the car accident, like a prison that confined her thoughts and emotions “always.” Her first reaction when she realized that forgiveness is not optional, but commanded by Jesus, was shock. She rejected forgiving because it was impossible. But it seems that during the struggle to forgive, the community of girls at the centre was helping her to grow. She wasn’t alone in this process, she continued feeling loved and accepted, and to hear repeatedly over time about forgiveness.

At the time of the interview Ruba showed a strong desire to forgive, even if she still asked herself: “Why can I not?” The main reason that she uses to encourage herself is God’s all-encompassing forgiveness: because she expects God to forgive all of her sins she wants to forgive, too. However, she also gained a second reason that illustrates the power of forgiveness in restoring her: She wants to truly forgive so that others can see her as a disciple of Jesus being like him, a “daughter of the Lord,” someone who has Jesus in her life. It strikes me how she now repeatedly thinks of herself someone who should be “seen”—after all the fear of being seen, all the running away from people so that no one should see her after the accident. Now she no longer thinks of herself primarily as ugly but as a bearer of the beauty of Jesus, his love and forgiveness in her life. Ruba has again become someone who, in her own eyes, is good to be seen. Even if there is still pain in her narrative and the process is still a hard one, learning to forgive has brought spiritual and emotional healing to her and taken her deeper into discipleship, making her into someone who wants to draw others to Jesus.
Ruba’s story illustrates once again how important it is in discipleship to engage Muslim women continuously and with patience in the word of God and the person of Jesus. This is particularly true for women who are struggling with suffering in their lives and need to experience him as the lover who accepts them and forgives completely: the one who has suffered horrendously but yet does not hold back forgiveness.

Understanding the difference in the religious discourse about forgiveness helps me build bridges, and yet to focus on the difference that changes everything: for disciples of Jesus forgiveness is not optional because God does not keep this option open to himself. When this truth hits home, women who feel the need for retribution and revenge may start on the journey to bless those who harmed them instead. Discipling women to forgive is best done in a community where love and acceptance build the basis of dealing with painful issues. Ruba needed the fellowship of other young women like her while she was struggling to come to grips with forgiving the person who had caused so much brokenness in her life. Finally, I, as a co-learner in all matters forgiveness, should not avoid sharing about forgiving others, no matter how inadequate I feel. Instead I should listen well, pray with grace and love, and believe that God can free us all from the prison of unforgiveness.
The Weight of Hope
“I have learned that one cannot truly know hope unless he has found out how like despair hope is.”
- Thomas Merton

I keep putting off the writing of this poem. Because hope, And the grief that it responds to, Are both too deep To trivialize With words. This is the ache Of a weighty hope.

Let the weight Lie on Your chest. Let the ache Drill through Your sternum. Let the deep Cry out To deep. Too deep For words
To reach.

I will not speak
Of a world transformed
That we are sure we'll see.
I will not speak
Of the happily
Ever after
That is just
Around one
More corner.

The world is a dark place.
I will not deny that to you.

Let the weight
Lie on
Your chest.
Let the ache
Drill through
Your sternum.
Let the deep
Cry out
To deep.
Too deep
For words
To reach.
I will not tell you
Of the miracles
*You* alone can bring.
Of the revolution
In society
Only *you* can create.
I will not even tell you
What *we*
Can do.

Let the weight
Lie on
Your chest.
Let the ache
Drill through
Your sternum.
Let the deep
Cry out
To deep.
Too deep
For words
To reach.
For we live in a world
Of instant gratification
Of instant adulation
And celebration
And so much procrastination ...
And we have lost
Our ability
To hope, and work,
For something
We cannot see ...
Or even, for something
We will not see
In our lifetimes ...

Hope.

The whisper to us of a world that will be.
A whisper of a world beyond us.
A hope that is heavy enough to bear the weight of despair.
That is what carries us through.

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