



OUT OF BABYLON

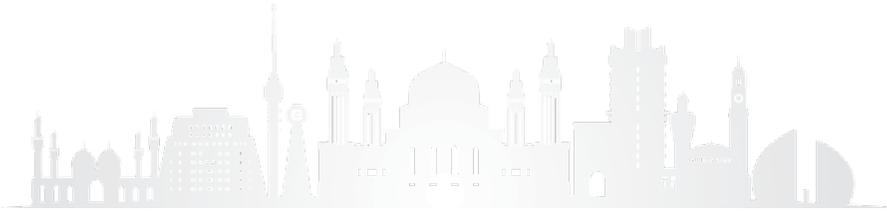
How God Found Me on the Streets of Baghdad

S. J O S E P H K I D D E R



Pacific Press®
Publishing Association

Nampa, Idaho | Oshawa, Ontario, Canada
www.pacificpress.com



Divine Appointments

God's Miraculous Encounters That Changed My Life

*“Now this is eternal life: that they know you,
the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”*

—John 17:3

I found Jesus on the streets of Bagdad, Iraq. However, I never thought that a random walk with my cousin one sultry Friday afternoon would turn out to be the most significant event in my life. That walk was not random; it was a divine appointment from God. It taught me that the Lord is guiding me, and He has a great plan for my life.

What I encountered during that walk led me to know Jesus and eventually give my heart to Him. My faith and commitment to Jesus Christ and my determination to stand firm for Him caused me to fail two years of schooling because I refused to take the exams on the Sabbath. I also lost a scholarship that covered four years of education and was kicked out of university.

One day during the summer of 1975, after all of these events had occurred, there was a gathering at my home with about one hundred upset relatives. They were disappointed with my newfound faith that led me to lose the education they had hoped for me. I was spit upon, humiliated, beaten almost to death, and thrown out on the street. However, three decades after that event, I am able to see that through this experience of loss, a

OUT OF BABYLON

beating, and humiliation came the greatest blessing of my life. In fact, I am alive today because of that experience.

My testimony shows that when we surrender everything to God and are totally committed to Him, we might face persecution and difficulties, but eventually, He will make all things to work together for our good (Romans 8:28). I encountered this to the fullest.

After forty years of knowing and walking with Jesus, I know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the meaning of the words in Jeremiah 29:11: “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, . . . ‘plans to give you hope and a future.’” These words are not just sentimental words that God gave us; rather, they are His ideal purpose for our lives. God is in the business of leading His people. He knows everything about us—where we sit down, our thoughts, and where we go (Psalm 139:1–3). He knows where we live and what we do for a living (Revelation 2:13). He knows the desire of our hearts and even the number of hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:30).

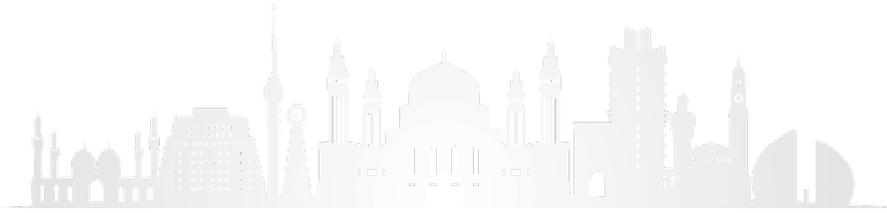
I am amazed that God takes all the mosaics of our lives—all the little and big events, all the problems and challenges—and puts them together in such a way that when we look back, it makes perfect sense. We will see how God has intervened in our lives and fit the pieces together flawlessly. As you look back at your past, through the eyes of faith, you will see that behind every event in your life, God is working everything out for good. Our role is to seek the Lord with all of our heart, mind, and soul. If we do that, we will find Him, and He will pour out His abundant blessings upon us (see Deuteronomy 4:29–31).

Jesus revealed Himself, His power, and His grace to me through many experiences and relationships. He spoke in many different ways as His providence guided me.

Learning about and choosing to follow Jesus was the best thing that ever happened to me. It changed the trajectory of my life. I found in Him a wonderful Friend, loving Savior, and great Lord. My prayer is that you will experience the same.

As you read my story, reflect on how God has led in your life as you see how He has led in mine. My prayer is that, at the end, you will stand in awe and say, “What a Great God we have.”

This is a story about the amazing love of God and the importance of surrendering to Him. It is a story about the incredible power of God released through prayer. This is the testimony of God’s redemption of one man from Nineveh.



Finding God in Baghdad

God's Purpose and Guidance in My Life

This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.

—1 Timothy 2:3, 4

I come from Mosul—the biblical city of Nineveh—which is located in northern Iraq. The name Nineveh lives on since the modern city and the ruins of the ancient city are called the District of Nineveh, and the region is called the state of Nineveh.

About 2,760 years ago, God sent Jonah the prophet to Nineveh. He led the Assyrians who lived there to worship the one true God. At some point in history, Nineveh returned to their old way of worshiping idols, but God never forgot about Nineveh. Hundreds of years after their original conversion, tradition has it that Thomas went east and was able to convert many people in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and India to Christianity—including Nineveh. Over time, because of persecution and discrimination, the vast majority of Christians in that region have migrated to the West. Others have been killed, and some have converted to Islam.

Jonah continues to be an integral part of Mosul. When I was growing up, everyone in the state of Nineveh was urged to participate in the fast of Jonah at least once in their life by not eating or drinking anything for three days

OUT OF BABYLON

and three nights. At the heart of Mosul's downtown area was the grave of Jonah. (Jonah's grave was destroyed by ISIS in July of 2014.)¹ All the major roads led to his grave or went around it, reminding all the people to repent and turn to the mighty God who can give them forgiveness and a new life.

The walk that changed my life

My father was a businessman who had moved his business from Nineveh to Baghdad for better opportunities. We lived in a suburb outside the city called New Baghdad.

I was born in a nominal Christian home. My parents belonged to the Christian Orthodox Church, which is very similar to the Catholic Church. I do not recall my father ever going to church, not even for Christmas or Easter. My mother showed a little more interest in God. She went to church a few times a year. I received hardly any biblical instruction, and I knew very little about the nature of my faith. I lived a very happy and contented life, but things started to change one boring afternoon.

My dream as a teenager was to be a professional soccer player. My idol in life was Pelé, the Brazilian soccer legend from the 1970s. Millions of young boys from all over the world wanted to be like him. Obviously I was not the one who took his place. Nevertheless, my passion for soccer drove me to practice almost daily.

One Friday afternoon in the summer of 1971, I invited my cousin Basher to come to my house and spend the afternoon playing backgammon and practicing soccer. My cousin was a very strange fellow. He was, apparently, the only person in Iraq who did not appreciate soccer, nor like to play it. After about twenty minutes of practicing, he said he was done and wanted to go for a walk. By accident, or better yet, by divine providence, our walk brought us to the Adventist church.

There was a small sign (about six by five inches) advertising a movie about the life of Jesus Christ and inviting people to go in and watch it. If the sign had been any larger, the pastor would have been arrested and put in jail. In Iraq, any form of evangelism, public or personal, is against the law and is forbidden. But the pastor was innovative and took the risk to experiment with this form of evangelism, hoping and praying someone would see the ad and go in to watch the movie. My cousin saw the ad, looked at me, and said, "We don't have anything to do. Let's go in and watch the movie. We might learn something new."

We went in and saw Jesus on the screen. I saw Him performing miracles, teaching the crowds, and dying for our sins. As I watched, I was struck by how loving and kind Jesus was and also by the power that raised Him from the dead. I thought, *Here's Somebody who loved me so much that He died for me!* I was moved and amazed, and I fell in love with Him.

After the movie, Pastor Hillal Doss gave a devotional message about watchfulness. He said, “Christ took His disciples to Gethsemane to stay up and pray with Him, but they slept [Matthew 26:40]. What about us? Are we awake with Jesus, or are we sleeping?”

Getting to know Jesus

The movie and message touched my heart so much that I went to the pastor and asked him to teach me more about Jesus—the Bible study lasted for over four months. During that time, he taught me about the major stories of the Old Testament, such as Creation, the Fall, the Flood, the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity, and the Israelites’ deliverance from captivity, as well as the prophecies. Then we moved into the New Testament—the birth of Jesus, His life, the miracles He performed, His death and resurrection, the acts of His apostles, and His second coming.

My love and appreciation for Jesus deepened during that time as I learned more and more about Him and His love and plan for my life. For me, these Bible studies were life-changing. I learned so much, and I got a broader perspective on life. I wanted to spend time learning about the God who loved me so much that gave His Son to die on the cross for me. I was very eager to go to church every week on Tuesday after I finished school for another Bible study.

As we fall in love with someone, we intentionally focus on that relationship and desire to spend more time with that person. In the same way, our love for Jesus will deepen as we intentionally spend time with Him in prayer and Bible study.

In 1 Chronicles, King David advised the leaders of Israel to set their hearts and souls to seek the Lord, their God (1 Chronicles 22:19). From the first time I met Jesus on the screen, I chose to seek Him. My heart was thrilled with His grace. So I began a lifelong pursuit of God through Bible study, prayer, and worship.

If we desire intimacy with Him, it is necessary for us to approach the

OUT OF BABYLON

spiritual disciplines purposefully. I learned before opening Scripture to ask the Lord what He wants to say to me. Pray to understand His ways—He loves answering that request. Enter His presence with the intention of knowing His will, living His truth, and feeling His grace and presence.

As I studied the Bible with the pastor, I felt what Isaiah said to his Lord and God, Yahweh, “My soul yearns for you in the night; in the morning my spirit longs for you” (Isaiah 26:9). I was determined to seek the Lord with all my heart, mind, and soul. I did this even when I did not feel like putting the time into my relationship with Christ. Sometimes the Bible studies were amazing, and the Spirit of God touched me deeply. Sometimes they fell flat. If you fall in love with Christ, you are a Christian and are born of the Spirit. Christianity is not a religion. It’s a relationship with God.

The more you come to know Him, the more He sets your heart on fire with love for others and Himself. His love for us is infinite, and He proved it by dying for us on the cross. Once you come to see His true nature and how much He cares for all of us, you can’t help but begin to feel the same.

The Adventist pastor said something that deeply impacted me, “If you were the only person that God ever created, He would have sent His Son to die for you. Think about that for a bit. You are one out of 3.7 billion people on planet Earth, yet God valued your life by the value of the life of His Son, whom He sent to die for you. When you experience this kind of love, you will want to have a lifelong journey to know the heart of God.”

Then he asked me, “Who do you love here on earth? Why do you love them?” He continued by saying, “I really love my mom and dad with all of my heart, and I know about them because of that love. Knowing all these things about them, and how much they care for me, drives me to love them even more. It is the same thing with Jesus. The more we know Him, the more we will love Him.”

In the struggles of life, we can become distracted and not really take the time to just be with our Lord. Visit Christ in His Word. That would be a great place to start. We are all on a journey to know the heart of God. Think about who Jesus is and how important His friendship is to you. Pray and receive His presence and grace. Then think of Him dying on the cross for you. He died so that you might live. Should we not be head over heels in love with Him?

In John 15:15, Jesus says, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant

does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.”

Jesus will come to you with words of healing or words of comfort, and perhaps as the relationship deepens, words of reproof and correction. There will also come a time for Him to clean up the well of our lives and hearts, creating positive and lasting changes in us.

My appeal to you is to fall in love with Jesus. He will open rivers of living water inside of you.

A time of testing

I loved everything I learned about Jesus. Then, one day, I went to church to have another Bible study, but we didn't have one. The pastor looked at me and said, “You have been coming here for several months to learn about Jesus. It's time for you to accept Jesus into your heart.” That was very hard because I grew up in a culture where if you changed your faith from that of your parents', they killed you. If society and family didn't kill you, they ostracized you, shunned you, and made your life miserable. If you left the comfort and security of your parents' faith and home, you lost your support system. I didn't want any of that to happen to me, so I thought seriously about quitting the Bible study.²

Before I tell you about the decision I made, let me tell you about my first Bible.

1. Dana Ford and Mohammed Tawfeeq, “Extremists Destroy Jonah's Tomb, Officials Say,” CNN, July 25, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/07/24/world/iraq-violence/>.

2. There is only one type of conversion allowed in the Middle East by law and tradition—from Christianity to Islam. Very few Christians become Muslim, and the few Muslims who become Christians have to leave the country in order to save their lives. Changing denominations in the Christian community is only acceptable from Orthodox to Catholic, or vice versa. The Orthodox and Catholic Church communities frown upon members converting to Protestantism—particularly to Seventh-day Adventism.