Part 1 of 2: Conversion & Persecution in a Muslim Setting
with Darrell L. Bock, Anna, and Fikret Bocek
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Darrell Bock: Welcome to the Table, where we discuss issues of the connection between God and culture. And today our topic is life in the context of Islam. And we have two guests. One is here in the studio, but not with us where you can see her. We're protecting her identity, and her name we're using for the podcast is Anna. And she lived in the Middle East and was a child in a mixed marriage, so we'll talk about what life in that kind of a context is like. And then my second guest is Fikret Bocek who is in Izmir in Turkey, and has been a pastor there for several years. Fikret hosted my wife and I when we did our tour of Turkey years ago. And Fikret, it's a real pleasure to have you with us.

Anna: Thank you, Dr. Bock. It's good to be here too.

Darrell Bock: All right. We're going to talk a little bit about life in an Islamic context. And Fikret, I'll let you go first. Talk a little bit about what you do now. And you come from a Muslim background, so talk about how you came to Christ.

Fikret Bocek: Well I'm a pastor now, planting the church here in Izmir, the Protestant Church of Smyrna. We are planting one church, but this church plant turned into several church plants now. We have four church plants in Izmir and one in the capital Ankara. I grew up as a Muslim, as a Sunni Muslim, not knowing anything about Christianity, believing that Bible was just Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and that was all corrupt. And that's what Muslims here teach, that the Bible is a corrupt book. It's been changed by Christian monks and priests. So that's what I believed growing up, until I saw this movie called <em>Ben-Hur</em>. <em>Ben-Hur</em> changed everything.

Darrell Bock: And I know a little bit about your story, so I'm going to follow-up. So you discovered something about the crucifixion and that got your curiosity started. Tell us about that.
Yes. While seeing Christ crucified in that movie Ben-Hur, I wanted to know whether this was a historical event that really took place or whether it was just a story that was made up by the monks. So I went out looking for more information, looking at some historical books. All the books I had found were all from a Muslim perspective, except one, an Encyclopaedia Britannica, and that said Jesus was crucified when you look under Jesus Christ. It doesn't say anything about resurrection, but it says that Jesus was crucified. I wanted to know more about the teachings of the Bible, and these questions I had weren't so I would convert to Christianity.

You know, as Muslims would say, you know, "May it never be. May you never, or may I never become a Christian." I never thought that I would become a Christian. You know, for centuries, Turks thought, "The infidel, the Christian," and, "Why should I become one?"

Well months later, as I looked for a Bible in libraries, bookstores, even talking to Westerners thinking all Westerners were Christians, I found out talking to some Westerners that not all Westerners were Christians.

Well, some months later, I met a couple, an American couple, actually from Dallas, who were on their honeymoon passing through Turkey, and I saw a book in their backpack as we were talking at a café, and the book was called The NIV. I didn't know what it was, but it said, "The NIV Study Bible." And I started asking them questions and found out that they were born-again Christians and they were more than willing to answer my questions. I wanted to see the Bible – the Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

They put the Bible in my hand and as I was looking, I just couldn't find Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I saw other parts. I saw the Old Testament, I saw the other parts of the New Testament, and I asked them where Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were. And they showed me and I asked them what this part of the Bible is, about the Old Testament and the New Testament.

And Muslims in Turkey do not know that Christians also believe in the Old Testament. And there was this book called the book of Acts, and Romans, and all the way to the book of Revelation. So I just asked them what this Old Testament is about – what does it talk about, what is the main idea?

And I actually asked them to summarize it. And they took it, they read the first three chapters of Genesis. I thought they were going to summarize. And I thought, "Are you summarizing or reading the whole book?"
Darrell Bock: It's going to be a long coffee.

Fikret Bocek: And they were actually establishing the fact that it is God who created heavens and the earth, and everything in it, and men and women. And what Adam did, how he sinned against the Lord and how he was kicked out of the Garden of Eden, and what Christ did – or what Christ was about to do. So they read to Genesis 3:15 and then brought all the way to the cross, and why Jesus had to die on the cross; they explained all that.

And they were talking in terminology that Muslims in Turkey would actually understand, like the meaning of blood, like the lamb being sacrificed for your sins. People here talk in those terms. Muslims here believe that you have to sacrifice a lamb for your sins once a year believing that the blood of this lamb will cover your sins for a year. Sometimes they sacrifice more than one.

Just this past October, there was a sacrificial feast, and they sacrificed about 15 million lambs and a thousand other animals believing that the blood would cover them.

Darrell Bock: Now is this the equivalent of the Day of Atonement that the Jews have, or is it a Muslim variation on it, and what's it called?

Fikret Bocek: Well in Turkish, it's called the Kurban – Kurban Bayrami – Kurban meaning, "The sacrificial lamb." It is like the Day of Atonement with some Muslim traditions added to it, which are taken from the Hadith and from the lives of the Caliphs.

Darrell Bock: And just to connect the dots, the NIV Bible that you're talking about is actually the New International Version, isn't it?

Fikret Bocek: That's right.

Darrell Bock: That's amazing. And, obviously, you came to the Lord as a result of this. So you're planting churches now – and you minister really all across Turkey. Isn't that correct, in many ways?

Fikret Bocek: Yes. Actually, we have a Turkish website. We have the Turkish Bible in there. We also have a more simple website specifically for Muslims. They go in and read about answers to their questions, like whether the Bible's been changed or not, or the Trinity. We get many questions about the Trinity, and we respond to them that way.
We have some Christians in different towns. Actually – well, right now, you can't see. But this way up north when you drive about 45 minutes is Pergamum, and there are about three Christians there. We go there and visit them, and we're hoping that we will be able to plant a church in Pergamum as well. We face many issues there. People are more conservative compared to Izmir, Smyrna. And a little bit north of Pergamum we have some more Christians. Our problem is, we're not able to gather them together because they're all suspicious thinking that there may be an informant among the other converts. So, you know, we face these challenges with converts.

Darrell Bock: Okay, I'll come back to that. Let me ask you one other question and then I'm going to talk to Anna here for a second. Let's talk about the amount of Christians who are in Turkey. How many are there? I mean it almost sounds like you can count them individually almost.

Fikret Bocek: Yes, yes. Well, in 1960, there was only one Christian, one convert in the whole country. Today, there are about 3,000 converts who are attending churches. We think that there are about 3,000 more who are unable to attend our churches in different parts of the country.

Darrell Bock: And Turkey is how large? What's the population of Turkey?

Fikret Bocek: About eighty million people.

Darrell Bock: Eighty million, so that's not very many Christians overall. And you're one of very few pastors who have a theology degree. Is that correct?

Fikret Bocek: That's correct, yes. There aren't very many out there.

Darrell Bock: Okay. Well, Anna, let's turn to you. Why don't you talk about your own experience growing up, your background, and how you managed to come to Christ as well. I know your situation is slightly different than Fikret's.
Anna: Yes. As you mentioned earlier, I come from a mixed background. My father is Muslim, my mother is Greek Orthodox. Having this combination is not common in the Middle East. But for my parents, they got married outside of the Middle East and met outside where my father found out the only way to marry my mother was to become a Christian himself. So he converted to Christianity and got baptized in a church – with a Catholic church that was available, and my mom accepted to marry him after he became a Christian.

Then sometime after that, they went to the back in the Middle East where my dad returned to his identity, to Islam. He had to face culture, his family; and then he started to force my mother to convert. But my mother remained faithful to her faith, and then she did not believe in divorce. She stayed with my father to raise up her kids, and she thought she wanted to give us her faith. If she could do one thing to protect us and to provide us, she felt a responsibility to do that part – which I'm very grateful.

So as I grew up, my only Christian influence that was available to me was my mother. But in my environment, mostly were Muslims around me. My dad sent us to government schools where the religion of Islam was taught. I have no choice to choose my own religion, even after I grew up. If the father is Muslim, it would be recorded in my identification. The government identification, I'm a Muslim, and I cannot change that by any means.

So I went to school, went to government where I was taught the Koran, to memorize it, and taught how to pray, taught ablution before the prayer. They were teaching us the fasting. So that was my influence with Islam. It was mostly in school.

My father was comfortable with that because he thought the school will take its part to teach us what Islam is about. The only thing my dad did while I was growing up is from time-to-time, he would take me aside to reinforce what he thinks the school was teaching me, that Jesus is not God. That the Christians erred in believing Jesus is God. He's only a prophet and he was superseded by the last greatest prophet Muhammad.

And he wanted to also teach me the other truth that he was never crucified, that God would never allow one of his prophets to be humiliated like that. So he took Jesus' life to heaven, but he made somebody else to look like him. And I've always wondered why would God want to wait 600 years for Muhammad, their prophet of Islam, to come and tell the world that that wasn't Jesus.

Darrell Bock: Mmm, that's an interesting take.

Anna: That was somebody else. So I've always wondered about that.
My dad, interestingly, he used the Bible as I growing up. We had a Bible, but I've never seen it except two occasions that my dad would take it out to show me from the Bible how Jesus is not God. And I remember the example he brought me that one of – it was in the Gospel of Mark, where one man came to Jesus and he said, "Good Teacher, what must I do to earn eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me God? There is no one good except God."

And my father repeatedly used this story to show me, "You see, Jesus, even himself claiming not to be God." And he was using a couple of stories. So like I said, I only saw the Bible twice as I was growing up at home.

On the other hand, my mom secretly taught me her faith. She didn't use the Bible, she would just use stories to tell me about Jesus. I knew he was the Son of God who came and was crucified and rose again on the third day, and now he's seated on the right hand of the Father interceding for us. I knew that, but I really did not know why he had to do that.

I love Jesus through my mother, because I saw the example of my mother. I was so close to her, to my mom, and the beauty of her character, her example – it drew me. Not only me, but even my brothers. I was the only girl. And so we all embraced my mom's teaching though secretly. She told us not to tell anybody, because it would be a big problem for her and for us.

So my brothers and I embraced my mom's teaching secretly, but we embraced it through – during the ritual prayers every night. She taught us to pray, she taught us to fast – some Christian fasting. And so my exposure to Christianity was through my mom's beautiful example and the stories that I heard, and I fell in love with that.

As I was studying Islam for 12 years in school, until I graduated high school – and all my friends were Muslims in school – I was never drawn to God in Islam, to the god of Islam. Something – I was just never drawn personally.

In school, I was taught the beautiful side of Islam. Even then, things I was just wondering about; but, again, I think the beauty of what I saw in my mom; and some of the stories just touched my heart.

**Darrell Bock:** So you really got to compare the two faiths to one another as you were growing up, very much so.

**Anna:** Correct.
Anna: My dad was a nominal Muslim. He didn't go to the mosque, but he fasted every year in the month Ramadan. He was faithful in doing that, and he made us fast along with him. But he didn't stress for us to pray or go to the mosque.

Darrell Bock: That's interesting. Fikret, your experience with the crucifixion is very, very similar. Isn't that what drew you in the <em>Ben-Hur</em> story was the whole idea that Jesus really was crucified?

Fikret Bocek: That's correct, yes.

Darrell Bock: So it's a very common – the common view in Islam is that Jesus himself was not crucified, but that there was some type of substitute or something on the cross. Is that correct?

Fikret Bocek: That's correct, yes.

Darrell Bock: Yeah. That's interesting, because – and this is the New Testament person in me coming out. Gnostic Christianity has the same view of Jesus that it wasn't he who was crucified, but that his Spirit left the body that he occupied before he went to the cross. That's second century. So that's several centuries before Muhammad, but it's a very, very similar story.

In fact, I remember, not only when I was in Turkey, but in other parts of the Middle East when I talk about this or discuss second-century issues in Gnostic Christianity versus Orthodox Christianity. And I tell this part of what the Gnostics believe, and those who come from a Muslim background recognize the similarity and comment to me about it, and it always struck me as fascinating part of the story.

Well, Fikret, let me come back to you and have you talk about another scenario that is involved in Islam. We've talked a little bit about Anna's story and how she was raised in a mixed context. But there also is sometimes terrific persecution of Christians.

Fikret Bocek: Yes.
And explain both what your experience has been, and then there's one particular event that I want you to tell us about. So, first, your own experience with persecution.

Well, we've seen some converts come, and they see persecution – sometimes from family, sometimes from their employers, sometimes from government officials. In my case, after I gave my life to Christ, I didn't really tell very many people about my conversion. I had this fear that people would find out. So even when I went to the church, I would take a different route, a different bus, and sometimes go the opposite direction and take a train and get to the church.

But one day towards the end of 1988, after church, we went to a friend's house and we thought that this man was a new convert, but he was acting like he had become a Christian. He was not a Christian at all. He was working for the police, and we were all arrested that day and taken to a detention facility where they question or interrogate terrorists. They asked us to recite an Islamic prayer.

There were about – well, throughout Turkey, most of the Christian converts – Muslims who converted to Christianity – were all arrested; and I was one of them. And there were 10 or 12 of us in this room. And they were very nice to us initially, just giving us some tea and some cookies; and they asked us to recite this prayer and everything would be fine, and we would all be released.

This first man – and at this time, we still hadn't known that he was an informant. He said the prayer, basically saying that there is no god but Allah, and Mohammad is his messenger prophet. He said it; he left.

And there was another person right next to me, and he did not recite the prayer. He actually said something that really upset the officials there. He basically said he would never call Muhammad a messenger of God. And a man who is in hell couldn't be God's messenger.

So they beat him up and put him in a cell, and it was my turn. As I said, you know, even before I was arrested, I had this fear, and that was really crippling me. And at this time in my mind, I thought I will say the prayer and walk out of there, but I will not mean it. I'll just say it and get out.

I opened my mouth and I thought I was about to say it, but somebody behind me just shut my mouth. I wanted to turn around and tell this person not to do it, because I just wanted to say it and get out of there. I turned behind me and there was no one; nobody standing behind.
And I knew I could talk, but I just couldn't say that there is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. It just wouldn't come out of my mouth. And I knew that somebody was just squeezing my mouth, and I just couldn't say anything.

They took me to another room, continued asking, but then put me in a cell with other Christians. I know a couple other Christians, when they were asked, they said the prayer and they were released. So we were with a couple of Christians. We were in this one cell and they separated us and put us in different cells.

So we were there for ten days and there was a lot of beatings, a lot of psychological torture – just, you know, kicking, hitting with sticks. But in this time, something that happened to me personally was, you know, this fear that I had had disappeared. If I was not arrested, if they hadn't arrested me that time, I don't know what would have happened. But after that arrest, it was like training for my heart. It was God preparing me, giving me patience, and making me bolder, and taking this fear of men out from my life.

As I was looking at these Turkish police that were beating us, I wanted to tell them that, "You guys have no idea who is with us right now, who is strengthening us right now. The Creator of the universe is here and you're telling me to put my faith in some other god that you guys made up. That will never happen."

Well, ten days later, we were all released, thanks to the European Union. Sir Fred Catherwood came from England and asked the Turkish Prime Minister if there were any Christians in prison, and the Prime Minister said there were no Christians in prison. We were not in prison, we were in a detention facility, but we were released the same day. And since then, I've been serving the Lord. I would say my true conversion took place in that detention facility.

Before that, I knew – you know, I professed faith, months before that, but I still had this fear, and I was tied to this world in many different ways. But in the detention, God truly converted my heart. I gave my life to Christ there.

**Darrell Bock:** That's amazing. I'm going to turn to Anna here for a second. Have you seen or experienced anything similar to that in terms of persecution? How does the Islamic community deal with people? You've already said you couldn't change your religious identity, so they control that part of the situation in terms of how you're identified. Have you experienced anything at all like what Fikret's describing?
Anna: Yes, in different ways. As I was growing up, the things that I always heard from my girlfriends, they say, "Don't you ever grow up to embrace your mother's religion. We will never talk to you." So I've always heard that.

People tried to make sure that I don't go toward my mom's religion in ways to say, "We will not talk to you. You will not be part of us."

But when I came to confess my faith, it was in '88; and the reason for that, because I had a Bible for the first time in my own hands. And as I read the words of the Lord Jesus where he said, "Whoever shall confess me before men, I will also confess them before my Father who's in heaven; and whoever shall deny me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven."

I was living with my mom in a place where mostly Christians lived, so I was confessing my faith to the Christians around me; and in the church where I used to go, I was away from my father. He was in another city. But I knew that was not a complete confession, that I needed to tell my family – my father, my brothers, and my Muslim friends, that I shied away from saying – or from – I did not know that was important for me to say it until I knew that was on the heart of the Lord Jesus for me to do it.

So as I confessed my faith, of course, I knew what could come up if I confessed my faith, because my mom, as I was growing up, she always taught me to keep it secret out of fear. I was afraid, but when I read the words of the Lord Jesus, it became like fire in my heart. I could not – it was like a hammer that shattered my fears. And I started to share my faith.

I started with my brothers. Finally, I did – the hardest one was my dad. By God's grace, I did. It wasn't easy. I faced different things from my brothers. One of them stopped talking to me and said, "My sister died to me."

Others tried to put the pressure on me in different ways. My father was the most. My girlfriends, they looked down upon me, but the worst one was my dad, which I feared the most. He was a strong man.

I've always obeyed my father. Never, ever said no to him, never looked him up in the eye to be able to say no. I was very obedient, very submissive, and when I had to confess my faith to him, it was just the power of the Lord, of his Word in my heart.

As I did, the first thing he did, he did not threaten me. He brought me a lady to the house. This lady, she had a Master in Islamic Law, and he wanted her to teach me – first, to give me a chance to understand.
He said, "I have not done my part in teaching you. I entrusted you to the school and to your mother, but now I'm going to take over. I'm going to teach you what Islam is."

And to my surprise at this lady who had her Master in Islamic Law, when she came to teach me for about a month, my father, when I confessed my faith, he took me to his house. I was semi, you may call it, in prison in the house. So I was away from my mother, away from the Christian influence, and the Christian people.

So I was always in his house, and this lady would come every day. Like I said, to my surprise, she did not use the Koran. She did not use it; she did not tell me anything about Islam. She had a Bible in her hand and she would take the Bible and go through verses from the beginning, and especially in the Gospels, to show me the apparent contradictions that are found in the Bible.

I did not know much. I didn't hear sermons where I was, but I was reading the Bible, and I knew Jesus died for me and he rose again. The only way to worship God was through Jesus Christ, and my sins cannot be forgiven outside of the shed blood, trusting the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. I knew that very much. I stood upon that rock of what I knew, but I didn't have answers for this lady.

I was troubled, because I didn't have answers. I was bewildered. But the truth that was so clear in my heart, I said to myself, just the fact I don't have answers for her, or she's using the Bible – and it looked like, to me, like an apparent contradiction, that doesn't make it right. I said one day I'm going to study the Bible, and I'm going to show this lady that she was wrong, because of just a sure assurance of who Jesus is in my heart.

Then after a month, this lady gave up on me, and my dad wasn't happy; but then he took over. He said, "I'm going to teach you now." He gave me a week. He would sit me down every day to teach me; and then at the end of the week, he asked me, "Now, tell me. Was he crucified? Did he rise again from the dead?" And I said, "Yes."

He said, "That's it, I have done my part, I warned you. Now," he said, "I'm just going to have to put you to death according to the Islamic teaching." He said, "I will do God a favor if I kill you."

Now when he said that, "I will do God a favor," I remember reading somewhere in the Gospel of John that he said a time was coming when people were going to think they do God a favor when they kill you. I'm not going to say I wasn't scared, but I was comforted to say, "Wow, what Jesus said is right, it's true."
So I was put in a room thinking that each day could be my last day on earth. My dad mentioned that sometimes he might use a knife, he might burn me, he might burn my mom. It was scary. I've always feared my dad. But in that room when I was terrified of that, every time I hear a noise, I think, "Okay, that's my dad coming to kill me."

It became so tiring to me that I was away from any help that I could ask for, where I fell on the floor before the Lord and said, "Lord, help me. I'm very afraid." And the Holy Spirit there reminded me of the Scriptures a favorite passage on my heart the Lord used big time was Matthew, Chapter 10. From that chapter, I was reminded when the Lord Jesus said, "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent, and yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. The very hairs of your head are all numbered, so do not fear. You're more valuable than many sparrows."

I was comforted by the fact that my life, it's in God's hand. No one has the authority to end my life here on earth unless God allows it. So I was comforted, but then I said, "What about if God allows to end my life here on earth? He can." I was then comforted to say that I would be with him forevermore. It didn't take completely the fear from my heart, but I felt like as if somebody's carrying me to continue to confess Christ and faith, despite that death might happen.

About a month later, my father realized that death did not work with me, then he started to threaten me to marry an Islamic religious leader without my consent. In that country, they have a way to do that. It happened before, I knew about it. I got terrified. I was afraid of death, but I knew that death, you just die and that's it. But I thought if this marriage will go about, I will have to die every day.

My dad said, "The reason why I'm doing this, because once I get married, that means I belong to my husband and he would convert me to Islam." So he wanted to pass the responsibility.

As I was so scared, it's amazing how sometimes during that time when you're vulnerable, Satan uses opportunities to find a way out of it. But I praise the Lord that he rescued me out of this. It didn't fall through. The Lord protected me as I prayed and asked the Lord for his help.

Then it came the final sentence from my dad at least, I would say. He said to me when he stopped threatening me with death, with marriage, then he said, "Okay, I'm going to give you an ultimatum. I'm going to give you the freedom to be a Christian, I'm going to give you the freedom to worship in your heart whoever you want, as long as I don't see it and no one knows about it."
"I'm not going to ask you to be a Muslim, I'm not going to ask you to go to the mosque, I'm not going to ask you to wear any certain clothing. But if anybody publically asked you what religion, you must say you are Muslim. But in your heart, worship whoever you want. Otherwise, if you don't do that, I'm going to disown you as a daughter. I'm going to write in the newspaper that she's no longer my daughter."

That was very hard. I didn't want to lose my dad, I was the only girl. I was always treated very special by him. I was loved, provided for all my life in a special way. I wanted to keep that relationship.

And as Fikret said that sometimes you come to say, "Okay, he's not asking me to be a Muslim, so, so what. I can confess to say I'm a Muslim in front of people, but I can live my faith. He's allowing me in my heart, in my room, I can worship as long as no one sees it. Surely the Lord will understand that."

So for some moment, because I don't want to lose that relationship, I thought I could do that. But the picture of Jesus on the cross openly taking the shame for me, and when I heard his voice that he wanted me to openly confess him, he did not want a secret disciple. I cannot do that. And if I was to do that, I felt like I had to die to myself.

My heart was no longer mine. How can I just say something that is not who I am? So I wasn't able to do that, even despite of the fact that my dad said he would disown me.