

Witness to a Murder

by B.R.

At 5:20 pm Sue and our son Billy walked out of our apartment building to go to the evening church service. As Sue crossed the street to where our car was parked, she noticed a crowd of kids. Suddenly they all stepped back, and she saw a girl with a knife and someone struggling to get it away from her. Then she spotted a man also who seemed to be choking another man.

In order to avoid the altercation, Sue and Billy made a big circle around them to arrive at our car. Just at that moment, walking up the sidewalk as if nothing had happened, came the man who had been doing the choking, his wife, and his twenty year old daughter who had been wielding the knife. Sue could see that the girl was hiding the knife between her arm and her body.

As Sue pulled out of the parking place, suddenly some men who had been helping the choked individual looked around abruptly. The man who had been being choked vomited blood and collapsed. He had been stabbed in the back and died in the operating room a short while later. Sue had been a witness to a murder!

Although Sue didn't actually see the knife blow, others did. The girl had stabbed the man in the back while her father was choking him. It had all started as an altercation between two kids. One had been ringing the doorbell of the other family. As often happens in Moroccan society, a fight between kids quickly became a fight

between parents, although witnesses say that the man who died did not want to fight and was not the instigator of the violence.

Since this is all anyone talked about for the next week, how could we apply the Word of God to the situation?

First, I had known Brahim, the man who died. I had met him in our neighborhood when I helped him carry a heavy load of fruit he had bought up to his apartment. That same summer I had had a chance to speak to him about Christ, although he didn't agree with what I said. Recently, I had met up with him again after we had been away in Morocco and he had moved. Just a week ago I had been talking and laughing with him in the parking lot where numerous groups of men hang out and swap stories after work.

The whole week after the murder the parking lot and cafes were abuzz with conversation about the murder. I had opportunity to discuss with people the subject of anger. "You see how quickly we can become angry and what damage anger can do. The Bible says, 'Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, for the anger of man does not work the righteousness of God' (James 1:19-20)." People would agree with me and speak about what a shame it was that "those other people" had such anger in their hearts. Since Islam is a works-righteousness religion, it's easy to see the sins in

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others but not in oneself, especially if one has never committed murder.

However, I added, "You know, we all have anger in our hearts. We are sinners, and anger is deeply rooted in our hearts. Given the right circumstances it jumps out into the open. But it's always there. It's part of our sinful nature. Do you think that that man who choked Brahim or his daughter thought this morning, 'Today I'm going to kill someone.'? Of course not. They were probably laughing and happy and enjoying life. They may even have done their prayers. They would never have dreamed of killing someone. Yet, given the right situation, their anger flared, intensified, and led to murder.

"You see, murder is just the normal result of anger. Murder is just anger more fully expressed. How many times have each of us gotten angry at someone—like in traffic for example. Some people in our country kill people for cutting them off in traffic. We are all murderers in our hearts. For this reason Jesus says in the Bible, 'You have heard that it was said to the men of old, You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment. But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, You fool! shall be liable to the hell of fire.'" (Matt. 5:21-22).

Now these are words that Islam would never say. According to Islam man is born good, with his heart as a clean slate. Muslims do not think of them-

selves as sinners. We may occasionally sin, but we aren't sinners. A sinner is one who has totally given himself over to drinking alcohol or doing drugs or eating pork or forsaking the prayers. The sinner is always the other guy. How different from the Christian view that man is born corrupt in sin, that his very nature and state is sinful.

Thus, talking with Muslims about inner sin and the sinful nature of man is very important in our evangelism. For as long as the people think that they are good, as long as they feel that they are not in danger with God because of their sin, our words about Jesus and salvation appear to them as utter folly since what we say about Jesus contradicts what they have been taught for centuries.

The second day after the murder I went with one of my neighbors to translate for him. His son had dented a French person's car, and the father needed help in negotiating a settlement. After we had done that, he bought me coffee in a cafe. And of course we talked about the murder.

My neighbor said, "You know in Islam there are three types of people whose prayers go up directly to God and he hears them." The third type was "Poor, helpless people like that Brahim." I then said, "You know our Bible says that the person whose prayer goes up directly to God and is heard is the one who prays from his heart in the name of Jesus who saves from sin."

My neighbor insisted that Jesus never died but rather, as Islam teaches, that someone who looked like him was

substituted in his place while God rescued Jesus by taking him directly up to heaven. I responded by giving numerous reasons why Jesus had to die to save us from our sins and how he rose from the dead. I was then able to speak about us as sinners, using the example of anger and murder.

Although my neighbor didn't agree with me, he listened to the explanations and didn't try to contradict what I said. This was most likely the first time that anyone had ever spoken in person to this man about Christ. As we were walking home he said to me, "You know, there is a radio station that you can hear when you're driving through Spain. It talks in our Berber language about Jesus."

When we were at the cafe I got a newspaper and read a brief article about the murder. The article seemed to have the story all backwards. It reported that Brahim was the aggressor and that he was choking the other man. The daughter, in order to save her dad's life as he was being choked, stabbed Brahim in the back. I knew that wasn't true, having heard Sue's story and the story of many people who were there. My neighbor said the paper was just telling a bunch of lies.

It turns out that the paper was reporting the girl's version of the events, no doubt designed to get her off with a lighter sentence. I asked my neighbor why the paper didn't report what all the other people saw. He replied, "But no one was willing to say that they saw it. When the police asked if there were any witnesses, everyone kept silent."

I was shocked. Sue had not known at the time that it was a murder. All she saw was a bit of blood on Brahim's back and the men assisting him. She assumed that it was an injury that would be taken care of, and since there were plenty of men around (A woman in Moroccan culture has nothing to do with a man's world.), she had continued on her way to church. It wasn't until later that night when she returned that she found out it was a murder. And it wasn't until two days later that we found out that no one was willing to be a witness.

Sue and I decided to go down to the police station and report what she had seen. Even though she hadn't seen the direct knife blow, she certainly could testify that it was not Brahim doing the aggressing.

Out in the parking lot, I brought up the newspaper article and how the story was being misrepresented. People agreed that it was horrible, but that no one wanted to say they saw it.

I said, "But we have to. If we've seen something, we need to tell the truth about it. Lies are being told, and there were many people who saw what happened. My wife was here and she saw it. She saw ten or fifteen men who were here and saw it."

"But they are afraid to talk."

"Why would they be afraid to talk?" I asked.

It turns out that in Morocco, a witness to a crime can be harassed and bothered by the police, especially if the criminal has bought off the police

Christ as his savior, the Holy Spirit comes into his life and begins changing him."

This brings up another difference between Islam and Christianity: the power and motivation to obey God. Hours after the murder one of the devout Muslims in the neighborhood, dressed in his typical long, white robe, was angrily preaching to a group of men near the scene of the crime: "Do you know why these things [the murder and similar bad actions] happen? Because we have forsaken our religion. God has given us one book to follow, the Koran. He has sent down this book to be obeyed and to be taught to all men in the whole world, and we don't do it. Do you know where these problems come from? They come from us, from inside of us. It's because we don't follow our religion anymore."

Far from being a discourse on the sinful nature of man, this was a motivational speech by a Muslim to get these other men to obey the rules of Islam more. Islam says: try harder, apply yourself more. Obey the rules, and you won't have crimes like murder.

As is typical in Moroccan society after a person dies, I and other men went to visit Brahim's family and sit with them for a time. This provided more opportunities for discussion and interaction. After the autopsy, the family, as do almost all Moroccans here in France who have had a family member die, took the body back to Morocco to bury. Brahim's family has hired two lawyers and are in the process of gathering

names of people who were witnesses. It seems that a number of people are now willing to talk.

This whole incident reminds me of another murder which occurred two thousand years ago and yet is still very much a current event. Although it seemed at first so senseless, yet we who have experienced the power of Jesus' death and resurrection have much to tell about its meaning. May each one of us be willing to talk to others about what happened on that day and what it means for the world!