

The Day of Bad Luck by BR

We walked into our Moroccan neighbor's house and greeted each of the family members. After taking off our shoes, we sat down on the couches that lined the walls, I with the father, Miloud, and my wife, Pat, with the oldest daughter, Drissia.

We were far enough apart that we couldn't hear each other's conversation, but we were each talking about the same thing. A neighbor was very sick in the hospital. I was speaking with Miloud in Arabic, and Pat was speaking with Drissia in French.

"Farid is very sick," said Miloud. "He can't even talk. I just came from visiting him. He can only make signs with his hand."

"May God heal him," I said. "What does he have, and when did he get sick?"

"Three days ago he was at work, and suddenly he fell over. They took him to the hospital, but he can't talk," Miloud replied.

"The poor thing," I said. "What did the doctors say was the name of the sickness?"

"I don't know," answered Miloud.

"Sometimes older men have heart attacks, and sometimes they have something which occurs in the brain," I said. "A blood vessel is blocked and injures part of the brain, because there is a lack of blood. Depending on what part of the brain it injures, the person's body is affected. Some people can't talk afterwards. Often, they can't move one side of the body." I drew a little diagram of the body and how different spots in the brain affect different body functions.

"That's exactly what happened with Farid. He can't talk, and he can't move the right side of his body. He can only make signs with his left hand," said Miloud.

"That must be it then," I said. "Tell me his family name and his room number. I am a pastor, and I will go visit him. In our religion the pastor goes to visit someone sick and sits with him and prays for him."

"Okay. We do the same sort of thing," replied Miloud.

This was a seemingly normal conversation. Pat's conversation with Drissia was quite different. As we compared notes, it became obvious that two world views were at work.

"Our neighbor Farid is in the hospital and is very sick. He can't even talk," Drissia said to Pat.

"What happened to him?" asked Pat.

"Evil spirits have caused this," she replied.

"Really?" said Pat. "How do you know it is evil spirits and not some sickness?"

"Because he can't even talk," replied Drissia. "Also, it happened to him on the day of bad luck. It happened last Friday, the 13th."

"What can be done for him?" asked Pat.

"Well," said Drissia, "not much in the hospital. Evil spirits don't respond well in hospitals. They like it there and they often gather together so that they are very strong. You can't do much against them. If he was at home, then we could do something. Farid's boss made a mistake by taking him to the hospital. He should have brought him home. This sort of thing happens all the time

in Morocco. We would call the *fqih* (a private Koranic teacher and sometimes a healer). He would read the Koran."

"Is there a *fqih* here in this neighborhood?" asked Pat.

"No. But there's one in a city about 3 hours away," said Drissia.

The next day Miloud was going to the hospital, and I asked if I could go with him. He agreed and we ended up in a waiting room with several other Moroccan men waiting to visit Farid. I was sitting next to Farid's oldest son, who is in his early twenties.

"Did you know that I am a *fqih* with the Christians?" I asked him.

Although I had never talked with him before, he said, "Yes. You are a pastor."

"When someone is sick or possessed with evil spirits, we Christians visit him and read the Bible and pray for him," I said. "Of all the prophets, there is one who was well-known for healing sicknesses and casting out evil spirits. That was *Sidna Isa*. (2) He raised the dead, healed the sick, cleansed the lepers, and cast out evil spirits."

"And of all the prophets, there is only one who is still alive-*Sidna Isa*. All the other prophets are dead, but he is alive in heaven. (3) For this reason, his name is powerful. He is still powerful to heal and deliver from evil spirits. There is a verse in the gospel which says: 'With power and authority he commands the unclean spirits and they come out.' His name is powerful, not because of magic, but because he is alive. All the other prophets are dead, but he is living."

I then took out my New Testament in Moroccan Arabic and read him Luke 4:31-36 and Mark 1:32-34. I offered to

pray for his father. He didn't say much, although he seemed appreciative of the words I'd said. Although Miloud heard this conversation, he didn't react much.

Later we all went in to see Farid. He was lying down, unconscious, with all sorts of tubes in him. The son left, leaving myself, Miloud, and two other men with Farid. Miloud muttered a number of phrases I couldn't understand, opened a package he had been carrying and took out a bottle with Arabic writing on it. He poured out some of the liquid into a plastic container and took cotton he had brought and with the help of the other two men started to rub this liquid all over Farid's body.

I read what the bottle said: "Oil of the seed of blessing-for treatment and healing." Finally the son peeked his head in the door to see if they were done. (Maybe he was keeping a look out so that no nurses would know they were spreading oil all over his body. I don't think there was anything medically dangerous about what they did, but I doubt that the nurses would have approved).

As we were all leaving, the son said to me, "Do you want to stay more?" I wasn't sure what he wanted, but maybe this was the opportunity to pray for Farid.

"Come with me," I said to him. We stood next to Farid's bed, and I put my hand on his shoulder and prayed in Jesus' name for his healing, whether from sickness or evil spirits or both. We then went back to the waiting room.

We sat there a while. Every so often one of the men would say things like:

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"Everything is from God." "Healing comes from God." "Everything is submitted to God." "May God bring healing." These words were intended to be a comfort rather than a dry fatalism, comfort in the sovereignty of God, trying to encourage the son and themselves to submit to God's control.

Although I don't know how these phrases are received by the ones suffering, whether as a real comfort or simply as trite words that do little to heal, I couldn't disagree with them. God is the one who is in control. His will, not ours, is ultimate and healing comes only from him. But there was no mention of God's love, comfort, closeness, or care.

For all the supposed submission to God's will, the conversation showed that, far from a resigned submission to the will of God, the people were desperately trying to manipulate God and the spiritual world to change the situation.

The men started to discuss what had transpired. They had already called in three *fqihs* from the area. Two had come to the hospital and read the Koran over Farid. One of them said that even though Farid couldn't talk, he uttered two words: "Allah, Allah."

"Really?" I asked. Miloud said he didn't know for sure. Apparently the *fqih* was alone with Farid and later told the people that he had uttered these two words. Did the *fqih* just say that in order to encourage them and appear worthy of his fee? This *fqih* also said that they needed a *fqih* who knew not only how to read and say all the proper phrases in Arabic, but also someone who knew how to translate them into French. These evil spirits were French spirits;

they didn't understand Arabic. For that reason they apparently didn't respond to his treatment.

The second *fqih* told the people that the evil spirits were no longer in Farid.

"So, the spirits are gone, then?" I asked.

"Well, that's what he said," said Miloud. All the men agreed that if the spirits were really gone, then Farid would be able to talk and open his eyes. Since he wasn't, then the spirits must still be there.

The third *fqih* didn't come to the hospital but to the house. He wrote out three things that needed to be done in order for the spirits to leave. First, Farid's body needed to be anointed with a mixture of oil and water once a day for three days in a row. Second, the family needed to take generous servings of couscous to the local mosque to be eaten by the believers. Third, the family was to buy a chicken without any mixture of colors in the feathers. The chicken was to be slaughtered, the intestines put in a clean envelope and carried out to the forest. The rest of the chicken was to be cooked and taken to the mosque on Friday to be eaten by the believers.

Tuesday had been either the second or third anointing of Farid's body with oil. Two days later he died. Cause of death: stroke.

During that intervening time I tried to develop a Christian response to some of these things and to discuss this with Muslims I met. Everyone had heard about Farid's illness. Although most people wouldn't bring up with me the fact that they thought it was evil spirits, I always said to them, "People say that

evil spirits did this to him.” When they saw that I was not just a Western materialist, then they were freer to talk about their own world view.

Pat and I visited Aziza, who speaks French more than Arabic. “Did You hear about Farid’s being sick?” we asked her.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “He lives right above my parents. This thing happens sometimes in Morocco. The person can’t talk. On one side he can’t move. I don’t know how you say this in French.”

I thought she was talking about how to say that the person can’t move. “You mean paralyzed?” I asked.

“Yes, he’s paralyzed,” she said. However, that wasn’t what she wanted to say.

“People say that he was attacked by evil spirits,” I said.

“Yes! That’s what we say. That’s what I mean,” she replied.

“How do you know it’s evil spirits?” I asked.

“He doesn’t talk,” she said. “Plus, the *fqih* opens the Koran above the sick person and reads it. This enables the *fqih* to see what’s in the sick person, and he can tell if there are evil spirits.”

“There are evil spirits (4) everywhere,” she continued. “For this reason you must say *bismilleh* (in the name of God) every time you take a step or walk, especially if you walk in a puddle, since the spirits like to be near water. Saying *bismilleh* protects us.”

At this point I repeated the same basic points concerning Jesus which I had shared earlier with the oldest son. I concluded by saying, “for this reason,

those who trust in him don’t have to be afraid of evil spirits or say *bismilleh* at every step. Jesus protects us from the spirits.”

I am concerned to speak to people where they are. I don’t know if Farid had been attacked by evil spirits, (4) but everyone else thought he had. To speak only about the medical aspects of sickness and say that God can heal completely misses where the people are living: in fear and bondage to spirits, some real and some imagined. I need to communicate to them that Jesus Christ has had victory over evil spirits, that he protects those who believe in him, and that he is able to deliver from evil spirits as well as heal physical illnesses.

I also need to be careful as to how I approach the topic of Jesus’ being able to heal. I could just announce that Jesus, the Son of God, has power in himself to heal. But at this point I would lose my audience. They would argue that God does not have a Son and that all the prophets could do nothing on their own, but were mere men acting with the power of God.

This would take the focus off the point I am trying to make in this very close-to-home area of evil spirits. By stressing that only Jesus is alive and that all the other prophets are dead, I want them to see that Jesus is greater than Mohammed. There’s something about Jesus that is special and unique. As they reflect on this and have other conversations with me later, I hope that the Holy Spirit will move them to be attracted by Jesus and to wonder in a similar way as the disciples: “Who, then, is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?” (Mark 4:41). As they know more about

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Christ and his life, they will be more prepared for the question: "Who do men say that I am? ... Who do you say that I am?" and for the Biblical answer: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt. 16:13, 15,16).

I spoke with another couple about Farid's situation. The wife was convinced that it wasn't good to leave him in the hospital. "They should take him home, and then we could give him the medicine of the Arabs."

"What's that?" I asked.

"We put sulfur on his body," she replied. I related to this couple what the different *fqihs* had said.

"Do you Christians believe there are evil spirits?" the husband asked.

"Yes," I said. "We believe there are evil spirits. But to cast them out, we don't have to put oil all over someone's body or bring the intestines of a chicken out to the forest or bring couscous to the mosque. God is all powerful. If he wants to heal the person he will. We pray and ask God to do that. God doesn't need oil or a chicken or couscous. He's not hungry. What does he want with the intestines of a chicken? Why does he need them?"

The husband, although he certainly believed in evil spirits, didn't have much confidence in the *fqihs*. "Yes," he replied. "That one is a liar who said to do all those things with the chicken. He doesn't know what to do, but he's afraid people will find out, so he says to do all these things, and people do them."

"God isn't like a machine," I continued, "where we just push a button and he does what we want. Push 'heal' and he heals. Rather, he does His will, not our

will. If he were just a machine and we pushed his button, we would be the gods and he would be the person."

I added another angle: "We Christians try to help people when they are sick or when they have problems with demons. But we don't do it for money. Think of how much money these people spend on the *fqihs*. They're desperate and will do anything. They call one *fqihs*, and he comes and says something. They pay him, but nothing happens. Then they call another and pay him and nothing happens. Then another."

"In Morocco, when someone is really sick, the people say, 'Oh, you must take him to the *fqihs* way over in Marrakech,' " explained the husband. "When you go there, and that doesn't work, they say, 'Take him to the *fqihs* in Fez. He'll know.' They spend a lot of money."

"Look, why would you take a sick person to see a *fqihs* all the way to Marrakech or to this city or that city?" I asked. "God is almighty and powerful. He's everywhere. Does God live in Marrakech? Does God live in Fez? No, he's everywhere."

"The words you say are very good," said the husband. "But people don't want to hear them."

I went on to explain how we Christians help people and pray for them, but not to get money. We shouldn't make money from people's problems. I read Luke 4:31-36 and continued with the explanation I had used previously.

When I heard of Farid's death, I went to the family's apartment, as is the custom among Moroccans, to convey my condolences. Men came and went all

evening. The women came and went in another apartment.

As we men sat mostly in silence, one would say things like: "Everything comes from God." "Death is inevitable. It happens to all of us." "Everything is submitted to God." "May God have mercy on him." "It was written."

I prayed for a chance to speak at a later time about these events. I wondered what the three sons thought. Did anyone see the contradictions between "everything is from God" and taking the chicken's intestines to the forest? How much do they fear being attacked by evil spirits? Does their stated attitude "It is written" really reflect their inner feelings or does it just cover up a fear of the dark side of the spiritual world?

What does the oldest son think of me, a Christian, having come to visit his father and pray for him and now to come and convey my condolences? Does he think, 'The Muslim *fqihs* couldn't do anything. The Christian *fqihs* couldn't do anything either. There's no difference.' This had seemed like such a good occasion for the Lord to show his glory and show that Christ is more powerful than Islam, but nothing like that happened. How would the Lord use this situation and me in it for his glory and for the advancement of the gospel?

As I left the house, I paused by the son with whom I had spoken in the hospital. "Some day if you would like to talk about these things or would like someone to listen to you, I'm available," I said to him. "These moments are very difficult. When my grandfather died, I was very angry, against God, against the world, against everything. If ever

you want to ask any questions, whatever they are, I'd be happy to listen to you."

He seemed appreciative. I'm praying for opportunities to minister the love and gospel of Christ to this family.

Endnotes

1. It is difficult to translate the word "pastor" into Moroccan Arabic. The Moroccans don't have a history of a Christian minority living among them, as do some countries in the Middle East, so some Christian terms are unknown. I try to use Islamic terms that help convey what I am. I asked a number of Moroccans who know me for some suggestions. Most used the word *fqihs*. An orthodox *fqihs* is probably quite close to what a pastor is. He is especially known for knowing and teaching the Koran. He brings "God's word" at births, circumcisions, weddings, and funerals. He visits the sick. He prays. However, some *fqihs* are also involved in magic and using Koranic words in magical ways. Thus, when I mention that I'm a *fqihs*, I clarify that I don't do magic, that God forbids that.

2. *Sidna Isa* is the term that Moroccans use to refer to Jesus. Although most Christian Arabs refer to him as *Yesoua*, most Moroccans have no idea what this word means. Even when I use just the Koranic term *messiah*, people are often still confused. Whenever I use the term *Sidna Isa* (our lord Jesus with a small "I"), people understand right away that I'm talking about Jesus. Although some Christians object to the use of this term, communication is more important at the beginning stage than exact historic precision that leaves people confused.

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3. The prophets Elijah and Enoch (whom Muslims also call prophets) are also alive, having been taken up directly into heaven without experiencing death. I want to contrast a dead Mohammed with a living Jesus. Muslims don't think much about Elijah or Enoch (whom they call *Idriss*), but they all believe that Jesus is alive in heaven and will come back on the last day to rule. One Muslim-background believer in Christ likes to push Muslims to think by asking why was Jesus the one who had a miraculous birth and not Mohammed? Why did Jesus do all these healing miracles and not Mohammed? Why is Jesus alive and Mohammed dead? Why it is Jesus who is coming back to rule and not Mohammed?

4. The Arabic word here is *jinn*. "Evil spirits" isn't the precise translation. In the Muslim world view *jinn* are spiritual beings which are different from angels and demons. All angels are good, and all demons are bad. Some *jinn* are believers (Muslims), and some are not. Thus, some do good, and some do evil. In common practice, people want to protect themselves from attack by the *jinn*. Thus, "evil spirits" conveys the popular sentiment.

Farid could have been possessed. The physical manifestation was a stroke. The medical world is equipped only to deal with physical illness. Yet, even the clear medical determination of a stroke says nothing about the spiritual dynamics behind it. Job had real live boils all over his body. We know from Holy Scripture that these physical boils had a spiritual cause.