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Chapter 1

THE QUESTION

“Our very question invites God to reveal His heart to us.”

Early on a morning in August 2010, I carried a cup of hot coffee and my laptop onto my friend’s screened porch. I’d only been back in the States for a couple of weeks and still bore the deep exhaustion of my previous season in Afghanistan.

I set my coffee and laptop onto the table and breathed my thanks to God: for the porch, the screens that kept it bug free, the cool air, and the dense trees that filtered the morning light. I thought of my friend who was still sleeping upstairs and silently thanked her for welcoming me, once again, into her quiet, peaceful home.

I sat down on a wooden Adirondack chair, sipped my coffee, and logged onto my computer. My computer, such a faithful companion—a battered Toshiba laptop still laced in Afghan dust. It booted slowly and so I sipped my coffee, breathed the

morning air, and watched the blessedly dust-free leaves float in the gentle breeze.

Quiet. Peaceful. America.

Still, my body was only slowly uncoiling from the tight, chronic stress of life in a war zone.

The previous year in Afghanistan had been both joyous and exhausting. In the summer of 2009, while I was in the midst of preparing to receive a team of young adults who were exploring overseas work, the Afghan secret police informed me of a specific kidnapping threat. They were sure I was the target. I packed my evacuation bag in a chaotic rush, my insides numb with shock and confusion. The next day, the police discovered that I had not been the target after all, so I returned to my Afghan home.

I continued plans to welcome the team while more threats surfaced. Finally, at around 4:30 in the afternoon, just a few days before the team was meant to arrive, an explosion rocked my house. The concussion struck my ribs with the force of a flat board swung by a strong man. I gasped, caught the wall and my breath, and realized what I had to do.

The team was already on its way, so I traveled to Dubai to meet and tell them, "I'm so sorry. But it's just too dangerous right now for you to come." Confused and disappointed, the team, four young adults, spent a couple of weeks in Dubai and then made their way to Jordan while I returned to my Afghan home.

A month later, I prepared to leave the country for a break.

Once again, I faced a kidnapping threat. This time it wasn't specific, but was instead associated with the road I needed to travel.

How does one pack for a possible kidnapping? I spent hours deciding, un-deciding, re-deciding. Really. How does one pack for a possible kidnapping? Late in the afternoon I gave up, zipped my bag closed, and resigned myself to whatever would happen to me the next day.

That evening, I found a large piece of white board, took out my markers and colored pencils, and went to work. I covered the sheet with pencil-drawn faces, eyes looking straight at me, some full of fear, some resolve. Then, with Magic Marker, I began writing the names of God, first in the backward looping characters of the Dari alphabet, then in the boxier characters of my own English. Khuda Qaderi Mutlack, all-powerful God, Master of the universe, Lover of my soul. I wrote until there was no more space, and, in the writing, began to find peace.

When I finished the board, I wrapped my knees in my arms and started to sing. Over the course of the next several hours, I sang every worship song I knew.

That night, I slept easily and gently. At six o'clock in the morning, I pulled a blue burqa over my head, slipped into Afghan sandals, and sat down in the back seat of an old Russian taxi. In the front, a gray-bearded Pashtun man gave me instructions. "Keep your face covered. Don't let your hands show. When they stop us, look away. Don't let them see your blue eyes through the screen."

Next to him sat a middle-aged, bearded Hazara man with a

small gray turban. “I will tell them you are my wife. There will be many checkpoints. Some will be illegal. Just don’t move and please, please, don’t say anything.”

I sat in the backseat, watching the world through the screen of my burqa. I prayed, sang songs inside my heart, recalled Scriptures, and watched. I had no idea what would happen, and yet I was oddly at peace.

We did stop at checkpoint after checkpoint. At one, men with Kalashnikovs (military assault weapons), some in uniform, some not, questioned us closely. I knew the consequences of being found out; my driver and chaperone would likely be killed, and I would be taken to God knows where. I kept my eyes averted and my heart focused on Jesus. It took us three hours to cross over to safety.

That experience and so many others took their toll.

In the spring of 2010, I planned yet another out-of-country trip. I needed to see a doctor for a test that could not be performed in Afghanistan. I bought a ticket for Wednesday, May 18, 2010, on Pamir Airways.

On Tuesday afternoon, May 17, I packed a small suitcase and made arrangements to travel to the airport the following morning. Just as I finished packing, I received a startling phone call. It began with a gasp. “Thank God.” Then followed in a rush of words, “I knew you were going. I couldn’t remember what day. Did you hear?”

“Hear what?”

The story that followed took my breath away. The morning

flight, one day before the one I was meant to take, never reached its destination. Instead, the plane crashed into the Salang, the mountains in the middle of Afghanistan. All the passengers and crew were killed.¹

I missed death by a day, just one day.

I never did make that medical appointment.



The challenges of that season in Afghanistan weren't over. In late May 2010, Afghan television showed a cellphone film of a group of Afghan men praying, worshipping, and being baptized as Christians. Riots swept through the streets of my small town. Once again, I packed my evacuation bag, this time to the staccato rhythm of automatic gunfire and the sounds of men yelling beyond the walls.

I spent the day dressed and ready to go, my scarf around my head and my sandals on my feet. By evening, the rioters had disbanded and an uneasy calm settled over the city. The next day, Friday, the day of afternoon prayers, I took my evacuation bag and sought refuge in a nearby foreign military base.

I was grateful when the mullahs² called for calm and our town returned to normal. By evening, I was once again back in my Afghan home.

These things take their toll.

Sometime in early July, a neighbor called me to his house. I drank tea with him and his wife and children. We talked about floods and orchards and crops and I wondered why he had

requested my presence. Eventually, he got to his point.

Men, outsiders, perhaps from Kabul, had come to our neighborhood mosque. They had a simple request: throw rockets at the foreign woman.

I kept my calm. “What did the men in the mosque decide?”

“They decided they will watch you.”

So they did. They talked to my staff, the beneficiaries of my projects, my neighbors, and the shopkeepers on the corners. And they watched me. Men stood in groups and watched me walk out of my house. They watched the gates I disappeared through and waited for me to return. They talked among themselves: assessing, evaluating, deciding.

The stress takes its toll.

Finally, at the end of July 2010, I packed my things and returned to America. I desperately needed a break. I needed peace. I needed to breathe. That morning I sat with my morning coffee and laptop on my friend’s screened-in porch and watched the leaves gently float in the morning breeze. When my laptop booted, I clicked onto email.

I think I stopped breathing. I know my limbs went cold. I read all the message headers at the same time. I couldn’t move. I saw names of senders: coworkers and friends from my town in Afghanistan, friends from Kabul, others who normally lived in Afghanistan but were now in England, Canada, or Seattle. I saw their names and felt a wail rise up from within the pit of my stomach. And yet, I had no breath. My cry was trapped—cold, hard, and fierce.

I began clicking on the messages and slowly the story took shape. A team of foreign medical workers had been executed in the mountains of northern Afghanistan.³

My mind spun. Faces of friends floated into focus, and yet I didn't know who was on that team. I searched the Internet for names, but the release of information was slow. I returned to the emails and pieced the stories together. I recognized one and then another and then another member of that team.

I don't remember what happened after that. The next few days are lost to me. I do remember that at some point that morning my friend, whose house I was staying in, awakened. She walked out onto the porch, took one look at me, and began to cry. I don't know what she saw in my face, but it was enough to tell her that something had gone terribly wrong.

I remember trying to explain what little I knew and at the same time wishing for all the world that we were not having this conversation on her cool, peaceful porch. I knew that once again I had brought violence and loss into the life of someone whose heart went to Afghanistan because it went with me.

I wanted to protect her, to shield her from the loss and the pain and the fear. I wanted her to be like other Americans for

BOTH WE WHO GO, and those who love those who go, face the deep evil in the world and turn to God with all our human fragility. We ask the question: why does God call us to dangerous places? Our very question invites God to reveal His heart to us.

whom Afghanistan is just a news report. But it was too late. She'd already seen the pictures of my Afghan friends. She'd heard their voices on audio files I'd recorded. And more than anything else, she'd listened to my stories. She'd heard my voice and seen my eyes when I talked about people I had come to know and love so deeply.

For my friend, Afghanistan was and will always be a place full of precious and beautiful human beings and also a place of devastating violence. Although she never stepped down from a plane at Kabul airport, she, like the friends and families of all of us who go to a dangerous place, had certainly been there. The losses I experienced, she experienced with me.

So on that August morning, my friend sat down on an Adirondack chair in a tree-enclosed porch in the middle of America and wept for a group of fragile human beings who had been brutally executed in the mountains of Afghanistan, and for their friends and families who would never be the same.

Since that August day, other aid workers have been killed or kidnapped in Afghanistan. The names and stories of some have been posted on the Internet. Most, especially those who were kidnapped, held hostage, and later freed will remain forever nameless except to those who know and love them.

None of us will ever be the same. The trauma many of us have experienced is real. It's shaped us, marked, and transformed us.

We ask our question from the experiences of living in places of chronic stress, sporadic trauma, and brutal martyrdom. Both

we who go, and those who love those who go, face the deep evil in the world and turn to God with all our human fragility. We ask the question: why does God call us to dangerous places?

Our very question invites God to reveal His heart to us.

As I write these words, I'm remembering a European husband and father who spent a month chained to an Afghan man. Hostages. I'm thinking about his wife and children who spent that same month trying to breathe. I know of a father who buried his daughter in the Afghan dust and who somehow found the grace to forgive those who had taken her from him. I think of a woman who remembers her martyred friends every time she eats pancakes because that was something they'd done together.

I'm writing, also, for the mothers and fathers who wake up in the morning and check the news just to make sure their children are still alive; and grandmothers who swallow their fear, Skype with their grandchildren, and ache to have them home.

I'm writing for the workers who come home shattered, lost, and confused; and the friends, families, and church communities who struggle to receive them.

My question isn't limited to Afghanistan, but encompasses all the dangerous places—places where people go because Christ calls them to do so.

A young mother loses her husband to dengue fever in south-east Asia. A family is plucked from a roof in Chad. Another family is lost in Yemen. The children turn up, but the parents are never found. A college student with a heart for inner-city ministry is brutally assaulted and killed. Black leather-coated men

enter a house in Central Asia and carry a husband away. Days later he's returned, but neither he nor his wife will ever be the same.

That's the thing; we're never the same. We go to dangerous places with Jesus, and we're never the same.

Somewhere along the journey, we each look into the face of darkness and ask a frightening question: why does God call His beloved children to such a dangerous place?

It's a fair question, necessary, personal. And we're not the first to ask it.

Before us, generations of Christian evangelists, doctors, teachers, and aid workers followed Christ to Japan, Ghana, Fiji, Palestine, and a host of other dangerous locations. They faced disease, hunger, war, and even cannibalism and crucifixion. Some died, some were killed, and some returned home, their mental and physical health broken.

Nor are any of us giants. We are not Christian Navy SEALs, the toughest, most committed, most hard-core followers of Christ. Instead, we are completely human.

We are idealistic young men and women hoping to bring light and love into the world. We are occupational therapists who teach local mothers how to help their children afflicted with cerebral palsy. We are art therapists who help Serbian children make sense of the war they've experienced. We are seasoned aid workers feeding the hungry in Syrian refugee camps. We are retirees who have raised our children and answered the call to train medical personnel in West Africa.

We are doctors and lawyers, dancers and writers, project managers, technologists, and linguists. We are flesh and blood. Fragile. Hopeful, sometimes frightened, always human.

And those who send us are just like us: sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, friends, grandparents. Some of us go to church and raise our hands. Some of us sing the liturgy and kneel before the Communion rail. We read NIV Bibles, KJV, NASB, ESV, and any of a dozen other translations. We attend denominational churches, house churches, and independent churches.

We are wealthy and poor, white, Asian, African American, Hispanic. We are married and single, men and women, old and young.

The thing we all hold in common is that we love Jesus and we've walked with Him into a dangerous place.

For some of us the journey has been shattering. It's important to say that. It's important to recognize that when we talk about walking with Christ into a dangerous place, we're talking about pain, fear, and loss. We're talking about stress, trauma, secondary trauma, and posttraumatic stress. Yet we go and count it a privilege to do so.

WE FACE SQUARELY and honestly what it means to follow Christ into a world that does not know Him. As we do so, we find answers that move beyond romance and excitement. We find purpose, comfort, and the peace that Christ offers us—a peace beyond even the most horrific circumstances. We find the heart of God.

In our experience, we face squarely and honestly what it means to follow Christ into a world that does not know Him. As we do so, we find answers that move beyond romance and excitement. We find purpose, comfort, and the peace that Christ offers us—a peace beyond even the most horrific circumstances. We find the heart of God.

As I write, my shoulders are tense and my breath shallow, and yet I sense holiness. There's something sacred in the journey—something sacred for all of us. Something none of us would trade for anything in the world.

In the fall of 2012, I took a train from Germany into Holland. I had made arrangements to visit dear friends from Afghanistan. For the sake of sharing the story, I'll change their names.

I'd not seen Lars, Noa, and their children since Lars's kidnapping; a crisis event that cost all of us dearly. I'd been planning the visit for some time and was sure I was ready, but I wasn't.

I arrived at the station early and decided on a short walk before our meeting. It didn't take me long to start crying. I can't tell you why I was crying, only that I was and I couldn't stop. I must have been a sight, a solitary woman dragging a suitcase down a midday street, sobbing. Strangers passed by and looked away.

Eventually, I gathered my breath and returned to the train station. I found Noa waiting for me. The joy of seeing her and the pain of our shared experience nearly swept my legs from beneath me.

Later that evening the three of us—Lars, Noa, and I—sat together, breathed, and shared our stories. Noa talked about

shock, fear, and deep sadness. Lars described his chains and helplessness. I spoke of shock and numbness.

If our conversation had stayed there, I think we would have drowned. Instead, I noticed something subtle but deep. We each shared glimpses, soft touches of grace. We reflected on how God had prepared us before the crisis to walk through it. We talked about the different ways He had been with each of us through the long season of Lars's captivity. We reflected on the gentleness with which He had held us when the kidnapping was over and we each lay wounded, exhausted, and confused in His arms.

We spoke these things through tears and trembling words. In doing so, we touched threads of Christ's presence woven through a dense and traumatic tapestry. It was not a conversation of exultant victory. There was no celebratory glory, but there was certainly glory.

In the midst of our pain-filled conversation, I recognized that we were sitting in the sacred, the holy. We had brushed against the eternal, transcendent God. Our trauma, sorrow, and grief were interwoven with grace, love, and even, though it's impossible to explain, joy.

I know as I write this that these are mysteries more profound than the words I choose to articulate them. I also know that I am grateful for having experienced Christ so deeply. In a very intense way, we shared both in Christ's suffering and His resurrection, and I am awed in the complete sense of that word.



Shortly after my trip to Holland, I found myself at church in America. We were celebrating Communion and the worship band was playing a simple, familiar song taken from Psalm 27:4:

One thing have I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD
and to inquire in his temple.

Before I went to Afghanistan, I had thought God's presence was an escape from the chaos and pain of the world, and I longed to be in that place of perfect peace, love, and joy. But that Sunday morning, as we sang and shared the broken bread and cup, I realized I had indeed seen the beauty of the Lord. I had seen God's sorrow and God's joy, God's suffering and God's celebration.

That was not the vision I wanted and yet I was transfixed, held in place by a force I could not define. Part of me wanted to shout, "No! This is not what I signed up for. This is not what I want." I ached to push my way out of the pew and flee God's terrible beauty, and yet I couldn't move. I was captivated by a God who loves completely, not in denial but rather in embrace—a God who, in the place of suffering, both suffers and loves.

This book is my humble attempt to explore what it means to know this God who suffers and loves and invites His fragile children into life with Him.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Chapter 1: The Question



Please take time to reflect on what you have read. You can use the space provided, or better yet, use a separate journal to go deeper into the Scriptures and truths that are written.

1. How do you think God views the suffering of some of His people?
2. Can you imagine following Christ even if the journey includes suffering and loss?
3. Consider Psalm 27:4. Write out the verse. What do you desire most from the Lord?
4. For what or for whom do you sense God consistently calling your attention, care, or concern?

5. What are the gifts, talents, and abilities that God has given to you in this season? Can you offer them back to Him?

6. Are you willing to follow Christ wherever He leads?