

11. Yohanna Katanacho

This article is a condensation of the account of the life of Yohanna Katanacho given at the website of CISF, the Christian International Scholarship Foundation.^{1 2}

Yohanna was born into a Roman Catholic home in Jerusalem. His childhood home was on the historical "Via Dolorosa"—the way of the cross—almost exactly at station number eight of the Stations of the Cross. Though geographically close to the physical site of the crucifixion, Yohanna was nevertheless very distant from the God whose son died there.

In spite of a period of adolescent rebellion and the ongoing fighting in his land, Yohanna entered university in Bethlehem to study chemistry, blessed as he was with a good mind. Convinced that God did not exist, he became a leader within the atheist student movement, arguing that religion—particularly Christianity—was a bad thing and stood in the way of humanistic progress.

It was then that the Lord got Yohanna's attention in a very powerful way—a way he could not ignore. Awakened one night at 3:00 AM by the ringing of church bells in Jerusalem, a strange air began to penetrate his body and he found himself paralyzed, unable to move his arms or legs. Attempting to struggle, he could neither move nor shout for help. After nearly two hours of effort, he finally surrendered, saying, "O Lord, if this is You, free me and I promise to look for You!" Almost immediately, he began to move again, got up, drank some water and returned to bed. By the next day, the thought of arguing that God does not exist struck fear in his heart, as did even walking in dark places. Puzzled and confused, he began to search earnestly for God.

Although interested in Bible study, he still struggled with the idea of eternal judgment and thought God to be unfair. It was at a "revival" meeting in Jerusalem where the words, "You are a sinner" made him face his own sinful heart and his need for a savior. Yet, even then, his scientifically trained mind still remained unconvinced. It was during that same meeting, when the preacher encouraged him to give his heart to the Lord that he decided to take a step of faith, despite his doubts. Yohanna says he told God, "You can have my heart, but you'll have yet to convince my mind."

Over the coming weeks, Yohanna had three vivid dreams that painted a radical picture of the grace of Christ. In the final one, he looked up into the face of the Savior

1 <http://www.cisf.org/-dr-yohanna-katanacho-palestine>

2 CISF is a non-profit ministry focused on developing Servant Leaders for the majority-world Church by identifying and investing in the advanced theological education of gifted Christian leaders from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe.

who carried him through danger and felt an overwhelming sense of peace and tranquillity. He also realized that trusting in Christ meant relying fully on His grace. Yohanna heard the Lord say, "If you want to follow me with your own efforts, you will lose me. You cannot keep grasping at my garment. If you are in Christ, then I will carry you."

It was during this time that Christ won his mind as well as his heart. Convinced of the Savior's authenticity by God's grace, Yohanna surrendered fully to his Lord. Yohanna's life continued to change dramatically. He soon became a leader among the Christian students, starting a Bible study at Bethlehem University. He became a minister in the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church and attended seminary and graduate school in the U.S.

Yohanna says that over the years, Jesus has shown him what it means to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. "For me", he explains, "love was an active and counter-cultural decision because I was living in a culture that promoted hatred of others. Not only did the very context in which I lived promote hate on a daily basis—by newspapers, television, media and neighbors—but daily circumstances reinforced it. One of the marks of Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews is mutual alienation. To break that cycle, I must have a completely different world view."

Yohanna says he struggled for a long time with loving the Israelis—particularly the soldiers who would put him through daily document checks, sometimes making Palestinians like him wait for hours to be processed. But as he began reaching out to them, he began to take active steps to express God's love. He printed up flyers in Hebrew and English with the title, "Real Love" and words from *Isaiah 53* which he would hand to soldiers along with his ID card whenever he was stopped. Whenever the soldiers would ask him questions, he was able to share the peace of Christ. As time went on, his feelings toward the soldiers changed—so much so that he actually wanted to be stopped and asked for his papers because such stops provided opportunities to share Christ.

In addition to ongoing efforts in reconciliation and evangelism, Yohanna teaches at Bethlehem Bible College and at an extension site in Nazareth. He continues to write and preach and look for ways to train young Christians with a heart to serve God and to love others in a way that promotes the peace that only Jesus can bring to the Middle East.