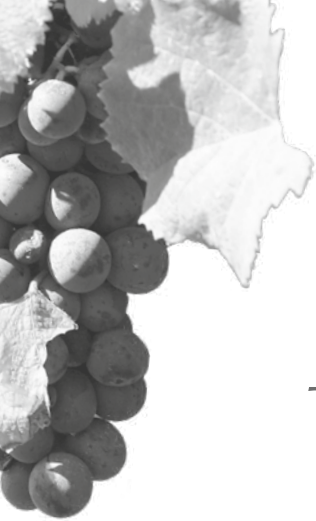




# The Faithful Gardener

Seven Seasons of  
Discipleship with  
Your Friends from a  
Muslim Background

Fred James



# The Faithful Gardener

Seven Seasons of  
Discipleship with  
Your Friends from a  
Muslim Background

Fred James

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek.  
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche  
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at  
*<http://dnb.d-nb.de>*.

*The Faithful Gardener: Seven Seasons of Discipleship with Your Friends  
from a Muslim Background*

Copyright © 2024 Fred James

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a  
retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical,  
photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author.

Published © 2024 by OM Books

Alte Neckarelzer Straße 2 · 74821 Mosbach · Deutschland

E-Mail: *[buchbasar.de@om.org](mailto:buchbasar.de@om.org)* • Internet: *[www.om.org/de](http://www.om.org/de)*

ISBN: 978-3-947995-29-5

Cover and title-page image by Andia/Alamy Stock Photo.

Graphics and layout: MediaWorks, *[om.org/mediaworks](http://om.org/mediaworks)*

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of  
Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. *[www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)*

*I dedicate this book to my wife Regina — dear friend, gifted  
disciple-maker and faithful companion on the journey.*



# Contents

Acknowledgements .....	7
Preface .....	9
Entering the Garden .....	13
1 Clearing the Stones .....	17
2 Sowing Broadly .....	25
3 Watering Regularly .....	33
4 Cross-pollinating .....	40
5 Supporting and Protecting .....	49
6 Allowing God to Prune .....	61
7 Multiplying Cuttings .....	69
Finding Life in the Garden .....	77
Select Bibliography .....	83



# Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the many friends who have shared their discipleship stories with me over the years. This fable is woven together from your true stories which have their origin in God's great salvation story. I am especially grateful to the following friends who gave insightful feedback and encouraged me along the way: Marlene, Ruth, Scott, Ben, Julyan and Chris. And special thanks to the team from MediaWorks, a ministry of OM: Simon, Erin and Gabrielle for the great production, design and proof-reading.

*\*Names within the narrative have been changed to protect identities.*





# Preface

## An Open Door

Christians today have a wide-open door to share the love of Jesus with Muslims. You may have a Muslim friend, colleague or neighbour. Your church may be located next to a Muslim community. Muslim refugees might have moved into your area as a result of war and hardship in their home countries. Maybe you want to share your faith with a Muslim friend via social media. Or perhaps you are planning to leave family and friends and go to live and work in a predominantly Muslim country.

Those of us who long to share Christ with our Muslim friends face many questions:

How can I even start to answer their many questions and queries?

What would help me move beyond friendship to take the conversation deeper?

How can I pray and read the Bible with Muslims?

How might I present the gospel in a culturally appropriate way?

If my friend does decide to follow Jesus, what might a journey of discipleship look like?

How can I encourage them to share their new-found hope with family and friends?

When struggles and problems inevitably arise, what can I do to help them overcome and persevere?

What type of Christian fellowship group would help believers from a Muslim background thrive in their faith?

If you have questions like these, then this book may well be for you. I have written it specifically for those who desire to present the truth of Christ to their Muslim friends. It takes the form of a story in which the protagonists explore the issues that arise when inviting Muslims into a living relationship with Jesus. The narrative tapestry is woven together from stories and experiences which have their roots in the young and vibrant church which God is growing in traditionally Muslim countries.

*The Faithful Gardener* suggests seven steps for taking our Muslim friends on a discipleship journey from first encounter to deep-rooted faith in Jesus. The first chapter uses the picture of clearing stones in a field. It offers thoughts on what to do when faced with questions and objections to the claims of Jesus. The second chapter looks at how we might sow the seed of the gospel in the heart of our Muslim friends in a culturally relevant way. Chapter three explores ways we can water and nurture that seed so that the Word of God puts down deep roots in their hearts. The fourth chapter is a call for unity and diversity in growth groups. Chapter five looks at some of the very real challenges that believers from a Muslim background face and how they can best be supported. In chapter six, the discussion is about recognising the things that often prevent believers from a Muslim culture being more fruitful. The final chapter returns to the beginning of the discipleship cycle and looks at how a small group of Muslim-background believers might multiply and form new groups.

## The Faithful Gardener

God is often portrayed as a faithful gardener or garden owner in scripture. Right from the beginning God revealed himself as a gardener (Ge 1–3). All through the Old Testament he calls himself the vineyard owner and his people his vine or vineyard (Isa 5:7, Ps 80). God longs for his people to be like a watered garden or a grape vine that produces abundant fruit (Isa 58:11, Jn 15:1–8). Sadly, too often, we neither tend the garden of our hearts nor produce good fruit. We so easily get entangled by the weeds and thorns, the cares and distractions of life (Mt 13:7). Yet the fruitful garden endures as a wonderful picture of a place where God's people live in *shalom* with him and with one another (Mic 4:4).

The garden was, at the beginning of time, continues to be today and will be once again, a special place of meeting between God and his people. Adam and Eve tended the garden of Eden in the beginning, Jesus knew anguish and intimacy with the Father in Gethsemane and one day the faithful will be fully healed and restored in the eternal heavenly garden (Rev 22). All through the ages, God has longed to restore the closeness and abundance we once enjoyed in Eden. It is remarkable that we can have a foretaste of that joy here on earth through faith in Christ. Yet one day we will see the full revelation of his love when we meet the Faithful Gardener in his own heavenly garden (Isa 51:3).

I sometimes wonder why God chooses to meet us in gardens. Is it because God reveals his glory through the beauty of creation? Or because we experience God's loving care for us as we carefully tend our gardens? Or is it that, in this special place, we can sense the Creator's goodness and generosity through all five of our senses: observing the beauty of an exotic flower, handling the heavy earth, smelling sweet blossoms, tasting juicy fruits or hearing him whisper to us on the breeze? Or is it rather because a garden is a precious place of refuge and silence away from the white noise of the world? Perhaps for some or all of these reasons.

## Gardening and Discipleship

A garden is a great place to meet with God and gardening is also a rich biblical metaphor for discipleship. Scripture speaks of clearing stones, sowing seed, watering well, encouraging unity in diversity as well as protecting and supporting young growth, planting out, pruning and lastly, harvesting. (Mk 4:20). Just as there are different gardening jobs to do in spring, summer, autumn and winter, so there are different stages of a disciple's walk with Christ — praying faithfully, reading scripture together, sharing stories, healing wounds and encouraging the weak, freeing from destructive practices, exhorting boldness in sharing the gospel. And what a relief it is that we are simply called to be faithful gardeners rather than being responsible for the fruit and growth (Jn 15:5).

Gardens found in the Arab and Persian worlds are often hidden behind high walls, jewels to be discovered, green oases in a dry and sun-baked landscape. They are especially evocative because of the stark contrast between what is watered within and barren without. In this way, the gardens found in the Near and Middle East or Central and South Asia more closely resemble the gardens of the Bible than the temperate gardens of Europe and North America. They sing of the rest, refreshment and fruitfulness offered by God compared to the harsh dryness of a life without him (Jer 17, Ps 1 and 23, Isa 35 and 55, Jn 15, Rev 22).

The idea for *The Faithful Gardener* was seeded in the Covid-19 years when I spent many hours working online at home. Between Zoom calls, I took short breaks in my own garden. And while I was weeding, pruning or watering, the idea sprouted, grew and matured into what you now hold in your hands.

My prayer is that this short story will help you walk with and disciple your Muslim friends in a meaningful and life-changing way.

In addition, I hope it also gives you a flavour of the culture and values that many of our Muslim friends live with, especially those who come from rural backgrounds.

### A Brief Note

In the following story, Christians from a Muslim background are referred to as believers, brothers and sisters or simply followers of Jesus. The two main characters in conversation are male but the principles of discipleship which they discuss are equally applicable to a discipleship relationship between two women. Bible references are made within the text (book, chapter and verse) using the New International Version (2011).

# Entering the Garden

I am standing nervously in front of a large wooden gate, drumming up the courage to knock.

Yes, it is definitely this house. The street resembles one long high wall with numerous pastel-coloured gates set in it. Some are colourfully painted, others traditional and wooden. The ancient timber gate before me is intricately carved and bears a dark blue enamel sign with the number 7 printed in white. The chill of winter is over and the late spring evening is mild and pleasant.

Allow me to introduce myself ... My name is Dawud. Peace be with you. I am 18 years old and live in a village in Central Asia with my parents and brother and sister. I am hoping to get married next year and am looking forward to going to teacher-training college. I was born a Muslim but got to know Jesus three years ago when my younger brother became a believer and I saw the change in him. It was hard for us at first as my parents were disappointed that I was rejecting their ways. However, after seeing a change in my behaviour, they now accept that I follow a different path. My mother is very open to finding out more about Jesus. Having shared my new-found faith with many friends, five of us now meet regularly to discover more of God's purposes for us in his Word. We usually eat together, catch up, pray and read the Bible, in a park in the summertime or a café in the winter. I never expected to lead a small Bible study group, but that's what I find myself doing. As you can probably sense, I am young and finding my way. I often feel overwhelmed by the questions and needs my friends bring: fear, poverty and loneliness to name but a few.

That is why I am here now. Last week, I finally reached out for help and sent a message to my uncle, Ibrahim, the oldest and wisest Jesus-follower I know. He isn't my real uncle but we all call him this out of respect. 'Would he have time for me?' I had wondered, knowing he was very busy and often away visiting isolated believers in remote mountain villages. Yesterday, to my surprise, he phoned to say ...

“Dawud, come for supper tomorrow evening.”

So here I am in front of his house. I can smell the aroma of grilled lamb from the cooking fires up and down the street. My stomach is rumbling and it is high time to knock.

The door creaks open a little to reveal the face of a kindly young woman.

‘This must be one of Uncle Ibrahim’s daughters-in-law,’ I think to myself. I know that the whole extended family, including sons, wives and grandchildren, all live together in this one courtyard house.

“Peace be with you. Is Uncle Ibrahim there?” I ask.

Without saying a word, as is the custom between men and women of a similar age, she ushers me into the courtyard. Then a young girl, probably one of Ibrahim’s many grandchildren, leads me to a brass bowl. I hold out my dry and dusty hands and she pours cool water over them three times.

Having wiped my hands dry, I follow her to a raised platform covered with a kilim, cushions and a white embroidered dining cloth. It is in the shade of a grapevine and looks very inviting after my long walk. She signals for me to sit and then ambles off to help her mother cook. I take off my shoes and gladly settle back among the comfortable cushions.

I find myself in the middle of a truly gorgeous walled garden, a vibrant oasis of spring green enclosed on all sides. Dividing the garden from the street is a long wing of rooms where the family lives. On the three remaining sides are high mud-brick walls. From where I am sitting, I can see large and small trees laden with apples, apricots, cherries, plums and pomegranates. Growing in between the trees is a wide variety of vegetables and flowers. I can tell there are fig trees hidden somewhere at the back too. The afternoon sun has baked them and the whole garden is filled with their sweet scent. All around the courtyard is a wide brick path crowned by a high wooden trellis covered with budding grapevines. Uncle Ibrahim is hopping around up there like a mountain goat. As I watch, he descends the wooden ladder and comes across to meet me.

“Peace be with you, Dawud,” he says, holding his right arm across his chest in greeting. “How are your father and mother and brother and sister?”

“Thank you. We are well. My father is away in the high pasture with our sheep. Nuh finishes school this year and Mariam is learning to cook.”

We talk for several hours drinking green tea, nibbling nuts and exchanging family news. Then my uncle turns to me and asks if I have

something on my heart. I have been waiting patiently for him, the older one, to enquire after the reason for my visit.

“Uncle, I need your help. I don’t know who else to turn to. I am more surprised than anyone to find myself trying to lead a small Bible study group. Some of us have come to faith and others are still checking out the claims of Jesus. I feel completely unprepared. It’s awkward and challenging because some are older than me, others struggle with emotional problems and many are afraid of what their relatives and friends will do if they find out. One was even thrown out of his home last month for starting to follow Jesus.”

“Yes, I hear you, Dawud. It is not easy following Jesus in this dry and barren land. And it’s especially challenging in our culture for a younger leader to teach older believers. I think young Timothy must have faced similar difficulties in Ephesus. In the same way Paul encouraged him, I encourage you. Don’t let anyone look down on you because of your youth. But be an example to them in the way you act by your love, faith and purity (1Ti 4:12).”

“Thank you, Uncle, for that encouragement but will you tell me what to do? Can you help me?”

Uncle Ibrahim looks long and hard at me as if weighing up what to say.

“Dawud, how committed are you? How much time are you prepared to give?”

“Right now, Uncle, I am desperate. If things don’t change, I’m ready to give up. I myself really want to grow in Christ and I also want to see these men grow. If you can teach me, then maybe I can pass that on and we will all be able to grow together.”

“Dawud, I am so encouraged. With a heart like this, I am sure you will see much fruit,” Ibrahim says, pouring me another cup of tea.

“Before we start our journey together, let me say this. I am an old man now and you show me great honour by asking me for help and advice. Yet any insight I might have was forged in the furnace of hardship and refined by much trial and error. I am neither expert nor guru and have known paralysing fear and great doubt, especially in my younger years. I hope to learn a lot from you too and so my desire is that we will both grow together. I like to ask questions and if you don’t mind being challenged to wrestle with issues yourself, then I will surely share what I have to give, by the grace of God.

“I invite you to come and spend some time with me through the different seasons of the year. When you are here, you won’t be needing your smartphone and you can leave your neat shirt and shoes at home



too. Bring some old clothes and be prepared to get your hands dirty,” he says, with a twinkle in his eye.

I am extremely relieved that Uncle Ibrahim has agreed to meet with me even though I am a little unsure what he has in mind.

We spend the rest of the evening sharing family news and enjoying lamb kebab washed down with apricot juice.

# Clearing the Stones

*He dug it up and cleared it of stones and  
planted it with the choicest vines.*

ISAIAH 5:2

A week later, here I am at Uncle Ibrahim's house with my old clothes and a lot of questions. Stars twinkle in the pre-dawn darkness and the cool early morning air is invigorating. I am looking forward to finding out what Uncle Ibrahim will share with me today.

"Hello Dawud. You can leave your belongings here and we will walk up to my brother's plot of land on the hill. There's something I want to show you up there," my uncle says.

As we gain height the sun rises over the mountains and I can feel its warmth on my face. We approach green pastureland with a cluster of mud-brick houses perched on it. Next to one of these, I see some distant figures standing together, chatting. We draw closer and one of the men calls out.

"Peace, brother Ibrahim. How is your family?" Ibrahim and his brother catch up on family news. After a while, the group of men, who turn out to be friends, relatives and neighbours, slowly walk to a rectangular patch of stony ground marked out with wooden stakes and a tightly drawn string. Uncle Ibrahim explains that his brother is going to build a garden here in front of his house. He has called his friends here to help today, just as he has helped them build their houses and gardens in the past.

"Dawud," Ibrahim says, "today we are going to clear the ground of stones so that Muso can later lay down some good soil, build an irrigation channel from the mountain springs and eventually plant a beautiful garden. For now though, let's join the others and help clear the stones."

'Seriously?' I think to myself. The ground looks impossible: rocky, dry and hopeless. Reluctantly, I pick up a hemp sack and start to fill it with rough stones.

After a couple of hours of back-breaking work under the rising sun, everyone stops, sits down on empty sacks and enjoys a rest. Uncle Ibrahim motions for me to sit next to him.

“Now Dawud, that was exhausting, wasn’t it? As you catch your breath, I have a question for you. What would you say we have been doing?” Ibrahim asks me.

“I have just picked up more stones than I normally would in a whole year!” I say incredulously, wondering what he is getting at.

“That’s right! We did indeed. Yet we did more than that.” He strokes his short white beard and continues, “We took the first step on a long journey towards seeing this dry and barren land covered with lush grass, fresh vegetables and an apricot orchard.” That’s the dream Muso cherishes. That’s what motivates him. And today he’s seen that dream come one step closer.



“Just as Muso wants to see a fruitful garden, we want to see our Muslim friends fall in love with Jesus and follow him. That’s what motivates us, isn’t it?”

I nod in agreement. That is indeed my desire.

“So, just as we are clearing stones from this ground, our first task in discipleship is to help those who are seeking after truth to clear the stones from their hearts. The stones are often the inherited untruths we carry with us, which prevent us receiving Jesus.”

I reflect for a moment and recall some of the questions that seekers have asked me about Jesus. Feeling overwhelmed by the memory of many difficult conversations, I fall silent.

“Dawud, it’s not by our own strength that these people will accept Christ. It is only by God’s power. Faith is a gift from God (Eph 2:8–9).”

I do know this but I am relieved to hear it again nonetheless.

“So the most important lesson in clearing stones from the ground is prayer. Pray for God to glorify himself in seekers’ lives (Isa 43:7). Pray that God will open their eyes as Jesus opened the eyes of the blind man (Jn 9:7). Pray he will soften their hearts (Eze 11:14). Pray for him to come in power and reveal himself through dreams and visions (Job 43:14–15). Prayer is calling on God’s power and should be the foundation of all our disciple-making.”

Ibrahim continues, “Ten years ago a friend of mine sensed that God wanted him to move to a remote village to share the good news of

Jesus. God may call us out of our comfort zone, but he always equips and prepares us (Ex 4:10–11). And one way he prepares us is through prayer. Before my friend moved to this other village, God told him to find some praying friends and to wait on him. He was to stay where he was and not move out until he was sure God was leading (Ex 33:15). In that time of waiting and praying God gave him many words and pictures of encouragement, which confirmed his purpose and gave him confidence to go. And today, ten years later, there is a small group of believers from a Muslim background reading God's Word together."

"So some of the stones are hidden in the ground and they can only be cleared by prayer?" I ask.

"That's right. The stones can only be removed by the Holy Spirit. As Paul reminds us, we are not wrestling with people and ideologies, rather with unseen spiritual forces (Eph 6:12).

"I heard of a sister living in a remote desert city," Ibrahim says. "She met some Jesus-followers and started to explore the Christian faith. She read scripture and asked a lot of questions. However, at night time when she slept she used to have strange dreams and found it hard to breathe, as if something were pressing down on her chest with heavy weights. She shared this with her new Christian friends and they all prayed for her to be freed from this oppression. Soon after that she decided to follow the Lord herself. The spiritual opposition is real but it can be overcome by God's power when we pray in Jesus' name. As Paul reminds us, Christ reigns supreme above all spiritual authorities (Eph 1:21)."

"Can you teach me how to pray effectively for such stones to be removed?" I ask.

"I can only share what I have learned," says Ibrahim. "Just as our Lord commanded, I have found it good to pray together with two or three other believers when praying for our Muslim friends. Jesus gave us a special assurance that the Father hears and responds when we do the asking together (Mt 18:20). One may have a word or picture to encourage the others. Two people may receive the same verse and that can be a confirmation of God's leading. Another may have a warning to save the others from rushing ahead unwisely. There is God-given power in being united in prayer.

"Dawud, what else do you think we might do to clear stones?" Ibrahim asks me.

After a pause, I say, rather tentatively, "Fasting, perhaps? Sometimes we fast and pray in our small group. We do this when someone has a special need. Though I don't have much experience of this."

“Yes! I encourage you not only to pray but also to keep on fasting, Dawud. Jesus did this in preparation for his ministry (Mt 4:2) and he assumed we would too (Lk 5:35). Fasting is often overlooked but it helps us to humble ourselves before God (Ps 35:13), practice self-discipline (1Cor 9:27) and be more sensitive to God’s voice (Ac 13:2–3). It’s important to find a way of fasting that suits you. Some fast one day a week, others one day a month. Some fast for specific needs as they arise. Some fast from meat, others from sweets. There are many different ways to fast. God often responds when we give our attention to him in fasting and prayer.

“Another powerful way to pray is to walk around the building or neighbourhood where you wish to see God move people’s hearts,” Ibrahim continues. “Pray for Christ to shine his light in these places,” says Ibrahim, “God commanded Abraham to walk through the land he was giving him (Ge 13:14–17) and he also ordered Joshua and the Israelite army to walk around the walls of Jericho before giving the city to them (Jos 6:2–5). So I encourage you to pray for the ground you believe the Lord is giving you.”

At this point I start to feel a little uncomfortable. My prayer life is mainly solitary and tends to be squeezed in between all my other activities. So I resolve to ask two close friends to meet with me to pray for our Muslim friends and to think when and how our group could commit to fasting regularly.



“Uncle Ibrahim, I see I still have a lot to learn about prayer and fasting,” I say. “Yet I still don’t know how to answer the specific questions of my Muslim friends. Some say that Jesus didn’t die on the cross but rather fainted or was substituted by Judas. Others insist Jesus wasn’t the Son of God and still others say the Bible has been corrupted. I am sure you are familiar with these arguments.”

“Yes,” Ibrahim says with sadness in his voice, “these are indeed some of the stones in the field.” After a short silence, he says, “You could point to the many scriptural and extra-scriptural texts that testify to Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection (Mk 16, Jn 20). You could explain that the chance of surviving a Roman execution was virtually nil. You might gently explain to them that Jesus was not the result of a sexual union between God and Mary, as many mistakenly believe, rather that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit visiting Mary (Lk 1:35).”

He pauses. "It is important to attempt to answer their questions as best we can with love and respect. There are also answers available in books and on the internet which can help us, and we can discuss these as they arise, in our times together. Yet I find if open conversation turns to closed argument, hearts are hardened rather than softened. My experience tells me that when this happens, the better way is to gently love and serve people. Let me tell you a story.

"It wasn't easy for one of the believers in our group when she was younger. Her parents and relatives pressured her to return to their faith. When she was old enough to marry, her parents found a young Muslim man and married her off. Her new husband knew she was a Jesus-follower from the start. After a few years together, his relatives made him feel very ashamed that his wife was a Christian. So he threatened to divorce her if she didn't turn back to Islam. However, she stayed faithful to Jesus. One day her husband threw her out of the house, even though they had a small child. She returned to her parents. Yet every week on a Saturday she would go back to her husband's house, wash his family's clothes for them and then walk back to her parents in the evening. After two years of her faithfully doing the washing, her husband was deeply moved. He fell down at her feet and kissed them. Then he took her back and soon after that he became a Jesus-follower himself."

Ibrahim continues, "Dawud, pray for those who are seeking the truth. Be the hands and feet of Jesus to them and let God soften their hearts. It takes time to build relationship. Let's not rush ahead, rather walk with our Muslim friends. Let's live life with them. You just heard that it took this sister two years of serving her ex-husband after she was divorced, before his heart melted. Once the bridge is built, we can walk over it and start to share more deeply. So let's love and serve our Muslim friends in practical ways and pray for the Lord to soften their hearts.

"Do you remember how you came to Christ, Dawud? What was it that persuaded you to follow Jesus?" Ibrahim asks.

I think back to when I was at school.

"My brother and I used to have terrible arguments," I say. "Then, when he started to follow Jesus, he became calm and pulled back from disagreements, saying they didn't really matter after all. He grew kinder and reached out to me. It was his new-found peace and gentleness that persuaded me to make the same decision to follow Jesus a few years later.

So I know from my own experience that Uncle Ibrahim is right. By loving and serving people, God can soften hearts and clear stones.

“Just as you were, many Muslims are genuinely attracted to Jesus by his love and peace,” Ibrahim says. “However, they are afraid to draw closer because of the fear of opposition from their families. For some this is a very real threat, as it was for my friend’s sister. And today news travels fast with mobile phones. It is much harder to be discreet.”

“This is a real issue for us, Uncle. One seeker in our group is extremely anxious about meeting together with other Christians,” I say. “What can I do to encourage him, Uncle?”

“In this case I would try and meet up with him in a café or park,” Ibrahim says. “Meeting on neutral ground away from the ears of friends and family can be helpful. As a friendship develops, your friend can ask questions and begin to hear the good news from you in a way he can understand. Hopefully he will find the boldness to keep meeting with you and when he decides to follow Christ, he could start meeting and sharing with his own friends, which would be more natural.”

‘That’s great advice,’ I think to myself. ‘I’ll try and meet one-to-one with my seeker friend and also suggest that our small Bible study group meets more in public places. This would give us more freedom to talk openly.’

With that we both get up and continue to clear stones till the sun goes down. With sweat dripping from my brow, I look around and see large piles of stones at the four corners of the plot. Uncle Ibrahim is right. It is extremely hard and time-consuming work clearing the ground. I imagine those stones have been lying there for decades, if not centuries. It is not easy for people to leave deeply ingrained ways of thinking.

“What do you think would have happened if we had turned up this morning and started sowing seed straight away on the rocky ground?” Ibrahim asks. I imagine the meagre crop we would have harvested, if anything at all.

“I guess that’s the same as if I tell someone the good news before their heart is ready to receive it,” I answer.

“That’s right,” Ibrahim says. “A few green shoots may sprout up. People may say yes, nod their heads in agreement and even come along to your group a few times. But the roots won’t go deep. They won’t be able to stand when hardship comes and will soon start to drift away. Listen to what’s on the heart of your Muslim friends. Pray for them. Help to clarify their misunderstandings. Patiently love and serve them. Clear the stones.”

I have plenty to think about as Uncle Ibrahim and I walk slowly back down the hill to his village. Who do I know who is searching for Jesus? What questions do they have? How can I pray for them?

After passing under Ibrahim's gateway, we stretch out our tired legs on the veranda and eat some dried white mulberries. Crickets chirp in the darkness and my eyes begin to close. I wonder what Uncle Ibrahim has in store for me next time.

### Clearing the Stones — Questions for Group Study

1. Read Isaiah 5:1–2. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. Who do the vineyard owner and the vines represent? What is the vineyard owner's desire? How does he prepare his vineyard?
3. What could “digging up the ground” and “clearing the stones” mean in terms of preparing your friends to hear the good news of Christ?
4. Which friends in your family, neighbourhood or workplace is God putting on your heart?
5. What stones do they have in their field? What holds them back from hearing and accepting Jesus?
6. Ibrahim talks about different types of digging over and clearing the ground: prayer walking, fasting, answering the questions people



have and serving their practical needs. Which of these have you found to be effective with your friends? What new methods of digging and clearing might you try out?

7. What practical steps can you take to pray and fast for your friends, to answer their faith questions and to serve them?
8. What resources would help you answer the questions of your friends better? Podcasts, videos, training, books, etc?

## Sowing Broadly

*A farmer went out to sow seeds for a harvest. As he was sowing ...*

LUKE 8:5

A week later, in early May, I am greeted by the smell of fresh bread wafting across Uncle Ibrahim's courtyard. My uncle is pottering around the garden inspecting plants and trees. I walk over to the standpipe and wash my dusty hands.

"How are you, Dawud? I hope that stiffness from lifting stones has long gone?" Ibrahim asks.

"Yes, Uncle, one day's hard labour was definitely enough for me!"

"Today won't be so strenuous," he smiles. "Come and have some breakfast!" He breaks off some bread, hands it to me and pours tea from a small blue ceramic pot. It is so peaceful sitting on the veranda looking out over the beautiful garden, soaking up the cool morning air and not feeling the need to say anything. Uncle Ibrahim picks up an old Bible and reads a psalm. We give thanks to God and pray for the people on our hearts.

"Last time we met, we spent time on my brother's land," Ibrahim says, "today, I'd like us to work in my own garden."

We pull on our boots, step over the water channel that runs around the courtyard and walk out onto the soft brown earth between the pomegranate bushes. I feel myself sink down a little.

"I cleared the stones here many years ago, but you can see that I have recently dug and prepared the ground for sowing."

I look around me and see long lines of earth mounds about a foot high with narrow channels between them. The earth has been ploughed by hand to form chocolate-coloured ridges. I appreciate the skill with which my uncle has got the lines so straight and parallel. The ground looks expectant and ready.

I turn back to my uncle and see him take several small white paper packets out of his old coat pocket.

“These are radish seeds. Today, Dawud, we’re going to sow them on this patch of ground.”

With that he reaches into one of the packets, draws out a handful of seed and scatters it in arcs as he walks slowly and steadily away from me. After turning round and moving over to the adjacent furrow he walks back continuing to scatter as he goes.

“Here, Dawud, you take the seed and cover the next section.”

I stumble in the furrows, miss my step and throw more seed to one side than the other. Slowly, I walk back to my uncle and redden with embarrassment. The growth will be pretty patchy where I have sown.

As if reading my thoughts, Ibrahim says, “Don’t be too hard on yourself, Dawud. It takes practice to learn to sow broadly. You’ve made a good start!”



We spend the rest of the morning sowing the large garden and then return to sharpen and oil his gardening tools before having lunch. The Central Asian midday sun is already penetrating, even in spring, and I am glad to be sitting in the shade of the veranda. I take a long refreshing draught of cool water. After a generous lunch of rice and chicken we sit back and relax. Then my uncle asks me, “Dawud, what did you notice as I was sowing?”

“You scattered seed on both sides so that the ground was evenly covered. You used bold generous movements. You sowed broadly.”

“That’s right! Just as I sowed the radish seed broadly, let’s be bold and intentional about sharing the good news of Jesus with as many people as we can. Just as some of the seed we sowed today will not take root because it is too dry or will get choked by weeds, sadly not everyone will hear the gospel, obey and grow in faith — just as Jesus said (Mt 13:1–9). Nevertheless, some seed will grow. When you come back in a few weeks, I trust the seed in the damp furrows will have sprouted. If I continue to water it, it should produce a good crop.

“Our task is to sow broadly and then wait to see who responds. Be prepared to sow the Word in and out of season (2Ti 4:2–5). You can sow broadly in so many ways, Dawud. There are so many possibilities, which we will explore together today. Sowing the gospel broadly is like

switching on a light to see if people are drawn to the truth and want to find out more, or if they are disinterested and wander away.”

“So, Uncle Ibrahim, how do you sow broadly?” I ask.

“Stories are a great way to sow broadly, with small groups of family and friends,” says Ibrahim. “Stories are powerful because they take listeners on a journey of discovery. They are open-handed and respectful. Stories don’t put people on the spot and demand a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ response. You can simply enjoy a good yarn or you can delve deeper into the spiritual truths if you so wish. They are much easier to remember than a list of propositions and they tend to travel well. Good stories will be told and retold. They can even weave their way around a whole community. Once I had the pleasure of hearing a story that I had originally told months earlier, that had worked its way back to me. Like a boomerang.”

“But Uncle, what type of stories could I tell my Muslim seeker-friends?” I ask.

“What stories do you think would make a good starting point, Dawud?” Ibrahim challenges me.

“There are so many,” I reply, “perhaps I could start by telling stories about Bible characters in the Old Testament, who they might have already heard of?”

“Great idea! You know, our Muslim friends are often familiar with the names of Old Testament characters but don’t know the stories as the Bible tells them. For example, I remember how, as a Muslim, I struggled to understand God’s requirement for blood sacrifice to cover sin and shame. It seemed such a strange idea to me back then. So by using the patriarchs and prophets, you start on common ground and build a ladder, rung by rung, all the way up to Jesus. You can talk of the animal that needed to be sacrificed for the clothing God gave Adam and Eve. Tell them of the ram God provided as a substitute sacrifice for Abraham’s son. Share about the lamb’s blood on the doorframe that spared the lives of Moses and God’s people. All these signs point to the coming perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

“You could also explain how the prophets, patriarchs and kings all point to the coming Messiah and his perfect sacrifice.

“Why not share Jesus’ parables with Muslims too?” Ibrahim suggests. “Jesus was a great storyteller and the parables are short, punchy and ready-made for sowing broadly. He told them to small groups and big crowds. Jesus himself sowed broadly,” Ibrahim says. I am beginning to catch my uncle’s excitement.

Just then, Ibrahim's wife, Sara, comes and sits next to him and joins in the conversation.

"My sister lives near a school and loves to tell stories to her neighbours with their small children in the afternoon," Sara says. "She invites them into her courtyard and they sit together under the shade of the grapevine. Each week she tells them a story based on one of Jesus' seven 'I am' statements in John's gospel. What I find wonderful is that she illustrates her stories with everyday objects. When she talks about 'I am the bread of life,' she picks up one of the flat round breads from the table. For 'I am the true vine,' she directs their gaze to the grapes hanging above them and for 'I am the door,' she points to the wooden door to their house. Her starting point is, 'How can I make Bible stories come alive so that my Muslim friends can understand them more clearly?'"

Sara continues, "I also like to tell stories about women in the Bible. Some of the women I know around here struggle with self-worth, neglect and worse. So when they hear the story of Hagar, for example, and understand that God sees and cares for each one of us and that we are special to him, they often want to find out more (Ge 16). Another character who speaks powerfully to women is Ruth. For women who have lost husbands, struggle with abandonment or are living far from home, Ruth's story of exile and finding acceptance among God's people is very relevant."

"Uncle Ibrahim and Aunt Sara, do you memorise a bible story and retell it word for word or simply paraphrase it?" I ask. Personally, I tend to avoid storytelling because I have difficulty remembering all the details.

"Some people tell stories word for word and others paraphrase," Sara says. "My memory is not as good as it used to be, so I prefer to tell stories in my own words. I have four or five that I use regularly and by now I can recall them reasonably well. The key is to paint a picture with words, mention the main points, skip superfluous detail and know how you want to end. When you finish, don't just leave it hanging. Rather end with a question that invites a response. You could ask, 'What do you think the message of this story is?' or 'What stood out to you?'"

Ibrahim adds, "I often tell seekers the story of my own walk with Jesus; how my life was before I met him, then about the moment I decided to follow Jesus and lastly, how he has given me such peace and hope. Sharing your own testimony demonstrates powerfully that God is not distant but close and caring. Our own story shows that he can meet with people and transform them. It may seem ordinary and unspectacular to us but it is studded with the jewels of God's grace (2Co 4:7-9).

“Dawud, can you think of any other ways to sow the seed of the gospel with your friends?”

I reflect for a moment and then remember a friend of mine who also follows Jesus. He recently showed me all his friends on a social media platform and how he posted invitations to find out about God’s blessing and all his friends could read it. It occurs to me that this might be a very effective way of sowing broadly. Then I remember the Christian radio and satellite TV stations I have heard of. I also know someone who hands out SD cards with Christian literature in electronic form. So I tell Uncle Ibrahim about these new technological opportunities to sow broadly.

“I have a friend called Bilal,” I tell my uncle. “He once explained to me how he asks questions on his social media channel: ‘What do you understand by God’s blessing?’ or ‘What do you think happens after death?’ or ‘How do you find peace?’ He says that questions like these about spiritual topics awaken interest and lead to fruitful conversations. He also offers to explain Christian festivals like Easter or Christmas. He tells me people often show an interest and want to find out more. When this happens, he links them with Bible study groups in his region. So I think we could use social media to sow the gospel even more broadly.”

“That’s remarkable, Dawud,” Ibrahim says. “I am old and these fast-moving new possibilities are too much for me to do myself. But I find them very exciting. Be creative about how you can sow broadly among your friends and relatives.”



“When you have sown broadly, look and see who is responding positively,” Ibrahim says. “If they are open and hungry to find out more, this is the right time for you to follow up with them. As with any work in the garden, Dawud, timing is critical,” says Uncle Ibrahim. “Look, it’s getting warmer now. The flowers and trees are blossoming. Spring is here and it’s time to sow and water. So when you have sown broadly, ask yourself, ‘Who is this the right time for? Who appears ready to respond? Have I prayed for them? How can I help clear the stones in their field and water their ground (Pr 15:23)?’”

“If someone is showing interest in the gospel, I have found that a very good way is to first listen to their needs,” Ibrahim says.

“When you are getting to know someone, listen to them carefully as they start to share their concerns. Pay attention because these things

are important to them. It is a great honour and privilege they bestow on you when they share their needs. There may be very few people in their family circle that they can share these deeper things with, because of the danger of gossip or appearing weak. As you listen, you are showing respect and love for them and this strengthens your relationship.

“I wonder, Dawud, what do you do when someone responds with curiosity?” Ibrahim asks with a smile.

I reflect for a minute and then remember a relative of mine. “Uncle, a few years ago, each month I used to visit one of my aunts. She was a Muslim back then. We would sit and drink tea in her kitchen and she would tell me of her kidney pain. Every time we met, she would complain how her kidneys hurt. It was clearly her biggest struggle. For a long time I didn’t know what to do so I just sat there. Eventually it occurred to me that I could offer to pray for her. I was surprised when she said yes. I was so surprised that, as a Muslim, she was open to praying with me. So I prayed that Jesus would heal her kidneys, and when I came back the next month her pain had gone. As a result, she is now really curious and is meeting regularly with a female cousin of mine to read the Bible.”

“Dawud, that’s so encouraging to hear. You’re right! Praying for someone’s needs in Jesus’ name is an extremely powerful way to follow up if someone appears open to Jesus (Col 3:17). If their friends and family are gathered around, then they are watching and listening and the seed continues to be broadly sown. You are inviting the Holy Spirit to act in their lives. He is like a wind sweeping through the room. My friends often say they feel lighter or at peace when I pray (Ac 2:2). I believe they are sensing God without knowing it. And then if the Lord chooses to heal them right there, they will experience God’s power for themselves (Ac 14:5–6). This can prompt them to find out more or even make a commitment of faith there and then.”

Up until now, I have been using a simple standard formula or a prepared speech to share my faith. Looking back, I feel ashamed because I often try to force the conversation in a direction it doesn’t want to go. This usually ends in an awkward silence.

“Uncle, are you saying that gospel presentation techniques are the wrong way to share?” I ask, wondering if what I have been doing was wasted.

“No,” he replies, “simple explanations of key truths can be very helpful, both because they are easy to remember and easy to understand. However, in my experience, they often come later in a relationship when you have built trust. First sow broadly to many, find out if there is a

desire on their part to seek the truth. Do you remember what we said about timing? Timing is essential in all aspects of discipleship.”



The rice and chicken are beginning to make me feel sleepy. My head is filled with images of seeds, furrows, boomerangs and mobile phones, and I realise how narrow my sowing has been. Ibrahim’s stories and questions have challenged me to think bigger and broader but I am looking forward to an afternoon snooze, when Uncle Ibrahim says something that surprises me.

“Thank you, Dawud. I enjoy spending time with you,” Ibrahim says with a smile. “Before we have a nap, I’d love to hear how you met Jesus.”

### Sowing Broadly – Questions for Group Study

1. Read Luke 8:4–15. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. Why do you think the farmer sows the seed broadly? What will happen if he doesn’t sow broadly?
3. In our story, Ibrahim talks about different ways we might sow the seed of the gospel broadly amongst our friends: by retelling Bible stories, parables or proverbs, sharing our own personal God-stories, through music or song and through social media or webchats. What types of broad sowing have you found to be effective? What new ways might you try?



4. In the Parable of the Sower, there are four types of ground and only one is fruitful. Sadly, many reject Jesus outright, fall away or get overwhelmed by worries and pleasures. What can we learn from this in terms of broad sowing?
  
5. In our story, Ibrahim suggests ways in which we might follow up with those who show interest in our broad sowing. He talks of listening well to people's needs and praying for them. What ways do you follow up? What has worked well? What new ways might you try out?
  
6. How could you use social media to share your faith with your friends? What could you share in your groups to raise interest and curiosity in the good news of Jesus? (Bible verses, links, videos, podcasts)

## Watering Regularly

*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it,  
but God has been making it grow.*

1 CORINTHIANS 3:6

On a warm evening in early June, I stand watching the setting sun cast shadows across the wall of Uncle Ibrahim's house. To my surprise, the gate is closed and all is quiet behind it. The pigeons are roosting and I imagine his neighbours sitting at home having their supper. For a moment, I wonder if I have misunderstood Ibrahim's message.

To my relief, I only have to knock once, and the gate opens to reveal Ibrahim carrying a large plank of wood.

"Thank you for coming so late in the day, Dawud," my uncle says. "Here, can you please take this? It's heavy. This evening we are going to water the garden together. You remember the radish seeds we sowed? Those seeds are thirsty and need plenty of water, along with all the other plants and trees. Evenings are best because the sun is low and the water won't evaporate."

"How are we going to do that, Uncle, and what is this plank for?" I ask, as I know there is no piped water in this part of town.

"Look behind you, Dawud. Do you see that channel beside the road? The water in it has flowed many miles from high up in the blue mountains."

I turn and see a knee-deep concrete channel edged with grass and filled with clear sparkling water.

"Dawud, can you wedge the wooden plank firmly in the channel? This will divert the water into the courtyard, flood the furrows and give the new seeds and old trees a good soak. We have an agreement on our street whereby each household is permitted to divert water once a week. That way all the gardens get well-watered."

I bend down to set the plank in place, then stand up and watch in wonder. The water really does back up and start to flow along a narrow

cement channel across the path and into Ibrahim's courtyard. From here it is diverted all around the courtyard and onto the ploughed earth. After two hours the furrows are full to the brim and the whole garden is drinking deeply.

The pink evening sky is reflected gloriously in the watered furrows. Uncle Ibrahim calls me over and together we clear a few blockages and deepen some trenches. Eventually all the vegetables and trees are well soaked.

"I think that's enough for this evening," Uncle Ibrahim says. "Dawud, will you go and remove the plank from the water channel and store it over there behind the gate? Let's have some tea and watermelon on the veranda."



As we eat fresh melon and sip hot tea, I lean across and show him a new chat on my smartphone.

"Uncle, after our last meeting, I went home and posted a message about God's blessing in one of my social media groups, and look, now I'm in conversation with an old classmate about how we can get to know God," I say. Ibrahim squints at my phone, as his eyesight isn't so good, but I can see his big smile.

"Great to see you trying out new ways of sowing broadly!" he says.

Then Uncle Ibrahim looks out across the well-watered garden and says:

"As we walk with new believers, one of our most important tasks is to water each other regularly with the Word of God (Col 3:16). If we meet together every week to study Scripture, pray and worship (Heb 10:25), then we will have the opportunity to put down deep roots and grow strong (Ps 1). Let me show you something."

We walk over to a large apple tree in the centre of the garden.

"This tree is forty years old," Ibrahim says. "I planted it when I built the house. Most of the roots are quite shallow but one or two tap roots go down deep to anchor the tree and also draw up ground water. It gets so hot here during the summer that this tree would die without deep roots.

"In the same way, we face the drought of hardships and the scorching heat of opposition, especially from our families and relatives, from spiritual leaders, and from our communities.

"If we don't drink regularly from the living water God provides in his Word, our faith will shrivel and dry up.

“I once knew a young man who had three brothers. He came from a wealthy family in the big city. One day, he met a Jesus-follower from far away and decided to follow the Lord. He grew quickly in faith at first and shared with his family. However, his parents felt he had brought great shame on them by becoming a Christian and they put him under pressure to recant his new faith. So he stopped reading Scripture and meeting for fellowship. After many months of threats and persuasion, his family threatened to disinherit him. Under such pressure he really struggled. Sadly, he gave up regularly refreshing himself with the Word of God and meeting with believers. In the end, he decided to walk away from Jesus and return to the faith of his family. So tragic.”



“Uncle, I am worried that some of my friends in our small group are not really drinking deeply from Scripture. They struggle to understand the text and are losing interest. Several have difficulty reading as they had to work in the fields from a young age and missed out on school. Others can read but prefer not to. They easily get lost in their Bibles. What would you recommend?” I ask, concerned that even though I was busily watering, the new shoots were not growing.

“Have you heard of Discovery Bible Studies,<sup>1</sup> Dawud?” Uncle asks. I shake my head. “They are simple to understand and everyone is encouraged to participate. They are a great way to water the seed you have sown.

“When our group meets, I like to start the study by catching up and asking how everyone is. We drink a lot of tea together. Then we go round the circle and ask each other how it went sharing with our seeker friends during the week. This keeps us committed to passing on what we learn.

“Then we open our Bibles and choose a short passage from Scripture. I find a series from creation to Christ is a good way to begin, especially for new believers. One of us prays and asks the Lord to speak to us through his Word. Then we invite two people to read the passage out loud. To follow up, I ask someone to retell the story in their own words with the whole group chipping in to help them.

“Then when everyone is ready, one of us asks five simple questions: What does this passage say about God? What does it say about us

---

<sup>1</sup> “Discovery Bible Study”, The Discover Network. 2019. <https://discovernetwork.co.uk>.

humans? What stands out to me? What will I do? And with whom will I share what I have learned this week?

“A simple Bible study like this helps our group in many ways. We all hear Scripture read aloud and retold three times. It allows both the aural and literate ones to take part: those who have only had a few years of school together with the few who have studied at college. Everyone in our group has the opportunity to hear God speaking to them personally. Many of us have been brought up to believe that the religious leader is the sole mediator of God’s Word and that we should not read the holy books ourselves. So it is totally transformational to hear the living God speak personally to each one of us.

“I love Discovery studies because they are participatory and interactive. More like a conversation than a sermon,” says Ibrahim. “One day I will invite you to our group and then you can see for yourself.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t study books of the Bible or do more in-depth Bible studies on special topics and themes, Uncle?” I ask, perplexed.

“Dawud, we all need teaching from the whole of Scripture. After all, every word is breathed by the mouth of God (2Ti 3:16–17),” says my uncle. “However, simple Discovery Bible studies are especially helpful in the early stages of a faith journey because they help new believers develop the habit of reading the Bible in a way which is easily reproducible with their family and friends.” There is definitely a place in large groups for prepared studies. It can be a great joy to learn from a gifted teacher. The early church met in small groups in people’s homes as well as in big groups in the temple colonnades (Ac 2:46, Ac 5:12–14). I believe there is a place for both. However, my conviction is that deep-rooted discipleship takes place in the small group.

“Did you notice the last question in the Discovery study, Dawud: ‘With whom will I share what I have learned?’” Ibrahim asks. Yes, I have seen it and am wondering how that works out in practice.

“If we want to see our faith grow, we need to hold each other accountable to share what the Lord is saying to us. If we know that we will be asked the following week whether we did what we said we would, we are more likely to be obedient. I know I am,” he says with a smile. “And if we said we would share with a friend, then others will get to hear the good news too! That way we will move from being hearers to doers of the Word (Jas 1:22–25)! Spiritual roots grow deeper as we face challenging situations and learn to rely on Jesus,” Ibrahim says.



Just as I am contemplating asking another question, I notice that Uncle Ibrahim has reached for a silk bag lying on the carpet beside him. With great care he takes a stringed wooden instrument out. He rests the round goatskin drum in his lap and holds the long arm in his left hand. As he begins adjusting the tuning pegs I notice the fretboard shimmering with mother-of-pearl inlay in the half light.

Satisfied with the notes he is obtaining, he leans back against a cushion, crosses his legs and starts strumming; a poignant yet uplifting melody fills the veranda and floats out over the garden. I recognise the words of one of the first Christian worship songs ever written in our own local language. The birds in the garden seem to quieten out of respect as we sing together.

Afterwards, Uncle Ibrahim puts the instrument down and turns back to me.

“Worship songs in our mother tongue are powerful because they come from our hearts and speak to our lives. Songs from other countries are also valuable. However, our home-grown worship reflects who we are and speaks of a joy refined in the fire of suffering and persecution.

“What I want you to see, Dawud, is that hearing God through the Bible is the primary way we water our faith to make it grow strong and vibrant. And a beautiful way to do this together is by singing Scripture-based songs (Ps 5:11). Songs are like stories in that they can be remembered and re-sung by families and friends. Suddenly the Word of God is alive and dancing through a community.

“In fact you can water in many different ways. You might tell Bible stories or share testimonies of how you’ve seen God at work in your life. You might sing local-language worship songs together, like I have just done. You could simply sit quietly together and look out over a garden like mine. God is as sure to speak to you through the beauty of his creation as he spoke to Job (Job 38–42), David (Ps 8) and so many more of his children. There is a such a rich variety of ways for your friends to hear God’s voice and grow.

“So be creative in how you water your people’s faith with the Word of God! Use biblical pictures and illustrations from everyday life. Use proverbs and sayings. Use music and song. Make your message relevant and personal as well as easier to remember! This will be a great help to the believers. We love stories and song. Embed your teaching in our culture without losing the saltiness of the Word.

“Do you remember the story of the apostle Paul in Athens?” Ibrahim asks? I shake my head and he continues, “When Paul was preaching in

the Greek debating circle, he made reference to their shrines, statues and poems (Ac 17:22–34). Paul is a good example for us. Let's teach people scriptural truth in ways they are able to relate to.

"For example, many Muslims love the book of Proverbs because their own traditions also have proverbs and sayings. This is a form of expressing truth about God and human nature, with which they are very familiar. I encourage you to observe the culture around you and use examples from it to communicate biblical truth."

I ponder what Ibrahim has just shared.

Then I see that it is very late and time to head home. Yet as if he could read my thoughts, Uncle Ibrahim insists I stay the night. That is the tradition here after dark. He assures me that it is unsafe on the streets at this hour. I say that I am sure I'll be fine but then I politely acquiesce and accept his invitation.

After a quick bowl of soup dunked with bread, my uncle and I roll out our sleeping mats and stare up at the stars sparkling in the black velvet sky.

As if to illustrate what he has been saying about creativity in watering with biblical truth, Ibrahim asks:

"Isn't it amazing how the stars reveal truth about God? They remind us of the one who delights in us and rejoices over us (Zep 3:17); they reassure us that he never sleeps even when we close our eyes after a long day like today (Ps 121:1); and they speak of God's faithfulness through generations from Abraham to the present (Ge 26:4).

"Peace be with you, Dawud, and sleep well."

## Watering Regularly — Questions for Group Study

1. Read 1 Corinthians 3:5–9. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. Are you more of a sower or a waterer, more of an evangelist or a disciple-maker? Reflect or discuss in your group.

3. In our story, Ibrahim shares that the best way to water or nurture new believers is to read the Bible with them. What particular way does he suggest we might do that?
4. Share your experience of using Discovery Bible studies or a similar simple way to read the Bible. In your opinion, what makes Discovery Bible study effective?
5. Which of the five Discovery Bible study questions do you find most uncomfortable to answer? Why is that? Why do you think the last question is so important?
6. Ask your friend whom they might invite to come along to a Discovery Bible study.
7. What creative ways can you think of to share biblical truth with your friends? What pictures, images, songs or sayings might help them?



## Cross-pollinating

*Now to each one the manifestation of the  
Spirit is given for the common good.*

1 CORINTHIANS 12: 7

“Meet me tomorrow morning just after opening time at the back of the bazaar,” Uncle Ibrahim tells me on the phone.

Next morning, I arrive early at the bazaar, lean against a wall and watch the bustle of activity all around me. Local gardeners walk slowly up and down the long rows of young plum, apple, pear, apricot and almond saplings laid out on the dusty ground. They inspect the branches, check for disease or damage, scan the root balls and haggle over prices.

“Good morning, Dawud! Thanks for meeting me here,” Uncle Ibrahim says. “Let’s head over to where they’re selling cherry trees.”

After spending a long time picking out two sweet cherry trees, my uncle opens the haggling with his first price. The young seller counters by saying he can’t possibly part with them for less than double what has been offered. He explains they were top quality, come from his very own garden and that he is in two minds whether to sell them at all. My uncle respectfully points out a few nicks on the stem and says that, in his opinion, his offer compares very favourably with the general market price. Their conversation continues back and forth for ten minutes until a mutual agreement is reached.

“Dawud, you carry one and I’ll take the other as they are heavy and unwieldy,” Ibrahim says. So we each pick up a sapling and walk back together through the narrow twisting alleyways to his house.

“Before we plant the trees, I want you to notice that, though they look similar at first glance, they are in fact two different varieties of sweet cherry. Like many fruit trees, sweet cherries need cross-pollination to make them strong and healthy.”

He takes a spade and asks me to dig two holes a little deeper than the root ball and a good distance apart. Then we add some rotted humus, set the two trees in place, fill in around with soil and water them from an old metal can. Standing back, Uncle Ibrahim leans on his spade and gazes appreciatively at these two new additions to his garden.



“Cross-pollination is an important principle of gardening, Dawud,” my uncle says. “And it’s also essential for healthy discipleship. Think of believers as different varieties of cherry tree. Just as different types of cherry need each other in order to bear fruit, so we also need one another’s diverse gifts in order to bear spiritual fruit. A single tree on its own won’t get pollinated and therefore won’t bear fruit. Paul calls us to rejoice in our God-given diversity and live together in peace and unity (1Co 12:12–31). Diversity in unity: a huge challenge, fraught with difficulties! We will look at the challenges next time we meet. Needless to say, this is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit!

“We know from our own experience, don’t we Dawud, that the pressure on new believers from a Muslim background is enormous? If we don’t have a loving community around us made up of variously gifted brothers and sisters, then we will struggle to stand firm when hardship comes. Just like these cherry trees.

“The need to meet together despite all our many differences may sound obvious,” Ibrahim continues, “but over the years I have seen believers disciplined alone who have really struggled to grow strong in faith. One-on-one conversations are absolutely vital for spiritual encouragement and challenge, but the believer who cuts himself off from others misses out on so much. They never experience the joy of shalom together, the beauty of communal worship and the helpful insights of other believers. They never taste the benefit of mutual encouragement, gentle loving correction and the challenge of exercising patience with one another (Php 4:4, 2Ti 3:16, Col 3:13). Meeting together as a group to read Scripture is critical for our healthy growth as followers of Jesus. We make up different parts of one body, with our Lord as the head (1Co 12:27). We hear God speak to us through each other in different ways. Each has different gifts according to the Holy Spirit’s distribution. The teacher can teach, the preacher preach, the prophet prophesy and the practical person can serve (1Co 12). You can laugh and cry together. You can encourage and build each other up

(Ro 12:15). For all these reasons, I strongly encourage you, Dawud, to maintain unity and diversity in your Bible study group.

"I remember when I came to faith, I was the only person in our village who followed Jesus. I was very afraid and felt extremely isolated. One day I travelled to the monthly market and happened to meet another believer discreetly sharing his faith with a stallholder. It turned out he was a brother from the big city and he put me in touch with another brother who lived in the village next to mine. We arranged to meet up once a month. I can remember being so grateful for that one brother.

"Sadly, some give up meeting together and very often slowly start to slide back into their old ways without the support of other believers around them. Imagine me uprooting this pomegranate bush here from the garden and planting it outside the gate on dry ground (Heb 10:25) ... It would struggle to survive."

"But Uncle, some of the believers in my group would put their lives in danger if they confessed their faith to their family. Others may be disowned by their parents. A few live too far away to meet for regular fellowship." I think for a moment and then add, "Perhaps they could receive encouragement from Christian stations via radio, TV or satellite? Or they could connect with Christian internet sites where you can chat or speak online?"

"Good ideas, Dawud. I think you know more about these possibilities than I do," Ibrahim says. "Yes, you're right. Pressure and persecution from family members is a very real possibility. If we can encourage our brothers and sisters to use media to connect with other believers, this can help reduce the sense of isolation and provide life-giving fellowship with others.

"In our Bible study group, we have a rich mix of gifts, ages and characters. We are like the plants and trees in this garden with all the variety of colours, scents, flavours, shapes and sizes. There's dear old Hawa, a widow over eighty years old with the gift of prophecy. Then Ishmael is a retired car mechanic and very good with his hands. He loves to help and serve in practical ways. If you have a broken kettle or vacuum, he'll repair it. Young Yusef is developing into a gifted teacher and preacher. He can explain the Word of God very clearly. His wife is a wonderful teacher with the children. Adam is a bold evangelist and loves to go to the bazaar and spend hours talking about Jesus with stallholders and passers-by. Then there's a sizeable group of children who enjoy the worship times and family feel of the group. And I do my best to lead and keep things together. We need each other with all

our differences, Dawud. The Holy Spirit teaches us as we exercise our various gifts,” my uncle says.

I can feel Ibrahim’s pastoral heart burning.

I reflect on what Uncle Ibrahim has said about cross-pollination and the importance of staying together despite all our differences in personality, temperament and cultural background.

Looking out over the garden, I marvel at the richness and variety of all the trees and flowers thriving together in one space. Apples, cherries, grapes, pomegranates, figs, apricots, strawberries, pears, almonds, persimmon, radishes, onions and cabbage *all in one garden*. Ibrahim’s garden is a true picture of unity in diversity!

“Dawud, I wonder, where you have seen cross-pollination work well? Where have you seen people’s differences bear fruit?” Ibrahim asks.

“My cousin’s group of believers flourishes by having people of all ages,” I say. “The retired folk love to look after the babies and little children. Their parents take the opportunity to participate in Bible study. The older children enjoy the Bible stories. The teens are actively involved in visiting the old people’s home once a month. The children’s discipleship is lively and exciting.”

“That’s a beautiful image,” Ibrahim says. “I remember visiting another small group when I was younger. There were believers from three different ethnic groups in it. Traditionally these groups despised, hated and warred with each other. The division was centuries old. No one would ever dream of inter-marrying. The dominant cultural group looked down on the minority groups and the minority groups despised the dominant group. Well, in that small group of believers, a young man and woman from two different cultural groups fell in love and decided to marry. With the consent of their parents of course! It was a wonderful picture of cross-pollination!” my uncle says with a wink (Gal 3:28).

“When cross-pollination works well, when unity in diversity succeeds, it is beautiful to behold. However, our brokenness means that, in reality, our communities are often filled with mess and conflict. Rest assured, Jesus can work with that. We will look at the challenges of resolving negative conflict later in the summer.”



Ibrahim motions for me join him as he moves away from the cherry trees and starts to walk towards the mud-brick wall on the other side of the garden. Set into the wall is a small blue wooden door that I hadn’t

noticed before. The paint is pale and peeling, weathered by wind and sunshine. He leans against it and the door creaks open.

“Beautiful!” I exclaim. Stretched out before me is an apricot orchard ringed by fig and pomegranate trees. The sunlight dances between the leaves and the branches sway in the breeze.

“This garden belongs to my sister and her husband,” Ibrahim says. “We have lived next door to each other for many years. We built this gate to allow our two families to live and grow together. The children come and go through it, our wives exchange food and my brother-in-law and I help each other with heavy work in our gardens.

“Just as our two families meet and mix together, I have seen how healthy it is for different groups of believers to do the same,” Ibrahim says. “Cross-pollination can take place not just within the group but also between different groups (1Co 12:26). Many individual believers or house groups are very isolated, so it is like breathing fresh mountain air when we come together with other groups.

“I remember a brother visiting our group and teaching on the topic of marriage. He asked, ‘What does it mean to be a loving Christian husband or a respecting Christian wife in our culture?’ (Eph 5:25–33), It was the first time that many of us had actually considered this issue,” Ibrahim says. “Many of us had carried over destructive behaviours from our old lives. It was exciting to see the Holy Spirit bring hope and refreshment. I learned a lot. The wife of one believer said at the end, with tears in her eyes, that for the very first time after twenty years of marriage, her husband had thanked her for looking after the children.

“One man confessed he was hardly ever at home because of the pressure of work. When he did have free time, he went out with his friends. He realised this was damaging his family life and decided to spend time each Saturday with his wife and children, We would not have been transformed that day if we hadn’t been cross-pollinated by this visiting brother.”

I reflect to myself that, as first-generation Christians, we often lack role models for a healthy marriage and bringing up children. So I can see that it is a good idea to cross-pollinate and learn from other groups of believers. It feels like we are in the process of exploring what it means to be loving Christian spouses and parents within our own culture. It must have been like that in the early church. Exciting but also very challenging.



“Uncle Ibrahim, I can start to see the importance of cross-pollination. You have explained that we need each other’s diverse gifts. You described how beneficial it can be to learn from other groups,” I say, as I try to order my thoughts. “On the other hand, don’t we also need time alone with God? Don’t we need times of silence and solitude? Don’t we need to be ‘pollinated’ by God directly as well as cross-pollinated by each other?” I ask.

“Yes indeed, Dawud,” Ibrahim says. “We are all called to develop our own individual spiritual lives. There are so many distractions and concerns that clamour for our attention and try to prevent us meeting with God in prayer and Bible study. Especially when we are young in faith, it is hard for us to develop new spiritual habits alone.

“At the start of our journey with Jesus I strongly suggest new believers find a spiritual companion to walk with them (Ecc 4:9–12). This could be an older brother or sister in the faith (Tit 2:4–8). You could pair people up with believers in your group so they have someone like this: someone they can question, observe and learn from.

“For example, my friend Jafar prayed one day and God told him to meet up with another brother who was young in faith. Jafar decided to be an older brother for this brother, and for two years he sacrificed other activities to share his life with this man. It was a costly step. He was there for him when he had struggles and questions. He modelled how to pray, read Scripture and share his faith. They cross-pollinated each other through their intense discipleship relationship,” Ibrahim says.

“That’s a huge commitment!” I exclaim.

“Yes, it is. But it’s the principle which is important. Successful discipleship is like an apprenticeship rather than a college education. It’s about shaping our attitudes and behaviour as well as our head knowledge. Life-discipleship connects head, hands and heart. It takes time and commitment. Believers from our culture need an especially strong community and significant practical help, as well as Bible teaching. This is because they have often lost their former community and have had no role models to observe. Are we prepared to be whole-life-disciple-makers?” Ibrahim asks.

I ponder that question.

“But let me return to your original question, Dawud. In my experience, believers can develop their own spiritual life through practising the spiritual disciplines,” Ibrahim explains. “The spiritual disciplines are based on Jesus’ own spiritual practices and help us enjoy the fruit of God’s goodness. We can practise some of the disciplines, such as

submission, service, confession, worship, guidance and celebration,<sup>1</sup> corporately. The other disciplines, such as meditation, prayer, fasting, Bible study, simplicity and solitude, we can do alone. These latter disciplines enable us to connect with God individually. It is through them that God pollinates our hearts with his love and truth and we can put down deep roots in him.”

I wonder how Uncle Ibrahim practises these solitary disciplines himself, so I ask him.

Ibrahim starts off by saying: “Dawud, it is important that we each find our own times, places and ways of practising the spiritual disciplines. Each of us is wonderfully and uniquely made in God’s image. So there is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to these disciplines.”

“Myself, I get up early in the morning and enjoy a quiet hour or two with the Lord here in the garden, weather permitting (Mk 1:35). During that time, I reflect, worship with psalms and songs (Ps 100), read the Word, meditate on shorter passages and let them go deep, sit in silence and contemplate what God wants to say to me through his creation. I really love this special time alone with my king before the busyness of the day. I might also fast one day a week or a little longer if I hear of a pressing need. I have developed these spiritual habits over many years to suit me. So I would encourage new believers to take small steps and find how they can grow in one or two of the solitary disciplines to start with,” Ibrahim says.

I feel both encouraged and challenged by what Uncle Ibrahim has shared. I am beginning to understand more clearly that we need each other’s diverse giftings and varied personalities in order to grow and mature. If we allow him, the Holy Spirit moves between us and fertilises our hearts just as bees move between cherry trees and cross-pollinate them.

And for our faith to grow strong, we also need solitary times in prayer and Bible study away from the group.

“Dawud, even you and I meeting like this is an example of cross-pollination. We are learning and sharing across different generations and families. I am very grateful for our times together and trust we will bear more fruit as a result.”

I am grateful too and am starting to feel better equipped to lead our little Bible study group.

“Let’s go down to the café by the river and have some kebabs for lunch,” my Uncle suggests, “I know just the place.”

<sup>1</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008).

So we wash our hands, wipe our shoes clean and head out of the gate together.

### Cross-pollinating – Questions for Group Study

1. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4–11. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. What is the main purpose of the different spiritual gifts? What happens when people don't use their gifts?
3. How is your group doing at encouraging each other to use their spiritual gifts and maintain unity and peace in the group?
4. In our story, Ibrahim talks of the benefits to a new believer in having an older brother or sister to walk with for growth and discipleship. Do you have someone like that to walk with you? Which younger believer could you offer to be an older brother or sister to?
5. Ibrahim also shares how important it is for believers to keep meeting together. What do you think causes believers to stop meeting together? In what ways can you encourage each other to stay in contact and keep meeting?



6. Ibrahim talks about the benefits of “cross-pollination” or meeting up with mature believers from outside your group. For example, teaching, finding marriage partners, having other role models. What benefits can you see in linking with mature believers from outside your group?
7. What external resources (books, podcasts, training, etc.) would help to cross-pollinate and strengthen your group?
8. Ibrahim shared about the value of spiritual disciplines for growing in faith. What spiritual disciplines would you like to explore and practice as a group or individually?

Corporate disciplines: *submission, service, confession, worship, guidance, celebration*

Solitary disciplines: *Bible meditation, Bible study, prayer, fasting, simplicity, solitude*

## Supporting and Protecting

*Carry each other's burdens and in this way  
you will fulfil the law of Christ.*

GALATIANS 6:2

It is only eight o'clock on a clear July morning but I can already feel the heat rising. The azure sky is cloudless and the vine leaves flutter in the breeze. Children are laughing and playing in the courtyard as they enjoy their freedom from school.

My uncle and I are far down the garden, staring at a huge old fig tree. Its branches snake and spread in all directions. Some hover just above the ground and look dangerously close to snapping.

"This fig tree is twice as old as I am," explains Uncle Ibrahim. "It has stood here since long before the house and courtyard were built. It has borne plenty of good fruit over the years but, as you can see, it now needs a helping hand."

He reaches down and picks up a cleft stick from the brick path. Then he wraps an old piece of cloth around the two prongs of the V-shaped end.

"This will prevent any bruising or scratching," Ibrahim explains. "Dawud, can you gently lift this fig branch for me?" my uncle asks. As I heave it up, he places the cleft end of the stick underneath it. Then he wedges the other end in the thick brown earth. 'That certainly looks more stable,' I think to myself ... 'It's like a gnarled old man with a new walking stick.'

"Now, let's work our way around the tree and prop up the other hanging branches. You lift and I'll prop," Ibrahim says. After half an hour, the job is done and we wander back towards the house and sit on two old chairs in the shade of the gateway.

"Just as the old fig tree needs the support of these props, we need the steady support of our brothers and sisters. Let's be ready to encourage those who are struggling and provide practical help with life's challenges."

You don't have to do all the heavy lifting yourself. You can help each other depending on capability and availability. But as the group leader, you should be aware of who needs a helping hand."

We walk towards the veranda and sit down on cotton mattresses around a low table laden with a teapot, cups and small bowls of apricot kernels. Uncle Ibrahim pours a cup of tea for each of us.

"Now, Dawud, sit back and have a good look at how I've arranged the trees in the garden. What do you notice?" Ibrahim asks.

"You've planted the bigger fruit trees at intervals throughout the garden and the young trees, fruit and vegetables are growing up amongst them," I say.

"Right. The older, more mature trees provide shade for the younger plants against the scorching heat of the summer sun. Without their shade, the fruit and vegetables would shrivel and dry out," Ibrahim explains.



"Young believers from a Muslim background struggle with all sorts of practical life issues and need the help and support of older believers to find a way through. And we older ones, like myself, benefit from the enthusiasm and strength of the younger. Without this essential support many stumble and fall. It is said that as many as nine out of ten believers from our culture turn back to their former religion, less for theological reasons and more for lack of genuine supportive community.

"You'll find that authentic discipleship is very much rooted in the messiness of everyday life. This is where the community of believers become the hands and feet of Christ to each other," Ibrahim says.

'I know this to be true from my own experience,' I think to myself. I have seen new believers isolated, lonely and helpless. Some have been cut off from their family and community. They may be penniless and have nowhere to live. I know of others who have been excluded from the job market because of their faith. Many have difficulty finding a marriage partner. Others are already married and their new faith can cause difficulties within their marriage. Some brothers and sisters have left for Europe and America as refugees. They struggle with extreme loneliness, understanding a new culture, learning the language, visiting the doctor, making friends and budgeting their finances. Their discipleship needs are often very practical.

"Let me give you an example," Ibrahim says. "One of the biggest challenges in discipling believers from a Muslim background is in helping

them find suitable marriage partners. Most of the young adults are first-generation believers with Muslim parents who are duty-bound to arrange a Muslim marriage for their offspring. So, in order to find Christian life partners for our young people, a group of us leaders has formed an informal network. We arrange events where our eligible singles can meet and check each other out. We let each other know when someone is looking for a spouse and see if there is someone suitable in another group. Helping our young people find a Christian partner is an essential part of discipleship and we need cooperation and partnership between the leaders of different house groups if we want to see our young folk happily married," Ibrahim says.

I smile to myself because I am interested in getting to know a lovely girl in the neighbouring town at the moment. Maybe Ibrahim knows?

Aunt Sara walks by just at this moment, carrying a bundle of twigs for the bread oven. She looks at me and smiles too. Maybe she has heard something from the girl's mother? Very little remains secret in our small town! She sits down beside her husband.

"It is especially hard for girls who follow Jesus and have Muslim parents," she says. "The girls desire a believing husband yet their parents understandably want them to marry an eligible Muslim. Young men may have greater freedom to choose a bride but young women, especially in rural areas, have very little choice. Although it is true that girls may have some say in liberal urban families. Traditions are changing and Western ways are spreading even into our region. When these newly married girls move into their Muslim husband's household, it is extremely difficult for them to meet with other believers and keep their faith alive. Their duty is to serve their new family and there is pressure to follow their former faith."

"What can you do to help believing brides who find themselves in this position?" I ask Aunt Sara.

"First, I make sure I am praying for them on a regular basis, since it is ultimately the Holy Spirit who will comfort, protect and direct them. Then I try and keep in contact with them at all costs, so they don't feel cut off. This is much easier today with a smartphone. They can still speak with believing friends even if they can't visit them. I encourage them to find a Bible app in our language and keep feeding on God's Word. Listening to worship songs can also bring joy and comfort," she says.

"Yes, helping believers find a believing marriage partner is a major challenge," Ibrahim says. "But there are many other ways in which believers may need assistance: putting in a good word for a brother to

find a job, giving a couple a small loan, helping when someone is sick or a family is searching for an apartment. These are all ways we can demonstrate Christ's love and presence in practical ways (Gal 6:10). Your discipleship group can become the family that a believer may have lost (Ps 68:6). Your more mature members can become a father or uncle in Christ to their younger brothers and sisters.

"There is a clear expectation in our culture that an older relative or authority figure with experience and networks will help a younger relative to get started. The father or uncle will often play this part.<sup>1</sup> He may help them find a job, a place to live or share his job skill with the younger person. I have heard that in Europe and America there are agencies and social services to advise and assist people in need but they really do not replace the social support provided by family networks in our society," he says. "When someone from a Muslim background becomes a Christian, they are often so distanced by their community and excluded from their natural social networks that it's very important that our older, more mature believers take their cultural responsibility seriously and help the younger ones," Ibrahim says.

As I hear this, I realise I need to discreetly link up some of the men in my Bible study group with older, wiser heads for practical support.



Then my uncle stands up, motions for me to follow and walks along a narrow path to the mud-brick wall that stands tall and strong around the garden.

"Dawud, put your hands on the wall and feel how solid it is," he says. "I built this wall with my own hands when my wife and I moved into this house. It's taller than I am and its purpose is to keep out the wild dogs and the goats that might wander in from my neighbours. Likewise, we need to help new believers to protect and prepare themselves for the attacks that will come. Fear paralyses us and stunts our faith.

"Ultimately it is God who is our defender (Dt 32:4) and good shepherd. He is the one who fights for and protects us (Ps 23). Following his example, we who are older in faith have a responsibility. We are called to be under-shepherds and protect those he has called us to walk with (Ac 20:28). One of the biggest threats facing believers like us from a Muslim background is fear. This fear can have its roots

---

<sup>1</sup> Arley Loewen, *Rethinking Shame and Honour* (UK: Micah Global, 2017), 42.

in persecution by our families, by the community, by religious leaders or even by state authorities.

“It is important to prepare new Christians to stand firm against fear. Just like this strong wall around my garden, you can help believers build strong spiritual defences. Teach them how to put on their spiritual armour. Remind them of the belt, which is the truth of the gospel — and show them the falsehood of all other claims. Remind them of their shining breastplate — that they are washed clean of all sin because of what Christ did on the cross. Remind them of their sandals — with which to boldly go and share the hope they have with others. Remind them of their shield — that, through faith in Christ, nothing can separate them from God. Remind them of their helmet — that they are saved by grace, not works. Remind them of the promises and assurance found in Scripture. And finally, remind them to pray for strength and grace, and for each other (Eph 6:10–18).”

I have heard some of the stories about Uncle Ibrahim and the persecution he endured. In his youth he was the first believer in our town.

“Uncle, were you afraid when you first became a follower of Jesus?” I ask.

“Yes, I was very afraid, Dawud. I was scared my parents would disown me and throw me out of their house. I was afraid of what would happen if my friends and relatives found out. We have a lot to lose. Yet what helped me was seeing someone live courageously in the face of fear: I was inspired and changed, because of an older friend’s testimony.

“Ali leads a house group in a remote desert town. One day, the police warned him, via friends, to stop his gatherings, otherwise he would regret it. Nevertheless, Ali was bold and continued to hold fellowship meetings in his small flat. One day he was sitting at home together with his wife when there was a knock at the door. He sensed trouble and his wife went and looked through the spyhole. Two policemen stood there looking impatient. They knocked louder and demanded Ali open up. Ali rang one of his neighbours and asked them to look out of their door and check how many policemen were there. He learned there were more at both ends of the corridor. Weighing up his options, he decided to leap out of the bedroom window. Unfortunately, he broke his leg. Nevertheless, two policemen dragged him off for interrogation. After two days they released him. Ali said it was only then that he realised the authorities couldn’t do anything worse. So he boldly continued to lead his house church. The young people in the group were inspired to be courageous like their leader and the house group is thriving to this day.

“Dawud, help the new believers to understand that following Jesus is costly but that he has won the victory. We walk the way of the cross but he gives us the strength to bear it. Teach them to expect opposition but to be bold and full of joy in the Lord. Do everything you can to help them prepare for the attacks that will surely come,” Ibrahim concludes.



Just then, I see a confident young man, about my age and wearing a black leather jacket, jeans and sneakers, enter the courtyard and walk slowly towards Uncle Ibrahim, Aunt Sara and myself.

“Peace be with you, Suleman,” my uncle says in greeting. Suleman saunters over, takes his ear pods out, and replies, “Peace be with you, Uncle.”

“Suleman, come and sit with us. This is my good friend Dawud. We have just been talking about discipleship and gardening. Dawud, this is Suleman, my oldest grandson. He is on vacation from his studies in the city.”

I feel a little intimidated by Suleman’s cool manner, university education and expensive leather jacket. But when he smiles broadly and shakes my hand warmly, I relax.

Aunt Sara pours us all a cup of tea and Ibrahim continues the conversation.

“Suleman, we were just discussing how hard life can be for Jesus-followers in a small village like ours. They are put under pressure by their parents, who, sadly, may even disown them. They are ostracised by friends and neighbours. Getting a job is hard enough; finding a believing marriage partner is almost impossible. Please tell Dawud what it is like for believers like you who live in the big city. How is your experience different from ours?” Ibrahim asks.

Suleman considers Ibrahim’s questions for a moment and then replies, “Here in the village, I am a tethered donkey; in the city, I can roam free. Everyone knows what I do here; in the city nobody cares. Our family is controlled rigidly by my grandfather here in the village, but in the city I am my own boss.

“We believers in the city have more freedom to make our own decisions and shape our own lives. I used to spend most of my free time in the village with my brothers and cousins and had to ask my

parents for permission to visit friends. Now, I can visit whoever I want, whenever I want.

“Because my neighbours are all students like me, I have freedom to attend our believers’ group. No one asks where I am going. I can even travel to the mountains on summer camp with other young believers. I can hang out late. I have so much more freedom in the city.

“It’s not all easier though. I miss my brothers and sisters and my mother’s cooking. I get lonely sometimes in my small room. The city is far away and I can’t come back as much as I’d like to. I love coming home in the holidays, playing with my brothers and sisters and helping my father on his small plot of land. This is still my home, even though I feel constrained when I’m here.

“The freedom of the city also means it’s a lot easier to meet girls in our fellowship group and one day, hopefully, choose whom I want to marry. My parents are Muslim but, thankfully, they are easy-going about my new path. We have agreed that I can choose the girl I marry so long as they can meet her and have the final say. That way, we are all satisfied,” Suleman says.

“Thank you for sharing about life in the city, Suleman. I can see that you enjoy much freedom but that it can be lonely away from the family,” says Ibrahim.

“I realise that other forms of persecution can be more indirect and distant. I have several friends who have left our country and now live in Europe. They came to faith in Christ many years ago. Yet I don’t know if they are still walking with Jesus, because they are afraid that word will get back to their families here. They are concerned about what their families will suffer and that they themselves will be pressured into returning to Islam,” Ibrahim says.

“Fear is a very real enemy and has many faces, Dawud, for believers in both the Muslim world and in the West,” Ibrahim says. “Pray that God will give us a spirit of boldness. Read in Acts together, how the early disciples overcame their fear; be courageous in your own faith yourself and show them the way by your example.”



Then my uncle picks up a plastic canister with a hose and spray nozzle. “Let’s go and inspect the grapevines,” he says. We walk back down the garden to the house and I look up to see several varieties of young



grapes hanging from the high trellis. This is the spot where I saw Ibrahim working the first day I visited.

“Dawud, I need to constantly check for natural threats to be found inside my garden, not just from the neighbour’s goats. In just the same way, you need to protect the believers from the threats and danger that emerge from within your group as well. Attacks will come not just from outside your group. They will come from inside too.

“Hold the ladder please, while I climb up, and then follow, bringing the container with you,” Ibrahim says. I wobble slowly upwards, lay the container on the metal roof and crouch nervously on the trellis. I have only been up here a minute and already feel dizzy, longing to get down again. I marvel at my uncle’s confidence and agility.

“Look over here,” Ibrahim says, “Do you see the mildew on these leaves? I need to treat this with sulfur spray before it spreads any further. Otherwise, it could spell disaster for the whole crop.” Then he takes hold of the container and starts to spray.

Thankfully, he sees how unsure I am up here and asks me to go back down and make some tea, while he continues to treat the affected vines. Half an hour later we are sitting together on the veranda sipping green tea and eating raisins and apricot kernels.

“Mildew, aphids, beetles and diseases damage the fruit trees and seriously threaten their fruitfulness. They can destroy a garden from within. Likewise, unresolved conflict in a group of believers can be fatal for that group,” my uncle says. “People become hurt and angry, take sides and discontent spreads. The focus on Christ and his calling gets lost in secondary issues. Some stay and fight. Others just leave quietly to avoid the fallout. It is very sad to see,” Ibrahim laments.

“But how do we avoid conflict when we are all so different? Tension seems to be pre-programmed,” I ask.

“You’re right, Dawud, you can’t avoid conflict. The early church experienced conflict and we still do today. For them, the struggle was between Jews and Gentiles and what people should or should not eat (Ro 14:19–23). For us, the battleground is often pride in leadership, mistrust between brothers and sisters, or a deep-seated lack of forgiveness.

“The challenge is not to avoid conflict but to handle it with honesty, grace and respect. Develop an attitude of appreciation for one another in your discipleship group. This is a great way to fireproof against destructive conflict. Value each other. Treasure your gifts and strengths rather than complaining about your differences. Remember the calling of our Lord to love one another. The apostle Paul called it mutual edification (Ro 14:19).”

“So, what do you do to encourage an atmosphere of mutual appreciation?” I ask.

“Let me tell you a story,” Ibrahim says. “Thirty-nine years ago last July, my wife and I got married. I had only met her twice before our wedding week. I had seen her from a distance and given my consent, but after the wedding, I started to realise how different we were. I am the idealist and intellectual. She is down to earth and practical. She is concerned about the little things. I love to dream and think big. In short, we were constantly arguing and fighting in our first few years together. Then, over time, we learned to forgive each other quickly. We realised the key to a healthy relationship is being thankful for the things we appreciate about each other.

“And of course, practising forgiveness is key,” Ibrahim says. “Experiencing Christ’s unconditional forgiveness in our own lives is the starting point. Then we will have the freedom to forgive others.

“Dawud, our brothers and sisters need to hear again and again about God’s undeserved love and forgiveness. As former Muslims, coming from a culture of works in which you earn forgiveness, old habits die hard. It is so easy for us to fall back into that way of thinking. So don’t stop teaching salvation by grace. We need to keep hearing it again and again. I urge you to keep repeating this foundational truth.”

“But what happens if a bitter disagreement has already broken out and is damaging the believers?” I ask. “How do you deal with that?”

“Dawud, it’s so important to understand the shame–honour culture we come from and live in. As I’m sure you have seen, it is extremely difficult for people in our communities to find reconciliation after conflict. Many of us have learned to maintain our honour at any cost. If someone shames us, then our tradition tells us that we have the right to take revenge. In extreme cases this can lead to generations of blood feuds and honour killings. Mostly people just withdraw and avoid any contact with their opponent for the rest of their lives. For Muslims, blessing is based on performance, and likewise, wrongdoing brings judgment. The concept of unconditional forgiveness is not a part of their teaching or tradition. So a lot of our brothers and sisters drag a heavy sack of unforgiveness with them when they come to Christ. But this is precisely where the gospel can be so wonderfully transformative,” Ibrahim says.

“So how do you facilitate forgiveness when there is conflict in your house group?” I ask.

“As you know, only the Holy Spirit can bring forgiveness, Dawud, but we can at least try to set the stage for him to work. Before I meet with

two believers in conflict, I ask both of them to take time in prayer and check their hearts before God. I ask them to reflect on their attitudes and behaviour before God. Only then do I sit down together with them,” says Ibrahim.

“First, we pray and remind ourselves that Christ has called us to live in peace. After that I give them both the chance to describe what happened and say how they felt. Before they apologise, confess and seek forgiveness it is important they see how they have hurt the other person and assure each other they will change their behaviour in future. Only then can they speak out meaningful forgiveness to the other person.

“If they wish, they can then start out on the road, often long, of reconciliation. Forgiving those who hurt us is what our Lord calls each of his children to do. However, reconciliation is a process of restoration, which can only follow if the two parties so choose. It can take a very long time, depending on how badly trust has been broken,” Ibrahim says.<sup>2</sup>

“Sometimes, it is simply too difficult in a shame–honour culture for two disputing believers to sit down together. In situations like this, I believe it is culturally appropriate to start communication through a trusted mediator. This person is usually a friend of both parties and can help to build a bridge. Once the groundwork has been laid through the third party then forgiveness can happen virtually and eventually relationship can be restored.

“When resolving conflicts, I urge you to be vigilant and act as quickly as possible. The deeper the roots go, the harder it is to dig them out (Eph 4:26–27),” Ibrahim says.

I can see that I have a lot to learn about the harder lessons of discipleship, especially because I find it difficult to face conflict situations head on and generally prefer to avoid them.

“Sadly, in some cases where a conflict between two people is damaging the fellowship of your house group and can’t be resolved, it may be best for one or both parties to leave,” Ibrahim says. “Of course, this is a last resort. But if the peace and unity of the fellowship is threatened, you may need to humbly consider this path. In Scripture Paul and Barnabas had a strong disagreement over Mark and decided to part company (Ac 15:36). So there is precedent for such action.”

I hope that it won’t come to this in our group.

As Uncle Ibrahim and I sit drinking tea, I look at the sunset on the high wall around the garden and also at the grapevines that he has just

<sup>2</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Conflict* (MI, USA: Baker Publishing, 2004).

sprayed. I am reminded of the threats from both outside and inside the community of believers. I resolve to be more vigilant as I look after our little Bible study group. I decide to try to pre-empt conflicts before they grow out of hand.

## Supporting and Protecting — Questions for Group Study

1. Read Galatians 6:2–6. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
2. What does it mean to carry each other's burdens (v 2) but to carry your own load (v 5)? What does Paul suggest we do instead of comparing ourselves with others (v 4)?
3. In our story, Ibrahim talks about the need to support one another. Who is struggling in your group? What are their needs (practical, emotional, spiritual)? What could your group do to help meet these needs?
4. What needs do you yourself have? Have you shared them with the group? What would help to build an atmosphere of trust in your group, to make it easier for members to share their needs?
5. Ibrahim says how important it is to challenge destructive behaviour (e.g. gossip, criticism) in the group before it spreads. Take a minute to reflect on your own attitudes and behaviour.

6. Take a minute to reflect. Has someone hurt you? Do you have anger or bitterness in your heart? Is there anyone you need to forgive? What steps can you take to set them and yourself free?
  
7. Practise forgiving in your group. One member role plays the person who has been hurt. Another plays the one who hurt them. Have someone lead them through the steps. The hurting person walks through steps 1 to 5:
  - Step 1 Describe exactly what happened.
  - Step 2 Describe your feelings. What hurt me? How did I feel?
  - Step 3 Name the sin. Describe exactly what the person did or didn't do that has hurt you.
  - Step 4 Bring to God your charge of injustice. Tell him all about steps 1 to 3.
  - Step 5 Speak out forgiveness. "I forgive ... for ..." and hand the case completely to God.

## Allowing God to Prune

*... every branch that does bear fruit he prunes  
so that it will be even more fruitful.*

JOHN 15:2

The late summer sunlight is softening as I look in at Uncle Ibrahim's courtyard gate. I hear the call to prayer from a nearby mosque, cutting through the quiet afternoon. Smoke from a cooking fire drifts across the garden. I call out a greeting as I enter.

"Peace be with you, Dawud, come in," Ibrahim says, "I'm in here."

I walk over to an old shed built into the garden wall. A faded blue door leans wearily on rusty hinges. Looking inside I am blinded by the darkness. The odour of oil, dust and rusty iron is overpowering. As my eyes adjust, I can see a trove of ancient garden tools: spades, shovels, hoes, hammers, forks, trowels, shears, nails, pruning saws, axes, rakes, buckets, knives and a ball of hemp string. Uncle Ibrahim emerges from the shadows with a hammer and some old nails.

"Can you hold the ladder while I repair it?" asks my uncle, pointing to an old wooden ladder lying on the brick pathway.

I kneel down and grip it firmly while Ibrahim hammers nails into two replacement rungs.

"This afternoon, we're going to prune the grapevines," my uncle announces. He sees the look of concern on my face and adds, "Don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to climb up there again. I'll prune from above; you can cut from below. That way you don't have to be up on the trellis and we get the job done together."

We carry the ladder over to one corner and prop it up. I look back across the u-shaped courtyard and see how the wide vine-covered trellis runs around its three sides. It will surely provide a good harvest, as well as offering welcome shade for the rooms looking onto the garden. The

vines are like a green translucent awning through which the sunlight speckles the brick path. The grapes will not be ripe until mid-autumn but it is exciting to see them starting to take shape: small sweet black ones as well as fat round green ones.

“We will only be able to make a start on the pruning today, Dawud. It’s just the first step on a long journey. I’ll need to do this again three or four times through the summer as new growth pushes through.”

Ibrahim hands me a pair of small pruning shears, puts another in his jacket pocket, scampers up the ladder and finds his footing on the trellis above. Then I climb just a few rungs and look up.

“Dawud, do you see this?” Ibrahim says, pointing to a long green branch covered in thick leaf growth but with no sign of any grapes. “We need to cut out branches like this because they deny the fruit-bearing branches valuable nutrients. They also block airflow through the vine and block the sunlight from ripening the grapes below.”

Then my uncle takes hold of another branch displaying a healthy-looking bunch already half-formed.

“Now, this is a good fruit-bearing branch. Do you see how the grapes are forming well? Beyond them you can see a large number of leaves, which really aren’t serving any purpose at all, so we need to prune those back too. That way more nutrients will flow to the grapes.

“So today, we’ll be cutting out unfruitful branches and pruning back fruitful ones to make them even more fruitful,” says Uncle Ibrahim.

Soon the air is filled with green snow as vine leaves float to the ground all around me. I am extremely grateful to be working from down here today. After two hours, my arms ache from reaching up to cut branches and the light is starting to fade. So we both climb down and survey the scene. About half the vines have been pruned and the brick path around the courtyard is covered with a thick green carpet.

Uncle Ibrahim’s daughter is already sweeping up the leaves and his wife is collecting the best specimens in a large enamel bowl.

Ibrahim explains that his wife is going to use the vine leaves to wrap rice and ground beef for supper tonight. “Please join us, Dawud. In the meantime, let’s take a rest on the veranda and consider how Jesus’ teaching on pruning applies to us as Jesus-followers.”



As we lean back and watch the sky turn dark pink then red, my uncle switches on a simple hanging light bulb and opens his old Bible and hands it to me.

“Dawud, please would you read from John chapter 15: the first four verses.”

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.’

“Dawud, let’s remember that God himself is the Faithful Gardener. It’s his garden and he is the one who prunes the vine. We can guard against pride if we remember this. Before we even think about helping others to find freedom, let’s inspect our own hearts in the light of God’s grace. Let’s discover what he wants to cut off from our own lives.

“When I was a young man, I struggled with anger,” Ibrahim confesses. “I still do. Back then, I often became loud and aggressive. I guess I picked this behaviour up as a child, from the men around me. I carried this aggressiveness into my marriage and would often shout at my wife to let off steam when I was under pressure. It made me feel good but it harmed her and put a massive strain on our marriage. Once, an older believer from another town came to stay with us for a few days. He observed my anger and gently challenged me to repent and pray for a peaceful heart. God used this man to prune me!

“As God calls us to be faithful gardeners, brothers and sisters in Christ will sometimes come to us with things that are holding them back. So, Dawud, I encourage you to walk patiently and gently with these believers. Support them as they open themselves to the Holy Spirit. He will show them the chains that hold them captive. We may have the privilege of assisting like midwives. The Lord wants to cut away all our harmful habits and attitudes, in the same way we have just pruned the choking leaf growth,” Ibrahim observes.

“What type of things do you think God wants to prune from our lives, Uncle? What are the things that hold us back?” I ask.

“There are many things that can prevent us from finding true freedom,” Ibrahim says. “Sinful attitudes as well as superfluous activities:



things like unconfessed sin, soul ties, curses, occult involvement; also distractions, worries and unnecessary activities.

“One of the saddest things I see regularly is when a brother or sister is held in chains by the wounds of the past. Sometimes they have been severely neglected and rejected, or they have suffered emotional, physical or sexual abuse. Some have abusive parents, others a toxic marriage. Many have simply not been cherished and have low self-esteem. The ones who have sought refuge overseas have often seen horrific hardship and loss of life on the journey there,” Uncle Ibrahim says with a heavy heart, as he recalls names and faces in the twilight.

“One young friend of mine was a teenager when his parents encouraged him to flee overland through many countries from here to Europe. He experienced considerable pain and hardship. On the way he became a Jesus-follower in a refugee camp when he met an older Christian couple. They were able to be there as Jesus pruned him of his anger and healed his hurt. With the help of other believers Jesus can do the cutting back to set us free,” Ibrahim says. My uncle’s eyes glistened with moisture in the evening light.

Aunt Sara has joined us as supper time approaches. She has been sitting quietly listening but speaks up now.

“I know a believing woman,” she says, “who was just thirteen years old when she discovered she was about to be married off to an elderly relative. So she eloped with her cousin, the love of her life, to another country. For many years she carried a heavy burden of bitterness towards her father. Today I hear she has found Jesus, and that he has gently pruned her of the hate she carried in her heart. Wonderfully, she has been able to forgive her father,” Sara says. She pauses. I cannot see what she is thinking but she sheds a tear.

“Another sister has a mother who is a professional shaman and fortune teller,” she continues. “The family home is often full of clients and dark dealings with the spirit world. When this sister came to faith, she went through a long process of confession, healing and deliverance from evil spirits. She describes it very vividly, as like snakes coming out of her mouth. Thankfully, she found healing after God pruned her of this inherited bondage,” Sara says. “I know other sisters who have been directly involved in occult practice themselves. In all these cases, Jesus was able to deliver them when they decided to turn away from these destructive practices and prayed in his name.”

“One brother found forgiveness in Christ,” Ibrahim shares. “But it wasn’t until he confessed his long and ongoing struggle with pornography that he found true peace and freedom.”

“Another friend of mine leads a small group of believers and is a very caring father to his children. Yet he found it very difficult to trust that God really loved and accepted him for who he was. As a child he was constantly criticised and had very low self-esteem. Although he taught salvation by grace to others, deep down in his heart he was still living by works as he attempted to earn God’s approval. He drove himself hard to do more and achieve greater results. He saw many small groups grow. Yet it was never enough. He still struggled to see himself as a beloved son of the king! Then one day, God gently started to heal those deep wounds,” Ibrahim says with a smile.

I begin to see that God, the Faithful Gardener, desires to free us from the habits that harm us, and he wants to bring healing to our wounds. The question is, will we allow him to?



Just at that moment two of Ibrahim’s granddaughters come onto the veranda bearing large plates of vine-leaf parcels. These are filled, tied with string and set in circles around the edge of the plate. My uncle pours us some green tea and we spend a happy hour sharing stories and news with his family. As the plates are cleared afterwards, we go for a walk round the courtyard to stretch our legs.

“Uncle, you said that the believers in those stories all found healing through God’s pruning. Can you tell me how that happened?” I enquire.

“In my experience,” Ibrahim says, “there are two simple steps to finding freedom, and both come through prayer: breaking prayer and healing prayer. We need God to break the power of a particular sin in our lives and then we need to receive his healing for the wounds it has caused.

“The first step is to ask God to break the power of the sin by naming it, confessing it and repenting. We need to lay our sin at the cross of Jesus and resolve not to pick it up again. The second step is to find deep inner healing. When I pray for healing with someone, we invite Jesus to show them the untruths they have learned to believe about themselves. Then, in the silence, we invite Jesus to speak scriptural truth to their heart, affirming their true identity in him,” Ibrahim explains.

“Let me give you an example of the first step — breaking the power of sin. We are told very clearly in Scripture to forgive those who have sinned against us (Mt 6:12). Unforgiveness is a sin and will keep us and the person who sinned against us in chains. It is one of the greatest joys to be present when someone finds freedom through forgiving,” Ibrahim says. The lady who Sara just told you about, who had been about to be married as a child, did this recently and has found great peace.

“Another example of a sin that needs to be broken is an unhealthy soul tie,” Ibrahim says.

“What is that, Uncle? I have never heard of it,” I exclaim.

“Unhealthy soul ties are bad, ungodly relationships, for example, two people having sex outside marriage or a mother who will not let her married son go. This second one can often happen in marriages where the young couple still live with their parents or in-laws. Often it works fine but sometimes the son never actually ‘leaves’ his parents emotionally (Ge 2:24, Eph 5:31). He ends up being manipulated by his mother and is more loyal to her than to his wife. This is very destructive behaviour for any marriage,” Ibrahim explains. “In the case of unhealthy soul ties, you need to walk with the person through the steps of acknowledging the soul tie, repenting of it, breaking the tie, forgiving the person they are unhealthily tied to and then praying for healing,” Ibrahim says.

“Often there’s more than one sin that needs to be confessed and have its power broken. Our hearts are deceptive and it can take time to work through multiple breaking prayers.”

I slowly realise that I need to ask the help of an experienced older believer to help me with recognising and ministering to these needs within our group.

“Uncle, what happens when the power of specific sins has been broken but the new Christian still struggles with pain and hurt? What happens when you move from breaking to healing prayer?”

“Once, a young Christian brother told me how healing prayer had helped him. He tended to react very badly to any form of criticism. His temper outbursts were extreme and he fought back by blaming those nearest to him. With the help of good questions and a lot of prayer, he looked back to his childhood. There he remembered how extreme criticism had hurt and hardened him. As a result he came to believe the untruth that he would never be good enough. When his prayer companion asked Jesus to speak his truth to the young man, he heard the Holy Spirit’s affirmation from Scripture that he was a beloved child

of God. Today he has found great freedom by knowing that he is precious to God.” Ibrahim recounts.

As we walk back to the veranda under the grapevine, I look up and see where we pruned in the afternoon. I can see the stars twinkling through the gaps in the leaves – little signs of hope after the pain of pruning.

I ponder how messy our lives are and how gently and patiently God prunes us so that we would bear more fruit. I resolve to start by looking at my own life and ask him to cut out the unhealthy thoughts and behaviours that are holding me back at the moment. I need him to shine his starlight through my leafy mess.

I thank Ibrahim’s wife for a delicious supper. This time I politely decline their invitation to stay the night. As I slowly wander home, I mull over what my uncle has just shared. Cats slink silently through the darkness and a dog barks in the distance. Who do I know who is extremely burdened by past failures, hurts and untruths? Do they want to find freedom, even if it means enduring some painful pruning? How might I start by praying for them?

I pass a young man dozing in a hammock next to piles of melons. On the spur of the moment, I decide to stop and haggle for one. After feeling its softness, I settle on a large yellow one. As I dig around in my pocket for coins, I find Uncle Ibrahim’s little hand shears. I make a note to return them tomorrow. The cold metal grip reminds me of the pain of pruning but I try to focus on the freedom and fruitfulness that it brings.

## Allowing God to Prune – Questions for Group Study

1. Read John 15:1–8. What do you notice? What stands out to you in this passage?
2. Who do the gardener, the grapevine and the branches represent? What is the purpose of God pruning the branches? What would happen if God didn’t prune?

3. Take a moment to ask God to show you any unhelpful attitudes and behaviours you are harbouring in your life. Confess them and ask for forgiveness and healing.
4. What heart attitude should we have towards those who are struggling with sinful thoughts and behaviour? What should we do and not do?
5. In our story, Uncle Ibrahim shares that it is good to have a trusted friend with whom you can meet regularly for prayer, mutual confession, accountability and encouragement. Do you have someone like this in your life? If not, who might you consider asking?
6. In our story, Uncle Ibrahim talks about two types of prayer for inner healing: breaking prayer, to confess and break the power of sin, and healing prayer, for wholeness and restoration. What could you or your group do to practise this type of inner healing prayer?
7. Do you know a believer who is struggling? Are they open to having someone pray with them?

# Multiplying Cuttings

*So the word of God spread. The number of  
disciples ... increased rapidly ...*

ACTS 6:7

I turn up my jacket collar and lean into the wind. The autumn breeze pulls leaves from the trees and throws them into a wild dance. School children shuffle slowly in twos and threes towards the first class of the day. Day workers, holding tool bags, stand on the street corner and wait hopefully for someone to hire them. The warm slow summer is just a memory and thoughts are turning to finding coal and firewood for the winter.

Uncle Ibrahim has been away over the summer visiting isolated groups of believers in the mountain villages. Last week he called to say he was back and to invite me to come and visit.

I call out a greeting at the open wooden gate. One of his daughters-in-law leads me in and I survey the garden. Where are the rich colours of summer, the yellow apples, red pomegranates and purple figs? Where are the laughing children? All around lies a tattered carpet of brown and grey.

“Dawud, it is good to see you after all this time. Tell me, how are you and your parents?” my uncle asks.

“We are all well thank you, Uncle. How was your visit to the mountains?” I reply.

“I was so encouraged to see the new believers standing firm in faith. Sometimes there are just one or two in a village. They read and pray and try to visit brothers and sisters nearby. Others listen to Christian radio or internet broadcasts. They seek to serve where they can and take opportunities to witness to relatives. The wind of persecution blows cold but they fan the flame of faith. Isn't it reassuring to know that the Good Shepherd is with us always, even when we walk through dark valleys?”

For a moment, he becomes lost in thought and then looks up and says, "Let's have a cup of hot tea to warm ourselves up!"

Refreshed, we walk over to a corner of the garden I hadn't noticed before. I see that the earth has been cleared, tilled and prepared. Curious, I ask what Ibrahim has in mind.

"Throughout the year, we have been looking at how to disciple new believers. We started in early spring with clearing the stones that seekers often have in their hearts. We considered how to sow the seed of the gospel broadly. Then we looked at how to water the seed so it can grow and become healthy. We saw how important unity and diversity are in a group. We reflected on how to provide support with practical life issues, and protection from external attacks. Then we saw how necessary it is that the Holy Spirit prunes our bad habits and unhelpful ways of thinking. Today we will take some cuttings and plant them out in new ground," Ibrahim says with a smile.

I am intrigued to find out how Uncle Ibrahim will do this. I have heard that taking cuttings is by no means a straightforward process. But then I suppose that neither is multiplying groups of believers ...

"Have a look in the tool store, Dawud, and see if you can find a small knife, pruning shears and an old spade," my uncle instructs.

A few minutes later we are crunching through fallen leaves towards an old mulberry tree in the middle of the garden. Ibrahim takes out some small shears and walks to the far side of the tree.

"One of the joys of gardening is taking cuttings and giving them to friends. Empty plant pots and barren plots of land are filled with new life," Ibrahim smiles.

"You'll need to come a bit closer and lean in to see this, Dawud," he says. Then he points to where a new mulberry shoot from this season is joined to an older, thicker branch.

"I'll cut the new shoot off right here just above the joint," he explains. "I like to cut shoots about a handspan in length with a good selection of buds." He stashes a bundle in his jacket pocket.

Ibrahim then walks over to a large pomegranate bush and cuts another handful of six-month-old shoots. Lastly, we make our way to one of the grapevines and there he cuts off more shoots in the same way.

Sitting at an old, weathered workbench, he lays the cuttings out in front of him. One at a time, my uncle makes a short diagonal slit near the last bud. He says this is to drain away moisture from the end. Then he peels off an inch of bark at the thick end of the shoot to reveal the green inner stem.

“Exposing this fresh green layer under the bark will help the shoots develop roots,” Ibrahim explains.

“Dawud, can you please dig a narrow trench over there where I have prepared the earth?” he asks.

Then he dips the peeled ends of the shoots in a bowl of honey. “Dawud, set them in the earth about one hand’s width apart, please.” I leave the top third poking out above ground. Lastly, he asks me to water them and press down the earth around each one.

“Now we need to ask God to give the growth (1Co 3:6),” my uncle says. “By next autumn some of these cuttings will have grown roots and will be ready for giving away. I look forward to seeing healthy pomegranates, mulberries and grapes in my friend’s garden. Isn’t that a wonderful picture of hope, Dawud? New fruit where previously there was none.”



“In the same way, Dawud, I look forward to hearing how your small Bible study group will grow in the coming months and years. I hope to see small groups spring up across the whole region. My prayer is that, as you follow Jesus, many others will be attracted to him. My hope is that your light will shine brightly in the darkness,” my uncle says.

“Dawud, I have enjoyed walking with you and watching you throughout this year,” Ibrahim encourages me. “Your faith is strong. You are committed. You are slowly learning to sow, water, protect and support your friends. You are becoming a faithful gardener.”

I reflect for a moment and realise that most of my free time is spent dealing with practical needs of the believers: helping one find a job, counselling another with depression, encouraging those facing opposition, linking up those who wanted to marry and supporting some with addiction. To be honest, I hadn’t given any thought at all to the idea of multiplying our group.

“Dawud, God only calls us to be faithful. It is he who brings the fruit.

“I invite you to lift your eyes and try to see what God sees. Doesn’t he desire one day to see this land covered with a knowledge of his glory as the waters cover the sea (Hab 2:14)?” my uncle asks. “Let’s pray faithfully for that to come to pass.”

“Until that time comes, encourage your brothers and sisters to serve one another with humility. Exhort them to boldly share the good news of Jesus with their families and friends. The gospel can spread when we



share with those the Lord has placed around us. When our friends and relatives see us live out our faith humbly and authentically, miracles can happen.”

“How God longs for Muslims, the lost sons and daughters of Ismael, to be saved and come to a knowledge of him (1Ti 2:3–4). Can you imagine groups of Jesus-followers all across this region, like stars sparkling in the night sky? Can you hear the gospel being whispered in their homes and in the marketplace?” Ibrahim asks me.

“Uncle, how can I encourage my brothers and sisters to think beyond their immediate needs? I would love for our group to grow and multiply, but it seems so far from where we are at the moment. Where do I start?” I ask, perplexed.

“It starts with God’s vision. As his vision becomes your vision, it will take root in your heart and spread to those around you,” Ibrahim says. It starts with your inner life, your prayer life. It begins by listening to the Spirit’s leading.

“OK, Uncle, I can see that it’s about God’s vision,” I acknowledge. “If that’s the case, what practical steps can I take to share his vision with my group?” I ask.

“As you walk with new believers, your actions will speak louder than your words, Dawud,” says Ibrahim. “What you do, not just what you say, will shape your followers. None of us have had the privilege of growing up in a Christian family. Most of us are the first Jesus-follower our friends will have seen close up. Your friends will watch you, weigh up your behaviour and, if convinced, they may follow your example. So if you share your faith with those around you, they will hopefully do the same.” Then he tells me this story.

“My friend Rauf lives in a mountainous land not far from here. When he got to know Jesus he moved to a big city. He led a small Bible study group like you do. Then, one day, he asked himself what it would take for the people in his home village in the mountains to hear about Jesus.

“First, he encouraged the believers in his group to go back and spend time living with their relatives in their own mountain villages. None went back because they were happy with their life in the city. There was water, heating and a good supply of food there. Why should they go back to their primitive mountain homes?

“Then Rauf sensed God calling him to go back to his own village. So, each summer, he spends a month in the mountains visiting friends and relatives in his own village and others nearby, sharing about Jesus. Whenever he goes, he takes a younger believer with him and models

how to share his faith. When he returns to the city in the autumn, he tells stories of what he has seen God do in people's hearts. Gradually, more of the believers in his city group are going back to share with their relatives in the mountains too. His disciples are following his example. You can influence your friends by your example," Ibrahim assures me.

"I encourage you to sow broadly in your everyday life, just like we talked about in our second meeting. That way you will be a shining example for the younger believers. Listen well to what's on people's hearts. Pray for people's needs in Jesus' name. Tell the stories of Old Testament patriarchs, prophets and kings. Learn a few key Bible stories, which you can retell regularly. Share Jesus' parables. Tell your own story. And remember how you explained the potential of social media," Ibrahim reminds me.

"I wonder, do you happen to remember the last question in the Discovery Bible Study?" Ibrahim asks.

"Yes," I reply: "With whom will you share what you have just learned?"

"That's right. As you read God's Word each week, you will ask yourself this question. Over time you will develop a culture of sharing your faith with those around you. It will become part of who you are as a discipleship group. It will be normal and natural. By God's grace, he will add new people to your group and your number will grow (Ac 2:47)," Ibrahim says.



"But how does a growing group become a multiplying group, Uncle?" I ask. They seem to me to be two different things.

"Over time, you may simply become too big a group to keep meeting in one room," Ibrahim says. "Then you will need to multiply out into two groups simply due to lack of space. But usually, its time for a new group to be planted out when a new group leader emerges from within your group," my uncle says.

"And how do you choose a new leader?" I ask, knowing this would not be easy and could potentially lead to jealousy and squabbling.

"In my experience, Dawud, you don't appoint or select a leader from 'above'. A new leader will usually emerge. They will be the person who not only learns from Scripture, but goes out and does what it says. They will be the one producing a crop yielding thirty, sixty or a hundred times what was sown (Mt 13:23). Watch and see who demonstrates the gospel with their hands and feet as well as proclaiming it with their words.

Ask yourself, who is looking out for the needs of others in the group? Who is sharing the truth with their family and friends? Who is encouraging others and building them up in faith?" Ibrahim says.

"If and when this person emerges, what do you do to train and equip them?" I ask.

"What did Jesus do as he trained the Twelve to lead the early church, Dawud?" Ibrahim asks.

"He took them with him," I say. "He taught, healed and sent them to do the same. He lived life with them."

"Yes, emerging leaders need to see, hear and experience what you do. Show them how you share the gospel with seekers. Ask them to lead your times together. Take them with you when you visit the sick and pray for healing. Spend time teaching them the Word and answering their questions. Then they will not just hear your teaching but experience it as well.

"I think of my friend Mohsin," Ibrahim says. "He lives in a town nearby. In the summer when the mountain roads are free of snow and the avalanche season has passed, he takes one or two believers from his group and his old car. They simply drive around, visiting remote villages and knocking on doors. When someone invites them in and offers them a meal, they gratefully stay and tell stories about Jesus. They have never had to sleep in the car. Muslim mountain people are very hospitable. They have had the joy of seeing people come to faith. After a few weeks they return home. This is great training for Mohsin's young leaders.

"I know another Bible study group leader who takes his teenage son with him when he visits members of his group. When he prays for healing, encourages a struggling brother or teaches a Bible study, his son is watching, listening and absorbing discipleship skills. On the way home on the bus, his son asks questions as he reflects on what he's just seen and heard. One day, I hope and pray his son will lead a discipleship group of his own. What I have learned from Mohsin is that he develops leaders by taking them on the journey with him. He apprentices them."

After supper, Uncle Ibrahim looks up and says, "I know it's dark but let's walk up to the rocky outcrop above the town. There's a great view from there."

Half an hour later, we are sitting together like two crows perched on a rock, looking down over the town. Houses, schools, shops and offices are lit up like an illuminated map. Streetlights mark the way home for returning workers. Courtyard lights twinkle with life.

“Do you see the lights in those houses down there, Dawud? Imagine each one is a group of believers scattered through the darkness. Can you see them shining the light of Christ in their neighbourhood? Can you hear voices sharing hope where there is despair, healing where there is suffering and truth where there are lies (Lk 4:18–19)?”

## Multiplying Cuttings — Questions for Group Study

1. Read Acts 2:47 and Acts 6:7. What do you notice? What stands out to you?
  
2. How did growth in the early church happen? Who were the characters involved and what did each one do? What do you think were the reasons for such rapid growth?
  
3. What is God’s heart for the lost? What Bible passages does Ibrahim mention about God’s longing for people to turn to him? What others can you think of?
  
4. In our story, Uncle Ibrahim talks about sharing our hearts for the lost by taking others with us as we reach out and disciple. Who do you know who is effective in sharing their faith? Ask them if you can go with them and learn from them.

5. Who can you share your own faith with in a bold and sensitive way? Which younger believer could you take along with you?
6. Very real fears and threats often prevent our friends sharing with their relatives. Ask them about their specific concerns and how you can pray for them.
7. Who do you see putting their new-found faith into practice, serving others and sharing their hope in Jesus? What can you do to nurture their leadership potential?

# Finding Life in the Garden

One warm evening the following summer, I accept Uncle Ibrahim's invitation to visit him and his friends. Bunches of big green grapes are hanging from the vine around the wooden gate, which is standing half open. I enter and hear music from a stringed instrument rising above the sound of laughing and conversation.

As I walk towards the voices, I think of everything I want to tell him. About how our discipleship group has grown and how we have planted a new group in the neighbouring village. Stories, questions and reflections dance around in my head.

I turn the corner and see the familiar pale blue wooden pavilion in the shade of the old apple trees. It looks like a huge bed standing on stubby legs with a low trellised balustrade running around it on three sides. A low roof provides shade and it is open on all sides to views of the garden. It stands invitingly in the middle of the garden next to the apricot and pomegranate trees.

A group of men and women sit cross-legged on multicoloured cotton mats around a long, low table. Elderly ones sip tea at the far end, in the place of honour furthest from the gate. Middle-aged men chat about the price of cattle feed and exchange opinions about the approaching rice harvest. Women catch up on family news and keep an eye on the children. They look splendid in their scarves and colourful ankle-length dresses.

The girls help Ibrahim's daughters-in-law carry drinks and spinach-filled pasties from the kitchen. Children run to and fro round the courtyard, splashing in the water channel and laughing. Occasionally they sidle back to their parents, grab a handful of sweets from one of the small bowls on the table and then return triumphantly to their friends. In the middle of the group sits Uncle Ibrahim, strumming his stringed instrument as the others talk and laugh around him.

"Hello, Dawud," he calls out. "Welcome! I am so glad you can join us today."

As the chatter subsides, Ibrahim greets everyone and welcomes them. Mothers tell their children to wash their hands at the standpipe, then come and sit down. It grows quiet and all eyes turn to Uncle Ibrahim. He welcomes each one by name and then takes up his instrument and starts singing a traditional Christian worship song. Slowly people join in and soon the garden walls are echoing with joyful song.

One of the women holds a round goatskin finger drum and starts to play. She segues into an old ballad and soon the rest of us are joining in. Worship seems to flow naturally as different ones start up new songs as soon as the others fade. After half an hour, the wave of adoration ebbs and Ibrahim picks up a Bible. He reads from the account of the Last Supper that is in 1 Corinthians chapter 11, then says:

“Let’s remember the perfect sacrifice for our sins that Jesus made for us on the cross. Let’s give thanks that we have been freed from the weight of sin, guilt and shame. Praise God that we live no longer under the heavy burden of works but in the freedom of his grace!”

Then he gives thanks to God and takes a large round flat bread, tears it down the middle and hands out small pieces. After everyone has eaten, the adults take a glass and drink. A thoughtful air pervades the gathering.

Just as he finishes, three large round blue plates loaded with rice, chicken, raisins and garlic are set down on the table. People shuffle into groups and start to dig into the mounds of rice and meat. Men gather around one plate, women and children around the others. Lively conversation continues, interspersed with handfuls of rice. After a while we slowly pull away from the plates and sit back against the cushions. A welcome breeze cools the air.

I reflect that this is more like a big family gathering than a formal event. People of all ages are sitting together. Children are welcome, I see. Communion flows naturally into a fellowship meal. Prayer and worship flavour the evening just as raisins enhance the rice.

As we wash our hands on moist cloths placed on the table, Uncle Ibrahim thanks the cooks for a delicious meal and invites us to turn in our Bibles to Acts 2:42–47. After a few minutes, everyone has found the right place.

Uncle Ibrahim slowly reads the passage. Then he asks two others to read the same passage again. The elderly ones, whose sight was weak, particularly like hearing the passage read out loud a few times. I appreciate it too because it gives me more time to reflect and absorb. Then Ibrahim asks if anyone would like to retell the story in their own words. There was a long silence ... So I volunteer.

I retell the story of the first Christians and how they devoted themselves to meeting together to hear their leaders' teaching, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. I add that everyone was amazed at the miraculous signs and wonders done by the ones who had seen Jesus. I explain that all the believers came together and shared their money and possessions as they were needed. They met together in public and in their homes and God graciously drew more people to join them. A couple of others chip in with details that I forgot to mention. Together we recount the whole story.

"Thank you, Dawud and everyone," says Ibrahim.

"Now, what do we learn about God from this passage?" he asks, looking around the group. A rather deaf old lady says she cannot hear and her husband leans over and repeats the question loudly.

"I learn that God reveals truth through his Word and demonstrates his power through powerful signs," says one of the mothers.

"Yes, he meets people in truth and power," says a younger woman. "That reminds me of the time last month when I shared about Jesus with my bedridden grandmother. I told her Bible stories and prayed in Jesus' name for her healing from bad dreams. Suddenly the nightmares stopped. She was so grateful and she wanted to know more about Jesus."

There are some nods and smiles from others in the group who have also experienced God's power as well as his truth in their lives.

"As I read this passage, I am struck by the fact that the first believers shared everything they had," says one of the farmers in the group. "I think this is very powerful. We work so hard to earn money, build a house and buy land. We spend so much time thinking about our own needs and security for the future. If we could only overcome the fear of not having enough for ourselves and trust God to provide ..."

"I was so grateful to you all for helping my family this summer when I lost my job," the man sitting next to him says. "We could not have survived if you hadn't given us money for lentils, cooking oil and a sack of flour."

I am struck by how much the passage resonates with the real-life needs of this group. A few others share their thoughts and then Ibrahim asks his second question:

"What does this passage tell us about ourselves as humans?"

"It tells me that we need to keep meeting together, and not give up meeting, no matter how hard it gets," says a young student. "If we keep going, I believe God can do great things through us. I know it's not easy for some of us to come to these meetings because our families are



against it. It would be easier to stay at home in the short term. But we want to stand firm in the long term and we need each other for that.”

“Yes, I agree,” says another. “I really need these times together. They are an oasis in the desert for me. I am so encouraged that you prayed for me when I was ill last week.”

“What I learn from this passage is that we need to be bold and share with people in our workplaces and schools, wherever God places us. It says they met in public as well as in their homes. It’s hard for us to meet as a big group in public because of persecution. However, we could perhaps meet in pairs in the bazaar. We could ask people if they need prayer, and share with them about Jesus,” says a young woman. “Would anyone like to come with me on Saturday and do that?”

“Yes, I’ll come,” says the girl sitting next to her.

“This text encourages me so much. It tells me that even though we are naturally weak, we can live radical lives for Jesus by God’s grace. We can share what we have. We can meet in public. We can teach his Word and we can expect to see God do wonders through us. I think this passage is a great encouragement and example for us,” I say.

I love this picture in Acts 2 of small, vibrant house churches. It matches my experience so well. It tells of the first Christians meeting in the Middle East two thousand years ago. And here we are, some of the first ever Christians meeting in our own country. The first believers shared what they had. So do we. They faced opposition. So do we. They saw God move in miraculous ways. So do we. I am convinced this is one of the key texts for believers like us.

Teacups are filled and nuts nibbled. One or two others speak before Ibrahim asks his next question:

“What will you take away from this passage?”

People share how God has spoken to them about the importance of fellowship, being generous with money, studying his Word, being open for miracles and telling relatives and friends about Jesus.

As the sun sets, Ibrahim asks his final question:

“And with whom are you going to share what you have just learned?”

Over the next ten minutes, many different names are mentioned by those gathered around the table. As I listen, I reflect on who I am going to tell. I decide to share this picture of a radical gathering of believers with the girl I would like to court. Perhaps she will share my vision with me?

Uncle Ibrahim closes the study with a prayer and we sing a couple more worship songs. Then he invites us to break into small groups of two or three, to share prayer needs and pray for each other. Some groups

stay sitting in the pavilion; others move to the veranda, whilst still others choose to sit on chairs by the gate. The children are also sitting quietly now, playing next to their mothers. I can hear the refreshing gurgle of water in the channel and pigeons cooing in the grapevines.



Ibrahim mentions that he is available afterwards if anyone wants to approach him with a particular question or need. Then he turns to me and asks how I have found the time together.

“I really enjoyed sitting with your friends today. Last year, I learned principles from you about effective discipleship, but today I have tasted it for myself.

“Your group is a rich mix of ages and experiences, gifts and needs. I like that the children and the elderly are all welcome and that everyone has a chance to participate and share. It feels more like a family gathering than an event. I see that the worship songs speak to people’s hearts because they are in our own language. I like the small, intimate group size, which allows people to be open and real about their struggles and joys. I hear about opposition from relatives and it reminds me of the heavy burdens that some people carry. It is a good idea to split into pairs or triplets to share more personal needs. We have these struggles in our group too. It’s so important for us to have a place to share about such things and find prayer, encouragement and support. I find it exciting that people want to reach out and tell friends, relatives and even strangers at the bazaar about Jesus. I can see that your group is a safe place to grow but is also looking outward,” I say.

“Thank you, Dawud, for your encouragement. We have this amazing privilege of being gardeners in God’s own garden. Let’s be faithful to our calling in seasons of warm sun as well as cold winter,” Ibrahim says.

“As you continue to grow in faith with your friends, Dawud, I hope you will be encouraged and equipped by the seven gardening principles I shared with you last year. Do you remember them?” he asks.

I think for a moment and then say, “God calls us to clear the stones of doubt and untruth, to sow broadly among those who don’t yet know him, to water regularly through teaching and serving, to cross-pollinate by working together in unity with our diverse gifts, to support those who are struggling and to protect those under attack, to enable God to do the painful but necessary work of pruning in our lives and to multiply out and plant new gardens in barren places.”

“Thank you, Uncle, for all that you have shared with me. I enjoyed working with you in the garden and I am sure this will help me remember the seven principles of discipleship,” I say.

We stand together in the gateway, underneath the gnarled old vine.

“Dawud, it has been such a pleasure to walk with you too,” Ibrahim says. “I have learned a lot too, such as new ways to share the good news through technology, and I have been encouraged by your humility and commitment. I am excited to see what fruit the Lord will bring forth in and through you.

“Keep looking to the Faithful Gardener and he will show you the way. We sow and water. He is the one who makes things grow. And remember, one glorious day, the Faithful Gardener will return to his garden and reap a great harvest (Rev 7:9).”

# Select Bibliography

4Training.Net. “Forgiving Step by Step.” [https://www.4training.net/Forgiving\\_Step\\_by\\_Step](https://www.4training.net/Forgiving_Step_by_Step). Accessed on 5 June 2024

Addison, Steve. *Acts and the Movement of God*. USA: 100 Movements Publishing, 2023.

Breslin, Scott. “Church Planting Tracking and Analysis Tool.” *Missio Nexus*. October 1, 2007. <https://missionexus.org/church-planting-tracking-and-analysis-tool/>.

The Discover Network. “Discovery Bible Study.” 2019. <https://discovernetwork.co.uk/>.

Forge. “Multiplying Movements.” 2023. <https://www.forgeforward.org/resources/books/mm/>.

Foster, Richard. *Celebration of Discipline*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2008.

Garrison, David. *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World*. CO, USA: WIGTake Resources, 2012.

Georges, Jayson. *The 3D Gospel — Ministry in Guilt, Shame and Fear Cultures*. Time Press, 2017.

Green, Tim. *Come Follow Me*, NC, USA: Lulu.com, 2017.

Leman, Kevin and William Pentak. *The Way of the Shepherd*. Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 2004.

Lidstone, Julyan. *Give up the Purple*. Carlisle, UK: Langham Publishing, 2019.

Loewen, Arley. *Rethinking Shame and Honour*. UK: Micah Global, 2017.

Nyman, James and Robby Butler. *Stubborn Perseverance*. 3rd ed. IL, USA: Mission Network, 2015.

Sande, Ken. *The Peace Maker — A Biblical Guide to Resolving Conflict*. MI, USA: Baker Publishing, 2004.

Trousdale, Jerry and Glenn Sunshine. *The Kingdom Unleashed*. DMM Library, 2018.

Willard, Dallas. *The Spirit of the Disciplines — Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York: Harper Collins, 1988.



Do you have a Muslim friend, colleague or neighbour? Is your church located near a Muslim community? Have Muslim refugees moved into your area? Do you live in a predominantly Muslim country? You want to see your Muslim friends come to faith in Jesus and grow in him, but you have many questions.

How can I share the gospel in a culturally relevant way? What type of community would nurture their faith if they decide to follow Jesus? What simple steps can I take on a discipleship journey with them? If you have questions like these, then this book may well be for you.

The Faithful Gardener takes the form of an engaging story in which two Christians from a Muslim background explore seven key principles of discipleship. Come and meet Ibrahim and Dawud in a Central Asian walled garden and follow them on their journey with Jesus.

---

*The Faithful Gardener is a beautifully crafted story which manages to introduce essential discipleship topics in a way which not only teaches but touches the hearts of new believers.*

- TILLMANN K.

Nostos Network of Diaspora Ministries, Operation Mobilisation

*This book will not only help us disciple believers from a Muslim background here in the West, but will also equip mission teams and churches discipling people in predominantly Muslim countries.*

- HA-DI ALLGAIER

Field Leader, Frontiers

*Writing from years of experience with Muslims in Central Asia, Fred James presents the pillars of discipleship in a crisp, engaging narrative to make the critical principles accessible to everyone.*

- JULYAN LIDSTONE

Ambassador for Muslim Ministries, Operation Mobilisation

---

**FRED JAMES** has lived and worked among Muslim peoples along the Silk Road for 20 years. After becoming a Christian as a student, he moved to the eastern part of Germany and was involved in a church plant while working there as an architect. He joined Operation Mobilisation (OM) in 2003 and was engaged in church planting and development work in Central Asia. Fred currently serves as associate area leader for OM in Central Asia and chairs the board of a small refugee outreach charity in Germany. In between field visits and training, he enjoys oil painting and working in his garden. You can contact Fred at [fredjamesbook@gmail.com](mailto:fredjamesbook@gmail.com)