

Running for Hope

A soldier becomes a 'shining star'

By Elie Hasbani

I began to sense God calling me to write this story soon after I lost my leg — and nearly my life — by stepping on a land mine in my native country of Lebanon. I was a soldier fighting for my homeland during the civil war between the Christians and the Muslims, and the struggle and dispute between Israel and Arab countries.

The Lord began to teach me that, in spite of my disabilities, He wanted me to become a runner. But how could I run when standing and walking were hard enough for me? I laughed at the thought. Then I realized that my laughter exposed my doubt and unbelief, like that of Sarah, the wife of Abraham who laughed when God told her husband, “Sarah your wife will have a son.” Sarah began to laugh to herself as she thought, “After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?” But nothing is impossible and too hard for the Lord, as Sarah learned when she was later blessed with a child.

To me the thought of ever running again was impossible; I would need a miracle or a dream that would be fulfilled in eternal life. But now I am ready to find out that the Lord’s promise for me to run is not only for eternal life, but also for life here on earth. Soon I hope to have a special prosthesis that will allow me to run. And by running, I will testify to the hope that God has given me to proclaim to others.

This story is not only for people who have lost parts of their bodies in war, either through an encounter with a land mine or some other misfortune. It is also for those who have lost their ambition and believe they have no hope in the future. My prayer is that others will learn they are precious to God and will turn to Jesus for strength — and hope.

Mine is a story about growing up during a war and learning some of the reasons why there is so much unrest and enmity in the world. But it is also a story of how God revealed Himself to me through His Son, Jesus Christ. I want others to know Him in the same personal way. My challenge to you, the reader, is to question and investigate every spiritual matter and teaching you have received about religion and God, and see if you are truly walking in the light of His Word. My story is not intended as a supplement or alternative to the Bible, the only Word of God, but I trust it will help to make clear God’s Good News in our battle against the evil one and his followers. God is not limited to any one way of working, and you may or may not experience what I did. God loves each of us personally and He reveals Himself in ways that are necessary for each person.

Another reason I tell my story is to shed some light in a world filled with so much darkness and evil, so that others can see the truth and distinguish the path God wants them to take. However, just hearing a story like mine, just learning facts about history, wars and tales of God’s work among strangers, merely creates knowledge about God. But each person needs to experience God first hand, in order to know Him personally and find peace and hope for the future.

I want to give tools to help others fight against the darkness and distress we live in. Only Jesus can save and heal the nations. Only He can give eternal life to men and women from all peoples, tribes and tongues. Only He can bring peace and reconciliation to families. Only He can bring the wolf and lamb together. Only He can allow men to handle snakes without fear and only He can bring Jews and Arabs to live together in peace. His love encompasses the whole world —

and He is calling us to run and win the race and get the glorious prize that is “eternal life.”

In the early 1980s in Lebanon, I was a young man at war. Having been brought up in the Catholic Church (although I was not living faithfully), I believed strongly that the fanatic Muslims and other groups such as the Communists were my enemies. I also had enemies within me. Although I had many friends, my heart was empty, and I continued to satisfy myself with heavy drinking and hashish. However, when I would awake the morning after a night of binging, my heart was full of fear and pain. I often wondered how I could change the way I was living and become a totally different person. Not knowing what to do, I continued to serve in the army.

It was 1982 and, as usual, I was facing hard times at school. I drove a military car to the school, parked it outside the campus and attended classes wearing my uniform. I don't know how I made it through that year, but I remember being very pleased and satisfied with the grades I received at the year's end. Poor grades or not, I had passed and that was my goal.

During the same year, some international missionaries came to my region and shared the gospel of Jesus Christ as Savior. Their message was that only He gives rest, peace, and eternal life to those who believe in him, confess their sins, and surrender their lives to him. Three of my five sisters, Georgette, Joumana, and Diana, received Jesus as their Savior. This made me angry, especially when they started attending meetings with these Christians.

“Why don't you attend the Catholic church?” I said defiantly. I tried to put a halt to these gatherings. My sisters began to explain the gospel to me and tell me about what had happened to them, how their lives had been changed. I thought the people they were gathering with were bad, and I did what I could to stop them from being part of this group. At first, I used gentle words to try to convince them not to go to these meetings any more, but this didn't work. I tried to convince them that we were the real Christians, and that we could justify fighting for our beliefs, but to no avail. My sisters loved going to these meetings. I had never seen them happier, but I was not convinced. I used my authority as their big brother. I hid their Bibles, watched them carefully to see if they would try to go to the meetings, and tried to forbid them. I even entered the places where they had the meetings and, with my parents' encouragement, tried to destroy these places. My father burned the Bibles and all the books my sisters had that contained Christian doctrine.

No matter what way we tried to stop them, however, my sisters continued to grow stronger in their faith, and somehow I knew that they had begun to pray for me. They secretly put a Bible in my car and another one under my pillow. I had to admit to myself that I was curious to know what the Bible contained, and I wanted to read it without anyone finding out about it. I did not know what parts to read or even where to start. Whenever I was on army duty, I would open the Bible and try to read it, but I did not understand what I read. Many times, when overcome by fear, I had to stop reading and close the book.

I saw the changes in my sisters' lives and the lives of other members of their group. They seemed to have what I had been searching for. They were happy and peaceful people. I was jealous of them. What was happening to me? I had a great desire to pray that came up out of nowhere, but I did not know how to begin. I even wanted to attend their meetings, but knew I couldn't. My pride and fear prevented me from doing anything religious. I feared other people's opinions and especially the views of my friends. What would they think of me if they knew that I had started to attend Christian meetings? They all knew that I was a big sinner; they knew all my evil actions. How would they ever believe that I saw a need to change?

Despite my pride and fear, I made many attempts to attend the meetings. I would park my car far from the church and walk there while pretending to go to a friend's house. If I entered the meeting room, I would sit in the back, always keeping my face hidden.

On one occasion it seemed as if everyone was looking at me with wonder and fear. I remember thinking that the prayers, songs, and even the sermon were all focused on me. I wanted to leave, but something kept me fixed to my seat. When the meeting was over, I was the first to leave because I didn't want anyone to speak to me. But one of the leaders was standing at the door waiting to greet me and say how happy he was to see me. He told me that I was welcome anytime. Before I could brush past him, someone else came to talk to me, and then a group of people gathered around me, expressing with big smiles their pleasure in seeing me there. Slowly I withdrew and, once outside, ran to my car. I could not wait to light a cigarette and I sped off down the road vowing never to go back to that meeting again. But I could not stop thinking about the subject of the sermon, "Children of God, shining like stars," and about how the preacher had encouraged the believers to share the light of Jesus Christ with those around them.

On October 10, 1985, I received an order from the General Command to take my troops on a mission to enemy territory to destroy some missiles that were aimed at our position. My friends and I took our guns and headed toward the area where the missiles were suspected to be. On our way there, I was supposed to be very cautious and alert for any surprise from the enemy. I was in constant contact with the General Command by walkie-talkie. Our mission was to find and disable the rockets before it was too late.

We got out of our tanks and the jeep and I gave instructions on how to reach the spot on Mount Abu Kamha, under the Mount of Hiram where the missiles were believed to be located. Cautiously we began our hike to the top of the mountain. Then, suddenly, we found three missiles! As soon as I spotted them, I contacted my leader and informed him that the first part of our mission was completed. He then gave me the order to disable the rockets before they could be set off.

I looked at my friends, made the sign of the cross over my face, and stepped forward to fulfill my mission. The missiles were connected with wires to a stopwatch that was set to detonate in 15 minutes. I had to act quickly but carefully. I had to find the correct wire to cut in order to disable them. My friend handed me a pair of pliers that were blunt and difficult to use. I was deeply afraid something would go wrong and the missiles would explode, but as the leader, I had no choice but to do the job. I figured out which was the correct wire and cut it. Fortunately, it was the right one.

I stepped back and said to my friends: "I did it!" They were all sweating from exhaustion and fear. We were relieved but still had one thing to do: change the direction of the rockets as an added precaution. I told my men to keep watching and remain on guard while I finished the task.

I knelt down and moved the first one, then the second, and finally the third. As I stood up, the earth suddenly exploded under me. The force and power of the explosion lifted me high into the sky and I landed flat on my back and hands. I was plastered to the ground like a limp rag. I could not comprehend what had happened. I smelled something burning, only to realize it was my own flesh. The taste of blood and dirt filled my mouth. I thought that either one of the missiles had exploded or that the enemy had attacked.

Then I felt the pain. A terrible pain wracked my whole body. Before looking at myself, I started to lose control. I felt like I had been torn to pieces. I tried to lift myself to a standing position but I couldn't. Suddenly, the thought came to me — I was going to die. This time, I was dying for real. I was so scared. What would happen if I died? I was sure I was going straight to

hell! What could I do? I tried to hold my breath inside of me, thinking that my soul was about to come out of me.

I started to pray for the comfort of my parents and friends. Exhausted and frightened, I lifted my head and gazed into the sky. Up in the heavens, I saw a small cloud. Then this thought occurred to me: My only hope was Jesus. Even though I believed in saints, I knew that they could not save me now. I cried out with all my heart, “Jesus, I know you are alive, and I know you are true. Please save me and take me to heaven. I don't want to go to hell. Forgive all my sins. I am a big sinner. I don't want to die!”

I was trying to hold onto life even though I had often wished for death. At that moment, I realized how important and precious life is, at the very moment when I was about to lose it. I continued to pray to Jesus, and I told him, “If you save me and keep me alive, I will be yours forever. I will serve you, follow you, and tell everyone about you.”

As soon as I finished my prayer, I heard a voice like a wind coming from heaven. It came on me and I felt peaceful and happy both in my body and in my soul. A strange power filled my body and I started to laugh and praise God out loud. What was happening to me? I had changed in an instant! I tried to sit up, and this time I did it very easily. I looked at my body — it was covered with blood. I saw my left leg, completely burned and hanging on the skin. The bone had been completely broken and crushed. My other leg was bleeding, and my calf was cut severely. I started to yell, “My leg is gone! My leg is gone! But I am still alive! Thank you, God. Thank you, Jesus.”

I tied my leg with a rope to stop the bleeding, then shouted to my friends who were shooting in every direction because they believed the enemy had attacked. They also thought I was dead, so when they heard my voice, they rushed to my aid in great surprise. When they saw me smiling and heard me laughing, they thought I had gone crazy. One of them said, “He must have fallen on his head and damaged his brain.” I started to encourage them when I saw their troubled faces. They did not understand the change that had come over me. They quickly called the High Command and asked for an ambulance and medical aid. Meanwhile, we realized that it wasn't the rockets that had exploded, nor had the enemy attacked. I had been standing on a land mine the whole time I was defusing the rockets.

We descended the mountain with my companions trying to hold my leg in place while carrying me. The severe pain was growing stronger by the minute. Every step down was treacherous; one wrong step could cost us our lives. The men holding me had to follow one leader, who carefully watched for safe rocks to step on. It was a terrifying process for them, and they were exhausted by the time we reached the bottom of the mountain more than an hour after we began. I could easily have died from all the bleeding. Despite all the pain, a strange peace filled my soul and I remained very calm.

An ambulance was waiting for us. Immediately, I was given an injection and those caring for me continued to try to keep me conscious. When we arrived at the hospital, nurses I knew personally did not recognize me because my face was so burned, cut, and covered with dirt and blood.

I woke up after an operation. I was lying on the bed, covered with a white sheet, and I could feel immense pain in my legs. I uncovered myself only to realize that my left leg had been cut off below the knee. This sent me emotionally over the edge, and I started sobbing. I was not ready to accept the truth. My family was there, gathered around me, all of them crying. They tried to

comfort me but it was no use. The pain was very strong since the anesthetic had worn off. One of my sisters, a nurse at the hospital, gave me some painkillers, but nothing could numb my sorrow.

I stayed in the hospital for more than two months. During that time, the missionary friends of my sisters visited regularly. I explained to them my elation after the explosion. I did not understand what it was, but they said it was the power of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter whom Jesus sent to help me and assure me of my salvation.

I was able to tell all my friends who visited me about what had happened and what God had done in my life. My room never seemed empty of friends, family members, and, of course, Christian believers who were of great support and encouragement. They prayed with me daily and we had wonderful times discussing the Bible. In fact, during my time in the hospital, what I did the most was read the Bible. For the first time in my life, I could understand what I read.

It was great to have loving, caring people around me all the time. But as soon as I was alone, I would begin to worry about my future. Why was I going through all this? Why the unbearable pain? How long would I live without my leg? What would people think of me? How could I continue to live with a disability?

I prayed constantly because my only hope was in Jesus. He was the one who saved me. I lost a leg, but I gained my life. I would not spend eternity in hell. I was encouraged by daily Bible reading and by the constant prayers of my sisters and the other believers.

When the wounds finally healed and I was able to live without the professional medical care of the hospital, I moved home. This was a very trying time for me, and for my family and friends. I had to stay in bed most of the time. I needed assistance just to move and sit in a chair. Adapting to this way of life was agonizing. Despite these struggles, my relationship with Jesus was growing closer and I never missed the opportunity to tell visitors how Jesus saved me.

I listened to my sisters and other believers tell me their stories of how they had received Christ as their Savior. Each one of them had had a different experience. I started to wonder if my experience was authentic. Did I have to feel what they felt, or even see what they saw? I learned that while each person may have a different emotional experience when accepting Christ, all will have essentially the same spiritual experience. As a newborn child of God, I had received the nature of my Father. I had his image, I carried his name, and I had the right to inherit eternal life.

One afternoon, after sharing my testimony in a small group, one of the believers had this prophecy: "You will be like a shining star in this world. God will use you and the world will see his star shining in the universe."

Another night, after I had drenched my pillow with tears, Jesus came to me in a dream and lit up my room with a bright light. I saw myself in heaven with an indescribable happiness. I was stepping on the long grass that had life. Every time I stepped on it, it did not break or die; instead it grew up instantly and took its former shape. I saw my leg growing in front of my eyes until it became perfect. It was an incredible vision that filled me with indescribable happiness.

I awoke with a strange feeling that my leg was still there. I opened my Bible and a verse lit up before my eyes which said: "I will never leave you or forsake you." I closed the Bible and opened it again and the same verse appeared to me. I knew that it was Jesus talking to me. He planted a new hope in my heart, and I renewed the decision I had made when I was lying on the ground dying from the land mine explosion: I would follow and serve him the rest of my life. I opened the Bible again, and God gave me a special verse from Psalm 117:17-18: "I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the Lord. The Lord has chastened me severely but he has not given me over to death." I realized that God was preparing an eternal body for me that would never

die nor be destroyed. I felt satisfied and was convinced that God was making everything work for good in my life. Yes, I had lost my leg, but I had won eternal life! (As Matthew 5:30 says, "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.")

Many times as I was growing up I heard this old saying: For each person who dies, a star falls from the sky. Each time you see a shooting star it means that a person has died. In my case, Jesus Christ, the true Light, had lit the star that was about to fall and never shine again. My light will continue to shine forever, because the source of the shining is the Eternal Light Himself.

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About land mines in the world:

Land mines remain the most active and dangerous threats in many places in the world where war has ended, other weapons have been put aside and enemies have become friends. A UNICEF report says that in 64 countries, an estimated 110 million land mines are lodged in the ground. A land mine is a perfect soldier: it never eats, falls ill or disobeys, says a general in the UNICEF report. Moreover, the land mine gives a bigger bang for the money. It can cost as little as U.S. \$3. Precisely because they are cheap and plentiful, land mines have littered the landscape of developing countries. Lebanon is one of these countries. It is where I grew up and where I lived during the civil war.

Limbless and blind children around the world bear witness to the land mines' destructive capabilities. Since 1975, the devices have killed or maimed more than 1 million people. They continue to kill 800 victims each month and disable more than 1,000 others. Many of today's land mines, which can remain active for decades, were planted before their youngest victims were born.

In the Persian Gulf War, for example, the United States and its allies laid about 1 million mines along the Iraq-Kuwait border and around the Iraqi city of Basra. In the fighting in the Balkans, at least three million mines have been laid.

UNICEF points out that the world is losing the battle to protect innocent people and children against land mines. While about 100,000 mines were cleared in 1993, two million more replaced them, according to UN sources. An additional 100 million land mines are believed to be stockpiled.

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