

Chapter 1

Discussion:

1. How much do you know about Iranian society before the Islamic Revolution in 1979? Do you know how it changed as a result of the Revolution?
2. The young boy's innocence was shattered at an early age. Did he seem traumatized by what he had witnessed when the men stoned the women? Why do you think curiosity was his main reaction rather than hysterics?
3. The Islamic government in Iran allows for the stoning of women who are believed to be unfaithful in their marriages. Do you think there could be any other marginalized groups in Iran that are treated badly with the government's approval?
4. The young boy's father was afraid his commitment to wrestling would interfere with his commitment to his religious studies. Would this necessarily be true? Can you think of any ways a commitment to wrestling, or athletics in general, might enhance rigorous religious studies?

Reflection:

5. Think about the group of Muslim men who surrounded the woman and stoned her. What would you do if you observed a mob hurting someone? Why?

Application:

6. This week, do a little research. Learn more about Iranian society pre- and post-Islamic Revolution of 1979. Spend some time especially learning about women and other marginalized groups in Iran. What do you learn that leaves an impression on you?

Chapter 2

Discussion:

1. As the young boy was being beaten by his father, no one in the family intervened. Do you think they should have intervened? Why or why not? How could they have intervened if they had chosen to?
2. Nane knew how harsh her son was with his family, yet she still helped her grandson when he was locked in her basement. What realities did she have to face, and what difficult choices did she have to make in order to help her grandson?
3. How can you explain the emptiness the young man felt in spite of his independence, wealth, and wrestling victory?

Reflection:

4. There is little recourse for a victim of domestic abuse in Iran. Think about the possible protections that are offered to victims of domestic abuse in your country. What safeguards are in place that are not available to victims of abuse in Iran?

Application:

5. Look around you. How are people being hurt? Who can you be a safe place for? Who can you defend or protect this week? How will you do it?

Chapter 3

Discussion:

1. While in jail, the young man asked himself why the governmental authorities were so afraid of Christianity. He had no answer. Do you think it's true that the authorities were afraid of Christianity? If so, why would they be?
2. How can you explain the emptiness the young man felt in spite of his independence, wealth, and wrestling victory?

Reflection:

3. The young man refers to the taxi driver, Abdolrahim, as his friend. Why would a teenager who isn't addicted to drugs be friends with someone who is? Have you ever been friends with someone who is very different from you in lifestyle or belief system? If so, was this an easy or difficult friendship to develop?

Application:

4. The father built domes for mosques as an expression of his faith and to give back to Islam. Do you have faith in anything or anyone, and if so, how do you express your faith? This week, give back to someone or something you are grateful for.

Chapter 4

Discussion:

1. Why do you think Farhan chose to speak privately to the young man about the Bible rather than share the information with every man at the table?
2. What do you think of the young man's statement, "All religions are the same and all religious people are the same"? Do you agree or disagree, and why? What is a "religious" person to you?

Reflection:

3. The young man thinks he can never be a Christian because he was born into Islam. Have you ever felt trapped by your circumstances? Has it ever been difficult to change your mind or your perspective because it would have been costly to let go of what you had always been taught?

Application:

4. The young man was intrigued by the conversation with Farhan, yet he wasn't sure he could trust a stranger. This week, strike up a conversation with a stranger about anything—it doesn't have to be about religion or a controversial issue. Attempt a conversation with a stranger and see what their reaction is. Judging by their reaction to you, do you think the stranger would be comfortable if you wanted to discuss something as serious and personal as religion?

Chapter 5

Discussion:

1. The young man felt remorse about the way he had wronged some people in the past, so he apologized. His apologies were largely rejected. What does this say about the duty and the benefit of making apologies?
2. The young man found that the desert offered him a quiet place to do some serious thinking and reflecting. How important do you think it is for us to have a regular place where we can retreat to for this?
3. The young man believes “if a pastor hasn’t suffered for his people, hasn’t been one of them himself, he cannot truly be a good shepherd.” Do you agree? Why or why not? How can a pastor suffer for his people?

Reflection:

4. Have you ever undertaken the humbling task of apologizing to someone long after you had offended them? What was their response? How did you feel afterward?

Application:

5. Where we come from is important. Ali’s family had owned the plain and been shepherds for 500 years. This week, outline your family history as far back as you can. What were your ancestors’ names? Where did they live? How did they make a living? Can you go back 500 years?

Chapter 6

Discussion:

1. In another country, the young man attended a very intense course of study from 7 am – 10 pm every day. What would drive a person to commit to this level of intense study?
2. The underground church became a home to the young man. Why is it important for all of us to feel like we have somewhere or someone to call “home”?

Reflection:

3. The homeless in Iran were seen as worthless; even the police didn't pay any attention to them. What is the prevailing attitude of your general culture or specific group toward the homeless? What do you think accounts for this attitude, whether it's a healthy or unhealthy attitude?
4. The Kurdish are a marginalized people group in Iran. Because of this, some of them resort to the crime of smuggling to provide for their families. How much responsibility do the Kurds bear for this crime? Do you think there might be any instances in your own culture where marginalized groups feel compelled and justified in committing a crime? If so, explain the similarities and differences between the Kurds and the marginalized people groups in your culture.

Application:

5. Have you ever spent time with a person who is homeless? Do you know where the homeless spend their time in your community? This week, explore your city, your community. Where do you think you see a person who is homeless hanging out during the daytime? During the evening? Overnight?

Chapter 7

Discussion:

1. Consider the way the young man described the homeless encampment and the fact that he said the homeless were often targets of violence. Do you think this is consistent with the homeless population in your culture? Why or why not?
2. Think about the temporary makeshift rehabilitation center Cyrus and the young man built and how casually all the equipment and medical supplies were provided. How was it possible to avoid governmental red tape? Do you think this would be possible in your culture?

Reflection:

3. The young man says that he and Cyrus needed to be accepted by the homeless before they would be able to talk to them about religion. He also says they began their relationships by listening. What does this say about judgment? Try to remember a time when you would have benefited from a little help. Did someone take the time to respect you and listen to you before they offered suggestions? Or did someone criticize you and offer no tangible help?

Application:

4. The young man and Cyrus knew they had to help the homeless people who had responded to their promise to help; he says he and Cyrus couldn't go back on their word. This week, think about any promises you've made or even any instances where you've given someone the impression you would do something. Were you able to get it done, or has something kept you from doing it? Commit again to following through on that promise.

Chapter 8

Discussion:

1. The young man refers to marriage as a promise that he would never break. Do you think people in your general culture or specific group think of marriage as a promise that can't be broken? Is this a promise that can be broken easily without harmful effects?
2. The young man says that being married to Sahar would not mean living together, and that they would never have children. Why do you think this was the way it had to be for them? Do you think this was fair for the young man to ask this of Sahar? Why would she agree to this?

Reflection:

3. The young man learned from the recovered addicts that people need to feel a sense of purpose in their lives and that they have some control over what happens. What about you? Was there ever a time when you felt situations in your life were out of control or you didn't know what your future looked like? How did that make you feel? Or have you always been fortunate enough to know your purpose and have a sense of direction for your future? If so, how did you find your purpose and future goals?

Application:

4. Take some time to consider your current situation in life and what future you would like for yourself. Identify current situations that you are dissatisfied with, and then ask yourself what you can change and how you can change it. After that, set some goals for yourself: short-term goals to be fulfilled in one year, mid-term goals that will take one to five years to fulfill, and long-term goals that will take more than five years to fulfill. Also, think about what you need to do to meet each of these goals.

Chapter 9

Discussion:

1. Explain the steps the young man took to insure a sense of family and teamwork among all his employees. What is it about these steps that made them so effective?
2. Behram said that he and the other recovered addicts wanted to contribute to the cost of obtaining 10,000 Bibles. They didn't have a lot of money to give away, so why do you think they wanted to help buy Bibles with their money?

Reflection:

3. The young man tells the other men that their group has no hierarchy of leadership; in other words, everyone had equal authority. What do you think about this concept? Have you known any other groups, formal or informal, that operate without a hierarchy? What might be the advantages or disadvantages to operating without a hierarchy?

Application:

4. Consider the concept of "paying it forward". The formerly homeless addicts reached out and helped other people recover from their addictions. Has anyone ever done a kindness to you that you haven't been able to pay back? Instead of paying it back, look around you. Who needs help? What can you do to pass along any benefit that you've gotten from someone else investing in you?

Chapter 10

Discussion:

1. In the Islamic Iranian society, only police carry guns. Why do you think that is? There are other countries that do not have Islamic governments, yet they have greater gun control than countries such as the United States. What do you think is the point in prohibiting citizens from owning or carrying guns?
2. Think about the arrest and court appearance the young man experienced, and then compare or contrast the judicial system in Iran with the judicial system in your country. Iran is a modern nation; this situation occurred in contemporary times. Does any of what the young man experienced seem reasonable to you?

Reflection:

3. Clearly, the young man was tortured when he was placed into the hole. He says he stayed silent because there were other people who depended on him to keep their identities secret. How strong are you? What have you had to endure for someone else's benefit? Why did you make this choice?

Application:

4. After being taken to his holding cell, the young man was escorted by a soldier to the bathroom down the hall. The soldier was only supposed to give him ten minutes, but he seemed a bit sympathetic and gave him longer. This is grace, giving someone something they apparently don't deserve or haven't earned. Who can you show a little grace to this week?

Chapter 11

Discussion:

1. The young man was convicted and sentenced for a crime without ever having a trial or jury of his peers. In this particular case, do you think a trial and a jury of peers would have made any difference in Iran? Why or why not?
2. Saber told the young man that his cellmates were in prison because they had all spoken out about the government in some way. What might be some ways they spoke out about the government—ways that are legal in a freer country but not in Iran?

Reflection:

3. After four months in solitary confinement, the young man was changed; he was withdrawn. Have you ever suffered something so traumatic that it changed you? How did you learn to be comfortable with the new you? How did you find hope for the future?

Application:

4. The young man used his gift of memory to encourage his cellmates by quoting words from the Bible that they found comforting. What gift do you have? How can you use it this week to encourage someone else?

Chapter 12

Discussion:

1. Sometimes when we know someone is hurting, we want to check in on them, but we don't know how. What are some things the young man's co-workers did that were casual ways of checking on him without overwhelming him?
2. Why was it so encouraging to the young man to find out that neither Behram nor his co-worker thought of Behram as the boss?

Reflection:

3. Does it surprise you that the young man wasn't eager to call or see anyone as soon as he was released from prison? What do you think your feelings would be about this if you were in his situation?

Application:

4. Is there anyone you hold a measure of authority over? Maybe it's at your job or in your family. If so, what is something you can do this week to help them feel they are an equal part of the team with you?

Chapter 13

Discussion:

1. What does the example of the fast growth of the underground church over a short period of time teach us about maintaining a growing endeavor?
2. Why do you think Ali and his street gang were interested in protecting the underground Christian group? Why do you think the Christians were willing to accept the help from a gang?

Reflection:

3. The young man taught his leaders how to handle money in the underground churches. What similarities or differences do you see between the way he taught and what you've typically seen in the churches or other non-profit organizations in your culture?

Application:

4. Have you ever donated your time or your money to a church or a charity organization? This week, do a little research online and choose a place where you would like to donate in some way. Consider things like who the organization helps, where exactly the money goes, how much money is required to hire staff and operate the organization, etc.

Chapter 14

Discussion:

1. The young man was arrested again, and as before, he did not resist. Why not? He knew he was at least being taken to jail; he probably wondered if he would be subjected to the same torture he'd been subjected to previously; he even had witnesses to his arrest this time. Why do you think he didn't resist?
2. How difficult do you think it is to be a defense attorney in Iran? Jamshidi tried to help his client, the young man, but with a judicial system that bows to the whims of tyrannical judges, he was rendered ineffective. Consider the role of a judge and defense attorney in your general culture. What elements are in place in your judicial system that allow the judge and attorney to work together toward the client's benefit?

Reflection:

3. The young man was harassed by the court system; he was not charged with a crime and his court dates never materialized. After having been previously imprisoned, this was enough to make him willing to sign over the deed to his apartment to be released from jail. Have you ever been harassed? What kind of strength does it take to stand up under that pressure? What were you willing to do just to be free from the harassment?

Application:

4. Emergency plans are sometimes necessary. The young man had to quickly make an emergency plan for his immediate future. This week, make an emergency plan for your immediate future. Let's imagine you are a victim of some crime, and you need to find a safe place. Where would you go? Who or what would you take with you? Who would you tell? What would you do with everything and everyone you leave behind? How would this affect relationships with the people that you can't explain any of this to? How would this affect the future that you had anticipated for yourself and those close to you?

Chapter 15

Discussion:

1. Think about the young man's relationship with Sahra's family. How would you describe the dating culture in Iran (do a little research if you need to)? How is the dating culture in your general culture or specific group similar or different? Do you think there are any benefits to the dating culture in Iran?
2. The young man was tempted to renounce his Christian faith. He was tempted to go to his father and humbly ask for forgiveness. He even says this would have been easy to do. But he didn't. How can remaining true to faith pull on us more powerfully than the temptation to renounce it all and go back to life as usual, a comfortable life without threat of harm?

Reflection:

3. Sahar basically asks the young man to change who he is for the sake of her family. The young man won't do it; he stays true to his principles. Have you ever had to pretend in order to make other people happy? Maybe you've had to pretend what you really believe in your heart? Or pretend you aren't in a relationship that isn't approved of? Or pretend you want to follow in your father's or mother's footsteps professionally?

Application:

4. Yousef reminds the young man that because he is partly Kurdish, the authorities may execute him rather than simply put him in prison. Do some research this week. Where, exactly, is the Kurdish region of Iran? Who, exactly, are the Kurdish people? In what other countries do the Kurds live? Why is the relationship between the Iranian government and the Kurdish people so strained?

Part One

1. The young boy's father was afraid his commitment to wrestling would interfere with his commitment to religious studies. Would this necessarily be true? Can you think of any ways a commitment to wrestling, or athletics in general, might enhance rigorous religious studies? Furthermore, in what ways might his wrestling experience have helped him through the times when he was later arrested, imprisoned, and tortured for his faith?
2. Apologies can be difficult. What are the elements of an acceptable apology? What is one of the best or worst apologies you've ever been offered?
3. We all need a place to belong. Where is your "home"? Who are "your people? Why?
4. Do you think a marriage ceremony is a religious or civil act? In other words, how important—or why is it or why is it not important—to make a marriage legal in the eyes of the government?
5. Who are you? Who is the real you? If people could look past your skin, past your physical features, and past whatever they think they know about you, what would they truly see? What do you believe deep down in your heart?