

September 5, 2001

Dear Friends,

Last week I had the privilege of spending a week living on the streets with some of my homeless refugee friends.

Before I share some of the things I saw and learned, let me share this point: I did NOT do this in order to know what it feels like to be a refugee.

Hopefully, I will NEVER know what that is like. I did not grow up in an oppressive country. I did not leave my family behind with the good chance that I would never see them again. Contact with my family in my home country has not been completely severed (as it has with many of the refugees). I did not risk my life and life-savings to go on a journey whose end was uncertain. I do not know what it is like to be willing to risk everything for the chance to experience freedom. I have an American passport. I have a family, home, and freedom. I do not have to go through the frustration of endless, confusing, and often contradictory bureaucracy and paperwork and being treated like an animal on a continual basis. I do not have the same hopelessness of finding work, finding food, or finding a country where I can have a normal life. I do not know what it is like to exist every day without knowing how or when I will ever have normal life. Additionally, I have the Lord. Etc., etc., etc.

I only lived on the streets for one week. My original purpose was three-fold:

1. To better understand their situation close-up, and thus better understand how we can better serve them in Jesus' name
2. To develop more of a heart for the refugees
3. To have opportunities of personally interacting with them about the Good News of Jesus

With thanksgiving to God, I can say that all three aspects were fulfilled.

Additionally, I added another purpose to the week. I FASTED and PRAYED during those 7 days that God would bring a spiritual breakthrough to the refugees and that He would provide a place that we could use to offer them shelter and the love of Jesus every day of the week (ie, "The Refuge"). I did a lot of walking and praying around Athens, looking for buildings that might be used for such a purpose when God provides the funds.

One last preliminary comment...the day I set off to stay on the streets, my dear Iranian brother NADER asked if he could join me. Of course I agreed, so he was with me most of the week and was a TREMENDOUS blessing to me and to the refugees in the park! I can't say enough about how thankful to God I am for Nader's partnership. (I will write more about Nader and his Filipina wife Ella in another e-mail).

Below are some thoughts you may or may not be interested in that came out of this past week, divided into three categories: THINGS I SAW OR EXPERIENCED, THINGS I LEARNED, THINGS GOD DID (THAT I COULD SEE).

THINGS I SAW OR EXPERIENCED...

- \* Every night I "slept" (somewhat) on the ground in a very large city park where about 200 refugees (all Muslims--mostly Afghans and some Iranians) sleep each night
- \* I did not bathe, brush my teeth, shave, or change my clothes for one week (I did wash my hands a few times and splash water on my face every day)
- \* I wore shoes that did not fit me well, did LOTS AND LOTS of walking and got several blisters on my feet early in the week

\* In my pockets I took less than \$8 and a partially-used phone card. I used up all the money on a few bus tickets (beginning and end of the week to go to and from home), some things to drink, and some medicine for a refugee

\* I went to places where refugees must go (with a refugee friend) such as the police station, soup kitchens, other "helpful" organizations. In so doing, I experienced the weariness of walking long distances in the hot sun, standing in long lines waiting, being treated unkindly and impatiently, and getting confusing and contradicting information (about important matters).

\* It was very hot every day, so shade and water were highly valued

\* Most of the time I was very tired due to the heat, lack of sleep, and lack of food

\* The only restroom in the park is a hangout for homosexual encounters (I discovered by experience) so I didn't use it after that

\* I saw MANY drug addicts, mentally ill, and demon-possessed GREEKS in the park and outside of the park. (I will share about one encounter I had with one of these in another e-mail in the near future). None of the refugees I saw had any overt symptoms of these problems.

\* On my third day, as I was walking around Athens ("Refuge"-hunting and praying) I was suddenly overcome with a severe "intestinal urge". With no facilities in sight, this impending force only becoming more powerful, my butt cheeks squeezed ever so tightly together and my face contorting into stressful expressions of strain, I picked up my pace in search of a fast-food place where I could make a dash for the restroom. About 1/4 of a mile later I made it, though not without leaving some evidence of my dilemma in my clothing. 30 minutes later I was doing the same thing again. (I mention this not to be gross, but to highlight another very practical struggle the homeless face, because while that could happen to anyone at all, most people could just go home to change and wash their clothing right away

\* As I did a lot of walking, I also did a LOT of sitting around (watching, praying, and "waiting"). This was actually one of the most difficult things for me as normally I am constantly "doing" things. I kept thinking about how, at the end of the week, I could get back to a schedule that would involve a lot of activity.

However, on the other hand, I am sure that I did more praying in one week than ever before.

\* Every day, policemen would come to the park to check papers and to run out most the refugees who were hanging around. Some days they came more than once. One day I talked for a while with some of this policemen and about how we should obey God and show love and help to these people (they didn't agree). One day they came 3 or 4 times, and in the evening a whole squad of "riot" police came and basically intimidated all of the refugees that were there (except for the few that were with me--I don't know why), and at night they chased out many who were sleeping in the park (but not me or the group I was sleeping with--we were further removed in a circle of bushes and they did not know where we were). However, I must confess that I did experience a little anxiety each evening that the police would come while we were asleep and arrest us or kick us out. Usually, the refugees all come back to the park as soon as the police are gone.

#### THINGS I LEARNED...

\* It DOES get cold at night in Athens in the summertime (especially between 3 and 6 AM) so **BLANKETS ARE IMPORTANT IN THE SUMMERTIME**

\* It is more difficult to sleep on the ground in an Athens park than I previously imagined...the traffic noise all night long is constant--horns, tires screeching, sirens, big trucks, loud motorcycles--as well as stray cats and dogs, tree locusts, and the hard ground (even when somewhat buffered by flattened cardboard boxes)

\* While many of the refugees in the park were only staying there from 2 days to one month, I met some who had been there for 3 months and one who had been there for 7 months

\* I learned that many organizations (not all) that offer "help" to refugees, offer only advice or counselling (often contradictory), or assistance that is "token" or "symbolic" instead of substantial, practical, or relevant

\* We (Helping Hands) MUST do more to help meet the practical needs of these people. Only then will the light and love of Christ really break through in a powerful way. We must do a better job of making the Athens Refugee Center (ARC) more welcoming, more practical, more relevant,

and more service-oriented. We MUST continue to trust God to provide a place where we can house more of these homeless people.

\* There are huge portions of the day when the refugees are just sitting around bored with nothing to do (if they can't find work by 8 or 9 am, then they most likely are not going to find it so they return to the park to wait until the next morning for another possibility); no money, no job, and no place to live all add up to a lot of boredom. They WANT to work, but the unemployment rate even among Greeks is around 10-12% so a foreigner without a reference who doesn't speak Greek is going to find it even more difficult.

\* Refugees also do a LOT of walking. Without money to spend on public transportation they must walk to the various soup kitchens, police stations, job possibilities, refugee organizations, etc. which are really spread out all over this city of 5 million people. GOOD SHOES ARE REALLY IMPORTANT FOR REFUGEES.

#### THINGS GOD DID (THAT I COULD SEE)...

\* We had MANY good opportunities to share Jesus with the Muslim refugees in the park. Some were open and some were not, but there were many seeds that were planted that we pray will grab root and grow and bear fruit for Jesus. Some of the spiritual conversations were started by us but most were initiated by the Muslim refugees.

\* Some told us (privately) during the week that they believed the message we were sharing but they were afraid at this time to let others know. They encouraged us, however, to keep on sharing.

\* Almost every time we started sharing with two or three people others would come over and listen. Some would come and go but the groups could get to as big as 20-30 at a time.

\* We saw a LOT of people reading New Testaments and tracts they had taken from our ministry facility. One night I saw three guys (Afghans) sit down, and one of them took out a tract to read. When he finished it, he gave it to one of the others. When he finished, he gave it to the other. Then another few guys would come and join them and they would each read it. By the time the group had all gotten up and left, about 15 people had read that Gospel tract.

\* We were able to see some answers to prayer. For example, we prayed for one Iranian to find work the next day since he had not found any for awhile, and he did. A new believer told us that he had prayed to God the day before, "Lord, I am so hungry. Please give me some food." A few minutes later someone brought food to the park to share with him.

\* God physically protected us from the police, fanatic Muslims, and a crazy man (who I will write about later)

\* The week ended on Sunday evening with me preaching at the Iranian Fellowship where over 60 Afghans and Iranians (mostly Afghans) showed up. Some were new believers, but most were seekers, many of whom we had shared with in the park during the week.

Well, I know there were other things, but this has gone on certainly long enough. Perhaps I'll share more at another time. Thank you for your prayers and support for this ministry as we seek to reach the nations through Athens.

Scott McCracken