I love basketball. So it was only natural that on my visit to Turkey I joined with a group of my new friends (arkadashim) to play basketball with the “city team” of Bergama. Those were the days of the “Dream Team II” so an American on the courts caused quite a sensation! (trust me, it was my nationality not my skills that brought attention, but I enjoyed it nonetheless). All was well, until an eerie cry pierced the air—it was the muezzin, giving the call to prayer. Instantly the basketball game stopped, and the lone American was left standing in bewilderment while the call to prayer was answered by my young, Muslim friends. I knew then I was the ‘visiting team!’

Over the two weeks I spent in Turkey I got to know these young students and something of their lives. Some of them had been in the Turkish army, some worked with their parents in shops there in the Bergama marketplace. Some were in love with Western culture; others preferred the lilting beat of the Turkish pop music they shared with me. Sadly, none of them knew much about Jesus, or Isa, as they called him. They only had a passing knowledge of the deep Biblical significance of their nation, often called the “Second Holy Land.”

We talked often of the role faith played in their lives, their struggles to find independence from what they saw as the stifling influence of their parents and their religion—prohibiting their search for the truth. One young woman in Dikili introduced my friends and me to her mother, a prominent physician on holiday from Istanbul. Fixing me with her intense, dark eyes, she said, “I’ve read the Koran, I’ve read the Inçill (the Gospel), I’ve read the Buddha. Now please tell me, what is truth?” Stunned, I looked at this well-educated woman on a quest and said, “Ma’am, the truth is not a principle, the truth is not a philosophy, the truth is a person, and his name is Jesus Christ. He’s changed my life, and he’ll change yours.”

My time in Turkey left me forever changed—and all to think, it started over a game of basketball.