

from Genesis 21:9–20 (NRSV)

⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son . . .

. . . and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy [Ishmael] and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

Luke 1:26–33 (NIV)

²⁶In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

1 Corinthians 15:1–8 (NIV)

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ²By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

⁶After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

This week, we turn to Islam and try to understand the faith embraced by 1.5 billion.

This week will be the most challenging of the entire series. Because of the horrors and violence unleashed by Al Qaeda and similar groups in the name of Islam, it is difficult to remember that the overwhelming majority of Muslims are peace-loving people with whom we share much. The most populous Muslim country is not in the Middle East; it is Indonesia. Pew, Barna and other researchers consistently find that Muslims in America are among the most conservative and law-abiding segments of society. They are middle-class, mainstream, family-centered, and hard-working. To say that Al Qaeda represents Islam is like saying the KKK represents Christianity.

So, we’ll strive to look past the violence of a few, so that we may understand better this faith that is embraced by more than 1.5 billion people. We’ll start with a brief look at Muhammad and then move on to some of the basics of the Islamic faith.

Muhammad and the Quran

First, it is important to put Muhammad in the right place on the historical timeline. He was born nearly 600 years *after* Jesus in Mecca on the Arabian peninsula. Though he grew up in a largely pagan world, he was exposed to both Judaism and Christianity. Indeed, he found himself drawn to both, as many before and after him have been.

When he was about forty, he had a deeply personal and spiritual experience in a cave outside Mecca. He claimed that he had been visited by the angel Gabriel, who gave him the very words of God. These words, in Arabic, Muhammad said, had been planted in his heart. Muhammad recited these words to others, who then wrote them down. Over the years, Muhammad claimed to have more such visions and passed on more of what he believed to be God's word. After his death, these writings were compiled into the *Quran*, which means "recitations." [More on Muhammad can be found in a page four text box.]

For a Muslim, the Quran contains the very words of God, in Arabic, dictated to Muhammad. The writings in the Quran are God-speaking and are written in the first-person. For most Muslims, the Quran should never be translated. Someone who wants to read it should learn Arabic.

All this is very different from what we claim about the Bible, which we believe to be inspired by God but written by men. Indeed, in Islam, every Quran printed is a copy of the "heavenly book" and is the full and complete revelation of God. We can say that Jesus is to Christianity as the Quran is to Islam. For a Muslim, the Quran is God made "flesh." Thus, every single printed copy of the Quran is to be revered and treated accordingly. To a Muslim, watching a Quran get abused would be like a Christian watching Jesus get abused.

The Five Pillars of Faith

"Islam" comes from the same root as the Hebrew "shalom" and can be translated as "submission." "Muslim" simply means "one who submits." Submit to whom? To Allah, which is simply the Arabic word for "God." It is not a name. How can we know what is God's will? For Muslims, the will of God can be found in these writings:

- First, the *Qu'ran*
- Second, the *Sunna* (collected writings about the life of Muhammad, whose life is the model for all Muslims)
- Third, the Bible (though because Muslims claim the Bible we have is corrupted, this is akin to lip service)
- The teachings of Islamic scholars.

Muslims' submission to God, seeking to live within God's will, is embodied in five pillars of the Islamic faith:

- *Shahada*: the confession of faith
The Muslim confession is simple and direct: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger." Believe this in your heart and you are a Muslim.
- *Salat*: Pray five times daily
Muslims get on their knees, face east toward Mecca, and pray at five set times every day. It is their way to stay connected to Allah throughout the day. It isn't hard to see what we Christians could learn from this practice. It is similar to the Christian tradition of the Daily Offices, which consists of eight daily prayer events.
- *Zakat*: charitable giving
In Islam, salvation comes by God's forgiveness of our sins and our own accumulation of good works, which purify us in God's sight. Zakat is such a purifying act. It consists of giving away 2.5% of one's wealth (not income!) every year for the good of the poor. I don't know how much accumulated wealth is in the hands of Christians in the U.S., but it must be a vast sum. Imagine how much good could be done with 2.5% of it every year. (There is more on Zakat in one of the page four text boxes.)
- *Sawm*: Fasting during month-long *Ramadan*, the ninth month on the Islamic calendar.

For about a month every fall, Muslims observe Ramadan¹, during which they fast from all food and drink from sunrise to sunset every day for the 30 or so days of Ramadan. They also fast from smoking and sexual relations during the daylight hours.

- *Hajj*: the pilgrimage to Mecca
All Muslims who can are to make pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime to engage in prayer and worship at Islam's central shrine.

What about Jesus?

Muslims revere Jesus as one of Allah's greatest prophets, second only to Muhammad. Surprisingly, they affirm the virgin birth. However, they do not affirm what the virgin birth implies, that Jesus is God incarnate. Muslims readily embrace the greatness of God, but they do not embrace God-made-flesh, born to a Galilean peasant girl.

Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified, but that he was taken up to heaven, a bit like Elijah. Thus, they also deny Jesus' resurrection.

In all, Muslims deny about Jesus what matters most. That he was truly God and willingly suffered death, even death on a cross, so that we would be put right with God.

Thus, without Jesus, the Islamic worldview comes down to these answers to the four questions. You'll see that Christians will agree with the essence of the first three answers. But when it comes to fourth, we do not believe that have it within ourselves to always to do God's will. Thus, the solution lies in Jesus, not in us.

- Who are we?
 - We are creatures, made by God ("Allah" in Arabic).
- Where are we?
 - On a planet created by God in the cosmos of God's creation.
- What is the problem?
 - We do not submit to God's will
- What is the solution?
 - We must submit to God's will

You can see that there is much we share with our Muslim cousins, but our proclamation that Jesus has put us right with God despite our sinfulness is not one that Muslims embrace. It is our duty to come to them in love and friendship so that they might see the true love and light of Christ in us and embrace Jesus as the Lord and Savior of all humankind.

Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God?

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all intend to serve the same God, the only God, the God who created all that is and came to Abraham nearly 4,000 years ago. All three religions claim Abraham, though through differing family trees. Jews and Christians claim Abraham through his son Isaac and Isaac's son, Jacob, as laid out in Jesus' genealogy in Matthews. Muslims tell their story through Ishmael, the first-born son of Abraham, though not of Abraham's wife, Sarah. You can find the story of Ishmael in Genesis 16 and 21. When you read the stories, you will see that God blesses Ishmael and promised him that he will be the father of a great nation.

Though all three of these religions intend to serve the same God and can rightfully claim to be children of Abraham, Christians alone claim that Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God, that he is God himself, that when you see Jesus, you are looking at God. Thus, from a Christian perspective, though Muslims intend to serve the one God, their understanding of God is incomplete. They can see some of the truth, but not the full truth of God that is embodied in Christ. Here too, the question always comes back to "Who is Jesus?"

¹ Like Easter, Ramadan is based on the lunar calendar, thus it moves around on the solar calendar we use in the west. The same is true of Yom Kippur and other Jewish holidays, as Judaism is also uses the lunar calendar.

Zakat (taken from the BBC religions site)

Zakat is the compulsory giving of a set proportion of one's wealth to charity. It is regarded as a type of worship and of self-purification. Zakat is the third Pillar of Islam.

Zakat does not refer to charitable gifts given out of kindness or generosity, but to the systematic giving of 2.5% of one's wealth each year to benefit the poor.

The benefits of Zakat, apart from helping the poor, are as follows:

- Obeying God
- Helping a person acknowledge that everything comes from God on loan and that we do not really own anything ourselves. Since we cannot take anything with us when we die, we need not cling to it.
- Acknowledging that whether we are rich or poor is God's choice, so we should help those he has chosen to make poor.
- Learning self-discipline
- Freeing oneself from the love of possessions and greed
- Freeing oneself from the love of money
- Freeing oneself from love of oneself
- Behaving honestly

Muhammad (adapted from the BBC religions site)

Muslims believe that Islam is a faith that has always existed and that it was gradually revealed to humanity by a number of prophets, but the final and complete revelation of the faith was made through the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century CE.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in Saudi Arabia in 570. He was a deeply spiritual man, and often spent time in meditation on Mount Hira. The traditional story of the Qur'an tells how one night in 610 he was meditating in a cave on the mountain when he was visited by the angel Jibreel [Gabriel] who ordered him to recite. Once Jibreel mentioned the name of Allah, Muhammad began to recite words which he came to believe were the words of God.

During the rest of his life Muhammad continued to receive these revelations. The words were remembered and recorded, and form the text of the Holy Qu'ran, the Muslim scripture.

Believing that God had chosen him as his messenger Muhammad began to preach what God had revealed to him. The simple and clear-cut message of Islam, that there is no God but Allah, and that life should be lived in complete submission to the will of Allah, was attractive to many people, and they flocked to hear it.

Muhammad's popularity was seen as threatening by the people in power in Mecca, and Muhammad took his followers on a journey from Mecca to Medina in 622. This journey is called the Hijrah (migration) and the event was seen as so important for Islam that 622 is the year in which the Islamic calendar begins.

Within ten years Muhammad had gained so many followers that he was able to return and conquer Mecca. From this time on he was generally accepted by the faithful as the true final Prophet of God. Muhammad continued to lead his community both spiritually and in earthly matters until his death in 632.

Sharia Law (taken from the BBC religions site)

Sharia is now a familiar term to Muslims and non-Muslims. It can often be heard in news stories about politics, crime, feminism, terrorism and civilization.

All aspects of a Muslim's life are governed by Sharia. Sharia law comes from a combination of sources including the Qur'an (the Muslim holy book), the Hadith (sayings and conduct of the prophet Muhammad) and fatwas (the rulings of Islamic scholars).

Many people, including Muslims, misunderstand Sharia. It's often associated with the amputation of limbs, death by stoning, lashes and other medieval punishments. Because of this, it is sometimes thought of as draconian. Some people in the West view Sharia as archaic and unfair social ideas that are imposed upon people who live in Sharia-controlled countries.

Many Muslims, however, hold a different view. In the Islamic tradition Sharia is seen as something that nurtures humanity. They see the Sharia not in the light of something primitive but as something divinely revealed. In a society where social problems are endemic, Sharia frees humanity to realize its individual potential.

The Sharia covers all aspects of human life. Classical Sharia manuals are often divided into four parts: laws relating to personal acts of worship, laws relating to commercial dealings, laws relating to marriage and divorce, and penal laws.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Probably the best place to begin is by sharing any personal experiences you have with Muslim friends or family. How can we come to see them as the face of Islam rather than Al Qaeda or the enraged faces on street mobs in the Mideast.
2. When you look over the five pillars of faith in Islam, what do you see there that we could learn from? For example, how robust and regular is your own prayer life? How could we strengthen our own prayer lives by incorporating some routine? What else can the five pillars teach us? Here's something to think about: What are the pillars of faith in Christianity?
3. Muslims revere Jesus but they do not worship him, for they affirm with Christians and Jews that only God is worthy of worship. But we Christians *do* worship Jesus. How much difference does this really make? Isn't enough to see Jesus as one of the greatest of all prophets and teachers? How would you explain to a non-Christian the importance of who exactly we understand Jesus to be?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 16 Sarah decides to take matters into her own and arranges a son for Abraham who is named Ishmael.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Genesis 21 The birth of Isaac (the son of Abraham and Sarah); Hagar and Ishmael are sent away</p>
<p>Wednesday, Isaiah 53 The suffering servant of Israel.</p>	<p>Thursday, John 5:16-30 The authority of Jesus and his identity with God.</p>
<p>Friday, John 10:22-42 The crowds know exactly what Jesus is claiming about himself.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

