

**What Every Christian Needs
to Know About**



Sharing the Gospel with Muslims



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Chart of Key Scripture Passages

Sowing a seed	Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,11
Pondering a riddle	Ecclesiastes 7:1-4
Solving a riddle	Psalms 49:1-15
A man who longed for eternity	Mark 10:17-31
A woman who thirsted for living water	John 4:3-42
Moses	Exodus 18:8-11
David	Psalms 69:19-20; 1 Sam 17:45-47
Hosea	Hosea 13:4
Daniel	Daniel 3
Jonah	Whole book, esp. chapters 1-2
King Hezekiah	Isaiah 37:18-20
Isaiah	Isaiah 45:21-23; 49:6
Messiah's birth (focus on the name)	Matthew 1:26-38; 1:21
Messiah's power to save (physically)	Luke 7:1-17
Messiah's power to save (spiritually)	Luke 19:1-10; 7:36-48; 23:39-43
Messiah's death & resurrection saves	Mark 16:14-16
Salvation climaxes in Revelation	Revelations 7:10; 5:6

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What every Christian needs to know about sharing the Gospel with Muslims

Introduction

Resurgent radical Islam is changing the world's landscape, fuelling a horrific escalation of Christian persecution. Also, militant Muslims are killing tens of thousands of (fellow) Muslims and have caused a humanitarian disaster involving the highest number of refugees on record. All this violence naturally makes one feel intimidated by Muslims more than we already are. However, these events should not make us feel daunted. We can be encouraged, realising they signal a ripening of the harvest. In recent years, tens of thousands of Muslims have become deeply disillusioned at seeing so much violence in their communities and have turned to Christ. (*A Wind in the House of Islam*, by David Garrison)

However, this doesn't mean the harvest flows in automatically; we must still preach the Gospel. (Romans 10:8-17) So let us be prepared, having our feet shod with the readiness to share the Gospel. (Ephesians 6:15) That's why I'm writing this small book, to encourage and equip Christians to do the work of ministry which includes telling the Good News. (Ephesians 4:13) Scripture repeatedly emphasizes **how** we should do this – speaking the truth in love and being full of grace, seasoned with salt. However, there is another principle I want to emphasize. We need to “unfold” God's Word so that “*the simple will gain understanding*,” especially those who don't have the capacity or inclination to read long, intricate apologetic arguments. (Psalm 119:130) So my aim is to explain the most essential insights one needs in order to witness effectively to Muslims.

What does it mean to “unfold” God's Word? It implies unwrapping the rescue story sequentially, one step at a time. I cannot think of a more friendly way to engage a Muslim in stimulating, meaningful conversation than sharing OT truths and stories in a way that unfolds God's panoramic rescue plan, showing how it is fulfilled in the NT.

This book traces two key truths: 1) eternity planted in the human heart, 2) God is mighty to save. The discussion alludes to many similarities between the Bible and Qur'an, however, it is not necessary to quote the Qur'an. The two above-mentioned themes are among the most significant 'common ground' beliefs which provide a basis for engaging our Muslim neighbors in friendly, seasoned-with-salt conversation.

In fact, these OT rescue stories have an undeniable ring of truth because of the way they seamlessly interweave God's saving power with his **oneness**. As you may know, the belief in Allah's **oneness** is the cornerstone of Islam. In fact, 90% of Islamic theology focuses on the oneness of God! (*tawhid*) This permeates the thinking of all Muslims, regardless whether they are devout, radical or liberal-minded. It is this belief that prompts Muslims to raise so many objections against the trinity and the deity of Christ. While we will focus on drawing out the story of God's rescue plan, you will also be equipped to address these objections. Suggestions for exploring them further are provided in the footnotes.

If Muslims resonate with Bible stories that teach God's oneness and power, they also strongly agree with the wise saying where Solomon observed that God has planted eternity in the human heart. (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

A heart for eternity

I've shared this with hundreds of people and have found that almost everyone responds openly if not warmly and this is true for Muslims and non-Muslims. The full quote, which fits on a paper the size of a business card, reads as follows, "*For everything there is a season, a time for every activity under heaven. A time to be born and a time to die ... God has made everything beautiful for its own time. He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end ... A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume. And the day you die, is better than the day you are born.*" (Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,11; 7:1-2)

Recently, I shared this with a young woman who was sitting next to me on a bus. While she was reading it, I noticed the man next to her was also looking at it. He asked me for a copy. Two days later I had a similar experience in a restaurant. After we finished eating, my friend paid the bill. Unfortunately, I missed the opportunity of giving this saying to the waitress so I began looking for her. When I couldn't find her, another waiter noticed I was in a quandary. I explained my situation and he promised to give her the slip of paper, but not without glancing at it first. His curiosity was aroused so he read the whole thing and asked, "Could I have one too?"

I've had hundreds of positive experiences like these which have convinced me that this pearl of proverbial wisdom has widespread appeal. In fact, I've noticed that Muslims are especially intrigued by it. I've also learned that

Footnotes

1 A common misunderstanding Muslims have when reading this story (Mark 10:17-31) is their presumption that Jesus was denying his deity. Sam Shamoun provides a helpful answer in his online article, titled, *How can Jesus be God when he denies being absolutely good, and says that only God is good?* This is available here: http://www.answering-islam.org/Shamoun/q_only_god_good.htm

2 See *The Mystery of Abraham's Sacrifice* available online: <http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/sacrifice.html>

3 Reading Isaiah 43:11 from their own viewpoint, Muslims accuse Christians of wrongly believing that Jesus is Savior. Sam Shamoun answers this objection in an online article, *Jesus Saves Exactly the Way God Saves – Since Jesus is God Incarnate!* http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/shamoun/jesus_saves_just_as_god.html

4 Yusuf is not the only Muslim who acknowledged that Jesus name means *God is salvation*. A conservative Mufti from Pakistan, Muhammad I. A. Usman, also acknowledged this in his book, *Islamic Names*. However, after a couple print runs, he seemed to change his mind. He stopped publishing this expanded version and reverted to printing an earlier version by the same title. This shorter version simply says Isa (Jesus) is a respected prophet of Islam without giving any specific meaning.

5 One of the most intriguing clues in the OT that points to Messiah's triumph over death and the grave is Isaiah 25:7-9: "*In Jerusalem the LORD ... will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign LORD will wipe away all tears. ... In that day the people will proclaim, "This is our God! We trusted in him and he saved us! This is the LORD in whom we trusted. Let us rejoice in the salvation he brings!"*

This prophecy glimpses a future day when "*there will be no more death or sorrow.*" (Revelation 21:4) This vision of a new heaven and new earth intrigues Muslims because their scripture describes paradise as a place where there is no grief and no death. You may want to read an online article, titled, *Is Death the End?* where this is explored in more detail. http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/death_end.html

6 See Warren Larson's article, *Why Muslims Love Jesus But Not Easter* available online here: <http://www.zwemercenter.com/why-muslims-love-jesus-and-hate-easter/>

7 See *Heartfelt Fasting and Repentance* available online: <http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/fasting.html>

8 See *Reluctant Messengers* available online: http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/reluctant_messengers.html

Muslim scholars invented the idea that all prophets are perfect. As a result they believe Jonah simply made a small slip or mistake. But the Bible plainly states that Jonah disobeyed God. In fact, his sin was so serious that it prompted God to take drastic action, by sending a fierce storm against the ship. It is important, therefore, to encourage our Muslim friends to read the whole story of Jonah. We pray they will realise that God takes sin seriously.⁷ Notice also that Jonah offered a sacrifice to the Lord. This provides another vital clue towards understanding that the Messiah is the ultimate sacrifice for sin as foretold in Isaiah 53.

And what about Christians? Is there a lesson for us in this story? Have we, like Jonah, failed to obey the Lord? Have we been unloving to our Ninevite/Muslim neighbor? Have we shrunk back from sharing God's message with them because of fear, bitterness, etc?

Let us consider some of the reasons why Jonah avoided going to Nineveh. Was it perhaps because the Ninevites were notoriously violent and he was afraid of them? Probably this influenced him, but Jonah was more to the point when he admitted he knew God is merciful and he suspected, from the beginning, this would be the outcome they would repent and not be punished! What Jonah really wanted was to see them punished. Of course, this attitude was not in tune with God's heart. Interestingly, 700 years later, James and John the sons of thunder, had a similar attitude problem. They wanted to call fire down from heaven on the Samaritans. (Luke 9:51ff) It is easy for us, having the benefit of hindsight, to look down on them but let us humbly ask ourselves whether we are really that different from Jonah or James and John?⁸

I trust you will feel free to correspond with me and ask any relevant questions. Please write to me here: rolandclarke1139@yahoo.com

All Bible quotes are taken from the New Living Translation unless otherwise noted.

This book can be downloaded freely online here:
http://www.answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/sharing_gospel.pdf

Other articles I have written are available here: <http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/>

this seed truth can be a beautiful place to begin exploring eternal life. You may wonder, "How far can you explore this truth with non-Christians?" This depends whether their curiosity deepens and becomes spiritual thirst, as with the Samaritan woman mentioned in the Gospel of John chapter four.

Most Christians are familiar with this story. Jesus began the conversation by simply asking for a cup of water and then unwrapped the gift of God – eternal life. Isn't it amazing how he did this in such a gracious and seasoned-with-salt manner? I imagine that Christ's example inspired Paul to write Colossians 4:4-6. "*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*"

The story continues to unfold with Jesus explaining salvation to the woman and then also to many people from her village. The villagers asked Jesus to stay for a couple days, giving him an opportunity to teach them and undoubtedly answer many questions. The Bible doesn't tell us exactly what he said but among the many things he told them, I think he quoted Isaiah 49:6, which foretells that the Messiah would "*bring God's salvation to the ends of the earth.*" This makes perfect sense because of how they responded by acknowledging, "*he is indeed the Savior of the world!*" (v. 42)

Background of John 4

Let me explain some background information that will help us understand this story. The Samaritans were staunch believers in one God, apparently the God of Moses. There are several clues in this passage that shed light on their religious beliefs. The Samaritans expected the Messiah to come, and they worshipped at a temple on Mt Gerazim. In fact, this temple was built as a rival to the original temple which God instructed King David to build on Mt Zion. Naturally this provoked many debates, generating hatred and distrust between Jews and Samaritans.

You don't have to be a scholar to realize that each clue corresponds to a similarity with Islam. Let me summarize these parallels in six points.

- 1) Like the Samaritans, Muslims believe in one God.
- 2) Like the Samaritans, Muslims take pride in claiming an ancestral link to Abraham (Samaritans focused on Jacob, whereas Muslims trace their connection through Ishmael).
- 3) Muslims and Samaritans expect the Messiah will come. One minor

difference is that Muslims believe at his first coming Jesus already was the Messiah (*Al Masih*) and they expect him to come again near the end.

4) Both religions believe God revealed his will through the prophets (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses)

5) Samaritan religious rituals were similar to those practised by the Jews, e.g. circumcision, clean vs unclean meat, animal sacrifice, etc.

6) Both Samaritanism and Islam emerged as a religious cult that twisted the original revelation from God to suit their own purposes. The changes that each cult introduced evoked accusations and heated debates with God's people. For example, Jews and Samaritans accused each other of corrupting the Torah similar to debates between Christians and Muslims. Also, Samaritans and Muslims both founded worship centres which rivalled the one in Jerusalem. It is not surprising that the Samaritan woman asked Jesus his opinion about the two rival worship centres - Mt Gerazim and Mt Zion. It is not surprising that the Samaritan Pentateuch adds to the Ten Commandments an instruction to worship the Lord God on Mount Gerazim!

In spite of the many similarities between the Jews and Samaritans they were deeply polarized and had no dealings with each other. (see v. 9, 27) Seeing these similarities helps us understand the long history of debates and the deepening polarization we have seen in modern times between Christians and Muslims.

Christ's encounter with the Samaritans sets an example for us so that we will befriend Muslims and share the reason for our hope with gentleness and respect. As Christ related to Samaritans, so too we should relate to the Muslims we meet in various circumstances of daily life – the wells of life.

Let us now read John 4 and see how Jesus showed a radically different attitude than was typical of Jewish people.

Jesus left Judea and returned to Galilee. He had to go through Samaria on the way. Eventually he came to the Samaritan village of Sychar, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there; and Jesus, tired from the long walk, sat wearily beside the well about noontime. Soon a Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Please give me a drink." He was alone at the time because his disciples had gone into the village to buy some food. The woman was

Gideon. Do you remember that he felt utterly inadequate for the daunting task God commissioned him to do? In spite of this, the angel encouraged him to be strong in the Lord. Then Gideon learned to rely on God and was able to accomplish a mighty deliverance.

We find another encouraging story in the NT involving a new believer, who was untrained and seemingly unqualified. After being freed from bondage to many demons, he wanted to be with Jesus, but Christ told him, "*Go and tell your family everything the Lord has done for you and how merciful he has been.*" Amazingly he obeyed the Lord and "*started off to visit the ten towns of that region and began to proclaim the great things Jesus had done for him.*" (Mark 5:19,20)

There is another story that shows **ordinary** believers spreading the Gospel among Samaritans who were regarded as notoriously hard-to-reach. We read in Acts 8 that a great persecution fell on the church in Jerusalem causing them to flee to the surrounding regions of "*Judea and Samaria.*" Up to this point in the book of Acts these areas had not been reached, although Christ had specifically included them in the Great Commission (Acts 1:8). Scripture says it was the **ordinary** Christians who "*preached the Good News wherever they went.*" Notice who was scattered and did the preaching "***all the believers except the apostles.***" (Acts 8:2, NIV bold font added for emphasis)

We cannot be absolutely certain why the apostles didn't join the mass exodus of Christians out of Jerusalem, but we do know they had a longstanding negative attitude which likely made them reluctant to go and preach in Samaria. This is consistent with John four where the disciples were reluctant to engage with Samaritans. On another occasion James and John wanted to call fire down from heaven against a Samaritan village for a relatively small offence. (Luke 9:51ff) When we consider the long-standing history of debates between Jews and Samaritans, the fiery outburst of John and James suggests they held a deep-seated prejudice against Samaritans an attitude that had characterised the Jews for more than 600 years. See the online article, *Reluctant Messengers*: http://answering-islam.org/authors/clarke/reluctant_messengers.html

Lessons from Jonah

Jonah's story shows that God is mighty to save, but there are other important lessons we need to learn. Salvation involves more than just physical rescue. It also means being saved from sin. Unfortunately, Muslims tend to underestimate sin, especially as it relates to prophets.

In fact, the image of a Lamb features prominently in Revelation. It is mentioned 19 times as a title of Jesus Christ. These allusions to the sacrificial death of Messiah contrast starkly with Islam's depiction of Isa breaking the cross.

Whenever possible read the whole story

Due to space limitations we were only able to briefly glimpse rescue stories spanning much of the Bible. I wanted to present the big picture which meant sacrificing many details. As you share these stories with your friends, please don't just summarise them. Read the whole story whenever possible. For example, I quoted two verses while sketching the story of the fiery furnace in Daniel chapter three. However, when you're sharing this with your Muslim friend it is better to read the whole chapter. The same holds true for the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 and the woman who wiped Jesus' feet with her tears in Luke 7:36-50. Use common sense and be lead of the Spirit as you do this with other passages.

A word of encouragement for those who feel inadequate for the task

Earlier we quoted Psalm 119:130, "*The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.*" (NIV) We've shown how this "unfolding" method enables the **simple** to gain understanding. I trust you have been encouraged, especially if you feel inadequate in terms of witnessing to Muslims.

We already noted that unwrapping the Good News **sequentially** enables **simple** people to understand our message more easily. Let me add a couple comments showing how important it is to keep our message **simple**. Christ's encounter with the Samaritans shows how he combined truth **and** grace. There is an undeniable **wisdom and simplicity** in the way Christ addressed the longstanding controversy as to which was the correct centre of worship: Mt Gerazim or Mt Zion. One of the lessons we can learn from Christ's example is to keep our focus on the main thing. Jesus didn't allow secondary issues to distract him from the most important thing, worshiping God in spirit and truth. He made it clear that in order to really know God, we must experience salvation which in turn means knowing God's Messiah – the one whom he commissioned to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth.

Christians often make excuses not to be involved with Muslims, because they see it as a specialized ministry requiring specially gifted or **trained** people. People have been using this kind of excuse ever since the time of

surprised, for Jews refuse to have anything to do with Samaritans. (John 4:3-9)

Naturally she was startled by the gracious and respectful attitude Jesus showed. As a Samaritan, she was used to being shunned by Jews. Not only so, Jesus stimulated her curiosity by offering her living water. This idea appealed to her. At the same time she was perplexed and intrigued.

She said to Jesus, "You are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan woman. Why are you asking me for a drink?"

Jesus replied, "If you only knew the gift God has for you and who you are speaking to, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

"But sir, you don't have a rope or a bucket," she said, "and this well is very deep. Where would you get this living water? And besides, do you think you're greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us this well? How can you offer better water than he and his sons and his animals enjoyed?"

Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life."

"Please, sir," the woman said, "give me this water! Then I'll never be thirsty again, and I won't have to come here to get water." (John 4:9-15)

The woman struggled to grasp what Jesus meant by 'living water.' It eluded her and she became thirsty for more! She was drawn deeper into conversation by two things: Jesus was full of grace and his conversation was stimulating, seasoned with salt!

As the story unfolds it wasn't long before Jesus gently but firmly probed her personal life showing her some embarrassing truths about herself. Was she perhaps beginning to feel a need for salvation? Not surprisingly, Jesus began to explain salvation. (v. 22) Jesus told her, "*You Samaritans worship what you don't know.*" (NIV) By this he meant that in order to really know God she needed to experience salvation which comes through the Messiah who is Jewish. The implication is, if you want to have nothing to do with the Jews, which was the typical attitude of Samaritans, you would cut yourself off from God's salvation.

During the next two days Jesus continued explaining these things to the villagers leading them to conclude that “*he is indeed the Saviour of the world.*” (v. 42)

The two themes Jesus talked about in John 4 – eternal life and salvation – are slightly different ways of describing the same basic truth. Through the first half of this book we will look at eternal life. In the second half we will focus on salvation.

In the same way that Jesus stimulated someone's curiosity by describing eternal life with a fascinating word picture, living water, so also Solomon stimulated people's curiosity with proverbs and riddles prompting them to seek to fulfil the longing for eternity that God had planted in their heart.

Glimpsing Eternity in Ecclesiastes 3 & 7

We already read Ecclesiastes 3:1,2,11 and saw how this wise saying rings true to people everywhere, especially to Muslims. We will now explore this timeless proverb starting from the OT showing how it unfolds and then is fulfilled in the NT. The outline unfolds in terms of four Scripture passages, two from the OT and two from the NT.

I have given this pearl of wisdom to hundreds of people, including Zulus, Hindus and Muslims. (Bear in mind that according to the Qur'an, Suleman was gifted by Allah with much wisdom.) Once I shared it with a Muslim and he replied enthusiastically, “As Muslims we take death seriously. We must think about it twenty five times a day.” You may think this is morbid, but Muslims feel it helps instil fear of God and deters them from wrong doing. Virtually every Muslim I have shared this proverb with has appreciated it, sometimes very enthusiastically.

Moving on from Ecclesiastes 3:11 we look at another thought provoking proverb as recorded in chapter 7:1-4. This paragraph which focuses on death is very interesting to Muslims and can stimulate further meaningful conversation.

A good reputation is more valuable than costly perfume. And the day you die is better than the day you are born. Better to spend your time at funerals than at parties. After all everyone dies – so the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for sadness has a refining influence on us. A wise person thinks a lot about death, while a fool thinks only about having a good time.

Jesus appeared to the eleven disciples as they were eating together. He rebuked them for their stubborn unbelief because they refused to believe those who had seen him after he had been raised from the dead. And then he told them, 'Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone. Anyone who believes and is baptised will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.

This statement makes it clear that Jesus Christ viewed his death as having saving power, in particular, the power to save from sin. (cf. Luke 24:44-47) God accomplished salvation at the cross, taking away the sins of the world through the sacrifice of Messiah as the spotless Lamb of God. Christ destroyed death⁵ by rising from the grave and gives eternal life to all who repent and believe in him as Lord and Savior.

We have taken many steps along a pathway guided by many prophets whose names have a ring of familiarity to Muslims. We've also been guided by various signposts in Christ's life which are mentioned in the Qur'an.

I trust these insights have encouraged you to tell the message of salvation boldly in spite of the fact that Muslims deny Jesus died on the cross. Indeed, according to authoritative Hadith writings, Isa will break the cross when he returns to earth in the end times. For this reason, the cross is a stumbling block and an offence.⁶ Nevertheless, we must not be ashamed of it or intimidated by the prospect of suffering for preaching the cross. (Galatians 6:12-14)

At the beginning, we mentioned that Christians are suffering more persecution than ever as seen in the recent martyrdoms of 21 Christians in Libya and 142 students at Garris University in Kenya who “*did not love their lives so much that they were afraid to die*” (Revelation 12:11). May their example challenge all of us, “What price are we willing to pay to testify of Christ?” Do we allow relatively small things, like shame or timidity, to stop our witness?

Salvation is prominent in Revelation

Whereas Muhammad's end-times vision portrays Jesus as breaking the cross, the apostle John's end-times vision exalts the Lamb who was slain. We read in Revelation 7:10, “*And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*” Also, Revelation 5:6 says, “*Then I saw a Lamb that looked as if it had been slaughtered, but it was now standing between the throne and the four living beings and among the twenty-four elders.*”

Of course, there are other dots to connect as we come closer to the climax of the story, the cross, where Christ paid the penalty of sin, overcame death and won the victory over Satan.

Messiah's miracles: showed SAVING power

As baby Jesus grew to be an adult more clues come to light, confirming that his mission was to bring God's salvation to the world. The next question is, "How did Christ reflect the name Jesus in his actions and his personality?" This can be answered on two levels – physically and spiritually. Jesus performed miraculous physical signs which showed saving power, i.e. God's salvation. He healed terminally ill people thus saving them physically from the brink of death.

Not only so, Christ raised the dead – those who were, in effect, already in the grip of death. This is clearly taught in both the Qur'an and Bible.

Messiah's mission: he came to seek & SAVE the lost

Jesus made a powerful impact on sinners, radically changing their lives. (Luke 19:1-10, NIV) Notice how the story of Zacchaeus, a notorious sinner, concludes with Jesus saying, "*The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.*" The word 'save' shows that Jesus believed his name reflected his mission. (See Matthew 1:21)

There are several other stories which illustrate how Jesus saved lost people and forgave sinners, e.g., the well known story of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well of Sychar. Do you remember how she responded when Jesus gently but firmly exposed her sin? Initially, she tried to hide from the truth but then admitted to having a series of illicit relations with five men. Amazingly, this story ends with many people from her village believing that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior of the world! It seems, from every indication in the story, that these Samaritans began to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Another example that highlights Christ's authority to forgive sins is the story of the sinful woman who wiped Jesus feet with her tears. (Luke 7:36-48) Yet another example is the repentant criminal who was crucified on the cross next to him. Jesus spoke comforting words to him shortly before they both died, "*I assure you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (Luke 23:39-43)

Messiah's death and resurrection: SAVED through believing in him

We read in Mark 16:14-16 that:

Muslims strongly agree with Solomon's advice to think much about death but they find it difficult to connect the dots between a good reputation and perfume and also between birth and death. We already glimpsed in chapter 3:11 how death is an elusive riddle, because, while we long to live forever, we cannot see the whole scope of God's work. If Ecclesiastes 3 posed a riddle, so also does Ecclesiastes 7, indeed, it poses an even more perplexing riddle. For example, to describe the day you die as better than the day you are born, is more than intriguing, it is a startling and incredible statement!

Let me illustrate how strongly these ideas resonate with Muslims. On one occasion I shared with an Imam a short meditation based on Ecclesiastes 3:11, entitled, *Homeward Bound*. He liked these insights so much that he included them in his sermon in the mosque! He was fascinated to see how the Biblical principle, a heart for eternity, correlates with the Qur'anic saying, "to Allah we belong, to him is our return."

I suggest that after reading Ecclesiastes 7:1-4 with your friend you ask what he thinks. Notice the mention of sorrow and tears and try to draw out his feelings. Every Muslim admits death is an unpleasant test en route to the day of judgement and the hereafter. Of course, their hope is that *Insha'Allah* (God willing), they will be admitted to Paradise. Death is a frightful, painful and even tearful experience although Muslims generally frown on shedding tears. This is how Muslims think: as we pause to realise that today could be our last, we will stoically brace ourselves to accept death as the ultimate test. They believe that the fear of death motivates one to avoid wrong doing.

For these reasons, among others, Muslims like these proverbs. God has made us in such a way that we instinctively try to figure out puzzles and mysteries. Here indeed is a riddle worth solving. In keeping with this, Solomon introduces the book of Proverbs by highlighting the importance of searching for ways of solving proverbs, parables and riddles. We read in Proverbs 1:5-7, "*Let the wise listen to these proverbs and become even wiser. Let those with understanding receive guidance by exploring the meaning in these proverbs and parables, the words of the wise and their riddles. Fear of the Lord is the foundation of true knowledge...*"

I encourage you to engage Muslims in thought-provoking conversations based on these wise sayings and riddles.

You might suppose that you can solve the riddle faster by going immediately from Ecclesiastes to Philippians 1:22-23. This passage helps us explain to Christians that to die is to be with Christ, which is “far better.” However, to expect a Muslim to take the jump from Ecclesiastes to Philippians is probably expecting too much of him. This will not necessarily solve the riddle faster because it probably won't make sense to our Muslim friend. A more helpful passage to read as a next step towards exploring the riddle of Ecclesiastes 3:11 is Psalm 49.

A meditation on immortality: Psalm 49

Now let's continue unwrapping the gift of eternal life by reading the sayings of another wise man, named Asaph. Like Solomon, the Psalmist meditated much on death. He also regarded death as a proverb or “riddle” that needs to be solved. The first 15 verses of Psalm 49 read as follows;

For the choir director: A psalm of the descendants of Korah.

Listen to this, all you people! Pay attention, everyone in the world! High and low, rich and poor—listen! For my words are wise, and my thoughts are filled with insight. I listen carefully to many proverbs and solve riddles with inspiration from a harp.

Why should I fear when trouble comes, when enemies surround me? They trust in their wealth and boast of great riches. Yet they cannot **redeem** themselves from death by paying a **ransom** to God. **Redemption** does not come so easily, for no one can ever pay enough to live forever and never see the grave.

Those who are wise must finally die, just like the foolish and senseless, leaving all their wealth behind. The grave is their eternal home, where they will stay forever.

They may name their estates after themselves, but their fame will not last. They will die, just like animals. This is the fate of fools, though they are remembered as being wise. Interlude

Like sheep, they are led to the grave, where death will be their shepherd. In the morning the godly will rule over them. Their bodies will rot in the grave, far from their grand estates.

ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6)

This leads us to consider another question, “How did Jesus bring God's salvation?” The simplest way to begin answering this is to look at Christ's miraculous birth, a story which is 'familiar' to most Muslims.

Messiah's birth: Jesus' name means God is SALVATION

It is helpful to bear in mind that while the Qur'anic account of Jesus' birth is somewhat different from the Biblical account, nevertheless, it does have significant similarities. So why not build on these similarities as we graciously engage our Muslim friend in seasoned-with-salt conversation?

Let me explain how this happened with a man named Yusuf who sat next to me on a flight from Frankfurt to Toronto. The six hour flight gave us plenty of time to get to know each other. When we said good-bye in Toronto, we exchanged phone numbers. To my surprise I found out Yusuf lived a half hour's drive from me! Over the next few months I met him a couple times at his shop. Eventually he invited me to come to his home. It so happened this was during the month of Ramadan. As Muslims are accustomed to doing, Yusuf and his wife broke the fast by eating some dates. I commented how much I love dates. This prompted Yusuf's wife to tell me the Qur'anic story of how Mary was leaning against a date palm when she was about to give birth to baby Isa/Jesus. This led us to discuss other aspects of the story, including what the angel said to Mary. I asked how the name was chosen. We concluded that the name came from God through the angel.

Then I asked, “Why did God choose this particular name?” As I expected, they didn't know, so I gave them a clue by reading a prophecy of Isaiah which summarizes the great task God intended the Messiah to do, “*It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.*” (Isaiah 49:6, NIV) I read this a couple times and asked them to choose a key word. Their teenage son who was also paying close attention to this conversation, picked the word 'salvation.' This simple conversation gave Yusuf and his family a glimpse of the Gospel. It made sense to him that the name Jesus (Yeshua) means *God is salvation*.⁴

I trust this illustration encourages you to ask thought provoking questions as you point people to the Messiah. These kinds of questions can help anyone (not just Muslims) to connect the dots in the unfolding plan of salvation, especially as you transition from the Old to the New Testament.

Here's another question you could try asking your Muslim friend, "If you were asked to write a book, entitled, *The 99 Most Beautiful Names of God/Allah*, do you think you would include the name Savior?"

Some Muslims with whom I've discussed this haven't hesitated to admit that Savior is a beautiful name. However, when they realised it isn't in the list of 99 beautiful names of Allah, they said it must be among the thousands of other Divine names, i.e. those which are not mentioned in the 99. My response is, "Don't you think this diminishes the importance of the name Saviour?" You have agreed that God is mighty to save, as we looked at the testimony of the prophets. Furthermore, can you see how important Savior is because it is a key criterion in terms of distinguishing the one true God from false gods?

Some Muslims may hesitate to accept this undeniable truth sensing (intuitively?) that Christians call Jesus Savior. They fear this may be in conflict with their Islamic understanding of Allah's oneness. Some Muslims reinforce their opinion by quoting Isaiah 43:10-11 which says that God **alone** is Savior.³

We've seen how the divine name Savior is emphasized throughout the prophets. Now we will explore a series of clues in the NT, showing how salvation is fulfilled in Jesus, including forgiveness of sin. Christians who know their Bible recall how the Jewish leaders complained that Jesus had no right going around forgiving people's sins. They insisted that "*Only God can forgive sins.*" (Mark 2:7; compare Surah 3:135) The answer to this quandary is simple, but difficult for Muslims to accept. The fact is Jesus is called Emmanuel, God with us. Based on our reading of OT prophets we understand that Savior is God's special signature attribute. We will see in the NT that by giving his Messiah the name Jesus (meaning God is salvation), God gave him authority to save people from their sins. (see Matthew 1:21; Acts 4:11-12)

Messianic prophecy: he will bring God's SALVATION worldwide

The OT prophets not only testified that God is mighty to save, they looked forward to the coming of someone who would bring God's salvation, the servant of the Lord, also called the Messiah. Like the Samaritans, Muslims anticipate the coming of Messiah. In fact they believe Jesus (Isa) is the Messiah. Furthermore, they know that God can foretell the future through his prophets. So it is appropriate to show our Muslim friend Isaiah's prophecy which foretells that the Messiah will "*bring God's salvation to the*

But as for me, God will redeem my life. He will snatch me from the power of the grave. Interlude

As you unravel this riddle with your friend, I suggest you ask him/her a number of questions. You might begin by asking, "What do you think of this meditation?" You may be pleasantly surprised to see how much it resonates with him. Eventually you will want to guide the discussion to consider the theme of ransom-redemption in verses 7-9 and verse 15. (Notice the words in bold font)

Ask the Holy Spirit to enable you to leverage these key terms (ransom, redeem) as clues pointing to the coming rescuer, the Messiah. Trust the Spirit to help your friend connect the dots between redemption and the cross, but don't exert undue pressure as though you can force-feed him or speed the learning process.

You need to make allowance for your friend to think through the implications of this riddle/proverb. This may mean asking questions to stimulate his thinking. At other times you ought to give him space so that he will ask questions, not unlike the young man in the story we will now consider.

A young man who yearned for eternity: Mark 10:17-31

A third stepping stone that helps us understand our heart-longing for eternity is in Mark chapter ten. A young man approaches Jesus with an earnest question.

As Jesus was starting out on his way to Jerusalem, a man came running up to him, knelt down, and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good. But to answer your question, you know the commandments: 'You must not murder. You must not commit adultery. You must not steal. You must not testify falsely. You must not cheat anyone. Honor your father and mother.'"

"Teacher," the man replied, "I've obeyed all these commandments since I was young."

Looking at the man, Jesus felt genuine love for him. "There is still one thing you haven't done," he told him. "Go and sell all your possessions

and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man's face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.

Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God!”

This amazed them. But Jesus said again, “Dear children, it is very hard to enter the Kingdom of God. In fact, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!”

The disciples were astounded. “Then who in the world can be saved?” they asked.

Jesus looked at them intently and said, “Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God.”

Then Peter began to speak up. “We've given up everything to follow you,” he said.

“Yes,” Jesus replied, “and I assure you that everyone who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or property, for my sake and for the Good News, will receive now in return a hundred times as many houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and property — along with persecution. And in the world to come that person will have eternal life. But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.”

Notice how the disciples reacted when Jesus said it is difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. “*They were amazed.*” Jesus explained that inheriting eternal life is as difficult as putting a camel through the eye of a needle. They were even more amazed, in fact, they “*were astounded*” and exclaimed, “*Then who in the world can be saved?*”

Notice how incredulous and perplexed the disciples were. But this reaction shouldn't surprise us considering how Solomon and the Psalmist posed puzzling proverbs intended to prod people to fulfil their heart-longing for eternity. Like Solomon, Jesus encrypted truth in sayings that were hard to grasp, especially for those blinded by pride or deceived by their self-righteousness.

Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah also tells an amazing rescue story in which King Hezekiah was besieged by the overwhelming army of the King of Assyria. Hezekiah prayed:

It is true, LORD, that the Kings of Assyria have destroyed all these nations. And they have thrown the gods of these nations into the fire and burned them. But of course the Assyrians could destroy them! They were not gods at all — only idols of wood and stone shaped by human hands. Now, O LORD our God, rescue us from his power; then all the kingdoms of the earth will know that you alone, O LORD [Yahweh], are God. (Isaiah 37:18-20)

Some time later, Isaiah declared in chapter 45:21-23:

There is no other God but me, a righteous God and Saviour. There is none but me. Let all the world look to me for salvation! For I am God; there is no other. I have sworn by my own name; ... Every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess allegiance to me.

Like the other prophets, Isaiah praised God because of his awesome power to save. But notice what Isaiah said, after the Lord commanded the whole world, “*look to me for salvation.*” Isaiah foretold something very special. He predicted the coming of a special 'servant' who will bring God's salvation to the whole world. (Isaiah 49:6) However, before we examine this Messianic prophecy let us review what we've said so far.

We have seen there is only one God and he is mighty to save. These twin themes are repeated by many different prophets showing how important these truths are. It is natural that we would be curious and want to ask our friend, “Is the name, Savior (or Rescuer, Deliverer) listed among the 99 beautiful names of Allah?” I asked Yusuf and he assured me that it was. I followed up by asking him if he would show it to me. Much to his surprise, he couldn't find it! How I wish this could have been an eye-opening moment for Yusuf. I pray that the Lord will remind him of this conversation and use it as a stepping stone to the light.

Muslims believe their religion reaffirms the teachings of the early prophets. So, if they honoured God as Savior, should modern day believers not do the same? The name Savior is even more important when you consider that God commanded the whole world to bow before him and acknowledge him as Savior, as we already saw in Isaiah chapter 45:21-23.

Daniel (Danyal)

Not long after Hosea the Lord raised up another prophet named Daniel who told an amazing story how three of his friends courageously faced the wrath of King Nebuchadnezzar. The King commanded them to bow before a 90 foot golden statue but they refused, preferring to die rather than sin against God. Finally they were thrown into the blazing furnace but God dramatically rescued them. The story takes an amazing turn as Nebuchadnezzar declares:

Praise to the God of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego! He sent his angel to rescue his servants who trusted in him... I make this decree that no one can speak a word against the God of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego. There is no other god who can rescue like this! (Daniel 3:28-29)

We've seen how the prophets Moses, David, Hosea and Daniel underscored God's oneness and his power to save. Not only so, this saving power proves he is greater than all other gods. Now we will see that the prophet Jonah also confirms these core truths.

Jonah (Yunus)

According to the Qur'an Yunus was saved by God from a near-death experience. Early in the biblical account Jonah got into a ship going to Tarsus, the opposite direction to Nineveh, where God had commanded him to go. A terrible storm struck the ship and the sailors desperately prayed to their idols but they were unable to save them. Finally they did as Jonah asked, throwing him overboard. The raging sea suddenly stopped and their lives were spared. The sailors "*were awestruck by the LORD'S great power and they offered him a sacrifice and vowed to serve him.*" (Jonah 1:16)

Having endured a fierce storm that threatened to sink everyone on board the ship, Jonah now experienced something even more terrifying. He was swallowed by a gigantic fish. However, as we know, God miraculously rescued him. The Bible tells how he prayed from inside the belly of the fish:

But you, O Lord God, snatched me from the jaws of death! ... Those who worship false gods turn their backs on all God's mercies. But I will offer sacrifices to you with songs of praise ... For my salvation comes from the Lord alone. (Jonah 2:6-9)

The story of the rich young ruler contains some fascinating insights but space doesn't allow us to explore them in detail here. Let me encourage you to rely on God's Spirit to gain understanding. After you discuss eternal life from Mark 10,¹ you will be ready to take the next step by reading John chapter 4.

A woman who was thirsty for living water: John 4

We have already skimmed through several highlights in John 4. We saw how Jesus sparked the curiosity of the Samaritan woman, igniting her heart-longing for eternal life. In fact this is what Jesus was referring to when he offered her the gift of God. Now let's connect the dots between eternal life and the gift of God.

As we review John 4 keep in mind the story of the religious young ruler who failed to find what he was so desperately looking for. Notice what hindered him: he couldn't humble himself to admit that he was a sinner. He was confident that he had kept the whole law, but in actual fact, he hadn't even kept the first commandment! He clung to his wealth showing that he was not worshipping God but money. Until he admitted this simple fact he could not be saved.

What point was Jesus trying to make by telling a parable of a camel going through the eye of a needle? He was saying that it is impossible for humans to save themselves. We cannot earn eternal life. But this is not impossible with God. He can save us by giving eternal life as a gift.

I have read Mark 10 and John 4 to many Muslim friends so I can assure you they find these stories interesting and stimulating. This shouldn't surprise us because, like the earlier passages, they contain a mysterious or hidden element. If Christ's audience was puzzled by the parable of the camel and the eye of a needle so also the woman in John 4 was puzzled by the unusual word picture Christ used to describe eternal life, i.e. living water. I cannot emphasize enough how Christ's encounter with Samaritans in John four has the potential to arouse the curiosity of Muslims and stimulate thought provoking conversation.

We've seen how the OT prophets described the Gospel as a riddle that needs to be solved. In a similar way, the Gospel, as taught by Jesus, caused his hearers to be perplexed. They needed it to be explained and clarified. So also the Gospel, as preached by Paul, was like a mystery that needed to be unveiled or made clear. We see this in Colossians 4:7 where Paul asked

the church to pray for him that he would clarify the mystery of the gospel.

In John 4 Christ began talking with the woman about water, then, living water and eternal life. But as the conversation moved along the focus changed. Closer to the end of the story Jesus touched on the theme of salvation/Savior. (verses 22 & 42) However, we did not explain this theme, except to say that eternal life and salvation are basically flip sides of the same coin. We will now examine the other side of the coin, God's power-to-save.

God is Mighty to Save

We will briefly look at the stories of six prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures. As you would expect these stories of heroic figures were often rehearsed as parents taught their children. This happened not only in Jewish families but also Samaritan families. So also today, Muslims teach (some of) these stories to their children albeit in a somewhat blurred or distorted way. We will unwrap this foundational truth of God's saving power, showing how it is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah.

Since Muslims respect the OT prophets it makes sense to explain the Good News beginning there and progressively unfolding it with passages from the NT (*Injil*). A good place to start talking about spiritual things with a Muslim is the story of Moses because it contains the first and foremost commandment. In fact, one could hardly find another Bible passage that resonates more strongly with Muslims. The fact that there is only one God is foundational to both the Bible and the Qur'an. It is important, however, for Muslims to realise that this command does not just teach God's oneness, it also underscores the awesome way God rescued them out of Egypt. Also, as we will see, the prophets who came later, continued to emphasize these twin themes of God's oneness and his saving power.

Moses (Moosa)

The first command reads, "*I am the LORD your God who rescued you from the land of Egypt, the place of your slavery. You must not have any other god but me.*" (Exodus 20:2-3) Muslims agree wholeheartedly with this command. They also agree with the second half which says God rescued Moses' people out of slavery in Egypt. (cf. Surah 2:50)

A few weeks before God revealed the Ten Commandments, Moses met his father-in-law Jethro. They had not seen each other since Moses had gone to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of slavery. So they had a lot of news to

catch up on! Exodus 18:8-11 summarizes their conversation:

Moses told his father-in-law everything the LORD had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians on behalf of Israel. He also told about all the hardships they had experienced along the way and how the LORD had rescued his people from all their troubles. Jethro was delighted when he heard about all the good things the LORD had done for Israel as he rescued them from the hand of the Egyptians. "Praise be to the Lord," Jethro said, "for he has rescued you from the Egyptians and from Pharaoh ... I know now that God is greater than all other gods.

This story resonates with Muslims. Imagine how they feel, hearing Jethro exclaim, "*the Lord is greater than all other gods.*" (*Allah u akbar*) Not only so, Muslims find it fascinating that Moses married the daughter of a Midianite priest. Incidentally, they know Jethro by another name, Shuaib.

Interestingly, the Qur'an teaches that Allah struck Egypt with a series of devastating plagues. But nowhere does it specifically mention the Passover Lamb by which the Lord redeemed Israel out of Egypt. However, this does not necessarily mean Muslims object to a sacrificial ransom. In fact, the theme of ransom is a vital part of *Eid ul Adha*, the annual sacrifice which Muslims perform each year in remembrance of Abraham.²

David (Daood)

The twin truths of God's oneness and his saving power are echoed again and again in the writings of the psalmist David. For example, he wrote in Psalm 69:19,20 and Psalm 96:2-5:

praise God our saviour! ... Our God is a God who saves! The Sovereign Lord rescues us from death... Each day proclaim the good news that he saves. Publish his glorious deeds among the nations ... He is most worthy of praise! He is to be feared above all gods. The gods of other nations are mere idols.

Hosea

Several hundred years after Moses had died the Lord raised up another prophet to call the wayward Israelites back to God. Hosea reminded them of the great things the Lord did for their forefathers:

But I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt. You shall acknowledge no God but me, no Savior except me. (Hosea 13:4, NIV)