

DRAFT

“The Cross & the Crescent: Understanding Islam” Islam

Good morning CrossWinds family! We hope that you had a blessed fourth of July weekend and enjoyed your time with family and friends! If you were here last week, you know that we are in the second week of our new series, “Alternatives to Christianity.” Last week we looked at Hinduism and Buddhism, and this week, as you probably guessed from the video that we just watched, we are going to be talking about Islam.

I love that video testimony for so many reasons, but I want to draw attention to just one this morning. Notice what the key to his transformation as a Christian was: reading the Word of God. If you were here last week, that is one of the key things that we talked about: how the Word of God is powerful enough to change the heart of anyone.

One of my favorite verses of Scripture is Romans 1:16, and I just want to read it to you this morning:

**“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”
(Romans 1:16 ESV)**

You see, in the first century, Christianity was primarily a Jewish religion, but it was quickly becoming a multi-ethnic religion. Gentiles were coming to faith in Christ every day in large numbers. And it was in this context that Paul wrote those words, proclaiming that this gospel is the power of God for salvation for all people, regardless of whether they were Jews or Gentiles.

God’s Spirit is not bound by ethnic or cultural differences. It is not harder for him to save a Muslim than it is for him to save your neighbor down the street who doesn’t want anything to do with God. And that is such an important truth for us this morning.

This past week, I read a book filled with stories of how the gospel is at work in the Middle East in massive ways. Scholars state that more Muslims have converted to Christianity in the past 25 years than in any other time in history. Some Muslim imams—which is the equivalent of a pastor—are stating that 6 million Muslims are converting to Christianity each year. 6 million every year! Even if that number is made up, which it undoubtedly is, it tells us one thing: the Spirit of God is powerfully at work in the hearts of Muslims.

This morning starts the first of two weeks here at CrossWinds where we will be looking at Islam. In some ways, Islam and Christianity have a lot in common. They both started in the Middle East. They both claim Abraham as the father of their religion. They both worship only one God.

DRAFT

But in so many more ways, Islam and Christianity couldn't be more different. But what are those differences? That's what we are going to be looking at during the rest of our time together this morning, focusing on a few different areas: the history of Islam, the basic beliefs of Islam, and finally some of the differences between Islam and Christianity. That's why this week is called "Understanding Islam."

Next week Lord willing, we will be looking again at Islam and we will be looking at some of the relevant questions that you may have for Islam. We will be looking at things like *jihad* and what that means, Muslims and evangelism, apologetics, and many other things. In fact, if you have any questions about Islam that you want to have answered, in your bulletin you will find a piece of paper that you can write your questions on. I can't guarantee that they will all get answered in the sermon, but if you put your name and email address with it, we will be sure to answer your questions via email. After you are done, please just leave them in your seats and we will pick them up after the service.

History of Islam

First, let's talk about the history of Islam and Muhammad. Muhammad was born in the year 570 AD in the Arabian city of Mecca. How many of you have heard of Mecca? Alright. Well Mecca is found in modern-day Saudi Arabia, and today is the holiest site in all of Islam. Today, Muslims are required to pray toward Mecca because of how holy it is in their religion.

Mecca was a merchant town back then, but it was also known as one of the regional centers for worship. In fact, Mecca was filled with idols, with 360 of them being worshiped there. In addition to housing a large pagan population that worshiped these idols, there was also a notable Jewish population. You see, in the year AD 70 (about 40 years after Jesus' resurrection), the Romans came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem. At that point, the Jewish people were scattered throughout the world and a number of them ended up in the Arabian peninsula.

There was also a notable Christian population in the area surrounding Mecca, but it wasn't what one typically thinks of when they think of Christians. When Christianity got popular, it primarily got popular in Europe and Africa. Whenever there were issues about theology: things like what exactly the Trinity is and how we define it, the church would hold a council. And as they poured over Scripture seeking the right answers to things like these, God made it clear to the church who was right and who was wrong.

When this happened, the people who were wrong were exiled from the "Christian lands." They were sent away from Israel and Asia Minor and Egypt because the Christians of that day were trying to keep the church pure. And if the church was primarily surrounding the Mediterranean coast, these heretics had no choice but to move east.

DRAFT

So you have a number of “Christians” who live in the Arabian peninsula as well, but they don’t believe what you and I typically believe. They had some messed up thoughts about God or about Jesus’ death on the cross and things like that.

And that’s the context Muhammad was born into. Again, he was born in Mecca in the year 570 AD to a merchant family. Before he was born his father died, and when he was 6, his mother passed away. Because of this, Muhammad lived with his uncle and became a merchant just like his uncle.

Fast forward several years to the year 595 AD when Muhammad was 25. When he was 25, he got married to a 40 year-old widow named Khadija. Khadija was quite wealthy (much wealthier than Muhammad was). Muhammad and Khadija lived relatively uneventful lives for the next 15 years in Mecca.

Throughout all of this time, Muhammad became increasingly concerned with the idolatrous worship that was taking place in Mecca. He came from a background that worshiped many different gods, but he himself only believed in one god, or what we call monotheism. And in the year 610 when Muhammad was 40, he was praying about this situation to his god when he was allegedly visited in a cave by the angel Gabriel.

Muhammad’s encounter with the angel of Gabriel is a fascinating story. Most non-Muslim scholars now believe that Muhammad suffered from epilepsy, because of all the symptoms that he had while experiencing this vision. I’m no doctor so I can’t say one way or another, but what I do know is that Islam believes that this was Muhammad’s first vision from Allah. Allah was calling him to be a prophet.

When we compare the story of Muhammad’s first vision from Gabriel, it is very different than the ones that we see in the Bible of angels appearing or God himself appearing. Muhammad actually first thought that he was being attacked by Satan and only later believed that his visitor was Gabriel. But that’s not what we see in Scripture when angels appear. Let’s look at a story of Gabriel from the Bible when he comes and visits Mary to share the news of the virgin birth in Luke 1:

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.””

DRAFT

(Luke 1:26–33 ESV)

Notice the difference between Mary's response and Muhammad's. Mary is troubled and confused; Muhammad thinks that he is being attacked by Satan. In other passages of the Bible where angels appear, people are scared—they even think that they are going to die—but never once do they think that they are being attacked by Satan! Instead, they are overcome with the glory of God himself. I know this is cynical, but the reason that Muhammad states that he was visited by Gabriel was just to gain the respect of Christians and Jews. In reality, he was just an epileptic or even worse: it really was a demonic attack.

For the next 12 years, Muhammad continued to live in Mecca with his wife Khadija. He tried to tell those around him that he was a prophet of God during this time, but no one believed him. In fact, in 622 Muhammad fled Mecca because of the the persecution that he suffered. He went north to the city of Medina. This is called the *hijra* and is considered to be the start of Islam.

When Muhammad got to Medina, he tried to convince those around him that he was a prophet of God, but still no one would believe him. And since no one was listening to him and believing that he was a prophet, Muhammad had a change of heart. He no longer went around asking people nicely to believe in Allah. He went around forcing people to convert to Islam and slaughtering them if they didn't.

This is quite different than what Jesus commands us to do in our evangelism, isn't it? Consider what Jesus tells his apostles in the book of Mark when they go out sharing the good news:

“He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts— but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. And he said to them, “Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.”

(Mark 6:8–13 ESV)

Christians are never called to impose their beliefs on others. Christians are never to force the conversions of others. Christians are supposed to share the gospel and leave the rest up to God. Islam couldn't be more different.

It's probably no surprise that once Muhammad changed his conversion strategy, Islam started to grow. His followers began to grow rapidly during this time and Islam continued to grow until his death in 632. After his death, the aggressive tactics of forced conversion were used by his successors, and Islam quickly spread throughout the Middle East, Africa, and even into parts of Europe.

DRAFT

Overview of Islam

With these tactics and the rapid spread of Islam during its inception, it should not be surprising to us that Islam is the second largest religion in the world. Statistics say that anywhere from 1.6 to 1.8 billion people consider themselves Muslims worldwide.

Unlike Hinduism and Buddhism that we studied last week however, there aren't just one or two different countries where Islam is found. Islam has many strongholds today in the world. Islam is the primary religion in the majority of countries in the Middle East and Central Asia. It is the primary religion in West Africa and North Africa. And it is the primary religion in Oceania nations such as Indonesia and Malaysia. On top of this, there are significant Muslim populations in many other nations in the world.

Muslim Beliefs

But what do Muslims believe? What is it that ties them together? Let's take a look at what makes a Muslim a Muslim. First, the word "Islam" literally just means "submission" and "Muslim" just means "one who submits." This betrays one of the most important things to recognize about Islam. Submission is an action, and it is important to recognize that Islam is a religion primarily focused on practices rather than on beliefs. It is what you do that makes you a Muslim more so than what you believe. Now that doesn't mean that beliefs aren't important in Islam! Islam has 6 core beliefs and 5 primary practices, which are called the 5 pillars of Islam. Let's take a look at each of these. First, the beliefs:

The first crucial belief of Islam is based on the **oneness of God**. Islam is a monotheistic religion, meaning that it only believes in one God. You may be thinking, "Wait, isn't that what we believe?" Yes and no. You see, the Trinity is an abomination to Muslims. Some Muslims believe that Christians actually believe in three gods. Some believe that Mary is considered a part of the Trinity. Some believe that Christians teach God and Mary had sexual relations. In response to this (none of which Christians believe!) Muslims focus on the complete oneness of God.

Second, Islam is based on the belief in **angels and spirits**. Muslims believe in the supernatural and that there are forces at work in this world besides just God. This is why Muhammad believed that he was being attacked by Satan and then later thought he was being taught by Gabriel.

Third, Islam is heavily based on the **teachings of prophets**. Muslims believe that there are literally thousands of prophets who have been sent by Allah to humanity to show the way. These prophets include people like Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus—who they call Isa—in addition to Muhammad, the greatest prophet of all.

DRAFT

Fourth, Islam believes that the **Qur'an** is the word of God. The revelations that Muhammad received from Gabriel were written down and compiled into what is now the Qur'an. The Qur'an literally means "recitation." It has 114 chapters which are called Surahs, and it is a little shorter than the New Testament. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is God's final revelation to humanity, but at the same time recognize that God had sent previous revelations to humanity. In addition to the Qur'an, Muslims believe that the Torah (the first five books of the Bible), the Psalms, and the Gospels are revelation from God, although Muslims believe they have been corrupted. Check out this verse from the Qur'an:

And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Law that had come before him: We sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Law that had come before him: a guidance and an admonition to those who fear Allah.

—5:46

Muslims also believe in a coming **judgment**. One day the living and the dead will appear before God and everyone will be confronted with the deeds done in their lives by receiving a book. The wicked will receive the book in their left hand, and the righteous will receive theirs in their right hand. So how do you make sure that you get the book in the right hand? By submitting to Allah's will. But even if you submit to Allah's will, you won't be guaranteed a spot in heaven. There is no such thing as assurance of salvation in Islam.

Finally, Muslims believe in the ultimate **decree of God**. Everything that happens comes from Allah's hands, both good and bad. Nothing can happen outside of his control.

Those are the six beliefs of Islam. Now let's take a look at how they play out in the lives of Muslims by looking at the five pillars of Islam. These five pillars are essential for all Muslims. What are they?

The first pillar of Islam is **confession**. Don't think of confession in the Catholic sense of going to a priest to confess your sins though. When Muslims refer to confession, they are referring to the saying that binds all Muslims together: "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet." Muslims believe that all you need to do to become a Muslim is to say these words and mean them.

Now one question you may have is why I sometimes refer to the God of Islam as "Allah" and other times as "God." I do that because Allah is just the generic word for God in Arabic. Muslims in the US often refer to Allah as God, and Christians in the Arabic world refer to their God as Allah. The two words are interchangeable. That doesn't mean that Christians and Muslims worship the same God! It just means that they use the same word.

DRAFT

Second, Muslims believe in the practice of **prayer**. Muslims are supposed to pray five times a day in a certain way. All of their prayers are to be directed towards Mecca.

Third, **giving to the poor**. An important part of Islam is the requirement to give 2.5 percent of your net income to the poor. Many Muslims give more than that, but that is all that is required to be a Muslim.

Fourth, **fasting**. Fasting is an important part of being a Muslim. Once a year, all Muslims around the world are supposed to go on a 30 day fast during the month of Ramadan. During the month of Ramadan, Muslims are not supposed to eat or drink any food or engage in any sexual activities during daylight hours. They are allowed to eat and drink during the evening.

Now why is Ramadan so important? Ramadan is important because it is the month of the year in the Muslim calendar when Muhammad received his first revelation from Allah. Muslims fast during this time as a way to try to encourage Allah to reveal himself to his people through dreams and visions.

Fifth and finally, all Muslims must make a **pilgrimage** to Mecca before they die. Mecca, as mentioned earlier, is found in Saudi Arabia and is the holiest site in all of Islam. At Mecca, Muslims go to worship at the Ka'ba, which is this large cube in the middle of the city. Muslims walk around this cube in a circle for several times and are eventually released from the city to go back out into the world to live for Allah.

As you can see, Islam is relatively easy to understand as a religion, at least compared to Hinduism and Buddhism. Many people think that there are a lot of similarities between Christianity and Islam but one of the largest differences between these two religions is on the issue of sin.

See, Christians see sin as a sort of hereditary disease. We do bad things because something is wrong with us from the very beginning. But that's not the case for Muslims. Muslims believe that sin just refers to the acts that are against the will of Allah. In fact, Muslims just see sin as "weakness" and nothing more than that. If sin is just weakness and isn't offensive to a holy God, then there is no need for God to come and die for his people as Christianity believes. Helping Muslims see the glorious truth of the gospel also means helping them see the terrifying truth of human wickedness.

But that's not the only difference between Islam and Christianity. Let's take a look at how the Bible and the Qur'an match up and then look at the lives of Jesus and Muhammad.

Qur'an vs. Bible

DRAFT

Both Christians and Muslims believe that their holy book is inspired by God and shares about the way to salvation. But are they the same beyond that point? Not even close. Here are some of the differences between the Qur'an and the Bible.

Conflicts vs. Unity. Islam claims to be written down by one man in the span of about 20-30 years. Christianity claims to be written down by about 40 different people over the course of thousands of years. With that being said, which would you think would be more unified? The Qur'an!

But unity is something that is missing in the Qur'an. Muhammad receives a vision that says one thing, and then a few years later he receives a vision that says the exact opposite. Check these two examples out:

**“Oh children of Israel! Remember my favor with which I favored you and how I preferred you to all creatures!”
—2:47**

**“They desire that you would disbelieve even as they disbelieve, that you may be level with them. So do not choose friends from them till they forsake their homes in the way of Allah; if they turn back (to enmity) then take them and kill them wherever you find them, and choose no friend nor helper from among them.”
—4:89**

The Qur'an is filled with inconsistencies and contradicting commands, so much so that Muhammad's scribe actually left Islam because of it. Several times Muhammad asked him to write something down that contradicted a previous revelation. The scribe asked him about these contradictions and Muhammad's revelation from God would change on the spot. Unable to take it, the scribe left Islam. He was later killed for abandoning the faith.

Compare that to the Bible. It is remarkable how unified the Bible is from start to finish. The Bible starts with people dwelling with God. Then the Fall happens. In one sense, the entire biblical storyline is about how God plans to dwell among his people once more. He dwells among them in the tabernacle and temple. He dwells among them in a literal way as Jesus in the New Testament. Then he send the Holy Spirit and he dwells within us. And one day, he will dwell among us once more. Everything in the Bible is unified. Everything in the Bible points to Jesus.

Second, the Qur'an is meant for **one language**, but the Bible is meant for **every language**. Did you know that Muslims only consider the Qur'an authoritative if it is in Arabic? It loses all of its power when it is translated.

DRAFT

As Christians, we believe that God can and will use his word in every language. This is why the gospel went forth in every language at Pentecost. And this is why there will be people from every tribe and tongue worshipping God at the end of time:

“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’”
(Revelation 7:9–10 ESV)

God’s word doesn’t lose its authority in different languages. It just becomes more glorious when it is spoken in different languages!

The differences between the Qur’an and the Bible are extreme. No one can say that they are essentially the same thing. They proclaim vastly different messages and vastly different paths to God.

Muhammad vs. Jesus

Of course, that makes sense when you think about how different Muhammad and Jesus are. Let’s take a look at some of the differences.

First, Muhammad was **a murderer**, while Jesus is the **Prince of Peace**. We’ve already mentioned that the way Islam grew at the beginning was through the forced conversions of many. Approximately one in every fifty-five verses in the Qur’an speak of war. In the Qur’an and the Hadith (which is considered to be the “rest of the story” of Muhammad’s life), there are 35,000 references to warfare and forced conversion. 35,000!

Contrast that with Jesus who said:

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”
(John 14:27 ESV)

Who would you rather follow?

Second, Muhammad was **polygamous**, while Jesus was sexually **pure**. After his first wife died, Muhammad married 16 other women. The Qur’an forbids men to have more than 4 wives. One of Muhammad’s sons had a beautiful wife, and Muhammad told his son to divorce her so he could marry her. When his son refused, Muhammad told him that Allah commanded it. Muhammad got his wife. Not only that, but one of his wives was 6 years-old when they got married. Muhammad was over 40.

DRAFT

Jesus couldn't be more different. Jesus never married, never had any sexual relations. He was completely and utterly focused on God's will. That doesn't mean that he wasn't tempted. Consider Hebrews 4:15:

**“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.”
(Hebrews 4:15 ESV)**

Again. Who would you rather follow?

Third, Muhammad was **sinful** while Jesus was **sinless**. Even the Qur'an mentions this:

**Then have patience, O Muhammad, for the promise of Allah is true. And ask forgiveness for your sins...
—40:55**

Of course, that comes as no surprise considering everything else that we have said about Muhammad so far. But what does the Bible tell us about Jesus?

**“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
(2 Corinthians 5:21 ESV)**

Jesus was without sin. And yet he died in the place of sinners like us so that we could be reconciled to God. That is grace.

There are many other differences between Jesus and Muhammad. Jesus performed miracles. Muhammad didn't. Jesus was selfless. Muhammad was greedy. And the list goes on and on. But I want to finish with one final difference:

Muhammad is **dead**. Jesus is **alive and reigning**. Perhaps the most fascinating thing about Islam is what it teaches about Jesus. Islam believes that Muhammad is dead but that Jesus was perfect, sinless, conceived of a virgin, performed miracles, is still alive, and will come again. And yet Islam believes that Muhammad is the final and greatest prophet of God.

Jesus is still alive and reigns on high. He will return again. Muhammad was a murderer who is dead.

We began our time together this morning talking about all of the encouraging ways that the gospel is spreading in the Islamic world. You see friends, people are leaving behind the chains

DRAFT

of Islam because it is quite a hopeless religion. There is no guarantee of salvation. You never know if you have done enough. Allah is to be feared more than he is to be loved.

That's what Ahmad realized 11 years ago. Ahmad was a taxi driver in central Asia. By God's grace, Ahmad picked up a Christian named John. When John shared his faith with Ahmad, Ahmad responded in faith that first time! John gave Ahmad a Bible and it was his most prized possession.

But one day, Ahmad was giving his old friend Ali a ride when Ali found his Bible in the car. Ali, a member of a terrorist organization, was shocked to see the Bible. What was more surprising to Ahmad however, was that Ali was curious about why his friend was reading a Bible. Even more surprising still, he asked if he could borrow it.

Ahmad said no, since it was his only copy and he figured Ali wouldn't give it back. Ali persisted, asking to borrow it for a week. Ahmad said no. "Three days?" "No." "A day?" "No." Finally, after much bargaining, Ahmad agreed to let Ali borrow his Bible for an hour.

One hour later, Ahmad showed up at Ali's house to pick up his Bible and began pounding on the door, but no one answered. The next day, he came to the door, but no one answered. And again and again he came with no answer. Every day for the next two weeks, Ahmad would do the same, desperately wanting his Bible back. Every day, there was no answer. Finally enough was enough. He decided to stay on the porch until he got his Bible back. After knocking for what seemed like hours, Ali's 5 year-old nephew answered the door and said, "My uncle told me to tell you he isn't here."

Ahmad laughed and walked into the house. He went to Ali's bedroom where he saw his terrorist friend kneeling with tears in his eyes, the Bible open in front of him. Ali said, "I haven't left my home in two weeks. I'm sorry I kept your Bible but I couldn't stop reading it. I love Jesus!"

Today, Ahmad and Ali pastor over 6000 Christians in dozens of churches that they have planted in one of the most hostile nations to Christianity. Why did they convert? Because of the power of the gospel.

We started this morning by looking at Romans 1:16 that was Paul's mantra for evangelism in his world. The same truth reigns today. In a world where Islam says do more, Jesus says it is finished. And God is working in the hearts of people who are far from him, calling them to him.

The good news of the gospel is that it is the power of salvation for all who believe. For the Jew. For the Greek. For the Muslim. For your moral neighbor. For your wayward child. God's Spirit and God's gospel are powerful enough to save. And that is truly good news.