

ASK 2021

Praying for the Middle East



**8 Barriers
to the
Gospel
in the
Middle
East**

8 Barriers to the Gospel in the Middle East

³Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. ⁴And as he sowed, some seed fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured it.

⁵ Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, ... and since it had no root, it withered away. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. ⁸ And other seeds fell into good soil and produced grain...

Mark 4:3-8

A time to plough... a time to sow... a time to reap

The parable Jesus told of the sower and the seed (Mark 4) resonates deeply with where we are at in our ministry in the Middle East. Some places are as resistant as hardened pathways. Others are unreceptive, like rocky ground, while others are choked with thorns. **But the seed of God's Word** is falling into good soil and yielding a harvest as many are choosing to follow Jesus.



| Kuwait City, Kuwait |

We are acutely aware of the many barriers Muslims face on their journey to faith.

In this special prayer initiative, ASK 2021, we look at eight specific barriers to the gospel in the Middle East. Let's pray in faith, trusting God to prepare the soil of many hearts to receive the seed of his Word, and to bear fruit for harvest.

| Aqaba, Jordan |



Revelation

Islam has borrowed just enough from Judaism and Christianity to inoculate its followers to the truth of the gospel. One of its foundational beliefs is that the Qur'an is the **final revelation** from God, correcting and superseding the Bible. This is a strong barrier,

preventing faithful Muslims from considering any belief but their own.

Even though the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers, God's light can shine into their hearts.

...the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵ For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:4-6



| Cairo, Egypt |



| Amman, Jordan |

Pray

- For the Spirit of God to open the eyes, ears and minds of those who have grown up in Islam to think outside of Islamic constraints
- For those who are doubting their Islamic beliefs to persevere in searching for the truth
- For workers and believers to be led by the Spirit as they seek to present God's truth in a clear way

Pray as God leads you, not forgetting to praise him for the power of the cross to save those who believe.

Cross

The cross of Jesus is a huge stumbling block for Muslims. Islam accepts Jesus as a great prophet of God, the precursor to Muhammad. He is one of the most mentioned people in the Qur'an. But they reject his divinity, and they do not believe he was crucified or that he died on the cross.

But what is the gospel without Jesus' incarnation and act of atonement for our sins on the cross? Without the cross, there is no gospel!

It is impossible for us to remove the offense of the cross, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For...it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:18, 21b-25



Apostasy

Apostasy is a powerful barrier to the gospel, for Islam does not tolerate people who defect from the faith. Anyone who 'abandons Islam in word or through deed' is considered an apostate and, as such, they face criminal punishment. Seekers must count the cost of following Christ: rejection by their family, friends and society; imprisonment; monetary fines; loss of inheritance rights; the annulment of their marriage; and losing custody of their children. In many countries, apostasy is punishable by death.

But this is no surprise to our Lord. Two thousand years ago, Jesus warned his disciples that the world would hate them.

¹⁸ If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

John 15:18-21



| Tel Aviv, Israel |

| Doha, Qatar |

Pray...

- For those who are counting the cost before making their decision
- For those who have chosen to follow Jesus and are suffering rejection by their family and friends
- For believers and Christian workers who are involved in the lives of those who are suffering and seeking to help them

What Scriptures can you pray for those who face the charge of apostasy for following Christ?



Solidarity

The solidarity of Muslim society is a formidable barrier to the gospel in every way. Strong social dynamics are at play in every part of life.

Religion, politics, economics and personal life are all accountable to Islam. Islam is more than a religion; it is a way of life! Religious practices, like daily prayers and fasting, are largely public, making it obvious if an individual appears to stray from Islamic expectations.

Not surprisingly, this creates a unified resistance to Christian efforts to share the gospel. Anyone who decides to leave Islam can be accused of being unpatriotic, for they are rejecting their nation, community and family. This is a powerful deterrent to following Jesus.

But the weapons of our spiritual warfare are also powerful and able to destroy strongholds.

| Manama, Bahrain |



⁴ For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, ⁶ being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete.

2 Corinthians 10:4-6



| Men are gathered for Iftar dinner. Dubai, UAE |

Let's pray for this stronghold to be broken in the lives of those God is calling to himself.

What other Scriptures come to your mind that you can pray in response to this barrier?

Works



| Pilgrims return to Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia |

Take some time to pray for the Holy Spirit to reveal his grace and forgiveness to those who are so earnestly trying to please God and earn salvation by their works. Pray that they will turn to Christ and receive forgiveness of sins.

Do any other Scriptures come to your mind? Pray that this barrier will crumble.



| Cairo, Egypt |

The drive to earn their own salvation is a stumbling block to many across the Middle East.

Islam strongly reinforces the conviction that it is only by avoiding sinful deeds, by performing good deeds, by seeking forgiveness and repenting 'a hundred times a day', that one can eventually enter Paradise. It also teaches that turning to any other religion will cause them to lose their salvation.

But God has called us, as he called Paul, to share the message of deliverance:

...to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith....

Acts 26:18

Desperation

In many places around the Arab world, people are living in desperate situations. War, famine, violence, and poverty consume their lives. Every ounce of energy they possess is spent on simply surviving another day. Hunger, pain, fear, bitterness, anger and destitution are huge barriers, blocking their

ears, their minds and their hearts to the gospel.

The Bible is full of references to God's care for the poor, widows, orphans, and victims of injustice. How can we forget that his love is for **all the world**?

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

John 3:16-18



| Beirut, Lebanon |



| Sanaa, Yemen |

What verses does God bring to your mind that you can pray for those in desperation, needing help just to survive?

How can we pray for those who are reaching out to provide that physical help?

How can we pray for the light of the gospel to penetrate in spite of their desperate circumstances?

Expectations

Sometimes expectations trip up seekers and new believers from a Muslim background. Having left the solidarity of the Islamic community, they are now rejected by their family and friends.

It is most natural for them to look to the Christian community to take the place of the family and support net they have lost.

But sometimes new believers struggle with the personal, private, individualised way we have in the western church of living out our faith. And why, they wonder, are there so many denominations in Christianity? **Unmet expectations** loom up as a disheartening barrier to following Christ.

There is no doubt that Jesus commanded us as his disciples to love one another:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 13:34,35



| Tripoli, Lebanon |



| Riyadh, Saudi Arabia |

How can we pray for his love to be shown to new believers in face of this barrier to the gospel?

And how can new believers grow in their faith and love for the Lord, his Word, and his people?

Pray as the Spirit burdens your heart.

...pray that the Holy Spirit will break down the walls of resistance, that his Word will shatter the hardness of indifference and open hearts to the good news of the gospel.

Indifference



In stark contrast to those who are living in desperation, others in the Arab world live in luxury. They enjoy all the material things they could ever want in life. They are self-satisfied and unaware of their need for God. The glittering luxury of their daily lives has led to an attitude of indifference to God – a seemingly impenetrable barrier to the gospel.

Even so, let us remind ourselves that God's Word is all-powerful, and his Spirit is not bound.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:12,13