

The path of humility

God is the one who opens doors and gives us opportunities to share the Good News with those who don't know Jesus. One way he does this around the world is through children. My oldest son, Calvin recently went on mission to Lesotho with his family. All six of his children socialized with their local neighborhood children enabling him and his wife to establish meaningful relationships with Lesotho neighbours but it was the youngest one, six month old James, who seemed to have a special “attraction” and opened doors for Sarah to meet other mothers.

In a similar way, children open doors to establish rapport with Muslims, even for sharing the Gospel.

Scripture contains hundreds of verses that mention children, fathers, mothers, families. Some passages teach parents and children how they ought to relate to each other. Other verses tell how God specially adopts and loves true believers as his own children, however, we know that in a general sense, God is Father to all mankind and he loves the whole world. (Ephesians 3:14-15; Luke 3:38)

People world-wide, regardless of their nationality, race or culture value children. Jesus acknowledged this when he said, “You fathers—if your children ask for a fish, do you give them a snake instead? ... Of course not! So if you sinful people know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.” (Luke 11:11-13)

Interestingly, people from widely different cultures instinctively show affection and nurture towards infants. Similarly, parents across the world identify with the virtue of childlike humility as highlighted in Scripture first by King David and his “greater son” the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

King David wrote in Psalm 131,

Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty. I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp. Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk. Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me. O Israel, put your hope in the Lord— now and always.

Not long ago I had an opportunity to share these heart-warming words with a Muslim shop keeper whom I had met on just one occasion a year and a half earlier. He greeted me with a beaming smile and told me how God answered his prayer. His wife gave birth to a baby girl – their first and only child in 22 years! I was so happy to hear this good news!

Later I realized what an opportunity this was to give my friend a baby gift so I bought a suitable outfit for Hussein's five month old infant. However, when I gave it to him I included a small card quoting Psalm 131 which he gladly accepted. Interestingly, the term for Psalms in Swahili is Zaburi – the word Muslims use in Eastern Africa to refer to the writings of the prophet Daudi, i.e. David. Moreover, David (Daood) is referred to in Acts 2:30 as a “prophet.”

All babies are regarded as humble because they are helpless and dependent on their parents.

But perhaps you are wondering, “Do Muslims really value humility?” Yes, for example, the Qur'an strongly condemns pride. Also many times each day they show humility by how they submit in prayer to God who is greater than they are. Muslims bow low and put their forehead on the ground before Allah, the supremely exalted One.

However, there is something our Muslim friends need to be reminded of so that they can better understand this psalm. “Nabi” Daudi was not just a prophet, he was also a **king**. In fact, he was Israel's greatest king, as indicated by the star of David as featured on the Israeli flag. David's humility is all the more remarkable considering what a great King he was!

Now let me share another experience which involves 3-6 year old children. While I was teaching in a certain country in Africa, I “happened” to meet several Christians who were running kindergarten programs. I also saw a number of signboards in other places advertising similar kindergartens which I was told were also managed by believers. I was also told that a significant number of Muslim children attend these preschools. I think that many of the people

who establish these kindergartens feel led to do this service as a genuine ministry prompted by the Spirit. It is one of many ways that God's people can be a blessing to their surrounding communities. Furthermore, these preschools can open many doors for Christians to build good relations with Muslim children and also with parents thus enabling followers of Jesus to let our *“light shine in such a way that they may glorify our Father in heaven.”* (Matthew 5:16)

The question arises, however, whether we should **just** shine such light in subtle, unspoken ways or can we also share using words? Ideally we ought to follow Christ's example, who displayed both *“grace **and** truth”* (John 1:18). How then can we *“make the most of the opportunity”* to engage Muslim families in conversations that are *“seasoned-with-salt?”* How can we graciously explain the Good News *“making the message clear as we ought to,”* like the apostle Paul instructed in Colossians 4:4-6?

Let me share an example that helps clarify this. This story did not happen in a school situation but in a home. I have a Christian friend who recently came to Canada as a refugee from Iraq. One day I visited him at his home. While his wife was preparing the tea, I suggested to Ashour that he phone our mutual friend, Mohamed, and ask him to join us. Incidentally, Moe is also a refugee from Iraq. So Moe came over and we all sat down to enjoy a cup of tea.

I suggested to Ashour that his kids might like to join us because I wanted to read a short meditation that relates to children. His two children – 8 & 10 years old – came and sat down with us and we all listened as Ashour read Psalm 131 from his Arabic Bible.

We then discussed it briefly. This in turn opened a natural door for me to mention how Jesus Christ highlighted childlike humility as an admirable trait that adults ought to emulate. We turned to a passage found in the Gospel (Muslims call it the Injil.) Matthew 18:1-5 tells how Christ's disciples asked,

“Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” He answered them by inviting a child to join them and then said, *“I tell you the truth, unless you turn from your sins and become like little children, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven. So anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And anyone who welcomes a little child like this on my behalf is welcoming me.”*

Ashour and I asked a couple simple questions from this reading. Then he let his kids go back to their room to continue playing. Meanwhile our conversation moved on to look very briefly at another story about humility as recorded in Mark 10:42-45:

So Jesus called them together and said,

“You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be the slave of everyone else. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

I'm sure you've noticed that humility is an important theme weaving through all these passages. We noted earlier how humility is relevant to Muslims. But there's more to it! They also value children and family life, in fact many Muslims have large families. Our friend Moe has three children making it all the more appropriate for Ashour and I to ask him, *“Why do you think the Scriptures use children to illustrate humility?”* We prayed that God's Spirit would use these questions to stimulate Moe and help him to gain more understanding – another step so to speak towards the ultimate truth.

What I want to emphasize from this example is not that you should copy every detail and verse of the conversation we shared that night. However, I do hope you begin see how this conversation shows a simple pattern of how one can engage unbelieving friends in meaningful conversation. Furthermore, it makes a lot of sense to unfold the message opening and reading from the Bible beginning with the OT and then flowing to the New Testament. If you fear that your Muslim friend could react negatively to an open Bible, simply quote the verse(s). This means making the effort to memorize Scripture. Keep in mind, memorization of the Qur'an is

highly esteemed by Muslims, so your friend will likely respect you for knowing portions of your Bible by heart. At this point, I want to offer some insights that can help us further explain the Gospel. I suggest looking for an opportunity to discuss another aspect of humility as seen in the imagery of a servant. Notice in Mark 10 Jesus didn't focus so much on **childlike** humility, as he did on being like a **servant**.

Be humble like a slave

Using the imagery of servant/slave as a way of illustrating humility makes a whole lot of sense. However, it has a special ring of familiarity with Muslims since they believe that the prophets (as well as believers generally) are servants or slaves of Allah.

As you try applying these insights with Muslims, using a more direct approach, I suggest that you first affirm something that Muslims and Christians share in common. For example, "I know you believe in the prophets. We know that most of the prophets were persecuted." Then ask your friend, "May I show you a prophecy explaining how God's servant, the Messiah, would be humiliated, but eventually be honored and greatly exalted?"

The prophet Isaiah foretold that the servant of the Lord, (a Messianic title) would be humiliated and then be exalted. We see this in Isaiah 52:10,13-14:

The Lord has demonstrated his holy power before the eyes of all the nations. All the ends of the earth will see the victory of our God.... See, my servant will prosper; he will be highly exalted. But many were amazed when they saw him. His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human, and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man.

What did Jesus mean by ransom?

Naturally we will need to consider what Jesus meant by **ransom**. It may be helpful to reread the last half of Mark 10:45 where Christ says he lays down his life as a **ransom**.

Bear in mind, few Muslims know what this word **ransom** really means. It will probably be necessary to patiently explain it which may take considerable time, perhaps more than one visit. (See footnote for further ideas that you could include in discussions.) Of course, some Muslims who realize that **ransom** implies the sacrificial death of Christ might raise objections. In such cases, the conversation may quickly move to the heart of the Gospel. This topic may seem like a "no-go zone" since Muslims emphatically deny Christ died and believe that when Isa (Jesus) returns to earth in the last days he will break the cross which is the very crux of Christianity! We need not worry that this could cause a weakening or even break up our friendship.

How then can we grapple with such a touchy topic in a tactful way? Can we do this in a way that avoids getting embroiled in a **heated** argument? Even if it does, Scripture tells us: we cannot avoid the "offence" which is implicit in the cross. (1 Corinthians 1:23) Nor should we be afraid or ashamed to face persecution for preaching the cross, as Paul testified in Galatians 6:12.

If your Muslim friend agrees to read the paragraph immediately following Isaiah 52:10-14, be thankful and continue reading the entire chapter. However, if he/she is not interested, don't push him. Verses 4-10 read as follows;

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried; it was our sorrows[a] that weighed him down. And we thought his troubles were a punishment from God, a punishment for his own sins! But he was pierced for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed. All of us, like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God's paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on him the sins of us all.

He was oppressed and treated harshly, yet he never said a word. He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. And as a sheep is silent before the shearers, he did not open his mouth. Unjustly condemned, he was led away. No one cared that he died without descendants, that his life was cut short in mid-stream. But he was struck down for the rebellion of my people.

He had done no wrong and had never deceived anyone. But he was buried like a criminal; he was

put in a rich man's grave. But it was the Lord's good plan to crush him and cause him grief.

Yet when his life is made an offering for sin, he will have many descendants. He will enjoy a long life, and the Lord's good plan will prosper in his hands.

Notice how Isaiah 52/53 correlates with the three key ideas that we glimpsed earlier in Mark 10:

- 1) the Messiah's **servant**-spirit,
- 2) his **exaltation** and
- 3) giving his life as a **ransom**.

Take the time, if necessary, to show how several statements in Isaiah 53 imply the idea of **ransom**, i.e. making a payment for someone else, e.g. the Messiah will pay the punishment for **our** sins. He will be pierced for **our** transgressions. Not only so, the punishment that he suffers involves laying down his life. Notice Isaiah states that Messiah's life will be cut short in midstream and he will be buried in a grave. Nothing is lower and more humbling than death.

Another Scripture speaking of Messiah's humility and subsequent exaltation is Philippians 2:5-11.

You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being.

When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross.

Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Earlier I suggested that the five fold series of Scriptures as outlined above contains insights/clues could be useful in a kindergarten school having a number of Muslim kids. If you are involved in a program like this, you may want to read the appendix which explores creative ideas showing how character-building devotionals can be introduced in the school curriculum in a tactful, gracious manner without offending Muslims.

Whether you are a kindergarten teacher or perhaps you've encountered families and children in a personal friendship, I trust you will find the insights explained in this article to be profoundly relevant. They can be useful whether you are a parent, grandparent, uncle/aunt, etc. Finally, let us remember that because children are **small** it is easy for us to overlook them. However, Jesus cherished and even honored them. Elsewhere Jesus says we should not underestimate **small** things,

If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities. (Luke 16:10)

Make the most of the opportunity

In this article we have looked at a number of Bible passages relating to humility. We saw how the topic of children can be way to illustrate this theme. We further explored humility using the imagery of servant/slave. While doing this we've also glimpsed a couple examples showing how children, as an integral part of daily life, can afford natural opportunities for us to befriend unbelievers. Not only so, we can engage them in meaningful conversation based on the themes of childlike and servant humility. However, it is important that we consider more carefully what it means to "make the most of the opportunity" as the apostle Paul taught in Colossians 4:2-6.

I'm sure many of us have had experiences seeing how children open doors to relationships. It would be helpful if each of us felt free to share an example. You may have had an encounter similar to the one I had recently in an elevator. A young couple came on the elevator with their baby in a stroller. So I smiled said, "Salaam alaikum" (Arabic greeting, "Peace be with you") to which they replied in kind. Then the father bent down and encouraged

his baby to respond, saying, “Salaam”. The baby waved and smiled at me. What a precious example of a random act of kind of kindness opening doors! But don’t forget, open doors are meant to be walked through!

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

Endnote

A suitable way to begin a conversation about Abraham with your Muslim friend is to read Surah 37:109-111. These Qur’anic verses say that Allah **ransomed** the son of Abraham with a momentous sacrifice. There is a close connection between **ransom** and sacrifice. I encourage you to read the following five Scriptures that unfold the lamb theme through the entire Bible. All these passages use the twin themes of sacrifice/**ransom** as glimpsed in Surah 37. This story, highlighting a supreme test in the life of Abraham, has long been recognized as an effective springboard (common ground) for sharing the Gospel with Muslims. 1) Genesis 22:1-14, 2) the Passover Lamb in Exodus chapter 12-15. 3) Isaiah 53:7 4) John 1:29 5) Revelation 5:9. A useful article that examines these passages more is titled, *The Mystery of Abraham’s Sacrifice* and is available [here](#).

Appendix: This little light of mine, I’m going to let it shine

I mentioned earlier that there are many kindergartens in a certain country in Africa. Perhaps you work in a kindergarten with Muslim children. If so, the following discussion may interest you. We want to explore creative ideas how to make the most of opportunities to sow seeds in the hearts of these children as well as parents.

Recently I visited in a certain country in Africa and met half a dozen brothers and sisters who work in different kindergarten programs. Most of them taught in a school where a majority of the learners were Muslims! I was interested to hear each one describe different circumstances they work under, especially unspoken pressures inhibiting them from quoting the Bible. In fact most of them could not even tell stories of prophets from the OT. It is important that we look creatively at these barriers that frustrate our efforts to be effective witnesses for Christ.

One lady who oversees a kindergarten told how her school offers an optional session each Saturday where they are able to teach various OT stories. However, most kindergarten programs did not feel free to give any Biblical input because they did not want to offend the sensitivities of Muslim parents. They believed that if they did quote from or allude to the Bible the parents would inevitably hear about it.

One wonders, “Are there no creative possibilities for introducing some Bible teaching, even just a short devotional based on an OT prophet?”

It seems to me that most kindergarten schools have established a good rapport with Muslim parents. Couldn’t one build on this by assigning a teacher to conduct a friendly visit to a couple key Muslim parents. He/she could begin the conversation by simply saying, “the teachers are considering ways to improve the curriculum.”

Wise as serpents, innocent as doves

Then the teacher can explain how they’ve noticed there is nothing in the curriculum that involves “life lessons” or “character building”. One suggestion for remedying this would be to have a 10 minute meditation each day that looks at the story of a prophet, highlighting how he demonstrated an admirable character trait. For example, humility (Daud in Psalm 131), courage (Daniel 3, Shadrack, Meshack etc.), faith (Ibrahim, Abraham), patience (Ayoub, Job)

We might be amazed how the Lord could answer our prayers and open a door to introduce such “devotionals” at the beginning of each day. Here are several reasons that might predispose Muslims to be favourable to this proposal.

- 1) When we openly share such a proposal and act in a consultative manner with parents it communicates profound respect.
- 2) It is important to wisely choose examples of character traits that the school staff think would be good to teach the children. The traits listed above resonate strongly with Muslims and will go a long way towards persuading them to agree with you. It may be helpful to expand on one or two examples, such as humility or courage. Don’t be timid to actually read the entire story of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego in Daniel chapter 3 because it appeals very strongly to Muslims. By the way, Danyal is esteemed as a prophet in Islam, even though his name is not mentioned in the Qur’an.

It could also be effective to begin expanding on the theme of humility by reading Matthew 18:1-5. This story has an undeniable ring of truth to Muslims. Let us pray that God uses it to pave the way for Muslim parents to give teachers more freedom to teach from the prophets. Let’s not unnecessarily restrict ourselves by proposing that we (only) teach from the OT prophets.