

Life in Arabia



Arabia. The name invokes memories of fables about a mystical land of sweeping, soaring sand dunes, desert date-palmed oases, Ali Baba, Aladdin and flying carpets. My husband and I have lived in this far-away, beautiful part of the world for many years, among people who are so very different from us, and yet not so different at all.

While the dominant religion is Islam, there are many here who do own Jesus as their Lord. However, they must do so in secret, as apostasy (conversion from Islam to another religion) carries serious social and legal consequences: the annulment of marriage, the removal of children, and the loss of all property and inheritance rights. Apostasy is also punishable by death.

One day a Western friend, who is married to a local Muslim, shared with me that her husband was suspicious of their eldest daughter. The daughter did not pray five times a day nor did she want to go on the Hajj, the traditional pilgrimage to Mecca.

The husband suspected her of following his wife, and believing as she did. But when the questioning got a little out of hand, in anger and frustration he put his open hand in my friend's face, and said, "Don't tell me. I don't want to know!" He did not want to fulfil the duties and obligations required of him if his daughter was bringing dishonour to the family. My friend and I cried and prayed together over her situation: how does a woman be a wife to a man who she knows would kill their daughter if he knew the truth?

We had been in the country for less than a year when I realised just how closely our family was being observed by our neighbours and our community. I was approached by a neighbour, covered in black from her head to her toes, shaking her finger at me as she insisted that I come to her home: she had been watching us and she wanted to know why we were so different.

I was asked about my children, and why my sons treated their sisters the way they did. The women could not understand why my sons were considerate, loving and protective

toward their sisters, because within a Muslim family, regardless of age, a daughter is there to serve her brother. It was a great opportunity to explain that as we were Christians, our family relationships were based on love for each other. And that men and women, sons and daughters, are equal in God's eyes. As parents we were equally proud of both our sons and our daughters: they were not worth more (or less) because of their gender.

While I was talking with these mothers I was watching their children playing outside in the courtyard. The boys were kicking a soccer ball around, and when it hit one of the girls in the stomach, she doubled up in pain. But the boys did not show the least concern for their sister, and she received a severe rebuke from her mother for interrupting the game.

In this Muslim land we are watched because we're different, and that works to our advantage because it opens up all sorts of opportunities to share about God and His love. A group of married women from my work once asked me to explain my 'love story'. They had been watching my husband and me for many months. They saw the consideration my husband gave me in the simplest of things, like opening the car door for me (an Arab man would never do this for his wife, as it would be considered demeaning), and walking beside me when we were out at the Mall, instead of requiring me to walk behind him. So the next day I

brought my wedding album into work, and explained how our marriage was based on the fact that we loved each other, and wanted to spend our lives together. I showed them photos of the church and the ceremony, and explained that the vows we made were a sacred promise before God and the community: my husband promised to love, honour and cherish me for as long as he lived, and I promised to love, honour and obey him.

Women in this country do not marry for love. They do not even get to choose their own husbands. While they are still very young, their parents choose their groom for them, from amongst their first cousins (which later

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often leads to major health issues in their children). In Arabia, the legal marriage age is 14, but I know women who were married and mothers by the time they were 11 years old. The formalities are completed at the courts by the fathers, and then at a later date set by the couple themselves they have the celebration.

There are actually two separate wedding celebrations: one for the groom and one for the bride. At the celebrations they dance and party until at least midnight, then the groom and his wedding party go across town to the bride's celebration, to claim her and take her to his home. When he and his wedding party enter the wedding hall of the bride, within the twinkling of an eye the room becomes a sea of black, in stark contrast to the music and dancing, eating and laughing, gossiping and talking that the bride and her guests had been enjoying up to that point. This is a very sad analogy of how marriage is viewed. The bride should not have to hide herself from the bridegroom, but these brides are not loved, and they know that.

I remember being shocked when a young local woman told me that it was not right to seek love from her husband, that the object of life was to become wise so that Allah would accept them into Paradise. To believe it is unacceptable to seek love within marriage, when it is the one thing they desire above all else, leaves both men and women empty, angry and deeply lonely.

My husband was approached in the



supermarket one day by a stranger, who hesitantly asked him, “Do you love your wife?” My husband arranged to meet him later for coffee in a more private setting, at which time the man explained he was deeply troubled because he was being forced into a marriage he didn't want. My husband was then able to share with him that God's plan for marriage includes love, and that He instructs men to honour and cherish their wives, and even be willing to lay down their lives for them, as Christ did for us. We have no idea why he approached my husband except that God obviously wanted him to speak with a follower of Christ and learn a little of what he himself knew was very different from his culture and religion.

Although many are hungry to learn more of this God who is so different from the harsh taskmaster of Islam, it is almost impossible

for them to understand His love because of their cultural background. Because they do not understand love, they cannot accept God's love, and they sincerely struggle to understand why He would do such a thing as allow His Son to die for them. Only the working of the Holy Spirit within the hearts of these people will make them truly believe that God loves them unconditionally, and give them the courage to become seekers of the Truth. Please pray for the land and people of Arabia. We come from two different worlds, two different theological frameworks, but we share the same longings: to be accepted and to be loved. ☞

The author and her husband are Kiwi partners, serving within their professions in Arabia. They have five children, who are now all adults.