

FOR AUSTIN

Wells Branch Community Church Publishing
14735 Bratton Lane
Suite #125
Austin, TX 787828

Explore God Conversation Guide
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Cover Photography by Chris Plekenpol
Inside Photography by Casey Decker & Steve Hilchey
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in Publication Data
Plekenpol, Chris
Explore God Conversation Guide / Chris Plekenpol.
p.90

ISBN-13: 978-1491081662
ISBN-10: 149108166X
12 11 10/ 6 5 4 3 2 1





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During our Explore God sermon series, we'll ask a different question each week that is on the minds of thousands of people in Greater Austin. Think of the people you know who are asking:

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Your part is simply this: invite people to explore God with you, begin to have spiritual conversations, and watch God transform lives, one at a time, throughout Greater Austin.

Don't Make Assumptions. Find the courage to ask questions and to express what you really want. Communicate with others as clearly as you can to avoid misunderstandings, sadness and drama. With just this one agreement, you can completely transform your life.

-Miguel Angel Ruiz

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

An organization called E3 Foundation has sought to increase the spiritual awareness in the cities across the globe and has partnered with churches throughout the Austin area. Wells Branch Community Church is just one of those churches. We are seeking to join in on



*spiritually
prepared
believers*
+
*spiritually
curious
people*

the over 400,000 spiritual conversations that will happen because of what God has done through the E3 Foundation.

Explore God brings spiritually prepared believers together with spiritually curious people to begin to have conversations about God. Our prayer is that by the E3 foundation raising spiritual awareness in our city, the curious will begin thinking and talking, and believers will begin listening and sharing.

You may be a spiritually prepared person, a spiritually curious person, or someone in between. We believe Explore God will be the catalyst for the largest conversation about spiritual things to ever occur in Austin.

Will you join the conversation?



According to a recent survey, 1,099,958 million people in Greater Austin are not believers in Jesus Christ. Over 60% of those indicated they are open to discuss faith and have spiritual conversations.

-Ed Stetzer, LifeWay Research

FAQs

Q: What is Explore God?

A: The goal of Explore God is to invite people to investigate questions about God in a non-threatening way through individual conversations with a believer. Explore God gives us practical ways to generate spiritual conversations around people's natural curiosity regarding their purpose, the reliability of the Bible, the existence of evil, who Jesus is, and other questions.

Q: Who is part of Explore God?

A: Over 300 churches across Greater Austin - and across denominational lines - will be active participants in Explore God. Go to exploregod.com to find out who is involved.

Q: What's my part?

A: Your part is to join the largest conversation about God to ever occur in Greater Austin by:

- **Training** to prepare yourself for spiritual conversations.
- **Engaging** people in spiritual conversations on a regular basis.
- **Joining** an Explore God small group.
- **Inviting** people to your Explore God small group and to church to hear the messages, ask questions, and continue the conversation.
- **Praying** for God's Spirit to be poured out through His Church across Greater Austin as we interact with the people in our area.



HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is a three-in-one resource to accompany the Explore God Campaign. First, we've written seven articles with our best answers to the seven most pressing questions to spiritually curious people. This is a great way for those who are Christians to prepare for conversations with those who are spiritually curious, while seekers can enjoy a look behind the curtain at the Christian worldview. Accompanying each answer are links to various resources for deeper study into each question.

Second, this is a film discussion guide aimed to engage the spiritually curious. This guide provides a safe platform for those curious about spiritual things an opportunity to join believers in conversation. Utilizing the material that the E3 Foundation has provided at ExploreGod.com, we will use these tools as the platform for conversation.

Paramount to the conversation is a humble and understanding way. If one person corrects another after every answer, those looking to have spiritual conversations will shut down and be less inclined to listen to others' answers which might shed light on who God is. Bottom Line: listen before answering.

Third, this book is an effective tool for those looking to dig deeper into the Word of God to find answers to the questions the spiritually curious are asking. It won't be uncommon for people to utilize a particular chapter to help deepen their Christian World View to each question.

A free pdf version of this guide is available at www.wellsbranchchurch.com

*The goals for this campaign are ambitious, but we firmly believe that He can do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine."
Ephesians 3:20*

DOES LIFE HAVE PURPOSE?

QUESTION 1



As a child, we all had days where we hated school. We would ask a series of questions to adults that inevitably would leave them speechless. It started like this.

“Why do I have to go to school?”

“So that you can get an education,”

“Why do I need an education?”

“So you can get a job.”

“Why do I need a job?”

“So you can provide for yourself to eat.”

Ultimately, what life came down to was not dying—right away.

Sometimes the conversation would take on a slight twist involving providing for family or to make my family happy or for even altruistic reasoning of providing for others—but still the answer that I would get for doing anything beneficial was simply to sustain life.

Why am I here? I think we have all come across this question after we have lost a job, relationship, or a family member. Doubts creep in, and for a moment we start to question the purpose of anything. Unless we are philosophically inclined, we are too busy with work, kids, dating, car payments, mortgages and rent to concern ourselves with thinking about why we are here.

Just living. That can't be it, can it?

King Solomon one of the richest kings ever to live and arguably one of the wisest wrote a treatise on life about 935 BC. The entire thing can be summarized by its opening line.

“Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.”¹

He then wrote 12 chapters on how he has experienced every aspect of life and found that nothing mattered. This guy learned all he could and became an incredible philosopher. He lived a life of hedonism and partied all he could. As a master architect, he

“Meaningless, Meaningless, everything is meaningless.”

-King Solomon



DOES LIFE HAVE

built buildings and planted vineyards. He gave lots of people jobs so they could continue living. He had hundreds of wives, concubines, and entertainers. He worked in biology, botany, and chemistry. Yet all that he could find was that a man lived, and then a man died. It's pretty depressing stuff actually.

But what King Solomon, a fairly devout monotheist, revealed was that life, in and of itself had no purpose.

Throughout history people have been coming up with the same thought. They try to put different twists on it to show how they have arrived at a new truth. But what they say is merely subjective. Their meaning of life was to be happy. That doesn't help a person who is abused, born in to a sex trade, or born with aids. That is the inherent problem.



I Was Made For This

We have all said things like, "LeBron James was made to play basketball." "Michael Jackson was made to entertain." "Steve Jobs was made to invent cool smartphones." In our own lives in certain moments of happiness or success have said, "I was made for this."

If that is true, who made you and why?

I can hear the skeptic say, "It's just a figure of speech."

But in that moment when you are most satisfied in life, when it feels like you are no longer the square being jammed into the circle hole, you breathe a sigh of relief and utter, "I was made for this."

You see it is that thought that I want to focus on. You were made for something. Random chance plus time is not why you know you were made for something, but can't quite put your finger on it. In all of us is that desire to be the LeBron James of something.

All of life in and of itself is meaningless if there isn't more to it. If there is no immortality, if there is no eternity, then what hope is there?

Famed atheist and scientist Richard Dawkins in his book, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* agrees.

"In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."²

PURPOSE?

Life in and of itself has no purpose without a creator.

King Solomon came to a conclusion in his work. He wrapped up the final chapter of his treatise on the meaning of life by saying, "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'...The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil."³

God created us and gave us purpose. He made us and knows what satisfies us. Investigating who He is might be the only way to find an eternal purpose in a temporary life. In fact, God made us to be satisfied in glorifying Him and enjoying Him forever. We already do this with temporary things. When we cheer for our favorite sports team, we glorify that team. We wear the t-shirts, we sit in uncomfortable chairs with several thousand of our best friends and make fools of ourselves in order to glorify the object of our affection.

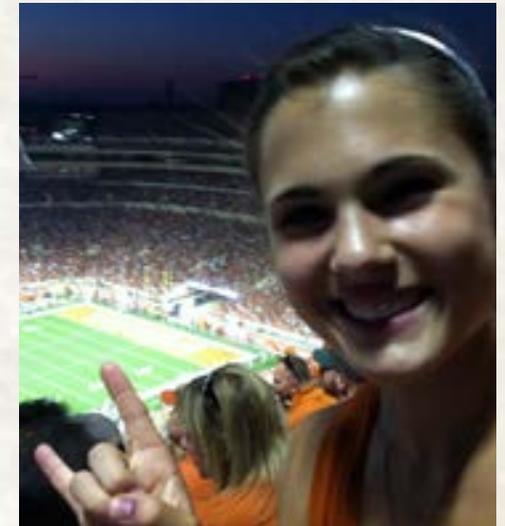
Austin Glory

In Austin, we love our Longhorns. Here are some of the lyrics from Texas Fight!

Texas Fight! Texas Fight!
For it's Texas that we love best.
Hail, Hail, the gang's all here,
And it's goodbye to all the rest!...⁴

Texans aren't the only ones who love their football team best. Take a look at Georgia's lyrics. Here the words are more tied to this idea of glory.

Glory, glory to old Georgia!
Glory, glory to old Georgia!
Glory, glory to old Georgia!
G-E-O-R-G-I-A.
Hail to Georgia down in Dixie!...⁵



To glorify something is to lift that one thing above all other things. If you are an alumni of Texas or Georgia, something inside you stirs deeply and resonates when the words are read—yelled, shouted, screamed. For avid college football fans, after the touchdown is scored and the extra point goes through the uprights there is a moment of sheer bliss. Worries slip away as shouts of adulation

DOES LIFE HAVE

rise to the sky. There could be nothing more enjoyable.

Here is what is strange about that. The winning of that game will not change the financial status of the fan. It will not change his relationship. It will not change the terrible boss. But for a moment those things become strangely dim in the light of the glory of his team.

We all were meant to worship something. The problem for most of us is we are worshipping a manmade icon of excellence. The season ends and we wait another long eight months for the season to begin drinking in gossip of the season like women staring at tabloids in the check-out line. Eventually Texas will lose. Eventually the coach will change. Perhaps the institution of the University of Texas might shut down. UT will let us down. UT isn't eternal.

We are designed to worship. We long for our worship to be satisfied. In that worship we find our purpose for doing even the most mundane task. Life becomes less about



staying alive and more about enjoying the eternity for which we were created. I think C.S. Lewis said it best, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."⁶

Imagine for a moment the feeling of celebrating a UT championship victory, being the bride you always dreamed of, having all you could have ever hoped for or wanted—forever. That's what happens when we tap into worship of our Creator.

Jesus faced this same question. A well-read and educated man walked up to Jesus and asked him, "What's the most important commandment?"

He might have said it this way. "What are we here for?" or "What does God want from me?"

He wanted to know his purpose. And Jesus' answer was incredibly simple which is why I think it to be so profound.

He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second most important commandment is this: 'Love your neighbor as you love yourself.' There is no other commandment more important than these two."⁷

Conclusion

Jesus informs us that we do have a purpose. The purpose is relationship with our creator. The purpose of life is to love God. God is the only thing that will last beyond

PURPOSE?

today. We are made to love God forever. The best way people can love an invisible, eternal God is to love his visible people for a temporary time. Although all of us may not agree with the premise, the practice of loving people is something generally we are all for. We would all say loving people and showing them love is good. However, it doesn't always happen. What prevents us from giving and receiving that love?

I would argue it is people not knowing their purpose greater purpose to love God. What do you think?

Let us know.

Tweet #DoesLifeHavePurpose

DOES LIFE HAVE

PURPOSE?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/11UzVUU>



Answer the Questions⁸

1. Which point of view stood out to you in this video?
2. Do you agree or disagree?
3. Did anyone shock you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/16CnaOM>



Answer the Questions⁹

1. Can you identify with any of the stories you just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. Does life seem like a random series of events or is there some kind of plan unfolding?
4. Do you think of yourself as unique? How do you think you became that way?
5. If you believe we all have a purpose, what role does God play in that - if any?

Read the Bible

Ecclesiastes 1:2

Matthew 22:34-36

Questions

1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can you learn about the character of God?
3. What can you learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live-out what you have learned?

My thoughts

IS THERE A GOD?

QUESTION 2



“Where do babies come from?”
Oh the joy of parenting. Here is how this usually plays out.

“Where do babies come from?”
“A mommy and a daddy.”
“Where did their mommies and daddies come from?”
“Their mommies and daddies.”
“But where did they come from?”

And usually right here we veer to one of four answers.

1. Mommies and daddies and all of our own reality is merely an illusion.
2. Mommies and daddies and all of our own reality were self-created.
3. Mommies and daddies and all of our own reality are eternal or self-existent—no beginning or end.
4. Mommies and daddies and all of our own reality were created by God (or a self-existent being).



Read more about why we have something instead of nothing at <http://bit.ly/11hW13f>



If you went with option one a strange look would come upon the child's face and they might respond that they know they are here. They might even say something really philosophic like “I think, therefore I am.” Rene Descartes would be proud. A few Eastern religion types might dabble in the thought that we are figments of our own imagination, but I always pinch myself and realize it actually hurts.

Answer two is that the first human created himself. That seems a bit odd, for how could a man make himself if he didn't exist in the first place? For those who have an evolutionary bent, how did the first amoeba make itself, or how did the first quark make itself? It is impossible logic to think that nothing can become something. For something

“Science can tell us how to do many things, but it can not tell us what ought to be done.”¹

-Author Unknown

IS THERE

to exist it must be created by something else, or it is self-existent or eternal. Some might argue for something called spontaneous generation, but it goes back to the same argument that something arrived without a cause.

Your third answer would be that the universe is in a steady-state system meaning it has always been here and existed just as it is. Or some argue that the universe is constantly oscillating—expanding and contracting. Mommies and daddies have just always existed eternally. This is difficult, because this would mean that there was no beginning.



Or perhaps the universe is really a multi-verse. We live in just one possibility of an infinite possible possibilities that exist simultaneously. The best example of this I heard is that it is like we are one bubble in an infinite bubble bath.² The fact that we exist in conditions perfect for us to live, and not implode or explode on ourselves in our universe is purely coincidental. This is because if there are

an infinite number of universes that means us being in the one that we are in is not all that exciting. We would have to be in the one that can sustain life, because there are an infinite number of universes with an infinite number of possibilities of what each multi-verse might hold. However this still begs the question, who created the multi-verse?

The evidence of our universe points to a beginning. Most scientists (atheist, agnostic, and theist) look at our universe as increasingly expanding. If one were to reverse time, that expanse would come back to a point, which would lead us to a beginning. And if we get back to a beginning, how did that something begin?

What was the first cause? Is it more possible that something came from nothing due to nothing or that something came from nothing, because it was acted upon from an eternal being—namely God. Let's take this one step further. Our universe has in it something those who believe in God would call design, and those who don't believe in God call "apparent design." The very fact that you can put together words and form sentences and read this book points to a design. Our DNA is so complicated it points to a design. Now it might be just "apparent design." It is possible that nothing not only produced something, but produced it in such incredible order and fine tuning that life as we know it could not exist without its current precision. Again, it's possible that everything is randomness plus chance, but is it probable?

Former atheist Lee Strobel commented,

"Essentially, I realized that to stay an atheist, I would have to believe that nothing produces everything; non-life produces life; randomness produces fine-tuning; chaos

A GOD?

produces information; unconsciousness produces consciousness; and non-reason produces reason. Those leaps of faith were simply too big for me to take, especially in light of the affirmative case for God's existence."³

That brings us to the fourth answer, which is that God created the universe. God is a self-existent being and started the universe at a certain point along the way. Some comment that it is hypocritical on the one hand to say that it is not possible for mommies, daddies and amoebas to not have always existed, but then turn around and point at God and say that he is in a different God category and therefore eternally exists.

What happens when the child asks the parent, "Where did God come from?"

This is where most of us get stumped. But God is in a different category. How many mommies, daddies, or amoebas do you know that have never died? The oldest people we know are in their 90's, or some have past 100.

There is no one 200 years old. So although the process of making mommies, daddies, and amoebas is one that might continue for a long time, they are created beings with a lifespan. And remember we just said that most scientists (atheist, agnostic, and theist) look at our universe as having a beginning.

Another term for God is the uncreated, eternal, self-existent one. To ask who or what created the uncreatable is not a valid question. It's like asking, "What does the color burnt orange smell like?" We can look at mommies, daddies, and amoebas and see how they at one time were not, but now are. Different story with God. He stands outside of time eternally.

This is where we must take a hard look at what is possible and what is probable. It is possible that everything just began. That randomly from one uncaused event, random chance plus time transformed matter, (quarks, protons, and electrons) into a mind that thinks rationally. It's possible, but is it probable? It seems more probable that an exquisite mind made matter and fine-tuned it in such a way that it became the universe it is today. It makes more sense that mommies and daddies are a reflection of God and his mind as opposed to being the culmination of matter becoming more sophisticated randomly over time.

"Essentially, I realized that to stay an atheist, I would have to believe that nothing produces everything; non-life produces life; randomness produces fine-tuning; chaos produces information; unconsciousness produces consciousness; and non-reason produces reason. Those leaps of faith were simply too big for me to take..."

-Lee Strobel

IS THERE

“When I began my career as a cosmologist some twenty years ago, I was a convinced atheist. I never in my wildest dreams imagined that one day I would be writing a book purporting to show that the central claims of Judeo-Christian theology are in fact true, that these claims are straightforward deductions of the laws of physics as we now understand them. I have been forced into these conclusions by the inexorable logic of my own special branch of physics.”⁵

-Frank Tipler (Professor of Mathematical Physics, former atheist)

How do Legos know right from wrong?

I think that question puts at the right place to analyze the next portion of this chapter. Legos are matter without a mind. To make Legos one must take acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) granules and inject them into a mold. The machine that does this melts and then molds the plastic granules into the classic Lego shape we have come to know and love. When it is done, we can build the Legos into anything we want: police stations, medieval castles, pirate ships, or spaceships. However, if the Legos were left for billions of years, would they develop a conscience?⁴

This is the assertion that many people make about our universe. Matter formed a mind. Mommies and daddies especially have the ability to choose right from wrong. In fact, we have unwritten moral codes that spark us into action. For example, some people get emotionally upset and feel violated when another inadvertently cuts them off in traffic. There is a direct impulse within to go and tell them that what they did was wrong.

Why? How do they know that what they did was wrong? Because every one of us agrees that cutting someone off in traffic is wrong. That is something called an objective moral standard.

There are subjective moral standards. Those are things that people value because they were taught to value those things. An examples would be to believe that you can have one wife, while others believe you can have four, five, or seven wives. However, the objective moral standard would be that one just can't have any wife he chooses.⁶ Other objective moral standards are sex trafficking and murder are evil.

Society can only develop subjective moral standards. Things like type of government and social manners are subjective to the culture. However, if we are to find just one moral standard that applies to all people, universally, then we must agree that something outside of all people, all places gave it to them. For example, every society values bravery and loyalty. I can't think of one culture that rewards cowards or holds cheating in high esteem. But why do we value bravery or loyalty? If we are merely matter, animated Legos, and our existence is just survival, then why do we value such altruistic character traits?

A GOD?

Conclusion

The universe seems to point to a finely tuned design created in time. Cultures all around the world seem to be on the same page with objective moral standards. It is possible that all of this has happened due to random chance plus time, but is that more probable than believing a God exists?

Let us know.

Tweet #IsThereAGod

IS THERE

A GOD?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/16CoD7G>



Answer the Questions⁷

1. Which point of view stood out to you in this video? Do you agree or disagree?
2. Did anyone shock you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/15Ypy37>



Answer the Questions⁸

1. Can anyone identify with any of those stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. What have you seen or experienced that makes it hard to believe in God? Easy to believe in God?
4. Were you raised to believe in God? How does your upbringing impact your beliefs now?
5. Do you feel comfortable being honest about your doubts?
6. What supports your belief in (or non-belief in) God?
7. Who is God to you?
8. How do you believe you can get to know God better?

Read the Bible

Romans 1:18-20

Romans 2:14-15

Questions

1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can we learn about the character of God?
3. What can we learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live-out what you have learned?

My thoughts



WHY IS THERE PAIN AND SUFFERING? QUESTION ③

“Mommy, I don’t want to go to the dentist. He is going to hurt me.”

“I know, Honey, but we have to get your cavities filled.”

“Why?”

“Because I want your teeth to be strong.”

“Why?”

“Because I love you.”

That is how the conversation might have played out hundreds of times on hundreds of car rides to the dentist. Here a good parent is going to willingly inflict pain on her child. In the child’s mind there might not be anything crueler than this. From the child’s perspective, the mother can’t love her. From the child’s perspective the world is nothing but hopeless misery. This vignette brings us to a question so many ask.

“Why do bad things happen to good people?”

I think a better question is, “Why do bad things happen at all?”

I’m writing this chapter from a little town called Chalinze, Tanzania on the continent of Africa. I’m a little jet-lagged so it’s the middle of the night. Because Chalinze is a trucking hub, truck drivers frequently stay the night here. The locals tell me that the prostitution rates here are through the roof. The abuse that comes with that lifestyle is terrible. But the people need to survive. Their mud huts with tin roofs and few places with running water would cause any Western person to think that God has forsaken them. In fact, my team met a baby that was found in the trash this very morning. Forsaken is a good word for this place.

But Westernized people aren’t free from pain and suffering. The same sort of injustices that are taking place outside my Chalinze hotel are happening in Austin, Texas. Shoot, at our church people are going through pain as couples face infertility. Others are coping

“Some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice.”¹

-Richard Dawkins

WHY IS THERE PAIN

with the death of a parent. Others are struggling with addictions that are causing them to steal from the very people that they really care about. Spouses are looking for ways out of dead-end marriages. Some are living with chronic tortuous pain—like knives being jabbed into the abdomen with no medical explanation.

There is a problem on our Earth.

When we ask, “Why does God allow pain?” I think we are asking more than a physical response question. It’s a question of suffering. We can understand a light amount of pain to prevent further pain, but we have a hard time with suffering—especially if it is prolonged.

All creation is subject to pain and suffering. Have you ever watched animals kill each other? Just go to YouTube and type in *animal violence* and you can catch a glimpse of the horrors that animals undergo. I just watched an older lion be brutally attacked by four younger lions establishing their presence in the pride. No one seemed to pronounce judgment on the animal kingdom. However, most universally agree that animal cruelty is wrong. Why? Most would say humans *know* better. How are we to know? If we are merely a product of random chance plus time, then there can’t be right and wrong. We merely live in a world of survival of the fittest—only the strong survive. In fact, killing off the old and weak prevents them from ruining the herd’s chance to survive.

Most of us believe that things should be different for human beings. We believe that human beings have an obligation to behave a certain way (i.e. not kill off weak people or cause animal cruelty). Last chapter we called this the objective moral standard. Many have given up on God because of what they perceive to be logical fallacies on how he has dealt with pain and suffering.

They give God one of three options:

1. If there was a God, then he would be powerful enough to not let pain and suffering happen on earth. He would stop pain and suffering in its tracks before causing any real damage. So since there is pain and suffering, there can’t be a God. Many who have undergone the severe tragedy of losing a loved one or experienced immense pain in life have come to that very conclusion.

2. There is a God and perhaps he created everything, but pain and suffering exist and therefore he is not all powerful. And if he is not all-powerful then he is like a Greek myth and can’t be trusted.

3. There is a God. He knows about pain and suffering. He can do something about



AND SUFFERING?

it, but chooses to do nothing and therefore is not good. He is just another kid with a magnifying glass making life for all of us “ants” very painful.

But let’s pause before we go deeper into this discussion. If everyone were to conclude that there is no God, would that change anything? Would people still die of AIDS? Would people still murder one another? Would young girls still be sold into the sex slave trade? Of course pain and suffering would still happen without belief in God. It just means we are left hopeless. There is no end of suffering.

Okay, just a thought, back to the discussion.

What’s the point?

The reason we don’t get pain and suffering is that it seems so pointless. I can tell you that people in Tanzania are suffering. They don’t have access to the same food and water we have. They are hungry,

I don’t know why God chose to give those in Westernized countries access to indoor plumbing and emergency rooms that will treat anyone at no cost. But go back with me to the beginning of the chapter and our story of the mother taking a child to the dentist. The mother knows what is good for the child. The child can’t see that answer. All the child knows is impending doom and pain that will never end.

I think that might be how we are here. A mother could never fully explain to an uncomprehending child why pain and suffering must occur at the dentist. She could never fully explain why she is behind the suffering. Like that child, I don’t think we have the faculties to understand why God would allow pain and suffering.

Remember our Richard Dawkins quote from chapter one? He said,

“In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.”²

But you don’t believe there is not rhyme or reason to anything. We don’t look at people dealing with chronic pain, children sold into the sex trade, and people in misery with a shoulder shrug and a parting of thought of “sucks to be you,” right?



WHY IS THERE PAIN

C.S. Lewis, a skeptic who later came to believe in God, expressed this idea in his book, *Mere Christianity*.

“My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of “cruel and unjust?” What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? Of course I had to give up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on that the world really was unjust, not simply that it did not please my private fancies.”³

As much as I disagree with Dawkins, I appreciate his intellectual honesty. C.S. Lewis a generation ahead of Dawkins came to the same conclusion. That either there is a God or there is no justice.

Tim Keller in his book, *Reason for God* puts it most succinctly.

“In short the problem of tragedy, suffering, and injustice is a problem for everyone. It is at least a big of a problem for non-belief in God as for belief, it is therefore a mistake, though an understandable one, to think that if you abandon belief in God it somehow makes the problem of evil easier to handle.”⁴

The Problem of Evil

I don't know if you caught it, but I snuck in the word that I had intentionally avoided. Evil. Both Dawkins and Lewis used it. That word makes people uncomfortable, because that means there is an absolute right and an absolute wrong. But here is the tough part. You can't have it both ways. Either you agree with Dawkins that there is no right and wrong and we must be indifferent to pain and suffering, or you agree with Lewis that there is a right and a wrong and therefore there is a God.

Since this is a book to Explore God, let's walk down the path of what God should do to deal with evil.

What basis should God stop evil? Should he punish really bad actions right away? What evil should God stop and which should he not stop? Should he stop just rebellious actions by greedy, murderous people? What about someone who tells lies that lead to people to mistrust one another and ruin a marriage? Does God take them out or maybe turn them into robots so that they never practice evil again? As we all know, evil actions are the result of evil thinking. Perhaps God could sound a searing alarm in our heads that only each one of us can hear when we think an evil thought. If that happened, I would be personally doomed with tinnitus.

It sounds silly, but that is really what would have to happen for God to prevent people from doing evil and still at the same time grant them minds of their own.

We want God to not allow evil. We also want God to let us do what we want. If we think about it, what we really want is our own personal God that doesn't let bad things happen,

AND SUFFERING?

but isn't too controlling either. I guess what we really want is to be God—having his power, but our own authority.

Let's look at it this way. God gives people the opportunity to either share in his love which is perfect or to love things that aren't perfect that will ultimately destroy them. In America, we like choices, so we like that part. When we choose loving ourselves, as opposed to loving God, we inevitably hurt another one of God's creation. We cause pain. We cause suffering.

As we are exploring God, I'm going to have you step into a Christian world view for a moment. You don't have to agree with it, but it does allow us to take a look at a world which is at certain times and certain places, paradise and others—Hell on Earth.

Christians believe God created people for a purpose: to worship and enjoy God forever (chapter one). He spent time crafting the Earth and people. However, his creation rejected and rebelled against Him. That rebellion is called sin. We all have done evil at one point and time and have caused suffering.

I can hear some of you saying, “Hey, easy, I didn't cause that much pain and suffering. I never intended to do anything evil.”

How does that work when your kids give you that excuse? We get pretty objective about the wrongs of our kids or maybe the wrongs of some guy we don't know on the news. We want the guy on the news to pay for crimes committed. We don't wait to hear his story. Either he did the crime or not. And if he did the crime, he must pay the fine, or do the time.

But that's not how we operate when it comes to us. We want God to understand how hard it is being us. We want fair—for us.

What part of life have you ever noticed to be fair? When was the last time you got pulled over for speeding, the cop was just about to leave you with a warning, and you said, “Sir, that's not how we do it around here—we must be fair. Please give me my ticket.”

You see you really don't want fair, and neither does anyone else. Now, how is God supposed to handle us getting what our deeds deserve? He could intervene in the moment, which we don't like, because we don't want to be told what to do and he could command the selfish person to “stop that.” He could issue a divine punishment. But how much punishment would be enough? And again when would he punish? After the act was committed, or when the thought was committed that led to the act?



WHY IS THERE PAIN

God is a judge. However, we notice that he doesn't punish every action right away. This is why we see sex traffickers, murderers, and corrupt government officials seemingly getting away with it. Now the problem of evil is so bad that all people are condemned. All are guilty in some degree of evil.

Jesus said that if you hate someone in your heart, you are guilty of murder. Turns out God knows our thoughts. Think about what goes on in your head. It can get pretty nasty in there if we are really honest with ourselves.

Some people were raised in a supportive environment where they were taught how to handle evil impulses. Others never learned consequences and how to handle conflict in their minds. Some never learned to suppress an inappropriate impulse.

To be just, God condemns the thought equal to his condemnation of the act. The condemnation leads us to the uncomfortable topic of Hell. The evil you witness around the globe and in your private world is so bad that it needs to be dealt with. God doesn't leave mass genocide unpunished. He doesn't leave the abuse of women and children unpunished. He deals with evil. I think we are okay with that. We want evil punished, but it's the severity of the punishment that makes people uncomfortable.

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis didn't portray Hell as a place where people were angry about going there, but rather a place of one's own choosing.⁵ People can receive God's love which is perfect or choose to love a created thing. Paul wrote in a letter to the Roman Church in the first century that God gave people over to their impurity... because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.⁶ We said in chapter one people are designed for worship. We are designed to worship God. Worshiping anything else leads us to a place where we worship ourselves or something we've created. This breaks our love relationship with God. We choose our fate.

Why can't God just get over evil?

This question requires some background. Christians know God as the Trinity. The three persons of the Trinity working in harmony from eternity past. They share a perfect love and adoration of one another and live in perfect community. The best way I can think of this love is to describe a married couple. The analogy has limitations, but work with me here. Have you ever heard a couple on their honeymoon?—so in love, so excited, so in tune with another. They are constantly saying things like, "Whatever you want to do, honey." Or the wife might say, "I just want to watch Sports Center all day with you and massage your shoulders." The husband might say, "I would love to shop at DSW for hours and help you try on every shoe." Before you discount this as impossible, imagine what that would look like in a marriage. Now imagine a couple not being like this just while they are dating, or engaged, or even just on their honeymoon. Imagine that other-centered love being eternal.

AND SUFFERING?

That's how the three persons of the Trinity work—constantly adoring one another and seeking to glorify the other. I'm not just pulling that out of thin air. One of Jesus' closest friends, John, wrote an account of Jesus' life. In it he wrote that Jesus taught that the Holy Spirit glorifies Jesus; Jesus glorifies the Father; and the Father glorifies Jesus. This glorifying business has been going on for eternity.⁷

Out of their love for each other, they created the universe to share that perfect love. Humans rebelled against God and ousted themselves from that perfect love relationship. We couldn't handle loving another perfectly and thus had to be separated from God for forever.

You can understand that. People disqualify themselves all the time from relationships. Boyfriends cheat. The school bully picks on the weak. Professional athletes use illicit drugs. When caught, they are removed from the organization.

That's what happened to us. God removed evil from the perfect relationship. To remove someone from the perfect relationship inevitably leads to suffering.

Jesus understands suffering.

Pain and suffering would seem to be a foreign concept for God. How could the most powerful, all knowing being suffer? This is where the background of the Trinity becomes important. Jesus, the second member of the Trinity suffered on the cross. Not only did he bear the physical pain of the most excruciating form of execution, but he suffered facing the wrath of God.

On the cross, Jesus shrieked, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"⁸

In that moment, Jesus suffered. The wrath he used to dispense as God in Heaven he now received. He absorbed all the pain and suffering due to mankind for all time. He was separated from God. He felt the torment



WHY IS THERE PAIN

of billions of Hells as He suffered for the world. He also endured the worst break up ever. An eternal relationship ended. God had forsaken Jesus. In one moment, he endured more torture than any of us could imagine.

That's how Christians know that God really loves them. What other religion presents God as one willing to deal with evil for his creation? At best with other religions you have a God who sympathizes with his creation. But Jesus takes it one step further and experiences the separation for us.

We find that he endured the cross for us. The only thing that the Trinity did not have before Jesus died on the cross was us.⁹ We are the joy that made it worth enduring the punishment of evil for all time.

Conclusion

Everywhere we turn we see the effects of evil. Does the presence of pain, suffering, and evil discount or prove God?

Tweet #WhyIsTherePain and let us know.

AND SUFFERING?

WHY IS THERE PAIN

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/139zOHU>



Answer the Questions¹⁰

1. Do you feel like the video is an accurate reflection of what people think?
2. Did anyone's view in the video surprise you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/16qDMfV>



Answer the Questions¹¹

1. Can anyone identify with any of the stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how much of a barrier is this question between you and God?(1 = very small, 10 = huge barrier). Why?

4. It has been said that pain is actually good for people. Do you think anything good can come from bad & painful things?

5. What do you feel is the cause of pain and suffering in this world?

6. What causes people to hurt each other?

7. Why do you think bad things happen to good people?

8. If there's a God, why do you think he allows evil in the world?

AND SUFFERING?

Read the Bible

John 9:1-41

Questions

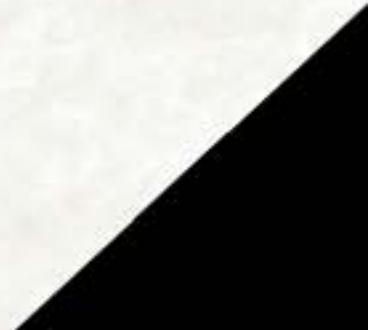
1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can we learn about the character of God?
3. What can we learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live-out what you have learned?



My thoughts





IS CHRISTIANITY TOO NARROW? QUESTION 4



When I was in college I came across a lot of different philosophies and many right-sounding religions. It seemed everyone had a solid slice of truth. When I heard this one illustration, I felt so profoundly moved by it that I started to question the absoluteness and relevance of any one religion. You may have heard of the Indian legend of the blind men who are asked to describe an elephant.

The story is told like this. There are six blind men. They are all asked to describe an elephant. The first blind guy grabs hold of the elephant's trunk and declares the elephant to

be like a snake. The second blind man touches the ear and decides that the elephant is like a fan. The next blind man is poked by a tusk and comments that the elephant is like a spear. Another blind man feels a leg and decides that the elephant is like a tree. The fifth blind man feels the side of the elephant and concludes that the elephant is like a wall. Finally the last blind man grasps the tail and declares the elephant to be like a rope.

Then the narrator lets the reader know that this is how religion is. Many people have a grasp of a part of the solution, but they are missing the big picture.

When I read that, I was sold. It took away the nasty incongruency of one religion dominating the landscape of truth. I could relax and think that Jesus might be my way to God, but Buddha might have the answer for Buddhists. Doctrine and beliefs don't really matter, because we are all essentially teaching the same thing.

When I presented this to my college roommate, Heyward Davis, he told me I needed to

By all means let's be open-minded, but not so open-minded that our brains drop out.¹

-Richard Dawkins

IS CHRISTIANITY

rethink my position. I figured he was a close-minded, organized religion guy, and he needed to pull his head out of the sand. Clearly those people were unable to think outside their own belief system to see the bigger picture.

But then it hit me. The most close minded person of all is the one who declares himself to be open-minded, when in fact he is close-minded. I then went back to the elephant illustration and found that there was one person who could see in the story. He was telling all the blind men they were in fact—wrong.

The narrator who told the story was the all-seeing one. He was the one that was telling the narrow-minded blind men that their religions were all a part of the same animal. But how did he know? How did he get eyes to see? The narrator trying to be all-inclusive is actually just as narrow as those whom he is trying to educate. He just doesn't know it.

It turns out that anyone who holds to any truth, even the "truth" that there can be no absolute truth declares himself to be the all-seeing one and the holder of absolute truth. The hypocrisy in that floored me.

The main reason I think that people want to relegate religion to a backward ancient cultic system is because it leads to incredible divisiveness. I would agree with that. Religion divides. Religions can lead to wars. From the Christian Crusades of yesteryear to the modern-day martyrs of Islam, we see how far one will go to fulfill his religious duty.

But what about life without religion? Some neo-atheists advocate doing away with all religion. Once religion is relegated to the private life and not ever brought up in public again, then we might heal from our religious wounds. We will be able to live in peace and prosperity. How did that work out in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia? The people became just as cutthroat as terrorists in airplanes. Here is another reality we have to face. No religion *is* a religion. Secular advocates feel as though they are the only ones with the ability and the right to not separate their private life from their public life.

Most people in the world (by a vast majority) hold deeply to religion. In fact, to say that the view of the few should dominate the view of the many might be seen as arrogant by most. This is clearly the case with religion.

So with all the baggage of bickering between religions and non-religion religions, how is Christianity relevant to our culture?

When Christ came on the scene in Jewish culture amidst a Greco-Roman world, he



TOO NARROW?

flipped the world's systems on its head. He took the most excluded people and included them. Christianity was the first time that economic and social status no longer took precedence in relationship. Gender equality was pushed to a level that no one could imagine. Before Christ, the world operated on survival of the fittest. Christians espouse the worth of all people and that all are made in the image of God. Social, economic, or gender status do not matter when it comes to valuing a person before God. This is why Christianity holds deep relevance in our culture that has so many different ideas, beliefs, and even thoughts on God. Many of the cultural proverbs that you live by are Christian.

One of the pastors at our church, Holland Greig has a relationship with a well to do skeptic. They were having lunch recently at Hop Doddy's on South Congress. When Holland asked his friend what he believed, he said, "You know. Do to others as you would do to yourself."

Holland smiled and responded, "You know who said that right?"

He thought for a second and said, "No, I guess I don't."

"Jesus said it. (Matthew 7:12)"

You see, a lot of things that you may believe about God are Christian ideas that you may have borrowed from Jesus without knowing it. I'll rattle off a couple.

God is love. 1 John 4:8

Perfect love casts out fear. 1 John 4:18

It's better to give than to receive. Acts 20:35

All things are possible with God. Matthew 19:26

Love is patient. Love is kind. Love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way; it keeps no record of wrongs...Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three but the greatest of these is love. 1 Corinthians 13

Funny that most of the really good stuff that we think about God, relationships, and life come from the same people who said that Jesus is the only way to heaven. Christians realize the distinct value of every other person. So much so that it is in the Christian's job description to make sure that Christianity, exclusive as it is, in believing that Jesus is the only way to heaven, is as inclusive as possible to different cultures, languages, and people. A Christian is called to pray for the peace of the city in which he lives that it may prosper. A Christian is to act in love towards others and live in a manner of integrity so that no one has a bad thing to say about her. Christians are to love their enemies.

Christians are called to put others above themselves. Imagine what would happen if people truly lived as Christ called them to live. This world would be—heaven on earth.

The reason why Christians can live a life of such humility is that they understand they brought nothing to the table when they were saved. This makes them ultimately the most humble people on the planet. A Christian's cause to try to convert other people is driven

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not by a you-can-do-it attitude of striving to be good, but the overwhelming realization that they aren't worthy or good in the eyes of God and their salvation is a free gift open to anyone. Any morality a Christian may have arises from salvation—not to attain it. That drives Christians to speak out in the public square to influence others to receive the free gift from God.

Perhaps you have been put off by Christians. You may read this and say, "This doesn't describe any of the Christians I know. They are not living up to that standard." To that I say, "Thank God." If you think about it, we all have standards that we want to live up to but don't. Most agree that speeding is bad, but we do it anyway. Most would say that gossiping is bad, but there are a couple juicy secrets you had to air out just to make sure you weren't wrong in what you were thinking.

To be a Christian, you don't have to be perfect. Jesus changes you from the inside out by the Christian spending time with Jesus (we call that prayer and Bible reading). That makes sense right? How many times have you spent time with a group of friends and you started talking like them, acting like them, forgetting that not everyone knows your inside jokes from that particular week you spent together.

Conclusion

Imagine what your part of the city would look like if people started loving people without fear. If people started treating others like they wanted to be treated. Imagine an others-focused world where people were genuinely concerned about the welfare of you and your family. Imagine how that might affect your family, neighborhood, or your city.

Let us know what you think.

Tweet [#IsChristianity2Narrow](#)

TOO NARROW?

IS CHRISTIANITY

TOO NARROW?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/16HElef>



Answer the Questions²

1. Do you feel like the video is an accurate reflection of what people think?
2. Did anyone's view in the video surprise you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/19awGeb>



Answer the Questions³

1. Can anyone identify with any of the stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. Who and what are some of the greatest influences in our culture?

4. Who or what is defining truth and reality for you?
5. What informs your morality?
6. What does our Western culture say about spiritual matters? About God?
7. Does Christianity play a valuable role in our way of life?
8. If God or a god created us, how do you think he/she/it views what we've made of Christianity?
9. Are you hopeful that public opinion of Christianity can improve? Why or why not?

Read the Bible

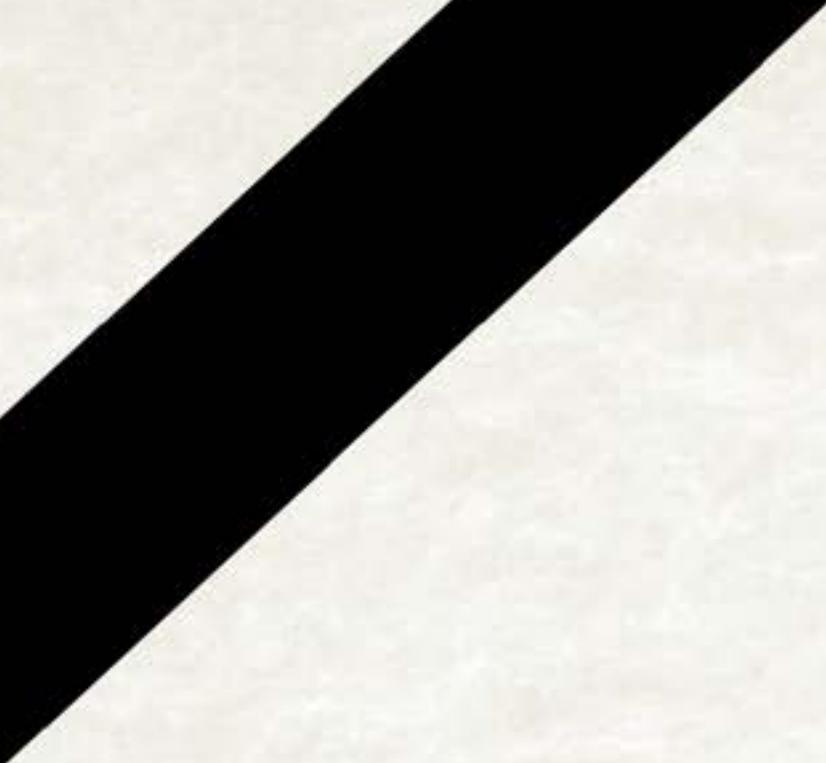
Acts 17:16-31

Questions

1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can we learn about the character of God?
3. What can we learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live out what you have learned?



My thoughts



IS JESUS REALLY GOD? QUESTION 5



C.S. Lewis, a professor at Oxford University, wrote,

“I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Jesus]: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us.”¹



Lewis gave us three options for which one could look at Jesus. The first was a lunatic, the second a liar, and the third would be Lord. I would like to add a fourth—Legend.

The reason Lewis said this is because Jesus said things like,

“I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)”

“Your sins are forgiven. (Matthew 9:2, 5)”

“Before Abraham was, I am. (John 8:58)”

We know that what Jesus communicated about being God is what the people of his day understood. They

“A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell.”

-C.S. Lewis

IS JESUS

made a decision to kill him or worship him.

The Jewish leaders said to Jesus, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.”² If Jesus didn’t think himself to be God, this would have been a terrific time to bring that fact up. When they say, “We want to kill you because you think you are God,” he could have easily corrected them. He didn’t.

When his own disciple, the guy most of us know as Doubting Thomas said, “My Lord and my God!”³ Jesus could have told Thomas to dial it back a notch, but he didn’t. Whenever someone worshiped him, he received it. We aren’t even going to get into Jesus walking on water, healing people, commanding storms to stop and demons to flee—but that evidence isn’t exactly scarce.

Jesus may have been a lunatic with a grandiose personality. That would have meant that he really believed everything he said, but he was nuts. The people who followed him believed everything he said, and since birds of a feather flock together, Jesus had an uncanny ability of getting all the disenfranchised crazies to follow him. These crazies were so competent that they were able to get so many people to follow them that within a couple hundred years the entire Roman Empire fell for the lunacy. It’s possible, but is it probable?

If Jesus were lying, what was his motive? When people lie, they lie to better themselves in some manner. Money, popularity, and advantage usually push people past moral norms. Perhaps Jesus was so ashamed of something from his childhood or upbringing that he took on the whole Messiah complex. He got his cousin John the Baptist who was a religious zealot to buy into it. Then he manipulated his fisherman cousins, James and John, to join him. After they gained a little momentum with the family, they swept people away into the cult. It’s possible that he became so swept up in the lie he started that he believed his own hype and then died for it. That takes us to the lunacy theory. Bottom line, it’s tough to lie for no gain. Again, it’s possible, but what is more probable?

From the writings we have in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, most have decided that Jesus was portrayed as the Son of God. They simply discount the story or believe that legend crept in and that we can’t separate the fact from the fiction. Author Richard Carrier in his book, *The Empty Grave: Jesus Beyond the Tomb* argues that the story of Jesus is merely legend. He wrote



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“There are still people today who believe that in 1947 an alien craft crashed and was recovered, along with alien bodies, by the United States government, and that this was subsequently covered up and kept secret. Though the “core story” of a saucer crash arose immediately in 1947, the elaborations began to appear as early as 1978, when an eyewitness, Maj. Jesse Marcel, described the recovery of the spacecraft in an interview. He never recanted his story, and since then the legend has grown enormously, with numerous devoted believers. This represents a clear case of a legendary development only thirty years after the fact, with all the subsequent additions to the legend (alien bodies, government threats against witnesses, storage of the craft on a military base in Arizona, physics-defying pieces of debris, and so on) arising less than fifty years after the fact, less than twenty years after the first legendary development. Even though modern literacy, skepticism, and technology have made it possible to expose this legend with copious evidence, thousands still believe it.”

Imagine if a promise of eternal life to a miserably oppressed and suffering underclass had been attached to this story, along with promises of a perfectly vicious revenge on their enemies and oppressors. Imagine that an army of the most fanatic of those who believe the story actively promoted this creed, seeing every attempt to stop them as part of the government’s conspiracy, confident that their own suffering and death would be rewarded and their torturers and murderers duly punished in the end. Imagine that like many Pentecostals today, these people could “prove” their doctrine’s truth by performing miraculous healings and handling of snakes, and adducing scriptures that support them. With only a little luck, could such a religion really fail to triumph?⁴

Richard makes a great point. Perhaps it was really oppressed people who were just wanting somehow to overcome their suffering through a God-Man Messiah; however, there is a counter to this argument. It fails to explain Paul. Paul started following Jesus after trying to kill off all the crazy people who believed the lie, legend, or lunacy that Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead. He was on a mission to single-handedly destroy Christianity. He may have succeeded if Jesus himself hadn’t intervened. Paul is the guy you can’t explain. He is the one who must give you pause. He died for his faith in Jesus. The very faith he was trying to expunge. And he did it all before the Gospels—the accounts of the life of Jesus—

IS JESUS

were written.

That is what makes this difficult. Paul's letters are scrutinized by even the most skeptical critics, and they all believe them to be authentic. I don't think Paul would have just joined the gang because he was having a mid-life crisis. He was a young man at the peak of his career when he met Jesus.

Bart Erhman, an agnostic and New Testament Scholar at UNC, does not believe in Jesus, but when interviewed about his book *Did Jesus Exist?: The Historical Argument for Jesus of Nazareth*, he gave some evidence more for Jesus than against.

When asked what sources he used to prove Jesus existed at all, he responded with the following.

"I look at everything that exists. There are not many references from pagan authors or from Jewish authors, but I do talk about those references that do exist and whether or not they are valuable. Most of the sources that we have are Christian sources, which means they have to be taken with a handful of salt because they're biased toward their subject matter. And most of them are decades after Jesus' life...I look at the Apostle Paul. His writings were 20 years after Jesus' life, but Paul himself converted to be a follower of Jesus within a year or two at the latest of Jesus' death—which means that people were telling enough stories about Jesus for Paul to convert a year or two later.

All of that shows that the myth party who claim that Jesus was made up 30 years later in Egypt, or some other claim—that simply can't be right.

We have evidence of people telling stories about Jesus in Palestine within a year or two of the traditional date of his death."⁷⁵



What Erhman can't get around is Paul. Neither can I. Enough people were spreading the stories about Jesus to send one of the most highly-trained Jewish leaders to go and strike down the growing sect.

I believe the account in the book of Acts that Jesus personally intercepted Saul on his way to Damascus. Jesus confronted him and the fact that Saul was not persecuting crazies following a lunatic or a liar, but rather Jesus Himself. Saul

REALLY GOD?

underwent a name change, and *voila*, we had a religious revolution on our hands.

Scholars may disagree how Paul was converted, but they can't argue with the fact that he was. The big question for us is why did Paul convert to Christianity? What did he gain to follow a lie? He was on a perceived God given mission to stamp out idolatry in Jewish culture. He had all the power of the Jewish authorities and the treasury of the Temple behind him. And that same man spread Christianity faster and farther than any other in history.

It's one thing to believe a dutiful follower of Jesus whom Jesus healed, tricked, or manipulated. It's quite another to believe a skeptic Christian-killer who spread the message that Jesus was the God-man sent from heaven to earth to die on the cross to redeem humanity.

Conclusion

We have four options when dealing with Jesus. He is liar, lunatic, legend, or Lord. Which one do you choose?

Let us know.

Tweet #IsJesusReallyGod

IS JESUS

REALLY GOD?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/11UFRgw>



Answer the Questions⁶

1. Do you feel like the video is an accurate reflection of what people think?
2. Did anyone's view in the video surprise you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/1bkWDIP>



Answer the Questions⁷

1. Can you identify with any of the stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about this video?
3. What are the most relevant historical figures that walked this earth?

4. Was Jesus an historical figure, in your opinion? Why or why not?
5. Does it matter whether he actually lived, as long as his teaching is carried out?
6. Do you think he was a God in the form of man or just a good man?
7. What makes Jesus different from other men?
8. Do any of His words impact your life?
9. What do you think about Jesus' claim to be God?
10. What you think about Jesus' claim to be the only way to God?
11. Where do you look for hope? For truth? For peace?

Read the Bible

Psalms 2:1-8

Isaiah 53:5-6

Matthew 26:64-65

John 6:44-46

John 10:30

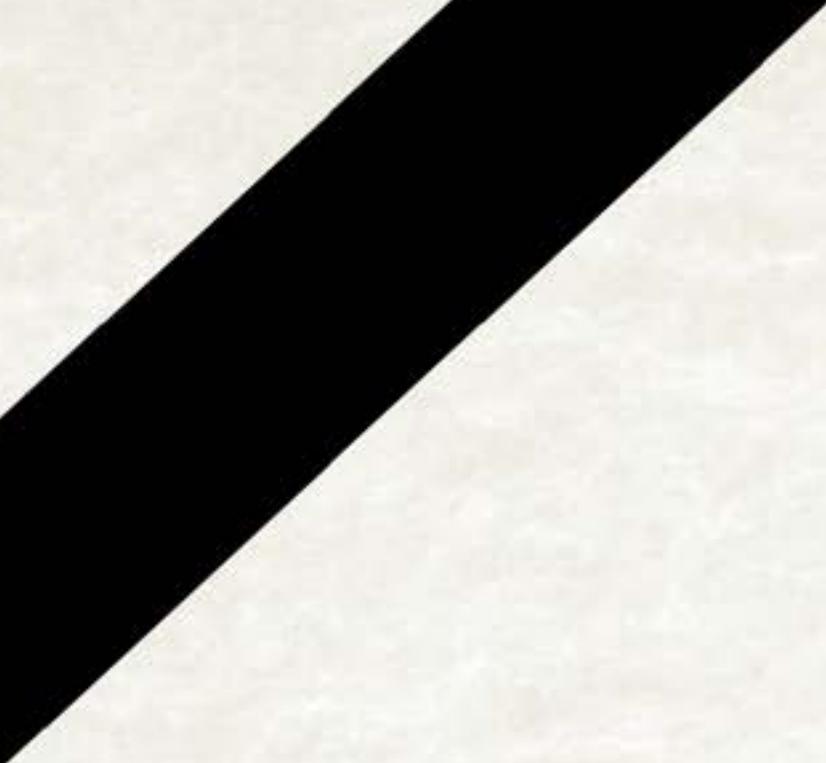
John 2:19

Questions

1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can you learn about the character of God?
3. What can you learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live out what you have learned?



My thoughts



IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE? QUESTION 6



The Bible is not a book. This might surprise you as every time you look at a Bible, because it sure looks like a book. It is a collection of 66 books written by 40 different authors. It is just way more convenient to put the 66 books into one handy carrying case we call the Bible. These books were written over 1600 years and originally in 3 different languages.

Philosophical thought based on the revealed order of the universe, what makes us happy, and universal morals can only take us so far. To go further in the discussion of who God is we must go to where God has revealed himself beyond what we can perceive from creation.

The Bible gets a lot of scrutiny. People make comments like, "We couldn't possibly believe something that a bunch of Christians put together in 323 AD to appease an Emperor." So let's take a look at this collection of books and see if this is something that can be trusted.

Evidence for the Old Testament

The Old Testament encompasses about 1200 years of history, starting around 1600 BC with the writings of Moses. There are historical books that give a history of the Jewish people. There is the Law which details the civil, religious, and legal codes for the people. There are wisdom books that give practical instruction for day to day living. There are poetic books that detail the love between God and man and the love between man and woman. There are prophetic books that give warning and prediction of the future. Some literature experts break the Bible down even further, but I think you get the general idea of what the Old Testament is.

The metanarrative of the Bible is that it is a love story between God and his creation. It is the story of God's creation rejecting God. It tells of God's judgment and finally a plan to

It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.¹

-Mark Twain

IS THE BIBLE

redeem his people which is fulfilled in the New Testament.

The Old Testament was methodically copied over and over again by scribes. After a copy was made, the scribe would burn the previous copy. Until the 1960s the oldest extant copy of the Old Testament in Hebrew was 800 AD. However, the Dead Sea Scrolls discovery was dated back to the very first century. There were no major errors in transcribing the Old Testament. The Old Testament we have now was an almost an exact match to the Dead Sea Scroll which relied upon human copiers.

Evidence for the New Testament

One criticism the Bible receives is that it hasn't been copied properly and there are all sorts of errors. We can see from the Old Testament find of the Dead Sea Scrolls that it was preserved. But what about the New Testament? Oddly, we trust other historical documents from around the time of the Bible, but no one ever doubts their accuracy. If they are held to be credible, let's then see how the New Testament compares with them. We can't reproduce the originals, but we can compare the time gaps between date written and earliest copy for the New Testament documents with other credible secular documents.

Manuscript Evidence for Ancient Writings

The manuscript evidence for the New Testament is overwhelming. It seems that there is nothing that can come close. The thing that is so powerful to me is the fact that the New Testament was completed at a time when others who knew Jesus when he was alive could testify that what he did didn't happen.

For example there is no dispute of Jesus cleansing the temple. There would have been hundreds of thousands of people at the temple when Jesus shut down sacrifices. You would think as the Christian faith spread someone might have spoke up and said that didn't happen. But there are no writings contending anything that Jesus did.

Take a look at the manuscript evidence for the New Testament as compared to various ancient manuscripts and decide which one is most likely to be true.⁸

Author	Written	Earliest Copy	Time Span	# Mss.
Caesar	100-44 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,000 yrs	10
Plato	427-347 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,200 yrs	7
Thucydides	460-400 B.C.	900 A.D.	1,300 yrs	8
Tacitus	100 A.D.	1100 A.D.	1,000 yrs	20
Suetonius	75-160 A.D.	950 A.D.	800 yrs	8
Homer (Iliad)	900 B.C.	400 B.C.	500 yrs	643
New Testament	40-100 A.D.	125 A.D.	25-50 yrs	24,000

RELIABLE?

See more here: <http://bit.ly/11mOkJc>



New Testament Authors

It's strange to think that we trust a man who is being paid by the emperor to record an accurate history of Rome. Would there be any skew?

What happened to the authors of the New Testament? They were never paid. In fact, they all were persecuted for what they wrote and never received a dime in royalties.

The Bible contains four accounts of the life of Jesus. Three of thhe accounts are similar and are in fact identical in some places. Some have concluded that there was one original author for these three stories of Jesus found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. However, there are too many differences in the accounts of Jesus for one to conclude that.

We don't have any of the original New Testament writings. We don't have any original ancient document. The best we have is copies. Turns out the New Testament copies are the closest to the originals by far. There isn't even a close second. We know they were written before 100 AD because many of the early church fathers referenced their work as being known to all Christians in the 2nd century AD.

Church Fathers referenced NT

The early church fathers or the second generation of Christians referenced the writings of the first generation of Christians as they wrote to expand their faith. Over and over Ireneaus, Clement, and Polycarp referenced the New Testament. This means that there had to be a New Testament for them to reference, which means the early dating of the New Testament is correct and that there wasn't enough time for Christ to have been simply developed myth.

Check out their writings here: <http://bit.ly/14ENtXI>



IS THE BIBLE

Embarrassing Details

If you were trying to “make up” a religion how many embarrassing details would you make up about your founders? I think this is where the New Testament in particular is very compelling for it being true. The disciples of Jesus looked like complete fools over and over again. They were accused of having no faith, they were rebuked for the way they treated women and children, and they denied Jesus under pressure.

What about Jesus? Jesus didn't go to the cross fearless. He in his private moments sweat drops of blood as he was about to die. He even asked God, the Father, if there was a way out so that he didn't have to go to the cross and absorb the wrath of God. While on the cross, Jesus shrieked out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” as the wrath of God was poured out on him. Without a Christian understanding of why Jesus would fear taking on the sin of the world or why Jesus would fulfill ancient scripture by screaming, “My God, My God! Why have you forsaken me?” one might compare him to other martyrs who died calmer.

We could point to Socrates' snarky comments and detached emotion about dying as he drank hemlock. When told no about pouring some of the hemlock out to honor the gods, Socrates said “I understand...But indeed it is allowed, indeed one must, utter a prayer to the gods, that my journey from here to yonder may be fortunate. This is my prayer and may it be so.”³

Plato wrote that as he said this he raised the cup and drank it down, “very calmly and easily.”⁴

Why didn't the authors of Christianity have Jesus die like that?

We might look at Christian martyrs like Polycarp who when asked by a Roman magistrate to recant Christianity. He said, “This fire will burn for but a moment and be quenched, but the fires of judgment will burn for eternity. But why do you delay, come do what you will.”⁵

That line is worthy of a movie.

Somehow all the embarrassing detail is left, in there like women being the first to report that Jesus rose from the dead. The culture at this time marginalized women to a point they were not allowed to testify in court. In fact, those opposing Christianity cited the inclusion of women who at least at one time were documented as seriously mentally ill in the testimony of Jesus being raised from the dead as the perfect solution as to why it couldn't be true. Celsus, a Greek philosopher was a contemporary of those in the early church and lived in the second century. He was skeptical of Christianity and wrote against it. The most interesting argument was when he wrote empathically,

Either [the Bible] is reportage... Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative...The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read.

-C.S. Lewis

RELIABLE?

“But who really saw this? A hysterical woman, as you admit, and perhaps one other person—both deluded by his sorcery, or so wrenched in grief at his failure that they hallucinated him risen from the dead by a sort of wishful thinking.”⁶

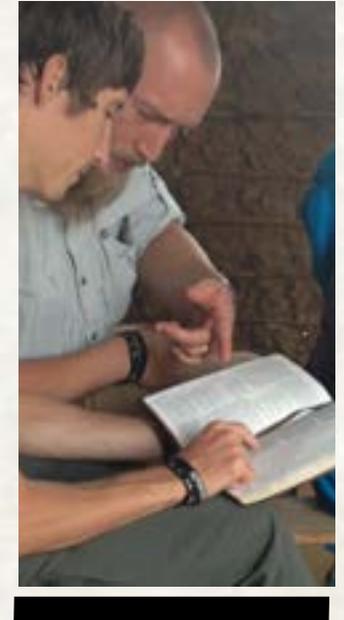
The accounts of Jesus life conclude with Mary Magdalene, a woman delivered of serious demonic possession being one of the chief witnesses. If this story were made up, it would have been a lot wiser to make up a story that Peter and his disciples found the empty tomb. Or perhaps as Celsus suggested that Jesus revealed himself to Pilate or to the Jews who crucified him. That is what you do if you are making up a story. The embarrassing details help validate its truth.

The Most Unique Literature of its Kind

If the Bible were legend, then it would stand apart as the first piece of fiction that ever included the level of real life fictional detail. Here are a couple examples. Jesus wrote something in the sand with his finger in John 8. Random characters are named who don't push the plot forward in Mark 15 where the sons of Simon of Cyrene, who carried the cross of Christ. C.S. Lewis said,

“I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends, myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this. Of this text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage - though it may no doubt contain errors - pretty close up to the facts; nearly as close as Boswell. Or else, some unknown writer in the second century, without known predecessors, or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern, novelistic, realistic narrative. If it is untrue, it must be narrative of that kind. The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned to read.”⁷

Lewis' cutting comment has to make one think. Modern realistic writing first came about in France in the mid-19th century. It is possible that the writers of the accounts of Jesus and the early church stumbled on to this literary technique almost 1800 years before it became prevalent. They learned how to create fiction as opposed to report events. It's possible, but is it probable?



IS THE BIBLE

Variations of the Gospels

The Christian faith is based primarily off the four accounts of Jesus life—the Gospels. Now here is the interesting thing about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John (what we know as the Gospels). They all tell the same general story, but have at times what would look like conflicting details.

For example Jesus gives Bartimeaus his sight in Mark, whereas in Matthew we don't get the names, but we read there are two men who receive their sight. Which is it? In Matthew, a centurion comes to Jesus on his own to heal his servant. In Luke, the centurion sends Jewish elders to Jesus to ask for his son to be healed. Which is it?

There are many apparent conflicts between the Gospels. However it would be the same conflicts that might be seen in different newspapers covering the same story. The Austin American-Statesmen might recount the story of a University of Texas versus the University of Oklahoma football game differently than the Norman Transcript. We know this to be true in the way we recount events in our own lives. How many times have you told a story, only to have your spouse interrupt and say, "That's not how it went." Your spouse would then say basically what you said, but differently. Same thing with the Gospels.

In fact the minor differences point to their truth. If they all said exactly the same thing, we could accuse them of collusion. But because of the variations found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we must conclude that each independently wrote his own account.

Conclusion

What do you do with the evidence that points to the Bible's authenticity? Are you willing to accept that this collection of ancient documents might be true? Are you open to accepting that its contents might not be contaminated? Let us know what you think.

Tweet #IsTheBibleReliable

RELIABLE?



IS THE BIBLE

RELIABLE?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/19jx7q5>



Answer the Questions⁸

1. Do you feel like the video is an accurate reflection of what people think?
2. Did anyone's view in the video surprise you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/11UGC9z>



Answer the Questions⁹

1. Can anyone identify with any of the stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. Do you believe everything you read? Why not?

4. What is your source of "truth"?
5. What are the most important historical books we have today?
6. When I say Bible, do you think dusty old book or timeless bestseller?
7. Would you say the Bible is truth or mythology?
8. If someone asked you to describe the story of the Bible, what would you say?
9. Have you ever tried to apply anything the Bible has to say? Describe it if so.
10. How relevant is the Bible to your everyday life? How practical?

Read the Bible

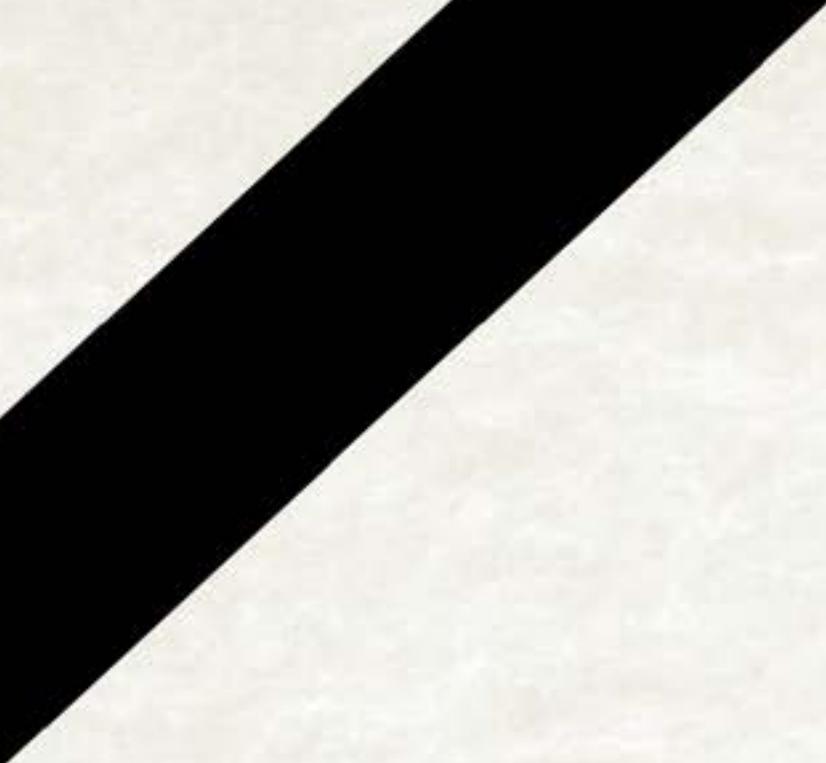
2 Timothy 3:10-17

Questions

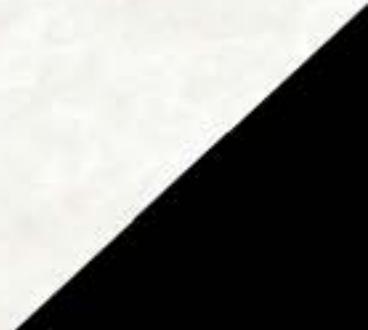
1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can you learn about the character of God?
3. What can you learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
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Application

5. How will you live out what you have learned?



My thoughts





CAN I KNOW GOD PERSONALLY?

QUESTION 7



There are two words that those trying to understand God need to know. They are transcendent and immanent. Many religions connect God with being transcendent. Buddhism embodies this. A transcendent God is one that sets up the systems of the Earth. He created people, animals, the oceans, and space. He created all the natural laws that govern the universe like gravity, $e=mc^2$, and the Dallas Cowboys are America's team.

Many try to achieve transcendence to commune with this God. They may live in temples, mountains, or caves. They get away from the evils of society to purify their soul with monastic living. They may even practice forms of meditation to take them to the next level of connecting with this transcendent God who doesn't seem like he wants to be found or bothered. He is outside of time and is completely powerful over all the affairs of man, but he doesn't intervene.

Some call him the watchmaker God who created everything and wound up time and then chose to sit back and watch.

The immanent God is the one who is involved in the affairs of man and has the ability and desire to intervene in time and space. An example of overly involved immanent gods would be the Greek gods of myth. These Greek gods and goddesses were famous for being involved in all sorts of ways. They were so involved, they ended up having overly intimate relationships with humans and their inability to control their own god passions brought more chaos than order to Earth.

God is not simply transcendent: outside space and time and omnipotent and omnipresent.

God is not simply immanent: involved and intervening in the affairs of man.

He is both. Not only is he both, but he loves his creation in a deep way, much like a father loves a child.

God is love. His very being embodies love. There is nothing in God that isn't love. God created humans to share that love and perpetuate it. It's tough to get our minds around

If nobody's perfect, how good is good enough?!

-Andy Stanley

CAN I KNOW GOD

that idea, but let me try. His love is perfect. His affections don't come with conditions. He is the perfect parent who loves his children completely.

God gave humans the ability to choose love or to choose selfishly. The first humans chose selfishly. I can sense an eye roll from those of you who don't believe the Genesis account of Adam and Eve. You may take it as metaphorical, or you may disregard the Bible altogether.

So let me start here. Every one of us has known the right thing to do in a certain situation and has chosen selfishly. This is why education alone is not the answer to the plight of the world. All of us have made a decision against what we have been taught.

In Christianese, we call this sin. Sin is anything we think say or do that displeases God. Sin has separated all humans from God, because all have inherited sin.

This inherited sin prevents us from experiencing God's love the way he intended. We are all infected with a sinful nature. No matter how good we think we are, there is still a separation between man and a perfect God. And this infection will kill us physically and spiritually.

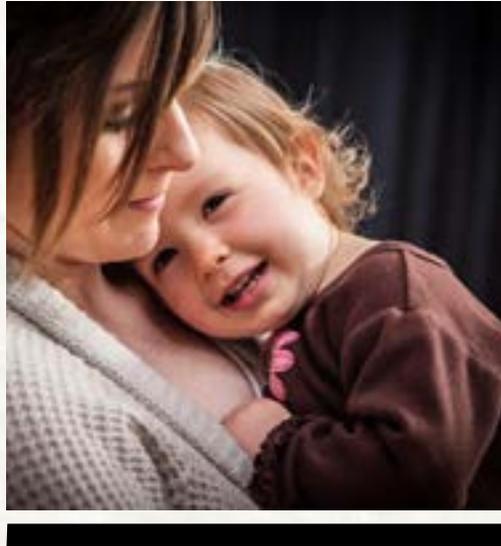
There is an AIDS epidemic in Africa. Prostitutes trying to survive give up their bodies to men who view them as their private playground. AIDS is passed. The woman becomes pregnant. Babies are born over and over again with AIDS. These babies didn't choose AIDS, they just have AIDS and everyday their lives are impacted by AIDS and worst of all they will die before their time. They are terminal. We are like these babies when it comes to inherited sin. That's us—terminal. Our sin will kill us.

Nobody's Perfect

You've heard the phrase, "Nobody's perfect."

Paul, a former skeptic and writer of almost half of the New Testament, wrote that everyone is guilty of sin and the wages of sin is death.² Those who love perfectly like God get to live eternally with God. Those who don't are eternally separated from God. The reason for this is when a person doesn't love perfectly there is something flawed within. The act of non-love is merely a symptom of a much deeper problem.

God created humans to enjoy him and his love forever. When people choose selfishly, they have revealed their inability to live with God eternally.



PERSONALLY?

Some think God a bit unfair here. They can get Adolf Hitler burning for eternity. However, most of us haven't killed six million people or sought world domination.

How good is good enough, then? How about just killing one person? Jesus Christ, who is the cornerstone of Christianity, raised the bar on this. He said if you hate someone in your heart, you are guilty of murder.³

I'm not that good. You're not that good.

Since we are filled with evil and on a trajectory away from His love, God must punish man or he is no longer a transcendent and just God. As we have said before the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit operate in self-less love and adoration for one another, and it was out of the desire to share this love that the Trinity created us. However, the problem of sin created a separation from God and his love.

This is where God became immanent. The Triune God sent the second person of the Trinity from heaven to earth in the form of Jesus. Jesus was fully God and fully man. The transcendent all powerful God became intimately immanent with his creation. Jesus was also known as Emmanuel, which is an Ancient Hebrew term which means God with us.

God displayed his immanence by taking on flesh and dwelling among us. It's not as though he wasn't involved before, but putting on flesh takes "I feel your pain" to a whole new level. In fact, God did something to a greater degree so that people could know his love personally.

Since God is transcendent he could not just overlook sin and evil, but knew his creation stood condemned unless he did something. So in his ultimate justice, he punished a person for sin. We talked about this in chapter three, but we will review it right here. Remember, none of us want fair. We want the police officer to drive away giving us a warning, not giving us what we deserve.

This is what brings transcendence and immanence together. God demonstrated his justice by bringing due punishment to those who have fallen short of his standard and created order. He showed his immanence and infinite love for the world by breaking into space and time as Jesus and undergoing separation from God the Father for us. That's why on the cross he screamed, "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?"³ His scream echoed through eternity as in one moment he experienced a billion or so Hells.

God was unfair to us in that Jesus who knew no sin, became sin on the behalf of humans and took



CAN I KNOW GOD

the punishment we deserved. He died in our place.⁴ In that way God showed his justice and mercy at the cross.

So here is the part that is challenging. What must one do to receive the substitution? How do people receive forgiveness and have the perfect relationship that God originally designed for us before sin?

We must receive the free gift. That sounds silly, I know, but there is an active part of receiving a gift. You must actually acknowledge it and receive it. In other words, you can receive a pardon from the execution due to you, but until you receive the gift and accept it, you don't have it.



Supreme Court Decision

Let me illustrate. In 1829, a guy named George Wilson and a buddy robbed the U.S. mail, an offense punishable by death. Wilson was tried and convicted and sentenced to die. Somehow Wilson had friends in high places. Andrew Jackson pardoned Wilson for his capital crime. However, when brought before the court to receive the pardon, Wilson denied it. He denied the pardon. He didn't accept the free gift from the President.

This was a problem for the court, as no one expected for a man pardoned to reject the pardon. But Wilson did.

The case went before the Supreme Court and the court decided that since he never accepted the pardon, he hadn't been pardoned.

Chief Justice Marshall wrote,

"...A pardon is a deed, to the validity of which delivery is essential, and delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered, and if it be rejected, we have discovered no power in a court to force it on him. It may be supposed that no being condemned to death would reject a pardon, but the rule must be the same in capital cases and in misdemeanors..."⁵

Wilson was executed because he rejected the pardon. The free gift of life was offered to a condemned and convicted man who had pleaded guilty. He didn't take it.

Knowing God personally is based solely on our ability to accept the pardon. We must admit our sin and the fact we stand condemned. Receiving the pardon is based on believing that Jesus died on the cross in our place and rose from the dead.

When we do that, we have access to God. This is the *beginning* of an the intimate relationship between our Father in Heaven and us begins. Let me emphasize **beginning**.

PERSONALLY?

Knowing God personally begins with a decision to accept the pardon Jesus gave us out of love. However, we have the rest of our lives to grow deeper in our relationship with God. This isn't an adoption by a disinterested philanthropist. This is your real father, the one who created you, starting an eternal life-long relationship. If you miss this part, you may not understand the message. Believing that Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead isn't an "intellectual ticket punch," but rather a life transformative moment.



Conclusion

What do you think? Are you willing to step over that line of faith and start your relationship with God?

Let us know.

Tweet #CanIKnowGodPersonally

CAN I KNOW GOD

PERSONALLY?

As a Group:

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/15YvR6M>



Answer the Questions⁶

1. Do you feel like the video is an accurate reflection of what people think?
2. Did anyone's view in the video surprise you?

Watch the video

<http://bit.ly/139CCon>



Answer the Questions⁷

1. Can anyone identify with any of the stories we just watched? In what way?
2. What did you find intriguing, compelling or frustrating about the video?
3. What might it look like to know God personally?

4. How might knowing God be similar to or different than knowing someone else?
5. Have you ever had unexplainable experiences that you attributed to God? Please explain.
6. Why might someone resist knowing God personally?
7. If you think it is possible to know God, how do you think we could get to know him better?
8. If you feel like you already know God, what things have you done to strengthen that relationship?
9. Jesus said to follow Him. What do you think that means and how do you do that?
10. What does it mean to be a disciple? Look up the definition of "disciple" and discuss.

Read the Bible

John 15:1-11

Questions

1. What does this passage teach about the nature of people?
2. What can you learn about the character of God?
3. What can you learn about the Gospel from this passage? How does this passage point to the Gospel?
4. Can you identify?
 - A promise to claim
 - A command to obey
 - A truth to believe
 - An example to follow

Application

5. How will you live out what you have learned?

My thoughts

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