



ASKING FOR A FRIEND

An exploration of the spiritual questions ^{YOUR FRIENDS} you most commonly ask

A CRU PRESS PUBLICATION

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WHAT IS THIS, AND WHY SHOULD I TRUST IT?

Certain topics can feel *really* hard to talk about, even with our closest friends. Things like God, spirituality and core beliefs; our deepest fears, hurts and insecurities; what truth is and how to find it. If you find these topics difficult, you're not alone. These conversations can be awkward. Uncomfortable. Even risky.

Though many of us shy away from discussing such things, at one point or another we all think about them. Maybe a loved one's death shakes you and causes you to wonder if there's anything beyond the physical world. Maybe an awful trauma creates questions about whether God is good, or even real. Or maybe your mind just wanders into unsettling philosophical territory.

Naturally, we pursue answers. Where can we find them if the topics are so hard to talk about?

Since 1951, Cru has sought to be a safe place for people to pursue and learn about God. Cru is a nonprofit Christian organization that seeks to come alongside others and help them discover the forgiveness, peace, and purpose God has made available to us through Jesus Christ. Cru communities can be found in over 100 nations, within many college and pro sports teams,

and on over 5,000 high school and college campuses worldwide. Maybe you even received this magazine from someone involved with Cru at your school.

Naturally, you might be skeptical. What is this? Is it propaganda? Biased opinion? How can I trust it?

We get it. We'd ask the same thing.

This collection of articles addresses the questions and issues that burden the minds of students like you. None are new, they're just framed in ways that reflect the experiences of your generation. Through research and firsthand experience, magazine editor Jason Weimer compiled and adapted content from a number of authors—including seminary professors, former atheists, and people who have studied the Bible and put it into practice for decades—and added some of his own material, in order to offer a thoughtful, relevant perspective on these subjects from the framework of biblical Christianity.

Jason has served as a Cru staff member for 19 years, helping mentor university students in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Melbourne, Australia. He has a



certificate from Cru's Institute of Biblical Studies and co-authored, with fellow Cru staff member Roger Hershey, the 2011 book *The Finishers*. And perhaps most importantly, as someone who has battled obsessive-compulsive disorder since childhood, he joins the millions of people throughout the 2,000 year history of Christianity who have wrestled with suffering and doubt and struggled to understand how God fits into all of life's joys and heartbreaks.

Over that history, many of these millions have found that Jesus and the Bible are worthy of their trust. But

don't just take our (and their) word for it. See if any of the questions here match the ones you ask. Consider the perspectives shared. Test them. Talk about them with others. We believe that the Christian faith addresses our complex, ever-changing, idea-saturated world in ways that make astonishing logical, emotional, and existential sense.

Maybe you will, too. But even if not, we hope the journey is rewarding!



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QUESTION 1

IS THERE A GOD? DOES THAT MATTER TO MY LIFE?

Imagine you live in a two-dimensional world. You have height and width but no depth, like a drawing on flat paper. To you, a 3-D person would be impossible to comprehend. They'd exist off the paper. You could look left and right or up and down, but looking outward—off the paper—isn't possible; that plane simply doesn't exist.¹

How would the 3-D person reveal themselves and engage with people in the 2-D world?

This is a bit like our situation with God. You and I exist in space and time—a physical world—so understanding or interacting with a being outside these dimensions is difficult. We can't "see" this being any more than a 2-D person could look off the paper to see a 3-D one. We might wonder if such a being even exists. We need that being to reveal themselves to us in some way.

A 3-D person might reveal themselves to a 2-D world by pressing their finger to the paper. They'd enter the world, but their appearance in it would be a fingerprint. It would suggest the 3-D person's existence, and even say something about what they're like, but it could also be dismissed. What if that "fingerprint" is just a part of 2-D reality, not an indication of a superior being?

The Bible anticipates these different responses. One of the Psalms, a songbook for the Hebrew people, begins: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."^A A later book states, "since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...."^B The observable world gives indications of God's existence. But the same passage says that people look at this plain evidence and dismiss it, suppressing the truth about God.^C

So, as we examine some evidence for God's existence, ask yourself: *If God exists, would I want to know him?* If you do, God says, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."^D

^A PSALM 19:1

^B ROMANS 1:20

^C ROMANS 1:18

^D JEREMIAH 29:13

WHAT “FINGERPRINTS” OF GOD ARE OBSERVABLE?

When we encounter something that appears to serve a clear purpose, we assume it has been designed. For example, when you see a Bird or Lime scooter on the street, you recognize that a company created it with an intended purpose, that it's something you ride, something you must pay to rent, something able take you places faster than walking can. You don't assume that it formed by a chance combination of parts.

When we observe the world around us, do we see indications of design? What should we do with that information if we do?

Here are just a few things that appear to show design, and, therefore, a designer.

THE BIG BANG

Scientists are convinced that our universe began with a massive explosion of energy and light. Astrophysicist Robert Jastrow, a self-described agnostic, stated, “The seed of everything that has happened in the Universe was planted in that first instant; every star, every planet, and every living creature in the Universe came into being as a result of events that were set in motion in the moment of the cosmic explosion...and we cannot find out what caused that to happen.”²

Cause-and-effect is a scientific sure thing. There is no spontaneous motion; some force must act first. Chemicals don't suddenly change unless something causes a reaction. Matter cannot arise from non-matter.

Alternative theories for the universe's origins continue to be proposed, but the most scientifically consistent one is that there was an outside cause.

EARTH

The Earth is located the exact right distance from the sun. Our surface temperatures range, generally, between -30 and +120 degrees. If the Earth were any farther away, we'd all freeze. Any closer and we'd burn up. Even a tiny shift in the Earth's position in relation to the sun would make life on Earth impossible.

Our Moon is also precisely sized and positioned. The Moon's gravitational pull creates important ocean tides and movement so ocean waters don't stagnate, while at the same time restraining them from spilling across the continents.³

WATER

No living thing can survive without water. Its abundance on Earth is remarkable, but water's unique properties are what make it an indicator of design: it behaves differently than any other liquid.⁴

Water is a universal solvent, allowing chemicals, minerals, and nutrients to easily dissolve and be carried, absorbed and used throughout our bodies.⁵ It's also chemically neutral, so it doesn't change the nature of the substances it carries.

Water has a unique surface tension, so it can flow upward in plants, against gravity, bringing nourishment to the top of even the tallest trees. It's also unique in that it becomes less dense as it cools. It freezes from the top down and floats in solid form, allowing aquatic life to survive winter. If water acted like other liquids, plant and sea life would be nearly impossible. All other forms of life would become impossible too.



SUPER-INTELLIGENCE IS THE ONLY GOOD EXPLANATION FOR THE ORIGIN OF LIFE AND THE COMPLEXITY OF NATURE. - ANTONY FLEW

HUMAN BEINGS

Our eyes can distinguish among seven million colors. They have automatic focusing and handle an astounding 1.5 million messages at the same time.⁶

The eye is just one of many systems the human brain must manage constantly. Your brain processes more than a million messages a second:⁷ the temperature of the room, the swirl of sounds around you, the texture of your mobile device, the dryness of your mouth, and much more. It does this while storing memories, regulating emotions, and maintaining involuntary functions like heartbeat and breathing.

But more than any other complex biological system, DNA is what prompts many scientists to consider whether intentional design lies behind all life.

Dr. Antony Flew, a British philosopher and longtime advocate of atheism, stated in 2004, “Super-intelligence is the only good explanation for the origin of life and the complexity of nature.”⁸ DNA research and discoveries played a large role in his conclusion.

The DNA code is similar to an intricate computer program. Only, instead of ones and zeroes, a DNA strand is made of four chemicals, abbreviated with the letters A, T, G, and C. Embedded within every human cell is a code of three billion pairs of these letters. If you were to read that code aloud at three letters per second, it would take thirty-one years.⁹

Dr. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project (which mapped the human

DNA structure) said that one can “think of DNA as an instructional script, a software program, sitting in the nucleus of the cell.”¹⁰ And your DNA is 99.9% similar to everyone else’s; the variations in the script that cause you to be you lie in that tiny difference.¹¹

As we consider these examples, we have to ask, “Why?” Why are Earth’s properties so finely tuned to accommodate life? Why does water behave differently than any other liquid? Why is DNA so complex? Are these a few of the fingerprints God has left on the paper of our world?

DOES GOD CARE WHETHER WE ACKNOWLEDGE HIM?

I (Marilyn) was once an atheist. And like many atheists, the issue of people believing in God bothered me. Why would we would devote so much time and energy refuting something we don’t even believe exists?

I thought my attention came from a sense of care for those poor, delusional believers. I wanted to help them realize their hope was ill-founded. But to be honest, I had another motive. As I challenged those who believed in God, I was deeply curious to see if they could convince me otherwise. Part of my quest was to become free from the question of God. If I could prove believers wrong, the issue would be off the table; I could freely go about my life.

VIDEO: DR. FRANCIS COLLINS OFFERS FURTHER EVIDENCE FOR GOD’S EXISTENCE (LENGTH: 1:45)



ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. Do you find belief in God difficult or easy? Why?
2. How does the evidence of design affect your belief about the existence of God?
3. What other evidence do you see? What about evidence to the alternative?
4. How often do you find yourself questioning your beliefs (whether for God's existence or against)? What prompts those questions?
5. Have you ever felt like God was "pursuing" you? How?
6. What sort of evidence would you consider to be conclusive, or "proof," of God's existence?

SCAN HERE TO READ ABOUT HUGH, WHOSE PURSUIT OF SOLID EVIDENCE LED HIM TO BELIEVE IN THE EXISTENCE OF GOD, THEN THE BIBLE AND JESUS CHRIST:



I didn't realize that the reason the topic weighed so heavily on me was because God was pressing the issue. I've come to find out that God intends for us to know him. He's surrounded us with evidence of himself and keeps the question of his existence squarely before us.

Others have experienced this as well. The late journalist Malcolm Muggeridge wrote, "I had a notion that somehow, besides questing, I was being pursued."¹² Renowned author and Oxford professor C. S. Lewis said of his experience: "...night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet... I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England."¹³

Lewis titled his memoir *Surprised by Joy* as a result of knowing God. I too had no expectations other than rightly admitting God's existence. But over the following months I became amazed by his love for me.

ARE THERE LESS SUBJECTIVE "FINGERPRINTS" OF GOD?

If God does desire for us to know him, we'd expect more than just subjective evidence. The good news is that he's given us just that in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Bible proclaims that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God,"^e "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature."^f In Jesus, God "became flesh and made his dwelling among us."^g Through Jesus, God did more than just leave a fingerprint. He became a 2-D figure in our 2-D world. He drew himself onto the paper.

Leaders and founders of other major world religions—Buddha, Muhammad, Confucius, Moses, etc.—all identified themselves as teachers or prophets. None ever claimed to be equal to God. This is what sets Jesus apart. He said that God exists, and you're looking at him.

Jesus did more than just make this claim, however. He said he could do things only God could: forgive people of their sins, give them eternal life in heaven and a more abundant life here. And he did things no mere human could: restore sight to the blind, enable the paralyzed to walk, raise people from the dead, and exercise power over even nature itself.

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."^h He voluntarily submitted to the barbaric ritual of crucifixion, dying a criminal's death. His reason? "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God..."ⁱ Because of his great love for us, he accepted the punishment we deserve because of our sins (denying God, rebelling from him, living in immoral or wicked ways, etc.). Then he demonstrated mastery over even death by rising from the dead.

Of all the religions known to humanity, only through Jesus will you see God reaching toward us in love, providing a way for us to have a relationship with him. Jesus's life, death, and resurrection is that way, and we're invited to respond by entrusting ourselves to him through faith.

WHY WOULD GOD MATTER TO MY LIFE?

You might think all this evidence is fine and good, that maybe God does exist, but don't see how it relates to you. Plenty of people seem to be good, happy, content, and purposeful without God. What difference would knowing God make?

C. S. Lewis addressed this in a sermon called "The Weight of Glory": "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."¹⁴

In other words, the happiness and fulfillment we get from staying healthy, being financially secure, doing meaningful work, and enjoying things like fine food or exotic vacations isn't inherently bad, but joy on a much higher scale is available. As you've probably experienced, the shine of the newest device or the latest trip quickly wears off, and you're left looking for the next thing that will make you feel satisfied.

Jesus said that he could fulfill desires in us that nothing else can.^j That's because we are not just physical beings; we're inherently spiritual, as well. We're made for more than just what we can experience in this world. By knowing the one who designed us and choosing to follow the purposes for which he made us, we can experience a fullness of joy, purpose, and peace that exclaims, "I was born for this!" First and foremost, this comes through being in relationship with our Creator.

^e COLOSSIANS 1:15
^f HEBREWS 1:3, ESV
^g JOHN 1:14

WOULD YOU LIKE TO RESPOND TO JESUS?



^h JOHN 14:6
ⁱ 1 PETER 3:18, ESV
^j JOHN 4:13-14, 6:35

There is also the question of eternity.

If God created us to know him, we've all abandoned that purpose in various ways.

Some rebel openly and want nothing to do with God, denying him or living in ways we know are the opposite of what is right and good. The innate morality we all sense in our hearts acts as a sign that some standard-bearer exists, even if we intellectually don't believe it. It also acts as a conscience, bearing witness to our guilt.

Others may not rebel openly but still live in ignorance of the God who made us. Either way, what would ignorance and rebellion communicate to our designer and creator?

The Bible shows us a God who is patient and gracious, but also just. If you never acknowledge God and receive his invitation to know him through Jesus, you'll still enjoy the benefits and joys he built into this world. But it will end here, because you've accepted the gifts but rejected the giver. The consequence of this rejection is a just outcome and a case of God giving us what we want—an eternity without him.

Or, you can accept God's invitation and find forgiveness of sin, restoration of relationship with him, and the promise of an eternity of unimaginable joy. In this, he also gives us what we want, only he knows our true desires and needs, and how to fulfill them, far better than we do.

See "Isn't Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?" at the end of this magazine to learn more about Jesus and what he has done for us, and how to enter into relationship with God through him.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Flatland*, an 1884 book by Edwin A. Abbott, fictionalizes this concept.
- 2 Robert Jastrow, "Message from Professor Robert Jastrow," LeaderU.com; 2002.
- 3 "The Wonders of God's Creation," Moody Institute of Science (Chicago, IL).
- 4 Michelle Starr, "Water Behaves Differently From All Other Liquids, And We Finally Know Why," from sciencealert.com (April 2, 2018).
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- 8 "There is a God, leading atheist concludes," nbnews.com/id/wbna6688917. From Dec. 9, 2004.
- 9 Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006) 1.
- 10 Collins, 102.
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- 12 Malcolm Muggeridge, *The Green Stick*, pt. 1 of *Chronicles of Wasted Time* (London: Collins, 1972), 125.
- 13 C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1955), 228-229.
- 14 C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory, and Other Addresses*, (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 26.





QUESTION 2

HOW CAN I FIND PEACE IN SUCH A STRESSFUL AND CONFUSING WORLD?

COVID. Climate change. Racism. Poverty. Human trafficking. Personal finances. Cyberbullying. Natural disasters. Childhood trauma. Broken families. Saying the wrong thing on social media. Relational stress. Mental illness. FOMO. Terrorism. Political polarization. Staying current on Instagram and TikTok and Discord and Snapchat and...

Whew.

It's no wonder that anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues are more widespread in this millennium than at another time in history. In a 2008 *Psychology Today* article, Dr. Robert Leahy observed that "The average high school kid today has the same level of anxiety as the average psychiatric patient in the early 1950s."¹ And that was before several major stressors on the above list had reached full bloom.

We are no longer merely aware of what affects us personally. The Internet has made us global citizens, and every serious problem from every corner of the world now buzzes in our pockets. Prior generations, even that of our parents, never faced such bombardment.

Where can we turn to find stability and peace? Can we look to the future with hope, regardless of circumstances? Can we go through life without feeling constantly anxious and endlessly tired?

A NOTE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Before we move forward, we must note that anxiety, depression, and other mental health struggles don't have simple answers. If you frequently struggle with anxiety, spiral into depression, or consider self-harm or suicide, please see a doctor. While these issues have a spiritual and psychological element, they also have chemical dimensions that often require medication. We may need medical or professional help to assist our brains in forming new pathways of thought. Counseling, medication, and other forms of therapy have significantly improved the lives of many who suffer with anxiety.

However, while these treatments help, their primary function is to create mental stability and allow people to engage life's difficulties more calmly and productively. They're rarely a total solution. It's like a person who breaks their leg and stops walking on it. Taking pressure off the leg helps, but it's still a broken bone.

What we need is an enduring inner peace that allows our minds and hearts to rest, in spite of difficult situations.



IS PEACE OF MIND POSSIBLE?

A military chaplain from World War II explained that “there are no atheists in the foxholes.” When life is good, people don't feel a need for God. But when things get messy, when they're huddled in a trench and bullets scream past just inches from their head, the need for help is acute.

Steve Sawyer, a student from Boston, found himself in a terrifying foxhole. He was born with hemophilia, which required treatment through donated blood. During high school, he learned that he'd contracted HIV through one of his treatments. He reacted with despair and rage. He'd destroy his room, punch through walls, chew out anyone that annoyed him. Since he didn't have a person to blame for his condition, Steve blamed God, even though he didn't really believe in him.

The particular foxholes in which we find ourselves may not be as scary as Steve's. But given the countless physical and psychological threats invading our devices and real-life spaces, we can feel like we're under constant fire. Our peace of mind can be greatly shaken, or in some cases, never be achieved in the first place.

Prompted by his dad and his college roommate, Steve eventually decided to push blame aside and reach out to God. Over time, he found incredible peace, forgiveness, and new

purpose. He died in 1999 at age 23, but spent the last few years of his life touring college campuses, enduring great pain, to tell fellow students how they could know God and experience the same peace.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid [...] In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”^A In the midst of suffering and dying, Steve found these promises to be true.

^A JOHN 14:27, 16:33

Picture yourself as an eight-year-old being bullied at school. Your lunch is stolen each day. You're pushed around, humiliated. You try talking to the bullies, avoiding them, even talking to the teacher, but nothing seems to work. They just change tactics and continue harassing you.

One day, though, an older student compassionately steps in and promises to protect you. You feel at peace, protected, and secure. The bullies still exist, but you can relax, knowing that someone stronger has your back.

Knowing and experiencing God's care is like this. It has a profound impact on our ability to be at peace no matter our circumstances.

ISN'T GOD A CRUTCH? WHAT IF WE CAN FIND PEACE AND STABILITY SOMEWHERE ELSE?

It's true that God can be thought of as a crutch, but he is likely the only legitimate one.

The way technology has shrunk the world and brought all of it—its potentials as well as its problems—to our attention has been a great service. It breaks down the illusion that we actually have control over our lives or the world in general.

We don't ever truly know what tomorrow will bring. Weather disasters may strike. Governments may fall. Friends may desert us. A mistake from the past may come back to ruin our future. COVID-19 has brought this uncertainty forward in even greater ways—a looming, invisible threat that may infect us no matter what precautions we take.

But even though the curtain has been pulled back to reveal how fragile and out of control we really are, we don't need to be resigned to a life of anxiety and fear.

WHAT ARE YOU BUILDING YOUR LIFE ON?

We don't like feeling out of control. It feels like falling, and we instinctively flail about, reaching for something to hang on to. In the face of an uncertain, stressful world, people have tried to hang onto wealth, achievement, education, politics, relationships, and more, in order to feel stable and in control.

These are things in which people place their faith and hope. If you expand the list to include entertainment, substances (food, alcohol, etc.), travel, adventure, and so on, it also serves as a list of escapes—ways to avoid the hard, painful realities of life.

Each of us places faith and hope in something: “If I try hard enough, I'll be successful.” “If I make enough money, I'll be happy.” “If I just make it through the next year, the future will change things.” We want to control the uncontrollable.

God has a different viewpoint. He says that placing hope and faith in ourselves or others, in achievements or diversions or anything else this world offers, is like standing on shaky ground. Instead, he wants us to trust him.

Jesus once said, “[E]veryone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”^B

It's wise to turn to God when catastrophes strike. But God wants to transform every area of our lives and produce fulfillment that transcends circumstance. When we rely upon him and his words, we are building on solid rock.

HOW DO WE KNOW THAT GOD CAN BE TRUSTED?

Psalm 23 is one of the Bible's best-known passages. Many who have never even opened a Bible can recite its first line: “The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.”^C This Psalm, like many others, employs a Hebrew literary device that draws attention to the center, not the beginning or end, as the focal point. In this case, the center, or heart, of Psalm 23 is the line, “you are with me.”^D

The promise that God would be with the psalmist allowed him to confidently say, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,”^E and “you prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.”^F

What is it about God's presence that allowed the psalmist to face dark valleys and sit to eat in the face of threat? There are too many things to list fully, but here are a few:

- **God is powerful:** “Nothing is too hard for you.”^G The God who created billions of galaxies and life forms is greater than any problem that confronts us.
- **God is all-knowing:** “I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning.”^H He knows what will happen in your life tomorrow, next week, and next year. If you've chosen to include him in your life, he will be with you and for you, whatever you might face.
- **God is ever-present and consistent:** “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble.”^I “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. Look up the lyrics to “Stressed Out” by Twenty One Pilots. Can you relate to the lyrics as well as the statistic from *Psychology Today* (page one of this article)? How so?
2. What brings you the most stress and anxiety?
3. How have you typically dealt with that? Have you found that way of coping to be helpful? Why do you think it is or isn't?
4. Do you still feel anxiety when things are going well? Why might that be?
5. What are you placing your faith and hope in? Is that worthy of your hope?
6. What other things do you go to as a way of trying to seize control of your life?



SCAN THIS QR CODE TO READ HOW KRISTEN FOUND GREATER PEACE AND PURPOSE IN JESUS THAN IN HER MANY ACTIVITIES

today and forever.”^J He is always present with his people, and always responds with the same care and mercy.

- **God sees, knows, and cares for you:** Jesus told his followers, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.”^K Throughout the Bible, God invites his people to “fear not” but instead trust themselves to his loving care.

HEBREWS 13:8^J
MATTHEW 10:29–31^K
2 CORINTHIANS 4:8–9^L
ISAIAH 53:6^M
MATTHEW 11:28^N

This doesn’t mean that those who know God won’t face difficult times. When disasters, pandemics, and other calamities strike, those who know God are included in the suffering. But God’s presence offers peace, strength, and a different perspective that transforms the way we can face them. In the words of one follower of Jesus: “We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.”^L

HOW CAN YOU BE ASSURED OF SUCH HOPE?

Have you ever wondered why, in spite of humanity’s incredible progress in technology, medicine, human rights, personal safety, quality of life, and so on, our problems never really go away? In fact, new problems seem to arise each day.

Humanity’s fundamental problem is that we’ve distanced ourselves from God. The Bible

describes it this way: “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way.”^M We’ve all tried to make life work without God, tried to build on shaky foundations. That’s what the Bible calls “sin.”

God wants to be in relationship with us, though. His solution was to send Jesus, his Son, to the Earth to die in our place, taking the just punishment for our rebellion against God. Through this, he offers the free gift of forgiveness and a place in God’s family. Jesus gives this invitation to each of us: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”^N

If you’d like to learn more about knowing God through Jesus—and how to experience peace, hope, and strength that empowers us for life in our anxious, stressful world—see the last section of the article “Isn’t Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?”

VIDEO: PASTOR AND
AUTHOR JOHN PIPER
EXPLAINS HOW GOD’S
PEACE IS AVAILABLE TO
US THROUGH JESUS.
(LENGTH: 2:50)



ENDNOTES

- 1 Robert L. Leahy, “How Big A Problem is Anxiety?,” from psychologytoday.com. Published April 30, 2008.

“HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHY,
IN SPITE OF HUMANITY’S INCREDIBLE
PROGRESS IN TECHNOLOGY, MEDICINE,
HUMAN RIGHTS, PERSONAL SAFETY,

QUALITY OF LIFE, AND ON AND ON,
OUR PROBLEMS NEVER REALLY GO
AWAY? IN FACT, NEW PROBLEMS
SEEM TO ARISE EACH DAY.”



QUESTION 3

IN SUCH A CONNECTED WORLD, WHY DO I FEEL SO ISOLATED AND LONELY?

I (Ashleyne) have felt lonely while rocking out to my favorite songs in the car, the windows rolled all the way down. I've felt it in a crowded room, surrounded by friends. And, of course, I've felt it in the middle of the night, both in my dreams and when I suddenly awoken in the dark.

When do you feel it? When you see a bunch of your friends in an Instagram post and you wonder why you weren't invited? When you post something that gets no reaction? When you show up at a party and wonder if anyone notices you're there? Or if everyone does?

Loneliness is familiar to all of us. A Proverb says, "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy."^A While we can understand and relate to others, we are all separate individuals. No one fully understands what it's like to be you.

^A PROVERBS 14:10

The degree to which we each experience loneliness, and the ways we react to it, can create painful problems. In an effort to avoid being lonely, we might look to alcohol, video games, hooking up, social media—or maybe we isolate ourselves and avoid the world completely.

Why is loneliness so common? Why do we feel it even if we have dozens of friends and thousands of followers? And what can we do about it?

“8 IN 10 COLLEGE STUDENTS AGREE THAT ‘I’M AWARE THAT MY NAME IS A BRAND AND THAT I NEED TO CULTIVATE IT CAREFULLY.’ – DONNA FRIETAS”

WHO AM I, REALLY?

The Bible explains that God wired us for connection, for community. In our hyper-connected world, we have almost endless opportunities to find it: Snapchat streaks, Clubhouse conversations, online gaming, and much more.

Yet, for all the opportunities it creates, social media can also lure us into some dangerous traps. FOMO is real. So is the no-win situation of comparing the lives we see in other people’s posts—their highlight reels—with our seemingly boring ones. A recent survey asked people aged 13-21 to identify what emotions they experience while using social media, and 50% or more said they felt “critical of myself,” “insecure,” and “isolated” at least some of the time.¹

These traps can lead us to develop an online image that doesn’t reflect what’s true in real life. We try to look happy and put-together in order to match the lives of others. We fear posting something that might come back to haunt us. We’re tempted to base our self-worth on how people respond to our online persona (or personas). Our struggles and vulnerabilities can stay hidden in these scenarios. As a result, we can push ourselves further away from others and confuse ourselves about who we really are.

In her book, *The Happiness Effect*, author and researcher Donna Freitas says that eight in ten college students agree that “I’m aware that my name is a brand and that I need to

cultivate it carefully.”² This concept comes from the advertising world—a brand is an expression of a company’s image, a way to convey certain characteristics or values and create an idea of what that company is like.

But it’s difficult to tell whether a company’s brand is authentic. It’s a carefully constructed image, designed primarily to evoke emotion from the consumer. When that image closely reflects reality, a company earns more trust.

As we conceive of our names as brands, and cultivate those brands through our online behavior, we face the same risks companies do: how authentic is my brand? Does it reflect the real me? Do I even know the real me, or am I constantly trying to create an image of myself that I think people will like?

When you only allow people to see the version of yourself you want them to see, they can’t know the real you. Loneliness is a natural result. So is a sense of disintegration: being one person here, another there. It’s confusing, stressful, and isolating.

Developing a solid, consistent identity—knowing who you really are—is an overlooked step in addressing loneliness. How can others truly know you if you don’t truly know yourself?

SCAN THIS QR CODE
TO TAKE A FUN QUIZ
DESIGNED TO HELP
YOU UNDERSTAND
WHERE YOU FIND YOUR
IDENTITY



WHAT ABOUT IN-PERSON RELATIONSHIPS? WHY DO WE STILL FEEL LONELY?

Although we can find meaningful connection online, nothing can replace the depth of connection found in real life relationships. But even with these, we're still prone to loneliness.

We can idealize romantic relationships and even friendships, thinking that if we only found the right person, we'd never be lonely again. But loneliness can be found even in happily married couples and tightly bonded friends.

Not only were we wired for connection with other people, we were wired for connection with God. It doesn't matter how many friends someone has, how well-known they are, even how wealthy or successful; these aren't enough to keep us from loneliness. Pop culture is full of examples of this: divorce, suicide, and addiction litter the landscape of Hollywood—the people we might least expect to be lonely.

The Bible also offers examples of people who seemed to have it all, yet still felt lonely. One is the Israelite king Solomon. He literally had everything: immense wealth, a giant palace, hundreds of wives, people serving his every need. God even granted him wisdom beyond that of any other person. Yet he wrote a book, Ecclesiastes, about how pointless life is: "...when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."^B It's not hard to hear loneliness and desperation in that statement.

ECCLESIASTES 2:11 ^B
MARK 1:40-45 ^C

In contrast, consider the leper who approached Jesus, begging for healing. Under Jewish law and tradition, touching a leper would make a person unclean, so lepers were outcasts, abandoned at times even by family and friends. Lepers often had no one to turn to; they were poor and ignored. This particular leper approached Jesus, fell to his knees, and said, "If you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man—possibly the first human touch he'd experienced in years—and cured him. The man was ecstatic; he went around telling everyone what Jesus had done, even though Jesus had instructed him otherwise. ^C

One interaction with Jesus changed the man's entire world. Even though he still had nothing and no one, he was brimming with comfort, meaning, and joy. His heart was full. Meanwhile, no amount of riches or women or fame could fill Solomon's heart.

Having a relationship with God can change everything. It's the ultimate answer to our loneliness problem. As Augustine, an ancient church leader, once wrote: "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee."³

HOW DOES KNOWING GOD HELP IN THE HERE AND NOW?

This sounds like it's too good to be true: a trite, over-spiritual answer that minimizes the issue. And in a way it is.

Even those who've found joy and contentment in a relationship with God will feel lonely, depressed, fearful, and doubtful. They will endure suffering. A relationship with God doesn't eliminate these feelings or other hurts. Our world is a damaged place, and we cannot experience life the way it was meant to be—yet.

A relationship with God does, however, offer two things that help us face loneliness with hope.

A COMMUNITY WHERE YOU CAN BE YOU

As we've already mentioned, part of dealing with loneliness is to be in community. We were created for it. And while no friend will save you from being lonely ever again, having people in your life who care about you for who you are (not for your body, money, skills, etc.) can help you see that you aren't really alone.

Brené Brown, a researcher and expert on human interaction, says, "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship."⁴ Scientific research has shown that these kinds of relationships lead to better overall health, physically as well as emotionally.

Though it is far, far from perfect, Christian community has the greatest potential for these life-giving relationships. When someone experiences the transformational reality that Jesus accepts them, even though he fully sees the depths of their ugliness and vulnerability, they are empowered and motivated to love others similarly. Jesus's followers are indeed called

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. When do you tend to feel loneliness the most? What seems to prompt it?
2. Does social media seem to lead you to feel more or less lonely? How?
3. How have you used social media to cultivate a "personal brand?" What "brand" are you seeking to create? Does it represent who you really are? How does that make you feel?
4. Why do you think relationships, online or in-person, always fail to fully deliver the sense of connection and community we long for?
5. Do you think a friendship with God would help you feel less alone, or deal with the loneliness you feel in more positive ways? Why or why not?



SCAN THE QR CODE TO HEAR GILLIAN'S STORY OF CRAVING ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FROM OTHERS, AND HOW SHE ULTIMATELY FOUND IT IN JESUS

GALATIANS 6:2
(SEE ALSO:
JOHN 13:34,
EPHESIANS 4:2,
1 PETER 3:8)^D

to live this way: “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” So in authentic Christian community, we can let our guard down, share the good and the bad, be vulnerable and real and still accepted.^D

SOMEONE WHO UNDERSTANDS AND IS ALWAYS PRESENT

Can believing in a God you can’t see help you feel less lonely on a Friday night? It seems hard to imagine. But the Bible says that God will never abandon his children^E, and that he is near to all who call on his name.^F God loves you and desires relationship with you. He wants you to come to him when you’re lonely.

Not only that, he understands. When Jesus faced the worst hours of his life—his arrest, trial, and crucifixion—his friends abandoned him. Some pretended they didn’t even know him. Jesus can sympathize with us when it feels like we’re totally alone, like no one sees us. He felt that pain himself. The Bible says, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”^G

What would it feel like, in your deepest moments of loneliness, to know you’re not alone? That the God who made you is with you and will never leave you?

Jesus endured rejection, from people and from God, for our sake. God sent Jesus to Earth to restore our relationship with him. The Bible tells us that we have been separated from God because of our sin: our rebellion against God to go our own direction in life; our moral failures and wrongs. Jesus, the perfect Son of God, died to pay the punishment earned by our sin, offering us complete forgiveness.

When we accept this offer, we, like the leper, are no longer an outcast but a child of God. We are adopted into God’s family, forever given a place to belong.



We are perfectly loved, so we don’t need to look for approval or acceptance from others. And we’re promised that, one day, God will set all things right. We will experience life as it was meant to be, never lonely again as we live forever in face-to-face relationship with God and all who follow him.

To learn how you can accept Jesus’s offer and enter a relationship with God, see the article “Isn’t Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?” at the end of this magazine.

JOHN 10:28–29;
MATTHEW 28:20;
HEBREWS 13:5; PSALM
94:14^E

PSALM 145:18;
JEREMIAH 29:13;
ROMANS 10:13^F

PSALM 34:18^G

ENDNOTES

- 1 Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z: Vol. 2*, 38.
- 2 Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 80.
- 3 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.1.1.
- 4 Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You’re Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are* (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2010).



QUESTION 4

IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY IS THERE SO MUCH EVIL, PAIN, AND SUFFERING?

“Trauma is ubiquitous.”

This sad statement is how researchers summarized part of their findings from a recent survey of Americans aged 13-21. The survey offered a list of potentially traumatic events, like abuse or natural disaster, and asked people if they’d experienced trauma because they or someone close to them had gone through it. Trauma was defined as leaving someone “with a sense of helplessness, terror, or distress lasting more than a few weeks.”

Of the nearly 1,300 people who responded, 82% said that at least one of the listed experiences had caused them trauma. Nearly 30% acknowledged having experienced four or more such events. The death of a loved one, suicidal thoughts, and betrayal were the most common trauma-inducing occurrences.¹

What traumas have you faced? Physical, verbal, or emotional abuse? Discrimination? Divorce or another sort of family drama? Cancer or COVID ravaging the body or taking the life of someone you love?

Pain and hardship are, sadly, universal human experiences. Our journeys through life are marked by disappointment, betrayal, defeat, sickness, injustice, heartache, hunger, and need. Reminders of death linger around us like a fog that will inevitably swallow us. We cannot escape it.

But why? Why is life so painful and hard? Why do bad things happen to good people as well as bad? Where is God in all of it?

WHY DO SUFFERING AND EVIL EXIST AT ALL?

These questions have no easy answers. People have puzzled over them for centuries. They've been an intellectual barrier to belief in God throughout history, summarized in a statement you've likely heard before in some form: "God can't be all-powerful and all-loving. If he were, the world wouldn't be this way."

But, while we may not be able to find easy answers or even ones that fully satisfy us, the Bible does offer several compelling and helpful perspectives.

The first isn't what we might want to hear but is nonetheless difficult to argue with: the world is the way it is because it's what we've demanded.

GENESIS 3:5^A

If you're familiar with the story of Adam and Eve, you'll remember that they chose to eat "forbidden fruit." They were persuaded to believe that they'd "be like God, knowing good and evil."^A They accepted the idea that they couldn't trust God, that maybe he wasn't good and didn't care about them, that his instructions weren't in their best interests. They decided to take control of life for themselves. Their choice wasn't simple disobedience over a piece of fruit. It was a betrayal, a slap in their creator's face.

Adam and Eve's story is our own story, isn't it? If we're honest, we like the idea that we can control our own destiny and define who we are and what we'll do. Who hasn't said—if not audibly, at least in our hearts—God, I appreciate that you made me, but I don't really need you; I know what's best for me. I've got this.

These choices to declare our own independence have led to all kinds of pain. Murder, racism, abuse, theft, war, slander, fraud—all are products of people seeking to serve themselves and get what they want, going about their lives as they see fit. We've all been victims of others' selfish choices.

We might ask why God gave us this choice. If God wants us to love and obey him, why didn't he create us to do so automatically?

God wants to be in relationship with us, and an authentic relationship must include freedom to move away from as well as toward the other party. A forced, controlled obedience isn't a relationship at all. Free will is a gift that gives us great dignity, but with it comes the potential for us to reject God and commit all manner of evil acts. People, and even the world itself, are violated and corrupted as a result, and this cycle of wrongdoing or violence towards another continues. As a trite saying goes, hurt people hurt people.

WHAT ABOUT PAIN AND SUFFERING THAT ISN'T DIRECTLY CAUSED BY OTHERS?

Some of the harshest, most painful experiences we face aren't caused by another person's choices. Natural disasters kill thousands every year, as do heart attacks and cancer and other debilitating illnesses. Why does God allow these?

We find that Adam and Eve's rebellious choice also had consequences for God's created world: "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you..."^B This paradigm—humanity's selfishness affecting nature—is paralleled in many ways today: pollution, climate change, viruses that emerge as human development intrudes upon certain habitats, etc.

^B GENESIS 3:17-18

But, while we can identify links between human behavior and these causes of suffering, how much of it is man-made and how much just part of the natural order? The universe often appears to be coldly harsh and random.

This is where our attempts at finding explanations can falter. Many events defy explanation. This doesn't necessarily mean that God is uncaring or absent, however.

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. Why do you think life is so marked by pain and difficulty?
2. Do you think suffering and pain serve a greater purpose? What might that be?
3. What traumas and hardships have you faced? How have they shaped you, either positively or negatively?
4. Does the Bible's explanation of why pain, evil, and suffering exist resonate with you? Why or why not?
5. How does Jesus's willingness to suffer on your behalf make you feel? How does it motivate you to respond?

INSTEAD OF BEING DETACHED FROM OUR SUFFERING, OR INCAPABLE OF DOING ANYTHING ABOUT IT, GOD LEANED INTO THE PROBLEM IN AN INTENSELY PERSONAL WAY. HE BECAME A HUMAN BEING HIMSELF.

WHY DOESN'T GOD DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?

The Bible declares God to be unlimited in power and overflowing with compassion. “The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.”^c “[W]ith God all things are possible.”^d “The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love [...] he has compassion on all he has made.”^e

It’s natural for us to cry out in times of distress, “God, how could you let something like this happen?” God’s apparent silence or inaction feels completely out of character. He loves us and could have acted to prevent this trauma, but he didn’t. Why?

Consider the implications of God removing all suffering. He’d have to remove all its causes, which would include you and me. We may compare ourselves to others and consider ourselves respectable and loving—but who hasn’t hurt someone else, intentionally or otherwise? We are all victims, but we’re also all victimizers.

Does this mean God is at the mercy of human choice? That he has no control?

No. God says he “reigns over the nations,”^f and that “my counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.”^g Somehow, God is able to maintain human freedom, which includes countless selfish and sinful actions, while still bringing about his will. This is one of Christianity’s most perplexing mysteries. Nothing surprises God. Nothing happens apart from his purposes. Yet human free will is authentic and real, not an illusion. We struggle to comprehend this primarily because God’s wisdom, intelligence, power, and

ability are so far beyond that of even the strongest and smartest person.

But even if these explanations can satisfy us intellectually (which, admittedly, isn’t easy), they may not provide emotional comfort or resolution. Seeing that God has actually done something about our suffering, something we might never have expected, makes that emotional peace possible.

WHAT HAS GOD DONE ABOUT IT?

Instead of being detached from our suffering, or incapable of doing anything about it, God leaned into the problem in an intensely personal way. He became a human being himself.

We’re told in the Bible that Jesus is God in the flesh, and that he became human in every way possible, except that he didn’t sin.^h He had free will. He got hungry and thirsty. He felt fear and joy and exhaustion. He got blisters and acne and sore muscles. And he knew—in real, embodied experience—the same pain and suffering we encounter.

Jesus was ostracized by family and friends, ridiculed by those who didn’t believe in him, accused and rejected by religious and civic leaders, beaten and tortured mercilessly, and nailed to a cross and lifted up in shameful public display and execution.

Jesus knew all that would happen to him beforehand. He predicted his rejection, torture,

ISAIAH 40:28 ^c
MATTHEW 19:26 ^d
PSALM 145:8–9 ^e
PSALM 47:8 ^f
ISAIAH 46:10, ESV ^g

^h JOHN 1:18,
HEBREWS 2:14–18;
7:26–28



MATTHEW 26:38¹
MATTHEW 27:46¹
JOHN 3:16–17^k
1 JOHN 3:16^l

and death on several occasions. Imagine the dread you'd feel knowing that intense pain, humiliation, and isolation lay before you. Just hours before his arrest, Jesus said to his friends, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."¹ These same friends would desert him just moments later.

Then, as he gasped for air before giving up his life, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"² His companionship with his Father—a close, perfect, fully satisfying relationship that had never known trouble—was severed.

Jesus understands what it's like to feel anxiety, fear, and dread. He knows physical pain and psychological anguish. He knows what it's like going through intense sadness and suffering alone. Because he endured such hardship and horrendous treatment, he more than understands whatever it is you're going through. He lived it, too.

Why did he do this? "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."³ Jesus willingly took our sin—those rebellious, selfish choices and attitudes—upon himself and paid its penalty: death. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."⁴ He did this so we could be forgiven and have a restored relationship with God. In addition to this, three other results of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection relate to the reality of our pain and suffering:

1. ETERNAL LIFE

Death and pain cause us to realize that there's something very wrong with this world. We yearn for someplace better—and God promises a better place for those who trust in Jesus. God will bring them into a renewed world where there will be no mourning, crying, death or pain.⁵ God will dwell with them directly, presently, and eternally.⁶

But eternal life isn't confined to that future place. Jesus said, "this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."⁷ Eternal life is, first, a relationship: one offered as a gift that we can receive and experience right now.

⁵ REVELATION 21:4
⁶ REVELATION 21:3
⁷ JOHN 17:3
⁸ ROMANS 8:28
⁹ JOHN 14:27, 16:33
^k MATTHEW 28:20,
JOHN 10:28

2. REPURPOSING OUR SUFFERING

God repurposed an unfathomable tragedy—the rejection and killing of his Son—into an event that makes forgiveness and new life available to all. He can also repurpose every trauma and pain we face: "in all things God works for the good for those who love him."⁸ Jesus's death and resurrection demonstrates that God can accomplish his purposes through even the most wicked human choices. We may not understand why we've experienced the traumas and hardships we have, but, in Jesus, we can rest in the promise that God will somehow use them for our ultimate good.

"I KNOW THAT IT WAS DESTINED."
SCAN THIS QR CODE
TO READ HOW ASHLEY
RECOGNIZED GOD'S
PRESENCE AND
GUIDANCE THROUGH
A SERIES OF AWFUL
EXPERIENCES, AND
HOW HE BROUGHT
GOOD THROUGH THEM



3. COMFORT AND PRESENCE IN OUR SUFFERING

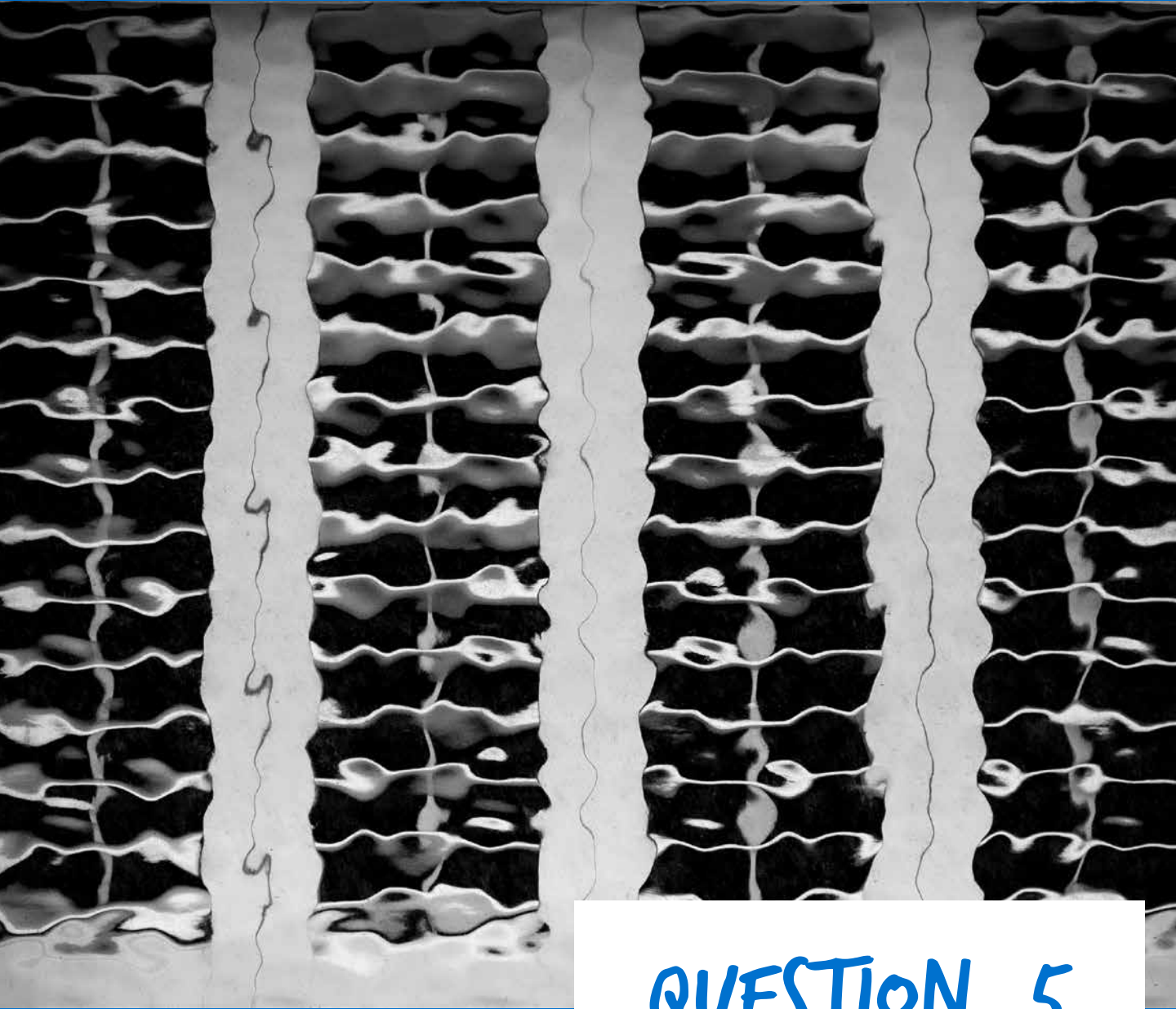
When we trust Jesus with our lives, we aren't suddenly exempt from difficulty. We can, however, face it with courage and hope. Jesus said, "Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid [...] In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."⁹ He went through our ultimate threat, death, and overcame it. Those who trust him will one day overcome it, too.

He also promises that he will never leave us and will always be with us.⁸ We often ask "where is God?" when facing hardship. "I am with you" may be the most satisfying answer he can give. Someone who is with us in our pain is one who knows exactly how we feel, who cares more than we can ever comprehend, and who won't back away, no matter how bad things get.

To receive Jesus into your life right now, see the last section of the article "Isn't Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?" at the end of this magazine.

ENDNOTES

¹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z: Vol. 2*, 7, 15-16.



QUESTION 5

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT JUSTICE?

Cries for justice fill our news feeds, ring in our ears, and erupt from our hearts. Even a fleeting glimpse of the world around us shows why: whether due to racial, class or another type of prejudice, greed, entitlement, criminal behavior, and much more, people all around us are treated wrongly. Some are exploited. Some cast aside. Some physically mistreated. Some face inherent disadvantage within societal structures. Some are falsely accused and vilified.

Injustice has stained our world since the beginning of human society. As prior articles have pointed out, humanity's universal choice to turn away from God and attempt to run our own lives—our sin—is the root cause. Our selfish choices introduced, and continue to introduce, all sorts of corruption and injustice into the world. Racism, sexual exploitation, theft, using power for personal gain—sin is the fountain from which it all flows.

What can be done about it? What has been done? What does true justice look like, and is such a society even possible?

This article can only begin to address these complex questions. But as we examine justice as a concept and the Bible's vision for it, we will find some powerful, profound, and even surprising answers.

WHAT EXACTLY IS JUSTICE?

Justice is a bit like the wind—you can identify when and where it is or isn't present, but you can't actually see or hold it. It's an abstract idea, not a concrete object. This, plus the breadth of what the word justice represents, makes it difficult to define.

In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, David Miller identifies that “justice takes on different meanings in different practical contexts,” but suggests that “the most plausible candidate for a core definition comes from the Institutes of Justinian, a codification of Roman Law from the sixth century AD, where justice is defined as ‘the constant and perpetual will to render to each his due.’”¹

This definition seems good, but it requires some nuance. On one hand, there is an element of cause-and-effect. Actions have consequence; justice demands an eye-for-an-eye, punishment that fits the crime. Or personal gain or reward that aligns with the effort that delivers it.

On the other hand, consider the justice ideals so prevalent in the world today: racial justice, social justice, climate justice, etc. The word “equality” perhaps best summarizes what we mean. There should be an equal playing field; people don't receive preferential treatment based on race, class, gender, or other factors. This is “rendering to each their due” based on our shared humanity. We're equally human, so we ought to have the same rights and opportunities, the same respect and treatment.

We might label these two facets of justice “legal” and “relational.” The first speaks to merit-based, penal, retributive justice; the other to fairness and societal justice.

WHERE DOES OUR LONGING FOR JUSTICE COME FROM?

The very idea of justice poses a problem for those who hold a naturalistic worldview. This view says that the physical universe is all there is, that our existence is due to chance: unguided evolutionary processes. Within this view there is no rational reason to call one thing good and another evil, or just and unjust. Things just are. The only standard available is the survival of the species, and even that is flimsy. Everything will be swallowed up by time and death anyway. Morality is arbitrary at best.

Why, then, do we think things should be fair? Why is the recognition of good and evil so innate? These concepts are present even in early childhood. If we were simply highly evolved animals, we'd expect human intuition and society to more closely resemble that of the animal world: ruthless, cold, utilitarian, survival and self-interest valued far above kindness and seeking the good of others, an inconsistent or absent morality, and more. Our sense of right and wrong and our values of kindness, justice, and the like—which are



largely consistent across the world's cultures—don't fit.

The Bible presents an alternative: rather than reflecting back an image of animals and the natural world, we are made in the image of God. This is the first thing the Bible says about human beings, spoken by God himself.^A

Our sense of justice—along with other facets of morality—is what it is because God wired it into us. It's a reflection of the fact that God himself is just. “He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.”^B “God does not show favoritism.”^C “Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments.”^D

^A GENESIS 1:26-27
^B DEUTERONOMY 32:4
^C ROMANS 2:11
^D REVELATION 19:1-2

VIDEO: PHILOSOPHER
KIRK DURSTON
EXPLORES WHETHER
OUR STANDARDS
OF RIGHT AND
WRONG ARE BASED
ON INDIVIDUAL
PREFERENCE,
SOCIAL
CONDITIONING,
GENETICS AND
EVOLUTION,
OR A HIGHER,
TRANSCENDENT
STANDARD-BEARER.
(LENGTH: 10:36)



ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. What injustices stir the greatest emotion in you? What do you feel when you see them?
2. Why do you think you feel this way? How do you account for such an ingrained sense of morality?
3. As society is predominantly secular, justice isn't based on people bearing the "image of God." What do you think is the basis upon which societal conceptions of justice stand? Is this a weak or strong foundation?
4. In what ways are injustices a product of both individual choices and corporate systems? Do the solutions meant to rectify these injustices account for both sources? How?
5. What do you feel should be done about injustices you've committed? How does Jesus's offer to take the ultimate punishment on your behalf land with you?

WHAT VISION OF HUMAN JUSTICE DOES THE BIBLE DISPLAY?

The Bible's vision of justice flows directly from the conception that humanity uniquely bears God's image. It encompasses both "legal" and "relational" aspects of justice.

In terms of relational justice, because all people bear God's image, all have inherent dignity and worth, regardless of ability, stature, appearance, family or ethnic heritage, or anything else. Before God, all people are equal. As theology professor Carl Ellis puts it, "ultimately to do right to people is to do right before God."²

Whenever a wrong is done to someone, whether by physical harm, favoritism, cheating, or something else, that person's dignity is diminished. They're harmed, and God's image is essentially marred^e. Legal justice requires a consequence. Justice in this form includes an aspect of retribution—the wrongdoer gets a deserved penalty—as well as restoration—the afflicted person is lifted back toward honor. The wrong is made right.

Pastor and author Timothy Keller points out how revolutionary this vision was: "The idea that every human had equal dignity and worth was [...] foreign to the Greeks and Romans. Aristotle famously said that some races and nationalities deserved to be slaves. Tom Holland writes that ancient cultures, apart from Israel, completely lacked any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value."³

Keller summarizes four characteristics of biblical justice: radical generosity, universal equality, life-changing advocacy, and asymmetrical responsibility.⁴

Radical generosity is founded on the principle that wealth and possessions ultimately belong to God. He entrusts it to us to steward, or manage wisely.^f For the people of Israel, that stewardship included instruction to allow some produce to remain after fields were

harvested, so that the poor or the traveler could gather it.^g Old Testament descriptions of just and righteous living also included sharing food with the hungry and a willingness to "disadvantage themselves to the advantage of the community."⁵

We touched on equality already. Leviticus 19:15 sums it up nicely: "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly."⁶

The next characteristic—life-changing advocacy—might seem to contradict the idea of impartiality. The Bible is saturated with instructions to show special concern for the poor and oppressed. Keller explains why this does not imply favoritism: "It does not mean that the powerful are less important as persons before God. They certainly are equally as important. But they don't need you to speak up for them. However, the poor do need you."⁶

Advocacy can take on many forms: meeting immediate needs, raising people toward self-sufficiency, representing the underprivileged to ensure they aren't exploited, reforming systems that privilege certain people above others.

By "asymmetrical responsibility," Keller means that both individuals and collective entities (families, communities, institutions, civilizations) share blame for sin and injustice. "The biblical text shows that both my sins and my outcomes in life (whether I am well off or poor) are due to complex factors, both individual and corporate and environmental [...] It is because of this complexity that the rendering of justice—both the distribution of rights and punishments—requires the greatest wisdom, deliberation and prudence."⁷

While we tend toward blaming either the individual or the system, it's almost always both. Our families, communities, schools, and other cultural institutions shape us in some way. If your family and culture treat certain people as inferior, that bias will naturally incubate within you. However, none of these entities force our hand. We ultimately make our own choices. So responsibility is "asymmetrical" in that, while corporate responsibility is present, individual responsibility is greater. We're all called to account for our own actions.

HOW DID JESUS'S LIFE AND DEATH AFFECT HOW WE PURSUE AND EXPERIENCE JUSTICE?

Early in Jesus's ministry, he gave what is known as "The Sermon on the Mount."^h Six times he introduced a topic by saying, "You have heard that it was said...", then referenced an element of Old Testament law. Each time, he followed that with "But I say to you...", and presented a new standard. Love your neighbor and hate your enemy became love your enemies too. Murder and sexual immorality were reframed as issues of the heart as well as outward action. An eye-for-an-eye form of justice became "turn the other cheek."

^e PROVERBS 14:31
^f 1 CHRONICLES 29:14,
LUKE 16:1-13
^g LEVITICUS 19:9-10
^h MATTHEW 5-7

WHY DO SO MANY CHRISTIANS SEEM UNCONCERNED ABOUT SOCIAL INJUSTICES?

At least as far as perception goes, Christians are either seen as all about justice (and often negatively labeled for it) or uncompassionate and detached, or even aligned with entities that maintain or deepen injustice. There are too many reasons for this to properly explore here, but here are two of the biggest:

1) As this article mentions, Jesus's return is when sin and death will be fully abolished. Until then, it remains, weakened in power but still influential. So Christians, like all people, make plenty of mistakes, over- or underemphasize issues, fail, hurt others, and make messes of things, including how to understand and approach justice. We're called to imitate Jesus, but growing to become more like him takes time and struggle.

2) Christians, like everyone else, are prone toward reductionistic ways of thinking. Some overly focus on the "kingdom to come," when Jesus returns and establishes the new heavens and earth; some overly focus on the "kingdom now," the reality that Jesus is reigning as king currently.

The Bible presents the need to hold these two things in tension. It clearly states that the world won't progress toward utopia. Corruption will remain, and even grow, until God intervenes, destroying this world order and establishing the new. So it's tempting to throw up one's hands and say "what's the point?" To those who don't share the same view, this appears cold and fatalistic. And indeed the Bible warns followers of Jesus against falling into this.

Alternatively, minimizing these clear biblical statements can lead someone to become overly hopeful in humanity's ability to build some sort of utopian existence. Many Christians throw themselves into bettering this world while neglecting to help people prepare for the next. Physical needs can trump spiritual ones, and it's certainly more socially acceptable to feed the hungry than to talk with others about their spiritual beliefs.

The example of when the people of Israel were forcibly exiled into Babylonian captivity gives us a view of a balanced perspective. In the Bible, Babylon is synonymous with all that's wrong with the world, a place God's people de-

idedly did not want to go. God communicated through prophets that the people would be captive there for seventy years. They could have gritted their teeth, stayed in their enclave, and rode the storm out. Yet in Jeremiah 29, God told them to "build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce [...] seek the peace and prosperity of the city [...] if it prospers, you too will prosper." He wants them to bless Babylon while they're there. For Christians, our "exile" in this world should be marked by bringing blessing to all around us, while remembering it's not our true home.

In this, Jesus didn't invalidate Israel's law and moral vision; he elevated them. The Sermon on the Mount acted as a cocoon, and the moral vision as it stood before Jesus went through a metamorphosis, emerging as the same species, but transformed into something more beautiful (and challenging). Nearly all New Testament moral teaching finds its basis in the Sermon on the Mount. And the word that best sums up this moral vision is love.

MATTHEW 22:35-40^j
LUKE 10:25-37^k

While justice "renders to each his due" with impartiality, love renders to each what is best. First Corinthians 13 presents love's many characteristics: it is kind, not self-seeking, keeps no record of wrongs, always protects and trusts and perseveres, rejoices not in evil but in truth. Jesus said that the entire law hung on two commands: Love God with all of yourself, and love your neighbor as yourself.^j And in his parable of the Good Samaritan, he declared that your neighbor is anyone you come across: friend, enemy, stranger, etc.^k

Justice is by no means absent in this transformed moral vision. We might see it as "Justice Plus." We are to step beyond only justice to consider what would be most loving toward another. What this is varies dramatically depending on the situation: forgiving an offense, acts of kindness and generosity, a compassionate ear, a truthful word, and so on.

The biblical moral vision is fueled by recognition that our world is broken beyond repair. Justice alone cannot produce an ideal society, because the root cause of injustice—our sin—remains present. Yet, as the above section shows, this doesn't mean justice (and environmental care, medical advancements, and other societal improvements) shouldn't be pursued. They certainly should, but with the realization that only God can solve all the world's problems in full.

I PETER 4:5,
REVELATION 20:11–13^L
JOHN 1:29,
ROMANS 6:3–11,
REVELATION 21:4^M
ISAIAH 9:7^N

And he will. The Bible shows us that the just, ideal, utopian society we long for will come. Before departing the world for heaven, Jesus promised that he'd return. When he does, he will judge each person for their actions,^L destroy death and permanently rid his people of their sinful nature,^M and reign over a kingdom marked by perfect justice and righteousness.^N

Being impartially judged by God may sound terrifying. Because while we have all been victimized by injustice (some more severely than others), we've also all perpetrated it (again, some more severely than others). Who hasn't ever sought gain at another's expense, overlooked evil, or hurt someone with words or actions, even if unintentionally? Fair justice in the legal sense demands accountability and punishment.

This is why the death of Jesus is so remarkable. The Bible makes clear that "there is no one righteous, not even one."^O We all deserve punishment, and just punishment for our sin, injustice, and rebellion against God is death.^P Since God is perfectly just, he can't simply overlook our sin or brush it aside. So he sent Jesus as a substitute: a man who committed no sin or injustice yet received the punishment of death for those who did. God's justice was satisfied and his mercy created a way for those he loves—all of us—to be forgiven and made righteous.^Q

When we acknowledge our need for Jesus to be our substitute and receive him, he promises to give us a new heart and to come to live within us. This is through the person of the Holy Spirit. Our efforts to live justly and lovingly toward others consistently fall short. The Holy Spirit is the empowering presence we need to more closely live out the biblical moral vision we just examined.

For more information about Jesus's death and resurrection, and how you can receive him, see "Isn't Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?"

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QUESTION 6

DOESN'T SCIENCE REFUTE MUCH OF WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS?

"The findings of science imply that the belief systems of all the world's traditional religions and cultures [...] are factually mistaken."¹

"[An atheistic point of view is] a demanding, rigorous, breathtaking grip on reality, one that has been vindicated beyond reasonable doubt. It's called science."²

These quotes reflect several widely held assumptions:

- Faith and reason are opposites.
- Religious belief is based on blind faith; unbelief on reason.
- Science is the sole determiner of what is true and real.
- Science has the tools to answer all our questions about the world.
- Christianity rejects much of what science reveals about the world.

These statements seem so obvious that they're often accepted without question. They go untested and feed what has become a dangerous cultural presumption: religion and science are incompatible or contradictory.

We aren't the first to face this sentiment. Christianity and science have had a bumpy, complicated relationship throughout history. When Copernicus and Galileo promoted the idea that the Earth revolved around the Sun, responses ranged from immediate denial to acceptance. Galileo, a Christian, openly asserted that his view was compatible with the Bible. The fact that he, a non-theologian, attempted to speak on theology caused more of his conflict with the Catholic Church than his science did.³

In the centuries since, scientific discoveries have encountered the same range of responses. Sadly, the most vocal Christians have been those who deny or oppose scientific findings, intensifying the perception that science and faith are enemies. It may be a surprise, then, to learn that many Christians, present and past, view science as entirely complementary to the Bible and their own faith.

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. How many of the assumption statements from the beginning of this article have you heard? Have you assumed them to be true? Why or why not?
2. What underlying assumptions are each of these statements built upon? Are these faith positions or have they been observably proven?
3. What questions from the “meaning script” do you think about most? How would they be answered from an atheistic or naturalistic perspective?
4. How would you answer these “meaning script” questions? What is the foundation those answers stand on?
5. What scientifically related questions, other than those addressed in this article, would you ask of the Bible? Does the discussion here reframe them in any way? How?

IS SCIENCE THE ONLY AUTHORITY IN DETERMINING WHAT IS TRUE?

The belief that science alone can tell us what is true is perhaps the most entrenched of all the above assumptions, especially within the scientific community. University of Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith says this turns science “from (1) one fantastic way to know many things about ourselves and the world into (2) an imperialistic, exclusivist, totalizing source of any and all legitimate knowledge about everything.”⁴

But there are questions science simply can’t answer. For example, science can describe how I drove to a local coffee shop to meet a friend: the physics of a combustion engine, how my brain sends signals that enable me to simultaneously steer, watch traffic, control the gas and brake, etc. But it can’t tell why: my friend and I had some conflict to resolve, and the values that flow from my faith—reconciling with others and treating them with love and respect—motivated the conversation.

Rebecca McLaughlin calls these two types of knowledge the “measurable script” and the “meaning script.”⁵ Science is primarily concerned with the measurable: how things work, cause-and-effect, the observable mechanisms of biology and chemistry and physics, etc. The meaning script deals with information on a more metaphysical level: purposes, motivations, values, etc. Many questions in this realm are crucial:

- *Why do we exist?*
- *Why do all people deserve justice and equality?*
- *Why do we naturally perceive some things to be right and others wrong?*
- *What gives a person dignity and worth?*
- *What happens after we die?*

Smith says that, “Scientists as public intellectuals have no legitimate intellectual grounds for many of the dismissive metaphysical or religious claims they make, supposedly on the basis of the findings of science.”⁶ They bring scientific

knowledge out of the measurable script and into the meaning script. In a way, this is like a golfer who claims that their golfing credentials make them reliable tennis instructors. They’re playing on the wrong field.

DOES FAITH PLAY A ROLE IN SCIENCE?

The view that science is the sole source of knowledge has been widely rejected in the field of philosophy.⁷ Part of this rejection comes from the recognition that statements like “Science is the sole determiner of what is true and real,” are actually propositions of faith. They’re empirically unprovable.

For example, take the statement, “Science has the tools to answer all our questions about the world.” To believe this, you must assume that science can answer questions about immaterial things (love, justice, freedom, etc.) as well as material, that we will make discoveries in the future that will enable us to answer questions we currently cannot, and that the human mind has the capacity to properly interpret and understand all the data science produces. We either haven’t, or can’t, prove these things.

Philosopher C. Stephen Evans writes, “Science by its very nature is not fit to investigate whether there is more to reality than the natural world.”⁸ Science assumes natural causes, that the universe is a closed system. This makes it incredibly useful in doing its job: spelling out the measurable script. But assuming a natural cause and the universe as a closed system are faith positions. As Evans goes on to point out, “both the statement ‘there is no supernatural reality beyond this world’ and the statement ‘there is a transcendent reality beyond this world’ are philosophical, not scientific, propositions.”⁹

Many people take faith to mean “belief without evidence.” The dictionary definition, however, is “belief that is not based on proof.”¹⁰ The Bible says “faith is [...] assurance about what we do not see.”¹¹ You can have lots of evidence without definite proof, and in such cases you analyze the evidence through reason to reach a conclusion. McLaughlin points out that this is exactly what science does: “My scientist friends are the first to acknowledge that science does not prove hypotheses but rather seeks to develop hypotheses to fit the available data.”¹¹

Rather than opposing faith, then, science simply shifts its object. As human understanding has grown, we’ve become increasingly confident in ourselves. Human ability to discover, reason, and explain is now seen as sufficient; God isn’t needed and is therefore rejected. Some consider this natural human progress. But even that is a faith position.

Christian belief, like science, also pairs faith and reason. We develop hypotheses about God, ourselves, and the world that fit available data. The article, “Isn’t Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?” at the end of this magazine, offers several examples of this reason-based evidence.

¹¹ HEBREWS 11:1



WHAT ABOUT THE AREAS WHERE SCIENCE SEEMS TO REFUTE THE BIBLE?

Don't Christians believe the Earth is only 6,000 years old? Doesn't evolution contradict the Bible? Aren't the Bible's miracles scientifically impossible? Doesn't all this mean that modern science makes the Bible irrelevant?

These are legitimate questions, and the discussion above isn't meant to dodge them. It's important to understand that science and Christianity both employ faith and reason, and the difference between the measurable script and meaning script, to engage well with the questions we find at the intersection of science and Scripture.

GENESIS 1-11

Many points of scientific friction with the Bible center on Genesis 1-11. These opening chapters include an account of creation, Adam and Eve's fall and alienation from God, the Flood and Noah's ark, and the Tower of Babel.

Christian interpretation of Genesis 1-11 varies widely. Some take it completely literally. Some look at it as totally allegorical. Others see it as a blend. One thing that seems clear is that Genesis 1-11 is written far more to speak to the meaning script than the measurable. The narrative threading through the entire Bible is concerned with humanity's separation from God and God's undeserved, relentless love that leads to rescue and redemption. The content of Genesis 1-11 is essentially a prelude that sets the stage for the drama that unfolds through the rest of the Bible.

McLaughlin states, "The primacy of meaning-seeking over fact-finding illuminates the biblical creation accounts... Genesis is not primarily concerned with science."¹² So, no matter how literally one interprets these chapters, we need to remember that they aren't written to communicate exactly how God created everything, just that he did, and why.

CREATION V. EVOLUTION OLD EARTH V. YOUNG EARTH

Most of the scientific community is convinced that Earth is billions of years old and that life developed gradually via evolution. These are often seen as silver bullets against Christianity, but they haven't been a problem for many Christians.

The Hebrew word translated "day" can mean a twenty-four-hour day; the general concept of daytime; today; continually; or an undetermined amount of time. There is nothing requiring us to read the creation account as six literal twenty-four-hour days. It could just as easily be grand sweeps of time. As a result, many Christians—both historically and now—don't take issue with the proposal of an ancient universe that began with a Big Bang.

The Big Bang theory created a stir in the scientific community when it was first proposed because it implied a divine cause. A Belgian priest actually put the idea forward first.¹³ Then, as scientific discoveries all but confirmed an expanding universe and a cosmic starting point, many scientists were taken aback. Some have offered explanations that don't call for a cause outside the universe: it just is, it's one of billions of parallel universes, it's self-creating. While these theories have varying degrees of merit, they're all unprovable faith positions that have faced criticism within the scientific world.

Apparent conflict between evolution and biblical creation has also been overblown. Historian James Moore notes that "with but few exceptions, the leading Christian thinkers in Great Britain and America came to terms quite readily with Darwinism and evolution."¹⁴ Harvard professor Asa Gray, Darwin's closest collaborator, stated to Darwin, "God himself is the very last, irreducible causal factor and, hence, the source of all evolutionary change."¹⁵

The Bible's assertion that God created the world out of nothing, then, is highly compatible with scientific explanations of how it all came together. And, just as has been true throughout history, new information is gathered daily. Belief in evolution and an old universe conceived through a Big Bang are examples of current perspectives that will likely be refined and possibly even change. They're also positions held by reason-based faith; hypotheses that fit the available data. We can't travel back in time to gain airtight proof.

MIRACLES

Biblical accounts of miracles are often dismissed as impossible. But these objections are built on the faith position that all events are due to internal natural causes. If there is a God outside of space, time, and even matter itself, it's certainly rational to believe that this God can act in ways that suspend natural order, or even work through the natural processes he created.

ARE SCIENCE AND CHRISTIANITY MORE RELATED THAN WE THINK?

“It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.”¹⁵

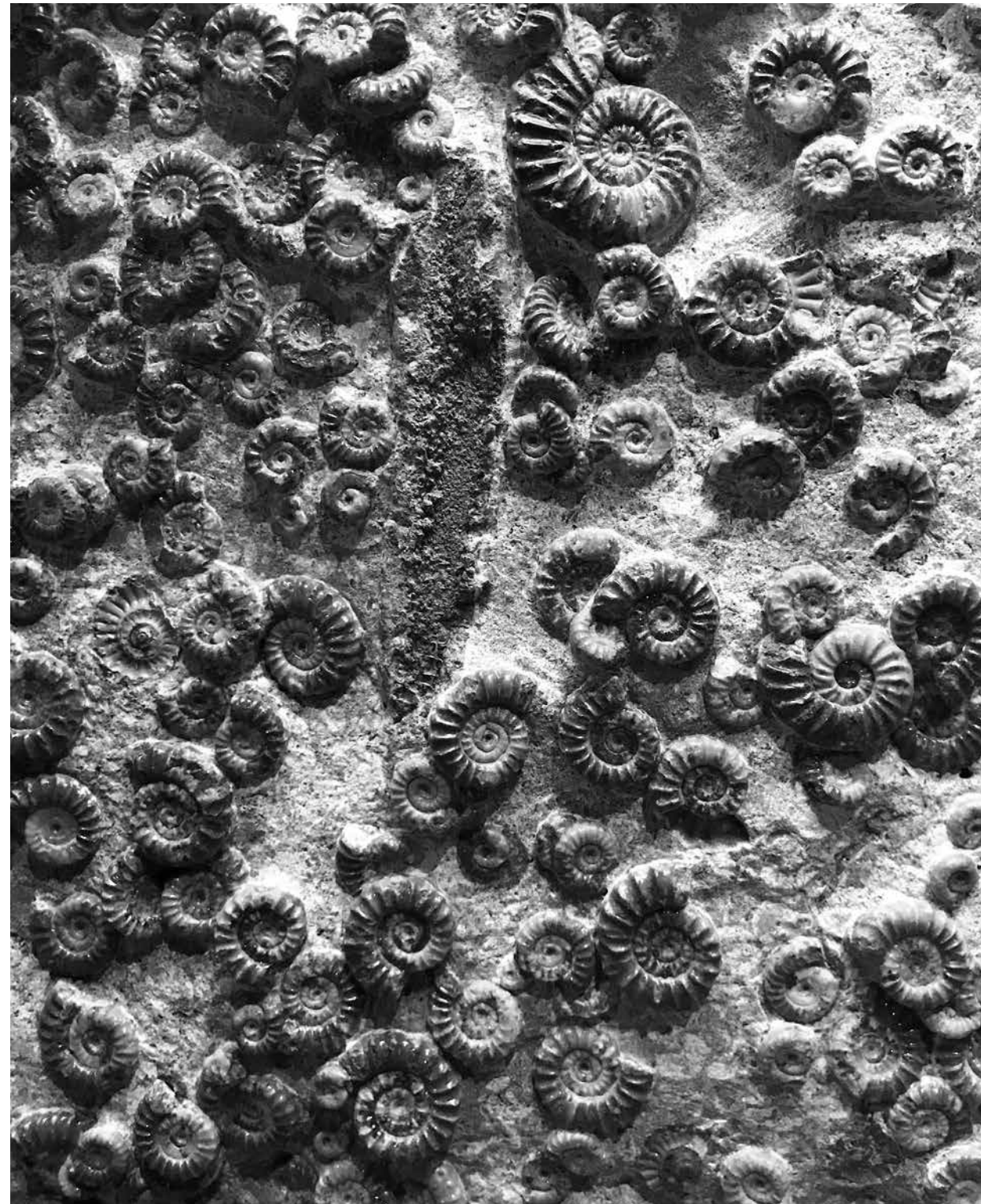
PROVERBS 25:2 ^B

This Proverb points toward a healthy marriage of science and belief in God. An infinitely wise God created the universe with laws, order, and other wonderful things to discover. Science enables us to search out these matters, granting understanding that can ultimately result in deeper worship of God.

Modern science is built on this philosophical foundation. McLaughlin notes that “[s]cientists seek natural causes for natural phenomena, not divine intervention in a test tube. But [Princeton professor and philosopher of science Hans] Halvorson notes that this method did not arise from atheism. On the contrary, the first scientists believed our universe was designed and created by God ‘according to a blueprint that can be discerned by rational creatures like ourselves.’”¹⁶

The scientific method developed through the work of two Franciscan friars (Roger Bacon and William of Ockham), and Christian scientists Francis Bacon and Robert Boyle.¹⁷ Scientists who pursued their work from a Christian understanding and foundation pepper history: Newton, Faraday, Pascal, Pasteur, Mendel, and many more.

Much of what science takes for granted—an ordered and predictable universe, consistent and measurable laws and constants, the rationality and reasoning power of human beings—wouldn’t logically flow from an atheistic understanding. If the universe had developed by spontaneous chance, we might reasonably expect the same level of spontaneity within it: laws and order that vary or change from place to place, things springing into and out of existence randomly, etc. And we’d



have little confidence that our own minds, having evolved according to blind luck, could be trusted.

The precision and fine-tuning of the universe indeed baffles many atheist scientists. Physicist Eugene Wigner felt that nature’s mathematical precision “is something bordering on the mysterious and that there is no rational explanation for it.”¹⁸ Nobel prize winner Richard Feynman once said, “The fact that there are rules at all is a kind of miracle.”¹⁹

Astronomer Martin Rees’s book *Just Six Numbers: The Deep Forces That Shape the Universe* explores six fundamental constants that “constitute a ‘recipe’ for a universe.”²⁰ Tiny changes to any of these would make a life-producing universe impossible. Rees concludes, because these constants are so astronomically precise and apparently independent of one another, that it’s implausible to think they coalesced by pure chance. Yet instead of attributing them to an infinite creator, Rees believes in an infinite number of parallel universes—also known as the multiverse. He takes a position of faith, as additional universes are unproven and perhaps unprovable. But is his conclusion more reasonable than believing in a super-intelligent being who created everything?

A surprising number of scientists opt to believe in such a creator. Many of these, like National Institutes of Health director Francis Collins, began to follow Jesus after their careers had begun. The evidence for God that science revealed played a large part in Collins’s decision.²¹

None of what we’ve examined proves or disproves God’s existence. What it does do, hopefully, is show that Christian belief isn’t thoughtless or unscientific. Rather, it’s a reasonable conclusion that science, instead of contradicting, can support or even lead one to make. As Nobel Prize-winning physicist William Phillips writes, “Many good scientists have concluded [...] that an intelligent God must have chosen to create the universe with such beautiful,

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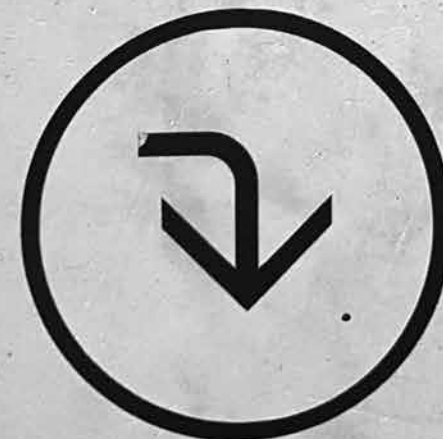
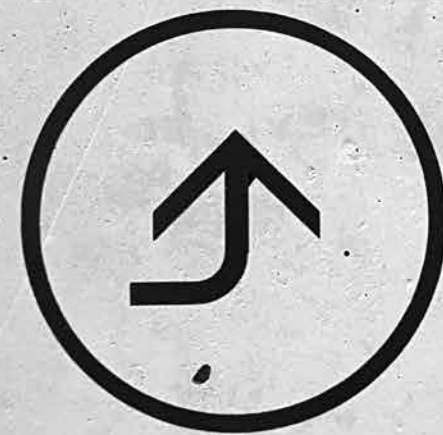
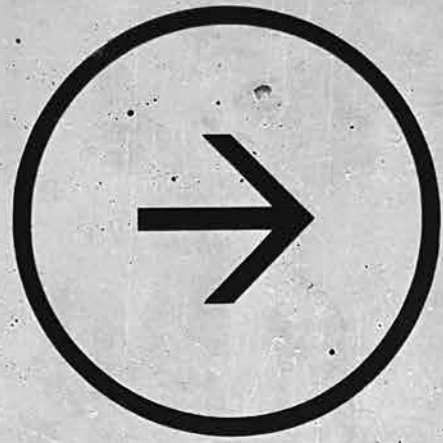
simple, and life-giving properties. Many other equally good scientists are nevertheless atheists. Both conclusions are positions of faith.”²²

To explore more scientific evidence seeming to point toward God, see “Is There a God? Does That Matter to My Life?”

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QUESTION 7

AREN'T ALL RELIGIONS BASICALLY THE SAME?

I (Jason) have had several Muslim friends, Hindu and Jewish next-door neighbors, and been acquainted with plenty of people unconnected to traditional religious structures who nonetheless describe themselves as spiritual. Your experiences have likely been similar. As the world becomes more diverse and connected, so do our relationships.

My friends from different faiths have been warm, friendly, caring people. People I've trusted, laughed with, shared meals with. Yet, as a Christian, I think their beliefs are not only incorrect, but that they also put them in grave spiritual danger. This creates tension—it can feel intolerant and unloving to think that those who believe differently are wrong.

Perhaps you've felt the same tension, either through recognizing contradictions between your spiritual beliefs and those of friends, or in seeing conflict or hate erupt along the lines of religious difference. A host of questions naturally arise: *Isn't it judgmental to call someone's spiritual beliefs wrong? Is it wrong to try to change someone's beliefs? Aren't different religions just different perspectives of the same God? Why would God only create one way to know him?*

CAN DIFFERENT RELIGIONS ACTUALLY COEXIST?

Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker that spells out the word "coexist" using symbols from various religions. Its sentiments are noble—respect each other and live in peace, agree to disagree and don't try to convert one another. And, to be sure, people can and should love and respect one another while disagreeing over deep convictions.

But many who put the "coexist" sticker on their car want to communicate something like,

"Can't we agree that these are all legitimate pathways to the divine? Stop being so hateful and exclusive!" Unfortunately, this view fails to consider just how diverse the world's religions are.

The following section outlines the core beliefs of several major world religions. Each has sects within which you'll find variation, so these are very general summaries.

HINDUISM

Most Hindus worship Brahman, ultimate reality or oneness, through millions of gods and goddesses. These are embodied within idols, temples, gurus, rivers, animals, and more. Hinduism teaches that one's present life position is due to actions in a previous life. A Hindu's chief goal is to break free from continuous reincarnation, and the law of karma that maintains it, through devotion to Hindu deities, dedication to religious rites and ceremonies, or meditating on Brahman in order to escape the illusion of self. If successful, the soul will be free and at rest.

BUDDHISM

Buddhism doesn't acknowledge any gods, though some Buddhists do worship deities. Buddhists believe the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) attained what they too strive to achieve: enlightenment and freedom from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth. This cycle inevitably includes suffering, which is seen as something to endure. Purifying one's heart and letting go of all yearnings and attachments to self, through restraint, fasting, meditation, and other disciplines, can free one from the cycle. The goal is to reach Nirvana—ultimate peace and enlightenment, "the blowing out" of the flame of desire.

NEW AGE SPIRITUALITY

New Age spirituality is an eclectic collection of ancient spiritual practices. It acknowledges many gods and goddesses, but ultimately aims to develop one's own power or divinity. Self supersedes all. When a follower of this type of spirituality refers to the divine, they most often mean a higher consciousness within themselves. Mysticism and psychic and spiritual techniques like chanting, meditating, and drumming lead one toward an altered consciousness, escape from external, objective reality, and development of one's own divinity and reality.

JUDAISM

Jewish people believe that the one true God, Yahweh, chose Abraham and his descendants to be his covenant people, representing him to all nations. Judaism contains two holy books: the Tanakh (the Christian Old Testament) and the Talmud, a detailed exposition of Jewish Law and practice. The Law included a system of animal sacrifice through which people's sins were atoned and they were ritually purified. The Jerusalem Temple, center of religious life, was destroyed and rebuilt several times. The last destruction was during the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the Temple hasn't been rebuilt since. As a result, Jewish religion focused more on Law than sacrifice, and local synagogues became central to Jewish religious life. Many believe that the Messiah is still to come, the Temple will be rebuilt, and the Promised Land fully restored to the Jewish people.

ISLAM

Muslims believe that Allah is the one almighty God, and that a line of prophets—Jesus and many Jewish prophets included—revealed Allah and his will to the world. Muhammad is considered the last prophet, and his words and lifestyle are authoritative. One's afterlife is determined by religious devotion, deeds in life, and faithfulness to Islam's five "pillars": reciting a creed, daily prayers, giving to the needy, the yearly Ramadan fast, and a pilgrimage to Mecca.

CHRISTIANITY

Christians believe in one eternal God who exists as a Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). This God created everything and became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Christians believe that, out of love, Jesus atoned for people's sin by dying on a cross—the final fulfillment of the Jewish sacrificial system. Three days later, he rose from the dead, proving his deity. Anyone who believes in Jesus as Lord and Messiah will freely receive forgiveness, eternal life, and a personal relationship with God. Followers of Jesus regard the Old and New Testaments of the Bible as God's written message to humanity.

CAN WE DISAGREE WITH RESPECT?

The tone of our current culture seems to suggest that disagreeing with someone means we're rejecting them entirely. But this only moves people further apart. Our thinking goes unsharpened and we see people as stereotypes because we don't interact with different types of people in the flesh.

Rebecca McLaughlin offers several thoughts that counter these tendencies:

“One of my wisest and gentlest seminary professors put it like this: ‘It’s often said that you should respect other people’s beliefs. But that’s wrong: what’s vital is that you respect other people.’ Indeed, when examined more closely, attempting to persuade others to change their beliefs is a sign of respect. You are treating them as thinking agents with the

ability to decide what they believe, not just products of their cultural environment [...] If our commitment to diversity is more than skin deep, we must cultivate deep friendships with smart people with whom we fundamentally disagree.”¹

For a Christian, seeking to persuade someone to follow Jesus isn't only a sign of respect, but of love. Those who truly believe that Jesus is God's only way for us to find the forgiveness, peace, and life we yearn for cannot help but be motivated to share that good news with others. Sadly, many Christians have proclaimed Jesus in ways that can hardly be considered loving. But talking about our faith while respecting others' beliefs is one of the ways we obey Jesus's teaching to love our neighbors as ourselves.



This brief overview reveals tremendous diversity. Consider just the views on the nature of deity: Hindus believe in many gods; New Age adherents in their own divinity; Buddhists in no deity; Jews, Muslims, and Christians in one God, but with vital differences in his nature and actions. Other core topics—the nature of humanity, basic human need and way it's addressed, how spiritual truth is revealed—are equally diverse.

How could all lead to the same place, or be equally true, in light of such ingrained differences? Affirming this would require followers of any of these faiths to deny some of their most sacred claims. As Rebecca McLaughlin writes, “to claim that Hinduism and Christianity are ultimately compatible is to do violence to both.”² We could interject any of these religions into her statement. Christianity isn't alone in making exclusive claims; each religion has distinctions that, if believed sincerely, would imply that other beliefs are wrong.

WHAT IF EACH RELIGION RECOGNIZES PART OF THE TRUTH?

A popular analogy is often employed to show how all religions can be equally valid. In it, several blind men encounter an elephant, and each reaches out to discover and describe what it is. One grasps the trunk and concludes it's a snake. Another feels the leg and declares it to be a tree. The ear is compared to a fan, the tail to a snake, and the tusk to a spear. Finally, one man pushes against the elephant's massive side and concludes it's a wall.

In their blindness, each describes the same thing in a radically different way. Likewise, if God is infinite and we are finite, we're like the blind men. No one can perceive God's full nature. So we should not conclude that any one religion has a corner on truth; all describe the same thing in a radically different way.

At first glance this analogy seems compelling. But several challenges emerge with a closer look.

First, are any of the men correct? An elephant is not a snake, spear, tree, or anything else. It's an elephant. The analogy seeks to equalize and validate all religious pursuits, but in the end it says they're all mistaken. Perhaps this is what some imply when they call for coexistence: you're all following fantasies, so at least get along with each other as you do.

Second, who can see the whole elephant and therefore enlighten the blind men? The person who tells the story, whether they realize it or not, implies that they can. They put themselves in the patronizing position of chuckling at the poor blind people—the billions who follow a distinct religion—while they have all the answers. Can anyone truly make such a claim? Again, instead of offering respect, all religions are belittled.

But what if someone came along who claimed to see the whole elephant, and presented credentials that affirmed he did? This person could accurately describe it to the blind seekers. In a sense, that's what Jesus claimed.

WHY WOULD GOD ONLY PROVIDE ONE WAY TO HIM?

PSALM 14:1-3,
ROMANS 3:10-23 ^A

All religions agree that people are needy and broken. Otherwise the religions themselves wouldn't exist. We lack peace, strength, wisdom, and self-control. We're tempted and fail. We hurt ourselves and others. We consciously fall short of whatever moral standard we carry. Today's constant admissions that we need to "do better" underscore this. The biblical word "sin" summarizes this brokenness, and the Bible tells us that it's common to everyone.^A

Even religious leaders like Buddha and Muhammad admitted brokenness and a need for forgiveness. "No matter how wise, no matter how gifted, no matter how influential other prophets, gurus, and teachers might be, they had the presence of mind to know that they were imperfect like the rest of us."³

In response, we pursue meditation, prayer, fasting, pilgrimage, self-help resources, personal sacrifice, and more. We hope these pursuits will reform our hearts and actions, increase our peace, and compensate for our mistakes. But do they?

Consider how difficult it is to obey all Jewish laws, or undergo the restraint necessary to detach yourself from all longing and desire, as Buddhists seek. A level of perfection is demanded, and it's difficult to know whether you've actually achieved it. There are always more sins to atone for.

If reaching God were possible through these pathways, perhaps God would have given us several options. But the stark reality is that no matter how good or devoted or peaceable we are, there's still a yawning gap.

The problem isn't that God only gave us one way to reach him, it's that our condition is so desperate. We don't need programs to help us work our way up; we need an intervention in which God reaches all the way down. We need a Savior.

The prophet Isaiah is honored in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. He wrote of this coming Savior: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity [sin] of us all."^B

Jesus identified himself as this Savior: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."^C "[T]he Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."^D

^B ISAIAH 53:6

^C JOHN 3:16-17

^D MATTHEW 20:28

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. How do your spiritual beliefs differ from those of your friends and family? How have you navigated those differences?
2. Do you believe all religious and spiritual paths lead to the same place? Why or why not?
3. Consider the descriptions of the world religions. What are some ways in which they fundamentally differ? Is there any way those differences can be simultaneously true?
4. What would people of each faith need to affirm or deny in order to be compatible with the others? How might a devoted member of that faith feel if they were asked to do that?
5. How would you summarize the basic human need or problem that religion seeks to address? Do you agree? In what ways, spiritual or otherwise, have you pursued a solution to that problem?



SCAN THE QR CODE TO READ ABOUT AJI, A HINDU WHO BECAME A CHRISTIAN AT A CHRISTIAN GATHERING HE SOUGHT TO SABOTAGE AND DISRUPT.

ISAIAH 53:5, 10, 12 ^E
MARK 8:31, 9:9,
10:33-34 ^F
JOHN 11:25,
REVELATION 21:4 ^G

Unlike other spiritual leaders, Jesus lived a sinless life and claimed to be divine. He backed this claim up with miracles and control even over nature. Then he was falsely condemned, whipped, beaten, and nailed to a cross. He submitted to this willingly. Isaiah identified the purpose of this sacrifice 700 years earlier: “he was crushed for our iniquities [...] it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer [...] the Lord makes his life an offering for sin [...] he poured out his life unto death.”^E

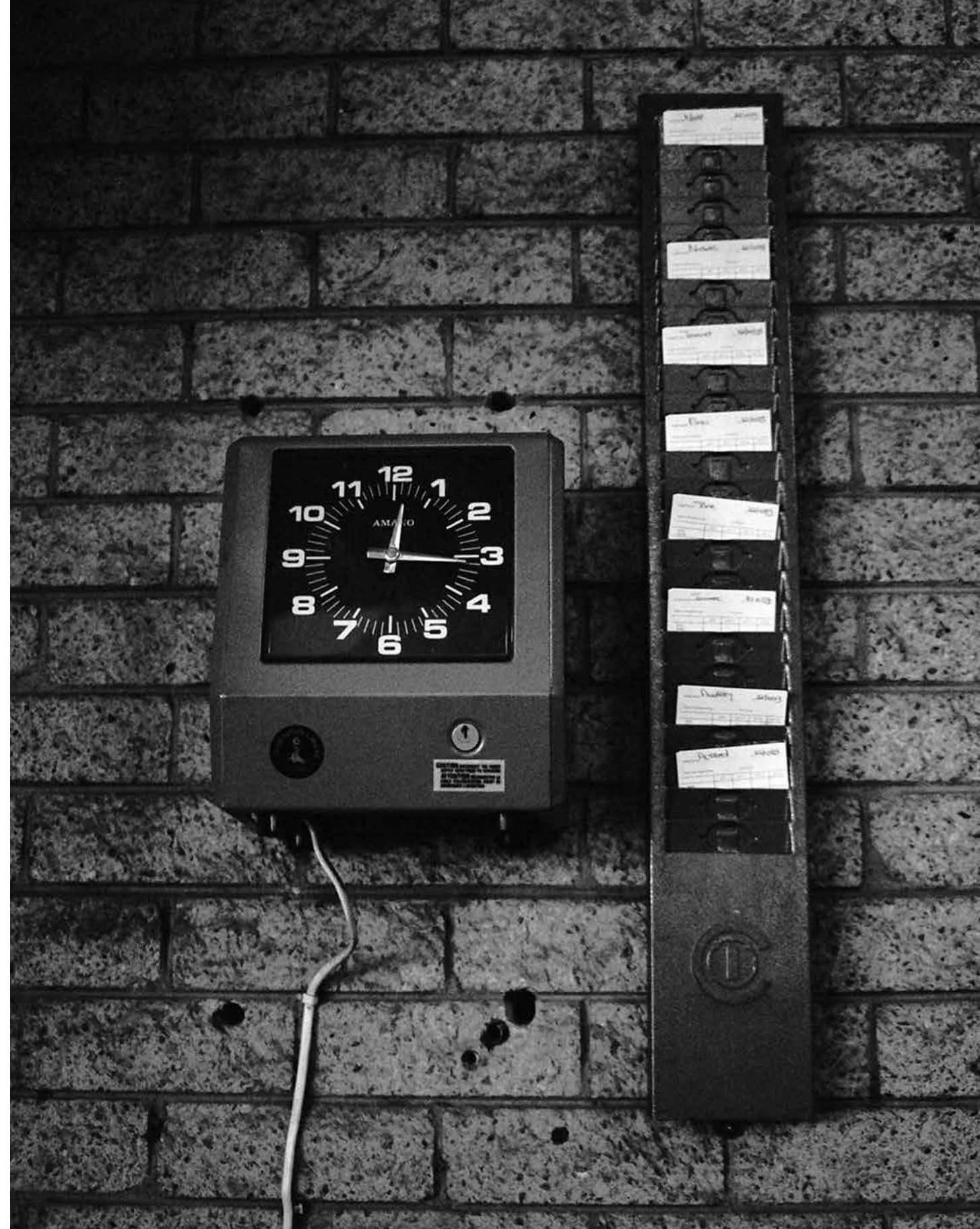
Jesus offered definitive evidence of his deity by rising from the dead. He predicted it would happen.^F Rumors of his predictions swirled, leading officials to station a guard of Roman soldiers outside Jesus’s tomb. Yet it was empty on the third day after his death. Many testified to having seen and interacted with him, refusing to recant this claim even when tortured or killed. The message they proclaimed was that any person could be forgiven by Jesus and receive eternal life with him by believing in him.

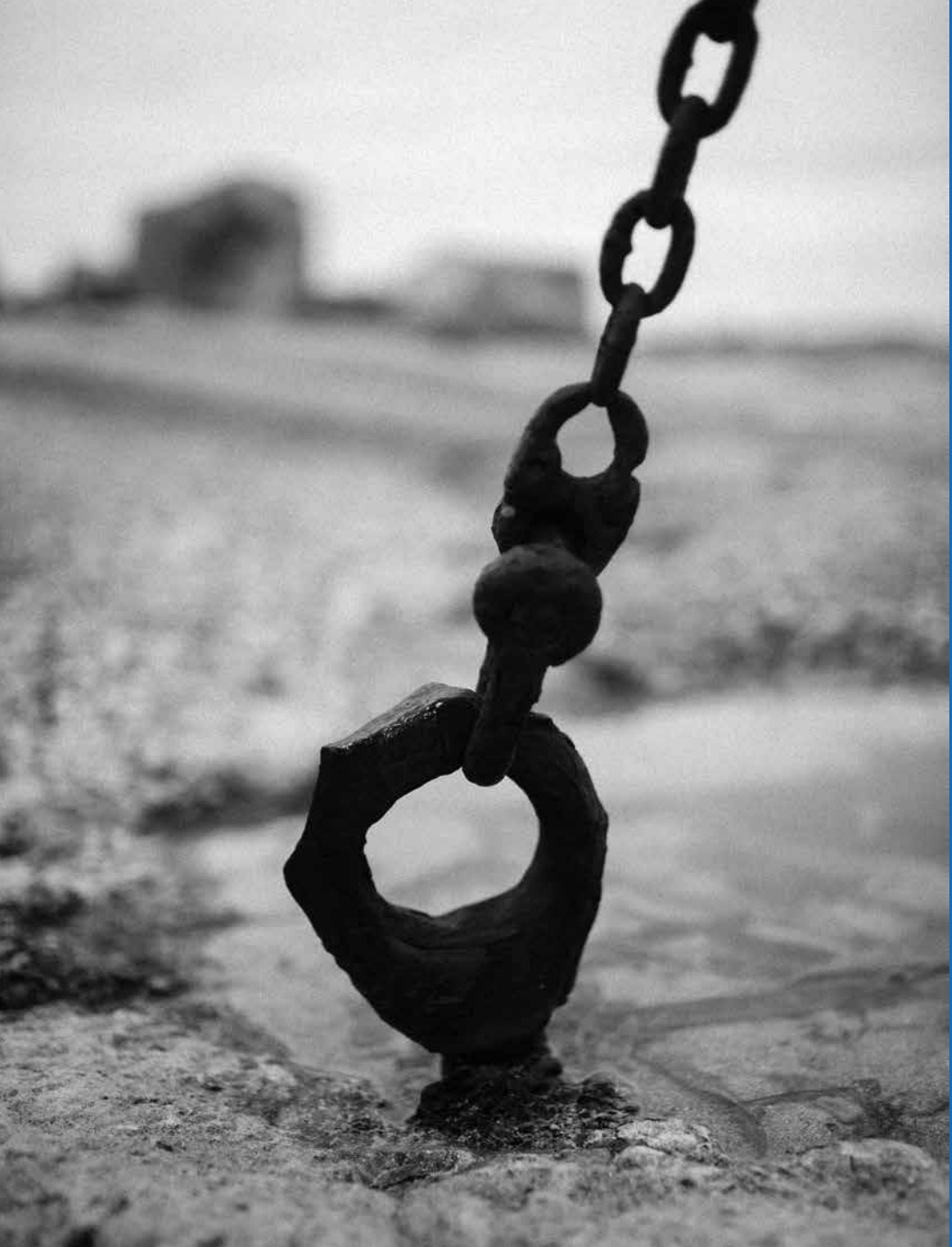
As we survey the religious landscape, Jesus stands distinctly apart. His love for humanity led him to physically enter our world. He voluntarily substituted himself as our representative before God, shouldering our imperfection and crediting his perfection to us. Then he rose from the dead, gaining victory over death itself and promising that his followers too will one day be free from death’s grip.^G If all this is true, he rises above other figures on the religious landscape as worthy of our trust, love, and devotion.

To explore whether it’s reasonable to believe that Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection is true, and how you can receive him, see “Isn’t Believing in Jesus Just Blind Faith?”

ENDNOTES

- 1 Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 55.
- 2 McLaughlin, 55.
- 3 Erwin W. Lutzer, *Christ Among Other Gods* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 63.





QUESTION 8

ISN'T BELIEVING IN JESUS JUST BLIND FAITH?

Many people today equate belief in Jesus with belief in Cinderella or Moana: treating a fairy tale as factually real. Perhaps you feel the same. How can we be sure what Jesus actually said and did? Haven't the stories about him become distorted? Isn't the Bible historically inaccurate? In light of these variables, isn't belief in Jesus as a savior of all humanity who died and resurrected just blind faith or wishful thinking?

Perhaps not. Fairy tales aren't built on verifiable real-world events. But evidence for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is abundant. We'll look at that evidence in a moment, but first we need to examine what "faith" is and is not.



ARE FAITH AND REASON OPPOSITES OR RELATIVES?

Faith is often regarded as belief in spite of an absence of evidence, or even in the face of evidence to the contrary. But that's really a wish, not faith.

One of the definitions for faith is: "belief that is not based on proof."¹ The Bible gives a similar definition: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."^A These definitions don't imply absence of evidence, but the absence of conclusive proof. Much of our lives are actually lived through faith-based decision making: we weigh available evidence and decide accordingly.

For example, when you arrange to meet a friend for lunch, you show up believing they will too. You don't have proof that they actually will until they stand in front of you. The act of going to meet your friend is a step of faith based on solid evidence: you trust your friend because they've followed through on prior commitments, shown that they care for you, and so on. Your friend's arrival isn't assured—an emergency could come up, they might mix up the time, or even forget—but you still act with the conviction that they'll be there.

Or, to use another example, boarding a plane is an act of faith. You don't check the engines or the pilot's license yourself; you trust the systems in place to do those things. You don't have observable proof that the plane can safely take you to your destination, only evidence like the fact that airline safety records are generally pristine and crashes are rare, and that it's incredibly rigorous and time-consuming to become licensed to fly.

In both examples, the step of faith is entirely reasonable. Indeed, for faith to have any value, it must be based on facts, reason, and good evidence. The object of your faith is

what truly matters. Your belief that the plane can safely take you to your destination isn't what gets you there. It gets you onboard, but a reliable pilot and airline do the work.

It is the same with Jesus. No matter how strong one's faith may be, it's not what "saves" them or ushers them into the presence of God after they die. It only gets them on the plane. Some people board with strong faith, some with weak, but both go where the plane takes them.

IS JESUS A RELIABLE OBJECT OF FAITH?

Jesus once asked his followers, "Who do you say I am?"^B This is the all-important question. If what Jesus claimed is true, our response has massive implications on our lives now as well as into eternity.

In order to evaluate whether Jesus is worthy of our faith, we need to know if we can trust the Bible, and examine the evidence we have of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection, and their historical effects. By doing so, you might find faith in Jesus to be quite reasonable, even rational.

HOW CAN WE TRUST WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS?

The Bible's sixty-six books were written by forty-plus authors in three different languages over a period of nearly fifteen hundred years. Yet it's amazingly consistent and carries one central message: God, who created us all, desires a relationship with us. He calls us to know and trust him.

Throughout history, the Bible has undergone intense scrutiny. It's faced archaeological tests, comparisons with external sources, and accusations that the Bible we read today differs from the original because of translation frequency and error. It has answered, and continues to answer, all the questions posed to it.

Archaeology has consistently confirmed the accuracy of the Bible's historical details. On several occasions, historians disbelieved that a particular place, person, or even culture referenced in the Bible ever existed, only to have an archaeological discovery affirm the Bible's record.² Archaeology has even verified the Bible's description of particular events, such as the discovery that the walls of Jericho had fallen exactly as the Bible reports.

Other ancient documents receive far fewer questions of authenticity, yet the manuscript evidence for them pales in comparison to that of the Bible. For example, Julius Caesar is believed to have written *Gallic War* between 100 and 44 BC. We have ten copies on record, each dated a thousand years after it was written. Homer's *Iliad*, the next most reliable ancient document to the Bible, has a 400 year gap between its time of original writing

HEBREWS 11:1^A
MATTHEW 16:15^B

IT IS STRIKING THAT ACCOUNTS OF JESUS'S LIFE FROM OUTSIDE THE BIBLE DO NOT DENY JESUS'S MIRACLES, ONLY THEIR SOURCE.

and the earliest of the 643 copies we have.³ Meanwhile, there are over 5,000 copies of the New Testament in existence, and all copies date from between 50 and 225 years of their writing.⁴ Our understanding of Jesus's life and words, and the events surrounding them, is far more reliable than that of Caesar, Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient figures.

Many people perceive Bible translation to be like a 2,000-year game of telephone: one person whispering a message in someone else's ear, who whispers it to the next person, and down a long line until the final message has little in common with the original. Actually, modern Bible translations are made directly from original source texts based on this collection of ancient manuscripts. The scribes (mostly monks) who copied them were famously meticulous. They checked and rechecked to confirm accuracy. The biblical documents that have been discovered are astonishingly consistent. Nearly all the discrepancies between manuscripts are small and have little to no effect on a passage's meaning. Most Bibles include notes indicating these differences as well.

External sources corroborate the Bible's descriptions of Jesus. Tacitus and Josephus, both first-century historians, reference Jesus in ways consistent with the accounts of the four Gospels (written narratives about him). Even the Jewish Talmud, certainly not biased toward Jesus, parallels biblical details. "We learn that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock, gathered disciples, made blasphemous claims about himself, and worked miracles, but these miracles are attributed to sorcery and not to God."⁵ It's striking that this account does not deny Jesus's miracles, only their source.

All this evidence provides a solid foundation for believing that what we read in the Bible is what the original writers wrote and experienced in real life, in real places. Much

like reading about World War I battles from a 1918 copy of the *New York Times* would reasonably be concluded to be accurate. Plenty of evidence confirms the source.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT HIMSELF, AND WHAT DO WE MAKE OF IT?

Jesus made a number of shocking statements about himself: "I am the way and the truth and the life."⁶ "I give them [my followers] eternal life, and they shall never perish."⁷ "I and the Father are one."⁸

In Jewish society during that time, there was no mistaking what Jesus meant: he claimed to be God himself. This enraged many religious leaders, who made him a target.⁹ But, rather than rescinding his claims, he made them a focal point of his teaching. He commended those who proclaimed him as God or worshipped him.¹⁰ He equated a person's attitude toward himself with the person's attitude toward God. To know him was to know God.¹¹ To see him was to see God.¹² To believe in him was to believe in God.¹³

When Jesus's life was at stake for making such startling claims, the Jewish high priest questioned him directly: "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"

Jesus's answer? "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." To which the high priest and other leaders condemned him as deserving death.¹⁴

⁶ JOHN 14:6
⁷ JOHN 10:28
⁸ JOHN 10:30
⁹ MATTHEW 12:14,
MARK 3:6,
LUKE 4:29,
JOHN 5:18, 10:33
¹⁰ MATTHEW 14:33,
16:15-17,
JOHN 6:68-69, 12:13
¹¹ JOHN 14:7
¹² JOHN 12:45, 14:9
¹³ JOHN 12:44, 14:1
¹⁴ MARK 14:60-64

THERE ARE ONLY FOUR POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR THESE BOLD CLAIMS:

1) HE LIED.

Perhaps Jesus knew he was not God, but deliberately deceived his hearers. However, Jesus's teachings carried undeniable power and wisdom. Many who deny his deity still consider Jesus a great moral teacher. But if he were lying about the most central part of his teaching, could he be a great moral teacher?

backs up his claims to deity. He actually invited this examination: "Even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in Me, and I in the Father."^L

2) HE WAS MENTALLY ILL.

When someone makes the kind of statements Jesus made, we instinctively assume they're mentally ill. But Jesus's life shows no evidence of the abnormality or imbalance we find in those who suffer from schizophrenia, paranoia, or the like. He stunned people with his wisdom, displayed incredible composure under pressure, and attracted many followers through his teaching and personal presence. Would someone suffering from delusions or mental instability be able to accomplish what Jesus did?

WHAT WAS HIS CHARACTER LIKE?

The quality of Jesus's character was such that he could challenge his opponents with the question, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"^M Sin means any wrongdoing, moral failure, or violation of God's standard. Those he addressed would have jumped at the chance to point out a flaw in Jesus's character, yet they didn't.

Jesus's twelve disciples walked alongside him for three years. They had every opportunity to see any chinks in his moral armor. Yet John and Peter, two of these men, proclaimed his sinlessness in their writing.^N This is especially striking because these Jewish men would have been trained from childhood to believe that sin was inherent to all humanity.

3) OTHERS INVENTED HIS CLAIMS.

Did enthusiastic followers from later centuries create a legend that misrepresents who Jesus truly was? The Bible's reliability, and even validation of Jesus's life by non-biblical sources, render this explanation unlikely. Eyewitnesses could have easily come forward to dispute what was being proclaimed in the Gospels, but we have no record of it.

WHAT DO HIS ACTIONS SHOW?

Jesus demonstrated both power and compassion. He restored sight and hearing, healed a variety of diseases, and reversed paralysis. His miraculous power even extended to nature and physical objects—he commanded a raging storm to cease, turned water to wine, and fed thousands with five loaves of bread and two fish. He even raised several people from the dead. Again, his opponents, both in the Bible and in outside sources, don't deny these miracles. Rather, they decided to kill Jesus, perceiving him to be a threat to their power.^O

4) HE TOLD THE TRUTH.

The most plausible explanation is that Jesus was being consciously truthful when he said he was God. We need to look at his life, then, to see whether it

DID JESUS REALLY DIE AND RISE FROM THE DEAD?

The ultimate evidence, though, was Jesus's resurrection from the dead. On several occasions, Jesus predicted his death, in what manner it would happen, and that he'd rise from the dead three days after his burial.^P This was the great test: it would either confirm or destroy his identity.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, Christianity has no validity. Jesus was just a man who lived and died. Martyrs, missionaries, and millions of others who have staked, and even given, their lives on his claims have been deluded fools.

On the other hand, if Jesus resurrected himself, it means that he can fulfill all he offers us: forgiveness of sin, eternal life, a constant comforting presence. We can know what God is truly like and respond to his invitation to know him and his love for us in a personal way.

DID HE ACTUALLY DIE?

Crucifixion was an especially heinous form of capital punishment. Jesus was lashed with a multi-cord whip embedded with metal or bone. Soldiers placed a mock crown of long thorns on his head and beat it into his skull. Then he was forced to carry his cross through city streets to the hill of execution. Once there, they drove nails through his wrists and feet to secure him to the cross.

In spite of this cruelty, suffocation is what ultimately killed victims of crucifixion. The manner in which they were suspended, their body weight pulling them downward, made it nearly impossible to breathe. Jesus had to use the nails as leverage to push himself upward, his bloodied back scraping against the rough wood. The Bible reports that he hung for three hours before giving up his life. To confirm his death, a soldier thrust a spear into his side.

One theory proposes that Jesus actually passed out and was only thought to be dead. He later revived in the coolness of his burial tomb.

The tomb itself was hewn from solid rock. Jewish leaders had remembered Jesus's statements that he would rise, and suspected that his followers might try to steal the body, so they persuaded the Romans to station a guard of soldiers nearby and sealed the tomb with an official Roman seal. Jesus, weakened by an incredible loss of blood and days without food and water, would have had to extricate himself from the tightly wrapped, mummy-like grave clothes, roll away the heavy stone, and disable several Roman soldiers. It seems impossible.

^L JOHN 10:38

^M JOHN 8:46

^N 1 PETER 2:22,

1 JOHN 3:5

^O JOHN 11:48-53

^P MATTHEW 16:21,

17:22-23,

LUKE 9:22, 18:31-33

DO ALTERNATIVES TO RESURRECTION MAKE LOGICAL SENSE?

Historians rarely dispute Jesus's actual death, and the fact that three days later his tomb was empty. Both critics and followers of Jesus agree on these facts. But other alternatives to the resurrection story have been presented throughout the centuries.

MATTHEW 28:11-15^a
MATTHEW 16:16^k
JOHN 8:12^s
JOHN 3:16^t

The first story to circulate was that Jesus's followers had taken the body while the Roman guards slept.^a There were likely at least four soldiers, possibly more. Is it likely they'd all sleep on duty, given that doing so was punishable by death?

One proposal is that Jewish or Roman authorities moved the body. Another proposes that the women who first encountered the empty tomb had gone to the wrong place. In either case, the authorities could have publicly displayed Jesus's body, smothering Christianity in its cradle.

Another theory is that those who reportedly interacted with Jesus after the resurrection experienced visions or hallucinations. While this might explain one or a few experiences, the Bible states that Jesus appeared to more than 500 people in various locations, and on several occasions to large groups. Mass hallucinations and the large number of different people and locations of these interactions don't sufficiently explain them.

WHAT DO THE LIVES OF JESUS'S FOLLOWERS INDICATE?

Consider how distraught the disciples would have been when Jesus died. The man they believed to be the long-anticipated Messiah was executed by the oppressors they hoped he'd subdue. Yet within a week they began to claim personal interactions with Jesus, and the joy and conviction these encounters produced lasted through the rest of their lives.

Were they lying? Was it a massive hoax? This wouldn't adequately explain their paradoxical joy and enthusiasm in the face of their leader's death, nor would it explain their willingness to take their message to the grave. Each of the disciples was tortured or executed for proclaiming Jesus as a physically resurrected Lord. Not one recanted.

Men and women will die for what they believe to be true, though it may in fact be false. They do not, however, die for what they know to be untrue. If someone ever tells the truth, it's on their deathbed.

The best explanation for the drastic conviction of Jesus's followers is an actual resurrection.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR YOU?

Earlier we mentioned Jesus's question, "Who do you say that I am?" He puts this question before all people, including you. Analyzing evidence and even giving intellectual agreement to Jesus's existence and deity is a step short of what he desires for you. Peter's response to Jesus—"You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God"^k—shows faith and devotion that goes beyond mere affirmation of facts.

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."^s If you've ever been in a dark, unfamiliar room, you know the feeling of insecurity it brings. You cast about for any sort of bearing. Anxiety ratchets up. You feel lost, frightened, uncertain. But when the light goes on, security, confidence, and peace set in. The same is true when one steps from darkness to the light of life in Christ.

The anxiety, emptiness, isolation, and more that we feel is largely because fulfillment and purpose are ultimately found only in Jesus. We were created by God, for God.

The Bible makes clear that though we were made for close relationship with God, our sin—that imperfection, violating God's standard, or, in truth, rebellion from him to take charge of life ourselves—separates us. So he sent Jesus with this promise: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."^t

ASK YOURSELF... OR A FRIEND

1. What are some things or people in which you've placed your faith in the past? What evidence, reason, or experience did that faith stand on?
2. Do you find the reasons why the Bible can be trusted compelling? Why or why not? What other questions about the Bible's reliability do you have?
3. Have you encountered, or thought of, any alternatives to the resurrection other than those mentioned here? Based on what you've read in this article, are those proposals plausible? Why or why not?
4. After reading all this evidence for and information about Jesus, who do you say he is?
5. This article focuses on logical and objective evidence. Jesus invites more than an intellectual response though, one also of devotion and trust. What, if anything, causes you to hesitate giving Jesus that trust?
6. Have you felt a need for God, or longing for more than what you've experienced in your life? How so? How might Jesus meet those needs and longings?
7. Would you like accept Jesus's invitation to know and follow him?



VIDEO: SCAN THE QR CODE TO WATCH A VIDEO CALLED "FALLING PLATES," WHICH (REATIVELY ILLUSTRATES WHAT JESUS DID FOR YOU AND WHY. (LENGTH: 4:07)

Jesus certainly could have avoided crucifixion. He even said so himself.⁴ So while the Jewish leaders and the Romans thought they were punishing a blasphemer and revolutionary, Jesus knew the true reason: he willingly submitted to death in order to receive the punishment we deserved for our sin—spiritual death, estrangement from God.⁵

An eternity estranged from God is the trajectory our lives will naturally follow. But Jesus offers a radical, transformative redirection. He offers complete forgiveness and assurance of a relationship with him throughout life on Earth and into eternity. You can begin that relationship simply by inviting Jesus into your life, even now.

JOHN 10:17-18^v
ROMANS 5:8-11, 6:23^v

The words you use are unimportant. What matters is that you respond to Jesus, to what he has done for you and is now offering you. You could say something like, “Jesus, I believe in you. I admit my sinfulness and brokenness and need for you. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I ask you to forgive me and come into my life. I want to know you and follow you. Thank you for coming into my life and giving me a relationship with you, right now.”

If you placed your faith in Jesus, or have questions and want to learn more, we want to help. The QR codes below lead to a primer on the Christian faith, helpful resources for spiritual growth, and opportunities to find a community of Jesus-followers near you. You might also want to tell the person who gave you this magazine—they’d love to celebrate this new life with you!

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?



SPIRITUAL GROWTH RESOURCES



FIND CRU NEAR YOU



ENDNOTES

- 1 From dictionary.com.
- 2 Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 122-145.
- 3 Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 55.
- 4 Scholars debate the exact date of writing for each NT book, but the most widely held view places each within a lifetime of Jesus’s death.
- 5 Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland, *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 40.

Jesus certainly could have avoided crucifixion. He even said so himself.^v So while the Jewish leaders and the Romans thought they were punishing a blasphemer and revolutionary, Jesus knew the true reason: he willingly submitted to death in order to receive the punishment we deserved for our sin—spiritual death, estrangement from God.^v

An eternity estranged from God is the trajectory our lives will naturally follow. But Jesus offers a radical, transformative redirection. He offers complete forgiveness and assurance of a relationship with him throughout life on Earth and into eternity. You can begin that relationship simply by inviting Jesus into your life, even now.

JOHN 10:17-18^v
ROMANS 5:8-11, 6:23^v

The words you use are unimportant. What matters is that you respond to Jesus, to what he has done for you and is now offering you. You could say something like, “Jesus, I believe in you. I admit my sinfulness and brokenness and need for you. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I ask you to forgive me and come into my life. I want to know you and follow you. Thank you for coming into my life and giving me a relationship with you, right now.”

If you placed your faith in Jesus, or have questions and want to learn more, we want to help. The QR codes below lead to a primer on the Christian faith, helpful resources for spiritual growth, and opportunities to find a community of Jesus-followers near you. You might also want to tell the person who gave you this magazine—they’d love to celebrate this new life with you!

WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?



SPIRITUAL GROWTH RESOURCES



FIND CRU NEAR YOU



ENDNOTES

1 From dictionary.com.

2 Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 122-145.

3 Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 55.

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