

Jesus Among Other Teachers

JESUS AMONG OTHER TEACHERS

**WHEN SCHOOL QUESTIONS
YOUR FAITH**

JOHN DANIEL McWILLIAMS

Jesus Among Other Teachers: When School Questions Your Faith

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Should I *think* about spiritual things?

This may seem to be a strange question, but there are those who say Christians should rely on *feeling* rather than *knowing*—that this makes us more spiritual.

Suppose you want to make a new friend. So, you select a suitable person and start studying them. Every day you watch the person. You ask people around you about the person. You find out about them online. Eventually, you know all about them. You know their favorite music, what they watch on TV, their hobbies—you know them *very well*.

Not only would this be creepy, it would be a lousy way to build a friendship. In fact, would that person even be your friend? Does knowing *about* someone make it a relationship? Of course not! Friendship is about being *with* someone—knowing about them personally and enjoying their presence. Talking with them. Laughing. Crying. Going places with them. Doing things together.

But consider this... When you have a friendship, don't you also *know* things about the person? At first you knew a little about them (that's why you became interested in them). Then by being with your friend, you learn more and more about them. The more time you spend with them the more you know them. You know their habits, their favorites, their fears. After a while you even finish each other's sentences. By having a *feeling* relationship, you also develop a *knowing* relationship. *Both are important!*

Unlike other religions, Christianity is about a *relationship* with your Creator, not just knowing about Him and learning a bunch of rules! Jesus came into the

world so that we could *know* him—not just study him. However, just as with our other friends, we learn more about Him as the relationship grows.

It's easy for some people to go to one extreme or the other in their relationship with God. You probably wouldn't like it if one day your best friend said, "I don't want to know anything else about you. I just want to enjoy the friendship we have now." A real friend would *want* to know more and more about you. Friendships are constantly growing. In the same way, as our relationship with Jesus grows, we should want to *know* Him better.

In His Word, the Bible, God has given us many details about what He is like. Since He is our friend, He wants us to know Him. The more we know about him, the stronger our relationship with Him grows. Over the years, our organized learning about God has become known as *theology*. The facts God has revealed about Himself and His creation are called *doctrines*.

Often when someone uses the words *theology* or *doctrine*, the reaction is, "Oh, no... more boring, brainy stuff!" In a way, that's sort of true. Studying the facts without considering the relationship can be boring. And sadly, there are many people who spend their whole life learning about God, yet they never have a relationship with him. But can you imagine learning facts about your best-friend-forever who happens to be the Creator of the universe and *you*? Could anything be more exciting!

So, should Christians think? Yes! Jesus said you should "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and *with all your mind*."¹ He wants

¹ Matthew 22:37

you to *think* about Him and *learn* about Him so that you can *love* Him more and more!

We'll look at theology and doctrines often in this book but always remember, our purpose in knowing *about* God is to grow our friendship *with* God.

Is it all okay to use logic and reason in studying God and the Bible?

God values faith, but He gives abundant evidence of His truths. Over the centuries, very intelligent Christians have uncovered strong, real-world indications of God and what the Bible teaches. Unlike other religions, the Christian's faith is reasonable and based in reality. It has stood firmly through over two thousand years of doubt, ridicule, and criticism. We would expect nothing less of an Almighty Creator!

The organized study of the evidence for Christian truth is called *apologetics*. ("Apologize" literally means to *give a reason*, not to *be sorry*.) In the next sections, we'll use a lot of apologetics.

Does it Matter Whether I'm Liberal or Conservative?

Can I Tolerate Intolerance?

How do I find out about God?

I've never met George Washington. He must have been an interesting person. His home, Mount Vernon, still stands in Virginia. Even though no one living today was a personal friend of Washington, we can know a lot about him by visiting his house. We can see what his mealtime would have been like. We can imagine that he was an organized person by the design of the farm. We can see by the architecture and furnishings that he enjoyed simple beauty and practicality.

The Bible tells us that we can know a little bit about God from observing what He has made. Our earth (in fact, the whole universe) is an orderly place, filled with beauty. Atoms and molecules behave in specific ways. Animals and plants seem to live in purposeful relationships with each other. Planets, stars, and galaxies move in orderly, predictable patterns. Moreover, we have sensory organs and brains that can actually perceive all of this!

The Creation (universe) seems to be here and do things "on purpose" and not just randomly. Even people who have never read God's Word believe there is something (someone) out there who started everything.

We might even go a step farther and say that this “someone” must be orderly and creative. He must enjoy beauty. He must care for us since He made us capable of observing and appreciating His creation. These “clues” about our Creator are a type of *general knowing*.²

Washington’s home gives a small peek at what he was like. His writings, however, tell us much more about him. When I read what Washington wrote, I know him much more personally. As powerfully as nature speaks to us about the Creator, God wanted us to know even more about him. Unfortunately, our limited human minds alone could never come close to learning more about the unlimited Creator of everything. Unless He decided to *tell* us more, we would never be able to know more.

Thankfully, God was willing to tell us about himself! In His written Word, the Bible, God gave us everything He wanted us to know about Him personally. The Bible is a type of *special knowing*. It tells us some of the things about God that we could never have learned any other way. Parts of Scripture are stories of how God dealt with other people. We learn a lot about God’s character by the way He interacted with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and many others. The events in the *Old Testament* (the first part of the Bible, written before Jesus came to earth) let us know that God is trustworthy, all-knowing, all-powerful, wise, and loving. He also spoke through special messengers (prophets) about His nature and what pleases him.

In the *New Testament* (the second part of the Bible) God spoke to us in a very unexpected way. The Creator

² Or *general revelation*...facts about God revealed by nature. God’s Word is considered *special revelation*.

of the universe actually came to earth Himself as the man Jesus. For the first time, people could communicate with God face-to-face! Jesus even said that whoever saw Him was seeing God.³ In human form, Jesus showed us many things about God through His teaching and His actions.

Today, we have the benefit of the Old and New Testaments to give us information about God. Through the Bible, God gives us every single fact that we need to know Him and enjoy living in His creation. But simply having the Scriptures doesn't mean we know what they say. The Bible encourages us to study it and keep on learning about God and reality. I know many very old people who say they have studied God's Word all their lives and are still finding new and amazing things about him.

It's also important to listen to God's teachers. He often explains the Bible to me through other Christians such as pastors, teachers, and even my friends. God also promised to send His Spirit to help us understand the truths He has given through the Bible. The most important thing is to stay close to your Creator Friend who loves you and wants you to know him! We stay closest to Him when we read of Him in the Bible. Then we pray, think about him, and listen as the Spirit makes things clear.

³ John 14:9

Where did God come from?

This question definitely shows how limited our understanding can be. God didn't come from anywhere because He has always been! He is *eternal*.

We have difficulty comprehending something that has always existed since everything we observe around us was caused by something else. This is called the principle of *cause and effect*. You push a swing (cause) and it moves (effect). Your parents (cause) had a child (effect).

Let's apply a little logical thinking. Try to go backward along the cause-and-effect chain...

What allowed you to push the swing? Your muscles.

What allowed your muscles to move? The bowl of cereal you had for breakfast.

What caused the grain to have energy? The sun.

What caused the sun to shine... and so on and so on...

But do you see that we can't keep going back forever? It also doesn't make sense that something could just pop into existence out of nothing. At this point, we have to imagine the very first "cause" that started everything. The ancient Greek thinkers considered this the *First Cause*—something that had to have always been, that had nothing that caused it. Christians believe that God was the First Cause.

This seems quite believable since God claims to be the first cause. Also, it would make sense that the first cause would have to be greater in all ways than the

effects it creates. Something can't produce another thing more complex than itself.

As God on earth, Jesus claimed to be eternal. He called Himself the "Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End" (the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet). This didn't mean that He had a beginning or an end, but in a way our minds could understand He was saying that He exists throughout eternity, from past to future.

God has also created us as eternal beings. Although we all had a beginning, we are promised that we won't have an end. We are said to be *everlasting*. Certainly, my body will someday end, but my spirit, the real me, will live forever. Those who trust in Jesus will enjoy eternal (everlasting) life with Him in heaven forever and ever. At that time, maybe we'll begin to understand eternity!

Is the Christian's God the same as Allah, Buddha, Brahman, and others?

Some religious people claim that all the gods of the different religions are just different ways of thinking about the same being. They often say that as long as one sincerely worships *a god*, it doesn't matter which one. Many with good intentions of tolerance and inclusion tell us we should consider all religions' deities equal and acceptable.

In one sense, the name we call God doesn't matter. Some people may use the Hebrew name *Yahweh* while

others pronounce it *Jehovah* or call Him *Lord* or *God*. The Greek name for God is *Theos*, the root used in several languages such as the Spanish *Dios*. These are all referring to the same being—the God of the Bible.

However, it's a different matter altogether when a name for God refers to a different being with a totally different history, relationship, and communication. For example, when a Muslim speaks of the supreme being he worships, is his *Allah* just another name for Yahweh? Some would say yes, since they are both thought of as the supreme spiritual being who interacts with humans.

But the Muslim's Allah is defined in a completely different context compared with the God of the Bible. The Islamic belief denies that Allah is a trinity. There is no Son, therefore, no cross, resurrection, or payment for our sin. Islam demands that a person earn their way to "heaven" by giving service to Allah.

Hindu and Buddhist "gods" are mere "forces" and not personal. Their ideas of sin and redemption are nothing like biblical truths. Like every other human-made religion, they require people *do* things for salvation rather than accept what has already been *done*.

Today, it's common to hear sweet-sounding memes like "All roads lead to God." This is far from the truth found in the Bible. Yahweh God says "I am the Lord. There is no other!"⁴ Moreover, Jesus claimed there is only *one* God, and He assured us that He *is* the only way to know Him.

⁴ Isaiah 45:5

Why does God let bad things happen?

It's no secret that bad things happen all the time. What was the last bad thing that happened to you?

Some bad things are not too bad... I dropped my phone in the puddle... There's a pimple on my nose...

Some are really bad... a severe illness... the death of someone you love...

Many people ponder this problem. Some people get mad at God when bad things occur. They ask "If God is all-powerful, *couldn't* He have stopped this tragedy? If God is loving *wouldn't* He stop this tragedy?"

These are good questions that sometimes cause people to turn away from God or doubt that He is what He claims to be. In fact, many who are opposed to God and Christianity say that some "tragic event" in their life was the cause. What answers can we give someone in this situation?

When we have a problem with God or the Bible, it's usually a good idea to consider whether the problem might be in our *thinking* rather than with God or His Word. Sometimes it's wise to back up and see the "big-picture" of life and reality rather than focus on the problem. Let's look at some ways Scripture deals with bad things...

First of all, it's important to see that God didn't intend for bad things to be a part of His creation. In the very first chapter of the Bible, God looks at His creation and says, "It is good!" It wasn't until the sin and rebellion of humans that this world started falling apart and things began to go wrong. We'll discuss this event

later, but for now just note that God created “good” and people brought about “bad.”

Then can’t God fix this problem? The answer is a definite “Yes!” The entire story throughout Scripture is about Jesus coming to earth and sacrificing Himself to reset the world back to “good.” This is called *redemption*. Jesus died to *redeem* not just the things of the world, but the people of the world! God was able and willing to deal with the “badness” caused by human sin. Yet that brings up another issue—timing.

After thousands of years of “badness,” God is still in the process of making things right again, but we’re very impatient creatures. We want our problems fixed now. That’s okay. Sometimes God does fix our problems quickly. He may immediately heal disease, supply needs, and mend relationships—or He may wait. We’re promised that in the future, Jesus will return to earth and completely eliminate sin, evil, and all bad things. The world will be just like heaven is now—perfect and good, without pain, suffering, or unhappiness.

Another thing to consider is that very often, bad things can bring about good things. You’ve likely heard “No pain, no gain.” We see this in many ways. An athlete suffers through hours of agony to reach a physical goal. A mother endures the pain of childbirth in order to enjoy the love of a child. Imagine trying to explain to a four-year-old why Mommy and Daddy want to put her in a hospital so that a medicine can make her sick then cause her to be weak, miserable, and bald. Yet the parents know that it’s the only way to stop the cancer that’s hurting their child. From God’s view, bad things can bring good things. From our view—it hurts!

Scripture tells us that not everything that comes our way will be good, but it can definitely work to bring about good.⁵ Unfortunately, we don't always know immediately what God is up to in our lives. This is when we must trust in His attributes of love, mercy, grace, wisdom, and omniscience. We know that whatever God allows in our lives is best for us because He is perfectly *good*. Like a good parent He is more concerned with our long-term well-being than our momentary suffering.

Sometimes, I get either too busy or too selfish to keep a strong friendship with God. God knows that I am happiest when I trust Him and rest in His love and friendship. Even when I stray from him, God still loves me. He might use problems and suffering to cause me to see my condition and want to come back to him.

Even though we know things will turn out good in the end, it's still not pleasant to have to deal with troubles and sorrows from day to day. The Apostle Paul encourages us to try and keep that big-picture view of things mentioned earlier. He says that our "brief" problems here on earth will seem worth it some day when we look back from an eternal perspective.⁶ Compared with our future everlasting joy, our present pain and sorrows will seem very small!

Are there things God can't do?

⁵ Romans 8:28

⁶ 2 Corinthians 4:17

Sometimes people say that God can do *anything*. He is, after all, omnipotent. We also describe Him as unlimited, unbounded, absolute, and perfect. But are there things that God simply can't do?

You may have heard the riddle: *Can God create a stone so big that He can't lift it?* The question shows faulty thinking about God and His nature. God can't do something that can't be done. This may sound like silliness, but it's really only a language problem. The stone-lifting question is an example of a *logical impossibility*. In other words, it isn't logically possible for "A" to be "not A", or for $1 + 1$ to not equal 2. In simplistic terms, logical impossibilities and absurdities don't exist in reality, so whether God can "do" them is a non-question. This doesn't mean that God is limited by logic and mathematics. These concepts are part of God's eternal nature—absurd ideas are not.

Being total perfection, any one of God's attributes can't contradict another attribute. For example, some ask why He can't simply ignore our sins just because He wants to? It's because that application of His *mercy* would contradict His attribute of *justness* (fairness).

God is also *holy* which means he's "set apart" or "different" from all His creation. This requires that He *not* be some things. God can't be the same as something He created, so there are many things His nature forbids Him from being.

Scripture gives several other truths about God's limitations. Hebrews 6:18 tells us that it's "impossible for God to lie." For Him to be untruthful would be in opposition to His character. Scripture also tells us that God can't change, be unfaithful, act unjustly, and anything else contrary to His nature.

Is God just the “feeling of love” among people?

John 4:16 tells us “God is love, and whoever stays in love stays in God.” This verse is often quoted by those who think of God as a “force” rather than a real being. They like to think of our Creator as a worldwide “feeling of happiness” that doesn’t hold us accountable for sin.

It’s clear from other scriptures that God is so much more than this. He also has attributes such as righteousness, holiness, goodness, justice, and many others. Moreover, God is a *person* with consciousness, emotions, and will. When John referred to God as “love” He was emphasizing one of the Creator’s most important attributes for Christians. Because God perfectly displays the attribute of love, He redeemed us from our sin and gave us eternal life!

The attribute of love does make God different from other supposed gods of other religions. Other gods are claimed to be loving, but it is more of an “add-on” to their personality. The God of the Bible has had love within His very being from all eternity. But who did He love before creating other beings? Only a *triune* God can solve this paradox. The three Persons of the Trinity have been in an eternal loving relationship. Love has always existed and is the driving force of God’s dealings with us, yet it is only one of his perfect attributes.

Did humans invent the idea of God just to meet their needs?

Some unbelievers claim that humans made up gods and other “superheroes” because they feared death, or they wanted to explain complicated things. They would say the God of the Bible is just wishful thinking.

It’s true that many people groups who have never heard of the Bible make up imaginary gods and goddesses to explain the world around them. Maybe we should turn the question around and ask why people seem to have a deep-down urge to make up gods.

Someone once said that we seem to have a “God-shaped” space in our hearts that only God can fill.⁷ Perhaps it makes more sense to say that since God made us specifically to have a relationship with Him that He also put that aspect inside us. We have a *need* for a “god” because that’s how the true God designed us! We desire happiness because we were designed to live in a happy place. We don’t like it when things go wrong because we were designed for a place where things don’t go wrong.

Of course, this reasoning only gives an alternative view. In other sections, we’ll look at specific evidence for the true God.

⁷ Blaise Pascal

Why doesn't God come down and prove himself?

If God really wants people to believe in him, why doesn't He come down from heaven and let us see him? Wouldn't a few simple miracles here and there fill the churches?

That's a very good question, since God obviously has the power to do that. We also know that He really wants to have a personal relationship with each one of us. Since God is all-wise and all-knowing, there must be a good reason for His "hiddenness." There are several reasons that might explain this.

One day when I was very young, my dad said he was taking me to a fishing spot he found when he was a boy. We set out through a thick forest on a path I had never used before. It was a scary place and at that point, I could have questioned my dad's plan. I could have said, "Wait, Dad... Can you show me a map to make sure you know where you're going? Or can you explain where this place is?"

But I knew my dad and I knew he loved me. He had always been honest, intelligent, and wise. My relationship with him allowed me to have *faith* in His love, ability, and intentions. I really didn't need the *sight* of a map! I'm sure my dad was more pleased that I trusted him than if I had demanded a detailed plan.

God places importance on our *faith* in Him. He is pleased when we "...walk by *faith*, not by *sight*."⁸ God

⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:7

desires the kind of relationship with us that leads us to trust His plans. This doesn't mean He's angry when we look for evidence of Him. When the apostle Thomas doubted that Jesus had risen from the dead in a physical body, Jesus came to him and asked him to examine His wounds to see if He was real. I'm glad we have Thomas's example, because I sometimes need a little more proof as well. God is kind enough to give evidence when we sincerely need it.

Also, when we take the first step of putting faith in God's intentions, He often gives us bits of evidence that prove our faith was correct. However, the usual order is *faith* first, *seeing* second.

But back to the question... "Why doesn't God come down and show himself?"

Actually, He already has in a very real sense! God literally came to earth as the man Jesus. The Creator God walked among humans as another human. He performed miracles that only God could do. Sadly, even this didn't convince most people, and even today most people don't believe the truth of these historical events.

Also, the first chapter of Romans tells us that God is certainly making Himself known...

Through the created universe, we can clearly see the invisible God and His true nature and power (Romans 1:20).

We live in a purposeful world that couldn't have "just happened." Our universe is orderly, complex, and beautiful, telling us that there must be a Creator who values those things, and has the power to bring them about.

What exactly does it mean to be a Christian?

Originally, the word “Christian” was used to mean someone was “Christ-like” or simply “a follower of Jesus the Christ.” Early followers of Jesus often paid a high price for carrying that name. They were persecuted or killed for being *Christians*.

Unfortunately, today the word Christian has different meanings for different people. Some call themselves Christian because their society somewhat follows Christian principles. Others go by the name simply because they don’t consider themselves atheist, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or something else. Many people consider themselves Christian because they try to do good works and agree with some of the ideas that Jesus taught. There are even some people who think they are Christian just because they were raised in a Christian family or had some ceremony done when they were born.

In the truest sense of the word, however, a Christian is one who personally trusts Jesus to forgive their sins and give them eternal life. Furthermore, a true Christian is obedient to the Words of Jesus and the Bible. They want Jesus to be the *Lord* (ruler) of their life. They are indeed *Christ-like* because they are saved and have a relationship with Jesus the Christ!

And that brings up another very important thing for believers to do. Scripture is clear that God expects us to join with other believers. Even though we might do some things individually, God intends for us to work together. Jesus Himself called this group “His church” and “His body.” Some think that belonging to a church is just an option we can choose for occasional preaching and parties. However, the Bible describes the church as a crucial part of the believer’s life! We can receive some things better as a *body* than as an individual.

Finally, for the rest of your life on this earth, God will be continually shaping you into the image of Jesus. This is called *sanctification*. The more we live the Christian life as the Bible describes the more our relationship with our Creator grows. Like any other friendship, we grow through experiencing things together. Then someday, the relationship will continue into an eternal adventure with our friend Jesus. God’s Word promises that this part of the journey will be even more thrilling and spectacular than its earthly beginning!

What am I?

There's a short cartoon about the beginning of Olaf the snowman from Disney's *Frozen*. The little snowman suddenly realizes he's a conscious being and wonders where He came from and what He is. You may have had similar thoughts. What am I? How did I get here? Why am I here? That's good! It means that you're a thinking person with a desire to know about things.

You may have heard theories about what humans are and how we got to where we are now. Some naturalists believe we are just evolved animals with oversized brains, able to ask questions about our world. These people would say that we are simply chemical machines consisting of cells and organs and such that have been evolving randomly for ages. They would conclude that we are just "accidents" caused by mindless evolution and that we really have no purpose.

The Bible gives a completely different explanation. God says we are special beings, created in His image and made to have a relationship with him. It tells me that I am purposely made to glorify my Creator and to share a loving relationship with him.

My Spirit, the real me that will live forever, is now living in a physical body that is made of molecules and existing in a physical world. The apostle Paul says that my physical body (the one I see in the mirror and the one that lives in the physical world) is like a tent that the real

“me” (a spirit) is now living in.⁹ My *tent* (body and brain) is physical (atoms, molecules, and energy), but the real conscious *me* is spiritual (*not* atoms, molecules, and energy).

A good way to think about it is: *I don't have a soul, rather I am a soul who lives in a body.*

What is my purpose in the universe?

Every human who thinks has pondered this question. The Bible gives a clear answer. In the words of an old Christian creed, our purpose is to “glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”¹⁰

Perhaps the most important question in life, the simple answer is overlooked by so many. For reasons only God Himself knows, He created humans to be His “image-carriers.” Like mirrors, we somehow reflect God’s nature, and this brings honor to Him.

But this is by no means a selfish act of God. Believers will spend eternity enjoying the unlimited treasures of God. Scripture says we will *rule* with God. We will *do things!* Adventurous things. Creative things. Important things. And the joy will never wear off. Even this glorifies God since it reveals him to be good, merciful, generous, and the source of all good things.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:1-8

¹⁰ Westminster Shorter Catechism

If God created a good world, why are things so messed up?

The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells about God creating the world. We would expect a perfect being to create a perfect world, and according to Scripture, that's just what God did. After each creation event, God even declares "This is good."

But the creation of humans, was a unique event. If the purpose of humans was to reflect the image of God and have a relationship with him, then these beings would have to be free to choose to love. Would you want your friends to be your friends because they had no choice? Who wants robots for friends? In order for love and friendship to exist, the giver of love has to be free to *give* or *not give* love. Only love that is freely given is real love.

But that involves the possibility that someone might not choose to give love or to obey. In a similar way, that's what happened with Adam and Eve, the first people created by God. At first, this couple lived in the garden at Eden in perfect friendship with their Creator. The Bible says Adam and Eve spent time with God every day in the garden.

But as an indicator of whether their friendship and obedience were true, God told them that a certain tree in the garden had fruit that they must not eat. Adam and Eve now had a real test of their love for God. Did they really love him, or would they decide to disobey Him if a selfish opportunity came?

Satan, in the form of a serpent, convinced them that it would be better to disobey God and eat the fruit. The

serpent led them to question whether their Creator really had their best interest in mind. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve decided it was better to ignore God and try to improve themselves without His help. They ate the fruit. The first sin was done...

God then allowed the couple to experience the consequences of turning away from the perfect plan of a perfect God. A world without God's goodness is a world that doesn't work well at all. From what the Bible says, the effects were immediate. Living things began to die. Things began to fall apart. Nothing worked perfectly anymore.

This event is called the *Fall* or the *Curse*. Instead of a world that reflected the perfection of its Creator, it now showed all the signs of a world separated from God. The entire universe headed toward *entropy*, a scientific way of saying decay, deterioration, and death. The Fall also affected all of Adam's and Eve's descendants (that's us). We inherited their fallen sin nature.

From a scientist's point of view, I'm amazed by the complexity and beauty of how nature works. And this is after things have been messed up by the Fall! I can't imagine a perfect world without death and decay, but we know that was God's original plan. Thankfully, God is merciful!

Immediately after the Fall, He gave the promise that a "seed" of Adam and Eve (one of their descendants) would someday reverse the effects of the curse and redeem not only the physical world but fallen humans as well.¹¹ We now know that this promised *Messiah* was Jesus. Although we don't see it yet, His death on the

¹¹ Genesis 3:15

cross redeemed the cursed world. God's Word tells us that right now it's as though the whole world is "groaning" as it waits for the full effect of this redemption.¹² At a future time, Jesus will officially "reset" the creation back to its original state.

Unlike other religions, the hope of Christianity is that a "messed up" world will eventually be made right again. Since I have a mind that's also affected by the Fall, it's hard to imagine what a perfect world will be like, but I can certainly say "Bring it on!"

How do I know what is true and what is false?

Suppose I told you, "Broccoli is the best tasting food ever!"

I would imagine there are lots of people who would disagree. Some might even say that broccoli is the *worst* food ever. You might argue that pizza is the best. Your friend might say tacos.

But I still say, "The best tasting food is broccoli!"

And not only do I make that statement, I also say that the statement is *true*.

"Wait a minute!" you exclaim. "What's true for you may not be true for me!" And you would be correct. The flavor of broccoli could be delicious to one person and

¹² Romans 8:19-23

horrible to another. Flavor is a *preference* and people might *prefer* different things. A statement about your preference could be true for you but not true for me.

Now let me make another statement: “Broccoli is a plant.” Suppose one of your not-so-scientific friends says “No, broccoli is an animal.” Your friend is not arguing about a preference. No matter how much this person *prefers* to call broccoli an animal, the *facts* about what we can observe about broccoli tell us it’s a plant.¹³

So, some things are *relatively true* and others are *absolutely true*. Our preferences and opinions may be relatively true which means they are true for some but maybe not for others. However, things that are absolutely true are true because they are based on reality. Absolute truth is true even if most people don’t believe it. It’s even true if *no people* believe it.

There is much disagreement in the world today over which beliefs are relatively true and which are absolutely true. In fact, most people question whether *any* truth is absolute. This idea, called *relativism*, claims that most or *all* beliefs are relative. So, if I say something is true, a relativist would say, “It may be true for you, but not for me.”

For example, I think that knocking you down and taking your lunch money is wrong. Not only does it just seem wrong to me, God gives a commandment in His Word that says “You shall not steal!”

However, a relativist might say that that shouldn’t be a strict rule. What if someone was very, very hungry

¹³ Some may still argue that our facts about plants and animals (or reality in general) are wrong, but the Bible, science, and common sense in general assume that that facts about the world around us are knowable and consistent. We’ll stick with that belief.

and had no money? Shouldn't they be allowed to steal someone else's lunch money? Or what if someone's little sister was very, very hungry? Would that now make it right to steal?

You can see how the idea of absolute truth can lead to some sticky disagreements. You may even be thinking of some other extreme situations in which stealing would be okay.

This is where an important faith principle comes into play. The Bible teaches that when God gives a clear rule about anything, that is an *absolute truth*. God is the ultimate "decider" of what is true or false, good or bad, right or wrong!

We also know that God's nature is to be perfectly loving, righteous, unchanging, and fair. He can't possibly be wrong in any rule that He sets forth. So, even if my mind seems to find something wrong with God's truth, the wrongness must be in my mind.

This is a difficult idea, even for some believers. It also goes against what our culture says. Most people want to believe that God's clear principles can have all types of exceptions. (Usually this is because we want to be the exception and have things our own way.)

It takes courage to stand on God's truth. There is no promise that it will always be easy or popular. It is, however, absolutely true that God expects us to know His truth and to stand in it...

We know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we can know Him who is true. We are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus. He is the true God... (1 John 5:20).

Obviously, I'm not free to interpret God's Word from my own views and desires. I must be certain of what God actually says through the Bible. If I claim that something is *absolutely* true, I must know *absolutely* that God said it! This can only come from the spiritual discipline of studying God's Word and keeping a strong relationship with Him.

How do I know what is good and what is bad?

Is it good to be kind to your friends? Is it bad to hurt an innocent child?

You likely didn't have to think long about either question. Isn't it interesting that you seem to know the difference between good and bad things without having to be taught? Yes, you were probably taught things you should do and things you shouldn't do, but it was because you chose not to do the right thing—not because you didn't know.

Philosophers have spent a lot of time thinking about that. Humans (unlike other animals) seem to have a built-in sense of right and wrong. Some claim it's just a result of evolution within a society. (If humans weren't kind to their friends, our species would have died off.)

I feel it's something more, and God's Word backs up that feeling. Scriptural explains that we were created in *God's image*. God knows right from wrong and so do His image-bearers. Romans chapter 2 says that even

those who haven't heard God's law, still know that it is there, telling them right and wrong. God has "written His law" on human hearts.

We often call this a *conscience*. Some consider it strong evidence for an intelligent Creator, since it would be hard to imagine evolution producing such a sense. Atheists and other naturalists are at a loss to explain why they feel things are right or wrong but have no reason for the feeling.

In addition to a conscience, believers have another "internal guidance system." When I put my trust in Christ, God put His Spirit inside me. The Holy Spirit is even more specific in guiding me to know good/bad, right/wrong, and true/false...

When the Spirit comes, He will guide you into all truth. (John 16:13).

Is it wrong to judge others?

I was once in a church service when I began hearing a man a few rows back whispering. Then he began mumbling out loud.

"How rude!" I thought. "This is a very important sermon, and this guy is ruining it!"

Then he began making sounds as though he was mocking the speaker. I was becoming angry. I got up and walked back to his seat. Immediately I saw the real situation. This man was having a seizure of some sort. The good news was, he was taken for treatment and ended up okay.

The bad news was, I acted on my bad interpretations. I judged him to be an insensitive jerk, and that certainly was not the case!

It's a very popular idea in the world today that "tolerance" = "good" while "judging" = "bad." Is it safe to always assume that what seems bad might be good? Is it always bad to judge the behavior of someone? A better question might be "What does God's Word say about judging other people?"

When a judgment is made about someone today, many people would shout "Wait, didn't Jesus say 'Judge not?'"¹⁴

Unfortunately, the rest of the passage is typically left off. He actually said, "Judge not, or you will be judged." In the context of this entire passage, it would be interpreted more like "If you judge someone else, make sure you aren't guilty of the same thing." Jesus goes on by using *hyperbole* (an exaggerated example), "Why would you try to advise someone about a speck in their eye, when there's a huge stick in your eye?"

This passage is about being a hypocrite, not whether judging is right or wrong. Other verses give much better insight about judging. In John 7:24, Jesus says "Judge the right way—not by mere appearance." So, Jesus indicates there is a proper way to judge another person.

God's Word tells us to stay away from false teachers. We can only do this by judging their words by the truths of Scripture. We are also expected to help others who are trapped in sinful practices. Again, this can only be done if we first determine (judge) someone's behavior as being sinful.

¹⁴ Matthew 7:1

There are three problems to avoid when we might feel the need to judge. First, we can judge only another person's *actions*—not their *motives*. The Bible defines certain actions that are clearly wrong (lying, stealing, lusting, murdering, etc.) God has *already* judged sins such as these, and we are justified in agreeing with Him when a person commits those sins. However, we are not justified in judging *why* a person acts in a sinful way. Only God Himself knows the mind and motives.

Second, we should only judge that which God has indeed *clearly judged*. For example, stealing is always a sin, but what about video games? I know a person who believes all video games are sinful. There may be some truth in what he believes. It's quite possible that video game-playing might cause someone to waste time which could be spent on more godly pursuits. Or a case might be made that video games make the player more violent. Whatever the belief, video game playing in itself isn't something *clearly* judged in Scripture. God is able to judge these situations, but I'm not.

Finally, if I feel good or superior when I notice someone sinning, I am not judging the *right* way that Jesus described. God's children are saddened by sin and want others to repent and stop sinning. Judging another person's sinful behavior is for a clear purpose—to help that person stop sinning. The attitude "I'm-better-than-you" has no place in judging the actions of others. We must always deal with others in love, gentleness, and a helpful, humble spirit.

Why are there people who don't believe in God or choose not to follow Jesus?

God's Word tell us we shouldn't be surprised that many people won't follow or even believe in Him. Jesus Himself said that relatively few people will trust Him for eternal life.¹⁵ God's offer of forgiveness through Christ is open to everyone, but sadly, most stubbornly refuse it.

Some claim to be *agnostic*. They claim they're just not sure enough about Jesus to follow him. Others say they are *atheists* who deny that God exists. There are still others who believe in God, but give reasons for not trusting Jesus for salvation...

- “Why would God allow suffering? I can't follow a God like that.”
- “I'm nicer than most Christians. Why do I need Jesus?”
- “My good deeds outweigh my bad deeds. Surely I'll get into heaven.”
- “Heaven sounds like a boring place. I'd rather not go.”
- “All religions will get me to Heaven. I think I'll choose an easy one.”
- “I want to have fun first, then someday I'll accept Jesus.”

We tend to think that non-believers have intelligent, logical, or scientific reasons for not believing in God or

¹⁵ Matthew 7:13

accepting biblical truths. The fact is most non-believers refuse to believe simply because they don't want to. Humans are selfish by nature and want to live their own way. Scripture tells what happened when light (Jesus) came to the earth...

The light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil (John 3:19).

It isn't a *thinking* problem as much as it is a *feeling* problem. Non-believers prefer to keep their sins because they like it that way. It's okay to discuss the logic (or illogic) of a person's disbelief. Ultimately though, when sharing Jesus with others we should present the good news just as the Scripture does and let the Spirit lead them: *God is willing to forgive your sins through His Son Jesus, if you'll turn from darkness to the Light...*

have not placed themselves under God's goodness. Only believers who love God can rightly claim His protection.

Also, "all things" will eventually work to bring about "good" for the believer. It doesn't say all things *are* always good in themselves. When I'm in the middle of some of these "all things," they may not seem good at that time. God's promise, though, is that eventually even these bad things will bring about good for me. What a wonderful peace it brings to know that not a single molecule will ever move without His knowledge and permission!

Is there a real devil?

There may have been a real King Arthur who lived in 5th-century England. However, the facts about him have been made so legendary that we might not recognize the real man from all the fanciful stories about him.

The Bible tells of a being called the devil. Because there have been so many “mythical” ideas made up about him, there are people who claim that this being doesn’t really exist. Some say “The Devil” is just a term we use for the “combined evil acts” that happen in the world. Nevertheless, God’s Word describes him as a very real personality, and it provides some useful warnings about him.

There are several names for this evil being. The word *devil* means “accuser.” This refers to one of the things he does. Like a schoolroom tattletale, the devil is constantly pointing out the sins of God’s children. Another name is *Satan* which means “enemy.” Several Old Testament scriptures indicate that this being was the angel Lucifer. This name “Lucifer” means “shining one.”

So, where did Lucifer come from? We know that all things, living and non-living, were created by God.

There are absolutely no beings that God did not create. Then did He create an *evil* being?

According to the Bible, Lucifer was one of God's most fantastic creations. Scriptures seem to say that he was the angel in charge of leading the other angels in praising God, maybe like a heavenly choir leader.

Originally, Lucifer was good, powerful, and flawless since God wouldn't make anything evil or imperfect. But God didn't make mindless robots. He wanted the angels (and us) to have the freedom to choose to love and obey him. And if there is freedom to choose obedience, there must also be freedom *not* to choose obedience. In one of the saddest events in cosmic history, Lucifer, used his freedom to oppose his Creator.¹⁶ He arrogantly decided that he would take over as god of the universe.¹⁷

But remember... *Lucifer is not the opposite of God.* He was created by God. As great and powerful as he is, he has never been even close to God's equal in any way. Satan isn't omnipresent. He isn't omniscient. He isn't omnipotent. He works only as far as God allows.¹⁸

Then couldn't God do something about him? Actually, He did... God immediately cast Lucifer out of heaven. (We now refer to him as Satan or the devil.) God also created a place to put Satan called Hell. Someday God will permanently put Satan there. The question is, why is He waiting? Why is this devil now free to do evil things in the world?

We've already discussed why God might allow bad things to happen. We don't know all of God's reasons

¹⁶ Ezekiel 28:12-15

¹⁷ Isaiah 14:12-14

¹⁸ See Job 1-2

for doing things. Perhaps He allows Satan to do some bad things in order to bring about good results. Martin Luther called Satan “the ape of God” as if Satan is on a leash and is only allowed to do what fits into God’s big-picture plan.

It’s very important that Christians realize that they have a powerful enemy, but that whatever happens, God is still much more powerful and He’s always in control...

Children, you are from God and have overcome, for He [God] who is in you is greater than he [Satan] who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

Do supernatural beings ever appear on earth?

We’ve discussed God’s angels—both the faithful ones and the fallen ones. Are there angels at work today? Although some would say the Holy Spirit could easily do their jobs, there is no indication that God has stopped using His divine messengers. Scripture reveals that righteous angels can and do interact with humans.

The New Testament tells of several angelic appearances.¹⁹ Angels may take on a human form. Lot's angelic visitors seemed to look like men (Genesis 19). Hebrews 13:2 says that sometimes we might meet angels and not be able to tell them from ordinary people.

Are there “guardian angels” that watch over and protect us? Jesus seemed to indicate that at least little children have angels assigned to protect them.²⁰ I did a lot of dangerous things as a child. My angel must have been very busy!

But if righteous angels can appear on earth, can fallen, evil angels do the same? Scripture warns us that Satan can disguise himself as an “angel of light.”²¹ What appears to be a good being could actually be the devil just pretending to be friendly and helpful. I would guess that his demonic helpers can do this, also. This makes sense, though, since Satan's goal is to deceive and lie. His lies would seem more believable coming from a good being than a scary one.

All of this shouldn't worry the believer, however. God is certainly more powerful than any fallen angel. Evil beings may seem frightful, but they can only work within God's permission and plans. We should rest in this truth and at the same time be aware of Satan's trickery.

¹⁹ Angelic appearances: Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25), wrestles with Jacob (Genesis 32:22-32), with Gideon (Joshua 5:13-6:27), the fiery furnace (Daniel 3:1-30), leads Peter out of prison (Acts 12:1-19), Gabriel speaks to Mary (Luke 1:26-38), tells the disciples Jesus will return (Acts 1:1-11), announces birth of Jesus (Luke 2:8-20), announces Jesus has risen (Matthew 28:1-10).

²⁰ Matthew 8:10

²¹ 2 Corinthians 11:14

God's Word encourages us to "examine the spirits to see whether they are from God."²² Any being or spirit that is truly from God will agree 100% with what the Bible says about Jesus. No matter how good and friendly someone appears, if they change the truth in Scripture, they are *not* from God!

In general, both righteous and fallen angels usually work unseen. Not every weird event is caused by a supernatural being, so there's no need to go around looking for supernatural beings. It should give us great joy and peace to know that the greatest of all supernatural beings, the Creator of everything, is working continuously in the life of every believer.

What is a miracle?

What exactly is a miracle? We use the word in so many ways.... "It was a miracle that she passed the exam... He miraculously made the goal at the last second... The beautiful newborn is such a miracle... The fever is gone! What a miracle!"

²² 1 John 4:1-3

But is it really a miracle every time a rare or “wished-for” event happens? Let’s define what a real miracle would look like. Unusual events aren’t necessarily miraculous. If you entered your name in a big drawing for a new bicycle, you would probably have a very small chance of winning.

But we know *one* person *will* win the drawing. If you win, it may seem to be a miracle from your view. But from the view of the rest of us, you just happened to be *the one*. Random events may appear to be miraculous when that’s just the way math works. As a scientist, I define a real miracle this way...

Miracle: An event in which a supernatural being changes an earthly situation by altering physical laws.

The resurrection of Jesus was perhaps one of the greatest miracles ever. Normal physical laws would have made Jesus’s body decay and turn to dust just like every other dead body. But God (a supernatural being) changed these laws and put life back into dead cells.

Jesus Himself worked many miracles. The laws of math and physics would say that a little bit of bread and fish would feed just a few people. Although Jesus was fully a man, He was also fully God, and His supernatural nature was able to change these laws and make a *little* equal a *lot*. Who would imagine that a basket of food could feed thousands!

Jesus also changed physical laws to walk on water, calm storms, heal the sick, and raise the dead. Was this some kind of magic show to entertain people? Absolutely not! Even though people were amazed by

His miracles and many benefitted from them, the main reason Jesus performed miracles was to show who He was—God in human form. He said that we can believe His teachings because His miracles reveal Him as God (John 10:38). Some of the followers of Jesus also worked miracles and for the very same reason. The truth of their teachings was verified by their power to do the miraculous.

Can miracles happen?

Some *naturalists* deny that miracles actually happen.²³ There are also Christians who believe biblical miracles had natural explanations and didn't need supernatural acts. *Deism*, in particular, is the belief that God created the universe then just let it go without interfering in any way.

I meet many Christians who seem embarrassed by Bible miracles. They feel that belief in supernatural intervention makes us seem old-fashioned or crazy to the rest of the world. But doesn't it make sense that One who is powerful enough to create the universe out of nothingness could also alter His creation whenever He wished? Which is easier—feeding thousands with a basket of fish and bread or creating an ocean full of fish and the DNA of a wheat plant?

²³ *Naturalism* says that only the natural world exists and there is no supernatural world—no God, spirits, or afterlife.

The answer is neither. God can do a “big” miracle as easily as a “little” miracle! But obviously, miracles are very rare. God’s universe is incredibly complex and orderly. It does very well in working by itself like a well-designed machine. A person could live their entire life without witnessing a direct miracle, and God is no less God!

Nevertheless, we should not doubt that God *can* work a miracle any time and any way He pleases. We should boldly believe that miracles were as real as any other event recorded in the Bible.

How do I know a miracle when I see it?

Many people today claim to have experienced miracles. As we have seen, miracles are probably very rare, although God can certainly work miracles as He pleases.

When miracles occur in Scripture, it’s never like “Hey, wouldn’t a miracle be great right now!” Instead there is always a clear purpose that usually is even more important than the miracle itself.

For example, when Jesus fed thousands with a basket of food, it was more than just filling hungry tummies. Jesus was always about teaching His disciples. They would be the ones to start the spread of the gospel to the world. They needed first-hand experience in what God is like and what He can do. If ever they doubted that God could provide the needs of His people, the disciples could think back to the little basket.

When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, of course this was beneficial to Lazarus himself. But it was much more than just a kindness to His friend. The big lesson for all who witnessed this miracle was that Jesus even has power over death. If Jesus can solve the biggest problem we have in this life, surely he's able to deal with our little worries!

So, the best way to tell whether something today is a true miracle is to compare it with Bible miracles. Here are some things that all biblical miracles had in common...

- Although God may have used people to do the miracle, there was never a question that it was God's power.
- Those who received the miracles were helped, but biblical miracles were mainly meant to support what the Bible says about God.
- Miracles never went against Scripture or added new truths.
- The result happened immediately and there was no doubt it was real (not like some kind of trick).

Compared with biblical accounts, many modern "miracles" are clearly false. God *can* and *will* use miracles as He pleases, but we should be careful about claiming something as miraculous and guard against those who might try to trick us for their own gain or reputation.

emotions, will, and all the attributes of God. He is a *person*.

Even though we tend to give the Spirit less attention than the Father and Son, He is in all ways equal with them. In Scripture, the Spirit is perhaps less noticeable because He works more “in the background” of believers’ lives. The Spirit actually *indwells* or “lives in” the believer (1 Corinthians 3:16). In addition, He does many other things for the believer...

- Teaches and reminds (John 14:26).
- Gives knowledge and wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:10-11).
- Reveals truth (John 16:13).
- Helps our weaknesses (Romans 8:26-27).
- Gives spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:7-11).

Far from being an eerie ghostly presence that comes and goes, the Holy Spirit is always near and connected with our spirits, even when we don’t recognize it. The Spirit is our constant, faithful helper in making us more like Jesus.

Do we know the man Jesus actually existed?

The question is usually asked this way: “Do we know anything about Jesus other than in the Bible?” This is often called the *historical Jesus*.

There are numerous references to the man Jesus in historical documents from early historians Josephus and Tacitus. Interestingly, many facts about Jesus come from His enemies and critics whose writings obviously center on a real, historical person.

We should be careful, however, that we don't get the idea that the Bible is not trustworthy in telling us about Jesus (or anything else it tells us.) In another section we see evidence that the Bible is a very reliable account of Jesus's life and teachings.

What is Jesus's real name?

In a way, I have several names. I was born into the *McWilliams* family. My parents decided to give me the first name *John*. Sometimes, my parents called me *Son* and my close friends call me *Johnny*. Some names are more like titles that refer to something I do like *Teacher*.

Jesus has always been God (the second Person of the Trinity), thus we could refer to Him as *God* or *Lord*. In Jesus' time, names tended to describe a person in some way. Long before Jesus was born as a man, Isaiah said one of His names would be *Immanuel* which means "God with us."

At the beginning of the New Testament, an angel told Mary to name her child *Jesus*. This is the English pronunciation of the name *Joshua*, but His Hebrew family and friends would have called Him *Yeshua*. (In a similar way, other languages might pronounce *John* as *Juan*, *Jean*, *Johannes*, or *Ian*.)

As Jesus began His ministry, many called Him *Rabbi* (*Teacher*). Eventually, some of His followers realized that He was *Messiah*, the deliverer prophesied in the Old Testament. The title *Christ* (*Chosen* or *Anointed One*) was often added to His name. The term *Christ Jesus* or *Jesus Christ* would be like *President Washington*.

Because Jesus is the central figure in all of history and fills so many roles, Scripture uses many names and titles to describe him. Just to name a few...

Wonderful Counselor
King of Kings
Redeemer
Lamb of God
Prince of Peace
Alpha and Omega

How privileged we believers are to know Him as *Savior*, *Friend*, and *Brother*!

Why did Jesus have to die?

Jesus did many good deeds during His earthly life. He healed people and raised the dead. He taught principles that changed the whole world for the better. Two thousand years later, mankind is still reaping the benefits of the values preached by this Jewish carpenter.

But Scripture leaves no doubt about Jesus's primary mission on earth—to redeem sinful humans by sacrificing His life. His purpose was to die so that believers might live eternally!

In the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before His crucifixion, Jesus prayed to God the Father. He asked that if His mission could be accomplished in any other way, let that happen. The Holy Spirit answered Jesus's question. The only way to pay for the sins of the world was for Him to die as a sacrifice.

Our human minds have trouble understanding this aspect of reality—the fact that our sins can only be paid for by death. As eternal creatures, the price for our sinfulness would be to suffer an on-going death for eternity. The animal sacrifices of the Old Testament were only symbols pointing to what Jesus would one day do. In some way that is difficult to fathom, the death of a perfect, sinless man (Jesus) could be substituted for our deaths.

Jesus's death was not a tragic accident! He said “I lay my life down... No one takes it from me” (John 10:17-18). I am unspeakably thankful that Jesus obediently and lovingly suffered and died for my sin!

Was Jesus half man and half God?

In our earthly bodies with earthly fallen brains, we have limited understanding. I look forward to the day when my new heavenly body will finally begin its journey of eternal learning. Imagine, each day discovering more of God's unlimited universe. How many times will I say, "Oh, so that's the way that works!"

My earthly mind can't comprehend the Trinity—three Persons, yet one God. Nor can I understand how Jesus could be God and man. Jesus was completely, 100% human just like you and me. He experienced hunger, pain, joy, sadness, love, and even temptations. The difference was, He had no sin nature.

However, Jesus was also 100% God! In our math, this may seem a contradiction, but not in God's. The Trinity remained the Trinity while the 2nd Person, Jesus, walked the earth in human form. As a human, He did all the things that every human did (except sinning). He ate, breathed, got tired, and probably even skinned His knees. Jesus had human needs and desires (without sinning). He experienced happiness, sadness, love, wonder, anger, and frustration.

But what about the God-nature (*divinity*) of Jesus? In a way we don't understand, Jesus was able to "set aside" or not use some of His Godly abilities (see next section). Jesus had to grow up and learn things just like you and me! Scripture doesn't tell us how this worked

or how much Jesus knew about certain “heavenly” things while in His earthly body. Whatever the case, Jesus set an example for us for living a life that is righteous and dependent on God the Father.

Did Jesus still know everything while He was a man?

Interestingly, Scripture tells us that the young man Jesus grew in size and *wisdom*.²⁴ If He was 100% God, didn't He already know everything? Wasn't He all-wise, being God? In some way, it seems that Jesus limited His own privilege to use His *divine* attributes.²⁵

Jesus could have saved Himself from many situations (even His death) had He wished. He never stopped being all-powerful, yet He usually chose *not* to use His divine powers. There are times He seems to allow His omniscience in some cases. Jesus saw Nathanael under a fig tree even though far away.²⁶ He also knew the past actions of the Samaritan woman at the well.²⁷ Of course, when in accordance with the Father's will, Jesus could work miracles and call upon His divine nature.

²⁴ Luke 2:52

²⁵ This is called his *kenosis* or “self-emptying.”

²⁶ John 1:48

²⁷ John 4

Did Jesus ever say that He was God?

There have always been people who want to lower Jesus's status to merely a gifted human. They claim "Of course Jesus was a great teacher or prophet. He obviously was very 'tuned-in' to God, but He certainly *wasn't* God in human form, nor did He ever say He was God."

Although the writers of the New Testament all recognized Jesus as God, it's true that Scripture never records Jesus saying the exact phrase: *I am God*... But as you probably have learned, there are many ways to say something clearly without actually saying it.

First, Jesus was worshipped as God and was called God by others and He never corrected them. The Bible tells of several angel encounters in which a person falls down and begins worshipping an angel. Angels always stop the people and say something like, "Wait, hang on! I'm just an angel. Don't worship me." Jesus had opportunities to do this, yet He accepted worship as God. He also said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 14:9).

Jesus made the unusual statement that He existed before Abraham—2000 years before.²⁸ He claimed to be equal with the Father.²⁹ Jesus claimed the ability to forgive sins which the Bible clearly teaches only God can do³⁰

Perhaps Jesus's most obvious claim to be God is in His blatant use of God's name when referring to himself.

²⁸ John 8:58

²⁹ John 5:17-18

³⁰ Mark 2:5-7; Isaiah 43:25

Jesus Among Other Teachers

In the book of John, Jesus uses the “Yahweh” name of God several times...

I AM the way, the truth, and the light.

I AM the good shepherd.

I AM the vine.

I AM the bread of life.

I AM the light of the world.

I AM the resurrection and the life.

I AM the door.

These sayings lose their full meaning in translation. When Jesus used the “I AM” (Yahweh) name of God as the subject of His sentence, the references were quite clear to His enemies. He was claiming to be God! They grabbed up stones to kill him. When Jesus asked them why, they replied...

It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God. (John 10:33)

There's no doubt that Jesus not only did the works of God, He communicated the fact throughout His ministry that he was indeed *God*.

How do we know Jesus really rose from the dead?

Did Columbus set foot on North America in 1492? Was President Lincoln assassinated while watching a play? Did Washington really chop down a cherry tree?

That's one of the problems with history. Unless we were there to see it, we may not believe it. We may hear from people who were there, or we may read reports written by people who were there. Either way—seeing is believing, or more accurately, not seeing might be not believing.

Most of the time we apply different levels of “trust” when we study historic events. When a lot of people or writings agree on something, we tend to believe it. If there is only one story about an event or if the storyteller is not believable, we usually find it harder to believe. The point is that with past events, we have ways of determining how reasonable an account might be.

Likely, the resurrection of Jesus is one of the most hotly debated historic events, and for good reason. If a human truly rose from the dead that would be the ultimate miracle! And the Bible is very clear on this—if Jesus *didn't* rise from the dead, how can we believe anything else the Bible says?

So, what do we know about Jesus's resurrection? What apologetic clues do we find in Scripture that show the biblical account is reasonable? Apologists have noted many different evidences, but I'll summarize just a couple³¹...

The people who lived at the time of Jesus's resurrection believed it. When the earliest New Testament books were written, many of the witnesses to the resurrection

³¹ For a deeper study, see *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* by Josh McDowell.

were still alive. Remember, hundreds of people had seen Jesus after His resurrection. If the story was just made up by the apostles, surely the public would have objected, “No way!” But this didn’t happen. These witnesses had no problem with what the New Testament said because *they had seen it*.

The leaders’ responses. The Roman and Jewish leaders certainly didn’t like the idea of Jesus rising from the dead. That would have meant they were wrong about everything. If the apostles had faked the resurrection, surely someone could have found Jesus’s body or exposed the conspiracy. They tried their best, but no one could disprove the resurrection.

Does God like science?

It surprises many people to learn that science was born from a biblical view. Other deities such as the Roman and Greek gods seemed to exist in a fantasy world with no solid physical laws. The God of the Bible, however, is orderly, dependable, and knowable. Early scientists who believed in this God could assume a universe that was *understandable* and *testable*. Just what science demands.

Johannes Kepler, the “father of astronomy,” said his work was merely thinking God’s thoughts after him. The Apostle Paul gives us one of the clearest connections between science and the Christian’s experience...

Ever since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.
(Romans 1:20)

Studying “what has been made” is a good definition of the true scientific process. In this verse, Paul says that there is enough evidence given about God through nature to make someone “without excuse” for not recognizing him. The book of Psalms also notes how the universe speaks to us about God...

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above tells of His handiwork. Every day it speaks to us, and every night it reveals knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)

Obviously, nature isn't a substitute for the gospel message, and the study of science in itself does not lead one directly to Jesus. However, Paul does imply that this clear evidence for an intelligent, mindful Creator should encourage unbelievers to search further. *Real* science glorifies God!

Since we have science, do we need God?

Imagine a person who grew up on a desert island with no contact with the rest of the world. Finally, he is rescued and taken to civilization. One day he finds a phone ringing. When he picked it up a voice came from it.

“Magic!” he cried.

“No,” someone explained. “It’s just an electronic device that changes radio waves into sound.”

“Magic!” the man exclaimed again. “Magic must be causing the waves that the device picks up!”

“No,” came a further explanation. “Another device far away is changing sound into waves and modulating the electromagnetic field.”

“Magic!” the man cried again. “An electromagnetic field magically exists that can carry a signal!”

See what’s happening? *Unknowns* were being revealed to the man one at a time. He’s beginning to fill in the blanks in his knowledge with real physical actions.

In the 1800s, Christian scientists used the phrase *God-of-the-gaps* to try to correct the “lazy” thinkers among them. They were concerned that instead of using

good science and logic, some people handled the gaps in our knowledge (unknown facts) by claiming, “It’s a miracle from God!”

For example, when it was found that genes were the cause of inherited traits someone wondered, “Where do genes come from?” Another scientist suggested, “...From God! He put genes in us by a miracle!” It was later learned that our genes come from our parents at conception. There was no miracle, so that gap was closed. Then the big question is: *Will science eventually close all the gaps in our knowledge, meaning there is no need for God?*

No scientific discovery has disproven God, the Bible, or the Christian faith (and according to Romans 1, it never will). Yes, science will continue to reveal more and more about God’s creation. We’ll find out many more of the mysteries hidden in God’s complex yet orderly universe. In a way, the fact that the universe works so well *without* constant, miraculous intervention is evidence that shows God’s great creativity and wisdom.

But scientists are finding that all the gaps can’t be closed. Science involves our senses examining the physical world. Science is really good at discovering the “whats” and “hows,” but *totally unable* to uncover the “whys.” The *why*-gap will always be beyond our physical senses and devices.

Physicists have theorized the universe back into the original singularity that “banged” into what we now see. The *cause* of this alleged “bang,” however, and the *reason for the cause* will ever elude science. Naturalistic scientists and atheists ignore logic problems and preach that science will eventually fill even the why-gap, but the physical limitations of science make this impossible. God will always be in that gap.

Is the Creation story in Genesis a real event?

In other sections of this book, we've examined the reasonableness of God and the Bible. Let's look at the creation just as the Bible does...

...in the beginning, God created...³²

Scripture doesn't try to explain God. It simply states the fact of His existence and that He created.

As a Christian and a science teacher, I've dealt with this topic extensively. The evidence ranges from the simple observation of the orderliness of nature to discerning the complex origin of information in a molecule of DNA. Chapter 1 of Romans reminds us that there is so much obvious evidence for a Creator in nature (*things that have been made*), that all who refuse to believe are "without excuse..."

For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking,

³² Genesis 1:1. The opening verse of God's Word.

and their foolish hearts were darkened
(Romans 1:20-21).

Note that the issue of nonbelief isn't due to a lack of evidence or even the misinterpretation of the evidence. The sad indictment is pronounced on those who *refuse to acknowledge* the Creator despite *knowing the evidence*. And the judgment has consequences in the here-and-now: *Their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

The creation is too often portrayed as a death match between science and faith. In the 17th century, astronomer Johannes Kepler was one of many past scientists who had no issue with a universe of miraculous origin. Despite popular opinion, many contemporary scientists also see no discrepancy between science and Scripture.

And realistically, the *who* of creation is the easy part for Christians. It's the *how* that raises questions. Four primary views are common among scientists and others who consider origins. There are numerous subcategories, nuances, and overlaps, but we'll keep it simple...

1. *Young Earth Creationism* accepts the literal interpretation of events in Genesis. The days of creation were six, twenty-four-hour days. Earth's age is roughly 10,000-*ish* years. There was also a worldwide flood that brought about many features we observe on the earth's surface.

2. *Old Earth Creationism* asserts that the days in Genesis are *figurative* or *symbolic* references to long

periods of time (billions of years). God created slowly, perhaps intermittently, all that we observe today, on earth and in the cosmos. Living things, including humans, were supernaturally created at appropriate times and experienced death for millions of years before the fall of Adam.

3. *Evolutionary Creationism (theistic evolution)* is basically the same as old earth creationism except that proponents acknowledge God used the process of slow evolution to bring life forms from ancient to modern. Little or no supernatural intervention was needed except perhaps in the very beginning.

4. *Naturalism (Darwinian evolution)* assumes only the physical universe. No intelligent, personal creator was needed, only random evolutionary processes. This is presumed to take long time spans to bring us to the present.

I appreciate the hard work of so many Bible-believing scientists who sift through piles of data from biology, geology, cosmology, and other fields related to origins. Like everyone else, I have my own view of creation events, but I've heard compelling arguments for the beliefs listed above (and several others).³³ There are

³³ My personal view of origins would be considered *young earth*. I realize there are data that seem to indicate a universe of extremely old age. I also see evidence that seems to contradict this, thus I've yet to find a good scientific reason for concluding one or the other. Because of this, my belief derives more from theology than from science. In my opinion, young earth creationism is the only alternative that addresses the sin/death issue. According to

still many questions to answer regarding *how* God created, and I would hope a healthy dialog will eventually resolve some of these.

It's one thing, however, to base views on legitimate data, yet quite another to disregard or eliminate particular alternatives simply because of their ties to supernatural intervention. I have a great deal of respect for scientists who might disagree with my take on origins because they have data that seem to support their conclusions. My problem is with Christian scientists who profess the supernatural as one of the bases of Christian doctrine, then reject it arbitrarily in practical applications to real events in the physical realm.

For example, the most flagrantly supernatural creation scenario is a literal six-day event, about 6000 years ago, in which God brings from nothingness the entire functioning universe, with strata and stars appearing to be of great age. Whether this is exactly true or not, the point is that often opinions rest on the degree of supernatural intervention with which one is comfortable: "If we are uncomfortable with the supernatural appearance of age, let's discard that and add a few million years. If the miraculous arrival of millions of fully formed species is a problem, let's throw in slow evolution." Again, *God can do a big miracle as*

Scripture (New and Old Testaments), death entered the universe by Adam's sin. There have been many attempts to circumvent this allegorically or etymologically, but the results are less than satisfying. And, I have absolutely no problem with God's supernatural intervention in any way he desires. I suppose I'll remain in the young earth camp until I find a good theological explanation for death without sin or a Savior with no need to save us.

easily as a little one. Beliefs should not be based on the *least supernatural* explanation.

What is *intelligent design*?

For centuries we have pondered “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and “I think, therefore, I am.” Science is somewhat limited in exploring these ideas, yet the created world undoubtedly affects our perceptions of them. These notions do lead scientists to ask two related questions: “Why is there *THIS something*, rather than nothing?” and “Why am I able to think about *this something*?”

These questions are especially troubling to those who refuse to believe in the Creator God. Seriously, why is the universe the way it is? There is no apparent rule within it that says it *had to be* this way. I can imagine countless ways it *could have been*. What if gravity was a little stronger? What if atoms had four primary particles instead of three? What if matter never condensed into planets and galaxies? In fact, why did there have to be any recognizable order at all? And that leads to the even more perplexing question “Why are we here as conscious beings able to ponder this order?”

Did you ever consider the complexity of a symphony orchestra? Imagine the collective hours of practice that prepared the mouths and fingers of the players. But don't stop there. Skilled players would be nothing without highly structured compositions to read and interpret. But keep going! Players and composers would be useless unless skilled instrument makers

followed precise, orderly plans for producing violins, flutes, and horns.

Need I say more? Of course! There sits an audience with ears able to convert sound energy into electrical signals. And don't even get me started on the brains that can take that conglomeration of complex nerve impulses and enjoy a concert! Our whole universe is filled with not just complexity, but layer upon layer of complexity.

While *naturalism* (the belief that only the natural universe exists, with no God) struggles to explain the source of this order and structure in the universe, those who believe in a purposeful Creator have no problem. This is especially true if one accepts the Christian doctrine of the Creator God as being personal, eternal, loving, and unlimited in every attribute.

This *teleological* (the appearance of purpose and design) argument for God's existence has been discussed throughout history. We also call this *intelligent design*. In the 17th century, William Paley used the example of finding a watch along a pathway. Would we assume the watch was the result of chance events? Did all the individual pieces of the watch just happen to all come together? No, it obviously would indicate an intelligent, purposeful "watchmaker." In the same way, Paley reasoned, we look at the orderly world around us and assume a Creator.

The more we learn about the intricate workings of cells, biochemistry, astrophysics, and almost every other branch of science, the more evidence of complexity and purposefulness we tend to find. What Darwin and other scientists believed were simple cell functions are now known to be way more complex. And keep in mind, the only alternative to purposeful design is that random, blind chance is responsible for all that we see!

What about evolution?

But what about evolution? Is there evidence for it? It seems that many textbooks, museums, and TV science shows just assume that evolution happened and that we must be idiots for not believing it.

Many non-scientists choose to avoid this topic, thinking it takes a degree in biology to understand it. Yes, there is complicated material to interest the expert biologist, but the basic idea of biological evolution (usually called *Darwinian evolution*) is fairly simple.

In its simplest form Darwinian evolution says this: “All life that we now observe has come about due to small, random, mindless changes over long periods of time.”

In other words, you are here now because of accidental chemical reactions that changed chemicals into cells, then to more complex animals, and finally to *us* all by blind chance. So, even a nonexpert, typical person could ask: “Does that sound reasonable?”

We could explore this idea in depth, and indeed many have.³⁴ For our purposes, though, the Romans 1 principle works quite well. Does our world around us *seem* to be the result of random, chaotic, purposeless changes?

No. As we discussed earlier, the universe seems to be orderly, purposeful, and created. Could these “signs” of intelligent design be a mistake? Could the universe look purposeful and not really be? Paul didn’t think so, and neither do a growing number of honest scientists

³⁴ There are many excellent resources that explain and give evidence for intelligent design. A good starting place is www.discovery.org.

today. I appreciate the fact that God has made the universe complicated enough to intrigue the experts yet simple enough to reveal Himself to everyone.

Digging Deeper Michael Behe, a leading intelligent design proponent, describes even some complicated systems which he describes as *irreducibly complex*. He uses a mousetrap as an example. There are seven parts that compose the traditional trap (wooden base, spring, trigger, etc.). If any of these parts were missing, it would cease to be a functional mousetrap, and according to Darwinian evolution, when a system loses function it will go extinct. Yet how could a mousetrap system ever evolve if it needed all seven parts at once to be a functioning mousetrap? What are the chances that all seven parts would have randomly come together *at the same time in the same place*?

Behe notes that biology is full of examples of this irreducible complexity. Even Darwin had problems with this concept in trying to explain how the human eye could have evolved with its many critical parts. What good would an eye be if it were lacking even one of these parts? And unless it was a functioning, beneficial eye, it would not have remained in the population.

How old is the earth?

Christians have different views about the age of the earth (and the universe in general). Two major views are common.

The *old-earth* view agrees with evolutionists that the universe is very, very old—around 10,000,000,000 (that’s ten billion) years or so. “Old-earthers” interpret the rock layers in the earth and other data as showing this great age. Those who believe in evolution naturally require long ages, since evolution is assumed to be a gradual process that could not happen without extreme long time periods.

The *young-earth* view takes a literal view of the book of Genesis in the Bible. “Young-earthers” believe the creation account in Genesis should be read simply and straightforwardly—God used *six real, 24-hour days* to create the universe. That would mean the earth is roughly 10,000 years old.

This is a *huge* difference! There’s no way to compromise these two ages and meet in the middle! Then who is right?

Remember, some beliefs about Scripture are *essential* and some are *non-essential*. Most Christians place these differences of opinion in the non-essential category. This certainly doesn’t mean they are not important—just that we can disagree and still be followers of Jesus.

So once again, who is right? As a scientist, I can see evidence that points to both views. However, I tend to be a young-earthier because of scriptural reasons...

- A simple, literal reading of Genesis seems to be speaking of real, 24-hour days.³⁵ (Old-earthers say these verses are simply poetic or figurative, and “days” could mean “eras.” Thus each “day” might be a billion years.)
- If Adam’s sin brought death to the universe, then old-earthers must explain how death happened for billions of years *before* Adam sinned (after the seven days of creation). That would mean that death would have been happening as long as living animals had existed. (Old-earthers would say that was millions of years before humans came along.) God would have created a system in which animals died violently and then proclaimed, “It is good.” This seems out-of-character for God as He is described in Scripture.
- The Bible teaches that supernatural (miraculous and *unnatural*) things can happen as God wills. Old-earthers usually have problems with supernatural events, thus a motivation for favoring long time periods. But creating something out of nothing *is* supernatural no matter how long it took! Couldn’t God create in seven days as easily as billions of years?³⁶

You will likely hear many variations of young-earth and old-earth views. The *most* important thing is to

³⁵ The word “yom” almost always means a simple day. Also, each day references “the evening and the morning were the __ day.”

³⁶ This would also explain the *appearance* of age. Old-earthers point to things in the universe which appear to be very old. But couldn’t God have created a universe that way? In fact, didn’t He? One second after Adam was created, he was probably observing large trees that appeared to be decades old although they had been created only days before.

understand *that* God created, not necessarily *how* He created.³⁷

Were Adam and Eve real people?

The event often referred to as the *fall of man* seems to be little more than a fairy tale today, even in many churches. Adam and Eve are considered myths, if acknowledged at all. Could their sins really affect us today?

Scripture is clear about the reality of the first human couple, and for good reason. Adam's sin was the cause for the fallen world and my sin nature. "Sin came into the world through one man, and death because of that sin" (Romans 5:12).

Jesus Himself spoke of the real-life Adam and Eve in explaining the significance of marriage vows (Matthew 19). Like any good Jewish boy, Jesus knew the Old Testament very well. Never in His teachings was there even a hint that certain parts were mythical.

So, what's the deal with eating the forbidden fruit? Why was this event so important? Here are some facts that Scripture gives us...

- Adam and Eve originally had a pure friendship with God.

³⁷ For more discussions about age-of-earth views, see answersingenesis.org, discovery.org, or reasons.org.

- The couple was in a state of innocence at this time.
- God always desired a free, loving relationship with humans. To test that relationship, He gave only one restriction—not to eat from a particular tree.
- In a free, selfish choice, Adam and Eve decided to disobey God.
- That choice (sin) broke their relationship with the Creator.
- The result was a “messed up,” sinful nature within, and a “messed up” universe in which they had to live.
- All that could come from these *fallen* parents were fallen descendants (us).

Many have attempted to make God out to be the “bad guy” for being so harsh. But this is simply because they don’t understand the *badness* of sin or the *goodness* of God. (Our sin nature has trouble accepting the idea that we have a sin nature!)

The modern view of humans is that we are “good down deep,” but our experiences can make us bad (selfish, cruel, greedy, unloving, etc.) However, Scripture is very clear about our true human nature: “I know that good itself doesn’t live in me” (Romans 7:18). At times, some people may choose to be “less bad” than they could be, but we all have a natural tendency to choose “bad.” (Only the Holy Spirit can give us the power to choose “good.”)

Not only did Adam’s sin cause humans to have a fallen nature, but the entire universe was affected. We

live in a world in which decay is normal. Things die. Animals eat other animals. Pain rules!

Does this seem like a condition for which God would say “It is good?”³⁸ Couldn’t an omnipotent and omniscient Creator do better? Of course, He could—and He did in the original creation.

It’s hard to imagine an *unfallen* condition, isn’t it? My fallen brain has experienced only a fallen world with rotting things, sick things, and messed up things. An imaginary Adam-and-Eve story leaves us wondering why things are the way they are.

I’m thankful that God in His mercy didn’t let the Story end here. Before the curtain falls on this tragic scene, the Creator promised a “fix.” A rescuer would come who would reverse the sin of Adam and “reset” our fallen nature and the fallen world.

Does God use evolution?

You have likely studied the theory of *evolution* in school. In simple form, it states that groups of simple living things may change into groups of more complex living things over long periods of time. The process of *natural selection* allows some genetic traits to remain while others are discarded.

The reason this theory has biblical implications is that some use it to say that God (or any creator) is not needed to explain the world we see. More specifically,

³⁸ Genesis 1.

humans could be the result of random, mindless genetic changes instead of the work of a purposeful Creator.

There are some Christians who believe that God might have used natural selection (evolution) to bring about the millions of different living things on earth.³⁹ They would have an old-earth view of history. Of course, God can do whatever he chooses. If He wanted to use evolution to cause all living things, He certainly could!

A better question, though, is “Did He use evolution?” This is another point over which good Christians may disagree. The Genesis account seems to describe a supernatural, miraculous creation, not a long, bloody evolutionary process. If God used evolution, then He would have ordained the violent death of trillions of animals (before Adam’s sin brought death). This seems to go against the nature of the God of life.

Was Noah’s ark real?

For most of us, the story of Noah and the flood is etched in our minds from storybooks and coloring pages. But “two-by-two, floating zoo, rainbows,”—isn’t all this better suited for a bedtime story than for real history? Can we believe what the Bible says about Noah, the ark, and the flood?

When we read Genesis 6 in an ordinary, literal way, it tells us that...

³⁹ This is called *theistic evolution*.

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- Noah was a real person.
- The whole world was terribly sinful except for Noah and his family.
- God's holiness wouldn't allow the situation to continue.
- God mercifully allowed Noah's family to escape His judgment.
- God instructed Noah to build a vessel to escape the coming flood.
- All the people on the earth were destroyed except for Noah's family.

Those who question the literal truth of the Bible attack the flood story on several levels. Here are some of the criticisms used by doubters and some responses...

The story was just an imaginary lesson about sin and judgment. Just as with Adam and Eve, the New Testament (including Jesus) spoke of a real flood event. Nothing about the story suggests that it was a myth.

A loving God would never destroy the world and all those people. This feeling is somewhat understandable since our sinful natures don't like to think about how bad sin really is. Some people don't want to admit that being *perfectly good*, God hates sin and must judge it in righteousness. God was merciful to Noah and his family by providing a way to live in a better world.

The ark part of the story involved too many impossible things... Could eight people build such a large vessel? Could samples of every species on earth fit into the vessel? How would you collect all those animals? Wouldn't some animals eat others? How could

eight people feed and water that many animals for over a year?

When we use the word “impossible” we should ask, “Impossible for whom?” Are any of these impossible for God? Of course not! If we believe that God created the universe supernaturally, why would we doubt that he could manage it supernaturally? The issue for Bible doubters isn’t so much a problem with believing the story as it is a problem with believing in a miracle-working God and whether His Word is trustworthy.⁴⁰

The flood was just a small, local event in Noah’s village. Doubters use this to dismiss the miraculous nature of the flood and ark. If the flood was only a small area, then the ark didn’t need to hold pairs of *every* species on earth, and it wasn’t a big deal. But Scripture claims it was a *very big deal!* The whole earth and all of the human race was affected.

There is no evidence for a worldwide flood. On the contrary, we live on a planet whose surface is 75% sedimentary rock (produced by rock particles settling out of water). Sedimentary rock typically contains fossils. These are the mineralized remains of living things which appear to have been buried quickly in these sediments. The surface layers of the earth contain

⁴⁰ However, when we really look at the flood account, there were only 3 supernatural acts: 1) the flood waters, 2) the animals coming into the ark, and 3) the closing of the ark’s door. Some of the other aspects *could* have been miraculous but didn’t have to be. For example, eight people working about 70 years could have built the ark. And not every single species was on the ark (probably no fish, crabs, jellyfish, etc.) The ark was *huge*. Plenty of room for land animal species. For full analyses of the flood events, these sites provide extensive resources: creation.com, answersingenesis.org, icr.org, or arkencounter.com.

billions and billions of dead organisms. We also see much evidence of massive amounts of water eroding and depositing rock material.

Although we use it as a children's story, the flood event is one of the ugliest in Scripture—not just the death of so many people and animals, but the sinfulness that led God to be sad that He had created humans. The flood account teaches us much about God's mercy, grace, and righteousness. We should never minimize its importance by considering any part of it a myth.⁴¹

Is there life on other planets?

In his *Space Trilogy*, C. S. Lewis imagines a solar system filled with *Hnau* (non-human space beings). According to the storyline, the parents of these races never fell in sin as did Adam and Eve. Death, sin, and evil are dealt with differently than on fallen *Thulcandra* (Earth). *Hnau* are also able to communicate with the angelic beings and have an unfallen relationship with God.

Lewis's fiction did bring up some interesting theological questions. Are humans the center of God's dealings? If there are extraterrestrials (ETs), do they sin? If so, does God offer them salvation from sin? Did God become one of them and live among them? Or do they

⁴¹ For full analyses of the flood events, these sites provide extensive resources: creation.com, answersingenesis.org, icr.org, or arkencounter.com.

have stories about a Savior who died for them in a galaxy far, far away? Will we someday teach them about Jesus?

These questions might sound odd, but the existence of non-earthly, conscious beings (other than angels and demons) would call for some theological answers. Today, we hear a lot about ETs, but despite our guesses, Scripture doesn't give a lot of clues about aliens. The Bible seems to place humans at the center of God's creative attention. God's grace, mercy, and love seem to be uniquely poured out on humans...

“It is not angels that God helps, but the children of Abraham” (Hebrews 2:16).

This passage is a comparison with angels, but the implication seems to apply to any possible beings.

I often hear the argument: “If Earth is the only planet with conscious beings, then why is the universe so enormous?” This question doesn't consider God's revealed nature. Our Creator's resources are unlimited. He often goes above and beyond “merely adequate” just to show his glory and his love for his creatures. Flowers grow in fields where no one sees them. Amazing fish are doing amazing things miles below the ocean's surface in total darkness. Besides, it's no more difficult for God to make a universe than a flower!

So, are there ETs out there (besides angels)? *We just don't know...*

Personally, the adventurer in me would like to meet some aliens out there somewhere. Who knows—in the vastness of Eternity someday, will God choose to populate other galaxies with other beings? I can only

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imagine. Whatever the case, we can rest assured that any beings we might encounter, now or later, will be God's creation.

Are parts of the Bible just stories copied from other religions?

Suppose a group of people witnessed the assassination of JFK—different people, same event. That night, one of the observers was interviewed for a news article, and the account was published the next day. Then suppose fifty years later, a reporter doing a “historical” article interviews another of the witnesses and creates a fresh documentary. Someone now compares the two documents and exclaims “Copycat! The piece published later is obviously copied from the original!”

This mistake is very common among Bible critics who aren’t aware of history or who choose to ignore it. We know that there are many ancient stories (older than Genesis) which include the first two people on earth who sin and are punished by their gods. Some of them include a garden or a snake, and they clearly mirror the biblical account. The same is true of the flood story. Sometimes, this is confusing to Christians who are taught that the Bible writers “borrowed” from other mythical stories.

The fact is, at one time, there was only one culture. When God divided humankind into many different cultures, each one would have still carried the same stories about their history. They would all remember stories about Eden, the fall, a serpent, angels, sin, a flood, and great-great-great grandparents who built a big boat.

Over time it wouldn't be surprising to find the different stories changed or purposely embellished to fit the new culture. Centuries later, when God inspired Moses to write the true versions of the stories, other older stories would naturally have some similarities.

I'm glad we have all of these similar stories about biblical events. Rather than making me doubt the biblical version, I believe these *extrabiblical* stories, even with their differences, actually support the ones in Scripture.

What is a worldview?

Some of my earliest memories are of the backyard on East 3rd Street. It seemed like a huge place. When I followed my dog Timmy to the back fence, the little tile house looked miles away. That was my world, along with occasional trips to town, church, and grandparents.

There were many mysterious things in my world. I recall watching through the fence as large, noisy trucks chugged by carrying long sticks on the back. Toward the end of most days, I remember hearing a low, mournful sound in the distance. Mama would comfort me, "It's just the mill whistle."

I didn't know what that meant, but it was enough to know that she knew and wasn't afraid. I began to look forward to the sound because it meant that in a little while Daddy would come home. He would always hug my sister and me as we met him at the door. Daddy smelled like something I never smelled in the backyard.

I figured it was just daddy smell. When I sat on his lap, I remember seeing little brown flakes all over his clothes. His pants had tiny holes with dark edges that mine didn't. My little brain pondered a lot of these mysteries.

I'm not sure about the details leading up to this particular event. One day my dad put me in the car, and we went to an unfamiliar place. It was noisy. Stick trucks were everywhere. Little brown flakes were blowing into the car window onto my pants. The smell in the air was my dad's smell, but much stronger.

Daddy pulled the car up next to a tall machine and said "Wait here. I'll be right back."

I watched as my daddy climbed a ladder to the top. He put on a strange hat and fiery sparks began raining down the side of the machine. In a minute, he crawled down and shook a man's hand. I watched as sticks like the ones on the trucks started rising one by one into the huge building. Suddenly, I heard the sound again. The mill whistle—except it was so loud!

Something incredible had happened. My daddy probably didn't notice. When we got back home, there was no change that my mama could have seen. Yet within my little brain, a coherent worldview was starting to form. All those random, mysterious puzzle pieces of my life were fitting together. For the first time, I was beginning to see my world as a "big picture." Things made sense...

When I saw the trucks the next day, I knew they were taking trees to the mill. The mill whistle? Not so mysterious. It comes from where my daddy works. When he came home, smelling of sawdust, I could touch the holes burned in his pants and ask, "Did you fix

machines today?” I could carry on an intelligent conversation with him! Even more important, I had a framework for new information. When Mama said Daddy had to work late, I understood that a lot of machines must be broken. When I saw a tree being cut down on TV, I could predict that it would be put on a truck and be taken to a mill. The world started to make more and more sense.

My worldview has continued to develop for several decades now. Each new factoid of truth I learn is a piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I go merrily through life picking up a piece here and another piece there, placing them securely in my idea bag. Over the years, I’ve collected a lot of information. It’s a mixture of data about philosophy, TV, theology, friends, science, society, ethics, history, and such.

I have enough information in my bag to live a successful life. However, there are different ways to handle the information. When a new need comes up, I could simply sort through the random pieces until I find the appropriate truth. In theory, this would work, and it’s probably how many people understand their world.

But I can think of a better way... Let’s take the pieces out of the idea bag and lay them out on a table. It would be great to have a puzzle box top with a picture, but let’s say we don’t. My grandmother taught me the strategy of connecting the edge pieces first then looking for same-color pieces. So, the puzzle is beginning to take shape. And I’m learning an important concept—the pieces “fit” in one way better than in others. In fact, with the not-so-good fits I have to mangle and distort a piece if it fits at all.

As I find more fits, I'm becoming quite pleased with my puzzle-assembling skills! But something much more important is happening. Now, if someone were to say, "That piece doesn't go there," I would quickly reply "No way, it has to! Look at the way it locks in place perfectly with the other pieces and how the pattern matches. How could it not be in the right place?"

I'm beginning to see ideas in a *context*, not just randomly. It isn't just the information of the pieces, it's also their connections to other pieces. After adding a few more pieces, suddenly I see it!... I know what the picture is! "It's the Mona Lisa!"

The bag of random pieces now makes sense. There's a *context*. I can see the "big picture." That piece with a nose—it has to go here. And that piece with an ear—there. I can even predict what a piece should look like: "The piece that's missing on the left side of Mona's face has to have an eye on it..."

And perhaps even more important, I know what *doesn't* belong. Suppose some cruel puzzle-packer had slipped in a few pieces from a another, totally different puzzle. No problem. I can easily see that those "strange" pieces would never fit the context of the Mona Lisa. A worldview is kind of like this.

What are some common worldviews?

A worldview will address many questions about reality, but some of the main ones are...

Jesus Among Other Teachers

1. What am I? (Where did I come from? What is my purpose?)
2. What is my world? (How do I deal with others? What is right and wrong?)
3. What is my problem? (Why is there pain and suffering? How can I fix it? Why is there evil?)
4. What is my future? (Will this world end? What happens when I die?)

Haven't you asked these questions in some form? Everyone does. The difference comes with how we answer them and how we fit these "puzzle pieces" together.

A strong *Biblical Worldview*⁴² is important for a Christian, especially in today's world. There are many other worldviews around us such as Naturalism, Secularism, and Mysticism.⁴³ These worldviews see the same world as everyone else but interpret their experiences differently.

For example, with the very serious issue of whether very elderly people should receive the very best healthcare, these might be the responses of different worldviews...

⁴² Also called a *Christian worldview*. I like to use the term *biblical* because some Christians choose not to accept some biblical ideas literally.

⁴³ Naturalism – Sees the world as only the physical. No God, devil, soul, Heaven, afterlife.

Secularism – Says that humans are the basis for all truth. If the majority think it's true—it is. (Also called Humanism.)

Mysticism – Teaches that there is no real truth except what an individual believes. (Also, called New Age or Hinduism.)

- Biblical Worldview – “Yes! All people are God’s image-bearers. We must honor that in any person at any stage of life.”
- Naturalist Worldview – “No, the elderly take resources from others. And there is no eternal purpose anyway. Why prolong their life?”
- Secular Worldview – “If the community or family can support them, or if they are still contributing to society, then okay.”
- Mystic Worldview – “Whatever those involved decide is okay. If it seems right, it must be okay.”

Unfortunately, many people (especially young people, and even young believers) don’t have any solid worldview, or they have worldviews that are random mixtures of all of these. What a confusing world it seems to them! Lack of a biblical worldview is why we see so much confusion and disagreement on so many important issues.

How do I build a biblical worldview?

This is a *very* good question for young believers. It’s possible for a believer to live life without a strong biblical worldview. There are so many competing ideas coming at us from friends, school, TV, and the Internet

that it's sometimes difficult to keep our worldview truly biblical.

The start of a strong biblical worldview is *a good relationship with Jesus and a good grasp of the Bible*. (Duh!) This is another reason for good habits of spiritual discipline. God's Word is effective in teaching us how to view and interpret the world around us. (I won't have a biblical worldview without knowing and believing the Bible!)

We also have other resources to help us understand and apply scriptural truths to our experiences. Good Christian *apologetics* (discussed earlier) helps tie worldview concepts together. In case you haven't noticed, one purpose of this book is to help build a biblical worldview. Many of the sections deal with "puzzle pieces" that fit together and reveal the big picture of reality.

There are many other resources for anyone wishing to strengthen their biblical worldview. The important thing is to *make the effort to do it*. Make it part of your spiritual discipline to keep putting the pieces together!

How did we get the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of 66 different books combined into a single volume. Those 66 books can be divided into two larger sections—the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*. As we've already discussed, the 39

books of the Old Testament were written over several centuries before the time of Jesus.

Some of the events in the early history of God's people were passed from one generation to another through spoken or *oral* stories. For example, it's likely that Moses wrote the book of Genesis many years after the events themselves. He had heard the accounts from his parents who heard from their parents, and so on. (But remember, God still inspired Moses to write the histories *exactly* as He wanted.)

Eventually, all the Old Testament *historical books* were written by Jewish people in their language Hebrew (and some Aramaic). The Jews called this collection the *Torah*. During Jesus's life and ministry, He read and studied the Torah just like any Jewish young man. When Jesus referred to a certain Scripture, it was from the Torah.

After Jesus's death and resurrection, the early Church that He established began to grow. In the first years, they would have used the Torah, but also the new teachings of Jesus. Jesus's Apostles (the disciples whom He personally taught) would travel between the local churches (small groups of Christians who had believed the gospel of Jesus) teaching the new Christians how the truths about Jesus were the *fulfillment* or *completed ideas* of the Old Testament. In other words, the Torah was the true Word of God, but Jesus's message was that He had completed the message that was started in the Torah.

Over the next decades, the Apostles and other Christian leaders began writing letters to the spreading churches, explaining the *gospel* (good news) of Jesus death and resurrection. They explained how Jesus's

death had paid for sins and that no more sacrifices were needed. These writings were passed from church to church so that all believers could learn the full explanation of God's truth. Eventually, the 23 accepted letters were combined into what we now have as the New Testament. The Bible (Old and New Testaments) now contained the complete message that God wanted people to have.

Both testaments are valuable to believers. The Old Testament provides rich insights into how God the Father deals with humans and what He expects. In the New Testament, the words and teachings of Jesus, His Apostles, and other leaders provide instructions for our salvation and for living the Christian life. When reading the Bible, it's good to read some of both testaments regularly.

Did God write the Bible or did men?

The Bible tells us that it has been “breathed by God.” We call this *inspiration*. Sometimes we say that an artist was *inspired* to do a masterpiece, or that a leader spoke *inspiring* words. Biblical inspiration, however, is more. We mean that God caused a person to write exactly the words that He intended.

Inspired does *not* mean that God turned the writers into robots, as if they were writing in a trance. Miraculously, those who wrote the various books of the Bible were guided by God's Spirit to write from *their own skills, knowledge, and personality*. God is

sovereign and able to shape the writers' experiences so that every word was *still His Word exactly!*

How do I know the copy of the Scripture I'm reading is the same as the original?

Did you ever play the “telephone game?” The leader whispers a phrase into one person's ear. That person whispers it to the next, and so on and so on. By the time the message reaches the last person it usually is nothing like the original.

Christian apologists have done much research into the *transmission* of Scripture—how it got from the original *manuscripts* to our current translations. We assume God supernaturally inspired only the original messages, known as the *autographs*. Eventually, though, that writing would have to be copied. Back in the day, writing was on papyrus or animal skin which wouldn't last forever. Also, multiple copies would be needed to go to different places.

Bible copiers are humans, whether today or 3000 years ago, and there is no reason to assume they are supernaturally inspired in their copying. We expect mistakes to be made in copying. And certainly, when a copy is translated into a different language, there is no absolute guarantee that all would be exactly like the autograph. Today, we have *zero* autographs of the Bible—only copies.

Then how sure can we be that our *manuscripts* (copies) are true to the original? Can I trust that my Bible

is accurate? First of all, early scribes took their jobs very seriously. History shows that they maintained strict standards of checking and rechecking, even counting characters much as a computer does.

In addition, other people were writing scripture passages (especially the New Testament) from very early times. Even those who opposed God's Word recorded scriptures in their arguments. Their writings help to verify the accuracy of manuscripts!

In the telephone game, we assume that the closer we are to the "front" of the line (the original whisperer) the less changed the message will be. With the same logic, we assume that the earlier the manuscript, the fewer the changes. This may not always be true, but it's a good starting assumption. We have manuscripts for most of the New Testament that were written within decades of the autographs.

As for the accuracy of the Old Testament, we were not sure until the 1940s. Around that time, a boy found a group of scrolls hidden in a cave near the Dead Sea. These Dead Sea Scrolls excited students of Bible manuscripts. The scrolls were written about 200 years before Jesus came to earth, much earlier than the copies we already had.

Amazingly (to those who doubted Old Testament accuracy), these manuscripts were almost identical to the more recent ones. We learned that over hundreds of years, the copies had hardly changed at all. The only changes were very small and didn't affect any major ideas. This gave good evidence that our present copies are quite accurate.

DIGGING DEEPER – The small differences we find among the manuscripts are typically just differences in numbers (such as the number of soldiers in a battle) or different spellings due to language changes. There are cases in which it appears scribes may have inserted their own “comments” into the text without noting them as additions. We also know that some manuscripts were purposely altered so that the true words didn’t “offend” so much (obviously not a good thing). None of the questionable passages influence the “main and plain things” in the Bible.

And fortunately, we have numerous manuscripts to compare. If there is disagreement over which manuscript is the most reliable, your Bible probably has footnotes that say, “this verse is not found in some manuscripts” or “this phrase says ____ in some manuscripts.”

The bottom line—we have very good evidence that the Bible we have has changed little since the autograph.

Who decided which books should be in the Bible?

I have a lot of books besides the Bible in my library. Many are by Christian authors who teach me much about God and His truth. However, none of these are divinely inspired as are the books of the Bible. They contain useful and reliable teachings about the Bible and Christian life, but they don't offer new truth not already in God's Word. So, how do we know the right books made it into the Bible we use?

The collection of inspired books in the Bible, called the *canon* of Scripture, was assembled over a period of time. Old Testament books were in use during Jesus's lifetime. This Torah had been collected over many centuries from the writings of Moses, the prophets, and others. Jesus quoted often from the Torah and never pointed out any errors. He even said that not a single letter of it would ever disappear. We assume that with Jesus's "stamp of approval," the Old Testament is just the way it should be.

The *canonizing* of the New Testament was a bit different. As the early churches were spreading, Jesus's apostles were teaching His truths in many. Most Christians considered their teaching to be inspired since Jesus had commissioned them personally to spread His Word.

When Saul of Tarsus became Paul the Apostle, his teachings were also seen as *authoritative*, or inspired by the Spirit. Most of the New Testament is composed of the Gospels (written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and letters written by apostles and other church leaders.

Despite what some Bible critics claim, there was little disagreement about which writings should be considered inspired, and thus, eventually included in the New Testament canon. Churches were already using the

Gospels and letters before anyone “officially” pronounced them as inspired. Early Christians accepted them because the truths they contained worked! The teachings spoke with authority and agreed perfectly with what the apostles had taught.

As the church grew, other teachers had begun spreading other writings. Some claimed that these works should be considered inspired as well. Others disagreed. Eventually, there were meetings to agree on exactly which books should be in the canon. There was little question about the books in our present Bible, but many of the newer writings were not accepted as divinely inspired.

Some of the writings that were not canonized as our Bible books, are still considered inspired by some religious groups. These are often called *apocryphal* books. The Bible we now have is a proven book that has shown itself to be accurate, coherent, and useful for many centuries. Some apocryphal writings may be useful or interesting, but that doesn’t mean they are inspired or without errors.⁴⁴

If God was able to supernaturally inspire the writing of certain books, I believe He was certainly able to make sure the Bible we have is just as He intended. We can assume that the original copies of each Bible book were perfect and approved by God.

⁴⁴ For example, I would hope this book is useful and accurate. But I can’t claim that I was inspired by God in the same way that biblical writers were. And as hard as I might try, I doubt that any of my writings are without error!

Is the Bible *all* true?

When I got my pet hamster, Margaret, I didn't know much about hamsters, so I also got a book—*Everything You Need to Know About Keeping Your Hamster Happy and Healthy*. That book kept Margaret happy and healthy for a long time.

Whether the Bible is all true is an extremely important question, since the Bible is the way we know about God, salvation, living a Christian life, and reality in general. It's the only inspired instruction book we have on staying spiritually healthy.

As already discussed, we expect God's message to us to be just that—*God's message to us*. But there are some who question whether all of the Bible is really God's Word. Here are some questions people ask...

Is every story and teaching in the Bible true? Some people like to “pick and choose” the parts of Scripture that are true. They say that some sections are God's Word, but others may be just people's ideas. If this were true, how would we know which parts to believe and which parts not to believe? What if my hamster book had some instructions that were just guesses inserted by the printer and not really the ideas of the expert? (Poor Margaret!)

Is every word, phrase, and punctuation mark in the Bible exactly the way God wants it? This may sound like an odd question but it's important. In other words, was the writer just trying to say what he *kind of* thought God wanted to say, or is it *exactly* what God wanted to say? What if my hamster book said, “Feed your pet three

times a day,” but the word “day” was changed to “year?” (Poor Margaret!)

Does the Bible contain all we need to know? Obviously, it’s also good to know how to read, write, feed your hamster, and a zillion other things *not* in the Bible. But the Bible *is* all God wants us to know right now about H

im, salvation, and Christian living. We say that God’s Word is *sufficient* in spiritual things. Books that discuss and explain Bible concepts are helpful, but we don’t need additional spiritual ideas that are not already presented in Scripture. What if my hamster book didn’t mention that hamsters need water? (Poor Margaret!)

Digging Deeper I believe the Bible is *inerrant* which means that the original manuscripts were completely the way God intended, down to the exact wording and punctuation. Jesus made the point that every letter and grammar mark in the Old Testament was true.⁴⁵ Also, Paul made a big deal out of whether a single word in the Old Testament was singular rather than plural.⁴⁶ Furthermore, 2 Tim 3:16 assures us...

All Scripture is breathed by God and useful for teaching, correcting, and training us to be righteous...

⁴⁵ Matthew 5:18

⁴⁶ Galatians 3:16 (Abraham’s *seed*, not *seeds*.)

Why is the Bible so hard to understand?

Maybe we should rephrase the question before we start... “*Is the Bible hard to understand?*”

Suppose your friend left you a note to tell you where to meet that afternoon. If you’re really good friends, you know how each other thinks. The note would be clear and understandable. Why would your friend want to confuse you or hide the meaning of the note?

The Bible is God’s message to His people. He *wants* us to know His message! Would He give us a message that was unclear or hidden in a riddle? On the contrary, we expect His Word to His friends to be understandable.⁴⁷

However, what if a stranger found your friend’s note? It’s possible that it may not be understandable to someone who didn’t know you or your friend. In the same way, those who are not believers often find God’s Word difficult or mysterious. Of course, if someone is seriously seeking to understand the Bible, the Holy Spirit will lead them to the truth about Jesus and salvation, just as He has done for all believers.

But having said all of this, the Spirit didn’t dump the entire knowledge of God’s Word into my brain all at once. God desires a *relationship* with me, not just a knowledge download! He often reveals scriptural truths slowly and steadily through prayer and studying His word. All of the “main things” in the Bible are the “plain things.” Yet I will spend a lifetime digging out and

⁴⁷ This is called the *perspicuity* of the Bible. It is a *perspicuous* (meant-to-be-understood) message.

contemplating new ways of applying the truths that the Spirit reveals.

But what about all the disagreements about the Bible?

It is certainly true that even though the Bible was meant to be understood, some still make it confusing. Often, however, the disagreements are over less important things (truths not critical to understanding salvation or the nature of God).

The Bible is a very diverse collection of writings. It has parts that are history, poetry, and instructions. Different writers also had different ways of looking at things. Some people disagree about whether a passage should be taken *literally* or *figuratively*. A verse taken literally could have a very different meaning when taken figuratively.

If your friend's note said, "Let's go hang out in the park," would you expect to find her clinging to a rope in a tree or sitting on a bench waiting? The figurative meaning would probably make more sense than the literal (unless your friend is just strange). The point is, you understand the meaning because you understand your friend and the context of the note.

That's another reason it's important to study the Bible regularly. You get used to knowing how the writers think. One part often gives clues for understanding other parts. The "big picture" view of the

Bible makes more sense than just looking at random verses.

Sadly, it's also true that some simply want the Bible to say things that it doesn't really say. Many people today who don't want to obey the truths in Scripture try to interpret literal passages as figurative. It's much easier to deny Bible truths when they're viewed as symbolic rather than straightforward, plain truth.

Remember, there are some figurative passages in Scripture, but they are usually obvious. A wise person once said something like, "If the plain sense of the Bible makes common sense, don't look for another sense or you'll have nonsense!"⁴⁸

Digging Deeper The various books of the Bible were written in Hebrew, Greek, and a little Aramaic. If you've ever studied a second language, you know that you can't just translate word-for-word. Different languages have different word order and "figures of speech" (idioms). As mentioned, "hang out" in English wouldn't be translated word-for-word to another language. (What if other speakers took it literally!) We would translate it into one of their phrases that meant "spend time together."

This means that in order to understand some verses we may need to know about the customs, idioms, and language oddities of the writer. Fortunately, we have learned much about these early Bible writers. We have the information to interpret Scripture accurately. If you have a question about a particular passage, do some

⁴⁸ David L. Cooper.

research about it. Check apologetic resources and your pastor or other reliable people who believe the Bible.

Which Bible translation should I use?

Remember, the Bible wasn't written in English, so we English speakers should take care to choose a translation that gets across the original message accurately. As discussed, we can't do word-for-word translations because languages don't "fit" the same syntax patterns. Every translation will be someone's decision about what they think is the best meaning.

So then, it's very important to choose a Bible translation that was done by people (hopefully a group of scholars rather than just a single person) who really understand the two languages involved, and the customs and culture of the writers, and who really believe God's Word is true.

Also, consider the *purpose* of the translation. Some translators may want to produce more of a "storybook" for teaching general ideas or for reading to children. These may be good, but not necessarily translations one would use for understanding major doctrines. Some translations are meant to lean more toward modern English idioms, others stay closer to the original Greek or Hebrew.

If you are a serious Bible student, I would recommend reading from several different translations. You don't even have to buy the Bibles anymore. Search the Internet for just about any verse (like Google "John

3:16”), and you’ll find many sites with parallel Bibles. These will show the passage you are studying in several different translations.

Try to find a good *lexicon* for the Old and New Testaments. These reference books are useful in explaining various words and their meanings in the context of the original language. Or better still, if you have the opportunity and the desire, you may want to learn the original Bible languages. It will take time and effort, but it’s quite rewarding to read and understand a passage from a true manuscript!

**Isn’t the Bible just a rulebook full of
“don’t-do-this?”**

When I was very young, my parents gave me many *don’t*-rules...

Don’t go to the street.

Don’t hit your sister.

Don’t touch the stove.

Don’t eat that bug.

Were my parents being bossy and unfair? I might have thought that at the time, but looking at the list now, all their rules were to protect me or make my life better.

Also, it was much more practical and efficient at this time in my life to tell me what *not to do* rather than what *to do*. (“Don’t eat bugs” was more practical than

“Do eat carrots, do eat bread, do eat cereal, do eat corn, do eat cookies, and so on...”

My car has an owner’s manual that gives me a lot of rules. “Change the oil... Don’t drive if warning light comes on... Don’t run engine in closed garage... Fasten your seat belt... Slow down on ice...” What a bossy car maker!

Well, not exactly. The car’s maker knows the capabilities of my car (better than I do). Who could possibly know *me* better than my Creator? Psalm 119 assures me that He even knew me perfectly *before I was born*.

Now add to this the fact that my Creator loves me with an unbounded love. Why would I ever want to question his rules? Not a single “no” from God is based on selfishness or randomness. Every “no” implies a “yes” to something else that is even better than what I think I’m missing!

Why did God want innocent animals to be sacrificed?

Many people criticize the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. They ask why a loving God would use such bloody, uncivilized acts—killing innocent animals to atone for human sins? Others claim that the Israelites just borrowed the grotesque idea of sacrifices from their pagan neighbors. Animal sacrifices seem so cruel and barbaric to us today. Guess what... They also seemed cruel and barbaric to people back in the day.

Yet that was God's purpose. Animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were symbols pointing to Jesus's sacrificial death in the future. God allowed His people to see the sheer ugliness and terrible price that sin brought. When a Jewish child witnessed the sacrifice, they likely were thinking "This is all because of sin! My sin! Sin must be terrible!"

God's Word makes it clear that animal sacrifices (or any other sacrifices we could make) could never pay for our sins.⁴⁹ Only Jesus's payment could atone for our sins. This included all the sins of humans past, present, and future.

Like so many spiritual concepts, we as humans fail to see the real nature of sin. God is good, righteous, and just. Had there been a better way we must trust that He would have chosen it! Those who consider the symbol of animal sacrifice to be cruel then refuse to

⁴⁹ Hebrews 10:4

acknowledge Jesus's extreme sacrifice have missed the point completely!

Why was God so mean in the Old Testament?

I've heard some Bible doubters say that there seems to be two Gods in Scripture. They claim that Jesus shows us a loving, friendly God in the New Testament, but that God in the Old Testament is grumpy and judgmental.

We know that one of God's attributes is His *immutability* (unchangingness), so He couldn't be different from one time to another. However, in revealing Himself to humans we often see different attributes expressed at different times.

The Old Testament does describe how God had to take some severe actions. He ordered the Israelites to go to war and destroy certain nations. He even destroyed most of humankind in a flood.⁵⁰ Remember, though, the Old Testament events *foreshadowed* (pointed forward to) Jesus. Many Old Testament accounts showed us the ugliness of sin as seen by a holy God. This led people to hope for a "fix" for sin and death.

In the New Testament, God reveals the fix. The "good news" is that He mercifully provided a sacrifice for our sin through Jesus. The Old Testament judgments make us aware of the deep need we have for a savior

⁵⁰ Even among these harsh cases in the Old Testament, God still showed Himself to be extremely loving and merciful in many instances.

who can forgive sin. The love, mercy, and grace of God have been working throughout the history of humankind, not just in the new Testament!

Today, many people like to imagine two different Gods. They want to concentrate more on God's love and mercy than on his judgment and anger. However, we must remember that God doesn't change. He still hates sin—the same types of sin he hated in the Old Testament. We who love Him should avoid sin in all its forms, even though we know there is forgiveness through Jesus.

What will Heaven be like?

We hear about “heaven” so often...

“That cake is heavenly!”

“Good heavens!”

But when the Bible speaks of Heaven, it's a *real* place. In fact, it's more real than this physical world in a sense. Heaven is the place where God is. It's His home and the place where Jesus said He would prepare a special place just for us. It's the place that will live forever.

As mentioned previously, any place with which we are unfamiliar is a bit scary. That's understandable. And it's why God gives us clues in His Word to let us know there's nothing to fear.

From another perspective, Heaven is that place that all of us long for deep inside. We all dream about wonderlands, Narnias, and somewhere over the

rainbow. Some people say that's just wishful thinking. I believe we imagine those places because *we were made to live in a place like them*. Our hearts long for our future home!

So why doesn't the Bible tell us exactly what Heaven is like? One reason is that it's so good, there's nothing on earth to compare it to...

What no eye has ever seen, no ear ever heard, and no heart ever imagined, this is what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

My heart can imagine some pretty awesome things, yet heaven is even better! Try to think of things that our unlimited, loving, generous, omniscient, omnipotent Creator can come up with! Can we even begin to imagine what He will provide for us motivated by unlimited grace and love? It doesn't simply stagger my imagination—it's way beyond it!

I've heard people worry about Heaven, saying "I don't think I'll like sitting on a cloud playing a harp all day." Others say, "But won't Heaven be like a long, boring church service?"

What sad misconceptions of Heaven! The word "boredom" won't exist in Heaven. Besides being a place where some things don't exist (pain, tears, fear, evil), Heaven is a place of activity. Not only will we finally be face-to-face with our Creator forever, we'll do things with Him. Scripture tells us we will *reign* with Him. There will be adventure, discovery, amazement, and accomplishment and it will get better and better! And you will still be *you*—not some ghostly, nameless

whatever! You will know and love believers you knew and loved on earth, and even more! (Pardon the exclamation marks, but Heaven is an exclamation mark kind of place!!)

Some people believe we shouldn't think too much about Heaven because there's still too much work to do here on earth. I disagree. The more I think about Heaven, the more I want to "put my treasure" there. This isn't selfish greed. Scripture tells us to serve God here on earth so that your Heavenly treasure will increase. I don't know what that means exactly, but it makes me want to get busy and serve Jesus!

The truth of Heaven also makes me want others to be there with me. I want to tell as many people as possible about the good news of Jesus so that their eternal home will be Heaven, also.