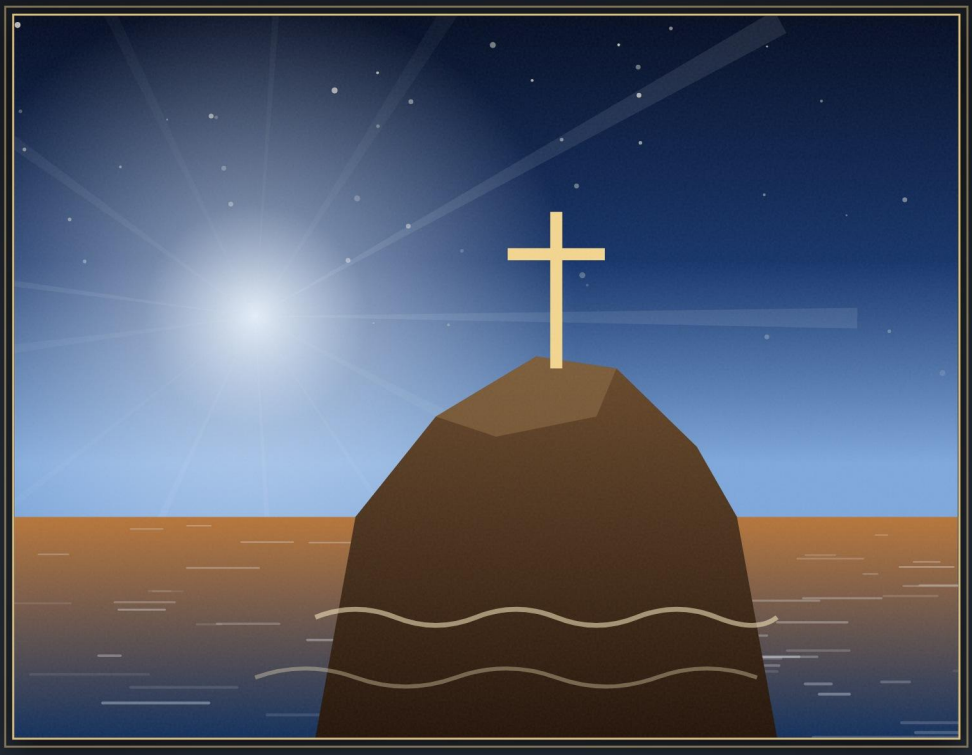
SIXTEEN HONEST QUESTIONS

Hard Questions About the Faith

For Seekers and Believers



Honest Answers for Honest Doubts

Andrew Dominguez

Trinfinity Enterprises

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Hard Questions About the Faith: Honest Answers for Honest Doubts

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A note before you begin. This book is written to teach the Bible and encourage faith. It shares my understanding of Scripture and is offered for study and spiritual growth. It is not counseling, medical, legal, or financial advice. If you are facing a crisis, a health problem, or a legal or money problem, please reach out to a qualified professional as well as your pastor and church family. To the fullest extent the law allows, Andrew Dominguez, Trinfinity Enterprises, and Andrew Dominguez's heirs, estate, successors, and assigns accept no liability for how this material is used.

A Note on the Bible Translation Used in This Book

My preferred Bible for personal study, teaching, and research is the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB). I chose it because it is a word-for-word translation in today's language, built on the ancient Scripture sources: the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament. I prepared the SLB myself, and the Scripture in this book is taken from it.

Where a literal phrase would mislead an English reader, the SLB gives the writer's meaning in plain words. Words added for sense are set in bold italics so you can see what is in the original and what is not.

The complete Steadfast Literal Bible is free to read, search, download, and print at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb. If you want to check a verse in its full setting or read the translation's preface and principles, that is the place to go.

Above all, my desire is not to promote one translation over another, but to faithfully teach the Word of God, encourage careful examination of the Scriptures, and help readers grow in their knowledge, understanding, and relationship with the Lord.

May every page of this book direct attention not to the translation itself, but to the truth of God's Word and the One whom it reveals.

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Contents

Before You Begin....1
Question 1: Is There Really a God?....3
Question 2: Why Does God Allow Suffering and Evil?....8
Question 3: How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?....14
Question 4: Has Science Disproved the Bible?....19
Question 5: Can a Thinking Person Believe in Miracles?....24
Question 6: Doesn't the Bible Contradict Itself?....28
Question 7: Can We Trust the Bible We Have Today?....34
Question 8: Wasn't Jesus Copied from Older Myths?....38
Question 9: What About the Violence and Slavery in the Old Testament?....42
Question 10: Did Jesus Really Claim to Be God?....47
Question 11: Isn't It Arrogant to Say Jesus Is the Only Way?....51
Question 12: What About People Who Never Hear About Jesus?....55
Question 13: Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?....60
Question 14: Isn't Faith Just Believing Without Evidence?....65
Question 15: Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites?....69
Question 16: Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?....73
A Closing Word....78
About This Book....79

Before You Begin

> *but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and **be** ready always for a defense to everyone who asks you an account concerning the hope in you, with gentleness and fear*
>
> 1 Peter 3:15 (SLB)

Some questions do not go away. Why does God let children suffer? How can a loving God send anyone to hell? Does science disprove the Bible? Isn't it arrogant to say Jesus is the only way? Why didn't God answer when I prayed? Did Jesus really rise from the dead, or is that just a story?

I have heard every one of these questions over the years, from skeptics, from friends, from people in Bible studies I led, and some of them from my own heart. I have believed in God for as long as I can remember, but that does not mean I never wondered. I have drifted from God more than once, and in the hardest seasons of my life these questions were not academic. They were personal.

This book takes sixteen of the hardest questions people ask about the Christian faith and tries to answer each one honestly. I will tell you what the Bible says, what thoughtful Christians have said through the centuries, what the evidence shows, and where Christians who love the Bible still disagree. I will not pretend that every question has a neat answer. Some do not, this side of heaven. But I am convinced that the Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. It is trust in a God who has given us good reasons to believe Him.

How to Use This Book

Each chapter takes one question. It opens with a short answer in a box, for those who want the bottom line, then works through the

question step by step. Each chapter closes with questions to think about or discuss, and a few verses to read.

You can read the chapters in any order. If one question is pressing on you right now, start there.

A Word to Skeptics

If you are reading this as someone who does not believe, thank you. I have tried to be fair to your questions. I will not ask you to turn off your mind. I will ask you to keep it open, and to look honestly at the evidence for Jesus, especially in the last chapter.

A Word to Believers

If you are a Christian, these questions are not a threat to your faith. Peter told believers to be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in them, "with gentleness and fear." That means we should know what we believe and why, and we should share it with kindness, not with a chip on our shoulder. Most people are not won by winning arguments. But many have been kept from faith because no one ever took their questions seriously.

A Word About Scripture

The Scripture in this book comes from the Steadfast Literal Bible (SLB), a word-for-word translation in today's language. Words added in English to make the sense clear are printed in bold italics.

Question 1: Is There Really a God?

> *The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*
>
> Psalm 19:1 (SLB)

The Short Answer No one can put God in a test tube, but that does not leave us in the dark. The universe had a beginning and needs a cause. It is ordered in ways that make life possible. And every one of us knows, deep down, that some things are truly right and others truly wrong. The Bible says these are fingerprints God left on purpose, so that no one would have an excuse for missing Him. The fullest answer is Jesus, who came so that we could see what God is like.

Every other question in this book rests on this one. If there is no God, then questions about suffering, hell and prayer are pointless. If there is a God, they matter more than anything.

Some people say there is no evidence for God at all. Others say they simply cannot know. The Bible says something surprising: that God has made Himself plain enough that people are responsible for what they do with what they see.

> *For His invisible **things**, from **the** creation of **the** world, being understood by the things made, are clearly seen, both His eternal power and divinity, for them to be without excuse*
> (Romans 1:20)

Paul does not say that creation tells us everything about God. It does not tell us how to be saved. But it tells us that He is there, that He is powerful, and that He is not part of the world He made.

Clue One: Everything That Begins Has a Cause

Nothing comes from nothing. When something begins to exist, we look for a cause. That is how science works, how detectives work and how every one of us lives every day.

As we saw in the chapter on science, most scientists today agree that the universe had a beginning. If the universe began, then something outside the universe caused it. That cause must be beyond space, time and matter, since all three began with the universe. It must be enormously powerful. And since it chose to create, it looks less like a blind force and more like a Person.

That is a strikingly close match to the God of the Bible's first sentence.

> *In **the** beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*
> (Genesis 1:1)

Clue Two: A Universe Set Up for Life

Scientists have found that many of the basic numbers of physics, such as the strength of gravity and the forces that hold atoms together, fall within narrow ranges that allow stars, planets and living things to exist. Change them more than a little and there would be no one here to ask questions. Scientists call this fine tuning, and it is widely discussed among both believing and unbelieving physicists.

Some answer that there may be countless other universes we cannot see, and we happen to live in one that works. That is possible, but notice that it is a guess about things no one can observe. The simpler explanation is the one the Bible gives: the universe looks designed because it was designed.

> *For thus says the LORD, who created the heavens (He **is** the God), who formed the earth and made it (He established it;*

> *He did not create it **as** formlessness; He formed it to be dwelt in): I **am** the LORD, and **there is** none else.*
> (Isaiah 45:18)

Clue Three: Right and Wrong Are Real

Almost everyone believes that some things are truly wrong, not just unpopular. Torturing a child for fun is wrong. It would still be wrong if a whole nation voted for it. When we say that, we are appealing to a standard above every person and every government.

Where does that standard come from? If we are only the product of chance, then right and wrong are just feelings that helped our ancestors survive, and no one could say the cruel person is truly wrong. But we cannot live that way. Even people who deny God protest loudly when they are treated unfairly.

The Bible says God wrote His law on the human heart. Our conscience is not perfect, but it points beyond itself.

> *who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness with **them**, and the thoughts between one another accusing or even defending **them***
> (Romans 2:15)

Who Made God?

This is a fair question, and children often ask it first. The answer is that God was not made. Everything that begins to exist needs a cause, but God did not begin to exist. He is eternal.

> *Before **the** mountains were born, and You brought forth the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You **are** God.* (Psalm 90:2)

Something has to be eternal. Either the universe is eternal, or something beyond the universe is. The evidence that the universe had a beginning points us to the second answer. Asking who made

God is like asking who is the bachelor's wife. The question does not fit the One it is asking about.

The Clearest Clue: Jesus

The clues in nature tell us that God exists. They do not tell us His name or His heart. For that, God did not leave us guessing. He came Himself.

> *No one has ever seen God; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made **Him** known.*
> (John 1:18)

When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus answered that whoever had seen Him had seen the Father (John 14:9). If you want to know whether God is real and what He is like, the best place to look is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We look at the evidence for His resurrection in the last chapter of this book.

What If I Still Have Doubts?

Belief in God is not about winning an argument. Many people are not kept from God by evidence but by pain, by bad experiences with religious people, or simply by not wanting anyone to be in charge of their life. Be honest with yourself about which of those is true for you.

God does not ask for a blind leap. He invites honest seeking, and He makes a promise to the person who seeks.

> *And without faith **it is** impossible to please **Him**; for the one who draws near to God must believe that He is, and **that** He becomes a rewarder to those who earnestly seek Him.*
> (Hebrews 11:6)

Questions to Think About

1. Which of the three clues in this chapter do you find most convincing? Which least?
2. Why do you think almost every culture in history has believed in some kind of God?
3. If right and wrong are real, what does that say about where they came from?
4. Besides evidence, what other things can keep a person from believing in God?

Read More

Genesis 1; Job 38-39; Psalm 19; Psalm 104; Acts 14:15-17; Acts 17:22-31; Romans 1:18-23. See also Is There Really a God and When Faith Has Questions, in this series.

Question 2: Why Does God Allow Suffering and Evil?

> *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer, nor mourning nor crying nor pain will be any longer, because the first things passed away.*
>
> Revelation 21:4 (SLB)

The Short Answer The Bible does not hide from suffering. It says evil entered the world through human sin, that God gave us real freedom, that He often brings good out of evil, and that He has entered our suffering Himself in Jesus. It also promises a day when He will end evil for good. We may not know why a particular thing happened, but we can know that God is good, that He is not distant, and that suffering will not have the last word.

This is the question I hear more than any other. It is not usually asked in a classroom. It is asked in a hospital waiting room, at a graveside, or at two in the morning. "If God is good and all-powerful, why did this happen?"

It is a fair question, and the Bible itself asks it. Job asked it. Habakkuk asked it. David asked it again and again in the Psalms.

> *How long, LORD? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?* (Psalm 13:1)

> *How long, O LORD, have I cried for help, and You do not hear? I cry out to You, "Violence!" and You do not save.* (Habakkuk 1:2)

If you are asking it, you are in good company. God did not strike these men down for asking. He answered them, though not always in the way they expected.

The Problem Stated Fairly

The skeptic's version goes like this. If God is all-good, He would want to stop evil. If God is all-powerful, He would be able to stop evil. But evil exists. So either God is not all-good, or He is not all-powerful, or He does not exist.

That sounds airtight. But it rests on a hidden assumption: that an all-good, all-powerful God could have no good reason to allow evil for a time. If God has good reasons, even reasons we cannot fully see, then the argument falls apart. The question is not whether we can see every reason. The question is whether it is reasonable to believe God might have them.

Where Evil Came From

The Bible does not say God created evil. It says God made everything good (Genesis 1:31), and that evil entered the world through the free choice of His creatures.

> *Because of this, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death passed to all men, because all sinned* (Romans 5:12)

God made people able to love, and real love requires real freedom. A world where we could only do good would be a world of robots, not children. That freedom came with the real possibility of turning away from God, and we did. Much of the suffering in the world comes directly from human choices: war, abuse, greed, cruelty, neglect, addiction.

I know this from my own life. Some of the worst pain I caused my family came straight from my own choices. Nobody else poured those drinks.

What About Natural Disasters and Disease?

Some suffering is not caused by any person's choice. Earthquakes, cancer, birth defects, tornadoes. Where do these fit?

The Bible teaches that when humanity fell, creation itself was affected. Paul says the whole creation "groans together" and waits to be "set free from the slavery of corruption" (Romans 8:20-22). We live in a broken world, not the world as God first made it and not the world as it will one day be.

That does not mean every illness is a punishment for a particular sin. Jesus made that clear.

> *Jesus answered, "Neither this **man** sinned, nor his parents; but **it was** so that the works of God might be revealed in him."* (John 9:3)

> *Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that these were debtors beyond all the men who dwell in Jerusalem? No, I say to you; but unless you repent, you will all perish likewise.* (Luke 13:4-5)

When a tower fell and killed eighteen people, Jesus said they were not worse sinners than anyone else. Suffering is not a simple scoreboard. But all suffering is a reminder that this world is not what it should be, and that every one of us needs to be ready to meet God.

God Brings Good Out of Evil

Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery. Years later, after God had raised him to power in Egypt and used him to save many lives, Joseph told them this:

> *And you, you planned evil against me; God planned it for good, so as to do as **it is** this day, to keep alive a numerous people.* (Genesis 50:20)

Notice what Joseph did not say. He did not say the evil was good. He said they meant it for evil, and God meant it for good. God did not cause their sin, but He was able to take it up into a bigger plan.

> *And we know that to those who love God all things work together for good, to those who are called according to **His** purpose.* (Romans 8:28)

This verse does not say all things are good. It says God works all things together for good for those who love Him. I have seen this in my own life. In 2014 I was badly hurt in a hiking accident and went through four major surgeries. The pain led me deeper into drinking, and for six years alcohol owned me. I would not wish those years on anyone. But God used even that dark road to break my pride, bring me to my knees, and lead me to write a recovery course that has helped others find freedom. I cannot explain every part of it. I can tell you He did not waste it.

God Has Not Stayed Distant

Here is what sets the Christian answer apart from every other. God did not stand far off from our suffering. He entered it.

> *And He **was** pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastening of our peace **was** on Him, and by His wound **there** was healing for us.* (Isaiah 53:5)

Jesus was hungry, tired, betrayed, mocked, beaten and crucified. He wept at His friend's grave. He knows what pain is from the inside.

> *For we do not have a high priest who is not able to sympathize with our weaknesses, but **one** who has been tempted in all things according to likeness, without sin.* (Hebrews 4:15)

When you ask, "Where was God when I suffered?" the cross answers, "He was there, and He suffered too." The God of the Bible is not a God who does not understand. He is a God with scars.

Suffering Will Not Last Forever

Finally, the Bible promises that evil and suffering are temporary.

> *For I consider that the sufferings of the present time **are** not worthy **to be compared** with the glory about to be revealed to us.* (Romans 8:18)

> *And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and death will not be any longer, nor mourning nor crying nor pain will be any longer, because the first things passed away.* (Revelation 21:4)

If this life were all there is, the problem of suffering would be crushing. But the Bible says this life is not all there is. God will judge all evil, set every wrong right, and wipe away every tear. The suffering of this life is real, but it is not the last word.

What We Do Not Know

I want to be honest. I cannot tell you why your child got sick, or why your marriage fell apart, or why that accident happened. The Bible does not give us those answers for each case.

When Job demanded an answer, God did not give him one. Instead, God showed Himself.

> *Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell **Me**, if you know understanding.* (Job 38:4)
>
> *By the hearing of the ear I had heard of You, and now my eye has seen You.* (Job 42:5)

Job never learned why he suffered. But he met God, and that was enough. Sometimes what we need most is not an explanation, but the presence of the One who holds the explanation.

> *The hidden **things belong** to the LORD our God, and the revealed **things belong** to us and to our sons forever, to do all the words of this law.* (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Questions to Think About

1. When has suffering made you question God? What did you do with that question?
2. Which do you find most helpful: that evil comes from freedom, that God brings good out of evil, that Jesus suffered too, or that suffering will end? Why?
3. Why do you think God answered Job with Himself instead of with reasons?
4. How could you comfort someone who is suffering without pretending to have all the answers?

Read More

Job 38 to 42; Psalm 13; Romans 8:18-39; 2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Revelation 21:1-5.

Question 3: How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?

> *Far be it from You to do according to this manner, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, and it would be, the righteous as the wicked. Far be it from You! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?*
>
> Genesis 18:25 (SLB)

The Short Answer The Bible teaches that God is both loving and just, and that a just God must deal with evil. Hell is real and serious, but God takes no pleasure in anyone going there. He has made a way of rescue through Jesus at great cost to Himself, and He will judge every person fairly, according to the light they had. In the end, no one will be in hell who did not choose to reject God.

Many people can accept a God of love. What they cannot accept is a God who judges. Hell seems to them like the cruelest idea religion ever invented. How could a God of love send anyone there?

It is an important question, and it deserves a careful answer. Let's start with what the Bible actually says.

Jesus Talked About Hell More Than Anyone

It may surprise you that the strongest warnings about hell in the Bible come from Jesus Himself. He spoke of "outer darkness," of "fire," and of "eternal punishment."

> *And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.* (Matthew 25:46)

Jesus was the most loving person who ever lived. If He warned about hell, it was not because He was cruel. It was because He loved people enough to tell them the truth.

A Loving God Must Also Be Just

Think about it this way. Would you respect a judge who let a man who had abused children walk free, saying, "I am a loving judge, so I don't punish anyone"? Of course not. We would say that judge does not love the victims. Love that never judges evil is not love at all. It is indifference.

Abraham asked, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" The answer is yes. God will do what is right. Every wrong will be answered. Every hidden cruelty will come to light. For the victims of evil, that is not bad news. It is the best news there is.

> *But according to your hardness and unrepentant heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in **the** day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each according to his works* (Romans 2:5-6)

God Takes No Pleasure in Judgment

The God of the Bible is not eager to punish.

> *Say to them, 'As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked **man**, but in a wicked **man** turning back from his way, and **that** he live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! And why will you die, O house of Israel?'* (Ezekiel 33:11)

> *The Lord is not slow concerning the promise, as some consider slowness, but is patient toward us, not wishing any to perish, but all to come to repentance.* (2 Peter 3:9)

He pleads with people to turn back. He waits patiently. And He went to the farthest length imaginable to rescue us: He sent His own Son to take the punishment we deserved.

> *for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time, for Him to be righteous and the **One** justifying the **one who is** of faith of Jesus.* (Romans 3:26)

At the cross, God's justice and His love met. He did not ignore sin. He paid for it Himself, so that He could be both just and the One who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus.

Judgment Will Be Fair

The Bible teaches that God judges according to what people know and what they do. Jesus said the servant who knew his master's will and did not do it would be beaten with many blows, and the one who did not know would be beaten with few.

> *And that slave who knew the will of his master and did not prepare nor do according to his will, will be beaten **with** many **blows**; but the one who did not know, and did things worthy of blows, will be beaten **with** few. And everyone to whom much was given, much will be required from him; and to whom they entrusted much, they will ask of him all the more.* (Luke 12:47-48)

This tells us that judgment is not one-size-fits-all. God sees every heart and every circumstance. No one will be treated unfairly. No one will be able to say, "That was not just."

Do People Choose Hell?

C. S. Lewis, the British writer who came to faith as an adult, put it this way in *The Great Divorce*: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to

whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" There is truth in that.

> *The one who believes in Him is not judged; but the one who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*
> (John 3:18)

God does not drag unwilling people into heaven. Heaven is the place where God is fully present and fully loved. Someone who has spent their whole life saying "leave me alone" to God would not be at home there. At the judgment, God will give them what they have chosen: life without Him. That separation from the source of all good is the heart of what makes hell so terrible.

What Do Christians Disagree About?

Christians agree that hell is real, that it is serious, and that it is final. Most Christians through history have believed that the punishment of the lost is conscious and never ends, a view that rests on passages such as Matthew 25:46 and Revelation 20:10. A smaller number of Bible-believing Christians hold that the lost are finally destroyed and cease to exist. Christians also differ over how literally to read the pictures of fire and darkness. These are real debates, but they do not change the main point: hell is real, it is to be avoided, and God has made a way of escape.

The Most Important Question

The real question is not, "How could God send anyone to hell?" It is, "How could God take anyone to heaven?" None of us deserves it. Every one of us has sinned. The wonder of the gospel is not that some are lost, but that any are saved, and that God paid the price Himself.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His Son, the only begotten, so that everyone who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Questions to Think About

1. Why do you think Jesus warned about hell so often?
2. How does the cross show both God's love and His justice?
3. Do you think people will be surprised at how fair God's judgment is? Why or why not?
4. How would you explain hell to a friend in a way that is both honest and loving?

Read More

Genesis 18:22-33; Ezekiel 18; Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 16:19-31; Romans 2:1-16; Revelation 20:11-15.

Question 4: Has Science Disproved the Bible?

> *The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*
>
> Psalm 19:1 (SLB)

The Short Answer No. Science studies how the natural world works. The Bible tells us who made it and why. The two answer different questions, and many of the founders of modern science were believers who saw their work as thinking God's thoughts after Him. Christians disagree about some details, such as the age of the earth, but the central claims of Genesis, that God created everything, that the universe had a beginning, and that people are made in God's image, have not been overturned by science.

Many people today assume that science and faith are enemies, and that the more we learn about the universe, the less room there is for God. You may have heard a teacher or a television program say that science has disproved the Bible. Is that true?

Two Different Questions

Science asks how. How does gravity work? How do cells divide? How old is that rock? Those are good questions, and science is very good at answering them.

But science cannot answer every question. It cannot tell you why there is something rather than nothing. It cannot tell you whether life has meaning, or why love matters, or what is right and wrong. Those questions are not less important. They are more important. And those are the questions the Bible is most concerned to answer.

> *In **the** beginning God created the heavens and the earth.* (Genesis 1:1)

The first verse of the Bible is not a science lesson. It is a statement about who stands behind everything that exists.

Believers Built Modern Science

It is simply not true that science grew up in opposition to faith. Many of the people who laid the foundations of modern science were Christians: Johannes Kepler, who worked out the laws of planetary motion; Isaac Newton, who described gravity; Robert Boyle, a founder of modern chemistry; Michael Faraday, a pioneer of electricity; James Clerk Maxwell, who described electromagnetism. They believed the universe could be studied because it was made by a rational God who built order into it.

That tradition continues. Francis Collins, who led the Human Genome Project, has written openly about his Christian faith. Many working scientists today are believers.

The Universe Had a Beginning

For much of history, many thinkers assumed the universe had always existed. In the twentieth century, scientists found strong evidence that the universe had a beginning. One of the first to propose this was Georges Lemaitre, a Belgian physicist who was also a Catholic priest. Today the idea that the universe began a finite time ago is the mainstream view in cosmology.

Christians do not tie their faith to any one scientific theory. Theories change. But it is worth noticing that the Bible said from its first verse that the universe had a beginning.

> *By faith we understand the ages to have been formed by **the** word of God, so that the things which are seen have not come into being out of things that are visible.* (Hebrews 11:3)

A Universe Fit for Life

Many physicists have noted that the basic forces and constants of nature fall within narrow ranges that allow stars, planets and life to exist. Change some of them only slightly and life as we know it would be impossible. People explain this in different ways, but many find it points to a Designer.

> *For His invisible **things**, from **the** creation of **the** world, being understood by the things made, are clearly seen, both His eternal power and divinity, for them to be without excuse* (Romans 1:20)

What About the Age of the Earth?

Here Christians who love the Bible disagree, and it is better to say so plainly.

- **Young earth.** Some read the days of Genesis 1 as ordinary days and hold that the earth is thousands of years old. They question the methods used to date rocks and fossils.
- **Old earth.** Others read the days as long periods of time, or see gaps in the account, and accept that the earth is billions of years old.
- **Framework.** Others see Genesis 1 as a carefully structured account of creation in six "days" that teaches who made everything and why, without fixing how long it took.

Faithful Christians hold each of these views. All of them affirm that God created everything, that Adam and Eve were real people, and that the fall brought sin and death into the world. Do not let this debate become a wall that keeps you or anyone else from Jesus. The Bible's main point in Genesis 1 is not the calendar. It is the Creator.

What About Evolution?

Christians also differ on how to understand biological evolution. Some reject it. Others believe God may have used processes over

time. All Bible-believing Christians agree that life did not come about by blind chance apart from God, that humans are made in God's image, and that we are not just animals.

> *And God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*
> (Genesis 1:27)

Does the Bible Contain Scientific Errors?

Critics sometimes point to verses that speak of the sun rising and setting (Ecclesiastes 1:5), or of the earth on its foundations (Psalm 104:5). But these are the ordinary language of everyday life and poetry. Weather forecasters still talk about sunrise and sunset. No one accuses them of denying that the earth turns.

The Bible was not written to be a science textbook. It was written so that we might know God. When it speaks of the natural world, it does so truthfully, in the everyday language of the people who first received it.

Science Points Beyond Itself

The more we learn about the universe, the more amazing it becomes: the vastness of space, the precision of physical laws, the complexity of a single cell. Science does not push God out. For many, it leads them to worship.

> *For You, You created my kidneys; You wove me together in the womb of my mother. I will give thanks to You, because **in** awesome **ways** I am distinguished; wonderful **are** Your works, and my soul knows **it** exceedingly.* (Psalm 139:13-14)

Questions to Think About

1. Have you ever felt that you had to choose between science and faith? Where did that idea come from?

2. Which questions can science answer, and which can it not answer?
3. Why do you think so many founders of modern science were believers?
4. How can Christians disagree about the age of the earth and still stand together on the main points of Genesis?

Read More

Genesis 1 and 2; Job 38 and 39; Psalm 19; Psalm 104; Colossians 1:15-17. See also Is There Really a God, in this series.

Question 5: Can a Thinking Person Believe in Miracles?

> *Ah, Lord GOD! Look, You, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great strength and by Your outstretched arm; nothing is too difficult for You*
>
> Jeremiah 32:17 (SLB)

The Short Answer Miracles are not a breaking of the laws of nature so much as the Maker of nature acting in His world. If God exists, miracles are possible. The real question is whether there is good evidence that a particular miracle happened. The Bible's miracles were done in public, before friends and enemies, and they point to something beyond themselves: the power and goodness of God, and above all the truth about Jesus.

The Bible is full of miracles. The sea parts, the sick are healed, the dead are raised. Many people today say a modern, scientific person simply cannot believe such things.

The Argument Against Miracles

The most famous argument against miracles comes from the Scottish philosopher David Hume, in his essay "Of Miracles," published in 1748. Hume argued that our experience of the regular laws of nature is so strong that no report of a miracle could ever outweigh it.

But notice what that argument assumes. If we decide ahead of time that miracles never happen, then we will always explain away any evidence that one did. That is not following the evidence. It is ruling out an answer before we look.

If God Exists, Miracles Are Possible

The laws of nature describe how the world normally works when nothing outside it acts. They do not say that nothing outside it can act. If I drop a ball, gravity pulls it down. If I catch it, I have not broken the law of gravity. I have added a new cause.

In the same way, a miracle is God acting in the world He made and keeps running. If God created the universe from nothing, then calming a storm or raising a dead man is not hard for Him.

> *For with God no declaration will be impossible.* (Luke 1:37)

So the real question is not, "Can miracles happen?" It is, "Is there a God?" and then, "Did this particular miracle happen?" The first question we looked at in the opening chapter. The second is a question of evidence.

Miracles Are Rare on Purpose

Some people picture the Bible as a book where miracles happen on every page. In fact, they cluster around a few key moments: the Exodus and the giving of the law under Moses, the ministry of Elijah and Elisha in a time of national rebellion, and the ministry of Jesus and the apostles. Long stretches of Bible history pass with none at all.

Miracles in the Bible are signs. They point to God's message and confirm His messengers.

> *Therefore Jesus indeed also did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.* (John 20:30-31)

The Miracles of Jesus Were Public

Jesus did not do His miracles in secret. He healed in crowded streets, fed thousands of people at once and raised Lazarus in front of mourners who knew he had been dead four days (John 11:39-45).

Even His enemies did not deny that He did remarkable things. Instead they argued about where His power came from.

> *And the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem were saying, "He has Beelzebul," and, "By the ruler of the demons He casts out the demons."* (Mark 3:22)

When Peter preached in Jerusalem only weeks after the crucifixion, he told the crowd that Jesus had been shown to them by miracles which, he said, "you yourselves also know" (Acts 2:22). He was speaking to people who had been there and could have called him a liar.

> *Israelite men, hear these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves also know* (Acts 2:22)

What About Miracles Today?

Christians agree that God still answers prayer and can heal. They disagree about whether the miraculous gifts seen in the book of Acts continue in the same way today. That debate is beyond this book. What every Christian can agree on is that God is not limited, and that we should test any claimed miracle with care and honesty rather than believing everything or nothing.

> *Test all things; hold fast the good.* (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

The Miracle That Matters Most

Of all the miracles in the Bible, one stands at the center: the resurrection of Jesus. If it happened, then every other miracle in the Bible is easy to believe. If it did not, then the Christian faith is false, as Paul himself admitted (1 Corinthians 15:14). That is why the last chapter of this book looks at the evidence for it in detail.

Questions to Think About

1. Have you ever ruled something out before looking at the evidence? What happened?
2. How does the existence of God change the question of whether miracles can happen?
3. Why do you think Jesus' enemies argued about the source of His power instead of denying His miracles?
4. How should a Christian respond to claims of miracles today?

Read More

Exodus 14; 1 Kings 18:20-39; Mark 4:35-41; Mark 5:21-43; John 9; John 11:1-45; Acts 3:1-16.

Question 6: Doesn't the Bible Contradict Itself?

> *The sum of Your word **is** truth, and every judgment of Your righteousness **is** forever.*
>
> Psalm 119:160 (SLB)

The Short Answer Most claimed contradictions disappear when you read them carefully, in context, and allow for normal differences between eyewitness accounts. Different writers often tell the same event from different angles, include different details, or summarize differently. That is what we expect from honest, independent witnesses. A few passages remain hard, but none of them touches a central teaching of the faith.

You may have seen lists online of "hundreds of Bible contradictions." They can look impressive. But when you look at the items one by one, nearly all of them fall into a few simple categories.

Different Details Are Not Contradictions

Imagine four people describing a car accident. One says a red car ran the light. Another says a sedan hit a truck. A third mentions the rain. The fourth says two people were hurt. They are telling different parts of the same story. If all four told it in exactly the same words, a judge would suspect they had rehearsed it.

The four Gospels work much the same way. Each writer chose what to include based on his purpose and his audience.

Example: How Many Blind Men?

Matthew says two blind men cried out to Jesus near Jericho. Mark names only one, Bartimaeus.

> *And look, two blind **men** sitting beside the road, having heard that Jesus is passing by, cried out, saying, "Have mercy on us, Lord, Son of David!"* (Matthew 20:30)

> *And they come to Jericho. And as He was going out from Jericho, and His disciples and a large crowd, a son of Timaeus, Bartimaeus the blind **man**, was sitting beside the road begging.* (Mark 10:46)

Mark does not say there was only one. He focuses on the one people knew by name. Mentioning one does not deny the other.

Example: One Angel or Two?

Matthew mentions an angel at Jesus' tomb. Luke mentions two men in flashing garments.

> *And look, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of **the** Lord, having descended out of heaven, having come, rolled away the stone from the door, and was sitting on it.* (Matthew 28:2)

> *And it came to pass, while they were perplexed about this, that look, two men stood by them in flashing garments.* (Luke 24:4)

Again, Matthew does not say "only one." He tells us about the angel who spoke. Luke tells us there were two.

Example: The Sign on the Cross

Each Gospel gives the wording of the sign over Jesus' head a little differently. Matthew: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." Mark: "The King of the Jews." Luke: "This is the King of the Jews." John: "Jesus the Nazarene, the King of the Jews."

John tells us the sign was written in three languages (John 19:20). The wording may have differed a bit between them, and the writers

may also have summarized. All four agree on the main charge: Jesus was crucified as "the King of the Jews."

Example: How Did Judas Die?

Matthew says Judas hanged himself. Luke, in Acts, says he fell headlong and burst open.

> *And having thrown down the silver* ***coins*** *in the temple, he withdrew, and having gone away, he hanged himself.* (Matthew 27:5)

> *(Now this man indeed acquired a field out of the wages of unrighteousness, and having fallen headlong, he burst open in the middle, and all his intestines gushed out.* (Acts 1:18)

The usual explanation is simple: Judas hanged himself, and at some point the body fell, perhaps when the rope or branch gave way, and burst open. Both accounts describe the same grim end from different angles.

Example: Who Moved David to Count the People?

Second Samuel says the LORD incited David to count Israel. First Chronicles says Satan did.

> *And the anger of the LORD again burned against Israel, and He incited David against them, saying, "Go, count Israel and Judah."* (2 Samuel 24:1)

> *And Satan stood up against Israel, and he incited David to count Israel.* (1 Chronicles 21:1)

The Bible often shows God using even the evil plans of His enemies to carry out His purposes, as in the story of Job, where Satan afflicts Job but only within limits God allows. Samuel looks at God's overruling hand. Chronicles names the one who did the tempting. Both are true at the same time.

Example: The Centurion's Servant

Matthew says a centurion came to Jesus to ask Him to heal his servant. Luke says the centurion sent Jewish elders, and then friends.

> *And when Jesus had entered into Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, imploring Him* (Matthew 8:5)

> *And having heard about Jesus, he sent to Him elders of the Jews, asking Him that, having come, He would save his slave.* (Luke 7:3)

In the ancient world, as today, a person was often said to do what he did through others. We still say, "The president announced a new plan today," when a spokesman read the statement. Matthew gives the short version. Luke gives the details.

Copying Errors

There are a few places where numbers differ between parallel passages in Kings and Chronicles. Many of these are best explained as copying errors in later manuscripts. Hebrew used letters as numbers, and some letters look very much alike. Christians believe the original writings were without error, and the next chapter shows how remarkably well the text has been preserved. These small differences do not change any teaching of Scripture.

How to Handle a Hard Passage

1. **Read the context.** Many problems vanish when you read the verses before and after.
2. **Ask what the writer is doing.** Is he giving exact words, a summary, poetry, or a figure of speech?
3. **Remember that "some" is not "only."** One writer's silence about a detail does not deny it.

4. **Look it up.** Good study Bibles and commentaries address nearly every well-known difficulty.
5. **Be patient.** Some problems once called errors have been answered by later discoveries. It is fine to say, "I don't know yet."

Why This Matters

Jesus trusted the Scriptures completely.

> *For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, one iota or one stroke will by no means pass away from the law until everything happens.* (Matthew 5:18)

> *Sanctify them in Your truth; Your word is truth.* (John 17:17)

The Bible is not a single book written by one person at one sitting. It is sixty-six books written by about forty authors over roughly fifteen hundred years, in three languages and on three continents. Its unity, its honesty about its heroes' failures, and its consistent message of God's rescue in Christ are far more striking than any small difference in detail.

Questions to Think About

1. Have you ever been troubled by an apparent contradiction in the Bible? What was it?
2. Why would four identical Gospel accounts actually be less believable than four slightly different ones?
3. Which of the steps for handling a hard passage do you find most helpful?
4. How can you respond kindly to someone who says the Bible is full of contradictions?

Read More

Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:16-21. See also Trusting the Word of God and Which Bible, Which Books?, in this series.

Question 7: Can We Trust the Bible We Have Today?

> *Grass dries up, a flower withers, and the word of our God will stand forever.*
>
> Isaiah 40:8 (SLB)

The Short Answer Yes. We do not have the original pages written by Moses, Isaiah or Paul, but we have thousands of handwritten copies, some very early, that let scholars reconstruct the original text with great confidence. The differences between copies are mostly spelling and word order, and none of them changes a core teaching of the faith. No other ancient book comes close to the Bible in the number and age of its copies.

"The Bible has been translated and copied so many times, how could we know what it originally said?" It is a reasonable question. It is a little like the game of telephone, where a message whispered around a circle comes out garbled at the end. But the Bible was not passed down like that.

Not a Game of Telephone

In the telephone game, there is one line, and each person hears only once. The Bible was copied in many places at once, by many different scribes, for centuries. When scholars compare copies from different times and places, they can spot where one copyist made a mistake, because the other lines of copies did not make it.

Modern translations are not made from earlier translations, like a copy of a copy of a copy. They go back to the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts themselves.

The Old Testament and the Dead Sea Scrolls

Before 1947, the oldest complete Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament came from about a thousand years after Christ. Then shepherds found scrolls in caves near Qumran, by the Dead Sea. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls were copies or pieces of nearly every book of the Old Testament, many of them copied before the time of Jesus.

One of the most famous is a complete scroll of Isaiah, copied before the time of Christ (most scholars date it to the second or first century B.C.). When scholars compared it with the later manuscripts, they found the text had been passed down with remarkable care over that span of a thousand years. The differences were mostly small matters of spelling.

The New Testament

For the New Testament we have more than five thousand handwritten copies or pieces in Greek, plus thousands more in early translations such as Latin, Syriac and Coptic, and countless quotations in the writings of early church leaders. Some of the earliest pieces were copied within a few generations of the originals. One small fragment of the Gospel of John, kept in Manchester, England, is often dated to the first half of the second century, though some scholars date it a bit later.

Compare that with other ancient books. For many classical writers we have far fewer copies, often made many centuries after they wrote. The first six books of the Annals by the Roman historian Tacitus, for example, survive in a single medieval manuscript. Yet historians use those books with confidence. By the same standard, the New Testament is the best-preserved book of the ancient world.

What About the Differences?

With so many copies, there are many small differences between them. Critics sometimes quote a large number of "variants" to make it sound alarming. But most of these are spelling differences, a word left out or repeated, or a change in word order, which matters little in Greek. A small number make a difference in meaning, and good modern Bibles point these out in footnotes. None of them changes any central teaching of the Christian faith.

Were the Right Books Chosen?

Some people have heard that church leaders voted on which books belong in the Bible centuries later, or that other "lost gospels" were hidden. In fact, the core of the New Testament, the four Gospels and Paul's letters, was being read and recognized by the churches very early. Later lists simply recognized what the churches had already received. The so-called lost gospels were written later and were never widely accepted as Scripture. The book Different Gospels, in this series, covers this in detail.

God Keeps His Word

> *Grass dries up, a flower withers, and the word of our God will stand forever.* (Isaiah 40:8)

> *Every Scripture **is** God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training which **is** in righteousness* (2 Timothy 3:16)

Christians believe God not only gave His word but also kept it. The history of the manuscripts shows that the Bible you can hold in your hands today faithfully passes on what the prophets and apostles wrote.

Questions to Think About

1. Why is the Bible's transmission not like a game of telephone?
2. What surprised you most about the Dead Sea Scrolls or the number of New Testament manuscripts?
3. Why do you think the differences between manuscripts are often made to sound bigger than they are?
4. How does knowing that the text is reliable affect the way you read your Bible?

Read More

Psalm 119:89-96; Isaiah 40:6-8; Matthew 24:35; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; 2 Peter 1:19-21. See also Which Bible, Which Books?, Dug Up and Written Down, and Different Gospels, in this series.

Question 8: Wasn't Jesus Copied from Older Myths?

> *For not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty.*
>
> 2 Peter 1:16 (SLB)

The Short Answer Claims that the story of Jesus was borrowed from older gods such as Horus or Mithras spread widely on the internet, but they do not hold up when you check the ancient sources. Many of the supposed parallels were made up or stretched, and the rest are vague. Almost all historians, including those who are not Christians, agree that Jesus was a real man who lived in Galilee and was crucified under Pontius Pilate. The Gospels read like history written close to the events, not like myth.

You may have seen a video or a meme claiming that Jesus is just a copy of older pagan gods. The story goes something like this: long before Jesus, there was a god who was born of a virgin on December 25, had twelve disciples, was crucified and rose on the third day. Therefore, the claim goes, Christians copied the story.

Check the Original Sources

The first rule of checking any claim is to go back to the original source. When you do that with these claims, they fall apart.

The ancient Egyptian stories of Horus do not describe a virgin birth, twelve disciples or a crucifixion. In the best-known myth, Horus is conceived after his mother Isis restores the body of the dead god

Osiris. Mithras, a god worshiped by Roman soldiers, was said to be born out of a rock. Most of what we know about Roman Mithras worship comes from shrines and carvings that date from the second century and later, after the New Testament was written, so if anyone borrowed, it was not the first Christians.

The date of December 25 is not in the Bible at all. The Gospels do not tell us the day Jesus was born. Christians chose that date for the celebration much later.

The Parallels Are Vague

Many religions have stories of gods who die and return, usually tied to the seasons: the crops die in winter and return in spring. Those stories are set in a timeless, mythical past. They do not name a real governor, a real city or a real year.

The Gospels do. Luke places the start of John the Baptist's ministry in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea (Luke 3:1). He names rulers, priests and towns that can be checked against other ancient records.

> *it seemed good to me also, having followed all things carefully from the first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may come to know the certainty concerning the words in which you were instructed.* (Luke 1:3-4)

Jesus Was a Real Person

Almost all historians who study the ancient world, Christian or not, agree that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person. The New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who is not a Christian, wrote a whole book in 2012, *Did Jesus Exist?*, to show that the answer is yes. Roman and Jewish writers, including Tacitus and Josephus, mention Him, as we will see in the last chapter.

Historians still disagree, of course, about who Jesus was and whether He rose. But the idea that He never existed, or that His life was stitched together from pagan myths, sits far outside the mainstream of historical study.

The First Christians Were Jews

The first followers of Jesus were Jews who believed in one God and hated idolatry. They would have been the last people on earth to borrow from pagan myths. Paul, a strict Pharisee, called the gospel a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23). A crucified Messiah was not something either group wanted to hear. Nobody invents a story that offends everyone who hears it.

The apostles insisted they were telling what they had seen.

> *That which was from **the** beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we looked upon and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life—* (1 John 1:1)

When There Are Real Echoes

Sometimes there are real likenesses between the Bible and other ancient stories. Many cultures, for example, remember a great flood. That should not surprise us. If the Bible is true, then other nations may preserve broken memories of the same events. A copy with errors does not prove that the original is false.

And some longings show up in every culture: the hope that death is not the end, that wrong will be put right, that God will come near. Christians believe those longings are real, and that Jesus is the One who actually fulfills them.

Questions to Think About

1. Have you ever seen a claim like this online? How could you check it?
2. Why does it matter that the Gospels name real rulers, places and dates?
3. Why would the first Jewish Christians have been unlikely to borrow from pagan stories?
4. How would you answer a friend who says Jesus never existed?

Read More

Luke 1:1-4; Luke 3:1-2; Acts 26:24-26; 1 Corinthians 15:1-8; 2 Peter 1:16-18; 1 John 1:1-4. See also How to Fact Check Anything Yourself, in the Fact Check Series.

Question 9: What About the Violence and Slavery in the Old Testament?

> *Far be it from You to do according to this manner, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, and it would be, the righteous as the wicked. Far be it from You! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?*
>
> Genesis 18:25 (SLB)

The Short Answer These are some of the hardest passages in the Bible, and honest Christians should not pretend otherwise. But they are often read without their setting. The laws about servants were given to limit a harsh practice in a harsh world, not to praise it, and they were very different from the slavery of the American South. The wars against the Canaanites came after centuries of God's patience with nations that practiced child sacrifice, and they were a unique moment in history, not a pattern for today. Through it all, the Bible points toward Jesus, who laid down His life rather than take anyone else's.

Many people who read the Old Testament for the first time are troubled. Why did God allow slavery? Why did He command Israel to go to war against whole nations? Is the God of the Old Testament different from the God Jesus revealed?

These are fair questions. Let us look at them carefully.

Slavery in the Bible

The word "slave" makes us think of the slavery of the American South, where people were kidnapped from Africa, bought and sold for life and treated as property because of their race. The law of Moses condemned the very act that started that trade.

> *And whoever steals a man, and sells him, or he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death.* (Exodus 21:16)

Much of what the Old Testament calls slavery was closer to debt servitude. A poor Israelite could sell his labor to pay a debt. The law limited that service to six years, and the master was told to send him away with gifts so he could start again (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12-15). A servant who was injured by his master was to go free (Exodus 21:26-27). And a slave who ran away from his master was not to be handed back.

> *You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped to you from his master. With you he shall dwell, in your midst, in the place which he chooses in one of your gates, in what **is** good to him; you shall not oppress him.* (Deuteronomy 23:15-16)

That last law alone set Israel apart from the nations around it, where helping a runaway slave was a crime.

Why Didn't God Simply Forbid It?

This is the harder question. Jesus gave a key to it when He talked about divorce. He said Moses permitted divorce "in view of your hardness of heart," but "from the beginning it has not been so" (Matthew 19:8). Some laws in the Old Testament were not God's ideal. They were limits placed on what fallen people were already doing, to restrain the worst of it.

The seeds that would end slavery were planted in Scripture from the start. Every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). In Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28). Paul told Philemon to receive his runaway slave Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but above a slave, a beloved brother" (Philemon 16). Many of the people who later led the fight against the slave trade did so because of their Christian faith.

The Conquest of Canaan

The book of Joshua records that God commanded Israel to drive out and destroy the nations of Canaan. To modern ears this sounds like genocide. Several things in the text itself help us read it rightly.

God waited for centuries. When God promised the land to Abraham, He said his descendants would not receive it for four generations, because the sin of the Amorites was not yet complete (Genesis 15:16). God gave those nations hundreds of years.

It was judgment, not favoritism. The Canaanite nations practiced child sacrifice and other evils, and God said plainly that Israel was not being given the land because of its own goodness (Deuteronomy 9:5; Deuteronomy 12:31). God warned that if Israel did the same things, the land would vomit them out too (Leviticus 18:24-28), and later He did send Israel into exile.

Those who turned to God were spared. Rahab of Jericho and her family were saved because she trusted Israel's God (Joshua 2; Joshua 6:25). The people of Nineveh, an enemy city, were spared when they repented (Jonah 3:10).

> *Say to them, '**As** I live, declares the Lord GOD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked **man**, but in a wicked **man** turning back from his way, and **that** he live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! And why will you die, O house of Israel?'* (Ezekiel 33:11)

It was a unique moment, not a pattern. The commands about Canaan were given for one time, one place and one people. They are never given to the church. Jesus told His followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:44) and to put away the sword (Matthew 26:52).

Bible-believing scholars also point out that ancient war reports often used sweeping language, such as "they destroyed everyone," which was not meant literally. The book of Judges, right after Joshua, shows that many Canaanites were still living in the land. Christians differ on how much weight to give that point, but it is worth knowing.

Is the God of the Old Testament Different?

Some people say the Old Testament God is angry and the New Testament God is loving. But the Old Testament describes God as compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Exodus 34:6). And the New Testament speaks just as plainly about final judgment. Jesus Himself spoke about hell more often than anyone else in the Bible.

It is the same God, holy and loving, in both. The difference is that at the cross, God's justice and His mercy met. Jesus took the judgment we deserved.

> *for the demonstration of His righteousness at the present time, for Him to be righteous and the **One** justifying the **one who is** of faith of Jesus.* (Romans 3:26)

Questions to Think About

1. Which Old Testament passage has troubled you most? Why?
2. How was the servant law in Israel different from the slavery of the American South?
3. What does Genesis 15:16 teach about God's patience before judgment?
4. How does the cross show both God's justice and His mercy?

Read More

Genesis 15:12-16; Exodus 21:1-27; Deuteronomy 9:1-6; Joshua 2; Joshua 6:22-25; Jonah 3-4; Philemon.

Question 10: Did Jesus Really Claim to Be God?

> *And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"*
>
> John 20:28 (SLB)

The Short Answer Yes. Jesus did not go around saying the exact words "I am God," but He claimed things that only God can claim: to forgive sins, to have existed before Abraham, to share God's glory and to be the judge of the world. His enemies understood Him, which is why they tried to stone Him for blasphemy. His followers, who were strict believers in one God, worshiped Him. That leaves us with a choice. Jesus was not merely a good teacher. He was either who He said He was, or He was not good at all.

Many people respect Jesus as a great moral teacher. Some say that the idea that He is God was added later by the church, long after He was gone. What does the evidence say?

He Forgave Sins

When a paralyzed man was lowered through a roof to Jesus, the first thing Jesus said was that his sins were forgiven. The religious teachers who were watching understood exactly what that meant.

> *Now Jesus, having seen their faith, says to the paralytic, "Child, your sins have been forgiven you." Now some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this **man** speak blasphemies thus? Who is able to forgive sins except One, God?"* (Mark 2:5-7)

I can forgive you for a wrong you did to me. But I cannot forgive you for a wrong you did to someone else. When Jesus forgave the man's sins, He acted as the One every sin is finally against. Then He healed the man to show that His claim was true (Mark 2:10-12).

He Claimed to Exist Before Abraham

In a heated argument, Jesus told His listeners that Abraham had rejoiced to see His day. They scoffed that He was not yet fifty years old. His answer stunned them.

> *Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came into being, I am."* (John 8:58)

"I am" echoes the name God gave Himself at the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). The crowd knew it. The very next verse says they picked up stones to throw at Him.

> *I and the Father are one." Therefore the Jews again took up stones so that they might stone Him. Jesus answered them, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. Because of which work of them do you stone Me?" The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a man, make Yourself God.* (John 10:30-33)

He Accepted Worship

In the Bible, good men and angels refuse worship. When Cornelius fell at Peter's feet, Peter made him stand up (Acts 10:25-26). When John fell before an angel, the angel told him not to do it, and to worship God (Revelation 22:8-9).

Jesus accepted worship. When Thomas saw the risen Lord and said, "My Lord and my God," Jesus did not correct him. He blessed those who would believe without seeing (John 20:28-29).

His Followers Called Him God

The first Christians were Jews who said every day that the LORD is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). Yet within a few years of the resurrection, they were worshiping Jesus and calling Him God. That is not the slow growth of a legend. It happened early, and it happened among the people least likely to invent it.

> *In **the** beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* (John 1:1)

> *for in Him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily* (Colossians 2:9)

> *awaiting the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ* (Titus 2:13)

Paul's letters, written within about twenty to thirty years of the crucifixion, already speak of Jesus as existing in the form of God before He humbled Himself and became a man (Philippians 2:5-11).

Only a Good Teacher?

The writer C. S. Lewis made a famous point about this in his book *Mere Christianity*. A man who said the things Jesus said and was only a man would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be deceiving people or deceived about himself. Lewis concluded that we must either reject Jesus or fall at His feet, but we cannot pat Him on the head as a nice teacher. He has not left that option open to us.

One God, Three Persons

Christians do not believe in three gods. We believe in one God who exists eternally as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus is not the Father. He prayed to the Father. But He shares the one nature of God fully. This truth is a mystery, but it is not a contradiction. The

book *One God, Three Persons* in this series looks at it in more depth.

Why It Matters

If Jesus is only a man, then His death could pay for no one's sin but His own, and He could not have done even that. Only One who is both God and man can stand between God and man.

> *For **there is** one God, and one mediator of God and men,*
> ***the** man Christ Jesus* (1 Timothy 2:5)

Questions to Think About

1. Why did the religious leaders react so strongly when Jesus forgave sins?
2. What did the crowd understand when Jesus said, "before Abraham came into being, I am"?
3. Why is it significant that Jewish believers in one God worshiped Jesus so early?
4. Why can Jesus not be "just a good teacher"?

Read More

Isaiah 9:6; Mark 14:60-64; John 1:1-18; John 5:16-23; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-8.

Question 11: Isn't It Arrogant to Say Jesus Is the Only Way?

> *Jesus says to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."*
>
> John 14:6 (SLB)

The Short Answer The claim that Jesus is the only way did not come from Christians trying to look superior. It came from Jesus Himself. If He is who He said He is, the Son of God who died for our sins and rose again, then there is no other rescue, and saying so is not arrogance but honesty. Christians should hold this truth with deep humility, because none of us earned our way to God. We were all rescued by grace.

Our culture prizes tolerance, and rightly so. We should treat people of every faith with respect and kindness. But many people go further and say that all religions are basically the same, different paths up the same mountain. To say that only one path leads to God sounds narrow and proud.

Jesus Made the Claim

The claim did not start with the church.

> *Jesus says to him, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."* (John 14:6)

> *And **there** is not salvation in any other; for neither is **there** another name under heaven which has been given among men by which we must be saved.* (Acts 4:12)

Jesus did not say He was one way among many, or a good teacher who pointed to God. He said He is the way, and that no one comes

to the Father except through Him. We have to deal with what He actually said.

All Religions Are Not the Same

It sounds kind to say all religions teach the same thing. But it is not true, and it is not respectful to the religions themselves. They disagree on the most basic questions.

- **Who is God?** One personal God, many gods, an impersonal force, or no God at all?
- **Who is Jesus?** Christianity says He is God the Son. Islam says He was a prophet but not divine and was not crucified. Judaism says He was not the Messiah. Many Eastern religions see Him as one enlightened teacher among many.
- **What is our problem?** Sin against a holy God, ignorance, desire, or illusion?
- **What is the solution?** Grace received by faith, or good works, or enlightenment, or escape from the cycle of rebirth?

They cannot all be true. Saying that all religions are the same actually ignores what each of them teaches.

Every View Is "Exclusive"

The person who says, "All religions lead to God," is also making an exclusive claim. They are saying that every religion that claims to be the only way is wrong. Everyone believes some things are true and their opposite is false. The real question is not whether a belief is exclusive, but whether it is true.

Why Christianity Is Different

Most religions are, at heart, about what people must do to reach God. Christianity is about what God has done to reach us.

> *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this **is** not from yourselves; the gift **is** of God, not from works, so that no one may boast.* (Ephesians 2:8-9)

If you could reach God by being good enough, then Jesus died for nothing (Galatians 2:21). The gospel says we cannot climb the mountain. God came down. That is why Christians have no room for pride. We did not find the way because we were smarter or better. We were found.

Humility, Not Arrogance

Arrogance would be saying, "I am better than you." The gospel says, "I am a sinner who needed rescue, and so are you, and here is the One who rescued me." That is one beggar telling another where to find bread.

Christians should speak about Jesus with gentleness and respect, listen carefully to people of other faiths, and never use force or pressure. But love does not stay silent about the way of rescue.

> *but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and **be** ready always for a defense to everyone who asks you an account concerning the hope in you, with gentleness and fear*
> (1 Peter 3:15)

What About Sincere People in Other Religions?

Many people in other religions are sincere, kind and devout. Sincerity matters, but it does not make something true. A person can be sincerely wrong about the medicine they take. The question is whether what they trust in is able to save.

God sees every heart, and He is not looking for reasons to shut people out.

> *And Peter, having opened his mouth, said, "In truth I grasp that God is not one who shows partiality, but in every nation*

the one fearing Him and working righteousness is acceptable to Him." (Acts 10:34-35)

*And you will seek Me and find **Me**, when you seek Me with all your heart.* (Jeremiah 29:13)

The next chapter looks at people who have never heard of Jesus.

Questions to Think About

1. Have you ever felt uncomfortable saying that Jesus is the only way? Why?
2. Why is it not respectful to say that all religions teach the same thing?
3. How is the Christian message different from "be good enough to reach God"?
4. How can you share the truth about Jesus with humility and kindness?

Read More

John 3:16-18; John 10:7-11; John 14:1-11; Acts 4:8-12; Acts 17:22-31; 1 Timothy 2:3-6. See also Different Gospels, in this series.

Question 12: What About People Who Never Hear About Jesus?

> *Far be it from You to do according to this manner, to put to death the righteous with the wicked, and it would be, the righteous as the wicked. Far be it from You! Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?*
>
> Genesis 18:25 (SLB)

The Short Answer The Bible teaches that God has made Himself known to every person through creation and conscience, that He judges people fairly according to the light they have received, and that He is not willing for anyone to perish. It also teaches that salvation comes only through Christ. Christians differ on exactly how God deals with those who never hear. What the Bible makes clear is that we can trust God to be just, and that we are called to take the good news to everyone.

This question usually comes right after the last one. If Jesus is the only way, what about someone born in a remote place who never heard His name? What about people who lived before Jesus came? It does not seem fair.

No One Is Left Without Any Witness

The Bible says God has made Himself known to everyone, even those who have never seen a Bible.

> *because what is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested **it** to them.* (Romans 1:19)

> *For His invisible **things**, from **the** creation of **the** world, being understood by the things made, are clearly seen, both*

> *His eternal power and divinity, for them to be without excuse* (Romans 1:20)

> *The heavens are recounting the glory of God, and the expanse is declaring the work of His hands.* (Psalm 19:1)

Creation shows that there is a powerful, wise Creator. Conscience shows that there is right and wrong.

> *For when Gentiles who do not have law by nature do the things of the law, these, not having law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness with **them**, and the thoughts between one another accusing or even defending **them*** (Romans 2:14-15)

Every person has received some light. The question is what they do with it.

God Judges Fairly

God does not hold people accountable for what they could not have known. As we saw in Chapter 2, He judges according to the light given (Luke 12:47-48). Abraham's question still stands: "Will not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" Whatever God does with those who never hear, it will be right.

God Seeks Seekers

The Bible shows God reaching people who were seeking Him. Cornelius was a Roman soldier who prayed to God and gave to the poor. God sent an angel to tell him to send for Peter, who then told him about Jesus (Acts 10). The Ethiopian official was reading Isaiah, and God sent Philip to him on a desert road (Acts 8).

> *And He made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, having determined **the** times appointed beforehand and the boundaries of their dwelling,*

> *to seek the Lord, if perhaps they might feel for Him and find **Him**; and yet He is not far from each one of us.* (Acts 17:26-27)
>
> *And you will seek Me and find **Me**, when you seek Me with all your heart.* (Jeremiah 29:13)

God placed people where they are so that they would seek Him, "and yet He is not far from each one of us." Many missionaries have told stories of people who were already seeking the true God when the gospel reached them.

What About Those Who Lived Before Christ?

Abraham, Moses, David and other Old Testament believers were saved by faith in the God who promised a coming Redeemer. Their sins were covered on the basis of what Christ would do (Romans 3:25-26; Hebrews 9:15). They looked forward to the cross. We look back on it. Either way, salvation is by grace through faith, and it rests on Christ.

Where Christians Differ

Christians who agree that salvation comes only through Christ hold different views on those who never hear:

- Some believe that those who never hear the gospel are judged by their response to the light of creation and conscience, and that all have fallen short of even that light.
- Some believe that God may apply Christ's work to those who respond in faith to whatever light He gives them, even if they never learn Jesus' name in this life.
- Many simply say that the Bible does not give us all the details, and leave the matter in God's just hands.

> *The hidden **things belong** to the LORD our God, and the revealed **things belong** to us and to our sons forever, to do all the words of this law.* (Deuteronomy 29:29)

What We Are Told to Do

The Bible does not satisfy every bit of our curiosity on this question. But it is very clear about our part.

> *How then will they call on **Him** in whom they did not believe? And how will they believe **in Him** of whom they did not hear? And how will they hear without one proclaiming?* (Romans 10:14)

The best answer to "What about those who have never heard?" is to go and tell them. That is why the church has sent missionaries for two thousand years, and why Jesus' last command was to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

And if you are asking this question but have heard about Jesus, the most important question for you is not what God will do with someone else. It is what you will do with the light you have been given.

Questions to Think About

1. What does creation tell people about God? What does it not tell them?
2. How do the stories of Cornelius and the Ethiopian official encourage you?
3. Why do you think the Bible does not answer every detail about those who never hear?
4. What is one way you could help take the gospel to people who have not heard?

Read More

Psalm 19; Acts 8:26-40; Acts 10; Acts 17:22-31; Romans 1:18-2:16; Romans 10:9-17.

Question 13: Why Doesn't God Answer My Prayers?

> *And He was also speaking a parable to them about its being necessary always to pray and not to lose heart*
>
> Luke 18:1 (SLB)

The Short Answer God hears every prayer of His children, but He does not always say yes. Sometimes He says no, because He knows better than we do. Sometimes He says wait. Sometimes our prayers are hindered by sin or by wrong motives. And sometimes, as with Jesus in the garden and Paul with his thorn, God answers not by removing the trouble but by giving grace to carry it. Unanswered prayer is not proof that God does not care. Jesus told us to keep praying and not lose heart.

Almost every believer has prayed hard for something and watched it not happen. A loved one was not healed. A marriage was not saved. A job did not come through. It can shake your faith. Does God hear? Does He care? Did I do something wrong?

God Hears

The Bible is clear that God hears His children.

> *And this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.* (1 John 5:14)

> *Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what things you have need of before you ask Him.* (Matthew 6:8)

Hearing is not the same as granting every request. A good parent hears every word a child says. A good parent does not give the child everything the child asks for.

> *If you then, being evil, know **how** to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who **is** in the heavens give good things to those who ask Him?*
> (Matthew 7:11)

Sometimes the Answer Is No

God sees what we cannot see. We pray from inside one moment. He sees the whole of our lives and eternity beyond.

> *For My thoughts **are** not your thoughts, and your ways **are** not My ways, declares the LORD. For **as** the heavens are higher than the earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Many of us can look back and thank God for prayers He did not answer the way we wanted. At the time it felt like silence. Later we saw His wisdom.

Sometimes the Answer Is Wait

Abraham waited about twenty-five years for the son God promised. Joseph spent years as a slave and a prisoner before God raised him up. Israel waited centuries for the Messiah. God's timing is rarely our timing, but it is never late.

> *And He was also speaking a parable to them about its being necessary always to pray and not to lose heart* (Luke 18:1)

Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow to teach us to keep praying and not lose heart.

Sometimes Something Is in the Way

The Bible is honest that some things hinder prayer. Unconfessed sin can (Psalm 66:18). So can wrong motives.

> *You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, so that you may spend **it** on your pleasures.* (James 4:3)

So can the way we treat others, especially at home (1 Peter 3:7). This is not a reason to beat yourself up every time a prayer is not answered. Often the reason has nothing to do with any sin of yours. But it is worth asking God to search your heart.

Sometimes God Gives Grace Instead

The most important examples come from Jesus and Paul.

> *And having gone forward a little, He fell on His face, praying and saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You **will**."* (Matthew 26:39)

Jesus asked the Father to take the cup of suffering away. The Father did not. But Jesus' prayer ended, "not as I will, but as You will," and through His suffering the world was saved.

> *Concerning this I begged the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.* (2 Corinthians 12:8-9)

Paul begged three times for his thorn to be removed. God said no, and gave him grace instead. Paul learned that God's power shows up most clearly in our weakness.

When You Do Not Know What to Pray

Sometimes the pain is too deep for words. The Bible has a promise for that too.

> *And likewise the Spirit also helps our weaknesses; for what we should pray as is necessary, we do not know, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with inexpressible groanings.* (Romans 8:26)

When you cannot find the words, the Holy Spirit prays for you.

Keep Praying

The Psalms are full of honest prayers that ask, "How long?" (Psalm 13:1). God does not ask you to pretend. He invites you to pour out your heart, to keep coming, and to trust Him even when you do not understand.

In my own life, I have not always prayed as I should. When I got busy, I put God on the back burner. In the dark years of my drinking, I was not seeking Him the way I should have been. But I never felt that God had left me. Looking back, I can see that He was at work in my life long before I had the sense to seek Him again.

Questions to Think About

1. Think of a prayer God did not answer the way you wanted. How do you see it now?
2. What is the difference between God hearing a prayer and God granting it?
3. What do Jesus in Gethsemane and Paul with his thorn teach you about prayer?
4. What will help you keep praying and not lose heart?

Read More

Psalm 13; Psalm 62:8; Matthew 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13; Luke 18:1-8; Romans 8:26-28; Philippians 4:6-7. See also Making Room for Prayer and Ask Seek Knock, in this series.

Question 14: Isn't Faith Just Believing Without Evidence?

> *Now faith is **the** assurance of **things** hoped for, **the** conviction of things not seen.*
>
> Hebrews 11:1 (SLB)

The Short Answer Biblical faith is not believing something with no reason. It is trusting a God who has given good reasons to trust Him: a universe that points to a Maker, a moral law written on our hearts, a reliable record of history, and above all the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Faith goes beyond what we can see, but it does not go against what we know.

Some people think of faith as a blind leap: believing something because you want it to be true, in spite of the evidence. Mark Twain is often quoted as saying that faith is "believing what you know ain't so." If that is what faith means, no thinking person should want it.

But that is not what the Bible means by faith.

What the Bible Means by Faith

> *Now faith is **the** assurance of **things** hoped for, **the** conviction of things not seen.* (Hebrews 11:1)

Faith is assurance and conviction. It is trust in someone who has proven trustworthy. You exercise this kind of faith every day. You trust the pilot when you board a plane, the doctor when you take a prescription, the chair when you sit down. That trust is not blind. It rests on good reasons, even though you cannot see everything.

The Bible Points to Evidence

The biblical writers did not ask people to believe without reasons. They pointed to things that could be checked.

> *Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative concerning the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as those who from **the** beginning became eyewitnesses and servants of the word delivered **them** to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things carefully from the first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may come to know the certainty concerning the words in which you were instructed.* (Luke 1:1-4)

> *For not having followed cleverly devised myths did we make known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but having become eyewitnesses of His majesty.* (2 Peter 1:16)

> *For the king knows about these things, to whom also I speak with boldness; for I am not persuaded that any of these things escapes his notice, not one; for this has not been done in a corner.* (Acts 26:26)

Luke investigated carefully, so that his reader would "come to know the certainty" of what he had been taught. Peter insisted the apostles were eyewitnesses, not storytellers. Paul told a king that "this has not been done in a corner." Christianity invites investigation.

Reasons to Believe God Exists

This book is not mainly about the existence of God. The book Is There Really a God, in this series, goes into that in detail. But here are a few of the reasons many people have found convincing.

- **Something rather than nothing.** Everything that begins to exist has a cause. The universe had a beginning. What caused it?

- **Order and design.** The laws of nature are precise and the universe is fit for life. Order points to a mind.
- **The moral law.** Almost everyone knows that some things, such as torturing a child for fun, are truly wrong, not just disliked. A real moral law points to a real Lawgiver.
- **The longing for more.** We are hungry for meaning, beauty, love and justice that this world never fully satisfies. That longing suggests we were made for something more.
- **Jesus Himself.** The best reason of all is the person of Jesus Christ: His life, His teaching, His claims, and His resurrection. The last chapter of this book looks at the evidence for the resurrection.

> *For His invisible **things**, from **the** creation of **the** world, being understood by the things made, are clearly seen, both His eternal power and divinity, for them to be without excuse*
> (Romans 1:20)

Faith Goes Further Than Proof

Evidence can take you to the edge of the water. Faith steps in. We cannot prove God the way we prove a math problem. But we do not live most of our lives on mathematical proof. You cannot prove that your spouse loves you, but you can have very good reasons to trust that they do. Faith in God is like that. It is reasonable trust in a Person.

> *And without faith **it is** impossible to please **Him**; for the one who draws near to God must believe that He is, and **that** He becomes a rewarder to those who earnestly seek Him.*
> (Hebrews 11:6)

Doubt Is Not the Opposite of Faith

Many believers struggle with doubt. That does not mean they have no faith. A father once came to Jesus with a sick son and cried out:

> *And immediately the father of the child, having cried out with tears, was saying, "I believe, Lord; help my unbelief."* (Mark 9:24)

Jesus did not turn him away. He healed his son. Thomas doubted the resurrection until he saw the risen Lord, and then he worshiped Him (John 20:24-28). Doubt can be a step on the way to deeper faith, if you bring it honestly to God and keep seeking.

> *Jesus says to him, "Because you have seen Me, Thomas, you have believed. Blessed **are** those who have not seen and have believed."* (John 20:29)

Questions to Think About

1. Where in daily life do you trust things you cannot fully see? What makes that trust reasonable?
2. Which of the reasons to believe God exists do you find most convincing? Which least?
3. Why do you think Luke and Peter stressed eyewitnesses and careful investigation?
4. What would it look like to bring your doubts honestly to God?

Read More

Psalm 19; John 20:24-31; Acts 17:22-31; Romans 1:18-20; Hebrews 11. See also Is There Really a God and When Faith Has Questions, in this series.

Question 15: Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites?

> *Faithful **is** the word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am foremost.*
>
> 1 Timothy 1:15 (SLB)

The Short Answer Some are, and the Bible never says otherwise. The church is not a club for good people. It is more like a hospital for sick ones. Jesus saved His harshest words for religious hypocrites, so if you are angry about hypocrisy, you are on His side. The many church groups can be confusing, but most of them agree on the core of the faith. In the end, the question is not whether Christians live up to Jesus. It is whether Jesus is who He said He is.

For many people, the biggest obstacle to faith is not an argument. It is a person. A father who went to church on Sunday and was cruel at home. A church leader caught in scandal. A Christian coworker who is harder to work with than anyone else. If Christianity is true, why are Christians like this?

Christians Are Sinners Who Know It

The Christian faith does not claim that believers are better than other people. It claims the opposite: that all of us have sinned and need forgiveness.

> *for all sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23)

I know this from my own life. I started drinking at sixteen and kept at it for years. I believed in God the whole time, and that did not

stop me from making a mess of a lot of things. I have been sober since May 29, 2020, and every day of that is God's grace, not my own goodness. When people look at a Christian and see failure, they are not seeing the gospel fail. They are seeing why we need it.

Changing is real, but it is slow. God does not finish His work in us all at once.

> *being confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will complete **it** until **the** day of Jesus Christ* (Philippians 1:6)

Jesus Hated Hypocrisy

No one in the Bible spoke more sharply against religious hypocrites than Jesus. He called the religious leaders of His day whitewashed tombs, clean on the outside and full of death inside (Matthew 23:27). He warned against practicing righteousness to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1).

> *Hypocrite! First cast out the beam from your eye, and then you will see clearly to cast out the splinter from the eye of your brother.* (Matthew 7:5)

So if you are angry about hypocrisy in the church, Jesus is angry about it too. The answer to fake faith is not no faith. It is real faith.

Not Everyone Who Says "Lord, Lord"

Jesus also warned that not everyone who uses His name truly belongs to Him (Matthew 7:21-23). Some people who have done terrible things in the name of Christ were never following Him at all. Their actions should be judged by His teaching, and His teaching condemns them.

Why Are There So Many Churches?

People are often confused by all the different churches: Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Catholic, Orthodox and many more. If the Bible is clear, why do Christians disagree so much?

Some divisions come from sin and pride, and Paul rebuked that kind of division in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). Jesus prayed that His followers would be one (John 17:21). Christians should take that prayer seriously.

But many differences are about secondary questions: how to organize a church, the style of worship, the timing of baptism or details about the end times. Across most of these groups, Christians agree on the core of the faith: one God in three Persons; Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man, who died for our sins and rose bodily from the dead; salvation by God's grace; the authority of Scripture; and the return of Christ. That shared core is far larger than the disagreements.

> *one body and one Spirit, even as you also were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who **is** over all and through all and in you all.* (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Look at Jesus

In the end, the question is not whether every Christian lives up to Jesus. None of us does. The question is whether Jesus is who He claimed to be. Do not let the failures of His followers keep you from looking at Him for yourself.

Christians, for our part, should own our failures, ask forgiveness when we wrong people and let our lives back up what we say.

Thus let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and may glorify your Father who ***is*** *in the heavens.* (Matthew 5:16)

Questions to Think About

1. Has a Christian's hypocrisy ever hurt you or someone you love? How did it affect your view of God?
2. What is the difference between a sinner and a hypocrite?
3. Why does it matter that Jesus Himself condemned hypocrisy?
4. What core beliefs do most Christian churches share?

Read More

Matthew 6:1-18; Matthew 23; Luke 18:9-14; John 17:20-23; Romans 7:14-25; 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 1 John 1:8-10.

Question 16: Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?

> *And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching **is** empty, and your faith also **is** empty.*
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:14 (SLB)

The Short Answer The resurrection of Jesus is the center of the Christian faith, and it rests on strong historical evidence: Jesus was crucified and buried; His tomb was found empty; many people, including skeptics and enemies, said they saw Him alive; and His followers were transformed from frightened men into bold witnesses who were willing to suffer for what they said they saw. Other explanations struggle to account for all of these facts. The best explanation is that He really rose.

Everything in Christianity rises or falls on this question. Paul said so plainly.

> *And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching **is** empty, and your faith also **is** empty.* (1 Corinthians 15:14)

> *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith **is** futile; you are still in your sins.* (1 Corinthians 15:17)

If Jesus did not rise, Christianity is false, and we should stop wasting our Sundays. If He did rise, then everything He said is backed by God Himself, and it changes everything. So it is worth looking at the evidence carefully.

Fact One: Jesus Died and Was Buried

That Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate is one of the best established facts of ancient history. All four Gospels record it. The

Roman historian Tacitus, writing in the early second century, mentions that "Christus" was executed by Pilate in the reign of Tiberius (Annals 15.44). The Jewish historian Josephus also refers to Jesus when he names James as the brother of Jesus who was called Christ (Antiquities 20.200).

Roman soldiers knew how to make sure a crucified man was dead. John records that a soldier pierced Jesus' side, and blood and water came out (John 19:34). Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council, buried Him in his own new tomb.

Fact Two: The Tomb Was Empty

On the third day, women who came to finish the burial found the tomb empty. Notice that the first witnesses were women. In that culture, the testimony of women was often given less weight. If someone were making up the story, they would not likely have made women the first witnesses. The detail is there because it happened.

Even Jesus' enemies did not claim the body was still in the tomb. They claimed the disciples stole it.

> *saying, "Say that His disciples, having come by night, stole Him while we were sleeping."* (Matthew 28:13)

That story admits the tomb was empty. And it does not explain why the disciples would then suffer and risk death for something they knew was a lie.

Fact Three: Many People Saw Him Alive

Paul passed on a list of eyewitnesses.

> *For I delivered to you among **the** first **things** what I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that*

> *He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some also have fallen asleep. After that He appeared to James, then to all the apostles. And last of all, as to the untimely birth, He appeared also to me.* (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Paul wrote this letter around A.D. 55, and he says he was passing on what he himself had received. Many scholars, including some who are skeptical of Christianity, date this summary to within a few years of the crucifixion. Paul even says most of the five hundred were still alive. In effect, he is saying, "Go and ask them."

The appearances were not to one person in a dream. They were to individuals and groups, indoors and outdoors, over forty days (Acts 1:3). Jesus ate with them and invited them to touch Him.

> *See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones, just as you see Me having.* (Luke 24:39)

Fact Four: Skeptics and Enemies Believed

Jesus' own brothers did not believe in Him during His ministry.

> *For not even His brothers were believing in Him.* (John 7:5)

Yet after the resurrection, His brother James became a leader of the church in Jerusalem (Galatians 1:19; Acts 15:13), and Paul says the risen Jesus appeared to James. Paul himself had been a fierce enemy of the church until he met the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. What changes a skeptical brother and a persecutor into devoted followers?

Fact Five: The Disciples Were Transformed

On the night Jesus was arrested, His disciples ran away. Peter denied Him three times. Weeks later, the same men were standing

in Jerusalem, the city where Jesus had been executed, boldly saying He had risen.

> *This Jesus God has raised up, of which we all are witnesses.*
> (Acts 2:32)

They were threatened, beaten and jailed, and they kept saying it. Acts records that James the brother of John was put to death (Acts 12:2), and early Christian writers report that other apostles were also killed for their faith. People will die for something they believe is true. They do not die for something they know is a lie.

What About Other Explanations?

- **The disciples stole the body.** Then they suffered for a lie they knew was false. And it does not explain Paul or James.
- **They went to the wrong tomb.** Then the authorities could simply have gone to the right tomb and produced the body.
- **Jesus did not really die.** A man who had been scourged and crucified, then sealed in a tomb, would not have convinced anyone he had conquered death.
- **The disciples had visions or hallucinations.** Hallucinations do not happen to groups of five hundred at once, do not eat fish, and do not empty a tomb.
- **It was a legend that grew over time.** The list of witnesses in 1 Corinthians 15 goes back to within a few years of the events, too early for a legend to replace the facts.

None of these explanations accounts for all the facts. The resurrection does.

Why It Matters to You

If Jesus rose, then He is who He said He is. His death really paid for sin. Death is not the end. And the same Jesus is alive today and can be known.

> *but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.* (John 20:31)

When Thomas finally saw the risen Lord, he said, "My Lord and my God." The evidence for the resurrection is not just a puzzle to solve. It is an invitation to meet the One who conquered death.

Questions to Think About

1. Why did Paul say that everything depends on the resurrection?
2. Which of the five facts do you find most convincing? Why?
3. Why is it significant that women were the first witnesses?
4. If Jesus really rose from the dead, what difference does that make for you this week?

Read More

Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20 and 21; Acts 1 and 2; 1 Corinthians 15. See also The Cross and the Empty Tomb and Dug Up and Written Down, in this series.

A Closing Word

> *Beloved, while making all diligence to write to you concerning our common salvation, I had necessity to write to you, exhorting **you** to contend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints.*
>
> Jude 3 (SLB)

We have looked at sixteen hard questions. I hope you have found that the Christian faith can stand up to honest questions, and that the answers, while not always neat, are solid.

But I want to end where Jesus ended. Answers to questions are good. They are not the goal. The goal is to know God Himself. Job did not get an explanation. He got God. Thomas did not just get evidence. He got the risen Lord, and fell at His feet.

If you have never trusted Jesus, I invite you to take the next step. Read one of the Gospels, John is a good place to start, and ask God to show you whether these things are true. He has promised that those who seek Him with all their heart will find Him (Jeremiah 29:13).

If you already follow Jesus, keep asking questions and keep seeking answers. And be ready, with gentleness and respect, to help someone else who is asking.

> *Come to Me, all who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest.* (Matthew 11:28)

About This Book

Hard Questions About the Faith takes sixteen of the hardest questions people ask about Christianity and answers each one honestly: whether God exists, suffering and evil, hell, science and Genesis, miracles, Bible contradictions, the reliability of the Bible, claims that Jesus was copied from myths, violence and slavery in the Old Testament, whether Jesus claimed to be God, other religions, those who never hear, unanswered prayer, faith and evidence, hypocrisy in the church, and the resurrection of Jesus. Each chapter gives a short answer, a full answer from Scripture and history, the points where Christians disagree, and questions for thought or discussion.

All Scripture quotations come from the Steadfast Literal Bible, which is free to read at trinfinityenterprises.com/slb.