

8 BIG QUESTIONS OF FAITH



▼ Click on a study title you'd like to see ▼

- 2** **HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE**
- 3** Study 1: **DOES GOD ALWAYS BLESS BELIEVERS?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 12** Study 2: **HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 20** Study 3: **WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?** *Leader's Guide — Articles*
- 28** Study 4: **HOW DOES FORGIVENESS BRING FREEDOM?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 36** Study 5: **DOES GOD KNOW YOUR NEXT MOVE?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 51** Study 6: **WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MESS?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 59** Study 7: **WILL GOD PROTECT US?** *Leader's Guide — Article*
- 68** Study 8: **WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?** *Leader's Guide — Article*

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE FOR A GROUP STUDY



This Bible study can be used for an individual or a group. If you intend to lead a group study, follow these simple suggestions.

- 1** Make enough copies of the articles for everyone in the group. If you would like your group to have more information, feel free to copy the Leader's Guides for them as well.
- 2** Don't feel that you have to use all the material in the study. Almost all of our studies have more information than you can get through in one session, so feel free to pick and choose the teaching information and questions that will meet the needs of your group. Use the teaching content of the study in any of these ways: for your own background and information; to read aloud (or summarize) to the group; for the group to read silently.
- 3** Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting people to open up.
- 4** When working through the questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for your group to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
- 5** Begin and end the session in prayer.

DOES GOD ALWAYS BLESS BELIEVERS?

The answer to that question may depend on how you define blessing.

The excesses represented by those preaching a “health and wealth” gospel make many believers cautious about asking for blessing. Yet Scripture frequently attests to God’s desire to bless his people. In this study, we will consider the concept of “good success”—how God blesses the people he uses.



Scripture: 1 Chronicles 4:9–10; Joshua 1:8; Psalm 73; Matthew 5:5; 6:19–24; Luke 18:18–25

Based on: “Unbalanced Blessings,” ChristianBibleStudies.com, 2011

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Unbalanced Blessings" from ChristianBibleStudies.com, included at the end of this study.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer. 29:11). This verse has been quoted and claimed almost more than any other in Scripture. But who was the Lord referring to and what was its original intent?

Discussion Starters:

- [Q] To whom was this verse written? When and why?
- [Q] If this verse was written to a nation, how does it apply to individuals?
- [Q] What does this verse teach us about the character of God?
- [Q] What does this verse teach us about the trustworthiness of God?
- [Q] In this verse, what is God's perspective in relation to time? How is that comforting or challenging?
- [Q] Does this verse represent God's plan for all people of all time? Can you think of exceptions, when God's plan was for people to suffer?
- [Q] How do we understand this verse next to Jesus' statement that the life of discipleship is the taking up of the cross, a life of self-denial and even suffering at times?
- [Q] Make a list of recent blessings. Who is responsible for them? Pick one that is obviously a blessing from God, for which no human could claim credit. How did that blessing also bless others?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**Teaching Point One: God blesses whom he chooses.**

A decade ago, *The Prayer of Jabez* topped the bestseller lists and sold more than 5 million copies. The little book prompted a lot of discussion of God's blessing through prayer. In it, author Bruce Wilkinson of Walk Thru the Bible explains the heretofore obscure prayer of a little known Old Testament character and how that prayer has affected Wilkinson's life and ministry.

Leadership Journal surveyed visitors to its website (LeadershipJournal.net) on the subject of Jabez. Taken at the height of the Jabez book sales, the unscientific poll asked, “How have you and your congregation responded to the Jabez phenomenon?” The results: 22 percent said they had read the book; 18 percent considered it encouragement to pray; 13 percent said they were praying the Jabez prayer often; and 9 percent said Jabez had changed their thinking on prayer. Only 5 percent said the Jabez phenomenon is “a bunch of hooley.”

The book raised our awareness of one concept in particular: that believers should be bold in their prayers for God’s blessing. Much was made of this short prayer and the two verses that recall it and the man who prayed it. Read 1 Chronicles 4:9–10. Tucked away in a genealogy, this passage tells us several important things:

Jabez was more honorable than his brothers. God blesses whomever he chooses for his own reasons. He chose Israel, for example, not because it was great; it was the smallest among the nations (Deut. 7:7). But often, when choosing to bless individuals, God chooses and responds to the righteous. Noah is one example (Gen. 6:9). James tells us the prayer of a righteous person is effective (5:16), and Elijah is offered as an example of someone whose prayer God favorably responded to. Those who are bold enough to ask for God’s blessing should assess their standing before God prior to praying.

Blessing was evidence of God’s hand. Material blessing is not always evidence of God’s favor (remember, the rain falls on the just and the unjust). In Jabez’s case, however, he asked for his territory to be enlarged and for God’s hand to be with him. The two are linked. Anyone who saw the territory of Jabez would see that God was at work. And if Jabez was bold enough to ask for this blessing, he would likely be bold enough to testify of its source.

God responded to Jabez’s prayer. This was a full-orbed prayer. It involved material blessing (land), physical and emotional blessing (freedom from harm and pain), and spiritual blessing (God’s hand). That God chose to respond to Jabez’s prayer in all these ways is exhortation for us to pray, but it should not be taken as a guarantee of blessing.

- [Q]** What kinds of blessings should Christians pray for?
- [Q]** What if God doesn’t bless us in the way we ask or expect?
- [Q]** Do you think righteousness is a prerequisite to blessing? Why or why not?
- [Q]** How has God blessed you in material, physical, and spiritual ways?
- [Q]** Read Matthew 5:5. What do you think Jesus meant by this?
- [Q]** What application can we make from Matthew 5:5 for our lives?

Teaching Point Two: God has expectations of those he blesses.

Read Joshua 1:8, where God reiterates his agreement with Israel as the people prepare to enter the Promised Land. In his salvation history, God intends for Israel to be a light to all the peoples of the world. He is giving his chosen people a home to call their own. He has promised abundance. With his promises comes the expectation of Israel's faithfulness. He admonishes Joshua to meditate on the Law and keep it central to his teaching and governance. As a result, God says, he will prosper the people. They will have "good success," as the King James Version renders it.

Our interpretation of this phrase is usually this: be good, have success. While exegetes must be careful that we do not turn the behavior-blessing connection into a formula (it would be an insult to Job and suffering Christians all over the world), there is certainly a relationship between the two. Some might be more comfortable talking in spiritual terms, saying godly behavior results in spiritual blessing.

- [Q] What is your reaction to this concept?
- [Q] What dangers are there in adopting this idea?
- [Q] Read Psalm 73. What is Asaph's approach to this idea?

Teaching Point Three: Those God blesses he also warns.

Jesus' teaching is replete with warnings about materialism. To the masses on the hillside, he preaches, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . . You cannot serve both God and money." To the rich young man, he says, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor. . . . Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

Read Matthew 6:19–24 and Luke 18:18–25.

- [Q] How can we balance these teachings with the encouragement to ask for blessing?
- [Q] As a result of this study, how might your prayer life change?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Action Point: On your own this week, look up all the verses and passages in the article "Unbalanced Blessings." When you've finished that, ask yourself the following questions:

[Q] How have I felt that God has been unfair to me in the past?

[Q] What kind of blessings should I be asking God for? What difference would that make in my walk with him?



UNBALANCED BLESSINGS

The balancing act of life is always tempered by the one gift that cost God everything.

By R. J. Thesman

As we toured my friend's beautiful home, I was struck with the details of design and construction. Walnut woodwork accented each room with coordinating built-ins. Archways led into the kitchen and family room area while granite countertops polished off each bathroom. Expansive views from the windows highlighted the country life I so admired.

"Deer and wild turkeys come often to drink out of the pond or strut across the driveway," the homeowner said.

In the family room's bookcase, I scanned the titles. The walnut grain of the bookcase accented the hard covers of various Bible versions, Christian fiction, and bestsellers in the inspirational market. How to have a strong marriage, how to raise wonderful kids, and how to be a witness in the community seemed to be favorite topics. The books echoed a lifetime of discipleship and service for this wonderful family.

We gathered around the thick dining room table and blessed the food. The wife spoke about God's many blessings, how she had designed the house online, and how God had provided so many of the wonderful things they enjoyed. The husband looked adoringly at his wife while pictures of their grown children and grandchildren smiled from the entryway. Light from the golden chandelier accented the healthy features of a family blessed by the Almighty.

Later that evening, I looked at the bookshelves in my small duplex. They, too, contained some of the same books, but the results of my life deeply contrasted with the results of my friend's life. Divorce, illness, financial insecurities, and long-term unemployment described my journey. No archways accented my kitchen. My furniture was repurposed from Goodwill or rescued from dumpsters. The country life I envied seemed as impossible as deadening the traffic noise from beyond my cul-de-sac.

My friend and I are both Christians. We love the Lord and attempt to live for him every day, but my friend's cushy life is completely different from mine. She seems to have somehow tagged God's blessings: a loving husband, wonderful children, financial security, and a beautiful house. She also looks forward to more blessings in heaven—a double portion of joy. On the other hand, I struggle as a single mom and can look forward to such blessings only after the doctors turn off the machines and record my time of death.

I learned from Asaph

That night, I cried into my pillow as I lay on my decade old mattress. "Why the disparity, Lord? I'm genuinely happy for my friend, really I am. But why are the blessings so unbalanced? Why has everything turned out so beautifully for her, and why is everything so hard for me? Have I done something wrong?"

He let me whine that night, but sent me to Psalm 73 the next morning. Asaph, one of King David's Levitical choir directors, must have had the same struggle. In this song, Asaph describes his trial of faith. He wonders why the wicked are so prosperous.

“They have no struggles,” Asaph writes, “their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. . . . This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth” (vv. 4–5, 12).

In other words, “What’s the deal, God? These people are wicked, yet their lives seem to be pretty sweet. I, on the other hand, live as an oppressed Jew and have to struggle every day to make a lousy buck. Why is life so unfair?”

Asaph complained for 16 verses, then fell on his face in the sanctuary and saw the truth. The wicked were proud, with evil conceits. They would eventually be swept away by terror. Asaph, on the other hand, could depend on God to always be with him, to hold his right hand and guide him with divine counsel. With his crisis of faith resolved, Asaph sang his Amen: “It is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge” (v. 28).

But Asaph compared wicked folks with faithful ones. We expect the wicked to thrive in a wicked world, because this is their comfort zone and compatible with their worldview. We also know that without Christ, they will eventually face God’s judgment. As believers, we may face persecution and trials, but we live in hope for that moment when we’ll see the face of Jesus and live eternally in paradise.

My struggle represented a different viewpoint from Asaph’s psalm, because I wondered about the inequities between Christians. My friend was not wicked in any way that I could see. She and her family had prayed the prayer of salvation, attended church faithfully, served the community, and lived exemplary lives. Yet even though our faith walks were similar, our realities differed.

However, Asaph gave me a formula to work through as I struggled with the subject of unbalanced blessings. This insightful choir director admitted that he “nearly lost [his] foothold” during his faith crisis. The reason: when he saw their prosperity, he envied the arrogant.

Although my friend didn’t appear to be arrogant as we toured her beautiful house, I still envied her prosperity. I didn’t necessarily want the same house, because our tastes are different. I just wanted more of her type of life. When I nearly lost my foothold and studied Asaph’s similar journey, I saw the envy in my own soul—basic covetousness that we need to always guard against. After a lifetime of faith and discipleship, I squared off with the tenth commandment and saw my sin: “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” (Exod. 20:17).

I had justified my emotions as not exactly coveting that particular house, but the truth was that I envied my friend’s life in the country, her ability to build a beautiful new house, and all the financial security that made her life possible. When I pared back the Christianese, I saw my attitude for what it was: coveting what someone else had, not being content with my own blessings, and despising my own life. According to God’s list of commandments, I violated number ten and possibly number one: “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3). If I so envied my friend’s life, then I was making a plastic god out of her good fortune. The idol of worldly blessings had become another object of worship, shoving the one true God off the throne of my soul.

My crisis of faith was based on plain old sin

So I spent a few moments confessing my covetousness. I recognized my desire to seek comfort from the things of this world rather than the Holy Spirit’s power. Although it didn’t seem unbiblical to want a beautiful house in a country setting, if I dwelt on that desire without giving it over to God, then my hopes were based on things of this world. If I coveted what someone else had, then I crossed over the line from a basic desire of the flesh to nearly losing my foothold.

The ugliness in my soul disgusted me. Asaph, I’m sure, would agree.

The second point Asaph showed me was hidden in verse 28: “it is good to be near God.” Although my life did include several challenges, at least I knew without a doubt that God was with me, as near as a whispered prayer. Perhaps the Almighty had not allowed me to have the same sort of blessings as my friend, but he had blessed me with the ability to hear his voice and sense his intimacy. During the early morning hours when the divine whisper came, I felt so loved and so blessed. Nothing else mattered. I needed to focus on the supreme joy of that intimacy rather than the walnut-lined bookshelves of my friend. I needed to thank God every day that he chose to be near me.

I was comparing myself to the wrong people

To force my thoughts away from that beautiful country home, I thanked God for the material blessings of my life. The fact that I lived in a duplex in a cul-de-sac in the free land of America was an intense blessing. Any number of women in Africa would have coveted my house over their grass huts in an oppressive political state.

Every night when I rotated under the spigot of my hot shower, I thanked God for that intense heat and its massaging effect on my tired muscles. Some women in Afghanistan had never felt the luxury of hot water on their tired bodies, never bathed their babies in anything other than muddy river water, never had the ease of just turning a faucet instead of walking miles and miles with a sloshing pot on their heads.

Thoroughly ashamed of myself, I made a list of some of the blessings God had allowed me to have: screens on my windows to keep the Kansas bugs out of the house; a working refrigerator with cheese, eggs, and milk waiting to become an omelet on my working electric stove; enough blankets to keep me warm during February blizzards. These represented only a few examples of how God was near and how good it was to be his child. I determined to be more grateful and focus on the not-so-obvious blessings rather than covet the ones I did not have.

Asaph’s epilogue concluded his crisis with the statement that the Sovereign Lord was his refuge. The idea of sovereignty underscored the fact that God and God alone decides which of his children receive blessings and which face challenges. God had given my friend a beautiful home, a loving husband, and a prosperous life. That was God’s will for her, and I was confident she was using those blessings to glorify God and further his kingdom.

God’s choices for me were different, but just as blessed because they had come from his sovereign plan. He had gifted me with the ability to do several types of work so that we could survive. He had allowed me to pray every day for my car and depend on him to keep it running even though the mechanic said it had a cracked block. God allowed my washer and dryer to continue to function long past the warranty dates. I needed to turn my challenges into blessings and use them to glorify him, to practice gratitude, and to further Christ’s kingdom with my prayers.

The fact that he is sovereign means that God gets to choose

I can pray and ask for certain blessings, but in the end, the final memo belongs to God. Jesus taught this lesson to Peter during one of their last confrontations. After a fish and chips dinner, Peter asked Jesus about the future of the beloved disciple, John. Would John also face persecution and martyrdom, or would he remain alive to see the return of Christ? In essence, Peter was asking the same question I had asked, “Why him and not me?”

Jesus answered, “[W]hat is that to you? You must follow me” (John 21:22).

It was none of Peter’s business what happened to John. If the Sovereign God decided to let John live a long and prosperous life and die of natural causes, then God’s plan for John was good. If Peter had

Christianity Today Bible Study
UNBALANCED BLESSINGS

Article

to die upside down, stretched out like a rubber band on a lethal beam, then God's plan for Peter was also good. Peter had no business questioning God's ultimate plan for another person. His role as a disciple was to faithfully follow his Lord and accept God's plan for him.

It was none of my business if God chose to bless others both on this earth and in heaven. That was God's decision and his choice. He had chosen to bless me in different ways. Just the fact that he allowed me to be one of his children was an incredible blessing straight from the loving heart of the Almighty. My role was to be his disciple, to serve him in whatever venue he placed me, and not to covet the blessings of others.

On God's scales, everything is balanced by the ultimate gift of his Son. No matter how we live our lives on this earth, whether we have it fairly easy or face one challenge after another, the balancing act of life is always tempered by the one gift that cost God everything. The ultimate blessing that is available to all is the blessing of grace. Nothing else really matters.

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HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Why did an omniscient God create humankind knowing that people in every generation would reject him?



Why would an omniscient God create humankind knowing that people, in every generation, would reject him?" The reader's question probably resonates with many Christians. One of CHRISTIANITY TODAY's former executive editors, Timothy George, raises several related questions: Does knowing people's destiny mean that God planned their destiny? Was it fair to create them knowing they would only reject him? In this study, we'll explore the issue from Old Testament and New Testament perspectives.

Scripture: Psalms 111; Ezekiel 18:19–32; Romans 9:14–21

Based on: The article "Has God Played Fair?," by Timothy George, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2001

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Prior to meeting, provide for each person the article "Has God Played Fair?" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine, included at the end of this study.

After the tragic attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, many wondered how God could allow such an awful thing to happen. Billy Graham indirectly raised the question in his address at the prayer service held at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., four days after the attacks.

"I have been asked hundreds of times in my life why God allows tragedy and suffering. I have to confess that I really do not know the answer totally, even to my own satisfaction. I have to accept, by faith, that God is sovereign, and he is a God of love, and mercy, and compassion in the midst of suffering."

Graham continued to point to God's goodness, even in such inexplicable circumstances. Yet, even harder to explain than earthly tragedies is what could be ultimately good about people rejecting Christ and suffering eternal punishment.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Have you struggled with why an omniscient God would create humankind knowing that people in every generation would reject him? If so, what kind of conclusions have you come to?

[Q] Can you think of any reasons why God wouldn't let everybody go to heaven?

[Q] How would you respond to unbelievers who ask this question?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: God invites everyone to trust in him and be saved from eternal condemnation.

Scripture asserts that God is fair and can be trusted. His acts are always in keeping with his character, and he is good. As such, he has provided redemption to his people.

It is God's desire that everyone believe in him (1 Tim. 2:4). That was his purpose in

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Leader's Guide

establishing the covenant with Israel and the church. That was his purpose in sending Jesus to earth and to the cross. And that is the activity of Christ even now, serving as our advocate in the presence of the Father, until he establishes his kingdom on earth.

God is not capricious. He is just. His offer of salvation is open to all people. He wants us to love him completely and thoroughly, with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Such love cannot be coerced, forced, or manipulated. It must be freely chosen. Only when it is freely chosen is a genuine relationship—the type that God wants—possible.

Read Psalm 111.

[Q] What kind of picture of God do you get from this psalm?

[Q] What covenant is referred to in verse 9?

Leader's Note: *His covenant with Israel that led to Jesus Christ and our salvation.*

[Q] How does that covenant demonstrate God's fairness and compassion?

[Q] Read Ezekiel 18:19–32. What insight does this passage give to the question of God's fairness to those who reject him?

Teaching Point Two: The choice is up to God and us.

Paul points to several Old Testament figures in his attempts to explain God's choices. There is the case of twins Esau and Jacob. God favored one over the other in his plan to fulfill his covenant promise to Abraham. Paul quotes strong language from God: "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:2–3). Then there is the case of Pharaoh. Exodus records that Pharaoh hardened his heart toward God, and then, with the pattern in place, God hardened Pharaoh's heart (see Exod. 8:15; 9:12; 9:34; 10:1).

Read Romans 9:14–21.

[Q] Based on these examples, what is the danger of repeatedly saying no to God?

- Is it ever too late to say yes to his offer of grace? Why or why not?

There are various ways of interpreting election. Here are the most well-known ones:

- God, in his wise and sovereign will, chooses some but not others for reasons we cannot understand. His selection may seem unfair, but that is simply because we have a limited perspective. Humans, bound in sin, do not naturally seek God (see Rom. 3:11), but when God's grace comes to the elect, it frees them to choose God.

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Leader's Guide

- God elects some to be saved because he knows beforehand that they will choose to accept Christ. Their election, according to this view, is based on God's foreknowledge.
- God elected all humankind in and through Jesus. All those who have faith in him share in a corporate election. A refusal to believe in Jesus, in this view, means one is rejecting one's election.
- Election refers to God's choice in the manner by which salvation is worked out. "Predestined" in this sense does not mean God has chosen the fate of every single person, one by one. Rather, he has established a route that has two destinations, depending on the choice made by individuals.

[Q] Which of these doctrinal positions do you believe?

- Which seems most consistent with the whole of Scripture?

[Q] If God has given humans free will so that they may accept Christ or reject him, how then does God know the future?

[Q] Some scholars contend that because of free will, God does not know the details of history. What are some problems with this view?

[Q] Read George's third point out loud. Do you find this a compelling argument? Why or why not?

Teaching Point Three: Jesus is the key.

George concludes by pointing to Jesus. Consider the roles of love and choice in the life of Christ.

Jesus, we know, is the incarnation of God's character, particularly God's love. At Calvary we see the goodness and graciousness of God in full. God chose Jesus to be our substitutive sacrifice. And we see the divine model of love in the relationship of the Father and the Son.

But Jesus is also fully human. In him we see the exercise of human will. He prayed that he might be spared the agony of the Cross, but he also surrendered his will to God's greater purpose. Jesus demonstrated his love for the Father by freely choosing to obey him.

In Christ we see the restoration of the human-divine relationship that was broken at Eden. God, who wants all people to love him freely, made it possible for their love to find eternal expression through faith in Jesus Christ.

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Leader's Guide

[Q] How is our initial question answered in Jesus Christ? What does he tell us about God's love and justice?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

[Q] Name at least one conclusion you have made from this study.

[Q] Whose choice is salvation? God's or ours?

[Q] Why would God give humans free will, knowing that people in every generation would reject him?

Leader's Note: *Because only in granting us the freedom to love or reject him can he make possible a genuine relationship with him.*

Action Point (to do on your own): *Read either the account of Esau and Jacob (Gen. 25:19–34; 26:34–28:9) or of Pharaoh's hardened heart (Exod. 7–11). Consider the following questions:*

- 1.** *Why would God choose one person and not another?*
- 2.** *Do you think of this person as a pawn or a willing participant in history?*
- 3.** *Do you think God's choice to favor someone is affected by the person's behavior or character?*
- 4.** *Do the person's actions show that God made the right choice?*
- 5.** *What do you think is the "big picture" biblical principle(s) at work in this account?*
- 6.** *Now read Acts 9:10–20. Where in this passage do you see God's mercy at work?*

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Leader's Guide

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 For more studies like this, go to ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Essentials in Knowing God** – 10-session Bible study
- **Who Is God?** – 12-session Bible study

📖 **When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer**, Jerry Sittser (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 0310243262)

📖 **The Problem of Pain**, C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; ISBN 0060652969)

📖 **Disappointment With God**, Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN031021436X)

📖 **The Screwtape Letters**, C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; ISBN0060652934)

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Article



HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Why did an omniscient God create humankind knowing that people in every generation would reject him?

By Timothy George, for the study “Has God Played Fair?”

The honest answer to this question is, we don’t know—at least not in a cocksure, foolproof way that takes the risk out of faith and the mystery out of revelation. The Bible says, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God” (Deut. 29:29, NIV). And yet this is a natural and reasonable question to ask. We can say four things in response:

First, everything God does, by either explicit decree or permission, has an ultimate beneficial purpose. This includes the fact of hell and God’s judgment against rebellious sinners, as well as the blessings of heaven and salvation in Christ. Love and holiness are both essential attributes of God, and they are not in competition with one another. As with Job, in the face of suffering and mystery we are tempted to accuse God of wrongdoing and put him in the dock. But God’s answer to Job reaches us as well: “Would you condemn me to justify yourself?” (Job 40:8).

Second, this question assumes that human beings are victims caught in the vise of an inexorable fate. But the Bible teaches that God in his goodness has created a world of moral order, one in which men and women are free moral agents. By creating Adam and Eve in his image and likeness, God gave them a quality of relationship with him that no other creature has. God’s creative act was so great that he trusted them with freedom. Unfortunately, freedom includes the freedom to turn away from God, and that is what Adam and Eve did. The fact that God knew beforehand what they would do in no way abrogated their capacity to act and do as they chose. God condemns no one unjustly. God is the judge of all the earth, and he will do right by everyone. On the final Day of Judgment, no one will be able to stand before God and say to him, “I have been treated unfairly by you!”

Of course, exactly how the inequities of this life will be seen in the tapestry of eternity remains imponderable. But we do know that God’s plan is free and purposive, that he does not compel or coerce human creatures made in his image, and that nothing can ultimately thwart his glory and grace.

Third, it may seem that we can get God off the hook by denying his absolute foreknowledge of future events, by seeing Creation as an open-ended experiment about which even God is in the dark. Rather than taking the problem of evil seriously, though, such a view of God trivializes it. We would not praise a doctor who produced horrible deformities while experimenting with human cloning.

Nor can we find solace in a disabled deity whose creative power unleashes a floodtide of suffering and evil over which he has no certain knowledge and only limited control. Such a god might deserve to be pitied—but not worshiped and adored. This is why orthodox Christians of all confessions have affirmed God’s complete foreknowledge of the future, however much they may have differed on issues such as election and predestination.

Finally, Jesus Christ is the surest window into the heart of God. When Martin Luther was asked difficult questions such as the one posed here, he replied by encouraging his troubled friends to “look to the wounds of Jesus.” That same advice had been given to him as a young man, when, plagued by guilt, he doubted whether he could ever be accepted by a holy God. By focusing on Christ, he discovered the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In Jesus Christ, God’s grace and truth were realized in perfect equipoise. In Jesus we see that God is unspeakably generous, “abundant in

8 Big Questions of Faith

HAS GOD PLAYED FAIR?

Article

goodness and truth” (Exod. 34:6, KJV), and at the same time a God of uncompromised purity and righteousness. In Jesus Christ the Creator has become our Redeemer, the Judge has received our judgment. Through his death and resurrection, the way to eternal life has been forever opened to all who turn from selfishness and sin and in simple trust commit themselves to Christ for all time and eternity.

—Timothy George, a CT executive editor, is dean of Beeson Divinity School at Samford University in Birmingham.

This article first appeared in CHRISTIANITY TODAY, November 2001

WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?

Did Jesus forbid us from judging others?

Our immediate response to the question, “Did Jesus forbid us from judging others?” is yes. “Judge not,” right? But what did Jesus mean by that? Is his instruction in the Sermon on the Mount being properly applied in our day? This Bible study and the commentary from Lewis B. Smedes are sure to prompt lively discussion.



Scripture: Matthew 5:20; 7:1–5; Romans 14:9–13; 1 Corinthians 5:12–13; James 2:12–13; 4:11

Based on: “Who Are We to Judge?,” CHRISTIANITY TODAY, October 1, 2001

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Who Are We to Judge?" and handout from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

Christians are often accused of being judgmental. Yet one of Jesus' basic teachings is that we are not to judge others.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Why, in your opinion, are Christians accused of being judgmental?

[Q] When is it wrong to judge?

- When is it right?

Optional Activity:

Read several examples from your local newspaper. Ask participants to determine whether judgment is right in each case, who should do the judging, and on what basis.

[Q] In our time, we hear a great number of calls for tolerance. Daniel Taylor says that "tolerance means I voluntarily withhold what power I have to coerce someone else's behavior."¹ If defined as such, can tolerance accompany judgment? In other words, does judgment have to exclude tolerance?

[Q] Is God intolerant? Explain.

[Q] What would the world be like if there were no judging?

Leader's Note: *Smedes notes the effects on achievement, community, forgiveness, and interpersonal relationships.*

[Q] Smedes says we need more judging these days. What do you think he means by that?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: Judgment is sometimes forbidden and sometimes encouraged in Scripture.

¹ "Are You Tolerant? (Should You Be?)," Daniel Taylor, CHRISTIANITY TODAY, January 11, 1999.

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?

Leader's Guide

To determine what Jesus meant when he said “do not judge” in Matthew 7:1, let’s first consider the other texts Smedes addresses. Read each of the following passages. Stop after each one and ask each of the questions listed below:

Romans 14:9–13

1 Corinthians 5:12–13

James 2:12–13; 4:11

[Q] Who is speaking?

[Q] Who is being addressed?

[Q] Who will be judged?

[Q] Who will be judging?

[Q] What is the offense?

[Q] What is the penalty?

[Q] Are there any lasting consequences from the offense or the judgment?

When you’ve read all the passages, ask:

[Q] What similarities do you see in these verses?

- Based on these passages, is judgment forbidden? If so, what kind of judgment?

Teaching Point Two: If we judge by the letter of the law, we ourselves will be judged by it.

Read Matthew 7:1–5, from the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus tells people not to judge.

As Smedes points out, the key to this prohibition is found in Matthew 5:20, which provides the context for what follows, including “Do not judge.” Read this verse.

[Q] Jesus is speaking to a large crowd of people familiar with the judgments of the

Pharisees and Sadducees. How does Matthew 5:20 qualify Matthew 7:1–2?

Leader's Note: *Jesus was telling the people not to become judges in the manner of the scribes and Pharisees, who judged others based on the letter of the law—which they themselves could not keep. His prohibition seems to attack hypocrisy and not the reasonable act of ascribing value to things or behavior. If we judge by the letter of the law, we ourselves will be judged by it. Jesus' saying in Matthew 7:2 is a proverb: The measure you use is the measure that will be used on you. Jesus is therefore warning us to choose carefully our measuring instrument: Will it be grace or law? Will it be a set of criteria we want God to judge us with, or will it turn out to be our very condemnation?*

People often say that justice is blind—that is, impartial. Various artists have portrayed justice as a blindfolded woman holding a scale. As D. A. Carson points out in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*,² Jesus did not advocate blind justice, but rather generous mercy. And if not for the sake of others, we should at least show grace and mercy for our own sakes.

[Q] How does it benefit us to show grace and mercy to others?

[Q] How do we find balance in judging sin while still showing love to the sinner? Give an example.

Teaching Point Three: Judging is a vital part of the Christian life.

Following Matthew 7:1–2, verses 3–5 do not forbid judging the actions of others. What is forbidden is judgment without first judging ourselves. We should see our own sins before we see the sins of others. And we should deal with our own sins first. When we have dealt with our sins, then we can see more clearly other people's sins and see ways to we can help them.

[Q] How does Matthew 7:5 make clear that judging is allowed, and even encouraged, as part of the Christian life?

[Q] Give an example of how someone has helped you see your sin and remove it.

Leader's Note: *Parallels drawn from Luke 6:36–45 are helpful for understanding Matthew 7. There the "Do not judge" statement comes on the heels of Jesus' exhortation to be "merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). "Do not judge" then is Christ's command for us to extend mercy and grace to sinners such as us. The parable of the trees in Luke 6:43–45, however, does encourage us to think critically about people and behavior based on their results. "Each tree is recognized by its own fruit," Jesus said. In the same way, we can judge (evaluate) human behavior, endeavors, or situations. If their results are bad, we ought not to get involved in them.*

² Zondervan, 1984.

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Smedes points out a process for making judgments. He identifies the following four steps in his article: 1) know the facts; 2) consult Scripture; 3) pray for discernment; and 4) make the judgment.

[Q] How would you apply this process to current events?

[Q] How would you apply it to a personal situation?

[Q] Based on our study, what are the limitations on our judging? Think in terms of persons who are judged, enforcement, and attitude.

[Q] What role should mercy play in judging?

[Q] How can we judge with humility from the position of a fellow sinner?

- How does the realization of our own sinfulness govern the words we use?
- How will this humility affect the offenses we choose to judge?
- How will this humility affect our relationships with other Christians and with unbelievers?

Action Point: Do the Handout for Further Study on your own this week.



WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?

Did Jesus forbid us from judging others?

A HANDOUT FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read John 8:1–20. In this passage there are several instances of judging. Read carefully and list who is judging whom and why.

The Pharisees might have contended that they were only keeping the law. Refusal to judge the woman would have been considered by some as a dereliction of duty. What do you think of Jesus' response to these religious leaders?

On what does Jesus base his judgment? How is Jesus' judging different from our own?

Does Jesus judge the woman? Does he judge her sin? Do you see a difference between judging the person and judging the person's actions? The adage "love the sinner, hate the sin" would seem to apply here.

What do you think Jesus was writing in the dirt? Some people have speculated that he was writing the Ten Commandments. Others suggest that he was writing the names of the men who had been with the woman, some of whom might have been standing in the crowd ready to stone her. Or perhaps he was writing the sins of those in the crowd. If you were in Jesus' place, what would you have written?

In a sermon based on this text, Frank Lewis, pastor of First Baptist Church in Nashville, Tennessee, named the stones the people were holding for the attitudes they might have represented (e.g., anger, jealousy, self-righteousness). He called out each attitude as the rocks hit the ground one by one.

As a devotional exercise, go outside and pick up several stones, naming them for your attitudes toward others whose behavior offends you. Say the attitudes aloud and drop the stones, one by one. Ask God to give you humility and love in their place.



WHO ARE WE TO JUDGE?

Did Jesus forbid us from judging others?

By Lewis B. Smedes, for the study “Who Are We to Judge?”

In three words, blunt and absolute, Jesus commanded us, “Do not judge” (Matt. 7:1). But did he really mean that we should never judge others? He goes on to suggest that it’s not the act of judging but the attitude with which we do it that God is most concerned about—“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged” (7:2).

There are other Scriptures that either cloud or shed light on the issue. Paul told the Christians in Rome not to judge one another (Rom. 14:13) but taught the Corinthians that they were to judge sinful believers and leave people outside the church to God (1 Cor. 5:12–13). James said he who judges his brother speaks against the law (4:11) but also implied that our judgments of others must be done with mercy (2:12–13).

Common sense suggests that if no one ever judged other people, there would be no real human community. In a sinful world, no community can exist for long where nobody is ever held accountable: no teacher would grade a student’s performance; no citizen would sit on a jury or call a failed leader to account. And, when you come to think of it, nobody would ever forgive anyone for wrongs he had done; we only forgive people if we blame them, and we blame them only after we have judged them.

I would suggest that, in our day and age, we need more—not less—judgment. Modern Americans suffer from a fear of judging. Passing judgment on the behavior of fellow human beings is considered an act of medieval, undemocratic intolerance.

Why? Because, our culture tells us, we are all flawed people, and people with flaws have no right to judge other people’s flaws. Furthermore, modern Americans do not believe that there are objective standards by which to judge. And where there are no standards, there is nothing by which to measure behavior.

Of course, the person who takes Jesus at all seriously does not kowtow to modern relativism. Judgment, for Christians, is an important piece of work that God calls us to do, especially in a world going morally haywire.

When a person judges, she also forms an opinion. But an opinion is not necessarily the same as a judgment. Opinions are often framed by our fears, pride, or ignorance. If all we had were human opinions, we might agree with those who say we should never judge.

Judgments are opinions that we form only after we have made a serious effort to know the facts, and, for those of us who are Christians, only after we have consulted the moral teachings of Scripture and prayed for Spirit-informed discernment. Any lazy or biased fool can have opinions; making judgments is the hard work of responsible and compassionate people.

For all of these reasons, common sense indicates that Jesus could not have meant that we are never to make judgments on what people, including ourselves, are up to.

But our common sense is hardly the litmus test of what Jesus meant, for in the end it is his Word that we live by. It’s helpful, then, to consider Jesus’ bold command in its biblical context.

Jesus may have been moved to speak as he did by the haughty way the Pharisees had of judging people. In Matthew 5:20 through 7:6, Jesus warns his disciples against following the traditions and practices of the Pharisees, who judged others as if they themselves were beyond judgment. What's more, they judged people by the letter, not the spirit, of the law.

So, most likely, Jesus meant, "Do not judge at all if you judge others the way the Pharisees do. If you do judge people this way, you will be judged with the same severity." Jesus' intent comes out in his metaphor of motes and beams (Matt. 7:3–5). We all have beams in our eyes, so to speak; to judge people for the little motes stuck in their eyes while we have big beams in our own is devilish arrogance as well as folly.

Nobody with a beam in his eye can see things clearly. He is dangerously low on discernment. And, since we all have this distorted perspective, we need either to be very humble or else leave judging to God alone. We have a moral responsibility to judge the moral behavior of others—but only if we are humbly aware that we will sometimes be dead wrong and never totally right. We must remember that our ability to judge is limited and especially that we are sinful people who will ourselves, one day, come under judgment.

—Lewis B. Smedes, now deceased, was professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California and the author of 15 books.

"Who Are We to Judge?," CHRISTIANITY TODAY, October 1, 2001

HOW DOES FORGIVENESS BRING FREEDOM?

How do you know that you have truly forgiven someone?

We can't live for too long before realizing we need to know how to forgive. We may want to forgive and try to forgive, yet still feel tormented by hurt and anger. As this study shows, forgiveness is usually a process. We may not forgive perfectly, but we can learn from the Bible how to find the freedom of full forgiveness.



Scripture: Matthew 5:38-48; 6:12-15; 18:21-35; Isaiah 43:25

Based on: The article "Keys to Forgiving" by Lewis B. Smedes, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, December 2001

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to leader: Provide each person with the article "Keys to Forgiveness" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY, included at the end of this study.

The goal of this section is to help class members learn to forgive their enemies fully. Choose the option you like best, or do several if time permits.

Option A: Ad Campaign

Divide the larger group into smaller groups of three or four. Give each group large sheets of paper or poster board, markers, old magazines to cut up for pictures, scissors, and tape. Every group should create a magazine ad. Assign some groups to develop an ad promoting forgiveness and the other groups an ad promoting unforgiveness. For example, a group's ad might say, "Forgiveness: Don't Leave Home Without It," or "Unforgiveness: The Natural Feeling."

Then have groups present their ads, explaining why they chose the picture and slogan they did.

Option B: Categories Game

Divide the larger group into smaller groups of three or four. Then ask the first group to name one possible misunderstanding about forgiveness. If that misunderstanding matches one from the list below, the group gets 1 point. Then ask the second group to name a misunderstanding. Continue until every item on this list, or nearly every one, has been named:

- Forgiveness is instantaneous or immediate.
- If you haven't forgotten what the person did to you, you haven't forgiven.
- Forgiveness means you'll be reconciled to the person who hurt you.
- If the wrongdoer has never taken responsibility for what he did, you can't forgive.

Option C: Crisis Counseling

Your group has been asked to provide crisis counseling for a 37-year-old mother of two whose husband was murdered. The widow asks plaintively, "How can I ever forgive the person who did this?" (You might even have a group member act the part of this woman.) Counsel the woman as if she is a Christian. After a while, change the situation so that the woman is not a Christian. How does the counsel change?

Discussion Starters:

[Q] In all that you heard, what most struck you, and why?

[Q] In his book *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes describes the way we sometimes feel: “I’ll never understand why you did that. There is no understanding it. You didn’t have to do what you did.... You did it of your own free will, and I hate you for it—at least I hate that part of you; and I blame you for it. I can’t get over it or excuse it or understand it.” What do you do when you feel this way?

[Q] What, to you, is the hardest thing about forgiving someone?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: If we refuse to forgive, we have no claim on God’s forgiveness.

Leader’s Note: Ask three different people to read Matthew 18:21–35. You’ll need someone to be the servant who owed 10,000 talents, another person to be the servant who owed 100 denarii, and another to be the king.

When they’re finished, you may want to retell the parable in a contemporary setting, perhaps like this:

In today’s terms, here’s a guy who has fallen behind financially. He’s maxed out every charge card. There aren’t any more relatives who will give him some money to get him through. Creditors are calling and leaving messages on the answering machine. The stress is a mile high, and it looks like they’re going to lose their home.

Then, a representative from Visa calls and says, “We’ve been looking at your account, and we’ve decided to make an adjustment to bring the outstanding balance down to zero.” Later that week, a representative from a company that tracks your credit history calls and says, “We’ve been looking at your credit record, and we’ve decided to clear it and treat it as if it were a new account.”

Then this same guy goes to work, sees somebody who had failed to return the 50 cents he borrowed from him for a can of pop, and throws him up against the wall, demanding the money.

[Q] How would you explain Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:35, “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart”?

[Q] How does this passage compare with Matthew 6:12–15, especially verse 15, where Jesus says, “But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins”?

HOW DOES FORGIVENESS BRING FREEDOM?

Leader's Guide

This raises the question of how God treats the person who does not forgive. Some scholars read Jesus' words literally, meaning that by not forgiving, you actually block the forgiveness God wants to give you. Others say that God's forgiveness is established by Christ's death and cannot be hindered; Jesus is using hyperbole to communicate that if you don't forgive, God will chastise you.

Either way, however, the irreducible meaning of Jesus' words about forgiveness is simple and shocking: If we don't forgive, something goes terribly wrong in our relationship with God.

Teaching Point Two: Forgiveness requires that we surrender the right to get even.

Read Matthew 5:38–48.

[Q] Have you ever felt like you had to forgive someone but later realized that person hadn't actually wronged you? If so, what happened?

[Q] Think about a time when someone did wrong you. What did you want from that person?

[Q] Other than forgiving, what are some ways people react to being wronged?

[Q] What happens to the person who refuses to forgive? What affect does that decision have on his or her life?

[Q] Smedes writes that forgiveness requires three basic actions: (1) We surrender our right to get even. (2) We rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer. (3) We wish our wrongdoer well. Which of those steps have you found the most difficult, and why?

[Q] What reasons do people give for not forgiving?

[Q] How would you reply to such reasons?

Philip Yancey calls forgiveness "an unnatural act." Smedes writes in *Forgive and Forget* that "forgiveness is a miracle. It breaks through the normal calculus of morality that calls for evenhandedness and balance. Forgiving is always a decision to put up with an uneven score."

[Q] If forgiveness is so hard, why bother with it?

Leader's Note: *To be obedient to Christ, who calls us to forgive; because it's the only way to be fully released from hate and bitterness, which would otherwise poison our character and relationships; because without forgiveness, our families, neighborhoods, churches, and nations would be destroyed; to be in full relationship with God.*

[Q] What makes it possible for a Christian to live with an uneven score?

Teaching Point Three: Forgiving does not require forgetting.

People say, “But how can I forget what that person did? That is an event stored in my gray matter. I can’t rewrite history. I can’t get those words and pictures out of my mind, because they actually happened.”

The question we might also ask is: How does God forget every time we sin against him? As Smedes points out, God said through Isaiah (43:25), “I am he who blots out your transgressions...and remembers your sins no more.” How does God do it? We know that God has perfect knowledge and therefore, a flawless memory. What God means by his promise in Isaiah is that he chooses not to remember.

Christian psychologist Louis McBurney writes that “forgiveness is not a one-time, magical act that removes all memory and pain; it’s a continuously repetitive choice.”

Thus, to “forget” sin done against us does not mean the memory of that sin will never cross our minds. Rather, it means, in Smedes words, “we can dethrone the memory; we can refuse to let it control our lives. We can detoxify the memory; we can purge its poison from our souls.”

[Q] How, specifically, do we “dethrone” and “detoxify” a painful memory?

Leader's Note: You might suggest an analogy of a video: when that painful scene comes into our memory, rather than press Play, Rewind, Play, Rewind, we can choose to press Stop and Eject.

[Q] What’s the difference between seeing someone as a monster and seeing someone as a person who did a monstrous thing?

[Q] Have you ever made that shift? What happened in that process?

Part 3 APPLY YOUR FINDINGS

The book and film *The Hiding Place* tell the story of a Dutch woman, Corrie ten Boom. During World War II, Corrie and her family sheltered Jews from the Nazi occupation forces in Holland. She and her family were arrested and shipped to a concentration camp. In the camp, Corrie’s sister, Betsey, died.

After Corrie got out, she thought she had forgiven this one particularly cruel guard, but still she was tormented by the hurt. Finally she went to talk to her pastor about it. Corrie’s pastor

took her outside the church and pointed up to the steeple. “You see those bells?” Corrie nodded. Her pastor said, “Well, after you’ve been pulling on the ropes, even when you let go, the bells keep ringing for a while. But let go of the rope. In time, the bells will stop ringing.”

In forgiveness, we have to let go of the rope, to stop tugging on the hurt that’s been done to us. If we make that crucial decision to take our hands off, after awhile the noisy clanging in our soul will finally slow and then stop. Our hearts will grow quiet again.

Action Point (to do on your own): We need to move this discussion beyond the academic to applying the Bible’s teachings on forgiveness to specific situations in our lives.

- Pray for someone who has wronged you. Ask God to help you see that person through his eyes.
- Think about a time you were hurt but were able to forgive. What helped you do that? How might it apply to someone you are currently struggling to forgive?
- How do I know if I’ve fully forgiven someone? Am I still thinking about what they did to me all the time? Have I surrendered my right to get even? Can I see the person who hurt me as a human being rather than a caricature? Do I want the best for that person?

—Study written by Kevin A. Miller, former Christianity Today Vice President and currently a pastor of Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois.



KEYS TO FORGIVING

By Lewis B. Smedes, for the study “The Freedom of Forgiveness”

Jesus was unequivocal on this point: As his followers, we are required to forgive those who sin against us (Matt. 6:15). But what if we don't feel like we've forgiven them? How do we know, then, if we have truly forgiven? The Holy Spirit, thank God, often enables people to forgive even though they are not sure how they did it. But forgiving, and knowing that we've truly forgiven, comes easier when we understand the realities of forgiveness:

1. Forgiveness is a redemptive response to having been wronged and wounded. This is simple but important. Only those who have wronged and wounded us are candidates for forgiveness. If they injure us accidentally, we excuse them. We only forgive the ones we blame.

2. Forgiveness requires three basic actions. First, we surrender our right to get even. Every victim is sure that the victimizer deserves to suffer at least as much as he made us suffer. But that is not necessarily so. “The wages of sin (wronging God) is death” (Rom. 6:23), but the payment was made through the death of God's own Son. The blood of Christ covers all of our sins, but each of us must do personal business with God in order to experience his forgiveness. When we forgive, therefore, we place the outcome of the matter in God's hands and often choose to live with the scales unbalanced.

Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer. When we have been badly injured and clearly wronged, we make an instant caricature of the person who did it to us. We define him totally by the one wrong he did. If he betrayed us, his total being is reduced to his betrayal. When we forgive, we rediscover that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. This is what God does. Our sin hid our faces from him; now, forgiven, we shine like sparkling jewels before him.

And third, we wish our wrongdoer well. We not only surrender our right to revenge against him; we desire good things to happen to him. We bless him. Unnatural? Too much to ask of us? Perhaps. And yet, this is how God forgives us; he not only surrenders his right to see us punished, he graces us with whatever blessing is right for us.

3. Forgiving takes time. God can forgive in a single breath. But we need time. Just before he died, C.S. Lewis wrote: “I think I have at last forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it.” Maybe, had he lived longer, he would have had to do it again.

4. Forgiving does not require forgetting. True, God said through Isaiah (43:25), “I am he who blots out your transgression.... and I will not remember your sins.” But does God have amnesia? Does God not remember that Peter denied his Lord? Or, does he treat Peter and all other forgiven people as if he cannot remember what they did? On a human level, it is futile to try to forget; the more we try to forget, the more we remember. But we can dethrone the memory; we can refuse to let it control our lives. We can detoxify the memory; we can purge its poison from our souls. But we do well not to worry about forgetting. Sufficient unto the day is forgiving.

5. Ideally, forgiving leads to reconciliation. But we often have to put up with less than the ideal. Sometimes the forgiven person will not want to be reunited with us; he may not care a fig for our grace. Besides, though he is forgiven, he may not be changed. If he is reunited with us, he is likely to clobber

8 Big Questions of Faith

KEYS TO FORGIVING

Article

us again. Forgiving happens in our hearts. There can be no reunion without forgiving, but there can be forgiving without reunion. An offender who has violated a law will need to endure the just judicial consequences. But even as that happens, the offended person can pray and seek full reconciliation on the other side of justice.

6. Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven. Nothing enables us to forgive like knowing in our hearts that we have been forgiven. This is probably why Jesus taught us to pray: “Forgive us our debts, [but only] as we forgive our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Jesus implies that it is unthinkable for a forgiven person to refuse to forgive. If we do refuse, he says later, we have no claim on God’s forgiveness. But remember, he does not expect perfect forgiving; he is the only expert at it. We are poor duffers trying to treat others as he treats us.

—Lewis B. Smedes, now deceased, was professor emeritus of theology and ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of *The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How* (Ballantine).

CHRISTIANITY TODAY, December 2001

DOES GOD KNOW YOUR NEXT MOVE?

God's freedom, our freedom, and spiritual confidence in a changing world.

Does God fully know all that will happen in the future? If so, can he change his mind along the way in response to our prayers and actions? While this conversation between theologians may seem somewhat irrelevant to most of us, it has profound implications. If the future is entirely determined by God, what need is there for our prayer or actions to bring about spiritual and social change? On the other hand, if God's activity is indeed altered by both our prayers and continuously unfolding world happenings, then what security do we have against other powers that might threaten our lives in the uncharted future? John Sanders and Chris Hall explore these matters in the dialogue recorded in *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*.



Scripture: Genesis 6:5–6; 1 Samuel 15:10–11, 29; Isaiah 45:21; 46:5–13; 55:8–9; Hebrews 4:13

Based on: The article “Does God Know Your Next Move?,” by John Sanders and Christopher Hall, *CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, May 2001

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to leader: Prior to meeting, provide for each person the article "Does God Know Your Next Move?" from CHRISTIANITY TODAY magazine, included at the end of this study.

Many of us, when challenged by painful and evil events in life, struggle with the uncertainties of our limited theological perspectives. If we say that God is omnipotent (all powerful) and omniscient (knows all things), we have a hard time seeing God's goodness in these tragedies. If, on the other hand, we say that these nasty occurrences are not from God but the result of evil powers mucking up our world, we must wrestle with how an all-sovereign God makes room for choice and happenstance around us.

Take for example the Muller family. They move to a new city because the father has been offered a job at a large factory. The move seems an answer to prayer, since the Mullers have been begging God for this possibility for more than a year. However, unknown to them, as well as other area residents, the factory has been allowing toxic chemicals to leech into the soil. In three years, the Muller children have been weakened by repeated infections. One is even diagnosed with leukemia. Despite regular medical checkups and sound health practices in the home, these conditions persist.

Finally, area residents hire a law firm, which orders groundwater tests. In response to the findings, the firm files a class action suit against the factory. The Mullers are in a bind. If they participate in the class action suit, Mr. Muller will lose his job, and the family will have no money to move. If they stay, their children will continue to get sick and perhaps die. The lawyers will fight for the Mullers, but only if they first pay some upfront fees, which will drain their limited resources.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Did God lead the Mullers to this place, knowing that it would place their children's lives in jeopardy?

- If so, what does God have in mind for such suffering?
- How should the Mullers pray?

[Q] Describe a time you thought you clearly knew God's plan but then felt horribly mistaken. What happened to change your mind?

[Q] Think about a time you came to God in total frustration, telling him that you simply did not know what to do. How did the matter get resolved? What gave you peace about the outcome?

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: God created all things and is sovereign over all, though we are responsible for the choices we make.

In the first part of “Does God Know Your Next Move?,” John Sanders says that God makes some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions. “Hence, God can be influenced by what we do and pray for, and God truly responds to what we do,” Sanders says. In response, Chris Hall quotes Tom Oden, who says in *The Living God*, “God’s incomparable way of knowing knows the end of things even from the beginning.” He then quotes Isaiah 46:10, in which God says, “I reveal the end from the beginning, from ancient times I reveal what is to be; I say, ‘My purpose shall take effect, I will accomplish all that I please.’”

Read Hebrews 4:13.

[Q] Does this verse imply that God knows everything—past, present, and future? Was time itself part of that creation?

[Q] What does this verse mean by saying “Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account”? Does that imply future or present action? On whose part—God’s? Ours?

[Q] How can God both know what we will do, yet remain responsive to our prayers and actions?

Teaching Point Two: God knows the past, present, and future.

In the first part of “Does God Know Your Next Move?” John Sanders says that God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge, but knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). He adds, “Graciously, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being.” Review Chris Hall’s response to that, which includes the following:

Unlike human nature, God’s knowledge is not partial or fragmentary, most importantly because God’s knowledge does not occur “from a particular nexus of time.” Rather, God “knows exhaustively, in eternal simultaneity.” In short, God’s knowledge is incomparable.

God’s relationship to time forecloses the possibility that God does not know all aspects of the future.

Even though God understands time, God is not trapped within it. God remains eternal. Read Isaiah 45:21 and 46:5–13.

[Q] According to Isaiah 45:21, what ability distinguishes God from other gods?

- In what ways does he exhibit this?
- How is it part of his glory?

[Q] According to Isaiah 46:10–11 God knows everything that he will do. But does he know everything that we will do? Can what God is planning to do and what we choose to do be separated from each other? Why or why not?

Optional Activity: *On a whiteboard or large tear sheet, brainstorm as a group on evidence from Scripture that God knows the future. Give specific examples, such as, God told Nebuchadnezzar in a dream that he would become so proud that he would go insane for several years, and then be restored.*

Teaching Point Three: God grieves over some of our actions, but that doesn't mean he didn't know what we'd do or regrets having given us the freedom to do it.

“It makes no sense to say God grieves, changes his mind, and is influenced by our prayers, and also claim that God tightly controls everything so that everything that occurs is what God desired to happen,” John Sanders writes to Chris Hall.

Read 1 Samuel 15:10–11, 29.

[Q] How does Sanders' quote square with what Samuel says to Saul in 1 Samuel 15:29?

- How does attributing human-like qualities to God affect our understanding of him and his ways?
- Could God feel sorrow for making Saul king, knowing what evil Saul would do, yet will to do so for reasons that had yet to be revealed? Explain your answer.
- Considering what happened after Saul's demise, what might some of those reasons have been?

Read Genesis 6:5–6.

[Q] In what way was God sorry that he had made man—had he made a mistake that now needed to be corrected?

- How did the flood and God's provision for Noah and his family factor into God's greater plan for human beings and all of creation?

[Q] Do you think God ever feels sorrow for or regrets something you have done?

- Did your action catch him off guard, or did he know all along that you'd be doing it?
- In what way has God used that situation for greater good in your life?

Teaching Point Four: Though God tells us much about his plans, many of his ways are beyond our understanding.

Read Isaiah 55:8–9.

[Q] Share about a time when you prayed to God for help in a time of trouble, but he seemed to be missing in action.

- How did that affect your perception of God's goodness? His power? His control over what would happen in the future?
- Did your perception change over time? If so, how?
- Do you now feel God was really in control all that time? Why or why not?
- Can we ever understand all of the reasons why God did what he did?

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Action Points:

Scenario A: *A friend gives birth to a baby with significant deformities. You are sitting with her in quiet conversation when her pastor comes in and speaks a few words about how God must consider this mother to be a strong woman of faith to give her such a great burden and responsibility.*

[Q] *What do you think of that advice?*

[Q] *How do you think your friend feels about it?*

[Q] *What do you say to her? What have you learned in the discussion of openness theology that might be of help here? For example, how much can we know about God's intentions?*

- *How would our not knowing all that God has in mind be of comfort to your friend?*

Scenario B: *You and others are discussing the AIDS crisis in Africa and how your government plans to spend millions of tax dollars on medical research and assistance for troubled countries struggling with AIDS. One person says that AIDS is God's punishment against homosexuality and sexual promiscuity, and the government ought not meddle with God in this matter.*

[Q] *What do you think—is AIDS God's judgment against sin?*

[Q] *Could God have prevented AIDS from happening, or didn't he want to?*

[Q] *Is God in any way responsible for the AIDS crisis, or is it totally due to human sin?*

[Q] *What have you learned in the discussion of openness theology that would cast light on this problem? For example, could God, who knows all things—past, present, and future—and creates all things—even AIDS—be grieving over what man's sin has now brought upon himself? What other teachings might apply?*

—Study prepared by Wayne Brouwer, pastor and author of many books and articles on the intersection of faith and practice.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 For more studies like this, go to ChristianBibleStudies.com

- **Essentials in Knowing God** – 10-session Bible study
- **Who Is God?** – 12-session Bible study

📖 **When God Doesn't Answer Your Prayer**, Jerry Sittser (Zondervan, 2003; ISBN 0310243262)

📖 **The Problem of Pain**, C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; ISBN 0060652969)

📖 **Disappointment With God**, Philip Yancey (Zondervan, 1997; ISBN031021436X)

📖 **The Screwtape Letters**, C. S. Lewis (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001; ISBN0060652934)



DOES GOD KNOW YOUR NEXT MOVE?

Does God change his mind? Will God ever change his plans in response to our prayers? If God knows it all, are we truly free? What does God know—and when does he know it? Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders debate openness theology.

By John Sanders and Christopher Hall, for the study “Does God Know Your Next Move?”

Does God change his mind?

Does he ever change it in response to our prayers?

How do Bible statements that God ordains the future and that he alters his plans relate to each other?

Does God know your next move—whether it’s a life-changing decision or a routine choice at the grocery store?

And if he really knows it all, are you truly free?

Does God know the future?

Does he know it precisely or just with a high degree of probability?

Was God taking a risk in making the human race?

If God doesn’t know the future, how do we make sense of Bible prophecy?

And if God doesn’t know the future, what are we to make of the Bible’s teaching that “those whom God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”?

Evangelical theologians are now discussing (and debating) the nature of God’s knowledge of the future. These theological debates have enormous implications for piety and pastoral care—especially for how we respond to the tragedies that invade our lives.

The Time Factor

All these questions hinge on one key issue: how God’s knowledge relates to the flow of time. How is his experience of time different from ours? Does everything exist for him in a divine simultaneity?

Key Christian thinkers, from second-century theologians Irenaeus and Tertullian to the 20th-century apologist C. S. Lewis, believed that God is free of the constraints of time, and therefore knows everything future and past. But a few theologians are now teaching that God doesn’t know the future precisely because the future does not yet exist. Thus, while God is very good at calculating the odds, he still takes risks—especially in dealing with his free creatures.

The one-word shorthand for this view—openness—comes from the title of a 1994 book, *The Openness of God*, by Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, and William Hasker. Those authors called their position “a biblical challenge to the traditional understanding of God.” As with all such challenges, the burden of proof clearly rests on those who advocate against the tradition. In the 20th century, key elements of this challenge were discussed in the personalist and process schools of thought, but no denomination or confessional tradition has taught it.

Openness theology has been generating much heated discussion in venues such as the Evangelical Theological Society. Some have called it heresy. Others have said it treads the verge of heresy. CT decided to bring together a key spokesman for openness and a defender of the historic Christian view, both of them with cool heads. At a December 1999 meeting of CT's senior editors, we tapped Eastern College's Chris Hall (author of *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, IVP) and asked him to set up an e-mail dialogue with Huntington College's John Sanders (author of *The God Who Risks*, IVP). Part one of that dialogue appears here; part two, in our next issue; and in expanded form, it will constitute a book to be published next year by Baker Academic.

The e-mail format has produced a series of to-the-point exchanges that make a complex topic more accessible and far more instructive and digestible than a pair of pro-con essays would have been.

Chris and John proved to be models of civility and clarity. If all discussions of this topic were like this, we all would be grateful.

Dear Chris,

When I was in high school one of my brothers was killed in a motorcycle accident. For the first time, I began to think about God's role in human affairs—was God responsible for my brother's death?

A few years later, while in Bible college, I read what my theology textbooks said about the nature of God. According to these books, God could not change in any way, could not be affected by us in any respect, and never responded to us. I was shocked! The piety that I had learned from other evangelical Christians was directly opposed to such beliefs. For instance, I was taught that our prayers of petition could influence what God decided to do. Not that God has to do what we ask, but God has decided that some of his decisions will be in response to what we ask or don't ask.

Such problems put me into a state of questioning—either the piety I had been taught was wrong, or the theology I was reading was wrong, or both my piety and the theology had to be modified in some way. I continued to wrestle with these issues while in seminary and it took me over 20 years to formulate the views I now have. My conclusion is that the evangelical piety I was taught as a young Christian was biblically correct and so we need to modify our theology at certain points (not every point) so that our theology corresponds, rather than conflicts, with our biblically grounded piety.

Let me summarize the perspective I now hold—the so-called openness of God theology.

First, according to openness theology, the *triune* God of love has, in *almighty* power, created all that is and is *sovereign* over all. In *freedom* God decided to create beings capable of experiencing his love. God loves us and desires for us to enter into reciprocal relations of love with God as well as our fellow creatures. In creating us, the divine intention was that we would come to experience the triune love and respond to it with love of our own, and freely come to collaborate with God toward the achievement of his goals. God has granted us the freedom necessary for a truly personal relationship of love to develop. Despite the fact that we have abused our freedom by turning away from the divine love, God remains *faithful* to his intentions for creation.

Second, God has, in sovereign *freedom*, decided to make some of his actions contingent upon our requests and actions. God elicits our free collaboration in his plans. Hence, God can be influenced by what we do and pray for, and God truly responds to what we do. God genuinely interacts and enters into dynamic give-and-take relationships with us.

Third, the only *wise* God has chosen to exercise general rather than meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate and for God to be creative and resourceful in working with us. God has chosen not to control every detail that happens in our lives. Moreover, God has flexible strategies.

Though the divine nature does not change, God reacts to contingencies, even adjusting his plans, if necessary, to take into account the decisions of his free creatures. God is endlessly resourceful and wise in working toward the fulfillment of his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. Usually, however, God elicits human cooperation such that it is both God and humanity who decide what the future shall be. God's plan is not a detailed script or blueprint, but a broad intention that allows for a variety of options regarding precisely how his goals may be reached.

What God and people do in history matters. If the Hebrew midwives had feared Pharaoh rather than God and killed the baby boys, then God would have responded accordingly and a different story would have emerged. Moses' refusal to return to Egypt prompted God to resort to plan B, allowing Aaron to do the public speaking instead of Moses. What people do and whether they come to trust God makes a difference concerning what God does—God does not fake the story of human history.

Finally, the *omniscient* God knows all that is logically possible to know. God knows the past and present with exhaustive definite knowledge and knows the future as partly definite (closed) and partly indefinite (open). God's knowledge of the future contains knowledge of what God has decided to bring about unilaterally (that which is definite), knowledge of possibilities (that which is indefinite), and those events that are determined to occur (e.g., an asteroid hitting a planet). Hence, the future is partly open, or indefinite, and partly closed, or definite. It is not the case that just anything may happen, for God has acted in history to bring about events in order to achieve his unchanging purpose. Graciously, however, God invites us to collaborate with him to bring the open part of the future into being.

Your fellow servant in Jesus,

—John

Dear John,

Like you, I think it's quite helpful to reflect on what has shaped each of us, and how this formation no doubt influences how we do theology and the conclusions we reach. What and who has deeply formed me? My questions and struggles have surely shaped me. Probably the greatest question I've faced over the years, theologically, spiritually, and emotionally, has been the problem of evil. And lurking behind this question, especially during my early days as a Christian, was the question of God. More particularly, was God good? Could God be trusted?

The divorce of my parents when I was a very young believer, for instance, caused me great anguish, especially when it appeared as though God had remained deaf to my fervent prayers that my parents' marriage be preserved. At that time, it seemed to me that my petitions had bounced back into my face, ricocheting off the walls of an inaccessible heaven.

During the same period, I worked as a driver and handyman for one of California's largest mortuaries, and I daily faced the question of evil and suffering. Was God in control of human history? Did God genuinely realize how many people were dying in Los Angeles, oftentimes alone, in despair, and in horrific circumstances? Did God care?

Lastly, during my later college years I began traveling internationally and quickly learned that the tragedies I had encountered in my family and behind the wheel of a hearse were multiplied worldwide. Indeed, the level of suffering I observed in countries such as Indonesia and India surpassed what I had experienced in the States.

I specifically recall visiting a refugee camp in Calcutta as war broke out between East and West Pakistan in the early '70s. As I witnessed children dying from starvation and disease I again wondered, *Where is God in all this? Is God in control of human history? Does God know the end from the beginning? Is God sovereign over time itself? Is God's knowledge of the future perfect and complete? Is God ever caught off guard or surprised by what occurs as history unfolds? Is God good? Is God loving? Can God be trusted? Are there certain decisions, events, and accidents that God could not prevent, largely because God either did not know they were going to occur or did not desire to violate human freedom? Did God possess the power and knowledge to protect me from my own folly, sin, and error? What could I expect from the God portrayed in the Scripture?*

How have I gone about finding answers? Two key sources come to mind: First, there is the Bible itself. I, like you, affirm the absolute authority of the Scripture over my life and thought. This affirmation is not a guarantee that I'll read and interpret it well or correctly, but the Scripture and its inherent authority is an indispensable starting point for theological reflection. Hence, if you can convince me that the Bible affirms and supports the openness position, I'd have to make serious adjustments in my own thinking and practice as a Christian.

Second, the church's history of exegesis or exegetical tradition deeply influences the interpretive choices I make as I read the Bible. Tom Oden has particularly helped me to see that the church's exegesis, particularly in its earliest years, must never be overlooked as we work exegetically and theologically in the modern context.

Thus, a key question: "Has the church, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or in its many Protestant communities, ever taught that God's knowledge of the future is limited, or that God is surprised or caught off guard by what occurs as time progresses?"

Stan Grenz ponders the same question in his comments on your work in his recent book, *Renewing the Center*. "What is perhaps even more disquieting about Sanders's proposal," Grenz writes, "is that it seems to require the rejection of such a broad swath of the Christian theological tradition. He intimates that on something as fundamental as our basic conception of God, nearly everyone from the fifth century to the present has deviated far from the true understanding of biblical texts."

I acknowledge that there have been figures in the church's history who have argued that God's foreknowledge is limited, but they are minor figures at best, and the church as a community has never validated their conclusions. While the interpretive tradition of the church is not infallible, extremely convincing exegesis will need to be forthcoming if the two marks of openness theology are to be accepted, that is: (a) God's knowledge of the future is limited, and (b) God's knowledge grows as time itself proceeds.

Finally, James Packer taught me that while biblical revelation is absolutely infallible, it presently contains certain irresolvable tensions, largely because God has chosen to keep certain things to himself, at least for the present. Thus, while God always speaks truthfully, God might well choose to remain silent or incomplete in his communication. Indeed, Moses taught Israel that the "secret things belong to the Lord" (Deut. 29:29). Packer has warned me, both as his student in Vancouver and in many of his writings, to beware of draining the mystery out of the Scripture in a misplaced desire for rational consistency. In Packer's words, we can frequently trace theological confusion and error to "the intruding of rationalistic speculations, the passion for systematic consistency, a reluctance to recognize the existence of mystery and . . . a consequent subjecting of Scripture to the supposed demands of human logic." Hence, I have learned to live with incompleteness, paradox, incomprehensibility, and deep mystery in my relationship with God and as I think theologically.

Simultaneously, though, the Bible makes certain things quite clear. For instance, while evil in its essence may remain inexplicable to me, in Jesus Christ, God has clearly spoken against evil and sin. While I may not understand why God has allowed certain events to take place, or has seen fit to remain seemingly silent in answer to certain of my prayers, I can know that God loves me and his world infinitely. How so? God has demonstrated this love and goodness in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. While God allows evil to occur and, indeed, uses it to further his own purposes, God has spoken and acted against that very same evil, as seen in the earliest sections of the biblical narrative (cf. Gen. 3). In Christ we have God's definitive statement against sin, evil, and suffering. God's last word will always be a redemptive one.

I find Tom Oden's comments in *The Living God* to be helpful, both concerning the nature and extent of God's knowledge and regarding God's relationship to time itself. In a way, Oden is simply summing up the ecumenical consensus reached upon these issues in the early centuries of the church's history. God's knowledge is "without limitation or qualification." It is, as the psalmist writes, "beyond all telling" (Ps. 147:5). What of God's knowledge of the future? "God's incomparable way of knowing knows the end of things even from the beginning: 'I reveal the end from the beginning, from ancient times I reveal what is to be; I say, "My purpose shall take effect, I will accomplish all that I please"' (Isa. 46:10). God knows "past, present, and future . . . external events and inward motivations."

Unlike human nature, God's knowledge is not partial or fragmentary, most importantly because God's knowledge does not occur "from a particular nexus of time." Rather, God "knows exhaustively, in eternal simultaneity." In short, God's knowledge is "incomparable." Surely this is what we should expect if we're dealing with God.

A word or two further regarding God's relationship to time might be appropriate, particularly in light of the openness model's contention that there are aspects of the future God does not know. I contend that this is incorrect, largely because God's relationship to time forecloses the possibility that God does not know all aspects of the future. Here Oden is again helpful. The argument runs along the following lines:

God's knowledge of the world is infinite. Hence, God in relationship to time "must be aware of duration and succession, even though not bound by them. If God did not understand duration and succession, God would understand even less about time than we do."

Even though God understands time, God is not trapped within it. God remains eternal. Thus, God "views all times as eternal now," while simultaneously understanding "the process of temporal succession." Here is a key distinction between divine and human knowledge. "We do not know next year until next year, but God knows next year already. We learn only successively through experiencing, but God does not have to learn something God already knows. We know things in part and by pieces, but God knows things fully, all at once," while still understanding duration and succession.

Thus, future events are not future for God, "but simply present." This seems to me to be a critical distinction that clearly sets off the classical model from that held by openness theologians.

Let me know what you think.

With warm greetings,

—Chris

Dear Chris,

Thank you for your thoughtful and challenging remarks. Your wisdom is valuable to me. Theology is, and always has been, produced in dialogue and I'm delighted to be in conversation with you.

In response, let me say that I agree that "In Jesus Christ, God has spoken against evil and sin." This is no small agreement! Jesus is God's definitive response to our evil, demonstrating the divine love toward us. I agree that God "allows" evil to occur and that God has "acted against that very same evil." However, you, as a classical theist, and I, as an open theist, disagree on the role of evil in God's plans. Since you believe that God cannot change in any respect, cannot be affected by us in any way, and that God meticulously controls everything that happens, you have to say that every evil that occurs is part of God's plan and that each and every evil is for the good. Given this, I wonder how you can claim that God acted "against" the very evil he ordained in the first place. Do you have a schizophrenic God? According to your view, nothing happens except what God specifically wants to happen, so God never takes risks, and his will is never thwarted in the least detail. Hence, you are forced to deny that God genuinely grieves over our sin (Gen. 6:6) since it makes no sense to say God grieves over what he wanted to occur!

Moreover, if God never responds to us, then you must affirm the doctrines of irresistible grace (we cannot reject God's will) and unconditional election (God chooses those who are saved without responding to anything the saved do). Of course, you may simply appeal to "mystery" and say we cannot understand God's ways. To that I say, "A contradiction by any other name is still plain nonsense."

You claim that I subject Scripture to the demands of human logic. Actually, we all use human reasoning when reading the Bible—I do assume you understand at least parts of it. Moreover, your view is not so "mysterious" as you suggest. To claim that divine sovereignty and human freedom are contradictory, one must give the terms precisely opposite meanings. However, you do not, since you believe God micromanages everything such that his will is never thwarted and humans are "free" to act on their desires, but they do not have the freedom to do otherwise than they do. That is, you affirm "compatibilistic freedom" (determinism and human responsibility are compatible). In your view, all God has to do is ensure we have the desires he wants us to have and then we will "freely" do what God has ordained. There is nothing contradictory or logically mysterious about that! However, we, along with the "Arminian" tradition, believe that God does not tightly control everything and that humans have "libertarian freedom." We have the freedom to do otherwise than we did (e.g., a murderer could have refrained from murdering), and we can thwart some of God's will.

Moving on, we believe that God's knowledge of the future is partly fixed and partly left open for three main reasons. First and foremost, we believe the Scriptures teach this (e.g., God grieves, changes his mind). Second, though we agree with Arminian theology on all but two points, we believe that complete foreknowledge of our future decisions implies the loss of our free will. Third, the "future" does not yet exist so there is nothing "there" to be known. Hence, you incorrectly state our view when you say we believe that "God's knowledge of the future is limited." We believe that God knows all that can be known, and to say that it is a limitation for God not to know "nothing" is ridiculous.

Finally, you beat on us with the club of the church tradition. Nearly everyone has said God possesses complete knowledge of what humans will do in the future, so how can we even think of going against such a cloud of witnesses? To begin, theologians have debated the nature and content of God's omniscience for millennia. There are several traditions regarding exactly what God knows.

Second, we do respect theological traditions: to disagree with the great theologians of the past is serious business. Nonetheless, like Luther we feel compelled to affirm our view because of Scripture

and sound reason. You sound just like John Eck, the Catholic inquisitor of Luther, who claimed it unimaginable that so many theologians could have been wrong on so central a teaching as salvation.

I would have thought that someone such as yourself, teaching at a Baptist college, would have more empathy for those who challenge certain traditions. Lutherans, Reformed, and Catholics killed Anabaptists for espousing beliefs that most evangelicals today take for granted. Clearly, Protestants believe that traditions sometimes need changing. After all, it was not until the 18th century that challenges arose to the virtually unquestioned tradition that all unbaptized children (or those born of non-Christian parents) who die are damned to hell!

However, proponents of openness do not reject the entire tradition. We affirm the ecumenical creeds, the main teachings of the Reformation, the authority of Scripture, and the importance of prayer and community.

Blessings on your ministry trips overseas, and I look forward to hearing from you.

—John

Dear John,

Since for both of us the Bible remains the ultimate authority, it's probably best to compare notes concerning key exegetical issues. The key question for me is this: does the exegesis being produced by openness scholars possess the exegetical strength to overturn the heart of the church's interpretive teaching regarding God's knowledge of the future and God's relationship to time? What if we focus on two key texts, God's testing of Abraham in Genesis 22, and Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial of Jesus?

In our correspondence, you've asked me, "What do you do with all the Old Testament references to God's grieving, changing, delighting, and repenting? Does not God say to Abraham, 'Now I know you fear God' in response to Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac? Does this not indicate that God's knowledge of Abraham has grown in response to Abraham's act of great faith?" Good question. You're right in seeing that we both will need to make sense of God's words in Genesis 22:12. "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen. 22:12).

Walter Brueggemann, whom you have quoted, writes that "God genuinely does not know.... The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows." What did God need to know that he did not yet understand? Why the test to elicit the needed information?

You have written, "The answer is to be found in God's desire to bless all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfillment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve his purpose? God has been faithful; will Abraham be faithful? Will God have to modify his plans with Abraham?" The straightforward, literal meaning of Genesis 22 is that God "now" learned that Abraham would be faithful.

Even an opponent of openness theology such as Bruce Ware admits that unless compelling reasons can be found for not accepting the straightforward meaning of the text, this meaning should be accepted. Ware, though, lists at least three fundamental problems with accepting the "literal" meaning, objections that appear quite reasonable to me.

If God must test Abraham to find out what is in his heart, this surely calls into question God's "present knowledge of Abraham's inner spiritual, psychological, mental, and emotional state." Yet other biblical texts teach that God does know the inner thoughts of human beings. Indeed, one of the characteristics that sets God apart from humans, a trait that demonstrates the glory of God, is God's ability to do this very thing. The Chronicler writes that "the Lord searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts." In 1 Samuel 16:7 we read, "the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." David writes, "O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you know it completely, O Lord" (Ps. 139:1-2).

It escapes me how God could possibly know David's thoughts before he expresses them, if God cannot know fully his unexpressed inner life. In fact, it is God's wondrous ability to far surpass humans in his knowledge that elicits David's praise: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain" (v. 6). Of course it is. David is not God.

Surely texts such as these can provide a lens through which I interpret what is going on between God and Abraham. If I can't use them to interpret the Abraham narrative, then one must conclude that there are at least some of Abraham's thoughts, indeed, his most important ones, that are beyond the ability of God to discern until Abraham actually acts. Thus God's knowledge is not only limited as to the future but also in the present.

As a result of the test, God now knows that Abraham fears God. Ware rightly asks if God did not know this already. Is this lack of knowledge plausible? Had not Abraham's actions, from his response of faith in Genesis 12 to God's promises, to his willingness to continue to live a life of faith in Genesis 15, indicated that he deeply feared God? Is it plausible to believe that God did not know Abraham feared him until the very point when Abraham raised his knife above the child of the promise? If so, Abraham seems to understand God better than God understands Abraham, for Abraham realized that God possessed the power to raise Isaac from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Did God not perceive that Abraham understood God possessed this power? Abraham understands this before he ever attempts to sacrifice Isaac. And yet God couldn't perceive this tremendous faith in Abraham? Think, too, of Abraham's instructions to his servant in Genesis 22:5. He instructs his servant to wait for both him and Isaac. Why? Abraham fully expected that both would return, even if a resurrection is demanded for the return trip to take place. Such a perspective seems to be demanded if the logic of Hebrews is included in the interpretive grid of Genesis 22. If so, how can your interpretation be correct? A "literal" interpretation of Genesis 22 appears to run into insuperable difficulties.

Ware, I think rightly, points to Paul's words in Romans 4:18-22 as evidence of Abraham's long track record of faithfulness and reverence, well before the command to sacrifice Isaac. "Against all hope," Paul writes, "Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead . . . yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God." Abraham's demonstration of faith and reverence, a faith credited to him by God as righteousness, is already established by the time we reach Genesis 22. Is that same God suddenly second-guessing himself by asking Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? Was God not convinced by the long history of faithfulness that had already occurred between Abraham and him?

Finally, Ware asks how can God possibly know, at least from an openness perspective, that Abraham will remain faithful in the future? In Ware's words, "What open theists claim God gained from this was, on openness grounds, either already known to God (so he did not learn something new in this test) or at best was a transient and passing truth (which could give no real assurance of how Abraham would act in the future). The straightforward meaning open theists commend simply cannot

be the intended meaning of the text.” If the text does not concern the extent of God’s knowledge, what does it concern? When we find New Testament writers such as James or the author of Hebrews commenting on this text, they focus on Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac as a sign of faith manifesting itself in good works, and on Abraham’s faith in God’s power to raise the dead. Even if Isaac dies at Abraham’s hand, Abraham believes God can bring him back to life (cf. Heb. 11:17-19; James 2:21). No New Testament writer uses this text to develop ideas concerning the nature or extent of God’s knowledge. So, if I’m to find the heart of the text’s meaning, I need to hear the text as apostolic witnesses are hearing it.

This reading of the text, one that focuses on Abraham’s faith in God’s power to raise the dead, is also emphasized by early patristic commentators on this narrative. Origen does mention briefly that some opponents (probably non-Christian critics of the gospel) have “thrown out against us that God says that ‘now’ he had learned that Abraham fears God as though he were such as not to have known previously.” Origen dismisses this possibility out of hand, as do almost all patristic commentators on Genesis 22. Why?

He constantly compared Scripture with Scripture. The interpretation which Origen offers, along with other early Christian commentators such as Ambrose, Chrysostom, and Caesarius of Arles, is multileveled. For example, the Fathers frequently understood Isaac to be a type of Christ; so was the ram caught in the bush. Caesarius understands Abraham to be a type of God the Father, who later is to willingly offer his Son as a sacrifice for the sin of the world. Indeed, Caesarius notes that in the liturgical rhythm of the year, Genesis 22 was read at Easter, “when the true Isaac, whose type the son of Abraham showed, is fastened to the gibbet of the cross for the human race.” I find this multileveled reading of the text to be exegetically fruitful and theologically profound.

Perhaps more to the point regarding the openness position, the comments of both New Testament writers and patristic commentators insist the heart of Genesis 22 is Abraham’s faith, not God’s knowledge. If the openness interpretation of Genesis 22 is valid, why do neither canonical nor patristic writers advocate it?

With warm greetings,

—Chris

“Does God Know Your Next Move?,” CHRISTIANITY TODAY, May 2001

WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MESS?

Trials and troubles can lift us to glory.

Mike Yaconelli bumped up against a hard wall when his 18-month-old baby developed cancer. That's when he first began to realize that God can be found in the ugliest messes of our lives. Yaconelli claims that some Christians tend to edit out the messy parts of the Bible. Thankfully, the Spirit-led persons who compiled the 66 books of the Bible didn't do that, for grace and healing often come through the messes we'd like to overlook or avoid.



Scripture: Exodus 17:1–7; 1 Kings 19:1–12; 2 Corinthians 12:7–12; James 5:13–16

Based on: “[Dick Staub Interview: Mike Yaconelli](#),” *Christianity Today's* weblog, posted August 1, 2002

Part 1 **IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE**

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Messy Spirituality" from Christianity Today's weblog, included at the end of this study.

Mike Yaconelli used to think that "getting God" would mean things would go blissfully well and that the Christian life was one of continual growth toward spiritual wholeness, with no setbacks or messes along the way. But when people gave him glib reasons for his infant daughter's illness, suggesting even that she would be better off dead, a chink in his faith developed. The chink, however, let in some light: God is not just about fixing people. Yaconelli realized that God often comes to us most fully in our brokenness.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] What experiences have led you to similar conclusions—times that made you wonder where God was?

[Q] Think about the times when you have grown spiritually: What conditions led to the spiritual growth? Were they all uplifting and positive? Or have you grown best when your life was being challenged by painful circumstances? Explain.

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: God is with us through times of crisis, even when we don't recognize his presence.

Read Exodus 17:1–7.

When the Israelites entered the wilderness after their liberation from Egypt, they complained about the lack of water. They wondered why God had rescued them from Pharaoh for *this!* They'd have rather returned to slavery than endure the dry and dreadful desert. But God had not abandoned the Israelites; in fact, he made provision for them, making water gush from a rock that came to be called Meribah, meaning quarrel, since they had quarreled with Moses over their living conditions (cf. Ps. 95:7b–11).

Ironically, their wilderness sojourn came to be a high point for their community. That's when God entered into a covenant relationship with them and gave them the law that provided order and cohesion to their community. Theologian W. Paul Jones writes, "Israel, stuck in the desert for 40 years, came to say it was their honeymoon time with God."

WHERE IS GOD IN THIS MESS?

We'll do anything to avoid pain and seek pleasure. Spiritually, this means we'd like to live on a continuous mountaintop of blissful presence with Jesus. But in reality, we usually live in a kind of wilderness—a time of temptation and trials, a dry place.

But as the Bible and many writers remind us, that is not all bad: Belden Lane, in his *Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, said: "The mountain is where one seeks to transcend ordinary human experience; the desert is where one enters it most deeply."

[Q] What about the account in Exodus 17:1–7 stands out to you?

[Q] What in that experience can you relate to your own life?

[Q] In past troubles, how have you seen God break into your life?

Teaching Point Two: In the midst of the wilderness, we need to stop and listen for God's voice.

Read 1 Kings 19:1–12.

Elijah was in a struggle for his life: Jezebel was out to kill him, so he fled. First God led him into a wilderness (his sojourn is reminiscent of the Israelites' wilderness trek, as it took 40 days and 40 nights, which is also the length of Jesus' later temptations in the wilderness). There Elijah was touched by an angel—twice—who brought him food and drink, then urged him to continue on to the mountain. After he entered a cave, every imaginable natural disaster hit: wind, earthquake, and fire. But God was in none of those.

And then there was "a sound of sheer silence" (that's in the NRSV; the NIV says it was a "gentle whisper").

[Q] What do you imagine that was like? How was God in the silence?

God allows us to enter wilderness because sometimes it is the only place where we will stop and listen for what he is trying to say to us or do through us. Henri Nouwen has said, "Precisely because our secular milieu offers us so few spiritual disciplines, we have to develop our own. We have, indeed, to fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord" (*The Way of the Heart*).

[Q] How do you take time to listen to God's sheer silence?

- What do you hear when God is most silent? What do you learn about yourself? About God? About your situation?

[Q] How does God break through to you most effectively? Share some episodes.

Teaching Point Three: A “thorn in the flesh” can mark an opportunity for service.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7–12.

Scholars debate just what ailed the apostle Paul. What was his “thorn in the flesh”? Whatever it was, he wanted to be rid of it, and he prayed toward that end three times (knowing Paul’s persistent personality, these times of prayer were probably long periods in his life, not single cries for help). But the thorn didn’t go away.

Through this process Paul moved from praying for deliverance to boasting about his difficulties—weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions. For he discovered that when he was weak, then he was strong. God, in other words, sustained him during these difficult times. Through this, Paul had an even more powerful witness to the grace of God. No wonder he could proclaim that nothing separated him from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:31–39).

[Q] Institutions (businesses, schools, churches) sometimes talk about leveraging their strengths to their advantage and overcoming their weaknesses so they are not liabilities. Have you ever thought about the opposite idea—leveraging your weaknesses to make them strengths? How can God use your weaknesses for his glory?

[Q] Think of people who have listened to you when you were down or in desperate straits. What was it about those persons that helped you then?

Teaching Point Four: God does want to heal us and make us whole persons, but not necessarily through a quick fix or cure.

When Pastor Duane Beck was fresh out of seminary, he made discipleship the focus of his ministry. He wanted his people to take more seriously what it meant to follow Jesus daily, in all of life. These were good people, he concluded; they were sincere, too, in their desire to follow Jesus. Yet there didn’t seem to be any progress toward greater levels of discipleship.

As he got to know the congregation better, he discovered that most of these people were carrying around some kind of pain, some scars from their past, that impeded their walk with Jesus. Out of this awareness he started a “prayers for healing” ministry. Periodically, in Sunday morning worship, people would file forward for a prayer for healing. Beck always invited them for all types of healing, not only physical, but also spiritual, psychological, and relational healing. He also reminded them of the difference between healing and a cure: It is possible to be healed—that is, to experience wholeness—even when one is not cured of a particular

malady. Beck's healing ministry is part of a larger recovery in North America of James's teaching about the prayers of the elders for suffering and sickness.

Read James 5:13–16.

[Q] If you have ever experienced healing (spiritual, psychological, relational, physical) through prayer, tell us about it.

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Avoiding pain and suffering is not Christian. Other religions, like Christian Science or Buddhism, are into either denying the reality of suffering or trying to live above it. The cross of Jesus Christ stands in stark judgment of such approaches. For it is through suffering and pain that God brings about redemption. God took on the pain and suffering of the world in order to save it. And that is why Jesus' followers are "burden bearers" (Gal. 6:2).

[Q] What do you think about Yaconelli's comments about the church being a place where people don't have to pretend they're okay when they're not? Should the church be a place where you can simply say, "I'm in bad shape," and someone will say, "Tell me about it"?

- Does that characterize your church and/or small group?

[Q] How could your church or group become that kind of place?

[Q] Is there anything that stops you from being an honest Christian?

Action Points:

- Conclude your time together with prayers for healing (spiritual, psychological, relational, physical). You might even want to gather around individuals in special need, laying hands on them as you pray.
- On your own this week, think of one personal weakness (weakness, not sin). How might God use that weakness as he used Paul's thorn in the flesh? How can you boast or at least be grateful to God for some suffering you've endured? You may not appreciate difficulties, but how might they be valuable to you?

—Study prepared by Richard A. Kauffman, former Christianity Today associate editor and author of numerous Bible studies in this series.



MESSY SPIRITUALITY

The author of Messy Spirituality discusses God's "annoying love."

By Dick Staub

Mike Yaconelli, who died in 2003, co-founded Youth Specialties, was a former editor of the religious humor magazine The Door, and authored several books, including Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love for Imperfect People (Zondervan, 2002). This interview took place in 2002.

You start the book by saying that after 45 years of following Jesus, your life is a mess.

The subtitle of the book was going to be "Christianity for the rest of us." And the reason I put that there is because I was so tired of hearing religious speakers tell me how perfect they were. After hearing a sermon or reading a book or going to some religious meeting, I felt worse than when I got there because they had it all together. They had it all figured out. You know what? I'm almost 60. I've had five children. And let me tell you, I don't have life figured out yet.

What was your early life in faith like?

My folks were converted when I was 11 years old. [They] had this incredible conversion and just turned around. And I did then, too. I can remember the night I became a Christian. And man, this weight came off of me and all that kind of stuff. What I didn't realize was, that was just the beginning—of a huge journey.

What happened when I went to church was they edited out all the stuff in the Bible so that when I heard the story of Noah I was always just thrilled to hear about this man who believed in God—the only guy who believed in God. They didn't mention that when he got off the boat he got drunk and got naked. They never told that. Thank God they didn't put that on a flannelgraph, but I'm here to tell you that I never heard that story.

So the theology that you were raised in was not messy. It was the idea that now that you've met Jesus, things are going to be straight.

They're going to be great, you're going to get fixed, you're going to be perfect.

What was the point at which you realized that this was not going to work for Mike Yaconelli?

Well, the beginnings of it happened when my daughter got cancer. She was 18 months old. And at that point, I had all these Christian people who were wonderful people come to me and tell me why God was doing it and that even if she died she'd be with God and "isn't that better?" And I'm thinking, *no, not really.*

That was the beginning of the sort of crack in my faith where I realized there's more to God than just fixing people.

Now here you are at this ripe old age telling us that there is a messy spirituality for the rest of us.

What that means is that it's incomplete. You and I are incomplete. I'm unfinished. I'm unfixed. And the reality is that where God meets me is in the mess of my life, in the unfixedness, in the brokenness. I thought he did the opposite; he got rid of all that stuff. But if you read the Bible, if you look at it at all, constantly he was showing up in people's lives at the worst possible time of their life. That's where he

8 Big Questions of Faith

MESSY SPIRITUALITY

Article

kind of broke through, where he connected to people, where they learned so much about it, where they met him, where they understood what he was talking about.

Sometimes I think that the church is in the business of editing all of the mistakes and the flaws and the messiness out of our life.

Pretending is the grease of non-relationships. Pretending is how you and I get through the day without ever having to know each other. When I walk in the room, you say to me, “How are you?” Well, you don’t want to know. And, frankly, I don’t want to tell you. So I just say “fine,” and you go “fine.” And off we go.

The church ought to be the one place where I’m so anxious to get there because I can stop the pretending. When you ask, “Mike, how are you?” I don’t go “Praise the Lord,” I say, “I’m in bad shape.” And you go, “Okay, great. Tell me about it.”

You have some dramatic statements in this book, including, “I don’t believe in spiritual growth.”

Well, that’s because we’ve made spiritual growth measurable. We’ve actually communicated to people that there are steps to spiritual growth and that you can know how you’re growing. And so I try to write a chapter about the whole fact that spiritual growth takes time. It’s tiny little steps. It’s lots of decisions, not just one decision. And I think that’s helpful to people. Frankly, I used to think, *oh well, gosh, I’m not praying every day.*

And the reality is that every tiny step I take towards God is a huge, huge thing. And the other part that bothers me is that when the church talks about spirituality and spiritual growth, it has all these rules.

The church is not about pointing the finger at people and telling them what they’re doing wrong. Our goal is to show them this incredible lavish love of God and the result will be, “Yeah, I’ll be a mess, but I’m so attracted to this God.”

And I’ll be honest with you, there have been times when I haven’t been attracted to Jesus. It’s kind of like when my grandson sees me. He grabs onto my shirt, and he won’t let go. I go around and he’s just hanging on and I go, you know, Noah, let go. And he goes, okay. And he doesn’t let go. To be honest with you, that’s the way Jesus has been in my life. There have been times where I’ve said, Jesus, I don’t believe in you anymore, get out of here. I don’t know. I don’t even trust you. And it’s like, okay. And he’s still hanging on.

That’s why I’m a Christian today.

Why do you call it God’s “annoying” love?

There have been times when things happened where I said, “God where were you?” I just was at World Vision today and I watched this film on AIDS where there are so many millions of kids dying of AIDS in Africa. I couldn’t stand it. I fell apart. And these people are praying every day. And not only are they dying, but their children are dying, and everyone around them is dying. And there are moments like that where I go, “God, where are you?”

I get no answer except he just won’t let me go. He just annoyingly keeps on loving me anyway.

I travel a lot and I came to San Francisco one night and missed my connection back home. I was so angry and upset and I called my son on the phone. I wanted him to encourage me. I said, “Man, I’m stuck in the airport, it’s been a horrible day. I’ve been traveling too much.”

8 Big Questions of Faith

MESSY SPIRITUALITY

Article

My son said, “You know, Dad, if you didn’t travel so much you wouldn’t have things like this happen.” Well, I didn’t appreciate that. I was ticked off. I said, let me talk to your son. Well, I forgot that when you’re 2 you can’t talk and when you’re 60 you can’t hear. This is not a good combination. He’s mumbling on the phone. I’m hoping that this is going to make me feel better. It’s making me feel worse. Finally, I’ve had it. I hear the phone drop onto the floor. Now, I hear the kids playing. I’m stuck in the airport. I have this miserable experience. I’m furious and angry when all of a sudden I hear crystal clear over the phone, “I love you, Grampa.”

And you know what? All my anxiety, everything went out the window. Do you know why I wrote this book? Because there’s a whole lot of people who are so freaking busy, they’re so cluttered that they’re at their wits’ end. And if they’d only just stop for a minute, they could hear the God of the universe whisper to them, “I love you.”

—“[The Dick Staub Interview: Mike Yaconelli](#).” *Christianity Today’s Weblog*. Posted August 1, 2002

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

If God is faithful to protect his people, why is life still so hard?

It's one of the oldest and strongest arguments against the existence of a loving, all-powerful God: bad things happen to good people. Nancy Guthrie experienced one of the most devastating things that can happen to anyone—the loss of a child—not once, but twice. To continue to believe in God's protection, Guthrie somehow had to reconcile biblical words of comfort with her life's episodes of intense suffering.

From what, and whom, does God promise to protect us? How does God's protection manifest itself? When can we expect it? These are the kinds of questions we'll explore in this study.

Scripture: Matthew 10; Romans 2:5–11; 1 Corinthians 15:12–19; Ephesians 6:10–18; Revelation 20:11–15

Based on: "Can I Really Expect God to Protect Me?" by Nancy Guthrie, *Christianity Today*, 2005



8 Big Questions of Faith

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Can I Really Expect God to Protect Me?" from Christianity Today magazine, included at the end of this study.

Protection is big business. Advertisements for medications, sunscreens, insurance, automobiles, credit cards, and many more products all promise protection from one hazard or another. We are scared and are grasping for something to take the fear away.

A look at the television schedule underlines this point. Crime dramas in the mold of the *Law & Order* and *CSI* franchises continue to proliferate, frightening viewers with packaged horrors and then soothing them with neat solutions. Supernatural thrillers capitalize on the unsettled mood, while political shows offer fictional heroes in high places.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Do you enjoy scary movies and TV shows? Why or why not?

[Q] Have you modified your life in response to your fears or know people who have? If so, how?

[Q] Do you think that we are more anxious today than during other eras, such as the Cold War, World War II, or the Great Depression? Why or why not?

[Q] In your opinion, are Christians any more or less paranoid than anyone else? To the extent that Christians do seem paranoid, how does this harm their witness?

Part 2 DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES

Teaching Point One: Our enemies might not be God's enemies.

Reflecting on the psalms, Guthrie noted that Israel's enemies were by definition God's enemies, while our apparent enemies are not. She wrote, "When we think about enemies, we think about bosses who seem out to get us, former spouses who want to ruin us, rivals who want to defeat us, and people who have hurt us. We think of those with ideologies and agendas at cross-purposes with ours. The truth is, we are much more concerned about having God on our side to protect our own interests and reputation than we are about being on God's side, seeking after his glory and ultimate victory." When an earthly enemy assails us, then, the problem is not a flaw in God's protection but a misunderstanding of his promises. Read Ephesians 6:10–18, which clarifies the identity of our real enemy, details our defenses, and tells us how to call for help.

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

[Q] Before reading Guthrie's article, whom would you have considered your enemy? Has her perspective caused you to alter your list?

[Q] How can we tell if an apparent enemy is of the "flesh and blood" variety or an agent of "the powers of this dark world" and "the spiritual forces of evil"?

[Q] What is the difference between asking God to be on our side and seeking to be on God's side? Give an example of a prayer of the first sort and a prayer of the second sort.

[Q] This passage seems to define our struggles narrowly, emphasizing the spiritual dimension far above all other aspects of our existence. Yet it ends with an exhortation to "pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests." Does verse 18 mean that God is interested in our "flesh and blood" problems, too? Or are spiritual challenges possibly more pervasive than we realize? Is there anything Christians should never pray for?

Teaching Point Two: Our priorities might not be God's priorities.

As Guthrie pointed out, Jesus' commissioning speech to his disciples is hardly a pep talk. The twelve likely hoped for assurance of success in a mission that would bring about a recovery of Israel's greatness and a defeat of the oppressive Romans. Instead, Jesus promised countless hardships on the road to a victory so distant no one could name the date of its arrival. This is not exactly the assignment the disciples—or any of us, for that matter—signed up for.

Read Matthew 10.

[Q] Do you think Jesus' dire warnings of suffering and persecution applied specifically to the disciples, or do they apply to all Christians?

[Q] How can we square this passage with Jesus' words at the end of Matthew 11, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light"?

[Q] What does it look like in our contemporary society to take up a cross and follow him?

[Q] Are persecuted Christians healthier spiritually? Why or why not?

[Q] Based in part on this passage, Guthrie concluded, "God cares more about our spiritual health than our physical health. Our bodies are going to die. Our souls are going to live forever. And God's ability to protect our souls from eternal judgment and eternal death is more significant than his ability to protect our bodies from disease or

8 Big Questions of Faith

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

Leader's Guide

death.” Do you agree with this assessment? Do you pray as if you agree with it? Do you find it reassuring or discouraging, and why?

[Q] If physical health is a matter of relative indifference to God, why did Jesus perform so many healings?

[Q] On the other hand, if God is concerned with physical health, why do Christians suffer and die at the same rate as everybody else?

[Q] What Scriptures or other sources of guidance might Christians draw upon to think through this conundrum?

Optional Activity: *As a group, analyze and/or sing Martin Luther's famous hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." (For lyrics and musical accompaniment, visit <http://www.hymnsite.com/lyrics/umh110.sht>.) Note particularly the relative weight Luther gives to physical and spiritual realities in verse 4, which ends: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; / the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still; / his kingdom is forever."*

Teaching Point Three: Our timing might not be God's timing.

If our prayers were filed by category, the biggest box would probably contain the "arrow prayers": "Oh Lord, help me now!" But as the disciples, and Guthrie, learned, God is often less worried about the "now" than we are.

Read Romans 2:5–11, 1 Corinthians 15:12–19, and Revelation 20:11–15, which allow us to glimpse the key events on God's schedule. The larger these events loom in our consciousness, the smaller our immediate problems might appear.

[Q] How often do you think about things such as resurrection and judgment?

- What feelings do such subjects evoke—anxiety, confusion, elation, impatience, skepticism?

[Q] Why does the Bible say as much as it does about events that will occur at the end of time?

- Why doesn't it give even more details?

[Q] Does the knowledge that God will defend you on judgment day sustain you through earthly trials, or do the two situations seem completely disconnected?

8 Big Questions of Faith

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

Leader's Guide

[Q] Are you ever tempted to reverse 1 Corinthians 15:19, “If only for the *next* life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men”? Explain.

[Q] Walter Rauschenbusch, an architect of the early 20th-century social-gospel movement, once wrote, “Which will do more to make our lives spiritual and release us from the tyranny of the world, the thought that we may at any moment enter into the presence of the Lord, or the thought that every moment we are in the presence of the Lord?” How would you answer his question?

Optional Activity: *Recite as a group the first question and answer from the Heidelberg Catechism, a statement of faith professed by Reformed churches from the 16th century to the present.*

[Q] *What is your only comfort in life and death?*

[A] *That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore by his Holy Spirit he also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.*

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

In an address delivered January 6, 1941, U. S. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt listed four “essential human freedoms”: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. He wished to see these freedoms available to all people and saw in them “a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.” We do not live in that world. Our world is both more terrible and more hopeful.

Action Points: *On your own this week, ask yourself the following questions.*

[Q] What do you fear most? What would happen to your faith if that fear came true?

[Q] Do you hold any grudges against God for not protecting you or a loved one from an earthly tragedy? How can you let those grudges go? If you do not struggle with such feelings, what might you say to someone who does?

8 Big Questions of Faith

WILL GOD PROTECT US?

Leader's Guide

[Q] God has not promised us immediate freedom from want or fear. He has offered no guarantees against pain, sickness, loneliness, or loss. Yet he has made some glorious promises. What is one scriptural promise you can carry with you into the teeth of life's storms?

—Study prepared by *Elesha Coffman*, former managing editor of *Christian History & Biography*.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

📖 For more studies like this, go to ChristianBibleStudies.com

- [A Better Look at God's Face](#)
- [God's Purposes in Our Suffering](#)
- [When God Says No](#)
- [Finding God in Our Pain](#)

📖 [Fear Not: Facing Our Fears Through God's Love](#), Criswell Freeman (Thomas Nelson/W, 2005; ISBN 1404185569)

📖 [Holding On to Hope](#), Nancy Guthrie (Tyndale House, 2002; ISBN 0842364188)

📖 [How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?](#) Lewis B. Smedes (Random House, 1999; ISBN 0877883580)

📖 [A Mighty Fortress: Meditations on the Sufficiency of God](#), T.M. Moore (Christian Focus Public, 2003; ISBN 1857928687)

📖 [Spiritual Protection](#), Lance Lambert (Baker Book House, 2004; ISBN 0800793668)

CAN I REALLY EXPECT GOD TO PROTECT ME?

Divine promises in the midst of suffering.

By Nancy Guthrie for the study, "Will God Protect Us"



My bible study group assignment was to read Psalm 91 and express how it had been true in my life.

"He will rescue you from every trap and protect you from the fatal plague. ... For he orders his angels to protect you wherever you go. They will hold you with their hands to keep you from striking your foot on a stone." [All Scripture citations from the New Living Translation.]

At first blush it sounds really good, but that day I had to say what I really thought. Through tears I told the group, "I don't get how this is true. He did not rescue us from a fatal plague. He did not keep us from striking our feet on a stone but, in fact, allowed much worse than that."

In the year preceding we had buried my daughter, Hope, who was born with a rare metabolic disorder and had a short and difficult life. At that low point in my grief, I simply wasn't willing to gloss over the nice-sounding verse. I couldn't reconcile this passage with my experience, with reality. But I wanted to. I wanted to figure out how the scriptural promises of protection apply not only to me, but also to the missionary who is raped, the Chinese pastor who is imprisoned, the godly mother of three who succumbs to cancer. I wanted to know, *Can I expect God to protect me?* And if not, what are these promises of protection in the Bible all about?

Our True Enemy

I began in the Psalms, because they are filled with requests for and proclamations of divine protection. Most of them have to do with protection from "my enemies." For example, Psalm 59:9–10 reads, "You are my strength; I wait for you to rescue me, for you, O God, are my place of safety. In his unflinching love, my God will come and help me. He will let me look down in triumph on all my enemies."

Frankly, I have often been confused. Some of the things the biblical writers ask God to do to their enemies, I wouldn't wish on anyone! A sermon I heard on Isaiah finally helped me to make sense of this. Because the children of Israel and their God-appointed leaders were God's chosen people, friends of Israel were friends of God, and enemies of Israel were enemies of God. God's enemies are those who love themselves more than God, those who reject and refuse the gift of God in his Son, Jesus. Throughout the Old Testament story of God dealing with his chosen people, God reveals his power and his will to protect his children from enemies who would seek to do them harm.

So the challenge is to figure out, Who are our enemies? When we think about enemies, we think about bosses who seem out to get us, former spouses who want to ruin us, rivals who want to defeat us, and people who have hurt us. We think of those with ideologies and agendas at cross-purposes with ours. The truth is, we are much more concerned about having God on our side to protect our own interests and reputation than we are about being on God's side, seeking after his glory and ultimate victory.

I figured out that God has not promised to protect me from everyone I might define as my enemy. But he has promised protection from my ultimate enemy—sin—which, because of Christ, no longer has the power to enslave me or determine my eternal destiny. We can entrust ourselves to this just, strong God, who has gone to the lengths of the Cross to protect us from any enemy that seeks to alienate us from himself.

My problem is not so much a lack of protection from God. My more significant problem is that I'm sleeping with the enemy, justifying and enjoying my sin when all along he offers me protection from its damning power.

Different Priorities

As I listened to the words of Jesus, my understanding of protection became clearer. Honestly, it wasn't necessarily what I was hoping for.

Imagine the scene as Jesus prepared to send out his disciples in twos for ministry (Matt. 10). Far from a pump-you-up pep talk, he seemed to be preparing them for the worst. "When you are arrested, don't worry about what to say in your defense," he said. "Everyone will hate you because of your allegiance to me," he predicted. And then he encouraged them not to fear those who wanted to kill them. "They can only kill your body, they cannot touch your soul" (Matt. 10:28). *Gee, I think, they can kill only my body? And this should be a relief?*

The fact is, God cares more about our spiritual health than our physical health. Our bodies are going to die. Our souls are going to live forever. And God's ability to protect our souls from eternal judgment and eternal death is more significant than his ability to protect our bodies from disease or death. Trapped in these bodies and in this time, it is hard for us to grasp. So in our prayer requests for safe travel and physical health, and in our more desperate prayers amid great difficulties, we try to apply to our bodies his promises of protection for our souls, and we're left disappointed, accusing him of falling down on the job. But we will continue to be disappointed in him until our value system lines up with his, until we value the eternal life of our souls more than the limited life of our mortal bodies, until we understand that God's primary agenda is kingdom building. It may cost us our very lives, and he is okay with that.

Keep Them Safe from the Evil One

When we read the prayer Jesus prayed in John 17, a prayer of protection for his disciples, we can't help feeling hopeful. Jesus prayed, "Holy Father, keep them and care for them ... keep them safe from the Evil One" (John 17:11b, 15b). Surely God answers the prayers of Jesus with a resounding *Yes!*

As we listen in on this prayer, we can assume that God heard it and that Jesus always prayed in complete accord with his Father's will. So we might expect that God's affirmative answer to Jesus' prayer would mean that the disciples never faced any harm, right? But we know that isn't what happened. History records that all but one of the disciples were killed for their allegiance to Christ. Only John is said to have lived to old age, and he was severely persecuted for the sake of the gospel. Most of the disciples spent years in prison and were stoned, beheaded, or crucified.

So how do we reconcile Jesus' prayer of protection for the disciples with the reality that nearly every one of them died a martyr's death? Is that how God protects those he loves?

Jesus asked his Father to protect the disciples and us from the Evil One because he knows that the Devil wants to destroy us. In fact, according to 1 Peter 5:8, Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion looking for some victim to devour." Satan brings suffering to diminish our faith, he brings temptation to deceive us, and he brings doubt about God's love and goodness to estrange us from God.

But since Jesus prayed for us, asking his Father to protect us from the Evil One, we are not at Satan's mercy. God has answered the prayer of Jesus with a resounding *Yes!* While Satan may win a battle or two in the life of the believer, he will never win the war against the soul. Jesus has prayed for his own, and we are protected.

Protection from Judgment

Certainly one of the most politically incorrect words in the English language today is *judgment*. And to say that God will judge sin is considered an old-fashioned scare tactic. But Scripture is clear that judgment for sin is certain and will be terrifying for those who are not protected from it. Paul writes in Romans, “There is going to come a day of judgment when God, the just judge of all the world, will judge all people according to what they have done. . . . He will pour out his anger and wrath on those who live for themselves, who refuse to obey the truth and practice evil deeds” (2:5-6, 8). We would much rather talk about God’s love than God’s wrath, but isn’t it a relief to know that evil in this world will not go unpunished, that justice will be done? At least it’s a relief until I look into my own heart and recognize that the evil within me deserves nothing less than judgment.

God knows that you and I need protection from judgment, which is going to fall, flowing out of divine justice. So he sent us a Protector in the form of a vulnerable baby, a Savior who is no less than his own Son. “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:17). As we hide ourselves in the person and work of Jesus, we find shelter from the sure and certain judgment of the last day.

But Jesus is able to protect us from judgment only because there was no protection for him. As Jesus hung on the Cross, he absorbed judgment in our place so that we might be protected from it. “Since we have been made right in God’s sight by the blood of Christ, he will certainly save us from God’s judgment” (Rom. 5:9). When I see him there, no longer can I harbor resentment that he hasn’t come through for me in the way I have wanted. I realize he has paid the ultimate price so that I might be protected from the judgment I deserve.

So can I expect God to protect me? Absolutely! I’ve come to see that his “protection plan” is more vast and far-reaching than my shallow expectations once defined. I see now that God’s promises for protection go much deeper than protecting my body or my agenda or my plan for my life. I can rest easy. I’m protected.

—Nancy Guthrie is the author of *Holding on to Hope: A Pathway Through Suffering to the Heart of God*, as well as *One-Year Book of Hope*, a daily devotional written especially for those who seek to grow closer to God through grief and pain.

“Can I Really Expect God to Protect Me?” by Nancy Guthrie, *Christianity Today*, 2005

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

What do we know about the place where we'll spend eternity?



Considering that heaven is the eternal home of the believer, it is surprising how little we seem to know about it, and how much we think we know that is not actually in the Bible. Also, everyone who has grieved the loss of a Christian loved one has probably wondered where that person is right now—before Jesus comes back and establishes his eternal kingdom on earth. Beginning with the thought-provoking article from *Christianity Today*, “Finding Heaven,” this study will help your group explore Scripture’s tantalizing insights into our eternal home.

Scripture: Luke 16:19–31; 23:39–43; 24:13–43; 1 Corinthians 15:35–57; 2 Corinthians 5:1–5; 12:4; Hebrews 12:1; Revelation 2:7; 19–22

Based on: “Finding Heaven,” by Arthur O. Roberts, *Christianity Today*, April 2005

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

Part 1 IDENTIFY THE CURRENT ISSUE

Note to Leader: Provide for each participant the article "Finding Heaven" from Christianity Today magazine, included at the end of this study.

To enhance your study, you may refer to the book *Heaven*, by Randy Alcorn (Tyndale House Publishers, 2004). He offers clear, biblically based answers to nearly every question you might have about heaven. For a review of this book from Christianity Today, go to <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/002/34.88.html>. Alcorn's book was a significant aid in the preparation of this study.

Mark Twain, a gifted writer but a cynical unbeliever, wrote quite often about heaven. In one piece, entitled "Etiquette for the Afterlife," he gave advice to people preparing to meet St. Peter:

"Wait patiently in the queue till it comes your turn to apply for a ticket. Do not look bored, and don't starch your shin with your other foot.

"If you get in—if you get in—don't tip him. That is, publicly. Don't hand it to him, just leave a quarter on the bench by him, and let on you forgot it. If he bites it to see if it is good, you are not to seem to notice it."

"Leave your dog outside. Heaven goes by favor. If it went by merit, you would stay out and the dog would go in."

"Keep off the grass."

Discussion Starters:

[Q] People have lots of strange ideas about heaven (such as the idea that we will be greeted by St. Peter). What are some you've heard from other people, movies, or books?

[Q] When are you likely to find yourself thinking about heaven? What do you think about most?

[Q] The article, "Finding Heaven," answers the question, "Where is heaven, and how will we experience it before the final resurrection?" What questions did this article answer for you? What new questions did the article provoke for you?

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

Part 2 **DISCOVER THE ETERNAL PRINCIPLES**

Teaching Point One: Believers who die immediately enter an intermediate heaven to await the day when “the new heaven and the new earth” are established.

Note to Leader: *Rather than stating that teaching point at the beginning of this discussion, see if the class will come to the conclusion on their own by studying the following texts.*

Read Revelation 21:1–5.

[Q] Skim through Revelation 19 and 20. In brief, what kinds of things will happen *before* the new heavens and the new earth appear? (No need here to quibble over the details, just sketch out the main events.)

Note to Leader: *Christ will destroy the wicked on earth and will reign on earth for 1000 years (different churches interpret this in different ways, but in any event it precedes chapter 21). Then Satan will be released and then defeated once and for all. Then the new heaven and new earth will appear.*

[Q] Before all this happens, where are those believers who have died? When we say, “They’re in heaven,” where is that heaven? Look closely at Revelation 21:2.

Note to Leader: *John saw the New Jerusalem “coming down out of heaven from God.” So that is where it must be now. Verse 5 indicates that it is only at this point in the course of the end times that God “is making everything new.” While some may suggest that this vision has to be taken symbolically, given the nature of apocalyptic literature like Revelation, it still seems clear that the location of heaven now is different than where heaven will be after Revelation 21 is fulfilled.*

Read Luke 23:39–43.

[Q] What can you conclude from Jesus’ promise to the dying thief?

Note to Leader: *First, we can dismiss the idea of “soul sleep” —the suggestion that believers sleep until the final resurrection, unaware of the passage of time. Jesus said the thief would be with him “today.” Secondly, Jesus said he would meet the redeemed thief in paradise. Thus, paradise is where Jesus is now. The word paradise only appears*

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

two other places in the New Testament. (You may ask the class to look up these two texts.)

In 2 Corinthians 12:4 Paul says he “was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.”

In Revelation 2:7 Christ says to the church in Ephesus, “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.”

[Q] So what can we conclude about the heaven where Christians who have “fallen asleep” now are?

[Q] In the third paragraph of our article, Arthur Roberts writes, “Heaven is located within creation...” Do you find that paragraph to be consistent with what you’ve just studied?

Note to Leader: *Roberts is offering an educated guess, one that a number of other scholars accept. It is certainly true that heaven is a literal and physical place. (Perhaps not physical in exactly the same way as the world around us, but neither is it only spiritual, having no solid substance.) Whether heaven is actually up—literally above us somehow—or that expression is a metaphorical way of speaking, is hard to know for sure. Ultimately, God did not feel it was necessary for us to know exactly where paradise is, or perhaps, like children asking profound questions, we simply would not be able to grasp the answer.*

[Q] So how would you distinguish heaven now from the heaven yet to come, as described in Revelation 21–22?

Note to Leader: *Since it is clear that believers who die in the Lord are immediately with Christ in paradise, but also that this paradise is not the same as “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God,” which will only happen after all other end-time events, theologians have adopted the phrase, “the intermediate state” or “the intermediate heaven.” This is the current heavenly home of believers who have died and are awaiting the final resurrection. It is a wonderful state of delight, beyond our imagination, but it is not the complete fulfillment of all that God has promised.*

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

Teaching Point Two: It is not certain from Scripture what form believers possess in this intermediate state before the final resurrection.

Note to Leader: This subject must be tackled with humility. Godly, Bible-believing people interpret the Scriptures on this point differently. But it is profitable, nonetheless, to consider these texts.

Popular lore says people who go to heaven become angels, or floating, disembodied spirits. The Bible is not specific about what our bodies will be like in either the intermediate or the eternal heaven, but we do have some important clues from Scripture.

[Q] Read Luke 24:13–43, a description of two of Jesus' appearances after his resurrection. Scan through these verses silently and tell what you learn about Jesus' resurrection body.

[Q] In the last paragraph of his article, Roberts writes, "...after death some form of ourselves, reflecting the risen Jesus, will function in dimensions of reality not now accessible to us." Do you think that, since Jesus' body has the characteristics indicated in Luke 24, it follows that our bodies will be similar to his as soon as we die?

[Q] Read Luke 16:19–31, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. This story gives us a glimpse into both heaven and hell; however, it is not certain which elements in this story are literal and which are figurative. Some things suggested here have no other parallels in the Bible. For example, is there communication between heaven and hell, as depicted here, or does Jesus bring that into this story to make a larger point? It seems unlikely that believers who have died spend all their time cuddled up at Abraham's side. Nonetheless, this story is to be taken seriously as a glimpse into the afterlife.

[Q] What are some things we might infer from this story about the believer's body after we die?

Randy Alcorn, in his book *Heaven*, observes:

Both the rich man and Abraham reasoned and communicated, and they maintained their distinct identities from earth. The rich man and Lazarus are depicted as having physical forms [after death].... Of course, these references may be entirely figurative. But they might also suggest the possession of transitional physical forms, existing in a physical Paradise, to sustain and manifest human identity between death and resurrection. (p. 63)

It seems to many believers that this story, even though it is a parable, must be depicting after-life reality, lest Jesus be misleading us.

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

[Q] Read 1 Corinthians 15:35–57 and 2 Corinthians 5:1–5. What insight do these Scriptures give us into the nature of our bodies between death and the final resurrection at the return of Christ?

- 1 Corinthians 15:35–57 is a key passage on the resurrection body. The problem is that Paul doesn't explain whether the resurrection body he describes is ours immediately after death or only after Christ has brought all things under his control (the context in vv. 20–26) at the final resurrection.
- 2 Corinthians 5:1–5 is another important text on this subject. Paul refers to three conditions: “the earthly tent” (v. 1), being “naked” or “unclothed” (vv. 3–4), and “a building from God, an eternal house in heaven” (v. 1). The “naked” or “unclothed” reference seems to point toward a disembodied existence—the Christian's spirit having neither its earthly tent nor heavenly dwelling. What is puzzling is that Paul does not want to be in that condition. Yet do believers who are now with Christ find themselves in an undesirable condition? Furthermore, there doesn't seem to be any reference in the Bible to disembodied human spirits, having no substance or actual form; the body and soul seem to be always together as one person.
- The brief glimpses the Bible gives us of saints already with the Lord depicts them having human forms if not human bodies of some sort. For example, when Moses and Elijah ministered to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2–10), the disciples saw human figures and even recognized them. The martyrs under the altar awaiting Jesus' coming judgment in Revelation 6:9–11 appear to have forms in that they are offered white robes to wear. In the parable, all three characters—the rich man, Lazarus, and Abraham—are depicted as having bodies with senses.
- On the other hand, passages like Philippians 3:20–21, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, and John 5:25–29 indicate clearly that we will not have our eternal resurrection bodies until the return of Christ.

This question of the “intermediate state” of the believer cannot be resolved with certainty. However, these things seem to be true:

- After death, believers are immediately and consciously in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:8).
- They are with Jesus in paradise (see comments in Teaching Point 1). Paradise is a place of delight in the presence of God, other saints, and angels and is free from trouble and temptation.

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

- Believers are conscious and aware of their surroundings and, likely, of at least some events on earth (Rev. 6:9–11; also Moses and Elijah encouraging Jesus at his transfiguration).
- Believers, while not having their final resurrected bodies, are neither formless nor indistinguishable spirits (cf. the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, the martyrs under the throne wearing white robes).
- Believers, while not in distress during the intermediate state, will not have a sense of completion until Jesus' second coming. We will joyfully anticipate his second coming, even while we wait in his presence.

Teaching Point Three: Believers now in heaven are likely aware of us who remain on earth.

[Q] A distraught young woman, whose saintly father had just died, asked the pastor moments before the funeral, “Can my father see me right now?” How would you answer her?

[Q] Could we draw any help from the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which we looked at earlier (Luke 16:19–31)?

Note to Leader: *All three of the characters, Abraham, Lazarus, and the rich man, are aware of earthly people, and the rich man is concerned about his brothers' welfare. It is possible that Jesus did not mean this to be taken literally, but on the other hand, we certainly have reason to take anything Jesus says regarding heaven and hell seriously, unless the nature of the statement is obviously meant to be taken otherwise.*

[Q] Read Hebrews 12:1. Who are the witnesses referred to in this verse? What does the use of the word *witnesses* imply to you? (The writer could have said, “Since we are surrounded by so many *examples*,” but that isn't the word he chose.)

[Q] Can you think of Scripture passages that indicate that the inhabitants of heaven are aware of things happening on earth?

- There is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10).
- At Jesus' transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–3) he was attended by Moses and Elijah, who presumably came back aware of what Jesus was going through and about to face in his crucifixion. Thus they were aware of earthly events from their vantage point in heaven. (Notice that they also appear in bodily form.)

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

- In Revelation 6:9–11 martyrs are portrayed as being aware of events on earth, eager to see vengeance on the wicked. Would it not stand to reason that if they are aware of earth's ongoing evil, they would also be aware of other earthly events and people?

[Q] If people in heaven are aware of people and events on earth, won't they know sorrow over the sin and heartaches they see?

Randy Alcorn, in his book *Heaven*, skillfully addresses this question, making these points (pp. 72–73):

- “God knows exactly what’s happening on Earth, yet it doesn’t diminish Heaven for him.” The same is true of the angels and Abraham in Jesus’ parable.
- He suggests that there is no explicit promise that there is no sorrow of any degree or kind in the intermediate heaven. The promise of “no more tears” appears in Revelation 21 in conjunction with the coming of the new heaven and new earth.
- “People in Heaven are not frail beings whose joy can only be preserved by shielding them from what’s really going on in the universe. Happiness in Heaven is not based on ignorance but on perspective.” That is, from heaven’s vantage point. With such complete knowledge of God’s sovereignty and workings, the sorrows of earth do not look the same as they do here.

Part 3 **APPLY YOUR FINDINGS**

Randy Alcorn tells this story (from his book *Heaven*):

In 1952, young Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She’d already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly; she could hardly see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam for fifteen hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her she was close and that she could make it. Finally, physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn’t until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day she said, “All I could see was the fog... I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.” (p. xxii)

8 Big Questions of Faith

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

[Q] What are some life situations where it is important for you to “see the shore” of heaven?

[Q] What is one thing that has become clearer to you as a result of this study?

[Q] What do you think of the old cliché, “He’s so heavenly minded, he’s of no earthly good”?

C. S. Lewis wrote:

If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman Empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on Earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with Heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’: aim at earth and you will get neither. (*Mere Christianity*, p. 118)

[Q] Finish the sentence: If I thought more about heaven, I would probably...

Let’s conclude with a good story! On Sunday morning, January 9, 2005, Rev. Jack Arnold, a 69-year-old semi-retired Presbyterian pastor, was preaching at Covenant Presbyterian Church in Oviedo, Florida, where he had once served as senior pastor. Michael Bates, the associate pastor at Covenant, was listening to Arnold preach and told what happened:

Jack was preaching on the cost of discipleship. As he neared the end of the sermon he spoke of his favorite verse, “For me to live is Christ, to die is gain.” He quoted Wesley, saying, “Until my work on this earth is done, I am immortal. But when my work for Christ is done”—and Jack slapped his hands together toward the sky—“I’m outta here! I don’t know about you, but when my work is done, I go to be with Jesus. And that will be gain! And when I go to heaven...” At this point Jack paused briefly, looked up, swayed slightly, and grabbed the podium before falling back to the floor. And he was gone.

Jack’s son Brian remembered his father at the funeral:

As long as I have known my father he has been a restless man. His choleric personality certainly accounts for some of this restlessness, but mostly it can be attributed to his deep conviction that this earth is not his home.

WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Leader's Guide

Stanley Hauerwas coined the phrase “resident alien” to describe a Christian’s tentative relationship to the dominant culture. Dad was a resident alien. In fact, he was more like an illegal immigrant. He just had no business being here. No business but God’s business.

*—Study prepared by Lee Eclöv, senior pastor of Village Church of
Lincolnshire, Illinois, and a regular contributor.*



FINDING HEAVEN

By Arthur O. Roberts for the study,
“What Is Heaven Like?”

Where is heaven, and how will we experience it before the final resurrection?

—Linda Montgomery, Wichita, Kansas

One popular view locates heaven in a separate, non-material world. In recent centuries scientists and clergy seemed to strike a bargain: science gets the body (and other physical substances), while religion gets the soul (and other non-material stuff). Social scientists claimed title to the psyche, however, leaving the church a wispy, anemic, spiritual realm congenial to neither scientific nor biblical insights about creation and human nature.

This view sidesteps the physicality of Jesus’ incarnation and resurrection and their implications about heaven. It lacks the full force of the Christian hope for personal, conscious life after death.

Heaven is located *within* creation. It isn’t tucked into a galactic corner. Rather, we can experience glimpses of heaven through ordinary senses, reason, and intuition. Heaven is behind us, among us, around us, within us, before us—eventually to be fully experienced eternally in our resurrection bodies. Heaven is as real as oceans and suns, winds and planets in a hundred billion whirling galaxies. It is as real as people with bodies, minds, and spirits.

We find intimations of heaven in stories of humankind, spiritual experiences, and nature, but in Scripture we get our fullest picture: The triumph of Christ over dark powers will release the cosmos from sin’s bondage (Rom. 8:21). On the Last Day, we will become more, not less, embodied (note Rev. 21’s highly physical description of heaven). Heaven is a dimension in which the cosmos is bathed in holiness (Rev. 21:22–27).

The apostle Peter understood Jesus’ promise, “I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2), to mean not only his presence now but also a heavenly life with him. The present universe, Peter said, will be reconstituted—“a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:13). The apostle Paul pictured the “whole creation” groaning like a woman in labor. Those having the “firstfruits of the Spirit” eagerly anticipated bodily redemption and sharing the glory of the risen Lord (Rom. 8:15–25).

In heaven, cultures from this world will be shaped toward divine purposes (Rev. 21:24). But for all these intimations, heaven is a place we simply cannot fully imagine yet: “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor. 2:9).

What form will we have before the final resurrection? Even with his vision of “a man in Christ” who was caught up in “the third heaven,” the apostle Paul did not know whether it was in or out of the body—“God knows,” he wrote (2 Cor. 12:2–4). Nor do we know whether this vision refers to a state after the final resurrection. But we do know from Paul that, on the last day, we will bear the likeness of Jesus: “And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49).

We may take our cue from Jesus. Jesus’ triumph over death signals our own victory. Jesus is first through the mountain pass, as it were. Death isn’t the last word; life is—personal, conscious continuation beyond death. In post-resurrection mode, he moved between two dimensions. As earthly

8 Big Questions of Faith

FINDING HEAVEN

Article

“children of the resurrection,” we access one dimension of the kingdom of God in this life; in heaven we’ll experience a new dimension of it, though still awaiting our glorified bodies. We will be with the risen Jesus (Phil. 1:23), and therefore we will be of some essence or form to perceive and reflect his likeness.

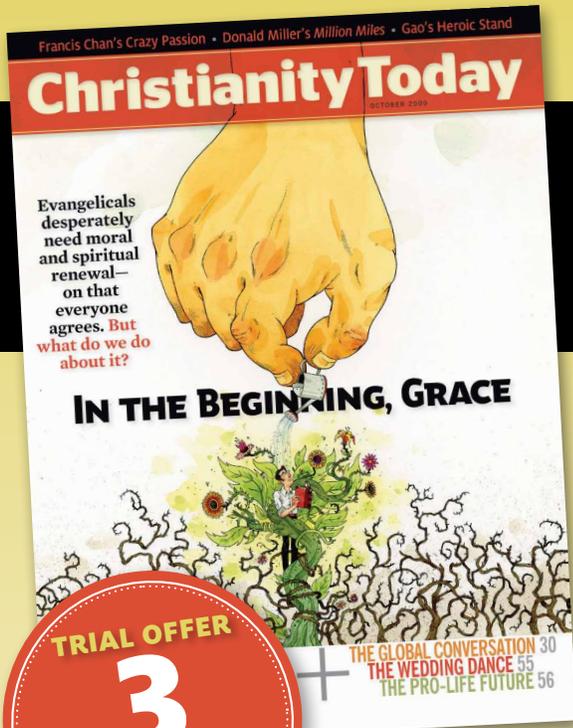
The dead in Christ aren’t in limbo awaiting the end-time melding of modes. Given the relativity of time, in relation to us, they’re already enjoying some form of the New Jerusalem. This “great cloud of witnesses” (Greek: “martyrs”) hovers about us, mind touching mind, spirit touching spirit, and one day, at the final resurrection of the Last Day, hand grasping hand! Created in the image of God, in the new heaven and earth we will put on God’s likeness. As John wrote:

“Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2–3, NRSV).

Heaven is where Jesus is; and after death some form of ourselves, reflecting the risen Jesus, will function in dimensions of reality not now accessible to us.

—Arthur O. Roberts is professor at large at George Fox University and author of *Exploring Heaven: What Great Christian Thinkers Tell Us About Our Afterlife with God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003).

“Finding Heaven,” by Arthur O. Roberts, *Christianity Today*, April 2005



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