

# Questions Teens May Have About God, the Bible, and the Christian Faith

By Ashby Camp

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## Introduction

My intention when I conceived this project was to respond to actual questions solicited from teenagers about God, the Bible, and the Christian faith. My teenage grandson provided a couple of good questions, but my plans to get input from various groups of teens did not materialize. I have instead produced a list of questions that I assume are "intellectual itches" of young people today. I hope my brief answers provide at least a modicum of relief. I was aided in compiling the list by Natasha Crain's [65 Apologetics Questions Every Christian Parent Needs to Learn to Answer](#).

### 1. Are there reasons to believe God exists apart from what the Bible says?

Yes. Here are some of them with brief explanations. More detailed explanations can be found at pp. 9-45 of [Answering the New Atheism](#).

**a. It is more reasonable to believe that a timeless, nonphysical, and immensely powerful personal being caused the universe to come into existence than to believe it came into existence uncaused from nothing.**

Everything that begins to exist has a cause for its existence; it is brought into existence by something. That is obvious. If you start with nothing you'll never get anything. The reason you will never get anything is that something can only come into existence if there is something to cause it to do so. Nothing, being the absence of anything, has no properties and thus has no causal capacity, no potential to bring anything into being.

Without regard to the testimony of Scripture, there are good reasons (philosophical and scientific) for thinking the universe began to exist at some point in the past. So something must have caused it to come into existence. And that something must have been outside the universe because it existed without the universe. It *caused* the universe and therefore is *independent* of the universe.

A cause that is outside of the universe and which brings the universe into existence must be nonphysical because matter/energy and space are part of the created universe and thus did not exist without it. That cause is powerful because it created the entire universe from nothing. And it is beyond or outside of time because time, as we know and experience it, is itself a property of the created universe. That is why the universe is often called "the space-time universe."

This nonphysical, timeless, and amazingly powerful cause is most reasonably understood to be personal rather than an impersonal force or set of conditions because a mindless force or set of conditions would automatically produce its effect (a universe) whenever it existed (as a temperature below freezing automatically produces ice). In other words, there could not be a time when such a force or set of conditions existed when the universe did not come into being as a result. And yet, the universe is not eternal; it came into existence a finite time ago. If the cause of the universe is a personal being rather than a mindless force or set of conditions, there is a ready answer to why the universe has not always existed: the act of creation was an exercise of that being's will. He created at a time of his choosing. All of this fits squarely with traditional concepts of God as an eternal, nonphysical, and powerful being.

Note that it is only that *which begins to exist* that must have a cause for coming into existence. That which has no beginning, which has always existed, like the God of Christianity, requires no cause for being. So whereas the universe *must* have a cause of existence because it had a beginning, God's existence needs no cause. To ask "What caused God?" is to incorrectly assign God to the category of things requiring a cause. It is to ask what caused the uncaused, which is nonsensical. It is like asking what time tastes like or how tall Tuesday is.

**b. It is more reasonable to believe there is an objective moral standard than to believe there is not, and it is more reasonable to believe that an objective moral standard cannot exist without God than to believe that it can.**

Are moral standards, notions of right and wrong, objective or subjective? When you say it is wrong to rape someone or to slit a baby's throat for fun do you mean it is really and truly wrong, wrong no matter who says otherwise (objectively wrong), or do you mean it is merely contrary to some current human opinion, a social convention, that is subject to change like clothing styles (subjectively wrong)? If the Nazis had succeeded in conquering the world and convincing people that slaughtering Jewish children was a noble purification of humanity, would killing them still be wrong? Is right and wrong whatever people say it is, or does it exist independently of what people think?

If there is no God, there can be no objective morality. This does not mean atheists cannot be good people; it means they cannot have a rational basis for claiming that any conduct is objectively wrong, wrong in a sense independent of human opinion. After all, in their view all of existence is the product of purposeless natural forces operating over time, and these forces are incapable of generating moral obligation.

If blind, purposeless forces, such as wind or dripping water, created marks in sandstone in the shape "Do not eat grapes," there would be no obligation to abstain from eating grapes. Anyone who appealed to those marks to condemn those eating grapes would be ridiculed and taught that mankind is not obligated to obey the fortuities of nature. If the prohibition against slitting a baby's throat is the product of the same mindless forces as "Do not eat grapes," it could be no more binding. Any contrary sense would be an illusion.

We know intuitively that there is an objective morality, that there are moral *facts* not just moral *opinions*. That is why we feel outraged over something like child molestation. If I cannot stand the taste of sushi and someone else eats it, I do not get outraged or indignant toward them because it is a subjective matter, a matter of opinion. It is completely different if they abuse a child.

Indeed, it is the objectiveness of morality, the fact morality is not made up by humans, not determined by human vote, that allows us to judge some human laws as unjust or immoral. As the famous civil-rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote from a jail cell, "A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law."<sup>1</sup>

Because atheism is incompatible with the existence of objective morality, our moral sense bears witness to the falsity of atheism. It is telling us that atheism is not true.

**c. It is more reasonable to believe that free will exists than to believe it does not, and it is more reasonable to believe that free will cannot exist without God than to believe it can.**

Humans are able to think and act in a genuinely nondetermined manner. We can choose to write a letter, eat an apple, or sing a song, and we can choose not to do those things. If there is no God, then the universe and everything in it is the result of physical laws (gravitational, electromagnetic, chemical, mechanical, thermodynamic, and radiation) acting on matter/energy

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "[Letter from a Birmingham Jail](#)," April 16, 1963.

over time, which is an exclusively deterministic process. In other words, things occur solely because the laws of nature dictate that they occur. The question is how this strictly deterministic process could give rise to beings that act in a nondetermined manner. What evidence is there that physical laws can create free will, can create a state in which beings act in a way not determined by those laws?

Recognizing the problem, many atheists argue that free will is an illusion, that human choices and conduct are in fact determined by physical laws operating in the brain the effects of which are just too complex to be traced with any certainty. As one prominent atheist puts it, "We don't exist as immaterial conscious controllers, but are instead entirely physical beings whose decisions and behaviors are the fully caused products of the brain and body."<sup>2</sup>

This leads naturally to the claim that humans are not responsible for their actions, being in essence sophisticated meat robots. But the atheists who acknowledge this logical consequence of their position routinely admit they cannot live consistently with it. They continue to hold people accountable for their actions and to insist that society do so. In the words of atheist Richard Dawkins, "it is an inconsistency that we sort of have to live with -- *otherwise life would be intolerable*."<sup>3</sup>

The fact atheists cannot live consistently with the logical implications of their atheism is an indication that atheism is false. It clashes with reality. Rupert Sheldrake, a Cambridge-trained biochemist, explains the problem this way:

But materialists cannot possibly be consistent. They believe that minds are nothing but the activity of brains and the activity of brains can ultimately be completely explained in terms of physical and chemical causation, together with blind chance. In other words, free will is an illusion.

This must mean that the materialist belief-system is self-refuting. If a materialist were consistent, he or she would have to believe that his or her own beliefs were caused by brain activity alone. Materialists' brains make them believe in materialism. But, then, how can they try to persuade others to adopt this belief on the basis of science, reason, and evidence, if no one has free choice?<sup>4</sup>

**d. It is more reasonable to believe that the origin of life requires intelligent design than to believe it does not.**

The simplest imaginable single-cell organism would require such an astonishing level of integrated complexity that it is absurd to think it could have arisen by blind, purposeless processes. A cell is not some bag of goo that can be whipped up from a mud pool; it is an amazingly sophisticated robot factory with a host of nanomachines performing an orchestrated ballet. It truly is amazing. As breathlessly noted by one scientist, "Molecular biologists and cell biologists are revealing to us a complexity of life that we never dreamt was there. We're seeing

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Stenger, "[Free Will Is an Illusion](#)," June 1, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Logan Gage, "[Who wrote Richard Dawkins's new book?](#)" October 28, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> "[Rupert Sheldrake Interview](#)."

connections and interconnections and complexity that is mind-boggling. It's stupendous. It's transcalsculational."<sup>5</sup>

The last sixty years of intense research has brought the quest for a naturalistic explanation of the origin of life no closer to an answer. Scientists have been knocking themselves out trying to establish a plausible scenario by which life could arise without being created by God, and though the propaganda is that they pretty have much figured it out, the truth is that they are mystified. As one origin-of-life researcher admits, "Despite many interesting results to its credit, when judged by the straightforward criterion of reaching (or even approaching) the ultimate goal, the origin of life field is a failure – we still do not have even a plausible coherent model, let alone a validated scenario, for the emergence of life on Earth."<sup>6</sup> Many similar quotes from other researchers could be provided (see [Compilation of Quotes on the Complexity of a Cell and the Scientific Mystery of Life's Origin](#)).

**e. It is more reasonable to believe that purposeless natural processes are not sufficient to explain the diversity of life on earth than to believe they are.**

According to the atheistic scenario, after the first cell arose through purely natural processes, all forms of life on the planet descended from that first cell through purely natural processes, more specifically, by means of the blind, purposeless processes of random mutation and natural selection. This claim likewise has insurmountable problems. There simply is not enough time under any atheistic scenario for the vast array of proteins (and other essential biological products) present in those countless life forms to have been generated, let alone integrated into new functioning systems, without some kind of intelligent input or programming.

The vast majority of the scientific establishment accepts the naturalistic story not because any evidence demonstrates that natural processes are sufficient for the task but because they assume such processes must be sufficient; those are the only explanations they will consider. As put by the National Academy of Sciences, "The statements of science must invoke only natural things and processes. . . . The theory of evolution is one of these explanations."<sup>7</sup> So no matter how clearly the evidence points to intelligent input or programming in the diversification of life, establishment scientists will continue searching for purely naturalistic explanations, and they will prefer even implausible naturalistic claims over any suggestion of intelligent design. That bias is built into the scientific enterprise as they define it.

**f. It is more reasonable to believe Jesus was raised from the dead than to believe he was not, and his resurrection supports the existence of the God of Scripture.**

No known natural process can restore life to a person who has been dead for days, so if Jesus was raised from the dead he necessarily was the object of a supernatural power. Given that

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Strohman in David Suzuki and Holly Dressel, rev. ed., *From Naked Ape to Superspecies* (Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2004), 172.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene V. Koonin, *The Logic of Chance: The Nature and Origin of Biological Evolution* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2011), 391.

<sup>7</sup> *Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1998), 42.

Jesus claimed a unique relationship with the God revealed in the Old Testament, that God is the most likely power to have raised him, a claim made repeatedly by the New Testament writers.

The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that Boston College philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli assert that "Christ's resurrection can be proved with at least as much certainty as any universally believed and well-documented event in ancient history."<sup>8</sup> Here is a quick sketch of that evidence. For a fuller discussion, see [The Historical Case for the Resurrection of Christ](#).

The disciples sincerely believed Jesus had been resurrected; they were certain of it. We know this because we have multiple early and independent sources that make clear the disciples believed Jesus had been resurrected and because numerous facts and circumstances corroborate what these sources tell us about the disciples' belief. This evidence is so powerful that virtually all scholars accept as a fact that the earliest Christians at least believed they had encountered the resurrected Jesus.

One can infer from the disciples' conviction that Jesus was raised from the dead that they were convinced (a) Jesus' tomb was empty *and* (b) they had encountered him as a resurrected person and not simply as a ghost or hallucination. Either alone would not have been sufficient. If they believed they had encountered the risen Jesus but his body was still in the tomb, they would have been as quick as anyone to explain the appearances as some kind of ghostly visitation or hallucination. On the other hand, if the tomb was empty but the disciples were not convinced they had encountered the risen Jesus, they would have assumed his body had been taken, whether by grave robbers or enemies. In neither case would they have concluded that Jesus was raised from the dead.

So the question of how the early Christians came to be certain that Jesus was raised from the dead separates into how they became convinced his tomb was empty and how they became convinced he had appeared to them bodily. All the available historical evidence indicates that the disciples became convinced Jesus appeared to them bodily because he gave every indication of being present in body. And all the available historical evidence indicates the disciples became convinced Jesus' tomb was empty because they saw with their own eyes that it was empty.

No theory other than Jesus' resurrection can plausibly explain how from the earliest days the disciples were convinced Jesus' tomb was empty and that they had encountered him in bodily form after his death. Many alternative theories have been proposed, but for anyone whose mind is open to the possibility of God's existence (and thus to the possibility of Jesus' resurrection), they must be judged abject failures.

## **2. Why would an all-powerful and good God allow evil and suffering to exist?**

There is no doubt that evil exists in this world. There is both moral evil and natural evil (the latter is sometimes called simply "suffering"). Moral evil is the evil perpetrated by human

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 181.

beings, and it can be breathtaking. Just look at what was done to human beings in the concentration camps and gas chambers of Nazi Germany or what is being done today by Islamic extremists in many parts of the world. Natural evil includes the death, pain, and suffering inflicted by storms, volcanoes, earthquakes, fires, floods, diseases, and deformities. These have claimed the lives of millions, destroyed families, and caused untold physical and emotional pain and suffering.

Before rushing to address why God might allow evil to exist, it is worth noting that the existence of evil can only be a problem if God in fact exists. As explained above (Q. 1b), if there is no God then there is no real evil, no objective evil; there are only matters of personal likes and dislikes. In that case, the death and suffering of human beings is no different than the melting of snow or the drying of grass – an atheist may not like it personally, but it is neither good nor bad; it just is.

Regarding moral evil, God created humans with free will so they could *choose* to love him (and all that is involved in that). Love without choice is no love at all. But in doing so, God necessarily made evil possible because freedom to choose what God desires requires the possibility of choosing the opposite, what he does not desire. It is logically impossible to create humans who have choice and do not have choice, and not even God is able to do the logically impossible (e.g., make a square triangle). So God allows moral evil because it is worth it to him that we might love him freely.

In the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth (where we will exist as resurrected beings) and in the intermediate state between death and resurrection (where we will exist as disembodied spirits), I think we will still have free will, but there we will never choose to sin. We will not sin because our transformation into the likeness of Christ will be completed by the glorious vision of God's presence and Satan will not be there to tempt us as he did Adam and Eve in the Garden.

Regarding natural evil, this entered the world as a consequence of human sin, the result of rebellion by God's image-bearers. There was no suffering and death in the original very good creation, as there will be none in the eternal new heavens and new earth. Perhaps natural evil is a witness to the tragic consequences of rejecting God, an ongoing testimony of the alienation sin has brought, which is part of the means God uses to awaken spiritually dead humans and call them to himself.

Regardless of whether one can identify a compelling reason for the evil and suffering that exists in this world, it is important to recognize that God may have a reason for allowing it that we are unable to perceive. After all, he knows all things – past, present, and future – including the entire network of effects of everything that occurs, whereas we are sinful and limited creatures. Given the nature of God revealed in Scripture, most clearly in the sacrificial love shown in Christ, smart money is on his having a good and loving reason for everything he does.

Imagine an infant whose parents must perform open heart surgery on him to keep him alive. That baby does not know and is incapable of understanding the things that justify and make right and loving the pain and suffering to which his parents are subjecting him. Is it too

much to believe that the infinite God may know things we do not know, and perhaps are incapable of knowing, and that if we knew those things we would understand how the suffering we see is justified and right and loving?

We get a glimpse of the principle in the Lord's horrific suffering on Golgotha. God lifts the veil in that one instance to show us a case of his bringing ultimate blessing out of savage cruelty. He did something through the evil he allowed to be perpetrated on his Son that we never would have imagined if he had not told us.

When Job sought to know why he was suffering so horribly when he was no greater of a sinner than the next man, God did not tell him the reason why. Rather, he spoke to Job in the whirlwind and set before him the greatness of his being, the fact he created the universe and knows all things. The point was that Job needed to trust God's nature without having the explanation why. That is a very difficult thing to do, but it is the way of faith.

Here is a little poem I wrote that expresses this idea for children.

### **JULIUS BINGS**

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The garden teemed with living things,  
none so content as Julius Bings.

He'd sing atop the willow tree  
that no bird was as blessed as he.

My nest is fine, I've much to eat,  
my wife and kids are safe and sweet.

Each day I wake without a care  
because I'm good and life is fair.

From time to time the owl would say  
that things don't always work that way.

But Julius Bings would never hear,  
convinced that harm could not come near.

He thought bad things could only be  
for those who were much worse than he.

One summer day a storm moved in;  
thick darkness fell upon the glen.

So great the wind that blew that day  
nary a tree stood in its way.

And when the storm at last did part,  
none was left of Julius's heart.

For in the rubble he could see  
the nest that housed his family.

Oh why, oh why he said with tears,  
I have done right for all these years.

He asked the owl how this could be,  
who said it was a mystery.

"The hand that gave the tree and nest,  
life and family and the rest,

he who is the Ancient of Days,  
is far too great to know his ways.

A piece is all that we can see;  
he knows the final tapestry.

For now he lets creation bring  
much heartache through this kind of thing.

And suffers with us as we cry  
and hear no answer as to why.



But all is headed for a goal  
where suffering will have no role.

Julius cried for many a day  
but held to what the owl did say.

On that day we'll finally know  
the reason why so much was so.

After a time he sang anew  
but did so with a deeper view.

We trust his love through all the loss  
for only love would bear a cross."

In pain he learned a lesson dear,  
that through it all the Lord was near.

### 3. Why doesn't God make his existence more obvious?

As sketched in response to Q. 1, there is ample evidence for God's existence, but the question is why there is not even more. As atheist Richard Dawkins asks, why does not God "fill the world with super-miracles"?<sup>9</sup> A couple of possibilities come to mind.

First, God may have set the evidence at a level that will allow those who want to believe in him to do so but also will allow those who *do not* want to believe in him *not* to do so. In other words, God may not want to force someone to come to him who really does not want to come to him – he doesn't want to make them an offer they cannot refuse by removing any intellectual space for the exercise of their desire to reject him. As the expression goes, "A person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." He wants to move the will, the desire to believe, and has set the evidentiary environment as he wants for that purpose. He is wooing us rather than forcing himself on us.

Second, if God made his existence absolutely certain throughout our lives that certainty may make it more difficult to develop certain character traits, such as "pure compassion" for others, by clouding our motivation. As Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne explains:

The basic point is that a good God (like a good parent) would surely want humans (by their own free choice) to form a naturally good character, and so – for example – to become naturally inclined to help the poor and starving out of love for them because they are poor and starving. But if God made it totally certain that he exists and will give a wonderful everlasting life to those who have formed a naturally good character, then inevitably humans will find themselves strongly inclined to try to form such a character and so to help the poor and starving, not out of love for the poor and starving but in order to please God and to gain everlasting life. This latter is a good motive for any action, but not always the best motive. It will be easier for humans to form a natural inclination to help the poor and starving out of love, if the existence of God and the prospect of everlasting life are not (at least for a considerable period of our earthly lives) totally certain.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 65.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Swinburne, "[Response to Dawkins's \*The God Delusion\*](#)."

But again, even if one does not discover a compelling explanation for why God has not given more evidence for his existence, God may have a reason that we do not perceive. That certainly is possible given that we are finite creatures and he is the all-knowing and eternal creator of all things.

#### **4. Is it egotistical or arrogant for God to insist that people worship him?**

It is not. Pride is having a false and inflated view of oneself. Someone who cannot play basketball very well but who thinks he is the next Michael Jordan is prideful. If LeBron James said he could not play basketball very well that would be a *false* humility because that is not true, but if he refused to acknowledge God as the source of his gifts, he would be prideful for taking credit for God's work. God has an accurate view of himself. The truth is that he is the greatest conceivable being, and for that reason he is worthy of worship.

God insists that we worship him not only because it is right and proper to do so, as is a child's respect for a parent, but also because he wants us to stay attached to him for our own good. He is the ultimate reality, and if we lose sight of that truth and begin to construct a fantasy world that denies it, we will suffer harm. Worship, as we might say, helps to keep our mind right, which results in our blessing.

#### **5. Was God wrong to command the Israelites to kill the Canaanites?**

He was not. Before explaining why, it is worth pointing out again that if there is no God then there is no real evil, no objective evil; there are only matters of personal likes and dislikes (see Q. 1b). In that case, "wrong" loses its meaning. To ask whether any conduct is "wrong" in a meaningful, objective sense is to imply God's existence.

In evaluating God's conduct in this matter, it first should be noted that his command to Israel to "utterly destroy" the Canaanites exists among a greater number of commands or descriptions that Israel is to drive out, dispossess, or expel the Canaanites from the land rather than annihilate or exterminate all of them (e.g., Ex. 23:27-31; Num. 21:32, 33:51-56; Deut. 7:17-23). There was no command to pursue and hunt down the Canaanites, so if they had fled, as many no doubt did, or joined the people of Israel, as Rahab did, they would not have been killed. Those who refused to abandon the land God had given Israel as part of his unfolding work to redeem his creation were to be exterminated.

Though Joshua 6-12 says that absolutely every human in certain cities – young, old, male, and female – was destroyed, it is possible those descriptions are hyperbolic (understood exaggeration designed to emphasize a point – e.g., he hit the ball a mile). In other words, this may be standard, stylized "war language" in ancient Near Eastern cultures that would not be taken literally by the first readers but would be understood to mean that Israel utterly and

resoundingly defeated those cities. Paul Copan and Matthew Flanagan argue at length for this possibility in *Did God Really Command Genocide?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014).

But even if the statements in Joshua are intended literally, we are told that the Canaanites were grossly immoral, engaging in all kinds of sexual immorality and child sacrifices (Lev. 18:20-30), and that God waited for centuries before their sin reached the limit where it could no longer be tolerated (Gen. 15:16 – Amorite being a Canaanite people group). God chose to use the Israelites as the instruments of his judgment – unlike Sodom and Gomorrah which he judged directly – and in conjunction with their execution of that judgment to establish them as a special religious nation in that central geographical location, a nation through which he would bring the Messiah to bless all the nations of the world. God is not a human being; he is the giver of life and has the right to take it in judgment and in fulfillment of his good purposes.

The Canaanite children were not guilty, but only God is in a position to know how allowing them to live would have played out in history. Philosopher Paul Chamberlain asks, "might God have known that unless a particularly violent and unjust civilization was destroyed, those remaining would simply grow up and reinstate the same practices that would again entice Israel away?"<sup>11</sup> Of course, the innocent children who were killed would go to a blessed state (Paradise) and be delivered from their culture's moral and religious corruption.

## 6. How can a loving God send people to hell?

Hell is permanent banishment from the presence of God and the beauty and glory of his renewed creation. This exile from all goodness is so dreadful that it is portrayed in Scripture as a state of great sorrow and suffering (variously symbolized by fire and outer darkness). The question implies that consigning sinners to hell is somehow unworthy of a loving God, but we are in no position to determine the just penalty for sin, rebellion against the Almighty. We not only lack God's perspective of absolute holiness, but we also have been anesthetized to sin's horror by wallowing in it. If we better appreciated the majesty and holiness of God, better appreciated his importance, we would better appreciate the enormity of sin and recognize that it deserves eternal punishment. The Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas saw the issue correctly many centuries ago:

Further, the magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin. . . . Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom the sin is committed, the graver the sin – it is more criminal to strike a head of state than a private citizen – and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Chamberlain, *Why People Don't Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 111-112.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. and ed. by T. C. O'Brien (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27:25.

The criticism of God in this matter is all the more unfounded in light of his costly provision of forgiveness for all who avail themselves of it. This is the subject of the next question. Those who remain unforgiven, those who do not appropriate Christ's atoning death, rightly receive the punishment their deeds have earned.

## 7. Why did Jesus have to die on the cross for our sins to be forgiven?

In 1997 Timothy McVeigh was convicted of murdering over 100 men, women, and children by exploding a bomb in Oklahoma City. Imagine that at the time of his sentencing the judge said, "For the crimes for which you have been convicted, I hereby sentence you to one week of probation; you are free to go." If he had done that, the public outrage would have been so great that he would have been removed from office by sundown. The cry would be that *justice* had not been done.

If in response to that outcry, the judge explained that he was being *merciful* in his sentencing because McVeigh was sorry for what he had done, few if any people would say, "Oh, in that case it's okay." We still would find fault with the judge because his mercy had been exercised *at the expense of justice*. By refusing to mete out an adequate penalty, the judge trivialized the offense. He said, in essence, that the act of murdering scores of people and causing thousands of family members to suffer was no big deal. He said, in effect, that the people against whom this crime had been committed, both the individual victims and the society, were not important enough to make the crime really serious.

As said in response to the preceding question, if we better appreciated the majesty and holiness of God, better appreciated his importance, we would better appreciate the horror of sin. And if we better appreciated the horror of sin, we would better understand how a just God cannot treat it as insignificant. To forgive the monstrous offense of sin without payment of a penalty would be to condone the evil and to open God to the charge of being unjust. It would be to exercise mercy at the expense of justice.

So regarding our sin, there is tension between aspects of God's nature, between his justice and his mercy, between his holiness and his love. But that tension is not irreconcilable. The cross is where God's justice and mercy, his holiness and his love, are expressed at the same time. Because in his love God desires to forgive us of our sin, he sent Jesus, his Son, to take upon himself the punishment for that sin. So in the cross God is able to satisfy both his holiness and his love; his justice and his mercy. In other words, through the cross God is able to forgive justly or righteously. As John Stott has written:

This vision of God's holy love will deliver us from caricatures of him. We must picture him neither as an indulgent God who compromises his holiness in order to spare and spoil us, nor as a harsh, vindictive God who suppresses his love in order to crush and destroy us. How then can God express his holiness without consuming us, and his love without condoning our sins? How can God satisfy his

holy love? How can he save us and satisfy himself simultaneously? We reply at this point only that, in order to satisfy himself, he sacrificed – indeed substituted – himself for us.<sup>13</sup>

You see this link between Christ's crucifixion and God's justice or righteousness perhaps most clearly in Rom. 3:25-26:

<sup>25</sup>God set forth [Christ] to be, by means of his blood, a wrath-avoiding sacrifice [received] through faith. He did this as a demonstration of his righteousness, on account of the passing over of the previously committed sins <sup>26</sup>in the forbearance of God, as a demonstration of his righteousness in the present time, so that he might be righteous even in pronouncing righteous the one having faith in Jesus.

When seen in this light, it should not surprise us that Jesus says in Jn. 14:6, "I am the way and the truth and the life. *No one comes to the Father except through me.*" God provides no forgiveness other than in the atoning death of Jesus because it is only in Jesus that he forgives *righteously*, forgives in a way that is consistent with his being, his nature. As Rom. 3:25-26 indicates, even the sins that were forgiven by God before Jesus came were forgiven only because he was coming. The justice that his atoning death gives to forgiveness reaches backward in time as well as forward.

## 8. Is there reason to believe the Bible was inspired by God?

Yes, there is. The Old Testament indicates it is inspired by God by direct claims and by qualities that support or are consistent with those claims (unique assertions about God, fulfilled prophecies, historical accuracy, and coherence). But most importantly, the Old Testament is acknowledged as the word of God by Jesus Christ. As John Wenham writes in the beginning of his book *Christ and the Bible*, "We shall see that to Christ the Old Testament was true, authoritative, inspired. To him the God of the Old Testament was the living God and the teaching of the Old Testament was the teaching of the living God. To him what Scripture said, God said."<sup>14</sup> For Christians, those who confess that Jesus is Lord, Jesus' pronouncements on the matter are dispositive. As would be expected, the New Testament authors shared Jesus' view of the Old Testament.

Regarding the New Testament, we know from Jesus' acceptance of the inspiration of the Old Testament (and other lines of evidence) that God previously inspired an identifiable collection of writings in conjunction with the old covenant. It would thus be consistent, even expected, for God to inspire a body of writings in conjunction with his establishment of the new covenant in Christ. The fact the New Testament claims to be inspired and has qualities that support or are consistent with those claims (authoritative tone, historical accuracy, coherence, circulation and impact) fits that expectation.

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<sup>13</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 132.

<sup>14</sup> John Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 17.

## 9. How did the specific books of the Bible come to be included in it?

It is important to understand that the inspired writings were authoritative because they ultimately were authored by God. They didn't *become* authoritative by being recognized as inspired by the Jewish or Christian communities. Rather, they were *inherently* authoritative, and that authoritativeness simply was *acknowledged* or *recognized* by Israel and the church. Put differently, the writings are not authoritative because they are in the Bible; they are in the Bible because they are authoritative.

We know that by the time of Christ the Jews had a distinct body of sacred writings that they recognized as divinely inspired and authoritative. These were the 39 books of the Christian Old Testament, grouped differently (as 22 or 24 books) and in a different order. How the writings of the Old Testament were determined by the Jewish community to be inspired, to be sacred and authoritative, is not spelled out, but one can make some educated guesses (e.g., connection with a prophet, consistency, acceptance, and effect). However, since Jesus accepted without reservation that those writings were inspired by God, Christians can be certain that the Jewish community got it right. The Holy Spirit no doubt providentially guided the process. After all, if the Spirit helped Timothy to guard the divine message that had been given to him (2 Tim. 1:13-14; 1 Tim. 6:20), there is no reason to think he did not help Israel (and the church) do the same.

The individual New Testament writings were circulating long before a consensus on a closed list of authoritative books was reached. During that time most of the books were recognized as authoritative throughout the church, and even those that were questioned in some quarters were recognized as authoritative in large segments of the church. Probably by the mid-third century a general agreement had been reached regarding the place of the disputed books in the New Testament canon. At the human level, that consensus was achieved by the application of three basic criteria: (a) conformity between the writing and orthodoxy, i.e., Christian truth recognized as normative in the churches, (b) apostolic authority through direct authorship or association with the author of the writing, and (c) widespread and continuous acceptance and usage of the writing by churches everywhere. This does not mean there were no groups with their own set of books, but the worldwide church almost universally came to accept the same 27 books. As New Testament scholars Glenn Barker, William Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels observed:

The fact that substantially the whole church came to recognize the same twenty-seven books as canonical is remarkable when it is remembered that the result was not contrived. All that the several churches throughout the Empire could do was to witness to their own experience with the documents and share whatever knowledge they might have about their origin and character. When consideration is given to the diversity in cultural backgrounds and in orientation to the essentials of the Christian faith within the churches, their common agreement about which



books belonged to the New Testament serves to suggest that this final decision did not originate solely at the human level.<sup>15</sup>

## **10. Is the biblical text we have today what the inspired writers originally wrote?**

Yes, it is. The Jews had a very reverent attitude toward their Scriptures, an attitude rooted in the biblical writers themselves (e.g., Deut. 4:2), which made the copyists careful to preserve the original text. Though variation was introduced into the Hebrew Scriptures over centuries of copying, the changes usually can be identified by comparing ancient copies of the Hebrew text and the versions (translations of the Hebrew into other languages) and having an understanding of how mistakes or changes commonly occurred. The uncertainty that remains regarding a relatively small number of texts does not significantly affect the point of the passages. Just as the textual variants of the Old Testament that existed in Jesus' day did not prevent him from saying Scripture cannot be broken (Jn. 10:35) or prevent Paul from declaring that all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Tim. 3:16), we also can have sufficient confidence in the text to rely on its authority.

The same goes for the New Testament. There are some places where it is difficult to decide whether the original text said "X" or "Y" or "Z," but even in those rare instances one can be sure it said one or the other, and none of the possibilities jeopardizes any essential Christian belief. Thus, Daniel Wallace, who specializes in the field, states, "The din of alarmists notwithstanding, most biblical scholars – whether they are evangelical or liberal, Protestant or Catholic – believe that what we have today in all essential respects (though not necessarily in all particulars) is what the New Testament authors penned nearly two millennia ago."<sup>16</sup>

## **11. Why are miracles in the Bible more frequent and impressive than today?**

The Bible is the story of God's creation of the universe, the corruption of creation through mankind's sin, and God's rescue or healing of creation through the Lord Jesus Christ. That story spans thousands of years, but the Bible condenses the time by focusing on the key events or turning points in the story. Since God chose to work miracles at the time of those key events, one can get the impression from the Bible that miracles occurred more frequently in history than they actually did. There are long stretches of time in which there is no record of any miracles. For example, no miracles are reported during the thousands of years that separate creation from the Flood, during the hundreds of years that separate the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) from Moses and the Exodus, during the middle decades of the Jews' captivity in Babylon, or during the hundreds of years that separate the end of that captivity from the coming of Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Glenn Barker, William Lane, and J. Ramsey Michaels, *The New Testament Speaks* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1969), 29.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Wallace, "Has the New Testament Text Been Hopelessly Corrupted" in Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder, eds., *In Defense of the Bible* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2013), Kindle Location 3106.

And even during the times when miracles are reported, they are rare. That is what makes them so special and significant. Moreover, after Solomon's death miracles are found mainly in connection with the ministries of certain divine spokesmen, most notably Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament and Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament. They are used as signs of authentication, ways to demonstrate that these people are in fact from God, that they are acting on his behalf and their message is divine in origin. As put in Heb. 2:2-4:

<sup>2</sup> For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, <sup>3</sup> how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. <sup>4</sup> God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

This authenticating function of miracles also is evident in Ex. 4:1-9 (regarding Moses) and 1 Kings 17:19-24 (regarding Elijah). For additional New Testament texts, see Mat. 11:20-23; Jn. 2:11, 3:2, 6:14, 7:31, 10:37-38, 11:47-48, 14:11, 20:30-31; Acts 2:22, 43, 14:8-11, 27; Rom. 15:18-19; 2 Cor. 12:12. This is not to say God cannot have other reasons for performing miracles; it is to stress that authentication of his representatives is a significant reason.

God has not promised he will always perform miracles in the same way or with the same frequency, so we must respect his right to perform them as he sees fit. Maybe the nature or frequency of miracles has changed because the inspired record of their having been performed in the past is sufficient to authenticate the apostolic messengers and their message. In that case, miracles are no longer needed for that particular purpose. For example, when guys on Dude Perfect make a video of some astounding feat, they do not keep repeating the feat to establish their ability to do it. They simply refer people to the video of their having done it. Once God's performance of authenticating miracles was recorded in Scripture, their confirming effect would continue through that absolutely trustworthy record of their occurrence. God may want us to look there rather than keep repeating those miracles.

## 12. Why do we need to keep only some of the commandments?

The Mosaic covenant was a temporary pact or binding agreement that was entered into by God and the people of Israel soon after they came out of Egypt (Ex. 20:1 - 24:8). It included numerous commands that specified the way in which the faith of God's people, the Israelites, was to be expressed until Christ came. This set or group of commands commonly is referred to as "the law." What we call the Old Testament is the part of Scripture that pertains most directly to this old covenant; it details that covenant and describes life under it.

The Mosaic covenant included the grandest and most complete expression to that time of God's moral requirements, but moral requirements did not begin when God gave the law to Moses at Mount Sinai. Mankind was under moral requirements *from creation*; indeed, it was our rejection of those requirements that caused God to flood the Earth in the days of Noah, long



before Moses. But until the Mosaic covenant those moral requirements had not been given as "law," had not been laid down as specific, express commandments. Rather, they were known intuitively or innately as part of the law written by God on the human heart (see Rom. 2:15), which is part of our being made in his image. (The only prior "law" in this formal sense was the specific, express commandment that had been given to Adam.)

In addition to incorporating and detailing these universal moral requirements, the Mosaic Law included requirements that were peculiar to Israel, requirements that had no counterpart in the law of the heart to which all humanity was subject. These commands erected civil and ceremonial or ritualistic ("amoral") distinctions between Jews and Gentiles, probably (at least in part) to keep the people of God untainted by pagan practices in order to help them serve as a witness to their Gentile neighbors of the blessed life that exists under God (Deut. 4:6-8; Ezek. 5:5; Isa. 42:6, 49:6). Paul refers to this separating effect of the law in Eph. 2:14-16.

The new covenant that was instituted through the sacrifice of Christ rendered the old covenant obsolete or no longer operative (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 3:4-18; Gal. 3:15 – 4:7, 4:21-31; Heb. 7:11-22, 8:6-13). With the fulfillment in Christ of the planned obsolescence of the Mosaic covenant, the set of commands that were part of that covenant (that is, the Mosaic Law) ceased to be binding. This is clear from texts like Rom. 10:1-4, Gal. 3:23-25, and Heb. 7:11-14. That is why Paul, a Jew, could declare that he was not under the Mosaic Law (1 Cor. 9:20).

The fact there are different kinds of commands in the Mosaic Law is evident from 1 Cor. 7:19 where Paul writes, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." Though circumcision was a command of the Mosaic Law, Paul says it is not the kind of command that it matters to keep under the new covenant. (To this one could add commands of the law relating to sacrifices, the priesthood, religious feasts, holy days, ritual uncleanness and purification, and food.) The commands it now matters to keep are those universal moral desires of God that were expressed in the Mosaic Law and have been reiterated and sometimes intensified, either expressly or by implication, as part of the new covenant.

Though the *set of commands* that constitute the Mosaic Law ceased to be binding, many of the *individual commands* included in that set have a renewed applicability, and indeed find their full expression, in the new covenant. For example, Paul in Eph. 6:2 commands children to "honor your father and mother," quoting from the Ten Commandments in Ex. 20:12 and Deut. 5:16. The Ten Commandments also are reflected in New Testament commands and prohibitions against murder, adultery, stealing, lying, and coveting.

You can see this concept in terms of the various state laws. When you are in Arizona you are subject to the laws of Arizona, but if you move to Florida you are no longer subject to the laws of Arizona. Yet, you will find that some of the laws to which you are subject as a resident of Florida are the same as those to which you were subject as a resident of Arizona. Though you are no longer under Arizona law there is an overlap of the laws of the two jurisdictions. So also there is an overlap of the moral requirements of the old and new covenants, the Mosaic Law and the law of Christ. The fact dishonoring one's parents is sinful under both covenants does not

mean the old covenant is still in effect; it means the two covenants have that command in common.

The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. Paul says in Rom. 13:9 that the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). Thus, the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic Law, the set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law (e.g., Rom. 13:8-10; 1 Cor. 10:14; Eph. 6:2). This renewed moral law, centered in love, is the "law of Christ" (see 1 Cor. 9:21 and Gal. 6:2 with 5:14).

As Christians, we are to obey all commands that apply to us *as participants in the new covenant*. This includes all commands addressed to us in the New Testament and those from the Mosaic Law that are reiterated implicitly through the new covenant requirement of love. But we are not to obey commands from the Mosaic Law regarding the old covenant religious system, which was a shadow designed to pass away with the fulfillment by Christ, or those "amoral" regulations that were designed to keep the Israelites socially distinct from their pagan neighbors.

Of course, not all commands in the New Testament are addressed to us. Some obviously are directed to certain specific individuals and do not have general applicability (e.g., Rom. 16:3; 2 Tim. 4:13; Philem. 1:22). Other commands are limited by their cultural context when properly understood. For example, the command for women to wear a head covering in the worship assembly is rooted in the fact the head covering was a *culturally expected* piece of female attire. For a woman to pray in such a public setting without this cultural symbol of sex distinction would be something like a man praying in a dress in our culture. But since our culture attaches no gender significance to head coverings, the reason for the commandment does not exist in our case.

Another example of a cultural limitation is the command in several places for the Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss. This is not a command to kiss per se. Rather, given that a kiss was a common form of greeting in the ancient world and in Judaism especially, it is assumed they will greet by kissing. The command is that the assumed kiss be a "*holy* kiss." In other words, Paul and Peter (who refers to a "kiss of love") are saying, "The kiss with which you greet one another is to be holy (or loving)," meaning a kiss that is a genuine expression of Christian love. The greeting is not to be duplicitous, as was the kiss by Judas that betrayed our Lord. They are not addressing *whether* one must kiss as a greeting but are addressing *how*, assuming one will kiss, the greeting is to be done. This leaves room for different cultural forms of greetings, but all such greetings must comply with the command that they be holy or loving, that they be genuine.

### 13. Has science proved the Bible is false?

The scientific establishment, which is atheistic and hostile to Christianity, insists it has disproved the Bible's claims about creation, but that is not the case. It is only their interpretations of the data that are inconsistent with Scripture not the data, the actual facts, themselves. The data can be interpreted consistently with the word of God. I have illustrated my understanding of the dynamic this way:

Imagine a "John Doe" corpse is brought into a morgue in which two medical examiners work. An angel appears to one of the examiners, tells him "this John Doe is twelve years old," and then vanishes. As the two begin their examination of the body, they see the person is almost entirely bald, with some grey hair on the sides, and has wrinkled, baggy, and spotted skin. They run a test and determine that he has hardening of the arteries. The one examiner infers from these facts that the deceased was approximately eighty years old, but the examiner who was told by the angel that the deceased was twelve years old is unwilling to sign off on that inference. He tells the other examiner, "You are mistaken about the age. An angel told me this fellow is only twelve years old." The other examiner laughs and says "We must base our conclusions on science, not on superstition. The facts prove this 'John Doe' is around eighty and you are rejecting science by rejecting that conclusion."

The first examiner says, "There could be another explanation for the facts we discovered in our examination, one that is consistent with the fact an angel told me the deceased was only twelve. Because I trust the angel, I want to keep searching for an explanation that answers how the 'John Doe' could be twelve years old *and* be bald, except for a bit of grey hair, and have wrinkled, baggy, and spotted skin and hardening of the arteries. Just because you don't believe angels exist is no reason for me to conduct my investigation according to your prejudices." And with that, the other examiner says, "Away from me you non-scientist."

Further examination by the first examiner reveals certain anomalies, things that don't fit with the conclusion that the deceased was advanced in age. Maybe his eyes are too clear for an elderly person or his joints or teeth aren't worn enough. Because he was unwilling to accept the inference that ignored the angel's revelation, the first examiner discovers that "John Doe" suffered from a medical disorder, like Progeria, that produces these symptoms in children.

Many qualified scientists recognize that the data of nature, the actual facts, can be interpreted consistently with the biblical account of creation. See, for example, my [Categorized List of Online Articles of Interest to Creationists](#). There are, of course, difficulties and unanswered questions, but there is nothing that disproves the creationist understanding in the sense of rendering it impossible.