

10 Hard Questions

*“Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.”
(1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)*

*“be ready in season and out of season...”
(2 Timothy 4:2 ESV)*

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

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1 Peter 3:4-6, John 14:6, Romans 1:18-20

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Introduction:

Good morning!

Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Peter 3. We're going to be reading verses 14-16.

We're now in week three of our “Ten Questions” series in which we are addressing ten questions that every believer should be prepared to answer on the other side of this pandemic. I have heard from a number of you that your loved ones and your neighbors are showing a willingness to discuss spiritual things that they never showed in the past. Ground that was once hard is beginning to soften. The fields are RIPE for the harvest! But, to quote the Apostle Paul:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:14 ESV)

Christian, you need to speak. There is a solution to the deepest longings of the human soul and his name is JESUS!

So, let's speak up and enter in! Let's prepare ourselves for the questions that we will face and let's resolve not to allow our loved ones and our neighbors to go to hell because we were too afraid to tell them about the hope that we have in Christ Jesus.

Please, look with me once again to our text in 1 Peter 3:4-6. Hear now God's holy, inspired, URGENT, living and active word to us today:

But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, ¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶ having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:14–16 ESV)

If you've been tracking along with us through this series, then you likely have this passage memorized by now. Our series is essentially a ten-week-long application of this text.

How will you give a defense for the hope that is in you when your neighbor asks how a good God could allow so much suffering? That was the question we dealt with on week one. We pulled our answers for that question from the Bible which led naturally into the second question people will ask us, which is: "Why should I trust the Bible?" We answered that question last week.

But even after answering that question, people still want to wiggle out from under the authority of God. And one of the ways that they do that is by asking this next question: Aren't all religions basically the same?

Aren't All Religions Basically the Same?

One of the things that makes me proud to be a Canadian is the way in which we celebrate our ethnic diversity. We take pride in the knowledge that men and women from nations around the world have decided to call Canada home. And so we should! This diversity is actually a little foretaste of Heaven where we will see peoples from every nation, tribe and tongue worshipping together in unity!

However, in our noble attempt to celebrate diversity, we tend to go too far. You will often hear people say things like: “Whether you are Muslim or Buddhist or Sikh or Christian, you all essentially worship the same God and share the same values.”

I’ve heard intelligent people say that with conviction and confidence. And yet, that statement is clearly and verifiably untrue.

In fact, not only is it inaccurate, but it actually reflects a very disrespectful and condescending attitude towards the various faiths that are represented in our country. Rebecca McLaughlin notes:

To say that Christianity and Islam or Islam and Hinduism or just two sides of the same truth coin reduces pluralism to a patronizing posture by which we don’t respect others enough to take their beliefs seriously.¹

Exactly.

If we truly want to be a people who celebrate diversity, then we need to be honest enough to acknowledge that all religions are NOT the same. They each make exclusive truth claims about who god is, who we are, how we ought to live, and how this story ends.

That being said, once our neighbor has conceded that it is both inaccurate and irresponsible to suggest that all religions are the same, they will likely ask this important follow up question: Why should I believe in the God of the Bible?

Why Should I Believe In The God Of The Bible?

That’s a fair question. If I weren’t a Christian, I would be asking that question. How can you be so sure that your God is the true God? Your Muslim neighbor is also sure. The Buddhist in your workplace is sure. So why should I value YOUR confidence over THEIR confidence?

¹ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 48.

You've probably heard the modern parable of the blind men trying to identify an elephant. One man feels the trunk and declares, "This must be a tree!" Another feels the tusk and says, "No, it is a statue!" Still another feels the tail and proclaims, "This is a rope!"

The parable is meant to prove that all of these men were correct, in their own way. They were simply observing different elements of the same creature and making the best sense of the evidence they had before them. Therefore, the argument concludes, the Christian and the Muslim and the Jew and the Hindu are all worshipping the same God with the limited understanding that they have.

However, there are some glaring holes in this argument.

First of all, this parable is told by someone who seems to assume that they are the only character in the story who can see! The pluralist says: "I have the ability from my vantage point to see clearly that you are all simply grasping in the dark and describing the same god!" But how is this person so sure that he can see clearly? For the illustration to be consistent, you need to acknowledge that you too are blind and, if that's the case, then who are you to claim definitively that you can see what the rest of us cannot? That's just arrogant.

But the second hole in the argument is that it fails to account for one possibility. Granted, if we're all grasping blindly in the dark, trying to make sense of this unseen being, then we really don't have much ground for confidence at all. Who's to say that my guess has any more merit than yours?

But what if the elephant spoke? That would change things, wouldn't it?

And that's reason number one for why you should believe in the God of the Bible.

1. Because He has spoken

Last week we made the argument that you can and should believe the Bible. If you missed that sermon then you should listen back to last week because these arguments are all intertwined. We believe that the Bible is the very Word of God. As the Word is read, God speaks.

The Apostle to the Hebrews wrote:

Long ago, **at many times and in many ways, God spoke** to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days **he has spoken** to us **by his Son**, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. (Hebrews 1:1-2 ESV)

To be a Christian is to say with faith that through the Word of God and through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God has definitively SPOKEN.

But let's pause here because at this point, you're being interrupted by your skeptical friend. Here is their objection: "Are you suggesting that yours is the only god that speaks? Didn't god speak through Muhammad, and the Buddha, and Confucius? The fact that you think that your god speaks is not unique to Christianity."

And once again, that is a fair objection. How would you respond to that?

Here's what I would say:

Yes, Muhammad, the Buddha, Confucius and many other prophets and philosophers claimed to speak on behalf of God. They lived and they spoke with what seemed to be divine wisdom and authority, and then they died. And they remained in the grave. Every one of them.

Well, that is to say, all but One.

Jesus was not like these prophets and philosophers. He made higher claims. He claimed to be the Son of God! He claimed to speak the very words of God! And he claimed that he would die on a cross but that he would overcome the grave itself! And that is exactly what happened! The Apostle Paul wrote:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8 ESV)

Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians in the middle of the first century. He wrote this letter about 20 years after the resurrection took place. Meaning, most of the people who he refers to here as having seen the risen Christ would have still been alive! Pastor and theologian Tim Keller notes:

Paul refers to a body of 500 eye-witnesses who saw the risen Christ at once. You can't write that in a document designed for public reading unless there really were surviving witnesses whose testimony agreed and who could confirm what the author said... For a highly altered, fictionalized account of an event to take hold in the public imagination it is necessary that the eyewitnesses (and their children and grandchildren) all be long dead.²

As this letter was read to the church in Corinth and later as it was circulated to other cities, it would have only taken one person in the crowd to come forward and say: "Hey! I've been to Jerusalem and I couldn't find ONE witness, let alone 500!" At which point, the whole Christian faith would have crumbled to the floor.

But there was no recanting. In fact, people held to their testimony even as they were tortured and killed. Which explains why, in the midst of persecution, the Christian faith exploded into the history books!

It was verifiably true!

Jesus Christ died on a cross and was buried in a tomb. Three days later he rose from the grave and appeared to many before ascending to the Father. Rebecca McLaughlin notes:

Our believing or not believing in the resurrection may change us, but it does not change the objective reality of what took place two thousand years ago.³

THAT Jesus – the miracle-working, death-can't-hold-me-down, world transforming God-in-the-flesh Jesus – has SPOKEN. And do you know what he said? He said:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
(John 14:6 ESV)

² Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 105.

³ Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 54.

He is our authority. He PROVED his authority when he rose from the grave!

We're not left to grasp in the darkness, trying to make sense of God, because God entered into our darkness and revealed Himself powerfully and gloriously through His Word. John 1:14 says:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 ESV)

You should believe in the God of the Bible because He has spoken!

But as we have this conversation with our neighbor, we can also apply to reason. Of course, we can't START there! We start with the Word of God. But then we can observe the fruits of the other worldviews around us and make an argument for the superiority of our faith. Jesus did that. He taught us:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ **You will recognize them by their fruits.** Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. (Matthew 7:15-18 ESV)

"Look at the fruit," Jesus says! Which faith is producing good fruit? Which faith is producing thorns? We can ask that question, and as we do, we can make the argument that you should believe in the God of the Bible because His way leads to life.

2. Because His way leads to life

One of the lies that we need to confront head-on is the lie that all beliefs and ideas are created equal. They ARE NOT! Some ideas and beliefs are down-right dangerous.

Pastor Paul mentioned this last week. You would be hard-pressed to find any civilization in this world that you would want to raise a family in that has not been shaped by Christianity.

Christianity was instrumental in obtaining equal rights for women. Christianity was THE driving force that brought about the abolition of slavery. Christianity, from its earliest days has provided

hope and dignity for those who were rejected by society. It is and always has been good news for the poor, for the orphan, for the widow, for the sick and for the outcasts.

The idea that these values are universal and that they flow naturally from every worldview is verifiably false. If you choose to raise your daughter under Sharia Law in an Islamic nation, you will quickly discover that the freedoms she enjoys in Canada are not universally upheld. That's just reality.

Beliefs and ideas matter, and they are not created equal.

For example, the idea of reincarnation which is foundational to so many Eastern religions is a belief that fundamentally undermines mercy. The idea behind reincarnation is essentially that the ease, comfort and dignity of your next reincarnated life will be determined by the way you live this life. But that belief presents us with a problem: Why should we help a poor orphan boy when our worldview teaches us that he was born into this position because of the wicked sins of his former life? Maybe you think I'm regressing into theoretical speculation? I thought so too, until I walked the streets of India and saw cows adorned with flowers and treated as gods while impoverished children sat ignored in the gutter. Our beliefs MATTER and they shape our societies.

Christianity teaches us that all people are created in the image of God and that they are worthy of dignity and respect. Christianity commands us to love and serve the poor as if they were Jesus Christ himself. Christianity teaches us that God will one day exalt the humble and that those who exalt themselves now will eventually be brought low. Why is it that hospitals on every corner of this planet are named after Christian Apostles and saints? It's because Christians founded those hospitals, because Christians have been the champions of mercy, because the God of the universe taught us that every life matters! The truths espoused in the Bible produce GOOD FRUIT!

And lest it sound as if only the beliefs of the religious have consequences, consider these words from Friedrich Nietzsche in his treatise *Beyond Good and Evil*. The more Nietzsche wrestled honestly with his Atheistic convictions, the more he came to be REPULSED by the idea of mercy. In his mind, mercy was not something to be celebrated – it was something that was ruining

Europe. Mercy flies in the face of Darwinism. Mercy rewards the weak for their weakness. He wrote of the European Christians:

But when they had given comfort to the sufferers, courage to the oppressed and despairing, a staff and support to the helpless, and when they had allured from society into converts and spiritual penitentiaries the broken-hearted and distracted: what else had they to do in order to work systematically in that fashion, and with a good conscience, for the preservation of all the sick and suffering, which means, in deed and in truth, to work for the DETERIORATION OF THE EUROPEAN RACE? To reverse all estimates of value – THAT is what they had to do!⁴

Nietzsche looked out at the mercy and the charity and kindness of the Christians and he was disgusted. Not only did the Christians preserve the lives of people who should have been left for dead, but these Christians had the audacity to try and REVERSE our estimates of human value! They preached a message that gave intrinsic VALUE to the weak and the poor!

Let's give credit to Nietzsche in that he clearly understood Jesus' teaching. Jesus DID come to reverse the value system of the world. Jesus said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

⁷ “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

⁸ “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

⁹ “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:3-11 ESV)

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Middletown, DE: Millennium Publications, 2014), 36-37.

Beliefs matter and THESE are the beliefs – this is the doctrine – that CHANGED THE WORLD!
There is no worldview – no value system – no BELIEF ON THIS PLANET – that is more coherent and more conducive to human flourishing than that which we find in this glorious Book. And history bears that out.

After explaining all of that, I would turn to my neighbor and conclude with this final argument: You should believe in the God of the Bible:

3. Because He is the only One who can meet your deepest need

I want to end here because our primary agenda in this series is not simply to help you to win the argument. No, we want MORE than that! We want you to win the person! We want you to be able to win your friend to Christ. So, after you've made your argument from authority, and after you've appealed to the evidence that is so clearly seen in the world, it is not inappropriate for you to argue from experience.

Because we believe the Bible is true, we believe that our neighbors know in the deepest recesses of their heart, that there is a God that they are rebelling against. Romans 1:18 says:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, **who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.** (Romans 1:18 ESV)

Let's stop there and notice that every person in the world KNOWS deep down that there is a God. Well, HOW do they know? We find that in the following verses:

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because **God has shown it to them.** ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, **in the things that have been made.** So they are without excuse. (Romans 1:19-20 ESV)

God reveals Himself to us through His creation. This means that even the most adamant Atheist has a sense deep down within themselves that we are not some cosmic accident. The sun and the stars and the flowers of the field and the complexity of the human mind and the beauty of friendship – all of the evidence points us to the reality that there is a good God who made all that we see.

Your neighbor – whether they will admit to it or not – knows this to be true.

God made us to live in relationship with Himself. That is our deepest need. As Augustine famously said:

For you made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.⁵

So, speak to that.

Do you remember what that restlessness was like? I still do. I still remember what it was like to love my sins so much that I refused to acknowledge God. I remember how empty that sin left me! I remember how even my greatest moments of joy were ruined by the reality that something was missing. I was looking for fulfillment in all of the places where the world told me I would find it, but it was never enough.

Those two words describe the restlessness, don't they? Never enough.

But we don't have to live that way! Tell your neighbor that the God of the Bible is the only One who can meet our deepest need. We were made for a relationship with Him and even though our sin RUINED that relationship, in His great mercy He has made a way to bring us back to Him once again! The Apostle Paul wrote:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— (Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV)

⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith. **And this is not your own doing;** it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV)

The Bible teaches us that we are all sinners who needs grace. We are all lawbreakers that needs forgiveness. The Bible says:

⁵ St. Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine (Contemporary English Edition)* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2012), 4.

for **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24 ESV)

Christianity is the only worldview in the world that preaches this scandalous grace! Every other worldview in one form or another is built upon the foundation that we must WORK harder so that we can EARN god's love. If you can do enough, and obey enough, then you just might measure up.

Yet, the God of the Bible says, "You were dead in your sins when I found you. You didn't EARN my love. You COULDN'T earn my love! But while you were still a dead rebel, I set my affection on you! I picked up those dry bones and I breathed my life into them! You didn't do anything to earn that. It was a gift. It was grace. It was love."

Only the God of the Bible offers that kind of love.

When I was in India last year, I remember visiting the Golden Temple – the mecca of the Sikh faith. There was a wide, man-made lake surrounding the temple and I remember watching as people made their way down into the waters to wash away their sins. Some of these men travelled to the temple daily for this ritual, because this cleansing was temporary. As soon as they left the temple, their sins would once again begin to accumulate, and they would need to return and wash them away again! In that moment, I was helped to understand why Hebrews 10 is such gloriously good news:

But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. ¹⁴ **For by a single offering he has perfected for all time** those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:12-14 ESV)

One sacrifice. One cleansing. You don't need to come back to this pool day after day and week after week and year after year! Jesus paid it all! I wanted to shout with John the Baptist:

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29 ESV)

This is the glorious, scandalous, breathtaking good news of the gospel! Jesus Christ came to set sinners free! He came to cleanse us and to restore us so! He has paved the way for us to finally go home to be with our heavenly Father! There is no other religion in the world that offers this kind of hope! There is no other god in the world that extends this kind of grace! There is no other name by which man can be saved!

He has spoken, so we must speak! This is our mission. This is our privilege. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.