



FAITH ASCENT

CLIMBING GUIDE



2021



Climbing Guide

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FAITH ASCENT

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INTRODUCTION

A Muddy Mess

She said it the other day. You know what it means. She has doubts. It's your job as the parent to answer her questions. This is a *Code Red*, people!

You've gathered every resource you can find, even scrounging up some knock-out quotes from that actor Chris Pratt to seal the deal. You're going to address her concerns and set your daughter up perfectly for a life of Christian excellence. You're such a good parent. You've got this.

You sit her down and begin with the classic ontological argument for God. You forget what ontological means, but who cares! The argument is fool-proof. Then you hit her with an illustration from *The Chronicles of Narnia* and end with some of Paul's best stuff out of Romans.

When you finally stop to take a breath, she says, "But what about Mormons? Aren't they pretty much the same as us?" You're thrown off for a second, but, not to worry, you took a Sunday School class on the cults twenty years ago. You've still got this.

You hit on all the major heresies of Mormonism, but it doesn't phase her. She comes right back at you. "See, there's this boy in my class. He says Mormons are Christians too." Wanting to nip this in the bud before it becomes a big thing, you tell your daughter that she is not allowed to date non-believers. "That's so not fair!"

Now you're exasperated. "Life's not fair!"

She's got an answer for that too. "If God is in control of everything, why isn't life fair? I mean, what did he die for if we're all still here suffering 2,000 years later!" You stammer. She walks away. Check mate.

How to Use this Guide

This study guide has been crafted to help you process your unique thoughts about God, the Bible, and the Christian worldview. It's formatted to be discussed as a group--so gather as a family, a Bible study, a youth group.

There are a variety of methods for how this *Climbing Guide* can be used. There are five chapters, each with four sections. Within each section are various questions: these can be journaled for later discussion or discussed in the moment.

Method 1

Each person studies Sections 1-3 on their own. Be sure to have a notebook handy as you work through this study. Our words are meant to catapult you and your group into discussion. You'll get as much out of this as you put into this. Take copious notes and write down your answers to our questions as you go. Then get together with your group and discuss Section 4, as well as the notes you took on anything that stood out to you during your private study.

Method 2

Study all 4 Sections as a group, taking turns reading aloud. Along the way, there will be sections to read, questions to discuss, and things to explore to dive deeper. One way to use this book as a group is to have a youth leader read the informational sections and have students look up Scriptures and Google searches along the way. The possibilities are endless for how to divide the reading: just do what is best for your group.

Ultimately, the heart of Faith Ascent is to equip young people with reasons for their faith. This short book can't cover every important question about Christianity; not even close. Instead, we've tried to pick broad concepts that impact the way we process everything else. Our goal is that these five chapters are a jumping off point to talking openly about a wealth of topics and ideas. Thank you for letting us have that honor!

First Assignment

Philosophy and theology are powerful tools, but unless you're conversing with another academic, your audience probably doesn't categorize every emotional doubt, worrying thought, or curious question into neat little theological piles. It's much more likely that these ideas are jumbled up and mashed together with emotions, half-learned truths, and aphorisms nestled deep down in our psyche.

In order to get to an honest place of sharing, we need to begin by de-tangling all our mixed-up feelings and ideas about Christianity. It's hard work, and it may seem unnecessary until we have an experience like the one imagined at the beginning of this introduction.

One of our primary aims is to help you work through genuine doubts and questions in a healthy way. In order to do that, we need to acknowledge and confront these doubts and questions.

To start: write down, or discuss as a group, the top ten fears, doubts, or questions you or your small group has about Christianity. Don't worry about whether or not the questions sound academic. Just get them all down on paper. They can be as simple and vague as, "What is prayer?" or as particular as, "Did Japheth really sacrifice his daughter to God?" If you can't think of ten questions about Christianity, fill your list with general worries or anxieties you have about your own life.

More Worried, or Not at All?

Having listed out your doubts and fears, does it make you nervous? Does it feel like a lot, or a little?

If your list of ten looks bare, and your group doesn't struggle with many doubts or questions about Christianity, is there any reason to continue this study?

Answer: Absolutely! When we dig deeper into the reasons for our faith in Jesus, we're digging deeper into relationship with God. By spending time meditating and dwelling on His statutes and His designs, we're seeking to understand His character deeply. And since God is infinite, we'll never run out of character to learn. He goes on and on.

Down in the Muddy Muck

It's easy to get offended when talking about religion. For some people, there's nothing more private. Having open conversations about faith within families can be even more personal. No one wants to admit that they think differently than the rest of their loved ones. Doing so puts us in an incredibly vulnerable place. Perhaps that's why Jesus' first words at the Sermon on the Mount were, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Similarly, Micah 6:8 says that God requires three things from us: To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly. This includes having humility about our beliefs; we might hold inaccurate or illogical beliefs. In walking humbly, we need to take on patience and endurance. As we try to build a framework for our beliefs, we must be patient with those around us who are doing so at different paces and in their own ways. So then, as you seek to have conversations with those close to you about our faith, do so with humility and kindness. This isn't easy stuff. It's not meant to be. And because this involves honest communication, it's going to get messy. We shouldn't aim to walk out of these sensitive conversations without getting a little mud on our clothes.

And know this: There isn't going to be an answer for every question our hearts raise to God. Perhaps this is why God has sent the Holy Spirit to aid us, as Paul writes in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."

Discussion Questions

- Do you agree that many of us have thoughts about religion that are tangled up and maybe even illogical? What are some examples of these tangled up thoughts? Do you have some thoughts that are more influenced by emotion than concrete facts?
- Is there an area of Christian thinking that you feel like you don't know enough about? If so, what is it?
- Are there any truisms that you're holding onto that are inconsistent with Christianity? How do you know they're inconsistent? What makes them so?

NOTES



CHAPTER 1

What is the Gospel?



CHAPTER 1

What is the Gospel?

SECTION 1: WARM UP QUESTIONS

In one sentence:

Share your personal definition of the Gospel.

The term *Gospel* comes from the Greek word *Euangelion*. '-angelion' means message/messenger and the two-letter prefix 'eu-' means good. New Testament translators commonly use the phrases *Gospel* and *good news* interchangeably in English translations.

If every man, woman, and child really believed the Gospel was good news brought to them, who would deny it? We're guessing... no one. Everyone loves good news. It stands to reason then that not everyone agrees that the Gospel is good.

What are the reasons why some people might not view the Gospel as good news?

SECTION 2: JUMP OFF POINT

Are Four Gospels Less Clear than One?

Mark's Gospel, likely the first written, introduces Jesus and his ministry this way:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel." (Mark 1:14-15)

Jesus appears to draw a straight line between the Gospel and the *Kingdom of God* (described in Matthew's Gospel as "Kingdom of Heaven"). It would appear that if we could understand what this Kingdom of God/Heaven is, then we could understand what exactly the Gospel is. Thankfully, Jesus loved to talk about the Kingdom. Many of his parables provided imagery to describe the Kingdom. In Matthew 13 alone, Jesus provides multiple parables that depict this Kingdom:

Matthew 13:31 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Matthew 13:33 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Matthew 13:44 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Matthew 13:45 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Matthew 13:47 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Matthew 13:52 The Kingdom of Heaven is like _____

Helpful, right?



*The kingdom of
heaven is like yeast
that a woman took
and mixed into
about sixty pounds
of flour until it
worked all through
the dough.*

MATTHEW 13:33

Maybe not so much... Jesus himself alludes to this lack of clarity when he states in John 16:25, "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father." Has that hour come?

While Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus constantly referring to the Kingdom, John's gospel is oddly free of kingdom talk. Pastor Timothy Keller notes that when comparing texts like Matthew 25:34 and Mark 10 with John 3, entering into the Kingdom of God means the same thing as receiving eternal life.

After the Resurrection

The book of Acts, written by the Apostle Luke, serves as a sequel to Luke's Gospel. This sequel begins by stating that Jesus appeared to the apostles for forty days after his resurrection "speaking about the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). Even after his death and resurrection, Jesus is still talking about the Kingdom. Acts ends, 28 chapters later, with the apostle Paul "proclaiming the Kingdom of God" (Acts 28:31).

What does it look like to proclaim the Kingdom of God? Acts gives us numerous examples. The book is full of testimonies and sermons: from Peter's proclamation of the Spirit at Pentecost to Stephen's speech before his stoning. Luke describes how the early church leaders proclaimed the Gospel in a variety of ways. Read the following passages and see for yourself how the "Euangelion" is described.

- Acts 8:26-40
- Acts 10:34-43
- Acts 13:16-48
- Acts 8:12
- Acts 14:15

While these passages have much in common, there's no silver bullet here that fully illustrates in a single, succinct sentence what the Gospel really is. Why is that? Our contemporary Christian culture sees John 3:16 as the culmination of the Gospel, but when we look at the Gospel presentations in Acts, there's a diversity of content and explanation. Peter, Paul, James, and the rest of the early church leaders don't default to reciting John 3:16 when evangelizing.

The Consequences of the Gospel

In a second-century letter to Diognetus, Mathetes details the lives of Christians in the Roman Empire:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity... They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

Mathetes' letter shows us the Gospel in action. It not only calls us to life eternal, but to live in that abundance now.

Jesus calls us to love another and that through this love others will know that we follow the one, true, all-powerful God (John 13:35).

SECTION 3: BACK TO YOU

Comparing Approaches

Compare Paul's sermon to the Greeks at Mars Hill (Acts 17:22-31) with Stephen's Sermon to his Jewish accusers (Acts 7:1-53).

What do the two passages have in common?

Where do the two passages differ?

Summing it Up

So, where are we?

We've identified the Kingdom of God/Heaven as an aspect of the Gospel. We've highlighted that Jesus' parables demonstrate the centrality of the Kingdom message to his ministry. And we've surveyed the various ways the early church spread the good news.

What is the Gospel, really?

Mark states it in the first words of his Gospel:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:1)

The Gospel is Jesus. You can go about sharing the Gospel message in many different ways—and that's good!—because Jesus is more than any one verse, more than any one creed or testimony. He is the living God. He is the Good News. Jesus, and Jesus alone...

...nothing else compares.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- From your experience, what do non-believers think of when they hear the word “Gospel”?
- The “Romans Road” is often used as a Biblical way to evangelize and explain the Gospel. Read through the “Romans Road” verses (Romans 3:23, 6:23, 5:8, 10:9, 8:1). Do you think these verses alone sufficiently tell the Gospel message? Why or why not?
- Many of the stories told about the spread of the Gospel in the book of Acts don't include some important elements. Sometimes there's no talk of eternal life. In many cases, Jesus is not stated as being God at all. How should we interpret these conversion stories that seem to leave out important facts about the nature of Jesus and God? Is there any modern day application for us as we share “the reason for the hope that is in us?” (1 Peter 3:15)

FURTHER READING

Online Articles/Videos

- [Tim Keller Explains the Gospel](#)
- [Communication of the Gospel of Acts](#)
- [A Look at the Message in Acts](#)
- [The Kingdom Emphasis in Acts](#)
- [The Gospel as Apologetic \(Video\)](#)

Books

- N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters*, (New York: HarperOne, 2011).
- A. W. Tozer, *Jesus: The Life and Ministry of God the Son--Collected Insights from A. W. Tozer*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2017).

NOTES



CHAPTER 2

Is the Bible reliable?



CHAPTER 2

Is the Bible reliable?

SECTION 1: WARM UP QUESTIONS

Islam teaches that their holy book, the Quran, is eternal, having existed before the foundation of the world. Mohammad, the founder of Islam, told his followers that he received, verbatim, the direct words of God. To this day, Muslims believe that only the original Arabic version is the true, incorruptible word of God.

Do you think the Bible is eternal in the same way?

How is it different?

Is the Bible word-for-word what the Holy Spirit intended it to be?

Do you think it matters that most Christians aren't able to read the Bible in its original languages?

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 TIMOTHY 3:16-17

SECTION 2: JUMP OFF POINT

Millions of people trust the Bible as the word of God and believe that what it says God did in the past can be trusted. Many people, on the other hand, think for various reasons that the Bible is unreliable. When we look at the Bible as a collection of historical documents, we want to see if it can stand up against certain measures of historicity. We'll take a look at three forms of historical measurement: Transmission, Authenticity, and Correspondence.

Transmission

For well over a millennium, the Bible was duplicated, the sacred scriptures having been rewritten word-for-word. These scripture copyists are known as "scribes". They weren't perfect. They made mistakes. Then those mistakes were copied. Is this like the children's game of telephone when one person whispers a saying and passes it along, the message getting warped further and further until it's completely different from the original message? Are the original words of the Bible unknowable to us now?

The question of transmission was largely put to rest with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the 20th century. In a cave in the middle of the desert in a place called Qumran, hundreds of scrolls were discovered, having been buried and untouched for nearly two thousand years. The discovered scrolls include multiple fragments from every book of the Old Testament. Since these scrolls were so old, they were perfect for comparing to our current versions of the Bible, since these scrolls didn't go through hundreds of years of scribal copying. And what were the results? No substantial changes!

Besides the scrolls found at Qumran, other manuscripts have indicated that not one sentence was found in any New Testament book that was missing from the King James Version!

No evidence whatsoever has been found of anything that was ever “lost” from the New Testament.

Manuscript studies (called “textual criticism” in the academic realm) have vindicated the text of the Bible as extremely reliable. What little variations there are among the manuscripts do not significantly affect the message or doctrine of the Bible.

Textual Criticism--

the process of attempting to ascertain the original wording of a text.

-Oxford Languages

Authenticity

How were the original books of the Bible chosen?

When trying to determine what should be included in the Bible, the church fathers' first question was authorship. Was the book actually penned by those who claim to have written it? In the past few years, manuscripts and fragments from supposed ‘lost gospels’, including those supposedly written by the apostles Thomas, Judas, and Peter, have reached various levels of public attention. Research has revealed, however, that these books were written well over a hundred years after the life and ministry of Jesus. If the *Gospel of Peter* was written in the third century, then there's no way it was written by the Apostle Peter himself!

The early church rejected books that claimed to be written by apostles but were clearly not, such as the *Gospel of Thomas*. Such writings were acknowledged by the early church as inauthentic. They claimed to be written by someone close to the events they describe, but that was not true.

Christians, from the very start, have been concerned with authentic and true teachings, being careful to not let counterfeits slip into our Bible.

Correspondence

Another way to verify the Bible and the events the Scriptures recount is to look for outside sources of verification. Although historians cannot prove every fact recorded in the Bible (much less every fact recorded in other historical documents!), they have been able to verify a surprising number of details through archaeology and other forms of study. The outside evidence demonstrates the reliability that what the Bible says happened corresponds to history.

Take a look at just a few examples:

- The House of David inscription
- The Pontius Pilate inscription
- The Ossuary (burial box) of the high priest Caiaphas
- The obelisk of Israelite king Jehu depicting him paying tribute to Shalmaneser
- The bronze and iron arrowheads in Jerusalem left behind in the battle between the Babylonians and the Jews in 586 BC

The most important historical events of the Bible, of course, are the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That Jesus was crucified is as historically certain as anything can be from that era. Jewish and Roman authors writing less than a hundred years after Jesus' death attested to it as fact. That Christ's followers were convinced a few days later that he had risen from the grave is also a hard fact acknowledged by the vast majority of scholars. Once one gets past prejudices against miracles in general, the evidence for the resurrection becomes quite compelling. The best explanation for the reports of the empty tomb and Jesus' post-crucifixion appearances is that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead.



The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III
9th century BC,
from Nimrud, Iraq.
-The British Museum

SECTION 3: BACK TO YOU

Let's use our three historical measurements to look at the reliability of other religious texts. To start with, let's take a quick peek at *The Book of Mormon*.

Transmission

Joseph Smith claims to have found golden plates that had the entire book of Mormon inscribed on them in an ancient language. After translating them, Smith and a few of his closest friends returned the plates back to where he first found them.

Despite numerous excavations, the golden plates have not been found since that time. Smith translated the plates using "seeing stones".

Authenticity

The books contained within *The Book of Mormon* claim to have been originally written by various ancient authors, much like the books of the Old and New Testament. The accounts tell of how a group of Jewish people flee Jerusalem before the Babylonian invasion and sail to North America where they begin to colonize what would be modern day New York. With no external reference to any of these figures outside of 2,000 years from when the events allegedly occurred in *The Book of Mormon*, there's no way to authenticate the authorship. The New Testament, on the other hand, has early, external attestations of who wrote the books.

Correspondence

The Book of Mormon depicts huge populations of ethnic Jewish populations in ancient North America. In Ether 15:2, the text states that over 2 million "Jaredites" (a supposedly Hebrew race living in North America) were slain in one battle.

There is no archaeological evidence of such a grand battle, nor is there any evidence of an ancient Jewish population living in North America. There is scant corresponding evidence of any historical event from *The Book of Mormon* taking place. Compare this to the Bible, which references ancient cities we can excavate. Archaeologists are continually discovering ancient buildings, tools, mosaics, and other artefacts that validate many of the historical claims in the Bible. From Greco-Roman architectural references and other external historical documents, we know that Luke's Gospel and Acts include historically verifiable figures.

You're Turn

On your own, examine Islam and the Quran. How reliable is their sacred text? If you're unfamiliar with the Quran's historicity, try Googling "transmission of the Quran" or "authenticity..."

Often, when the Bible's historical validity is questioned, it's from a skeptic who wants to stop the conversation with one statement. Those statements usually sound something like, "There's no way that a document that's been translated a thousand times over can be reliable." Another common jab goes something like, "The Bible was written by ancient groups wanting to control the masses." Such sweeping statements can knock us down like cannon balls. Instead of becoming cannon fodder, all we need to do is turn our attention to the ways in which we validate past writings and events.

Look at Julius Caesar. No one doubts that Caesar lived. He even wrote his own memoirs about his war campaigns against the Gallic peoples in Europe. But how sure are we that those documents are true?

Do another Google search. Julius Caesar lived from 100-44 BC. What's the oldest manuscript copy we have of his Gallic Wars memoir? How does that compare to the manuscript evidence for the New Testament?

Scientific mistrust of the Bible began with the Enlightenment belief that miracles cannot be reconciled to a modern, rational view of the world.

Armed with this presupposition, scholars turned to the Bible and said, “The Biblical accounts can’t be reliable because they contain descriptions of miracles.” The premise behind such a claim is “Science has proven that there is no such thing as miracles.” But embedded in such a statement is a leap of faith. It is one thing to say that science is only equipped to test for natural causes and cannot speak to any others. It is quite another to insist that science proves that no other causes could possibly exist.

TIM KELLER

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- While the books of the Bible are historical documents, not all of them are meant to be understood historically, but rather literarily. For instance, the parables that Jesus tells are not supposed to be read as actual events that have taken place. What other passages in the Bible are meant to be read literarily rather than historically? Are there sections or books of the Bible that are gray areas and difficult to categorize as a genre?
- Why do you think Jesus didn't write anything down? If Jesus had written anything down, do you think we would treat it differently than the rest of the Bible? Why or why not?
- Does it bother you that mistakes made by scribes copying the Bible were re-copied and passed on? Why or why not?

FURTHER READING

Online Articles/Videos

- [The Reliability of the Biblical Text \(Video\)](#)

Books

- Josh McDowell & Sean McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2017).
- Arthur G. Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), second edition.

NOTES

CHAPTER 3

Does God even exist?



CHAPTER 3

Does God even exist?

SECTION 1: WARM UP QUESTIONS

An immensely important, but remarkably simple question lies beyond the limits of science. Why is there something instead of nothing?

Bob Dylan once sang, "Everybody's gotta serve somebody." In a similar way, everybody has to make a choice: Was the universe created by an outside force (God), or was it not? You may choose agnosticism or indifference, but at the end of the day, we are all desperate for an answer. Is the secret of the universe just chaos, or is there an intelligence at the heart of our reality?

- What questions is science unable to answer? In other words, where does science end and other forms of 'knowing' (philosophy, theology) begin?
- If you believe in the Big Bang Theory, what do you think happened "before" the Big Bang? How would you go about researching that question? Why was there matter/energy to begin with?
- If you don't believe in the Big Bang Theory, how do you conceptualize time before Creation? What did God do (or how did he exist) before anything existed?

SECTION 2: JUMP OFF POINT

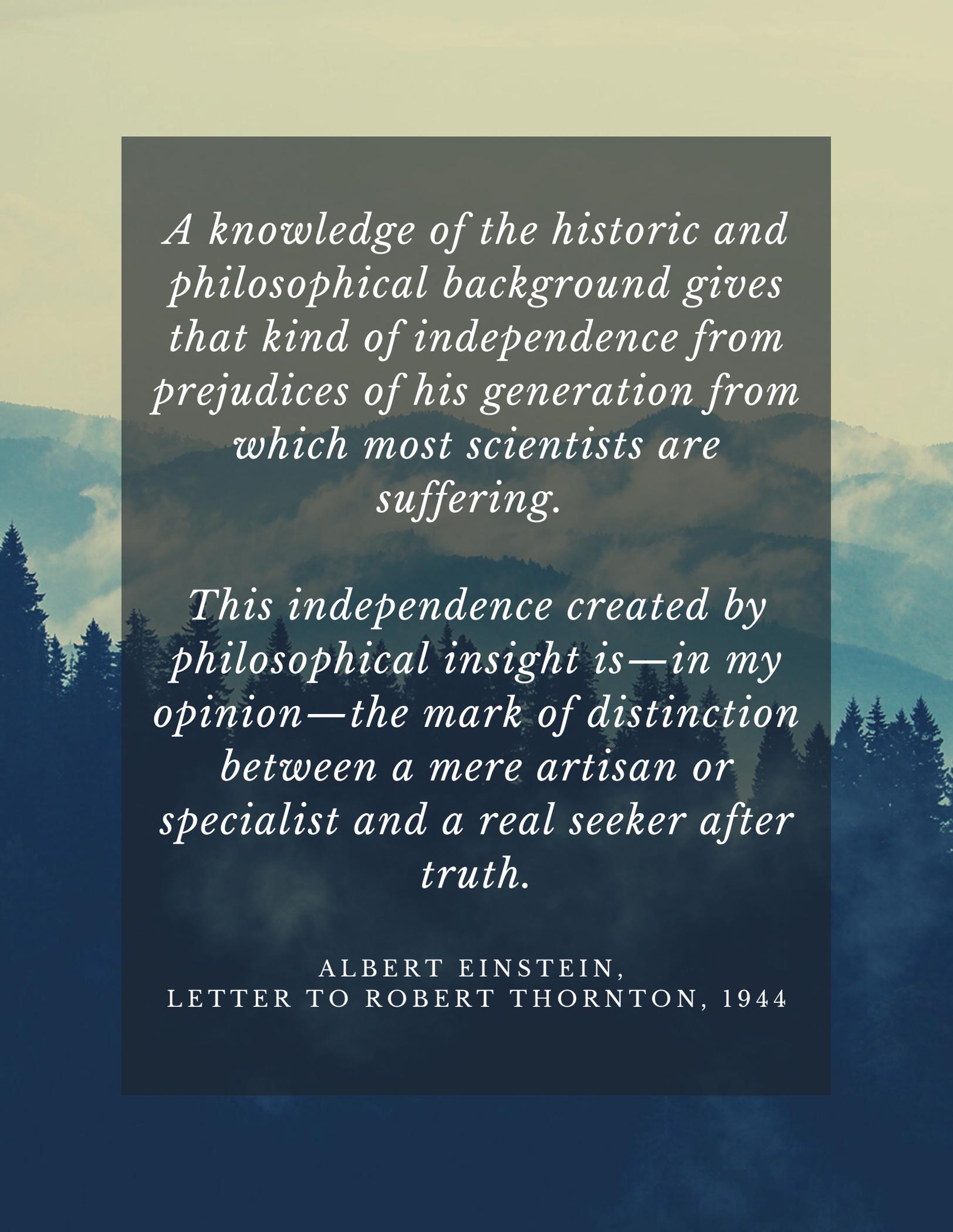
The question of God's existence can be broken up into three spheres of conversation: the origin of the universe, the design of the universe, and the existence of objective morality. We'll tackle each one-by-one.

Origin

Which of the two worldviews makes better sense of the origin of the universe: Atheism or Theism?

In the musical *The Sound of Music*, Fraulein Maria sings the line "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could." Maria realized that it's impossible for something (her love of Captain Von Trapp) to have arisen from no-thing. While science can point to a big beginning of the universe, it can't explain what caused the beginning to begin. At some point in the past, energy came into being and an action took place that was not in response to some other action. In other words, whether you believe in a god or not, the beginning of the universe introduces us to a moment in time when the laws of the universe, themselves, began to exist. How can this be?

Perhaps you reject this notion that the universe had a beginning. You may assert that the universe is infinite, having no beginning nor an end. Try to count to infinity. It's impossible. Whatever number you stop at, there's always a number beyond that. Now, can you do the opposite? Can you count back from infinity and ever get back to zero? No. Before any number could be counted, an infinity of prior numbers would already have to have been counted first. You just get driven back and back into the past, so that no number could ever be counted or reached. So then, the final domino in this series could never fall if an infinite number of prior dominoes had to fall first. Now apply this concept to time. If we assert that the universe is infinite, today could never be reached. That is obviously absurd because here we are! We are at today; it has been reached. This shows that the series of past events must be finite and have a beginning.



A knowledge of the historic and philosophical background gives that kind of independence from prejudices of his generation from which most scientists are suffering.

This independence created by philosophical insight is—in my opinion—the mark of distinction between a mere artisan or specialist and a real seeker after truth.

ALBERT EINSTEIN,
LETTER TO ROBERT THORNTON, 1944

Amazingly, this is just one of many cosmological variables that have to be just right in order for life to exist anywhere. These odds are worse than the likelihood that a Tesla could randomly exist on Mars without Elon Musk (or anybody) having put it there. It is far more reasonable to conclude that an intelligent designer put these cosmological components together for the existence of the universe, rather than to believe these components came together by chance.

Morality

Is murder wrong? What about child abuse? Puppy torturing?

If there is no god, then where does our sense of justice come from? Most proponents of an atheist worldview say that morality is merely the result of socio-biological, evolutionary processes. For atheists, morality is a social construct; a subjective reality.

Christian theology generally asserts that morality comes from God. God's moral nature is expressed in relation to us in the form of divine commands that act as the foundation for our moral duties and obligations. We understand these laws intuitively. This is why cultures across the earth throughout time have similar moral laws in their societies. We all see child abuse as evil. Similarly, we condemn Hitler and the Nazis as abhorrent. If morality doesn't come from God, then there is no universal reason that good deeds are good and bad deeds are bad. The atheist can't consistently condemn Hitler or say the civil rights work of Martin Luther King Jr. is good.

Our society rejects the actions of Hitler and child abusers. The most obvious reason we have for doing so is because God exists and no social construct of morality is immune from that "law above the law". The theist makes a reasonable decision to think that objective morals exist in the nature of God because alternative explanations fail.

SECTION 3: BACK TO YOU

We just looked at three arguments for the existence of God. However secure we may feel in the strength of these ideas, when presenting these concepts to a skeptic, it's likely that we'll be met with resistance. Why can't we prove the existence of God without a shadow of a doubt? After all, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Romans that "What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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..." (1:19-20). If Paul is stating that God's existence is obvious, why does it seem so hard to prove it?

Often it feels like debates on the existence of God end up in stalemates. Why is this so? Perhaps it's because abstract concepts like morality and thermodynamics aren't where we start our search for God. For most of us, the existence of God starts as a personal or relational question. So, for a moment, place aside these philosophical arguments. Answer this question for yourself: Why do you believe (or disbelieve) in God? What's your first memory of actually coming to a conclusion about God? What proved it for you personally?

In the book of Judges, Joshua sets up an "ebenezer" (essentially just a pile of rocks) to mark a time and place of God's provision for the Hebrew people. What ebenezers do you have in your life? Are there times when "God showed up" for you that has helped secure your faith? Or, if you're an unbeliever, was there a moment when "God didn't show up" that sealed the deal for you?

As we get older, mature, and experience more of life, we inevitably get the opportunity to build more ebenezers. Don't forget them. Take the time right now to record every major time that you believe God "showed up" in your life. Sometimes these ebenezers aren't specific answers to prayer. It could be that a historical event, such as the Jewish nation of Israel being reestablished after two millennia of wandering, can serve as a personal ebenezer. Or maybe it's a beautiful mathematical formula. Or a relationship.

Keep in mind that the existence of God is a two-fold question. It is most certainly a question for academics. We, as Christians, should seek to find evidence for God's presence in science and philosophy. But we should also be cognizant that God's existence is a relational question with personal answers.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Does the reliability of the Bible have any impact on the question of God's existence? How so?
- Of the three arguments presented in this chapter, which do you find most compelling? Which do you think is the least compelling?
- Romans 1:20 reads, "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." What do you think Paul is saying? Do you think that any honest searcher of God will find Him? Why or why not?

FURTHER READING

- J. Warner Wallace, *God's Crime Scene: A Cold-Case Detective Examines the Evidence for a Divinely Created Universe*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2015).
- William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2010).

NOTES

CHAPTER 4

Why do bad
things happen?



CHAPTER 4

Why do bad things happen?

SECTION 1: WARM UP QUESTIONS

Greek philosopher Epicurus once wrote,

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

How would you answer the question posed by Epicurus?

SECTION 2: JUMP OFF POINT

The problem of evil is actually three separate problems: Logical, evidential, and emotional.

1) Logical

The existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, benevolent God and the existence of evil are inconsistent or contradictory.

2) Evidential

The existence of God is improbable given the extent of evil present in the world.

3) Emotional

An individual doubts God's existence or is angry at God in light of their own experiences of evil and suffering.

The Logical Problem of Evil

This concern here is that the existence of evil directly contradicts the concept of a loving God. The earlier quote by Epicurus is the philosopher's way of trying to trap us in one of two logical syllogisms. A syllogism is a form of reasoning that would lead someone to rationally believe a conclusion if the premises were true and the logical inferences valid. Let's unpack the line of thinking presented by Epicurus:

IF God

a) Is willing to prevent evil-mindedness

but

b) Is unable to prevent it

THEN

c) He is not omnipotent

Since omnipotent means all-powerful, then being unable to prevent something would mean God is something less than all-powerful. So Epicurus' first dichotomy appears valid. But maybe what it means for God to be omnipotent needs to be spelled out more clearly. Let's try the second one:

IF God

a) Is able to prevent evil

but

b) Is unwilling to prevent it,

THEN

c) He is malevolent

At first blush, this syllogism seems true too, right? If you were able to stop Hitler before the holocaust, but didn't, you would be a bad person. Right? The problem here is that simply being unwilling to prevent a specific evil does not equal malevolence.

The philosopher Alvin Plantinga addressed the logical problem of evil by stating, "God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so." That reason, according to Plantinga, was to provide free will. God may have a reason or many reasons for not preventing evil. Christian scholars have debated what exactly God's good reasons are, but that goes further than we need go in order to defeat the logical problem of evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

This concern lowers the bar from the logical problem. Instead of trying to state that evil contradicts God's existence, it claims that the prevalence of evil in our world makes the existence of the Biblical God *improbable*.

The Christian has two ways to respond to this:

Option 1: Bite the bullet.

We can just admit that evil is a problem. There's no way around it. The question of why suffering exists is a monumental question. Even though the prevalence of evil may lead to a philosophical view that says God's existence is improbable, improbable doesn't mean impossible. Plenty of things happen everyday that are improbable. And more than that, when looking at other evidence for God outside of the question of evil, the whole argument for God tips the scales dramatically towards the probability that God exists.

Option 2: Disagree.

There are good reasons for why God would allow suffering. There are many theories and ideas that scholars point to for reasons that God allows evil. Here are four of them:

- **Soul-making.** God allows suffering for the betterment of our character. Just like an infant getting a vaccine, the newborn can't comprehend why they're feeling pain, but the parent has good reason for allowing the child to go through the painful moment.

- *Free will.* Heinous evil exists because humans commit free will actions that result in terrible suffering. Atrocities such as torture and sexual abuse are the result of humans doing human things. We live in a fallen, broken world.
- *Natural laws.* God created the universe with certain natural laws to function in order to exist. Earthquakes, tornados, and tsunamis all happen because of the way the world is.
- *Mystery.* Perhaps we just don't know all that transpires in the world, even the spiritual realm. Job 1:11 tells us that Satan wreaks havoc "without reason" and Ecclesiastes 8:14 tells us that the world is unfair and "meaningless." Moreover, there can be an array of factors that affect the outcome of some event, commonly referred to as the *Butterfly Effect*, and we just don't know all that happens. We only see the end result.

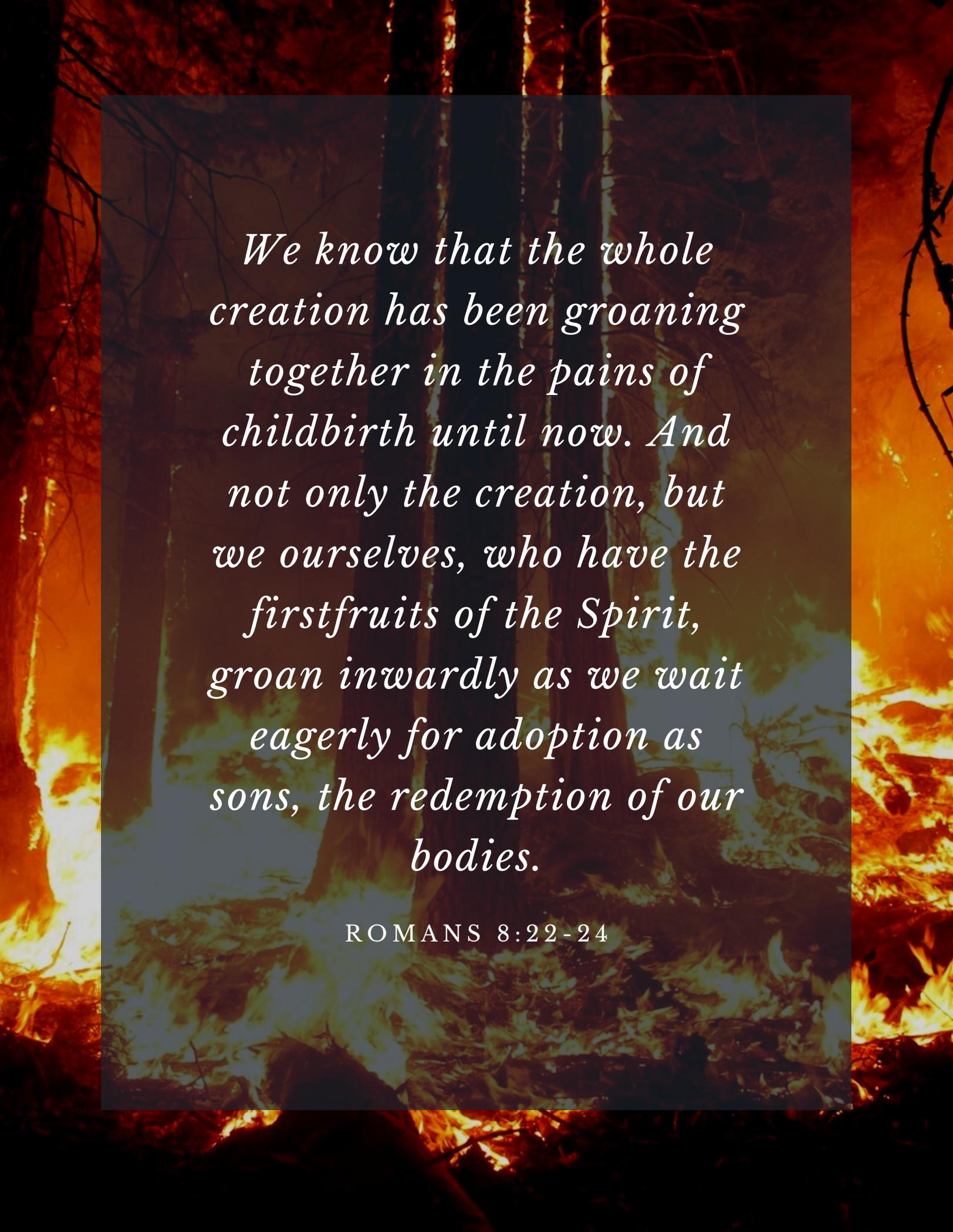
The Emotional Problem of Evil

Theodicy--

an attempt to vindicate divine goodness and providence in light of the existence of evil

So far, we've challenged the problems of evil from a robotic, knowledge-based approach. But most of us don't struggle with abstract ideas of pain, we struggle with the hurtful experiences we ourselves endure. Where was God when my sibling got cancer? Projecting anger at God when we suffer is commonplace. Elizabeth Landau of CNN writes, "It's not just religious folks, either. People unaffiliated with organized religion, atheists and agnostics also report anger toward God either in the past, or anger focused on a hypothetical image."

Perhaps the logical and evidential problems of evil have been resolved. Still, the emotional problem of evil is still around. And it will continue to be around. From Job all the way to Paul, the Bible is chock-full of human suffering. Paul writes in Romans 8:22-24 that:



We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

ROMANS 8:22-24

The emotional problem of evil is why we hold on to hope so tightly. Our continual suffering on this planet is why Christ's resurrection is such good news! It's evidence straight from God that He will make good on his promise. And what is that promise? Revelation 21:4 states that "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away."

SECTION 3: BACK TO YOU

REFLECT

Read each of the following passages and discuss how the early church viewed pain and suffering.

- 2 Corinthians 4:16-18
- Romans 5:3-5
- Acts 5:41
- 1 Peter 2:19-21

SUMMING IT UP

Perspective plays a very important role in how we actually deal with evil and suffering in our lives. For Christians, our perspective can be informed by our parents, our pastors, and our interpretations of the Bible. Overcoming a misperception can frequently mean realigning our perspective to a biblical view, the view that aligns with reality. The best medicine is to keep the faith: Christ died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Jesus provides the solution to the problem of experiential evil.

Life is often hard. Too often, it seems, things go horribly awry. People get hurt. Innocent children suffer. And yet, Christians know that God is not up in the clouds idly standing by watching his creatures suffer. Instead, our Father, seeing the suffering of the creation, decides to send His Son into the world through the Incarnation and gives life through the Holy Spirit. Roger Olson remarks,

*Because of the incarnation
our misery is forever
imprinted in the life of God
but so is our transformation
to glory. The wounds of Jesus
(and not just the ones put
there by the nails of the cross)
are part of God's life but so is
his glorious resurrection.*

*Because of the incarnation
God's grace and glory are part
of every human person's being
(in potency) and, with faith,
every human is capable of
participating in God's divine
life and family forever.*

ROGER OLSON

God has not left us to our own suffering. He's entered into it. And now, He's inviting us to enter into His kingdom.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Of the four potential “good reasons” God allows suffering, which one do you find most compelling? Why?
- Certain studies on college students have shown that “atheists and agnostics reported more anger at God during their lifetimes than believers.” Why do you think non-Christians would have anger towards God?
- Does the fact that Jesus suffered during his earthly ministry give you any comfort? Why or why not?
- Is there any painful experience that you're angry at God about? Are you willing to share that pain with someone you trust?

FURTHER READING

Online Articles/Videos

- [Anger at God Common, Even Among Atheists](#)
- [For God So Loved the World... That He Couldn't Stay Away](#)
- [God, Evil, & Suffering \(Video\)](#)

Books

- Clay Jones, *Why Does God Allow Evil? Compelling Answers for Life's Toughest Questions*, (Eugene: Harvest House, 2017).
- John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), revised and expanded edition.
- Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).



NOTES

CHAPTER 5

Who is Jesus?



CHAPTER 5

Who is Jesus?

SECTION 1: WARM UP QUESTIONS

Near the end of the musical *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, as Jesus is taken to Mount Golgotha, the narrator of the play sings the following lines to Jesus:

*Tell me what you think about your friends at the top.
Who'd you think, besides yourself, was the pick of the crop?
Buddha, was he where it's at? Is he where you are?
Could Muhammad move a mountain, or was that just PR?
Did you mean to die like that? Was that a mistake?*

For those outside of our Christian bubble, these are extremely relevant questions.

How would you answer them?

What makes Jesus different than other religious gurus?

SECTION 2: JUMP OFF POINT

Our first chapter defined the Gospel as Jesus. Just Jesus. We then tried to establish the faithfulness of the Bible in proclaiming the story of Jesus. We then backtracked to show evidence for believing in God. And lastly, we grappled with pain and suffering in a world designed by God.

So, if there is a God and he loves us and wants good things for us, and if Jesus is the best news God has to share with us, then the most important question we can answer for ourselves is: WHO IS JESUS?

Many religions have strong beliefs about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth...

Mormons

Jesus is God's physical son, and in being an exalted man, became a god himself, but not a member of the trinity (no trinity, polytheism)

Jehovah's Witnesses

Jesus is Michael the archangel, God's first-born son, but not God himself (no trinity, monotheism)

Muslims

Jesus is one of God's prophets, but not God himself (no trinity, strict monotheism)

Baha'is

Jesus is a manifestation of God, just like Mohammad, Buddha and other religious leaders in history (no trinity, monotheism)

These other religions all revere Jesus. Some of them give him divine significance, others don't. Some see him as only a messenger of God, while others assert his divinity but reject his humanity. To understand the identity of Jesus, we must contend with a certain tension that appears from the Biblical text.

Consider the following passages:

Jesus is a Man

Mark
6:3

Luke
2:7

Acts
2:22-23

Romans
5:15

Hebrews
4:15

Jesus is God

John
1:1-3, 14

John
10:30

John
20:28

Titus
2:13

Revelation
22:13

How can Christ be both God and man? Modern Christians may not give the apparent paradox a second thought, but this wasn't always the case. From almost the beginning of the church, church fathers have convened councils and debated meticulously the ins-and-outs of Jesus' identity both as the Son of God and Son of Man. Certain early theologians argued that Jesus couldn't have actually been a human like you and me. They asked questions like: "If Jesus is a man how can he NOT be a sinner, since man is by definition a sinner since the Fall?" These Son of Man deniers were labeled 'docetists' and shown to be wrong at various ecumenical councils.

Docetism--

the heretical belief that Jesus wasn't human and only appeared to die on the cross.

Hypostatic Union--

Jesus' humanity and divinity are co-equal in his singular personhood.

The term 'hypostatic union' came to describe Christ's dual citizenship. The Athanasian Creed (likely written in the 4th or 5th century) describes Christ this way:

He is God from the essence of the Father, begotten before time; and he is human from the essence of his mother, born in time; completely God, completely human, with a rational soul and human flesh; equal to the Father as regards divinity, less than the Father as regards humanity.

Although he is God and human, yet Christ is not two, but one. He is one, however, not by his divinity being turned into flesh, but by God's taking humanity to himself.

He is one, certainly not by the blending of his essence, but by the unity of his person. For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh, so too the one Christ is both God and human.

ATHANASIAN CREED

We can argue all day about the mechanics of Jesus being 100% God and 100% man. While the topic of "how" Jesus came to be both God and man can be fascinating, it's the "why?" question that should captivate our hearts.

REFLECT

Imagine for a moment...

How would Jesus' ministry have been different if he came to Earth as only God, and not as a man? What would have been different if he was only a man?

In the Gospels, Jesus is referred to as both "Son of Man" and "Son of God". He is the true intercessor, the only one capable of bridging the gap between God's infinity and our mortality. His dual-nature makes him unique in history. To answer the question asked in *Jesus Christ, Superstar*: No, Buddha and Mohammad are not equal to Jesus. They were mere men. Jesus, the Word, the Good News himself, is the only one capable of knowing our struggles and strife while being able to do something about it!

Okay, great. Jesus is God and man. We've checked that box. But there's something else we have to contend with. What about the fact that the Bible unequivocally states that there is only one God? Consider these verses that state the truth of monotheism:

Deuteronomy 32:39

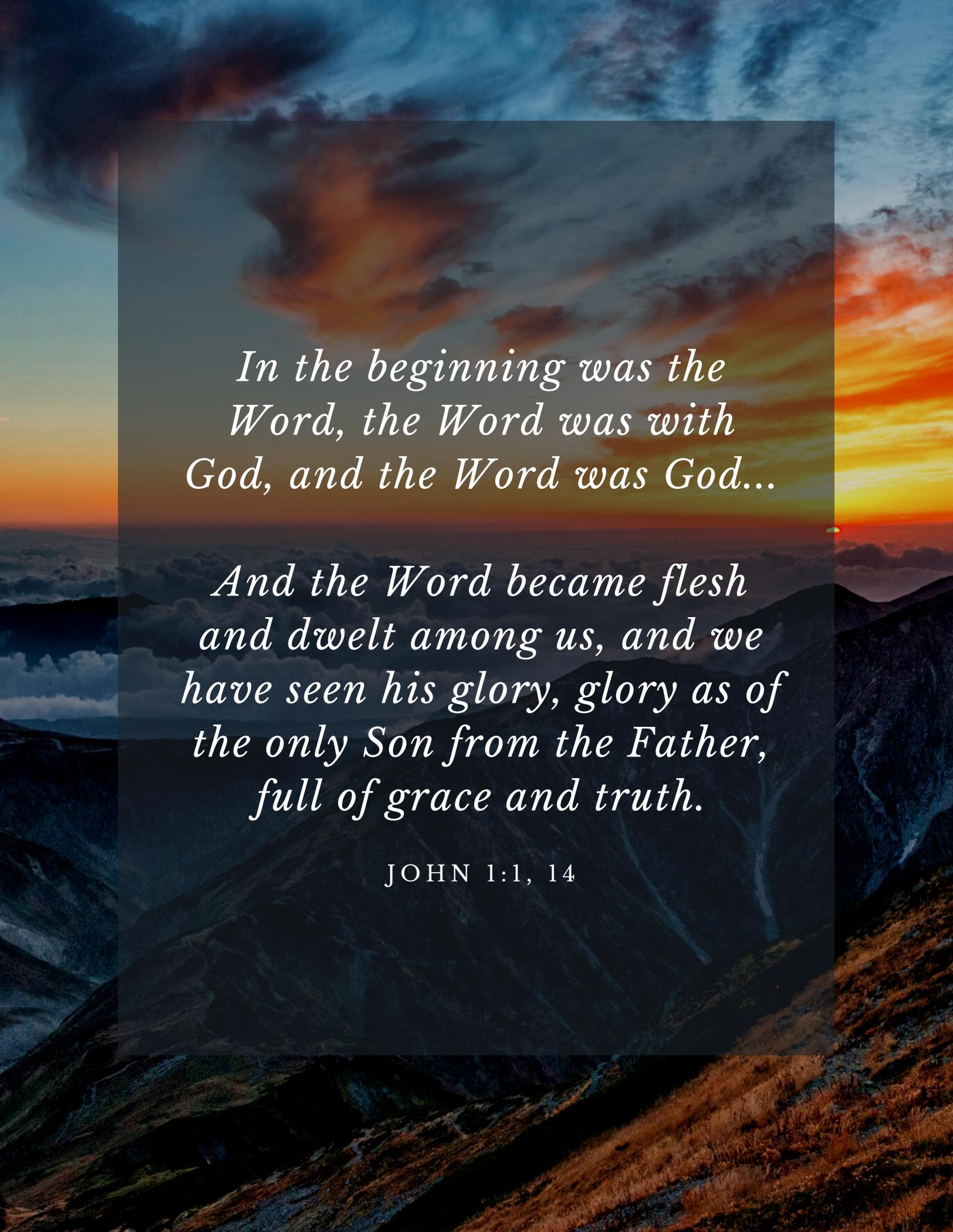
1 Kings 8:60

Psalms 86:10

Mark 12:29

Ephesians 4:6

How can Jesus be the Son of God, and a God, and there only be one God? The answer is something of a mystery. Yet the preamble to God's Gospel describes poetically Jesus' claim to being God, while still adhering to the notion of monotheism:



*In the beginning was the
Word, the Word was with
God, and the Word was God...*

*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 1:1, 14

The Good News is Jesus. And this Good News is that Jesus has come to dwell among us. And He is God. There is no one who can rival him.

SECTION 3: BACK TO YOU

Jesus makes his first big splash in Matthew 5. What follows over the course of several chapters is what we now lovingly refer to as “The Sermon on the Mount.” It famously begins with a series of blessings. As you read each blessing, try to think about what these words mean today in our culture.

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Who today would you label as poor in spirit?

Blessed are those who mourn...

Who are today's mourners?

Blessed are the meek...

What does a meek person in today's culture look like?

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...

Who's hungry for justice in our culture?

Blessed are the merciful...

Who is someone you know who has shown mercy?

Blessed are the pure in heart...

How can anyone in our internet culture remain pure in heart?

Can you think of someone?

Blessed are the peacemakers...

Who strives for peace everywhere they go?

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...

Who in the world today is persecuted for following Christ?

Why do you think Jesus chose to start his first major sermon with this list of blessings? What does that tell us about Jesus' priorities?

Summing it Up

Jesus is often called "The Great Physician". Why? Every one of us is wounded. We're broken. No one living today is free from jealousy, strife, envy, or hatred. We're all hurt. We need healing. Every last one of us. That's why Jesus is the Good News. He's God, but he's also one of us, knowing how hard and wretched it can be to be human. He is the second member of the Trinity and the second Adam of humanity. His life on Earth centers the Scriptures around a historically reliable event. His choice to die on the cross shows that not only does God care about pain, suffering, and evil, but he's willing to endure wretchedness himself to free us from its clutches and demonstrate his power over sin and death itself.

SECTION 4: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think were Jesus' top priorities during his earthly ministry?
- How would you respond someone who asks, "If Jesus is a man how can he NOT be a sinner, since man is by definition a sinner since the Fall?"
- What doubts do you still have about God? What questions do you have about Jesus? Write them down, and then seek to find answers. Jesus says in John 8:32 that "the truth will set you free". Don't be afraid of your questions. Knock at the door. Good News is waiting at the other side.

FURTHER READING

- Robert M. Bowman Jr. and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007).
- David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Jesus: An Introduction to Biblical, Religious and Cultural Perspectives on Christ*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015).

NOTES

CONCLUSION

What now?

Congratulations!

You did it!

You completed Faith Ascent's *Climbing Guide*.

Perhaps you've felt like you've just hiked up a mountain. In reality, you've just limbered up your muscles.

There is so much more to explore in the realm of Christian worldview, and we suspect that your reading and discussions have brought more questions to the surface. That's precisely what we were hoping would happen. We want you to deepen your faith, strengthen your walk with Jesus.

Before we say goodbye, let's take one last look back at the path we've traversed:

1

THE GOSPEL.

The Gospel is so much more than merely believing a few ideas so you can stay out of Hell. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus; this good news has huge implications for not just what we believe but how we live our lives every day, every week, and every year.

2

THE BIBLE.

The Bible is an ancient collection of books that have been passed along through a rigorous process. We can verify the success of their transmission by looking at ancient manuscripts. The books are authentic, meaning that they were written by people who were close to the events they describe. Furthermore, the events described in the text correspond to reality, and we can point to archaeology for that confirmation.

3

GOD.

To understand God's existence, we evaluated the questions of origin, design, and morality. God's existence makes the best sense of what we believe about the universe, function, and ethics.

4

EVIL.

The problems of evil can be broken into three categories: Logical, Evidential, and Emotional. These three types of problems each had different solutions, some more relational than intellectual.

5

JESUS.

Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. Other world religions want to make a claim about who Jesus is in their view, but none of them fit with the Biblical data that Jesus and the Father are one in essence. Jesus is the great "I AM" (John 8:58).

You've reached the end of our Climbing Guide, but your journey continues on.

We hope to see you hiking along similar trails, so be sure to say hello!



FAITH ASCENT PRESENTS:

CLIMBING GUIDE

Faith Ascent's *Climbing Guide* is a practical workbook for young adults and groups that explores five common Christian worldview questions.

Study Christian theology with us and equip yourself with strong reasons for your faith in Jesus of Nazareth.

Grab your gear and start hiking with us!



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Dr. Jaros leads the team at Faith Ascent Ministries as executive director. He moonlights as a scholar in systematic and historical theology with interests in philosophy of religion and New Testament studies.



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Dante serves as the Director of Outreach for Faith Ascent. He relishes in asking difficult questions. To date, he's the author of eight books and two popular podcasts.

For more resources and to learn about Faith Ascent Ministries, go to www.faithascent.com.

Faith Ascent is a non-profit organization in St. Louis, MO preparing Christian teenagers for the climb ahead.

