

Questions

Week 1

Day 1

Read: Mark 9:14-24

What does it mean to have faith?

I think this is a very real question, one that gets down to the core of what it means to believe. Many people have the idea faith must be unquestioning in order to be “pure.” What this can lead to is people who get good at “faking it,” at saying the right things at the right times but who, deep down, have a host of questions and doubts that are ignored. Over time, these questions can begin to eat away at a person.

We are beginning a series called “Questions” where we’ll be wrestling with some of the massive questions almost every Christian addresses in their lives. If you’ve ever had a question about God, faith, or Christianity, you won’t want to miss a week.

So what does the Bible have to say about our questions and doubts?

Quite a bit, actually.

The Bible gives us multiple pictures of people who have questions and doubts. Some of these come from the book of Psalms, a book in the Bible that contains songs and prayers to God. What we encounter over and over again are people crying out to God, giving voice to their doubts and questions.

In Psalm 62 we are told to trust in God and to pour out our heart to him. In Psalm 13 the author laments that God seems so far away from him. Even Jesus’ disciples, the ones that were with him every step along the way, doubted. After Jesus was raised from the dead he appeared to his followers and the Bible tells us that “when they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted” (Matthew 28:17).

Perhaps one of the best examples we find in the Bible about questions and doubt is when a man comes to Jesus asking that his son be healed. The man says, “If you can, please help us.”

“If I can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for him who believes.”

It might have been easy for this man to walk away. But he persists.

“I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” Part of what this father is saying is I have doubts. I have questions. But I want to believe. He doesn’t pretend to be more pious than he really is. He doesn’t try to hide his questions. He comes to Jesus.

And Jesus responds and heals the boy.

So what do you do with the questions and doubts that will inevitably come in your life? Do you pretend they don’t exist? Do you walk away from faith completely? Or do you bring those doubts and questions to God?

Questions Week 1 Day 2

Read: 1 Corinthians 15:50-52

The first question we’ll be looking at during this series concerns hell. Just mentioning hell is enough to make people uncomfortable, no matter what their personal beliefs are. One of the main questions that comes up and which we’ll be addressing more fully throughout this week is - How could an all-loving God send people to hell?

And I think it’s a valid question. At its core, this question is essentially about the character of God and the understanding of hell.

The first thing that needs to be said is that the Bible and Jesus do speak about hell. We might be uncomfortable with the topic, but it would be a mistake to ignore it just because it’s not the most pleasant conversation. I would also say there is a certain amount of mystery surrounding hell, just like there is a certain amount of mystery surrounding heaven. There is a degree to which we will never fully understand heaven or hell while we live on earth, so if you expect this issue to be completely resolved by the end of the week, sorry to disappoint.

This might seem like a strange way to begin addressing this question on hell, but we have to embrace the fact that the Bible is not a textbook and we can’t read it that way. We are sometimes tempted to read the Bible with the goal of finding easy answers to complex questions. The Bible was never meant to be read like a trivial pursuit card, where all you have to do is flip it over to get the one line correct answer.

There are things to learn, to be sure. There are answers. But there is also mystery.

When Paul writes about what happens after we die, he calls it a mystery.

We must always hesitate if we look at heaven and hell as if all the answers are easy. We must learn to embrace the fact that there is a deep mystery involved with hell.

To what degree do you agree that hell has a mysterious aspect?

Questions Week 1 Day 3

Read: Matthew 10:28, Romans 2:12-16

In the Bible, hell is described in many different ways, but we should not take all of these images literally. Whenever the Bible talks about transcendent things like heaven and hell it uses images and metaphors to describe what would otherwise be impossible to understand. The purpose of these images is to teach about some aspect of hell.

This point becomes even clearer when one evaluates the images the Bible uses. The Bible uses a host of metaphors to describe hell, many of which contradict each other if taken literally. For example, hell is described as a place of “darkness” but also a place filled with “fire.” Hell is described as a “pit” but also as a “lake burning with brimstone.” Sometimes the inhabitants of hell are described as being “cast out” (as in excluded from a dinner), “cast down” into a pit, or beaten like a disobedient servant.

The metaphors for hell vary and none of them should be taken as the one, definitive snapshot of what hell is going to be like. Yet, each gives us a piece of the picture, namely that hell is a very bad place where we don’t want to be.

The point of these metaphors is to express that hell is the opposite of everything God desires for humanity.

In fact, the word used for hell in the Bible is another metaphor to express this point. The Hebrew word used for hell in the Bible is *gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley just outside of

Jerusalem that was used as the cities main dump and it was where garbage would be burned. It is the ultimate destiny of people who choose to live a life God never intended for them to end up in a place like *gehenna*.

Don't get too tied into any single metaphor used to describe hell, since each are being used to point in this one direction: hell is a place we don't want to be.

What images normally come to mind in reference to hell? How does the image of gehenna fit into this understanding?

Questions Week 1 Day 4

Read: 2 Peter 3:9, Romans 1:18-25

A major question that many people wrestle with is, "How could an all-loving God send people to hell?"

Something we need to understand is that God doesn't send people to hell, it's something people choose for themselves. People put themselves in hell, not God. The Bible tells us that God does not desire that anyone perish but that everyone will come to God and be saved. Think of it this way, if anyone goes to hell it's against God's will. It is simply a misrepresentation to say God takes delight in people's pain or that God somehow enjoys people being in hell. God says rather clearly, "I take no delight in the destruction of the wicked" (Ezekiel 18:23).

God *allows* people to go to hell, to be sure. But he does this by giving people "their own way." In the book of Romans in the Bible, three different times we are told that God gave these "godless" and "wicked" people over to their lustful desires, to their sinful desires, and to their depraved minds. God allows people to choose their own way, to choose the road they want to travel. All of us become the decisions we make, and God is giving these people over to these decisions.

What God is doing is what they want God to do: leave them alone. And a life apart from God is the definition of hell.

We might conceive of God intervening, of *making* people choose the right path. But this is not the way of God. God does not force himself on anyone. God doesn't make people

do thing they do not choose for themselves. God gives us the freedom to choose. Some people choose God. Others choose themselves. God allows people to choose their own way, and once they have made that choice, God allows people to go their own way.

What do you think it means that God allows people to “go their own way?” What does this look like in people’s lives? What does this look like in your life?

Questions

Week 1

Day 5

Read: Ephesians 1:3-4, Romans 1: 26-32

In yesterday’s reading we examined how God does not desire for people to be in hell, but allows people to choose their own way. This is a challenging view for some people who cannot understand why a loving God would allow people to make choices which might cause them harm.

What this really gets down to is free will. God took a chance and gave humans free will, because it is only with free will that we have the ability to love God. This sounds like an overstatement, but it really isn’t. A lot of things can be forced on a person. A person can be forced to obey. A person can be forced to fear. But a person can never be forced to love. Love can only be given freely. God gave us free will because he desires our love, not our forced obedience or our forced fear. And love can only be given when there’s free will.

But there is another result of this free will, the ability to choose *not* to love God. You cannot remove the negative possibility without removing free will. It is only when we have the option to choose either way that we have the option to choose at all.

And some people choose roads that lead to hell.

For example, an alcoholic might love to drink more than he loves his wife and children. He might prefer the bottle to his family and work and home. He might, in his heart, wish everything and everyone would go away and leave him alone. This man might even believe he is happier with the bottle and nothing else than to have everything but not the bottle. So he chooses to drink. And in the end he gets what he wants and is left alone. He gets what he wants and is left with his privilege, but he is left with it to suffer.

This is hell.

This is why the good news of God is such good news, because we are able to choose a different way. We have the ability to choose a different path. We have the ability to choose love. We have the ability to choose God because God first chose us. God gives us a way to get out from under our choices and to break free from the decisions we've made.

What are ways that people choose hell for themselves? How does this support or challenge your understanding of hell?

**Questions
Week 1
Small Group Guide**

1. What are some topics that always seem to start fights among people?
2. What was your understanding of hell when you were a child? How did you learn about hell growing up?
3. What are some images that come to mind with regard to hell?
4. To what degree do you have questions about hell? How much have you (or do you) wrestle with this weeks question about a loving God sending people to hell?
5. What are ways that people choose hell for themselves? How does this support or challenge your understanding of hell?
6. What do you think it means that God allows people to “go their own way?” What does this look like in people’s lives? What does this look like in your life?

Questions

Week 2

Day 1

Read: John 8:32,

We are in the second week of “Questions,” where we’ve been looking at some of the questions that arise during our lives. This week we’ll be looking at the question “Are faith and science incompatible?” I think it’s fair to say that what this question really gets down to, at its core, is “Does science make faith irrelevant?” This question is phrased well by physicist Steven Weinberg when he wrote:

I am all in favor of a dialogue between science and religion, but not a constructive dialogue. One of the greatest achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for an intelligent person to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious.

There are a lot of people who struggle with the conflicts between science and faith. People, convinced that science answers all of the tough questions of life, have walked away from their faith.

The way science attempts to find truth is through what is called the scientific method, where theories must be tested, verified, and repeatable. You first create a hypothesis, test the hypothesis through repeatable experiments, verify the results to determine if your hypothesis was correct, and you have to be able to repeat those results, normally by a different set of scientists than the first. This is the scientific method.

But think of all the realms of information this leaves out of scientific inquiry. We are given the impression science can find every type of truth, but think about history. You can’t test or repeat history through experiments. Or how about things that are introspective? Science can’t answer why we fall in love, or why people have hope, or how people have faith. Science can’t address topics of morality, of what is right or wrong. None of these fit into the scientific method, but we all know they exist. We’ve lived out our own history. We’ve been in love or felt hope. We know, deep down, when something is morally right or wrong.

Of all the questions science can’t answer perhaps the biggest one is “why.” Science can answer some of the “how” questions but it can never answer the ultimate “why’s”. Why are we here? Why are we alive? Why do we value love, even when it costs us so much? Why do hot dogs come in packs of ten but hotdog rolls come in packs

of eight? Even if science created a time machine and we were able to go back and actually watch how the world came into being, it wouldn't answer the question of why it happened. Science can reveal a part of truth, but it cannot reveal it all.

I hope this week that we'll be able to engage with debate between science and faith in a way that will be helpful.

When you think about seeking truth, how does this normally happen? What type of "truth" do you think you personally value the most?

Questions Week 2 Day 2

Read: Genesis 1:1-3, Revelation 4:8

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. This is how the Bible begins, with the creation of everything by God. It's interesting to note that God begin by creating light.

As we look at the relationship between faith and science these are two important things to notice, that there was a beginning and that in the beginning there was light.

They don't sound very important, but we need to pay attention to them. There was once a theory presented by Isaac Newton that the universe was infinite. With this theory, the universe was understood to have always existed. There was no beginning or end.

A new theory came about with Einstein that changed this view. No longer was the universe considered to be infinite, but expanding. Einstein continues to say that the entire universe started with a beam of light, a photon, which exploded with such amazing and tremendous force that it moved outward in space.

What Einstein theorized and what modern scientists have verified hundreds of times over is that at some point there was a beginning. In the midst of the modern intellectual world is one of its greatest mind saying there was a beginning. And more than that, not just any beginning, but in the beginning there was light.

Science is affirming the Bible.

There's something else to add to this picture. The second law of thermodynamics states that everything is moving toward entropy, that is, that everything is running out of energy and running down. The whole universe is winding down.

Another piece of Einstein's theory is about how all time is relative to motion. This means that when there was no motion before that first initial moment of creation there was no time, therefore *there was a time before there was time*. And if the universe is grinding to a halt, working its way downward, *then there will be a time when time will be no more*.

Again, the Bible is affirmed by science.

What does it mean for you that science is not in conflict with the Bible but affirms it?

Questions Week 2 Day 3

Read: Colossians 2:4

One of the main issues that come up when discussing faith and science is evolution. It's become a linchpin in both the world of science and faith. In the world of science, anyone who doesn't buy completely into evolution is painted as a mental midget. In faith, anyone who doesn't completely disagree with evolution is a heretic. We have to get past all of these stereotypes so that we can look at the topic with clarity and objectivity. We need to not be deceived by fine sounding arguments, no matter what side is making the argument.

The first thing we need to do is learn how to define evolution, which is harder than it might at first appear. Evolution can be thought of in two different ways: microevolution and macroevolution.

Microevolution is evolution of small traits over a small period of time. For example, you can conduct an experiment where you are able to change or alter certain traits of an organism through selective breeding. And so, over a relatively short period of time, one

can breed dogs to be bigger, crops to be more durable, and horses to be faster. These small changes are observable.

But macroevolution is something else entirely. Macroevolution is what is talked about as the reason why life emerged from non-life. Microevolution, or these small changes, is sometimes used as a way of arguing about evolution. We can change the color of fruit flies in a lab so its possible that life emerged from non-life. But we have to realize that one is not tied to another. There is no doubt that microevolution exists, we can see it and test it. But microevolution does not automatically imply macroevolution.

We need to keep an eye on that word evolution. There are many fine sounding arguments that we need to evaluate critically.

What is your understanding of evolution? What (if anything) does this mean for your life and faith?

Questions Week 2 Day 4

Read: Psalm 139

One of the main components to life is DNA. DNA (or Deoxyribonucleic acid) is the blueprint for life. The codes written in DNA use a four-letter system to encode for the proteins that make life possible. This genetic code is in every single one of the one hundred trillion cells in your body and each cell holds the entire code. Each cell holds the whole library of instructions on how to make every protein of which your body is made. When a need arises, the cells access the information it needs and makes the proper protein.

What we have with DNA is a code of information. It's a language. We know from our experience we communicate with twenty-six letters, but computers communicate with two, 1's and 0's, and DNA communicates with 4 letters. These four letters are combined in such a way to make proteins. In order to make just one protein you need between 1200 and 2000 bases or letter combinations. That's a lot of info.

This might not sound earth shaking but this is one of the critical questions with regard to the origin of life because the information is what makes molecules into something that actually functions.

Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft once said that DNA works just like a computer program, only more complex than anything they'd ever made. And remember that Bill Gates used intelligent and purposeful programs to make this information. Where you find information you find intelligence behind it.

What does it mean to you there you were fearfully and wonderfully made? How does the complexity of DNA fit into that mindset?

**Questions
Week 2
Day 5**

Read: 1 Corinthians 13

Evolution, with all of its scientific detractors, perhaps faces its largest objections from the world of social sciences. Evolution relies on survival of the fittest to determine who is the most suited to pass genetic material to the next generation. This is called natural selection, where nature “selects” who lives and dies because of how well adapted they are to their environment. Yet, what sort of implications does this mean for us?

What would it look like if we truly lived out evolution? What would it look like if humans followed natural selection in their own lives?

It would look something like Nazi Germany.

The whole idea behind the “super race” of Nazi Germany was to eliminate anyone they considered inferior from the gene pool. Anyone who was disabled, handicapped, culturally different, racially different, or religiously different was eliminated in some of the most brutal ways possible.

The bottom line is this: there is an inverse relationship between love and power. If you want to have power over someone, don't fall in love with that person. If there is a

relationship between a husband and wife where she loves him dearly and he doesn't love her at all, whose in control? He is, of course, because he's in a position of dominance. She'll do anything for him out of love, but he doesn't care. He's in the drivers seat. You cannot express love and power at the same time.

Evolution and natural selection, take to their logical conclusion, lead to seeking power in order to survive. This is the opposite of the message of the Bible. In the Bible we are not called to seek power. We are actually not even called to try and survive. We are called to love. We are called to set aside everything, even our lives, for the sake of love.

Read 1 Corinthians 13, which is entirely about love. Think about how love is described in this chapter of the Bible and how it compares with seeking power or survival.

**Questions
Week 2
Small Group Guide**

1. Did you enjoy science classes in school? Why or why not?
2. In what ways do you think science affects your daily life?
3. How do you understand the relationship between science and faith?

Read Psalm 139, 1 Corinthians 13

4. What does it mean to you there you are fearfully and wonderfully made?
5. Given some of the examples from this week, how is this idea reinforced?
6. How is love described in the Bible in 1 Corinthians 13?
7. How does this conflict with the implications that evolution and “natural selection” have?

Questions
Week 3
Day 1

This week we're going to look at a very difficult, especially in our culture. It's the question, "Is Jesus the only way to God?"

One of the worst insults leveled against someone in our world is to be called a bigot. No one wants to be thought of as small-minded, opinionated, or maybe worst of all, intolerant. Perhaps this is why our question for this week is so difficult, because people are often called these names for answering it.

This question is phrased in a number of different ways. Sometimes you'll hear the statement that "all roads lead to God." Or maybe you've heard the argument that as long as you believe earnestly, it doesn't matter what you believe. Or perhaps you've heard it said that all faiths hold a piece of truth and God is revealed through all religions.

These are really all ways of asking the same question with regard to Jesus. Is he one of many different paths to God or is he the only way?

After all, there are a number of different faiths, all of which claim to lead to or reveal God. There have been people across cultures and history that have claimed an experience with some sort of deity. Where does Jesus fit in?

It's a question some people reading this are, undoubtedly, wrestling with. I hope that this week is a chance to look at what the Bible has to say about this important question. Yet, even if you are not personally working through this question of faith, I'm sure you know someone who is. It's become a central question asked of the church and of Jesus today.

To what degree do you wrestle with the question of whether Jesus is the only way to God?

Questions
Week 3
Day 2

Read: Matthew 7:13-23, John 10:7-10

One thing we need to understand is that no matter what belief system someone adopts, they will be making the claim that their system is right and that everyone else's system is wrong. If Islam is correct than billions of non-Muslims are wrong. If Orthodox Judaism is correct than billions of Gentiles are wrong. If it's correct to approve of multiple belief systems at once because they're all valid ways of achieving spiritual enlightenment than billions of Christians, Jews, Muslims (as well as others who believe their faith holds truth exclusively) are wrong.

Every time we make a claim about faith we will automatically be making a statement about other such claims. If Christianity is put under the microscope because of it's exclusivity, it will not be there alone.

This relates to a major objection to the claims of Jesus: that Christianity is too narrow. We must understand that narrowness does not automatically mean something is wrong. Jesus speaks about narrowness when he says that the road to life is narrow and not everyone will find it. What Jesus is saying is that not all roads lead to life, only the narrow road. As unpopular as it is to talk about, Jesus says that not everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus goes on to say that only those who listen to and obey his teaching will enter the kingdom of heaven. Even those who call out to him as "Lord" and who preformed great feats in his name are not necessarily on the right road. Jesus tells them, "I never knew you."

It's a sobering thought, and one that we avoid addressing. But it's part of the teaching of Jesus. What Jesus teaches is that those who are on the right road and who will enter the kingdom of heaven are those who Jesus knows.

What is your reaction to Jesus' teaching on the narrow road? What road are you on?

Questions
Week 3
Day 3

Read: John 14:6-9, John 10:30-33

Another way to think about this week's question is through the statement, "aren't all religions essentially the same?"

Religious beliefs and practices differ from culture to culture, but does the "how" of religion matter if they all are working towards the same goal? People base this idea on the thinking that there are different religious roads, varying in route, but all leading to the same place, to God. The "stuff" of each faith might differ such as prayer, worship, church, etc., but don't they all preach love, peace, and compassion towards fellow human beings and that we'll all ultimately end up in the same place (heaven)? The idea that most religions encourage love and kindness (as opposed to hate and cruelty) may be true, but with clear thinking can we say they are all the *same* because they are working towards the same goal? If all religions are the same, then not one of them can claim exclusivity of truth.

Can we rationally say that all religions are equally valid? Some people believe all religions are the same based on assumptions and generalizations without any knowledge of what different religions affirm or deny. How can Buddhism be true when it *denies* the existence of a personal God and at the same time Christianity be true when it *affirms* the existence of a personal God? Can there be a personal God and not be a personal God at the same time? The person who believes that all religions are the same does so by ignoring (or being unaware of) clear contradictions between them. This line of thinking is irrational.

Jesus says that he is the way, the truth, and the life, and also that he and God are one. These claims are clearly inconsistent with other faiths. Before we buy in too deeply in the slogans of our culture we need to think clearly about they mean.

Have you ever heard the saying that "all religions are the same?" What is your reaction to this thought?

Questions
Week 3
Day 4

Read: Jeremiah 17:9, Colossians 2:8

We tend to live with the idea that if something seems real to me, if it's something that I'm keenly aware of, I must take it seriously and investigate it further. Our initial reaction to any personal experience is not to consider it false and dismiss it, but to embrace it.

Basically, we tend to think of our experiences and perceptions as being true. We typically assume that if something seems true it must be unless we're given a good reason to question it.

The Bible teaches that our experiences, feelings, and thoughts are not always reliable. Yet, we often want to use these experiences as a basis for our faith. People sometimes don't like the idea or "feeling" that not everyone is on the right road in their life. We don't like the "feeling" that Jesus is the only way to God. It's not a comforting thought. And so some people alter their faith to fit this feeling.

One thing we must know is that we will not experience something from God that contradicts the Bible. Sometimes people will "feel" that something is right for them or their faith, but which contradicts the Bible. This is not from God. Our experiences and thoughts will affirm and support our beliefs and faith, but God will not reveal himself to you through your feelings in a way that contradicts what's found in the Bible.

This becomes even more problematic because we tend to have an inflated view of ourselves and human nature in general. We rely on ourselves more than we should. We rely on our own understanding and our own sensibilities to determine what is right and wrong, including this claim by Jesus that it is only through him that we may come to God. We need to allow God to form our faith.

How much do you allow your feelings and experiences to influence your faith and what you believe regarding Jesus?

Questions
Week 3
Day 5

Read: John 14:5-14

There is a thought that pervades society which states that truth changes from one person to another. Sometimes people say "It may be true for you, but it is not true for me." But our thoughts and feelings about what is true doesn't change whether something is true or not. Simply believing something cannot make it true. We believe something because it is true, not the other way around. I don't mean to sound harsh, but what you or I believe makes absolutely no difference on what is true.

We might be hesitant to point toward Jesus as being the only way to God, but Jesus had no such hesitations. Over and over again we see Jesus in the Bible making some very strong claims about himself. Yet, many people seem to be unaware of just how drastic these claims are.

Jesus makes the statement in John 14:6 that "No one comes to the Father except through me." This is a universal truth. It applies to everyone, even if they don't believe it.

One of the main objections to the claim that Jesus is the only way to God is a common belief today that God will accept people no matter what they believe, as long as they are sincere in that belief.

Sincerity, however, cannot determine whether something is true. It's possible to be sincerely wrong. Faith is only as good as the object to which that faith is directed. It's all too easy to find examples in our everyday lives that prove this point. People put their faith in the wrong person and they get swindled out of their money or betrayed. People trust a product, which ends up injuring them.

We all know what it's like to put our trust into something or someone who disappoints us.

Jesus tells us that it is only through him that we have access to God. This isn't a matter of just believing sincerely, it's a matter of what (or to me more specific *who*) we believe in.

The Bible teaches us that sincerity of belief does not replace having the right focus for

our beliefs. Confucius was once known to have said his followers could forget him as a person so long as they remembered his teachings. Jesus makes it clear that what we think about him makes all the difference.

Do you find this week's question challenging or encouraging? What is your response to Jesus' claims about himself?

**Questions
Week 3
Small Group Guide**

1. In advertising, extravagant claims are often made. What are some of the most outrageous claims you've ever heard?
2. When you were growing up, how was Jesus talked about, if at all, in your house?

Read: John 14: 5-14, Matthew 7:13-23

3. To what degree do you wrestle with the question of whether Jesus is the only way to God?
4. What are some of the potential reactions people have to the claim that Jesus is the only way to God? Have you encountered any of these in your life or in the lives of others?
5. Have you ever heard the saying that "all religions are the same?" What is your reaction to this statement?
6. How do you react to the claims of Jesus found in the Bible, some of which are pretty startling? What is your response to these claims?

Questions

Week 4

Day 1

Read: Psalm 57

Over the last several weeks we've been looking at some of the deep questions about God, faith, and Christianity. This week we'll be looking at one of the most challenging questions someone can ask about God. It's the question, "If God is all powerful and perfectly loving, why is the world so messed up?" Why is there so much pain? Why are there so many broken hearts and broken homes and broken lives?

It doesn't take much to grasp why this question is so prominent in our lives. Just turn on the nightly news and you'll see enough stories filled pain and suffering to validate that this question is one worth asking.

And as if it wasn't bad enough that the world is so messed up, the church, in general, doesn't seem to be a whole lot better. If God is intimately involved in the world and if the church is part of his plan to heal and restore the world, what's gone wrong?

How can all of the garbage we see in the world coexist with God?

During this week we'll be looking at this question from several different angles. First, why is there evil to begin with? Second, why is the church just as messed up as the rest of the world? Third, how does free will factor in to this equation? And finally, what about earthquakes and famines?

Each of these questions could easily be the topic of an entire book, so I encourage you to use this week's readings as a springboard to further conversations, research, and reading on the topic.

I think it's also worth mentioning that it's perfectly understandable, in the face of pain and tragedy, to react with anger and doubt. The Bible records the honest questions and doubts of many of its heroes, people such as Job, David, and Jeremiah. Even Jesus questions God in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he dies. God is not threatened by our anger or our questions. Yet, I hope we can all move past these initial reactions to where we are able to engage fully in seeking God's truth about our world and our lives.

To what degree do you struggle with the question for this week?

Questions
Week 4
Day 2

Read: Galatians 5:13-14

If God made the world, why is there so much suffering in it? Why is a world created by a perfect and loving God so filled with evil? When we look at the world and all of the pain and junk in it, who is ultimately responsible? My contention is that we cannot place that responsibility on God.

Part of what this comes down to is God's desire that we have the ability to love, to love him and each other. In order for us to have the ability to love, God had to give us free will, free choice, because it is only in the ability to choose love openly that love can ever exist.

God doesn't want a collection of mindless robots, but people who can willingly choose to love. But in order for us to have the capacity to choose love, we must also have the ability to *not* choose love. If God is going to give us the freedom to choose, then he has to give us the ability to misuse that freedom.

To be free is to be morally responsible, and to be morally responsible is to be responsible to (and for) each other. What is the freedom to love or not love except to ability to enrich or harm others, the ability to do good or evil? When we look at the evil and pain that so often fills our world, it's often the evil and pain that was someone's free choice.

So why doesn't God simply intervene every time someone is about to make a choice that will cause pain? The answer is because if God removes the ability to choose either good or evil, than he has removed our freewill. Let's say you picked up a stone. You might be able to use that stone to build a wall or to carve a statue. Or you could use the stone as a weapon to hurt or kill someone. And let's say that at the second you began to use it as a weapon, God turned it into a sponge. What God has done is remove the ability to choose, since you can only choose to do good with the stone. This is, after all, no choice since there is only one option.

The bottom line is we cannot choose love without freedom. It's impossible. But with freedom, the possibility exists for us to choose to *not* love, to do evil and cause pain. This is not God's doing but our own.

How are freewill and love tied together? Does this change your understanding of love and hate, good and evil?

Questions
Week 4
Day 3

Read: John 13:34-35

We might be beginning to grasp why the world is so full of junk, but what about the church? Why is the church so filled with junk, even when it's supposed to be set apart from the rest of the world?

Firstly, it doesn't seem reasonable to hold God responsible for what any church (or any religion) has done. To assume that God is responsible for the actions of people, even people who act "in his name," is to assume that people are mindless robots acting out God's divine will, God's preplanned program, without any responsibility themselves. But as we discussed yesterday, God created us with freewill so we can choose to love him.

The things that God wills and does are always good. Whatever is not good is from someone or something other than God. This seems like an odd distinction to make when talking about God's church, but it's a distinction we need to understand. The fact is that when the "Christian church" does things that are evil in the name of God, this only shows how everything done under the name "Christian" is not necessarily Christian.

Christianity, at its core, is about a relationship with God through Jesus, a relationship that is saving and transformational. This accounts for the tremendous amounts of good the church has done in the world. But there are others who have not encountered this sort of relationship, yet who still called themselves Christian and who commit great evils in this same name. This is against the will of God.

If you've been hurt or wounded by the church or by someone claiming to be acting in the name of God, I want to say I'm sorry. God does not will that evil be done in his name. When the church is functioning the way that God desires, it blesses everyone around it, whether they are a part of the church or not.

In what ways have you seen the church acting in ways that are contrary to the will of God? In what ways have you seen the church being exactly what God desires?

Questions
Week 4
Day 4

Read: John 3:16, Romans 5:6-8

We have spent a good deal of time this week talking about freewill. Yet, all this conversations about freewill might beg the question: “Is it worth it?” With all of the consequences of freewill, why would God take such a huge risk? Freewill created the possibility for people like Hitler and Stalin to come to power and to perpetrate great evils. Is the whole thing worth it?

There is a great risk that exists with the creation of freewill, but this is proportional to its potential for good. If I have the freedom to love only one person, then I have the freedom to hurt only one person. If I have the freedom to love only a little, then I have the freedom to hurt only a little. If I can love people a great deal, then I have the ability to cause a great deal of hurt.

The fact that humans have such a great capacity to do evil is an indication of the incredible amount of potential we have for good. Yes, there were Hitlers and Stalins in the world. But there are also Martin Luther King Jrs. And Mother Teresas. How could you possibly have the latter without the potential for the former?

So is it worth it? I think that everyone knows that to love someone is to open yourself up to being hurt. In loving another person, in raising a kid, in developing deep friendships, we often suffer a great deal. But does this mean that the best option is to avoid all human contact, to live alone, just to be sure that we don't expose ourselves to pain? Of course not. Even with all the pain, people still have children and still want deep friendships. In spite of the pain, we continue to love.

Isn't God faced with the same situation, only on a cosmic scale? Just because the potential for pain and evil exists, does that mean that the best option would have been for God not to create humans in the first place? After all, isn't love the only real reason that makes anything worth creating?

And the risks aren't just for humans, either. Over and over again we see that God suffers from the ill choices and the pain this his creation causes. With great pain God continually calls us back to him, back into a faithful relationship where we can use our freewill to express love to him.

Ultimately, our freedom involved God becoming a human and dying a horrendous death on a cross. Because of God's love, he chooses to suffer the consequences of our freedom. God says that not only is love worth the cost of freedom, its worth dying for.

What are ways that people have suffered because of freewill? What are ways that God has suffered because of it?

Questions
Week 4
Day 5

Read: Romans 8:18-25, Revelation 21:4

So far this week we've been looking at how the freewill God has given us often leads to pain in our world. But what about the things that are beyond our control? What about floods, earthquakes, famines, deformed babies and other things that rely on no ones freewill except for God's? If God is all-loving, why doesn't he take better care of his creation?

There are several things to consider when addressing this question. First, while it's not always apparent, human choice does affect these areas as well. Floods, wildfires, mudslides, and other "natural" disasters are often caused by human apathy toward the environment. Even things like famines would take on an entirely different light if people cared for each other the way God desires. If people "loved his neighbor like himself," how many people would suffer from famines? Experts in the field say that there is more than enough food for everyone in the world, but that a small percentage of people consume the majority of the world's resources. If people lived the way God desires, many of these evils would be eliminated, just by sharing the resources that we have?

Second, there are some limitations inherent in creation. In order for water to quench our thirst, it needs to be dense enough so that we can't breathe it. The air that we breathe must be thin enough so that we fall through it. The stones and rocks that support our homes must be hard enough to stub our toes on. This doesn't make these things evil, only the way they need to be.

Finally, we must understand that the world is not the way it was originally intended to be. The Bible makes it clear that there are powers outside of our physical environment that are at work. These powers, called "angels" or "demons" in the Bible, are not to be

understood as winged babies or horned pitchfork holders. These creatures have freewill as well, and some of them are actively working against the will of God.

In a Christian worldview, the world is not simply a piece of art, but is a battlefield akin to Normandy in World War II. We are living on a battlefield. And on battlefields terrible things happen. Everything becomes a potential weapon and every person becomes a potential victim. The entire cosmos, not only the world, is in chaos. But the promise of the Bible is that one day everything will be set right and there will be no more death or pain or tears. One day the war will end and peace will reign, just as it was intended from the beginning.

But until then all of creation waits and groans, just like a mother waiting to give birth. It waits and groans for the day that everything will be set right again.

In what ways does the world seem like a “battlefield” to you? During our lives we sometimes get glimpses of the world as it was meant to be. How have you experienced this?

Questions Week 4 Small Group Guide

1. Are you the type of person who watches the news and who likes to stay up to date on everything that’s going on in the world? What kind of things are normally in the news?
2. To what degree do you wrestle with the question for this week?

Read: *Galatians 5:13-14, Romans 8:18-25, Revelation 21:4*

3. How are freewill and love tied together? Does this change your understanding of love and hate, good and evil?
4. In what ways does the world seem like a “battlefield” to you?
5. During our lives we sometimes get glimpses of the world as it was meant to be. How have you experienced this?
6. In what ways have you seen the effects of our own freewill in the church, the world, and in our relationships with each other and God?

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are needed to see this picture.

Questions

Week 5

Day 1

Read: 1 Timothy 4:12-14

Throughout the series “Questions” everyone has had an opportunity to write down any question they’re wrestling with. As we’ve read through these questions we’ve found a fair number of questions concerning the Bible. Many of these questions related to the credibility and authority of the Bible. We’ll be spending some time this week addressing these questions.

Let’s say you have objections about the Bible. Perhaps you’ve heard people glibly use the rational “because the Bible says so” to explain or excuse an assortment of things. Maybe you feel like you have to simply swallow blindly that the Bible is true.

Well, let’s take some time to evaluate the Bible not as a document of faith, but as a historical document. I do believe that the Bible is inspired by God, but to use that as a “proof” of the Bible is like using a word to define itself. A good place for anyone who struggles with questions about the Bible to begin with is to investigate it as a historical document.

We’re going to be spending some time this week doing just that, taking a look at the historical authenticity of the Bible and specifically the Gospels, or the stories about Jesus’ life.

There are two main areas that textual critics (people who evaluate writings for a living) look at while addressing the historical veracity of a document: internal and external criteria. Internal criteria pertain to all information inside of the document in question while external applies (obviously) to all criteria outside of the document. This distinction will be made clearer over the next few days.

In each of these areas a series of questions are asked of ancient documents. Over the next couple of days we'll take a closer look at these questions and their answers with regard to the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life as found in the Bible.

To what degree do you struggle with questions about the Bible?

Questions Week 5 Day 2

Read: John 20:1-8

As mentioned yesterday, there are two different types of questions asked about historical documents: internal and external. Today we'll be looking at some of the internal questions that are asked of ancient documents and determine how the Bible stacks up. I've borrowed these internal questions from Dr. Gregory Boyd's book *Letters from a Skeptic*. They are as follows:

1. Was the author in a position to know what he or she is writing about? Does the text claim to be an eyewitness account or is the text based on eyewitness accounts?
2. Does the document contain specific and largely irrelevant details?
3. Does the document contain any self-damaging material?
4. Is the document reasonably self-consistent?

These questions form the backbone of how to critique an ancient document for the internal criteria. Now let's answer these questions with regard to the Bible accounts of Jesus' life (the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), also known as the Gospels.

Question 1 – The book of John directly claims to be an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. The book of Luke tells that the author sought out and investigated eyewitness accounts in order to write “an orderly and truthful account” of the life of Jesus. The books of Matthew and Mark are written from an eyewitness perspective, but they do not state so explicitly. If a book does not even claim any firsthand information, then it should be disregarded as a reliable historical document. The Bible does make this claim.

Question 2 – Firsthand sources typically contain many specific details not central to the story while fabricated material tends to be more general in nature. The Gospels are full

of such extraneous, specific details. Take the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb as an example (found in John 20: 1-8).

The day of the week is given (who cares?) as well as the time of day (does it matter?). John, the author, refers to himself as "the one Jesus loved," another detail of authenticity, since it would have been more clear to simply state his name. John remarked that he and Peter raced to the tomb and that John won the footrace (so what?). John bent over and looked into the tomb (tombs in ancient times were low, a detail that adds authenticity) and John sees strips of linen but doesn't enter (why not, why even include this detail?). Peter catches up and enters the tomb to find the burial shroud (irrelevant detail, what was Jesus wearing?). More than that, the cloth was folded and separate from the linen (is there any detail more irreverent than this, that Jesus folded his burial shroud before leaving the tomb?). Finally, John enters the tomb (who cares what order they entered?).

These details add nothing to the content of the story and are added with the author's recollection. This, again, adds tremendous levels authenticity. These sorts of details are littered throughout the Gospels.

Question 3 – The Bible is full of self-damaging material that would have been removed if the account was written later or was a fabrication. In the passage we just looked at the first person to discover the empty tomb was a woman (Mary Magdalene), which would have damaged the claims of a risen Jesus in ancient times, since the word of a woman was not considered trustworthy. The disciples are consistently shown in a negative light, they just don't seem to get it. There are also details included in the Gospels that would not have been included if one was fabricating a story to convince people Jesus was God, such as Jesus crying out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is a difficult teaching and it would only make sense to include this quote if Jesus actually said it.

Question 4 – The Gospel accounts are amazingly consistent across the four books, yet each contains significant differences. If the story isn't true, where does the consistency come from? If they were written together, the difference would have been smoothed out or deleted, so where do the inconsistencies come from? This is a sign of authenticity.

I hope you're beginning to see that the Gospel accounts stand up very well to internal textual criticism.

How might it be helpful to evaluate the Bible in terms of it being a historical document as well as being inspired by God? What is your reaction to the question related to the internal criteria of an ancient document with regard to the Bible?

Questions

Week 5

Day 3

Read: Psalm 119:104-106

Yesterday we looked at the internal criteria used to assess an ancient document. Today, we'll look at the external criteria. Again, there are several questions used to determine the validity of a document. These questions include:

1. Would the authors of the document have had motive for fabricating what they wrote?
2. Are there any other sources outside of the document which confirm material in the document and/or which substantiate its genuineness?
3. Does archeology support material in the document?
4. Could contemporaries of the document falsify its account, and would they have motive to do so?

So, once again, how does the Gospel accounts stand up to these questions.

Question 1 – What possible reason did the authors (Jesus' disciples) have for fabricating the Gospel accounts? Far from gaining anything from this, they suffer greatly for it. Why would the disciples create a lie and then maintain that lie in the face of severe persecution? There are no compelling reasons to think the disciples fabricated the Gospels for their own gain. There are virtually no scholars (Christian or otherwise) that doubt the disciples sincerity.

Question 2 – Numerous sources in the second century attest to the authorship of the Gospels. There is also information about Jesus, the early church, and the disciples from accounts outside of the Bible including: Tacitus (ca. 55-120), Suetonius (early second century), Josephus (ca. 37-97), Thallus (mid first century), Pliny (early second century) and ancient Jewish writings against Christianity (called the Talmud). Each of these helps substantiate the Gospel accounts.

Question 3 – There are no conclusive archeological finds that refute any biblical account. There are, however, many that support the Bible. There are too many example to list, but one of note is the census taken under the governor Quirinius which resulting in Jesus being born in Bethlehem. It was believed that archeological finds refuted this claim, but further evidence strongly supports this historical event described in the Gospels.

Question 4 – There were many different people and groups that wanted to undermine Christianity and the claims made in the Gospels, if they could have. Judaism viewed Christianity as a cult that needed to be stamped out. Why not just present the body of a dead Jesus and extinguish Christianity once and for all? Yet, in spite of the opposition, Christianity spread like wildfire. Even those that opposed Jesus never discredited his miracles or even that his tomb was empty, only that he accomplished these things through trickery, the power of Satan, or that the disciples stole the body (but remember, what did they have to gain from pretending that Jesus rose from the dead?). If the claims were false and there was strong opposition, it stands to reason that the opposition would have exposed the falsehoods.

To sum all of this up, internally and externally the Gospel accounts are good sources of history and are reliable documents. And this has nothing to do with the Bible being God's word or being "inspired," it's just history.

Faced with history, we must face the choice that Jesus was a demonic trickster fooling his way into people's faith (and getting killed for it), or he was who he said he was, the Son of God.

Do you find the answers to the questions for the last several days convincing? How do the answers to these questions fit with how you normally think about the Bible?

**Questions
Week 5
Day 4**

Read: Matthew 13:33-35, Mark 4:33

One of the objections people sometimes have about the Bible is about the miracles and "myths" in the Bible. After all, how can you trust a document that is filled with supernatural and (for some literally) unbelievable stories?

First of all, we have to understand that the miraculous things we read about in the Bible were not commonplace back then any more than they're commonplace now. God parted the Red Sea *once*. God created a giant fish to swallow a disobedient prophet *once*. God

saved three faithful men from the flames of a furnace *once*. We sometimes get the impression that these things happened all of the time because they are recorded in the same book. This impression is false, as indicated by the reaction that normally accompanies these miraculous feats, which is always amazement, doubt, and fear.

Second, we must realize that we've bought into a very misguided idea that the Bible must be 100% literal in order to be 100% inspired by God. In the Bible, God uses poetry, songs, metaphors, and symbolism in order to reveal some aspect of truth about himself. There is no reason to believe that God must limit himself to the genre of historical literature as a means of revealing himself. If you're familiar with how Jesus taught you see this point expressed another way. Over and over again Jesus teaches by telling stories, not stories that are literally true but that are true in a much deeper (and more important) way.

This begs the questions, of course, how do you know what is literal and what is symbolic? This is an important question, but in the end, not very much depends on it. You see, we have bought into the mindset that everything must be literal to be true instead of believing that it's true in the deepest sense simply because it's God's word and must, therefore, be taken seriously.

So, if you have a problem with the story of creation because there's a talking snake, remember that the point of the story is not about a snake's ability to talk, but about sin, disobedience, temptation, and turning away from God. This story is incredibly profound. Is its ability to teach us and guide us determined solely on whether the talking snake is literal or not? I hope we don't get so caught up into determining the literalness of these sorts of details that we miss the real point of the story in the first place.

This touches onto the point of who authored the Bible. Again, I don't mean to downplay this question, but very little hangs on this. Some people believe that Moses authored the first five books of the Old Testament while others do not. But what does it change? Does it change its impact of the book of Genesis if Moses didn't write it? Does it make it less God's word? I don't think so.

I know this is challenging to many people, but remember that the Bible was not written in our modern (and now postmodern) times. We sometimes place importance on things that Biblical writers would not have. I hope none of us miss the forest for the trees. Don't let small details get in the way of letting the Bible instruct, lead, and inspire you into a deeper relationship with God.

To you, what degree does the inspired nature of the Bible rely on a completely literal translation of the entire Bible?

Questions

Week 5

Day 5

Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-17

Another question that often arises about the Bible is how it was “put together.” This process is called “canonization” and it is where the Biblical canon (that’s with one “n” not two), the books of the Bible considered authoritative and authentic, was formed. Movies like *The Da Vinci Code* give people the impression that the Catholic Church put together the Bible in the fifth century and that a group of bishops arbitrarily voted on which books were allowed in the Bible and which were not, based primarily on personal or selfish reasons. How could a group of bishops hundreds of years after the books of the Bible were written decide which got into the Bible and which didn’t? How can we trust the Bible in light of this?

There are several misconceptions that we need to clear up with regard to this question. It’s true that a formal list of the canonical books of Bible wasn’t established until the fifth century and that there were a few people who quibbled over a couple of books in the Bible for some time (people still do, by the way).

But the early church recognized and used the books of the Bible as authoritative long before this official forming of the canon. If you looked at nothing except the writings of early church leaders (often known as the church fathers), you could piece together 90% of the New Testament just from quotes in their writing up through the third century. The early church fathers clearly held the Bible as we know it now as authoritative.

In fact, the only reason an “official” canon became necessary was because of a man named Marcion. Marcion hated Jews, hated the Old Testament, and started his own twisted form of Christianity. He also decided to create his own bible. He excluded the Old Testament (which he claimed was written by an evil god) and used only fragments of the New Testament that he would cut and paste together to fit his own self-serving and heretical theology.

Marcion’s movement began to catch on and the leaders of the church had to take a stand on what was and wasn’t true in the New Testament. It wasn’t that the church established a new canon as much as they were confronting a false teaching. The truth is that the canon of the New Testament was acknowledged as inspired almost right from the start. But because of some incorrect teaching and fabricated accounts there was a need to close the canon so that false teaching would not proliferate.

We must also keep in mind that the official formation of the Biblical canon was not something that was done flippantly. These people were dying for their faith and they wanted to be sure that what they were dying for be from God. No one wants to be killed over a lie. They applied pretty stringent criteria on the books in the official canon. Who wrote it? When was it written? Is it consistent with other book of the Bible that are held by everyone as being inspired? Did churches receive it as being inspired right from the start? Does it contain the transformational power of God?

This is the reason why some other book, namely books like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Judas (often known as the Gnostic Gospels), are not included in the Biblical canon because the answers to the above questions found them lacking.

Perhaps you still wonder if we got it right. What if some worthy book was left out? What if some inferior book got in? In the end, all of the evidence and arguments can't help us take a step of faith in trusting that God was just as active in the process of forming the canon as he was in the original process of writing the books. God went to such great lengths to reveal himself to us through Jesus and to save us through the sacrifice of his Son that I have to believe God would also oversee the process of how that information is passed down to us.

There are many more questions about the Bible that can be asked and I hope this week has equipped you to ask them more confidently. Please allow me say one final word concerning this topic. If you have hang-ups or reservations are about the Bible, I would encourage you to open up the book and read it. It's easy to find reasons to *not* read the Bible if you want, people have been coming up with new ones for generations. But I would encourage you to engage fully with the Bible for yourself. Through it God shows himself to us in ways that are both beautiful and powerful.

Do you struggle with the question of how the Bible was “put together?” How has this week challenged, encouraged, or stretched your thinking about the Bible?

Questions
Week 5
Small Group Guide

1. To what degree do you struggle with questions about the Bible?
2. What was your understanding of the Bible when you were a child?
3. What are some of the common questions or doubts people have about the Bible?
4. What value is there in looking at the Bible as a historical document as well as a document of faith?

Read: 2 Timothy 3:10-17, Psalm 119:104-106

5. The Bible describes itself as being useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training as well as being a lamp to our path. Which of these do you most often think of with regard to the Bible and why?
6. After reading this week's daily thoughts, do you feel more equipped to engage with the Bible? Why or why not?
7. In spite of any doubts or questions, how often and how deeply do you engage with the Bible?

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are needed to see this picture.

Questions
Week 6
Day 1

Read: Hebrews 13:5-9, Malachi 3:6

We've been taking some time over the last several week to look hard questions of Christianity, faith, and life during this series called "Questions." Each week we've been encouraging everyone to fill out cards with whatever question they're wrestling with and we'll be spending some time addressing your questions during this week's daily reading guide.

One question that came up over and over pertained to the apparent differences between God as seen in the Old Testament and the New Testament in the Bible. There is sometimes an impression that the God the Old Testament reveals is angry, vengeful, and a God of wrath while the God of the New Testament is a God of forgiveness, patience, and love. After all, isn't the Bible all about one God? Shouldn't he be the same in the Old Testament and the New Testament?

We're going to take some time to look more closely at this question.

One of the things we need to establish before engaging fully with this question is how we read the Bible. Here at CCC we believe that God has revealed himself through the Bible. The Bible is not just a book of inspirational quotes (though it certainly can be inspirational), but is something much more. The Bible is one of the key ways that God revealed himself to humanity and if we are going to learn about who God is we need to read the Bible.

We also have to understand that the Bible teaches that God is unchanging. The Bible speaks of God as being the same "yesterday and today and forever" and God says of himself, "For I am the Lord, I do not change."

So what do we make of this apparent contradiction? We'll spend some time this week probing deeper into this question.

To what degree have you wrestled with the question of the apparent differences between God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments?

Questions
Week 6
Day 2

Read: Proverbs 3:11-12, Proverbs 15:5

We are looking at the question of whether God is different in the Old Testament and the New Testament, since the God of the Old Testament appears to be angry and full of wrath while the God of the New Testament (revealed through Jesus) appears forgiving and loving. Did God change?

What we find when we read the Bible carefully and in it's context is that God is the same in both the Old and New Testaments. In both parts of the Bible, God displays both love and wrath, both forgiveness and judgment.

In the Old Testament, time and again God is called merciful, kind, faithful, compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love (Exodus 34:6, Numbers 14:18, Deuteronomy 4:31, Nehemiah 14:18, Psalm 13:5; 86:5; 108:4, Joel 2:13, just to name a few). Yet, sometimes we get the impression that God is angry or vengeful in the Old Testament because we read stories of God dealing not with individuals, but with the nation of Israel. This requires a shift in our thinking.

What we see in the Old Testament is God treating Israel the way a loving father treats a child. When they (collectively as a nation) willingly disobeyed God and strayed from him, God would punish them. This might not seem very loving, but discipline is not the opposite of love. In fact, the opposite is true. A measured level of discipline that leaves room for growth and learning is a sign of love.

God's response is harder to understand when it's aimed at a nation than when it's aimed at an individual, but God needed to guide and protect the people that he chose to tell the world about him and his love.

This is something that is hard for most of us, but just because God doesn't act the way we would, doesn't make God wrong. Just because God doesn't respond in ways that we understand doesn't make him mistaken. In fact, the opposite is true. If God always acted the way we would or in ways that we understand, what does that say about God?

In what ways might the things we sometimes see as vengeful or harsh actually be a measured level of discipline shown by a loving father?

Questions
Week 6
Day 3

Read: John 10:30, John 14:9

Another factor that plays into this impression that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are different is the proximity we have to God. Let me explain what I mean. While the character and nature of God doesn't change, our ability to see and interact with it does.

Jesus was born to reveal God to us. But why would God need to reveal himself this way? Think of it in this light. Let say you decide to get a fish tank. Anyone who's ever had a fish tank will tell you, it's a lot of work. It's much more complex than filling a tank with water and plopping in some fish. First, you have to make sure the water is at the right temperature. Then you have to check the acidity of the water to make sure the pH is correct. You'll need a water filter to ensure the water stays clean and aerated. Sometimes you need to put in antifungal or anti-algae tablets in to keep the fish healthy. Not to mention the daily feeding of the fish.

Now, you would think that after all of this considerable effort and cost on behalf of these fish that they would show you a little respect. Perhaps they might even show you some love. At the very least you'd expect them to show just a little appreciation. Yet, how do the fish react? More often than not they treat any incursion you make into their world with fear. You're going out of your way to supply and care for these fish but they interpret your every action as hostile. You change the water temperature and the fish react with fear. You add some fish medicine, and they cower in the corner of the tank.

This is how fish react to humans, and the distance between fish and humans is nothing compared to the distance between us and God. Just like the fish, we react the same way to God. God was working for the wellbeing of his people, looking out for and caring for them, but their main reaction was fear. Everything, even when God was acting for the good of his people, was interpreted as an act of anger or hostility.

If you really want your fish to understand you, you need to become a fish. In order for God to express himself fully to us, he became a human. He became just like us. Jesus was born to show us who God is and to show us God's love and mercy in terms we can understand.

How does Jesus' "nearness" help us understand God?

Questions
Week 6
Day 4

Read: Romans 1:18, Micah 7:19,

One thing we see over and over again, from the beginning of the Bible to the end, is that God pours out his judgment and wrath on sin. Our impression is that the God of the Old Testament was full of wrath but that the God of the New Testament isn't. Yet, in the New Testament we read, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

Sometimes I think we have the impression that Jesus doesn't reflect the God of the Old Testament because Jesus is so kind and forgiving. There is a thought that pervades the church that God forgives sin. Maybe your reaction is "of course God forgives sin," but I'd ask you to look again at how sin is spoken of in the Bible. God doesn't forgive sin, he forgives sinners. The difference might seem minor, but it really is huge.

God takes sin very seriously. He doesn't excuse it or ignore it. He doesn't sweep it under the rug or just pretend that it doesn't matter. God saves his harshest words and judgment for sin. The Bible tells us that he dumps sin into the deepest oceans depths. God takes sin and he stomps it under his foot. God takes sin and he separates it from us as far as the east is from the west. God takes sin so seriously that he sent his son Jesus to earth to pay the penalty of sin in our place. Think about that for a second. God drowns sin. God stomps sin. Not the sinner, but God pours out his wrath on sin.

God has always hated sin. God has always saved his wrath for sin. What we see with Jesus is a clearer picture of how God feels about people who commit sins, about how God feels about sinners. With Jesus we learn more about how God feels about people like you and me, people who mess up and sin.

Yet, with Jesus we also get a clear picture of how God despises sin. Jesus wants us to have lives that are free from sin. When a woman was caught in adultery and brought before Jesus, his response was to tell her that he didn't condemn her, but that she should leave her life of sin. The same is true with us.

What is the difference between forgiving sin and forgiving that sinner? How might this change the way we view God in the Old and New Testament?

Questions
Week 6
Day 5

Read: Isaiah 46:9-10, 2 Timothy 3:16

This week we've been having a conversation about the apparent differences between the God of the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is one final note worth mentioning with regard to this topic. Sometimes people get the impression that the Old Testament isn't really important and that it doesn't matter if we read or understand it. After all, doesn't only the New Testament that matter to us?

There are people who want to "give up" on the Old Testament. Sometimes this desire is innocent, since they want to focus only on Jesus. Other times its less innocent. Sometimes people don't want to engage with the difficult questions that the Old Testament can sometimes incite, including the question we've been looking at this week.

I hate to sound harsh, but some people want to "give up" on the Old Testament because they aren't that familiar with it and don't want to put in the hard work of understanding it more.

The bottom line is this, the Old Testament matters. Without the Old Testament we wouldn't understand the traditions and customs that we see in the New Testament and in the life of Jesus. Without the Old Testament we wouldn't understand how God sought after and desired a relationship with his creation and his chosen people. Without the Old Testament we wouldn't have access to the same wisdom and teaching that Jesus used when facing adversaries and trouble in his own life. Without the Old Testament we would miss out on some of the most beautiful poetry and songs ever written, each of which gives us insight into the character of God.

I hope that we would never "give up" on the Old Testament, because it is a part of our religious heritage. It might be hard to understand and it might take some extra effort to engage fully with the text, but if we put that effort forth we will be rewarded with insight and beauty. If you've never read the Old Testament, I encourage you to. Pray through the Psalms. Read stories about the life of David. Read Isaiah to learn more about who God is. Read through the Song of Solomon (if you never have before, this one might surprise you). After all, this whole question of God seeming different in the Old and New Testament is moot if we don't actually *read* them.

How much have you read and engaged with the Old Testament?

Questions
Week 6
Small Group Guide

1. To what degree do you struggle with the question for this week?
2. Describe a time when you saw something at a great distance and then close up. What differences were there in each of these perspectives?

Read: John 10:30, John 14:9, Hebrews 13:5-9, Proverbs 3:11-12, Proverbs 15:5

3. Jesus came to reveal God to us. In what ways does Jesus and the God we see in the Old Testament seem consistent or inconsistent?
4. How does Jesus' "nearness" help us understand God?
5. In what ways might some of the "harshness" of the Old Testament be a loving father disciplining his children?
6. What is the difference between forgiving sin and forgiving sinners? How might this account for some of the differences we encounter between how God is revealed in the Old and New Testaments?

decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

Questions
Week 7
Day 1

Read: Ecclesiastes 4:11-12

We are in the last week of the series “Questions” where we’ve been trying to engage with difficult questions that often come up in our lives. All throughout this series we’ve been encouraging everyone to write down his or her own questions for us to address. This daily reading guide will be looking at one question that arose over and over again which is: “Why do I need the church as long as I love God?”

There is a statement you sometimes hear where people love God and love Jesus but really don’t want anything to do with the church or “organized religion.” What this person often means is that they like the idea of something spiritual and bigger than themselves, but they have no interest in any “human institutions.”

This thought has become popularized within our culture by the level to which we live individualized lives. We are now completely able to live our lives without ever leaving our houses. We can have food delivered, we can download movies to watch, we can pay all our bills online, we can text message our friends, and we can buy new clothes (most likely in a larger size if we never leave the house), all from the comfort of our couch.

What this means for us is that we are capable of living our lives in complete isolation and we can become convinced not only is this acceptable, its preferable. After all, why do we need other people? Other people complicate things. Other people can be annoying. Other people can hurt us or betray us or disappoint us. Who needs the hassle?

Well, for one thing, the Bible says *we* do. The Bible says we need the hassle of other people in our lives. There is no mistaking God knows how annoying and difficult human relationships can be. There is no doubt God knows how painful they can become. Yet, what is affirmed over and over again is that we need to gather together with others. We’ll be taking time this week to look more closely at what the Bible has to say about going to church versus simply believing all on our own.

Have you ever wrestled with the question mentioned above? Do you know anyone who is currently wrestling with it?

Questions
Week 7
Day 2

Read: Hebrews 10:19-25

So what does the Bible have to say about going to church? If I believe in God, read the Bible, and pray, what difference does it make if I go to church?

The Bible addresses this very thing in a book called Hebrews. Hebrews is a letter written to Jewish Christians, that is, people who were Jewish but who came to accept Jesus as their Savior and Lord. While there are parts of this letter that can be confusing or difficult for modern readers, there are other parts that are crystal clear.

In Chapter 10, we begin to see what our faith should look like. Starting with verse 19, the author describes how we are set free by the blood of Jesus, who was given up as a sacrifice for us, and that because of this sacrifice we now have access to God. So what should our reaction be to this wonderful news?

We should draw near to God with confidence and with pure hearts, since the curtain separating us from God has been torn down. We should also hold onto the hope we profess with all of our strength, because we know that our hope is in God and God is faithful. This all sounds pretty good and exactly like we'd expect.

Now let's slow down and look closely at verse 24 and 25 which reads:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

So how should we react to the loving gift of God that set us free? We should think about, ponder, and come up with ways to help each other become more loving. We should look for ways to help each other do good deeds.

And we should also continue to meet together. We should not give up gathering together, but we should come together and encourage each other because there is a day coming when Jesus will return and time will end. Since this day is closer now than it was yesterday (and will be even closer still tomorrow), we should live with an sense of urgency to help each other.

The Bible tells us not to give up meeting together. Don't give it up. Some people have fallen into the habit of not gathering together with others, but don't let that be your story, the Bible tells us.

Perhaps the reason some people have given up meeting together (both today and back when this letter was written) is because they don't feel any urgency. Hebrews says that we should feel the need to meet together all the more because we never know when Jesus will return. How much urgency do you feel?

Perhaps people give up going to church because they have the wrong mindset about church. Church should be inspirational and enjoyable, but what we see in the Bible is that church is also not just a spectator sport. We are called to gather together not only to be encouraged ourselves but also to encourage and build up others.

Whatever the reason, it's clear that the Bible teaches we should never give up gathering together.

**What is your reaction to the idea that we should not give up meeting together?
Have you ever given up church or been tempted to do so? What is your urgency?
What is your mindset toward church?**

Questions Week 7 Day 3

Read: John 13:34-35, Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:11

There is one phrase that comes up over and over again in the Bible. It's a short phrase, so it's easy to miss, to skim right over, but we must not. And it's a phrase that makes it clear that the Christian life cannot be lived fully in isolation.

The phrase is: "one another."

Over and over again, we are commanded to do something with or for "one another." We are told to love one another. We are told to pray for one another. We are told to devote ourselves to each other, to honor each other, and to be humble to one another. We are told to be kind to one another, to submit to one another, and to forgive one another. We

are told to encourage one another, to spur one another on, and to show compassion to one another.

If you wish to serve, honor, and show your love for God, you cannot do it alone. Over and over again, God makes it clear that the only way to fully live out the Christian life is within a community of believers.

Some people want God and not the church. Some people want to worship God alone, without the intrusion of other people. Some people want to follow God in isolation. The Bible makes it clear that this is not possible and even if it was, it is not preferable. There are times when being alone is a benefit to our faith. But over the course of our lives, our faith is played out most completely within the midst of relationships.

To what degree do you think the Christian life can be done alone? To what degree do you try to live as a Christian alone?

Questions Week 7 Day 4

Read: Matthew 16:18, Matthew 28:16-20

I understand that the church has wounded some people reading this. Whether it was through some purposeful act or through neglect, many people have scars from the church. I could not be more sorry about this.

The church is a collection of imperfect people who sometimes say, do, and condone terrible things. I wish it wasn't true, but it is. And if you've been wounded by the church, I want you to know how sorry I am.

But I really hope, whatever your experiences with the church might be, that you don't give up on it. Sometimes people have a bad experience with church and use that experience as a way of validating or supporting their negative feelings toward the church. "You see," someone might say, "it's just like I thought it would be."

Imagine if we did this in other areas of our lives. Imagine if you had a bad doctor's appointment, so you stopped believing in modern medicine and going to the doctors. Or

imagine that school didn't begin the way you had hoped, and so you wrote off the educational system and dropped out of school.

It wouldn't make much sense. We don't seek out or enjoy these bad experiences, but we are able to evaluate these experiences apart from the whole. But that's what we sometimes do with church. If we have a specific bad experience with the church, we write off the entirety of the church. I hope that's not our story. No church is perfect (not even CCC, though we do our best to the best we can). But it's most often through the community of faith that we are able draw nearest to God and to see him working in us and in our world.

And remember, the church was Jesus' plan to reach a hurting world that needs God. The church was not a human invention, but is God's plan to help people drawn near to him.

Have you or someone you know even been “wounded” by a church? How do we sometimes treat the church differently than any other area of our life in this regard?

**Questions
Week 7
Day 5**

Read: John 14:6, John 18:38

One final thought as the “Questions” series comes to a close. I hope this series has been a great opportunity for you to engage with some of the difficult questions of faith. Yet, for some people these sorts of questions are very threatening.

This shouldn't be the case for us. Questions, even hard questions, are not the enemy.

I hope that we all become the sort of people who are always seeking out the truth. Because in the end, we are told that the truth isn't an idea or an answer, but the person of Jesus.

During his life, Jesus was asked the question, “What is truth?” But in the end, it wasn’t a real question, just a rhetorical one to prove a point. The irony is that all the while Jesus is standing right in front of him. Jesus the Truth.

I hope we live out a different story. I hope our questions are real, genuine questions, not flippant or rhetorical ones. I hope our questions are honest and heartfelt. And I hope we allow our questions to lead us to the truth. I hope our questions lead us to the Truth, to Jesus.

What is something that you’ve learned or an area in which you’ve grown throughout this “Questions” series?

**Questions
Week 7
Small Group Guide**

1. Name a time when you had a bad experience with a doctor or a teacher.
2. In general, how would you describe your experience with the church (positive, negative, indifferent) and why?

Read: *John 13:34-35, Romans 12:10, Ephesians 4:32, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 10:19-25*

3. What is your reaction to the idea that we should not give up meeting together?
4. Have you ever given up church, or been tempted to do so? Why?
5. To what degree do you think the Christian life can be lived alone?
6. To what degree do you live out your life alone?
7. What is one thing you’ve learned or one area in which you’ve grown throughout the “Questions” series?

NOTES: