

CHAPTER 9

QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

9. QUESTIONS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

Before reading this chapter, write down briefly what would you say if someone said to you, 'I don't understand the gospel, can you please explain it to me'.

Understanding the gospel

The gospel is profound. It is so simple, and yet so involved. It is of huge importance to us so we should seek to understand it as best as we can.

We need God's help to understand the gospel because it is spiritually discerned (Matthew 16:15–17). However, we need to be careful how we ask Him for help. The disciples asked Jesus many questions and learned much as a result. In contrast to them, the Pharisees asked many questions but were given parables in reply so they did not learn (Luke 8:9–10). They tried to discredit Jesus with their questions while the disciples wanted to know more. God wants to teach us, so if we ask questions in the right way and with the right motives, He will give us answers, sometimes way beyond what we were asking for (Matthew 14:26; Ephesians 3:20).

When we ask questions about God, very often the answers we receive will help us but will not completely satisfy us. This is typical of the way God works. God wants us to trust Him, and we cannot do this if we want everything explained first. Knowledge is important (Hosea 4:6), and it is right to seek it; however, knowledge itself will not substitute for a lack of faith.

In this chapter, we consider a number of common questions and objections people have about the gospel and we attempt to give some answers. Like all answers given in this book, they are imperfect.

Why is God so extreme?

One of the most difficult things about God is the extreme way He judges us. We do not object to the idea that there is life after death. Neither do we object to the idea that God wants to reward and punish people for how they lived. However, what we do object to is the extreme way God rewards and punishes.

God's rewards are out of this world:

1 Corinthians 2:9 But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” (NKJV)

2 Peter 3:13 Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (NKJV)

Yet the punishments, as we have seen earlier, are truly terrible:

2 Thessalonians 1:9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might (NIV)

There is no ‘middle of the road’

At first sight, God’s judgment of mankind seems unfair. We feel unworthy to inherit heaven with all its blessings, and we feel undeserving to suffer the horrors of hell. We expect a sliding scale of rewards and punishments to reflect the good things and bad things we have done, yet we are put into one of two categories and judged accordingly. Jesus used parables to communicate this truth, such as the shepherd dividing his sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:32) and the wheat being separated from the chaff (Matthew 3:12).

The Bible never refers to people as being semi-righteous or half-wicked. We are either righteous or wicked (Proverbs 11:31; 15:29; Ecclesiastes 3:17; Malachi 3:18). The church at Laodicea appeared to fall into a middle category but God rejected them (Revelation 3:13–16). A righteous person can become wicked and a wicked person can become righteous, but no one can be both righteous and wicked.

Ezekiel 33:18–19 When the righteous turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, he shall die because of it. But when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is lawful and right, he shall live because of it. (NKJV)

The Bible maintains that a righteous person does good and a wicked person does evil.

1 John 3:7–8 Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning... (NKJV)

Distinguishing between good and bad people

Our difficulty with God is the way He distinguishes between the righteous and the unrighteous as we cannot see a clear distinction ourselves (Matthew 13:24–30). We know, for instance, that Christians may occasionally sin (Galatians 6:1) and can have wrong priorities (1 Corinthians 3:1–4). We also see people who are not Christians living a very moral life (Luke 18:10–14). Yet God can make a clear distinction between them and with eternal consequences.

Hebrews 4:12–13 For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (NKJV)

The reason why God makes such a distinction is because He judges us according to our intentions and thoughts and not just on the things we do. He can see whether we have a righteous or a wicked heart. Everyone sins before God, but only those who recognise this fact and trust in God's righteousness rather than their own will be saved. Our own righteousness counts for nothing in His sight (Isaiah 64:6), but we will be treated as righteous if we believe on Him.

Romans 4:3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." (NKJV)

The reason why God can so easily distinguish between the righteous and the wicked is because He sees our faith in Jesus Christ.

Why must we believe?

Why is it necessary for us to believe? It seems such an arbitrary thing to do. Why is believing so important to God?

The reason for this is that firstly, God requires a response from us to the gospel. He has, after all, created us with a will of our own. If God did not require us to respond, we would not be obliged to change from our sinful ways.

Secondly, the thing God requires of us is the simplest thing we can do in response to His offer of salvation. If He asked us to do anything at all to be saved, such as to give some money to the poor, we would have to believe Him first before performing the act of giving. Believing requires no possessions, or skills, or a great intellect or physical effort.

Difference between accepting and believing

Although believing in God is a simple thing to do, there is more to it than just asking God to forgive our sins. If it was this way, we could ask every 'god' to help us. We need to ask believing that He will indeed forgive us.

Romans 4:24 (righteousness)...shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead (NKJV)

If we believe in Jesus, we will not consider any other method of salvation. In fact, we would strongly distance ourselves from any alternative. We need to have faith in Him—that means to trust Him with our lives. Some people believe in Jesus with the same level of faith as they believe in other historical figures, but this will not save us. Believing for salvation is more than a simple acceptance of the facts presented when the gospel is preached. We need to wholly trust in God despite anything to the contrary. Our faith will be tested (James 1:2–3).

Why can we not come to God directly?

John 14:6 Jesus said to him, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me...” (NKJV)

Jesus makes it quite clear that no one can approach God without first going through Him. Why is it this way? Why can we not pray to the Father without acknowledging Jesus? Many indeed claim to do this.

We have no direct relationship with God

The reason for this is because we have no direct relationship with God. Our sin comes between us and Him. God is perfectly holy and righteous (Revelation 4:8; Psalm 145:17), and in comparison we are sinful and corrupt (Ecclesiastes 7:20). Because of our sin, God will not come near us nor allow us to come near Him.

Isaiah 59:1–2 Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. (NIV)

One time, Isaiah saw God and described what happened to him.

Isaiah 6:5 ‘Woe to me!’ I cried. ‘I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.’ (NIV)

Isaiah was convicted because he knew he had sinned. He had to have his sin dealt with immediately otherwise he would have died. This happened in spite of him being a righteous man, a prophet of God and someone who God used mightily.

We cannot come unaided into the presence of God simply because He is so holy. We have to have our sins fully dealt with first and for this to happen we need someone to mediate between ourselves and God.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus (NKJV)

Why is Jesus Christ the only way to God?

Many religions purport to know God but without acknowledging Jesus Christ as the only way to God. Could they be right? Are there any other ways we can approach God?

Jesus is unique. When we look at who He is and what He has done, we can see that only He can atone for our sins. It is not possible for anyone else or anything else to do this.

We need someone to pay for our sins

Firstly, we need to recognise we are not able to attain the level of moral perfection God requires of us by what we do. Some people try to obey the law written in the Bible as best as they can and hope that God will overlook the times they fail. But no one is justified before God by the law (Galatians 3:11). Also, we are not able to atone for our own sins because the debt we owe is our own life (Proverbs 20:9). We therefore need to offer something not owned or earned by us.

Secondly, the person or object taking our place must be of at least equal value to us. Some men sacrifice animals for their sin, but they are of less value than man and so cannot substitute for us.

Hebrews 10:4 It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. (NIV)

(In chapter thirteen, we will look at why the Israelites in the Old Testament sacrificed animals.)

Thirdly, the person taking our punishment must be sinless themselves and proven to be sinless. If they sinned, they would need to bear their own punishment. Because we have all sinned (Romans 3:23) this rules out every person.

Psalms 49:7–9 No one can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for them—the ransom for a life is costly, no

payment is ever enough—so that they should live on forever and not see decay. (NIV)

Fourthly, the person taking our place must be willing to die for us. We cannot sacrifice a baby, for example, in our place. This act counts as murder and is a sin in God's sight (Exodus 20:13).

Fifthly, angels or other righteous spiritual beings cannot offer their lives to atone for us. Although they are higher than man (Hebrews 2:7), they cannot die for us as they are spirits (Hebrews 1:7).

No one else can pay for our sins

When we examine the possibilities, we have to conclude that only Jesus can atone for our sins (Revelation 5:1–10). As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus was born of a virgin and did not take on Adam's sinful nature. He remained sinless despite suffering temptation and was therefore proved to be righteous. He did not have to die, but willingly offered Himself as a sacrifice for us. Because Jesus is the Son of God (Matthew 3:17), His value is infinite. Therefore, His sacrificial death is sufficient to atone for every sin of every person who has ever lived.

1 John 1:7...the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. (NIV)

(See also Matthew 26:26–28; John 1:29; 1 Peter 3:18.)

If Jesus was just a man and not the Son of God, His death would only be sufficient to save one other person.

We can only have our sins forgiven through the death of Jesus Christ.

Acts 4:12 Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (NKJV)

Why do people say they know God yet do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Saviour?

Acts 17:22–23 Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and said, “Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the One whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you...” (NKJV)

The people of Athens believed they knew God but Paul had to correct their thinking and reveal the true God to them (Acts 17:22–31). Many people in the world today worship God in all sorts of ways but without acknowledging Jesus Christ as their Saviour. The reason why this happens is because they do not have a personal relationship with Him. They know God exists and they want to serve Him but do so using the traditions of man rather than the revelation of Jesus Christ.

We can know a lot about someone without ever meeting them

We can learn a lot about God through reading the Bible or listening to others talking about Him or even looking at the world He created (Psalm 19). However, we can do this without making our peace with God. We can recognise our guilt and confess our sins to God, but if we do not believe in Jesus Christ, our sins will remain unforgiven and we will still be in bondage to them (Proverbs 5:22–23).

Football fans are well-known for their passion and loyalty. They support their club for many years and see them play many times, yet for the most part, none of the players will ever know them personally. Likewise, religious people can show loyalty and fervency to God without having a relationship with Him. Many call on the name of Jesus Christ and never get to know Him personally.

Matthew 7:21–23 ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” ...’ (NIV)

Some religious people even end up working against God.

John 16:2 They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. (NKJV)

Jesus makes the point that it is not enough to be taught about God, but rather we must be born again (John 3:3).

Why do we have to believe the gospel now?

The gospel conveys with it a sense of urgency. ‘Repent’ is a word requiring immediate attention.

Hebrews 4:7... ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’ (NIV)

We are urged to make an immediate decision rather than postponing it to another day. The urgency arises because if we delay our decision for too long, we could unexpectedly die in the meantime.

John 8:24 “... Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.” (NKJV)

It is too late when we die

In this verse, Jesus makes it clear that we cannot have our sins forgiven after we die. We die either as a righteous person with our sins forgiven or as an unrighteous person still in our sins.

Why do we have to ask God to forgive us before we die? We can start to answer this question by restating the fact that we cannot arbitrarily ask God to forgive us. There has to be a basis for forgiveness and that can only be the atonement of Jesus Christ. God requires us to believe in Jesus Christ in order to have our sins forgiven.

This act of believing can only happen while we are on this earth. When we die we will see God and know He exists and therefore we can no longer believe in Him (consider Luke 23:34). Faith can only work when we do not see our answer (Hebrews 11:1). The demons believe in God (James 2:19), yet we know they are destined for hell (Matthew 25:41; 8:29). There is no atonement available for them. After we die, we will no longer have the opportunity to have our sins forgiven.

Why must we acknowledge our sins?

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.
(NKJV)

We have to confess our sins in order that we can have them forgiven. People have differing views on what actually is sin and so if we have had little teaching on the Bible, we will be unsure ourselves. Basically any disobedience to God, no matter how small, is sin. This includes things we have said or done as a child (Proverbs 20:11; Matthew 12:36). We do not have to remember every wrong thing we have done but rather to acknowledge we have sinned much and need God's help to change.

Why does God need us to confess our sins before forgiving us? Could He not just forgive us without requiring anything from us? If He forgave this way, everyone could be saved. The reason for this is that God respects our free will. He wants to forgive us, but we need to receive his forgiveness. We might not want to be reconciled with Him.

The way David loved his son Absalom is a similar way to how God loves us. Absalom killed his step-brother, Amnon, for raping his

sister, and then fled from David's presence. It took several years for them to be reconciled even though David longed to see him (2Samuel 13:32–39). Later on, Absalom rose up against David to usurp his kingdom from him. When he was finally killed, David mourned for him wishing that he had died instead (2Samuel 18:33). Although David loved him greatly, he could not enjoy a relationship with him because Absalom did not want it.

How do we know God has forgiven us and we will go to heaven?

How can we be sure we will go to heaven? We can be sure because God will always keep His promise (Numbers 23:19). He is completely and utterly faithful and He never lies (Titus 1:2).

Deuteronomy 7:9 “Therefore know that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments...” (NKJV)

Any question at all over our salvation will be in our response rather than God's promise. When we call on God to save us, we do so recognising our utter inability to save ourselves. All we do is believe in God, and the smallest possible amount of faith is sufficient to do this.

Matthew 17:20... I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you. (NKJV)

Our trust should be in God and not ourselves

Questions start to occur if we look at the things we have done and trust in our own works to save us. Then we will understandably doubt. Jesus spoke the following parable to people who trusted in their own works to save them.

Luke 18:10–14 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’ And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (NKJV)

Knowing we are saved

Although we cannot trust in our own good deeds to save us, what things we do can indicate whether we have a righteous heart. If we have been born again, we will respond to His call (Luke 14:16–24), believe the Bible (Luke 16:19–31), strive to enter the Kingdom through the difficult way (Luke 13:24–30), do good (Matthew 25:31–46), do God’s will (Luke 12:42–48), use the talents God has given us (Matthew 25:14–30), forgive others from our heart (Matthew 18:23–35), prepare ourselves for the return of Jesus Christ (Matthew 25:1–13), love our brother (1 John 4:20) and will not love the things of the world (1 John 2:15). Additionally, we will confess that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 5:1) and the Son of God (1 John 4:15), and we will confess Him before other people (Matthew 10:32–33).

If we find it difficult to do these things, we might be trying to work out our salvation in our own strength and not letting God work through us.

Another way we can know we are saved is through an inward sense God is speaking to us.

1 John 5:10 He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself... (NKJV)

John 10:27 (Jesus speaking) My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. (NKJV)

Having said this, there are times when God is distant from us (see for example Matthew 27:46; Psalm 22:1; Job 23:1ff). In this case, it is worth reminding ourselves that we are saved by believing on God and nothing more. Jesus said the following statement to a woman who was a sinner and who had just come to Him and washed His feet:

Luke 7:50 . . . “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace.” (NKJV)

God greatly desires us to be saved. He is not trying to make it difficult for us to inherit the Kingdom.

Luke 12:32 “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom . . .” (NKJV)

There can be no stronger confirmation of our salvation than the promises of God in the Bible. His word alone created the heavens and the earth (Hebrews 11:3), and the same word is therefore well able to save us. Jesus gives us the following assurance:

John 6:37 All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. (NIV)

Questions to consider

1. How much convincing do we need from God before we start to believe Him?
 2. When is it right to ask questions of God and when is it wrong?
 3. Are we able to explain to someone why Jesus Christ is the only way to God?
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