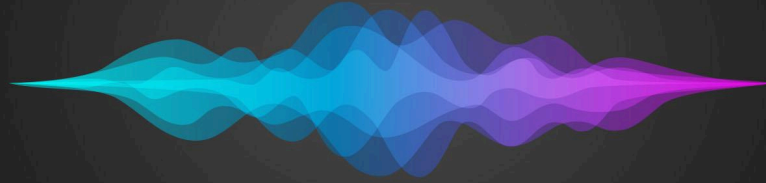


I've Been Meaning To Ask



I've Been Meaning to Ask...? Series

Some of the best conversations start with good questions, yet too often we refrain from asking the deepest questions of our hearts. Sometimes it's out of fear for what we'll hear and other times it because we don't want to appear weak or ignorant. When that cancer diagnosis strikes, we don't really want to ask, "How long do I have to live?" In our families, when squabbles arise, we tend to avoid asking, "Hey, can we talk? Can we work this out?" We all have questions we've been meaning to ask, but have never voiced out loud.

The same is true of faith. Christian or not, too often, when it comes to faith, we avoid those deep questions that always seem to linger just below the surface. Questions, if we're honest, we all wonder about, but feel too embarrassed or silly to ask. Sometimes we equate questions with doubt or ignorance, or we've been taught, "You just don't ask such questions."

We've crafted this worship series around the belief that voicing our questions - our toughest questions - actually tugs us forward in faith. For far too long, Christianity has been characterized by a blind certainty. "You've just got to believe!" your grandmother told you. Yet, the most celebrated characters in the Bible voiced their questions directly to God. In Genesis Abraham questioned whether God was really going to make good on his promise to give him and Sarah a son. In the book of First Kings, Elijah questioned whether or not God was still with him. In Luke, Mary had her doubts about how she could be pregnant with the promised Messiah asking the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34 NRSV). In the Gospel of John, Andrew questioned how Jesus could feed the five thousand with only five fish and two loaves of bread. In Acts, Peter had questions about reaching out to the Gentiles.

From the very beginning, questions have always been a natural part of believing. Christian theologian Paul Tillich wrote, "Doubt isn't the opposite of faith; it is an element of faith." More recently, Anne Lamott wrote: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, but certainty. Certainty is missing the point entirely."

Timothy Keller put it this way: "A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection. Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts — not only their own but their friends' and neighbors'. It is no longer sufficient to hold beliefs just because you inherited them. Only if you struggle long and hard with objections to your faith will you be able to provide the grounds for your beliefs to skeptics, including yourself, that are plausible rather than ridiculous or offensive. And, just as important for our current situation, such a process will lead you, even after you come to a position of strong faith, to respect and understand those who doubt."

Questions actually deepen our faith. Rather than drawing us from God, questions move us closer to discovering who God really is. Questions are the sign of a faith that is real and alive and curious. Questions tug us forward in faith.

Series Graphics:

Series Outline

Week 1: Am I enough for God?

Week 2: Do all religions lead to the same God?

Week 3: Is church and the Bible necessary?

Week 4: What about heaven and hell?

Week 1: Am I enough for God?

Romans 5:8

Romans 8

We're going to start this series with one of the most basic question far too many people wrestle with:

Am I enough for God?

Or to put it another way: Have I done enough for God? Have I lived a life worthy enough for God to accept me? Is my past too messy? My family too messy? What about my addiction or my unplanned pregnancy? Do I pray, give, serve, go to church or read my bible enough for God? And, if not, what do I have to change to be a real Christian? Because, honestly, when I come to church I often feel like an imposter.

To answer this question, we're going to talk about love.

There are two different kinds of love.

The first type of love is: **A love that loves because the object is valuable.** It's a love that is based on the value of or what the object of my affection has done. This is the most common type of love. I love their pizza! - that pizza is the best pizza on the planet. I just love my new granite countertops. I love Maroon 5 - they are the greatest band of all time. There is a love that is based in the value of the thing we love.

There's a second type of love, though: **A love that loves and gives value to the object.**

Think of your favorite teddy bear or doll or blanket. You carried that ragged old thing around - drug it through the house - until its eyes popped off, it's been repaired and patched 100 times. It's ragged and ugly and stinks, but you can't imagine parting with it. Why? Because you've assigned infinite value and value to your teddy.

How does God's love work?

Most people believe that God loves with that first kind of love: Love that love because the object is valuable. God loves you when you are worthy or worth enough. When you've done enough. When your life is valuable enough for God. When you've built your net worth to God by doing the right thing, praying enough, loving enough, giving enough, going to church enough, staying out the bars enough, not swearing and drinking enough, and reading your Bible enough. This is how we think God's love works - when and if I'm enough, God will love me. And there's good reason we think God's love works this way - that's the love we see all around us. That's what keeps stores in business and sells products and keeps the economic machines rolling.

This is how people imagined God's working since forever!

For example, **indulgences** were once seen as "a way to reduce the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins". By the late Middle Ages, indulgences were sold - if you gave the church money, you would be awarded salvation. Such a purchase even came with a receipt, or letter of indulgence. The church taught that you could purchase God's forgiveness and the remission of your sin, thereby giving you worth and value in the eyes of God. Indulgences were, from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, a target of attacks by Martin Luther and other Protestant theologians.

But God's love doesn't actually work that way. **God just loves and it's God's love that actually gives us value.** This is the kind of love God has for you. It's the opposite of the way we think God works. God gives us value. We don't have to earn or work or hustle to make ourselves valuable to God.

Gerhardt Forde wrote about this in the book, *Where God Meets Man: A Down to Earth Approach to the Gospel*. We tend to think faith primarily has to do with earning something - with “going up” somewhere — either to heaven or to some kind of “religious perfection.” The Christian faith is often likened to climbing a ladder or, if you will, a staircase. Take, for example, the symbol of “Jacob’s ladder.” In the middle ages it was popular, especially among mystics, as a symbol of the struggle the Christian must undertake to reach perfection...

“The difficulty with the idea of the ladder, however, is that it tends to send us off into the wrong direction. It tends to make us concerned with works of pious sublimation; it involves us in the task of ascending to heaven when we should be seeking like our Lord to come down to earth, to learn what it means to be a Christian here on this earth.”

This “ladder theology” inevitably distorts our understanding of the gospel. It sends well-meaning, God-fearing people striving to climb up the proverbial down staircase or escalator. Each Christmas we celebrate that God came down to be with us. God’s not looking for us to perfect ourselves so that we can go up. God came down because God is radically in love with you, wants to be near you and love you.

Romans 5:8 “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Romans 8:37-39

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Week 2: Do all religions lead to the same God?

Acts 2:1-13

Isaiah 45:6-7

At one time or another, you’ve wondered: There are over 4000 religions in the world - could it be that all of them point to the same God?

In this world of extremes, it seems as though there are two ways of relating to other religions.

1. **We’re right. They are wrong.** And, not only are they wrong, but they are an abomination and a threat. This approach has Christians doing everything and anything to defeat or destroy other faiths and the people who celebrate them.

People with this view would point to Bible verses like these found in Isaiah 45: “I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, **6** so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may

know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other. **7** I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.”

The price of this view. This belief, when pushed to an extreme, has the power to incite deep religious prejudices and violence - the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition to name just a couple, the holocaust, and recent anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim shootings and hate crimes. This way of relating to those of other religious traditions divides us, rather than bringing us together.

2. **We're all spokes on the same wheel.** In his work, “The World’s Religions,” author Huston Smith highlights an 19th century Hindu saint, Ramakrishna, as an illustration of a conviction that the various major religions are alternate paths to the same goal. Ramakrishna, after experiencing each of the major religions, concluded that there existed an essential unity among them. He wrote, *“God has made different religions to suit different aspirations, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself.”* A more contemporary version of this argument runs like this: *all religions are like the spokes of a wheel that all end in the same center.* The question, of course, is can this be right?

Most religions, this view would suggest, in some way, attempt to contemplate the divine; and some of them get closer than others. In this sense we can say that **all religions lead to God.**

People preferring this view would point to passages like 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, where Paul writes: Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. **20** To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. **21** To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. **22** To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. **23** I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

The price of all leading to one God. The argument that all religions are different paths to the same God appeals to our desire for unity and togetherness. However, the price for such a belief is twofold. First, some would claim that this requires you to ignore the real differences between religions on essential questions. This is a form of minimization that refuses to take religious beliefs seriously in the name of a false unity. Second, some would argue that it forces you to actually delegitimize religion altogether, albeit in the name of respecting all religions, by declaring all absolute truth claims of religion to be simply relative.

Yet, the vision God has for the world.

God's vision for God's world is laid out in Acts 2: When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues[a] as the Spirit enabled them. **5** Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,[b] **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" **12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What does this mean?" **13** Some, however, made fun of them and said, "They have had too much wine."

All nations, all people. All come together, not necessarily clear on what they are doing. So much so, that they look around and wonder - are these people all drunk? They are amazed and perplexed and have all kinds of questions, yet they are one.

There's a humility, and they are one.

Could all religions lead to the same God? Well, of course. For the author and creator of all the world - no problem. Steve Curtis Chapman once wrote, "God is God and I am not. I can only see a part of the picture He's painting..."

But, do all religions lead to the same God?

I don't know if all religions lead to the same God, but...If I could be honest: **I hope so.** I suppose I could get in trouble for saying this. Some of you might consider leaving our church because I said that.

Some of you are saying, "Yeah, but what about the violence in that religion!?" How could God possibly be associated with any of that? Yeah, well, look at what Christians have done and continue to do in the name of God.

Others of you are saying, "Those people claim to be religious, but they are just a bunch of hypocrites." Come on. Have you ever met a Christian that's a hypocrite? There are a lot of us.

Still others of you are saying, "Do you see how they treat women, how they hate gay people, how controlling, how messed up their theology is." Yeah, but seriously. Have you deeply looked at our Christian tradition? Christians regularly deviate from the love of God too.

Do all religions lead to the same God?

As Christians: Isn't that our hope? That all would know God. Love God. Experience eternity with God. If you call yourself a follower of Jesus, isn't our ultimate hope that all would know the love, peace and eternity with God.

Seriously, God is God and you and I are not. God's ways are bigger than my ways.

Hebrews 11:1 says: "Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see."

And this posture causes us to relate to our neighbors of other faiths differently:

1. **We act with humility.** We look at all people, whatever tradition, as a child of God. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the **world**...that he gave his only son." It doesn't say, for God so loved Christians. It says, for God so loved the **world**. I didn't come to condemn the world, but to save the world..."

Some may say this isn't a powerful enough view for a Christian. Many prefer absolute truth claims of Christianity. Yet, this view contradicts the essence of Christianity - a faith follows a God who "humbled himself by becoming obedient to death — even death on a cross!" He "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness." Philippians 2.

Leslie Newbigin writes: *[It has been suggested] that a claim to absolute truth must be oppressive... The claim of the Christian community is that in Jesus the absolute truth has been made present amid the relativities of human cultures, and that the form which this truth took was not that of dominance and imperial power but that of one... whose power was manifest in weakness and suffering... The Church thus does not claim to possess absolute truth: it claims to know where to point for guidance... for the common search for truth.* (Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, pg. 163)

Throughout the Bible we find instruction to humble ourselves and acknowledge that there are many things that we will not understand. In Proverbs 25:2, King Solomon writes, "It is the glory of God to conceal things; but the glory of kings is to search things out." In Psalm 131:1, David writes, "O Lord, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me." Scripture emphasizes that it is both our glory to search out the mysteries that God has created for us and our responsibility to humble ourselves and acknowledge that there are many things that we will not understand, that are too great and marvelous for us.

2. **We share our story and are curious about their story.** Let's be people in our communities for whom "people may be critical of us because of

what we believe, but are envious of us because of how we treat one another.” - Andy Stanley

Acts 17 - You do know we all came from the same place, don't you?

Paul was in Athens and there **“22** Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. **23** For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god.” Paul was being sarcastic. He was saying to the people that represented among them were people who worshiped every and all Gods and Goddesses. In Athens, it was like Baskin Robbins - they had every flavor of religion. Paul goes on to make a carefully crafted argument about religion:

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and **does not live in temples built by human hands.** **25** And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.”

What's Paul saying? In some ways, all our religious traditions and doctrines and buildings - God didn't make them. We did. But here's the truth about God: **“ 26** From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. **27** God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. **28** ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’^[b] As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’”

Paul is saying, “You do know we all came from the same place, don't you? The same God who created me, created you, and that person, and that creepy guy down the street and that Muslim in Saudi Arabia and Jew on the streets of New York. And since we all came from the same place: **29** “Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—**an image made by human design and skill.** **30** In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

In this melting pot of religions that was Athens, Paul didn't say, “Your problem is that you don't believe in the right things.” No, Paul says, “You're putting your trust in all the wrong things. You're putting your trust in the things you've created. Your religious doctrines. Your traditions. The religious enterprises you've built.” That's the “ignorance” that disappoints God and commands us to repent of. Not, You're believing all the wrong things.

When I get to heaven...

Do all religions lead to one God? I don't know, but I hope so. I'm guessing when I get to heaven I'm going to look around and go, “You're here? Really? huh?” And there are going to be a whole bunch of people who didn't believe the way I believed. Didn't practice the way I practiced. There will be people nothing like me. At least, I sure hope so. Don't you?

Week 3: Is church and the Bible necessary?

Acts 15:1-21

Can I believe in God, but not attend church? Isn't just being a good person all that really matters? Can I love Jesus and hate the church? And what about the Bible: Is the Bible necessary? What do I do when the Bible makes me feel uncomfortable? One approach to CANCEL. There are some things in the Bible we should resist taking literally, but canceling derails us from asking the most important question: What is the point of the Bible? What's the main message or the big story?

You canceled the church.

You canceled the church because it felt as though you didn't matter, you weren't seen, you weren't of any concern to the church.

1. **The reason many of us reject the church is because you experienced a church that rejected you.**
2. **You resisted the church because the church was all too resistible.**

The church was wrong.

The church was meant to be irresistible.

In the ancient world, the church was irresistible. People were flocking to the church in Acts. So much so, that even Gentiles - the very people Jews thought were beyond God's reach - Gentiles flocked to the church. And when they did, the religious leaders balked, arguing that these new believers weren't following the rules. Paul and Barnabas were called to Rome to argue their case. They testified and when the dust settled, James got up and said: *"It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God"* (Acts 15:19)

What did the early church decide? **We're not going to let anything get in the way of us leading people to Jesus.** Not rules. Not doctrine. Not styles. Not preferences. Not anything. Sadly, many of us grew up in a church that didn't read this passage. It was a church that was easy to resist. And so you canceled the church.

Or maybe...you canceled the Bible.

You canceled the Bible because...

1. **The Bible is full of contradictions and discrepancies.** It's not very hard to convince someone that the Bible is full of contradictions—that is, if they don't know the Bible very well. All you have to do is point out that Matthew places the "Sermon on the Mount," on a mountain ([Matt. 5:1](#)), while Luke says Jesus spoke on a "level place" ([Luke 6:17](#)). Is Abijah a good king (2 Chronicles 13) or a bad one ([1 Kings 15:1-8](#))? Were humans created last ([Gen. 1:1-2:4a](#)) or first ([Gen. 2:4b-25](#))? Of course, these are just samples from countless others that people like to bring up.

2. The Bible is just too full of violence, genocide, prejudice, and injustice, often commanded by God—and it's been used by Christians to justify more violence and oppression.

3. The Bible is at odds with science. From the creation story to the story of the flood, the Bible and science are clearly at odds.

4. Christians can't even agree on what it's saying, so who cares if it's true or not. All we have to do is drive down the street and see a Baptist Church on one corner, then a Lutheran Church on another, then a Catholic Church, a Presbyterian Church, and on and on to come to the conclusion that there isn't one, but a host of different Christian messages. Christians disagree on many things and such differences may lead some people to conclude that if Christians can't agree on what the Bible teaches, then why bother with it all.

In short, you were taught that the Bible is an instruction manual, when, in fact, it was never intended to be known in this way.

The Bible is a collection of passionate testimonies of God's people. It's a recording of God's people pointing to God and saying, "This is who and what God is to me!" And so...

1. **Yes, there are contradictions and discrepancies,** because everyone's experience of God is unique. It's sort of like when you sit with your siblings and talk about stories from the good old days, and once you start sharing, you realize that you and your siblings all experienced events very differently. The bible isn't a book of history. It is the peoples' passionate witness to God.
2. **Yes, there is violence.** When people get passionate about something, too often things get physical, don't they? We only need to look at the attack on our nation's capital in recent history to know this is true. The hardest category of biblical violence is in the situations where God commands violence. Could it be that in that ancient society that was inherently violent that the passages that seem to incite violence on behalf of God are misunderstandings of the character and purpose of God? The idea that the Bible contains witnesses of people whose passions got the best of them may feel uncomfortable to some, but isn't that true in our own lives? Isn't that what passion can do to us?
3. **Yes, the Bible doesn't align with science. It never intended to.** God gave us the Bible to describe *who created*. God gave us science to describe *how it was created*.
4. **Yes, Christians don't agree on everything** in the Bible, but you don't agree on everything your sister or father tells you, but you don't disown them, do you? Passionate people are really good at disagreeing, aren't we? Have you seen our politics lately? Why should faith be any different?

What's the big story of the Bible? You see, in and through the many witnesses of God's people there's this overarching narrative, from **Genesis to the start of the Church in Acts**, a story of God's faithfulness that the authors give witness to. God's love. God's unrelenting mercy and grace throughout the span of 100's and 100's of years. The Bible is this constant reminder that

we are part of a story that is so much greater than our own. That we have a heritage, a lineage, we are part of a family of people that have wrestled with God and live since the beginning of time.

Is church and the Bible necessary? No, but you'd be missing out on the best parts of faith. You'd be missing out on what God wants to give you. God gave us the church to surround us with a loving, caring community of people who want to make your life better. God gave us the witnesses in the Bible to remind us that we are a part of a story, a heritage, a lineage that is so much greater than our own seemingly insignificant story in the great span of history.

Week 4: What about heaven and hell?

Matthew 6:5-13 - Jesus teaches them to pray "Thy Kingdom come"

Revelation 21:1-7 - New Jerusalem here on earth

If you grew up around a church, you likely grew up with an understanding that after you die, you go to heaven or hell. And, for many, you grew up bound and determined to make it one and not the other. You said your prayers, sang hymns, confessed your sins, learned the creeds, became an altar boy - you tried to live the way you thought God wanted - because you knew full well what would happen to you if you didn't.

Today, there are over two billion Christians in the world, the vast majority of whom believe in heaven and hell. You die and your soul goes either to everlasting bliss or torment (or purgatory en route). This is true even in the land of increasing "nones": Americans continue to anticipate a version of the alternatives portrayed in *The Good Place*: regardless of religious persuasion, **72% believe in a literal heaven, 58% in a literal hell.**

For most Christians, the idea of "going to heaven when you die" is not simply one belief among others, but the one that seems to give a point to it all.

The most recent and memorable effort was NBC's smash hit comedy series *The Good Place*; but the humor even there was rooted precisely in fear of being sent to the wrong place, as Eleanor Shellstrop and her companions desperately worked to avoid the afterlife they deserved in the Bad Place.

The image many have of the Bible's role.

We're all familiar with the fire evacuation maps on the inside of a hotel room door. In a brief, succinct, and luminously clear manner, the map provides directions for evacuating the building in case of fire. Growing up, most were taught to think of the Bible as like God's hotel fire evacuation map for the human race. The Bible is a succinct and luminously clear set of directions for evacuating earth and avoiding hellfire.

The vast majority of people naturally assume this is what Jesus himself taught. But that is not true. Our view that you die and your soul goes to

heaven or hell is not found anywhere in the Old Testament, and it's not what Jesus preached. There is not even one passage in the Bible that talks about "going to heaven" after you die. The phrase "go to heaven" doesn't appear anywhere in the Old or New Testaments about death. Not once. This doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say about what happens to God's people after they die. It just means that "going to heaven" isn't the way Jesus or the biblical authors thought about it.

Neither Jesus, nor the Hebrew Bible he interpreted, endorsed the view that departed souls go to paradise or everlasting pain. Likely surprising to our worshippers, this is a later development in the Christian Tradition.

One of the hardest things for people to get their minds around is that ancient Israelites and then Jews and then Jesus himself and his followers had a very different understanding of the relationship between what we call body and soul. Our view is that you've got two things going on in the human parts - your body, your physical being, and you have your soul, this invisible part of you that lives on after death, that you can separate the two and they can exist - the soul can exist outside of the body. That is not a view that was held by ancient Israelites and then Jews, and it's not even taught in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, what we would call the soul is really more like what we would call the breath. When God creates Adam, he creates him out of earth, and then he breathes life into him. The life is in the breath. When the breath leaves the body, the body no longer lives, but the breath doesn't exist. And so in the Old Testament, there's no idea that your soul goes one place or another because the soul doesn't exist apart from the body.

Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven. Matthew 6:5-13

The followers of the Jesus-movement that grew up in that complex environment saw "heaven" and "earth" — God's space and ours — as the twin halves of God's creation. Rather than rescuing people from the latter in order to reach the former, the creator God would finally bring heaven and earth together in a great act of new creation, completing the original creative purpose by healing the entire cosmos of its ancient ills. They believed that God would then raise his people from the dead, to share in — and, indeed, to share his stewardship over — this rescued and renewed creation. And they believed all this because of Jesus.

They believed that with the resurrection of Jesus this new creation had already been launched. Jesus embodied in himself the perfect fusion of "heaven" and "earth." In Jesus, therefore, the ancient Jewish hope had come true at last. **The point was not for us to "go to heaven," but for the life of heaven to arrive on earth.** Jesus taught his followers to pray: **"Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven."**

Israel's scriptures had long promised that God would come back in person to dwell with his people for ever. The early Christians picked this up: *"The Word became flesh," declares John [1:14], "and dwelt in our midst."* The word for

“dwelt” means, literally, “tabernacled,” “pitched his tent” — alluding to the wilderness “tabernacle” in the time of Moses and the Temple built by Solomon. Studying the New Testament historically, in its own world (as opposed to squashing and chopping it to fit with our own expectations), shows that the first Christians believed not that they would “go to heaven when they died,” but that, in Jesus, God had come to live with them.

From as early as the third century, some Christian teachers tried to blend this with types of the Platonic belief, generating the idea of “leaving earth and going to heaven,” which became mainstream by the Middle Ages. But Jesus’ first followers never went that route.

What was the future hope for Jesus’ followers?

Ultimately, resurrection — a new and immortal physical body in God’s new creation. But, after death and before that final reality, a period of blissful rest. *“Today,” says Jesus to the brigand alongside him, “you will be with me in Paradise.”* “My desire,” says St. Paul, facing possible execution, “is to depart and be with the Messiah, which is far better.” *“In my father’s house,” Jesus assured his followers, “are many waiting-rooms.”* These are not the final destination. They are the temporary resting-place, ahead of the ultimate new creation.

The Book of Revelation. Revelation 21:1-7

That was the lens through which they saw the hope of the world. The book of Revelation ends, not with souls going up to heaven, but with *the New Jerusalem coming down to earth*, so that “the dwelling of God is with humans.” The whole creation, declares St. Paul, will be set free from its slavery to corruption, to enjoy God’s intended freedom. God will then be “all in all.” It’s hard for us moderns to grasp this: so many hymns, prayers and sermons still speak of us “going to heaven.”

The nasty parts of Revelation?

The people, in the Book of Revelation, who aren’t on the side of God, are actually destroyed. They are wiped out. This is the view that is fairly consistent throughout the New Testament, starting with Jesus. Jesus believed that all forces opposed to God would be destroyed when - at the end of time, they’d be annihilated. So their punishment is they would not get the kingdom of God. If they aren’t brought into the new Jerusalem, the city of God that descends from heaven, they will be destroyed.

People misinterpreted Revelation as a prediction of what’s going to happen in our future. And the graphic imagery in the book has really contributed to all of these interpretations of Revelation. Jesus was an apocalypticist who thought that the world was going to come to an end, that is precisely what the author of the Book of Revelation thinks, and the book is a description of how it’s going to happen. The book is written to an oppressed people and is all about the terrible destruction that is going to take place on Earth when God destroys everything that is opposed to him, before bringing in a good kingdom. And so all of the imagery of death and destruction and disease and war in the Book of Revelation is used to show what terrible measures God has

to take in order to destroy the forces of evil that have completely infiltrated the human world, before he brings in a new world. This is not a book that describes what's going to happen to individuals when they die and go to heaven or hell; it's a description of the final judgment of God that somehow is going to be coming to Earth.

A quick history of Judeo-Christian views of death & the afterlife.

The Hebrew Bible (Jewish Scriptures) itself assumes that the dead are simply dead—that their body lies in the grave, and there is no consciousness, ever again.

It is true that some poetic authors, for example in the Psalms, use the mysterious term “**Sheol**” to describe a person’s new location. Sometimes Sheol is talked about by people today as a place that's kind of like the Greek Hades, a place where everybody goes after they die, and they aren't really physical beings down there; they're just kind of like souls, and they exist forever there tormented forever. But in most instances Sheol is simply a synonym for “tomb” or “grave.” It’s not a place where someone actually goes.

And so, traditional Israelites did not believe in life after death, only death after death. That is what made death so mournful: nothing could make an afterlife existence sweet, since there was no life at all, and thus no family, friends, conversations, food, drink – no communion even with God. The most one could hope for was a good and particularly long life here and now.

But Jews began to change their view over time. About two hundred years before Jesus, Jewish thinkers began to believe that there had to be **something beyond death**—a kind of justice to come. Jews had long believed that God was lord of the entire world and all people, both the living and the dead. But the problems with that thinking were palpable: *God’s own people Israel continually, painfully, and frustratingly suffered, from natural disaster, political crises, and, most notably, military defeat.* About 200 before Jesus was born, there was a shift in thinking in ancient Israel that scholars today call apocalypticism. It has to do with the apocalypse, the revelation of God.

If God loves his people and is sovereign over all the world, why do his people experience so much tragedy?

Some thinkers came up with a solution that explained how God would bring about justice, but again one that *didn’t involve perpetual bliss in a heaven above or perpetual torment in a hell below.* This new idea maintained that there are evil forces in the world aligned against God and determined to afflict his people. Even though God is the ultimate ruler over all, he has temporarily relinquished control of this world for some mysterious reason. But the forces of evil have little time left. God is soon to intervene in earthly affairs to destroy everything and everyone that opposes him and to bring in a new realm for his true followers, **a Kingdom of God**, a paradise on earth. Most important, this new earthly kingdom will come not only to those alive at the time, but also to those who have died. These apocalyptic thinkers came to think that God was soon

going to destroy these forces of evil and get rid of them altogether, and the world would again return to a utopia - like paradise. It'd be like the Garden of Eden once more. The people who thought that maintained that this Garden of Eden would come not only to people who happened to be alive when it arrived; it was going to come to everybody. People who had been on the side of God throughout history would be personally raised from the dead and individually would be brought into this new era, this new kingdom that God would rule here on Earth. God will breathe life back into the dead, restoring them to an earthly existence. And God will bring all the dead back to life, not just the righteous. Those opposed to God will also be raised, but for a different reason: to see the errors of their ways and be judged. They will permanently be wiped out of existence.

This view of the coming resurrection dominated the view of Jewish thought in the days of Jesus. It was also the view he himself embraced and proclaimed. His main teaching is that the kingdom of God is coming. People today, when they read the phrase "kingdom of God," they think he's talking about heaven, the place that your soul goes to when you die. But Jesus isn't talking about heaven because he doesn't believe - he's a Jew - he doesn't believe in the separation of soul and body.

The end of time is coming soon. Jesus believed the earthly Kingdom of God is "at hand" (Mark 1:15). God will soon destroy everything and everyone opposed to him and establish a new order on earth. Those who enter this kingdom will enjoy a utopian existence for all time. He doesn't think the soul is going to live on in heaven. He thinks that there's going to be a resurrection of the dead at the end of time. God will destroy the forces of evil. He will raise the dead. And those who have been on God's side, especially those who follow Jesus' teachings, will enter the new kingdom here on Earth.

But Jesus put his own twist on the idea. Contrary to what other Jewish leaders taught, Jesus preached that no one will inherit the glorious future kingdom by stringently observing all the Jewish laws in their most intimate details; or by meticulously following the rules of worship involving sacrifice, prayer, and observance of holy days; or by pursuing one's own purity through escaping the vile world and the tainting influence of sinful others. **Instead, for Jesus, the earthly utopia will come to those who are fully dedicated to the most pervasive and dominant teachings of God's law - the two "greatest commandments" of Jewish Scripture: deep love of God (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and committed love of neighbor (Leviticus 19:18).**

Most people today would be surprised to learn that Jesus believed in a bodily eternal life here on earth, instead of eternal bliss for souls, but even more that he did not believe in hell as a place of eternal torment.

In traditional English versions, he does occasionally seem to speak of "Hell" – for example, in his warnings in the Sermon on the Mount: anyone who calls another a fool, or who allows their right eye or hand to sin, will be cast into "hell" (Matthew 5:22, 29-30). But these passages are not actually referring to

“hell.” The word Jesus uses is “**Gehenna**.” The term does not refer to a place of eternal torment but to a notorious valley just outside the walls of Jerusalem, believed by many Jews at the time to be the most unholy, god-forsaken place on earth. It was where, according to the Old Testament, ancient Israelites practiced child sacrifice to foreign gods. The God of Israel had condemned and forsaken the place. In the ancient world (whether Greek, Roman, or Jewish), **the worst punishment a person could experience after death was to be denied a decent burial**. Jesus developed this view into a repugnant scenario: corpses of those excluded from the kingdom would be unceremoniously tossed into the most desecrated dumping ground on the planet. Jesus did not say souls would be tortured there. They simply would no longer exist.

What Jesus actually said.

At one point he says there are two gates that people pass through (Matthew 7:13-14). One is narrow and requires a difficult path, but leads to “life” - loving God and loving neighbor. Few go that way. The other is broad and easy, and therefore commonly taken. But it leads to “destruction.” It is an important word. The wrong path does not lead to torture, or a version of what we’ve come to know of as hell.

So too Jesus says the future kingdom is like a fisherman who hauls in a large net (Matthew 13:47-50). After sorting through the fish, he keeps the good ones and throws the others out. He doesn’t torture them. They just die. Or the kingdom is like a person who gathers up the plants that have grown in his field (Matthew 13:36-43). He keeps the good grain, but tosses the weeds into a fiery furnace. These don’t burn forever. They are consumed by fire and then are no more.

Still other passages may seem to suggest that Jesus believe in hell. Most notably Jesus speaks of all nations coming for the last judgment (Matthew 25:31-46). Some are said to be sheep, and the others goats. The (good) sheep are those who have loved God, and loved their neighbors in need – the hungry, the sick, the poor, the foreigner. These are welcomed into the “kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” The (wicked) goats, however, have refused to help those in need, and so are sent to “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” At first blush, that certainly sounds like the hell of popular imagination. But Jesus goes on to explain it is the flames, not the torment, that go on forever. It is “eternal” punishment because it will never end. These people will be annihilated forever. That is not pleasant to think about, but it will not hurt once it’s finished.

What does the Bible say?

Let’s look at the New Testament passages that speak to what Jesus’ followers will experience after they die.

- Jesus spoke to the repentant criminal being crucified next to him, saying, “Today you’ll be with me in paradise.” - [Luke 23:42-43](#)
- Paul discussed his possible execution in a Roman prison, and he said death wouldn’t be so bad. It would make the Philippians sad, but he would get to be “with Christ.” - [Philippians 1:21-24](#)

- Paul talked about the true hope that drives Christian faithfulness, even in the face of death. The result of death, he said, was being “with the Lord.” - [2 Corinthians 5:6-9](#)

Notice the consistent factor is not that people will “go to heaven,” it’s that they all use the same phrase: Our hope is about being “**with Jesus.**” Both Jesus and Paul believed that not even death could separate people from God’s love, and that Jesus’ followers would be with him after death.

However, Paul does not envision this disembodied mode of existence as permanent, or even desirable. In [2 Corinthians 5:2](#), Paul wrote that in this world “we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.” He’s referring here to a resurrected body believers will inherit when they are finally made like Jesus. For Paul, the end goal is not disembodied bliss in heaven, but rather a restored physical existence, which is a gift from heaven.

But what about the interim period, when our mortal bodies rot in the ground? Paul describes this interim experience like “falling asleep.” He wasn’t alone in using sleep as a metaphor for death. It was common in Jewish culture to use the phrase “lay down with my ancestors” to talk about death. The prophets described death as a form of sleep and the hope of future resurrection as “waking up.” Remember that these are poetic metaphors, so we shouldn’t analyze them for precise information about what we will experience after we die.

So while we can’t say you’ll “go to heaven” when you die, we can say that one day you will be resurrected and reborn LIKE Jesus in the resurrection. Even better, that means you’ll be WITH Jesus. Now THAT is worth writing home about.

Where did our modern idea of heaven & hell come from?

In Ancient Israel, the expectation that the kingdom was coming soon began to be questioned because it was supposed to come soon and it didn’t come soon, and it’s still not coming, and when is it going to come? And people started thinking, well, you know, surely I’m going to get rewarded! Maybe not in some kingdom that’s going to come in a few thousand years, but I’m going to get rewarded by God right away. **And so they ended up shifting the thinking away from the idea that there’d be a kingdom here on Earth that was “soon to come” to thinking that the kingdom, in fact, is up with God above in heaven.** And so they started thinking that it comes at death, and people started assuming then that, in fact, your soul would live on.

It’s not an accident that that came into Christianity after the majority of people coming into the Christian church were raised in Greek circles rather than in Jewish circles because in Jewish circles, there is no separation of the soul and the body. The soul didn’t exist separately. But in Greek circles, going way back to Plato and before him, that was absolutely the belief. The soul was immortal and would live forever in Greek thinking. And so these people who converted to Christianity were principally Greek thinkers, they thought there

was a soul that lived forever. They developed the idea, then, that the soul lived forever with God when it's rewarded.

Paul.

Paul is very important for understanding the history of heaven and hell, as he's important for understanding most things about early Christian thinking. Paul was not a follower of Jesus during his lifetime, during Jesus' lifetime. He wasn't one of the disciples. He converted several years after Jesus' death. He - Paul was Jewish. He was raised Jewish. He wasn't raised in Israel; he was from outside of Israel. He was a Greek-speaking Jew. But he was also, like Jesus, an apocalypticist who thought that at the end of the age, there would be a resurrection of the dead.

When he became convinced that Jesus was raised from the dead, he thought that the resurrection had started. And so he talked about living in the last days because he assumed that everybody else now was going to be raised to follow suit. And so Paul thought he would be alive when the end came. For Paul, Jesus was going to come back from heaven and bring in God's kingdom here on Earth, and people would be raised from the dead for glorious eternity. Paul, in his earliest letters, affirms that view of the imminent resurrection. It's going to come very soon. And he fully expected to be alive when it happened. But then time dragged on, and a couple of decades passed, and it didn't arrive, and Paul started realizing that, in fact, he might die before it happens. And so in some of his later letters, he ponders the possibility of death, and he wonders, well, what happens to me, then? If I'm brought into the presence of Christ at the resurrection, and, you know, there's a gap between the time I die and - what happens to me during that gap? And he started thinking that, surely, he's going to be in Christ's presence during that time.

And so he came up with the idea that he would have a temporary residence up with Christ in God's realm, in heaven, until the end came. And so this is what the later Paul has to say, and this is the beginning of the Christian idea of heaven and hell, that you can exist - even though your physical remains are dead, you can exist in the presence of God in heaven. And once Paul started saying that, his followers really latched onto it because most of Paul's converts were from Greek circles. They were gentiles. They weren't Jews. And they had been raised with the idea that your soul lives on after death, and now they had a Christian model to put it on. They could say that, yes, your soul lives on, and so when you die, your soul will go up to God with heaven. And as time went on, that became the emphasis rather than the idea of the resurrection with the dead.

Hell.

Since these ancient people believed that the soul was immortal, that you can kill the body but you can't kill the soul, they thought, well, OK, so our soul will go to heaven to be with God, but then they realized, well, what about the people who are not on the side of God? Well, if we're being rewarded, they're going to be punished. And that's how you start getting the development of the idea of hell, that it's a place where souls go to be punished in - as the opposite of the people who go to heaven to be rewarded. And in thinking this,

as it turns out, the Christians are simply picking up on views that had been around among the Greeks since way back in the time of Plato. Plato also has ideas about souls living on, either to be rewarded or punished forever. And Christians now, who were mainly coming from Greek contexts, latched onto that idea with a Christian way of putting it.

It really comes down to...How do we read the Bible?

"I saw how the Bible isn't a book about how to get into heaven, it's a library of poems and letters and stories about bringing heaven to earth now, about this world becoming more and more the place it should be. There is very, very little in the Bible about what happens when you die. That's not what the writers were focused on. Their interest, again and again, is on how this world is arranged." - Rob Bell, Everything is Spiritual (pg. 62)

The Christian Mission.

Reading the New Testament in its own world - and coming to understand Jesus' view of life after death - is certain to surprise modern Christians. Perhaps the most important discovery they will make is a new, or rather very old, way of seeing the Christian mission:

"If the only point is to save souls from the wreck of the world, so they can leave and go to heaven, why bother to make this world a better place? But if God is going to do for the whole creation what he did for Jesus in his resurrection — to bring them back, here on earth — then those who have been rescued by the gospel are called to play a part, right now, in the advance renewal of the world." - N.T. Wright

Much of the content is taken from the work of Bart D. Ehrman. See the following books and articles:

- Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife, by Bart D. Ehrman.
- <https://time.com/5822598/jesus-really-said-heaven-hell/>
- Heaven in the American Imagination, by Gary Scott Smith
- Everything is Spiritual, by Rob Bell
- The Rapture Exposed, by Barbara Rossing
- <https://time.com/5743505/new-testament-heaven/>
- <https://bibleproject.com/blog/new-heaven-new-earth/>
- <https://www.npr.org/2020/03/31/824479587/heaven-and-hell-are-not-what-jesus-preached-religion-scholar-says>

Prayer of the Day:

God of grace, we come to you with all our questions. We pray for courage to ask and open hearts to search for answers. We ask that you would deepen our faith through our questions. In your Son's name, Amen.

Prayers of the church:

Lord God, thank You for your perfect love for us and that we are seen as valuable in your eyes. In moments of wondering if we are enough for you, we pray that you would remind us of your unconditional love and grace for us. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Generous Lord, we pray for those who are struggling with difficult questions of faith. Help them to not be afraid of their doubts or questions, but instead learn to hear your voice of wisdom, love and peace. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Holy Spirit, we pray for our church. Empower us to be a loving, caring community of believers where all are comfortable to ask questions. Guide us in grace to seek answers together. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Lord God, Thank You for your amazing plan of redemption for the world. Lead us with humility to share your saving love with those around us in kind ways. Thank You that we can trust You with all things. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Jesus, deepen our faith. Bring us to a place of deeper understanding and belief in you. Thank you for the questions that lead us to understand and love You more. In your name, Amen

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