

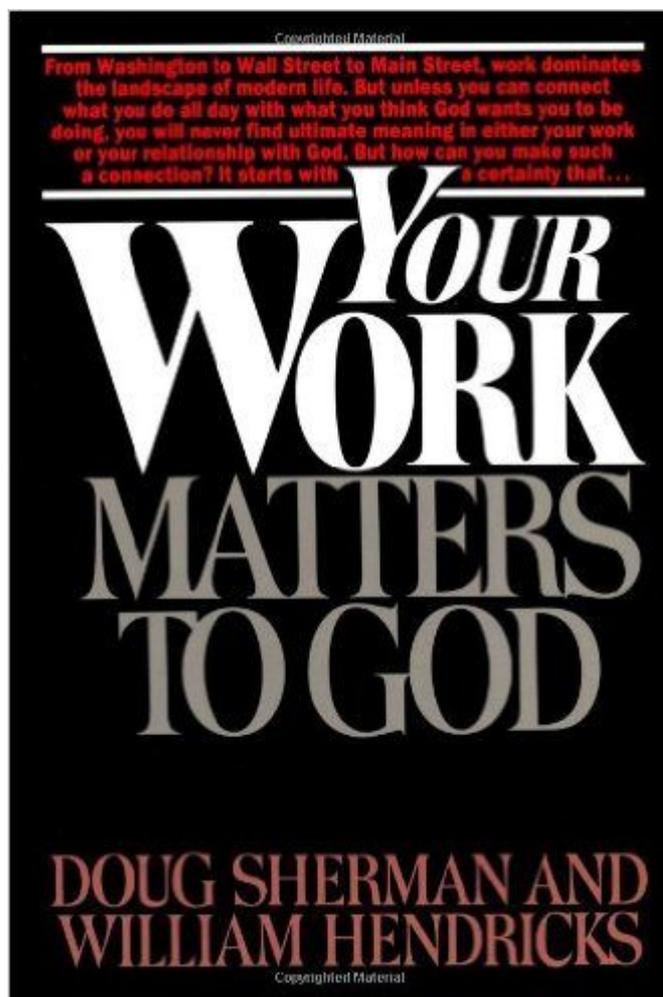
Your Work Matters to God

Sue Bohlin helps us look at work from a biblical perspective. If we apply a Christian worldview to our concept of work, it takes on greater significance within the kingdom of God.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Many Christians hold a decidedly unbiblical view of work. Some view it as a curse, or at least as part of the curse of living in a fallen world. Others make a false distinction between what they perceive as the sacred—serving God—and the secular—everything else. And others make it into an idol, expecting it to provide them with their identity and purpose in life as well as being a source of joy and fulfillment that only God can provide.



In their excellent book *Your Work Matters to God*,^{1}



Doug Sherman and William Hendricks expose the wrong ways of thinking about work, and explain how God invests work with intrinsic value and honor. Rick Warren echoes this idea in his blockbuster *The Purpose Driven Life* when he writes, “Work becomes worship when you dedicate it to God and perform it with an awareness of his presence.”^{2}

First, let's explore some faulty views of work: the secular view, some inappropriate hierarchies that affect how we view work, and work as merely a platform for doing evangelism.

Those who hold a secular view of work believe that life is divided into two disconnected parts. God is in one spiritual dimension and work is in the other *real* dimension, and the two have nothing to do with each other. God stays in His corner of the universe while I go to work and live my life, and these different realms never interact.

One problem with this secular view is that it sets us up for disappointment. If you leave God out of the picture, you'll have to get your sense of importance, fulfillment and reward from someplace else: work. Work is the answer to the question, "Who am I, and why am I important?" That is a very shaky foundation—because what happens if you lose your job? You're suddenly a "nobody," and you are not important because you are not employed.

The secular view of work tends to make an idol of career. Career becomes the number one priority in your life. Your relationship with God takes a back seat, family takes a back seat, even your relationship with other people takes a back seat to work. Everything gets filtered through the question, "What impact will this have on my career?"

The secular view of work leaves God out of the system. This is particularly unacceptable for Christians, because God calls us to make Him the center of our life.^{3} He wants us to have a biblical worldview that weaves Him into every aspect of our lives, including work. He wants to be invited into our work; He wants to be Lord of our work.^{4}

Inappropriate Hierarchies: Soul/Body, Temporal/Eternal

In this article, we're examining some faulty views of work.

One comes from believing that the soul matters more than the body. We can wrongly believe that God only cares about our soul, and our bodies don't really matter. The body is not important, we can think: it is only temporal, and it will fade and die. But if that view were true, then why did God make a physical universe? Why did He put Adam and Eve in the garden to cultivate and keep it? He didn't charge them with, "Go and make disciples of all nations which aren't in existence yet, but they will be as soon as you guys go off and start making babies." No, He said, "Here's the garden, now cultivate it." He gave them a job to do that had nothing to do with evangelism or church work. There is something important about our bodies, and God is honored by work that honors and cares for the body—which, after all, is His good creation.

Another wrong way of thinking is to value the eternal over the temporal so much that we believe *only* eternal things matter. Some people believe that if you work for things that won't last into eternity—jobs like roofing and party planning and advertising—you're wasting your time. This wrong thinking needs to be countered by the truth that God created two sides to reality, the temporal and the eternal. The natural universe God made is very real, just as real as the supernatural universe. Asking which one is real and important is like asking which is real, our nine months in our mother's womb or life after birth? They are both real; they are both necessary. We have to go through one to get to the other.

Those things we do and make on earth DO have value, given the category they were made for: *time*. It's okay for things to have simply temporal value, since God chose for us to live in time before we live in eternity. Our work counts in both time and eternity because God is looking for faithfulness *now*, and the only way to demonstrate faithfulness is within this physical world. Spiritual needs are important, of course, but first physical needs need to be met. Try sharing the gospel with someone who hasn't eaten in three days! Some needs are

temporal, and those needs must be met. So God equips people with abilities to meet the needs of His creation. In meeting the legitimate physical, temporal needs of people, our work serves people, and people have eternal value because God loves us and made us in His image.

The Sacred/Spiritual Dichotomy; Work as a Platform for Evangelism

Another faulty view of work comes from believing that spiritual, sacred things are far more important than physical, secular things. REAL work, people can think, is serving God in full-time Christian service, and then there's everything else running a very poor second. This can induce us to think either too highly of ourselves or too lowly of ourselves. We can think, "Real work is serving God, and then there's what others do" (which sets us up for condescension), or "Real work is serving God, and then there's what I have to do" (which sets us up for false guilt and a sense of "missing it").

It's an improper way to view life as divided between the sacred and the secular. ALL of life relates to God and is sacred, whether we're making a business presentation or changing soiled diapers or leading someone to faith in Christ. It's unwise to think there are sacred things we do and there are secular things we do. It all depends on what's going on in our hearts. You can engage in what looks like holy activity like prayer and Bible study with a dark, self-centered, unforgiving spirit. Remember the Pharisees? And on the other hand, you can work at a job in a very secular atmosphere where the conversation is littered with profanity, the work is slipshod, the politics are wearisome, and yet like Daniel or Joseph in the Old Testament you can keep your own conversation pure and your behavior above reproach. You can bring honor and glory to God in a very worldly environment. God does not want us to do holy things, He wants us to be holy people.

A final faulty view of work sees it only as a platform for doing evangelism. If every interaction doesn't lead to an opportunity to share the gospel, one is a failure. Evangelism should be a priority, true, but not our *only* priority. Life is broader than evangelism. In Ephesians 1, Paul says three times that God made us, not for evangelism, but to live to the praise of His glory.[\[5\]](#) Instead of concentrating only on evangelism, we need to concentrate on living a life that honors God and loves people. That is far more winsome than all the evangelistic strategies in the world. Besides, if work is only a platform for evangelism, it devalues the work itself, and this view of work is too narrow and unfulfilling.

Next we'll examine at how God wants us to look at work. You might be quite surprised!

How God Wants Us to See Work

So far, we have discussed faulty views of work, but how does God want us to see it? Here's a startling thought: we actually work for God Himself! Consider Ephesians 6:5-8, which Paul writes to slaves but which we can apply to employees:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, *as if you were serving the Lord, not men*, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

It's helpful to envision that behind every employer stands the Lord Jesus. He sees everything we do, and He appreciates it and will reward us, regardless of the type of work we do. I learned this lesson one day when I was cleaning the grungy bathtub of a family that wouldn't notice and would never

acknowledge or thank me even if they did. I was getting madder by the minute, throwing myself a pity party, when the Lord broke into my thoughts. He quietly said, "I see you. And I appreciate what you're doing." Whoa! In an instant, that totally changed everything. Suddenly, I was able to do a menial job—and later on, more important ones—as a labor of love and worship for Jesus. I know He sees and appreciates what I do. It forever changed my view of work.

God also wants us to see that work is His gift to us. It is not a result of the Fall. God gave Adam and Eve the job of cultivating the garden and exercising dominion over the world *before* sin entered the world. We were created to work, and for work. Work is God's good gift to us!

Listen to what Solomon wrote:

After looking at the way things are on this earth, here's what I've decided is the best way to live: Take care of yourself, have a good time, and make the most of whatever job you have for as long as God gives you life. And that's about it. That's the human lot. Yes, we should make the most of what God gives, both the bounty and the capacity to enjoy it, accepting what's given and delighting in the work. It's God's gift!{6}

Being happy in our work doesn't depend on the work, it depends on our attitude. To make the most of our job and be happy in our work is a gift God wants to give us!

Why Work is Good

In this article we're talking about how to think about work correctly. One question needs to be asked, though: Is all work equally valid? Well, no. All legitimate work is an extension of God's work of maintaining and providing for His creation. Legitimate work is work that contributes to what God wants done in the world and doesn't contribute to what He doesn't

want done. So non-legitimate work would include jobs that are illegal, such as prostitution, drug dealing, and professional thieves. Then there are jobs that are legal, but still questionable in terms of ethics and morality, such as working in abortion clinics, pornography, and the gambling industry. These jobs are legal, but you have to ask, how are they cooperating with God to benefit His creation?

Work is God's gift to us. It is His provision in a number of ways. In *Your Work Matters to God*, the authors suggest five major reasons why work is valuable:

1. Through work we serve people. Most work is part of a huge network of interconnected jobs, industries, goods and services that work together to meet people's physical needs. Other jobs meet people's aesthetic and spiritual needs as well.

2. Through work we meet our own needs. Work allows us to exercise the gifts and abilities God gives each person, whether paid or unpaid. God expects adults to provide for themselves and not mooch off others. Scripture says, "If one will not work, neither let him eat!"[{7}](#)

3. Through work we meet our family's needs. God expects the heads of households to provide for their families. He says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."[{8}](#)

4. Through work we earn money to give to others. In both the Old and New Testaments, God tells us to be generous in meeting the needs of the poor and those who minister to us spiritually. [{9}](#)

5. Through work we love God. One of God's love languages is obedience. When we work, we are obeying His two great commandments to love Him and love our neighbor as we love ourselves.[{10}](#) We love God by obeying Him from the heart. We love our neighbor as we serve other people through our work.

We bring glory to God by working industriously, demonstrating what He is like, and serving others by cooperating with God to meet their needs. In serving others, we serve God. And that's why our work matters to God.

Notes

1. Doug Sherman and William Hendricks, *Your Work Matters to God*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1987.
2. Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. p. 67.
3. Philippians 1:21
4. Romans 12:1, 2
5. Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14
6. Ecclesiastes 5:18-19, *The Message*.
7. 2 Thess. 3:10
8. 1 Tim. 5:8
9. Leviticus 19:10—Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God. Ephesians 4:28—Let him who steals, steal no longer but rather let him labor performing with his own hands what is good in order that he may have something to share with him who has need. Gal 6:6—The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.
10. Matthew 22:37-39

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The All-Present God

“As Charles Haddon Spurgeon once observed, there are very few things as uplifting for the heart and the mind as a serious study of the being and attributes of God. Hopefully, this

little article on God's omnipresence will encourage some others to take up such studies for themselves. They won't be disappointed." –Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Introduction



We can never get away from God. To some, this is quite threatening. To others, it is merely irritating or annoying. But for those who know and love God, it is deeply comforting and consoling, for it means that we are never alone.

In this article, I want to discuss an attribute of God that is often referred to as *omnipresence*. It's a big word, but all it means is that God is present everywhere. It was while meditating on this attribute that David was led to pen the oft-quoted verses of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (vv. 7-10).[\[1\]](#)

Clearly David took comfort in the fact that he could never get away from God, that there was nowhere he could go where God was not.

In a similar manner, King Solomon also spoke of God's omnipresence in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Here, Solomon recognizes that unlike human beings, God's presence cannot be

localized to merely one place on the earth. Indeed, the universe itself is not sufficient to contain the being of its Creator!

So how is the doctrine that God is everywhere present to be understood? And what practical applications might this have for our lives?

To begin, it is helpful to observe that just as the doctrine of God's eternity attempts to explain how God is related to time, the doctrine of omnipresence attempts to explain how He is related to space. Does God completely transcend space? That is, might He exist completely "outside" or "beyond" our spatial universe in some sense? Or is it better to think of Him as existing everywhere throughout all space? Then again, could it be the case that He somehow exists both within *and* beyond the created order? Obviously, these are deep and difficult questions. But since thinking through such things is part of what it means to love God with our minds, let us ponder these matters as carefully as we can (Mark 12:30).

God and Space

Other Scriptures certainly seem to affirm God's omnipresence. God asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I only a God nearby . . . and not a God far away? . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24). Here the Lord affirms that He is present everywhere, that there is nowhere in heaven and earth where He is not. But how should we understand this?

Should we think of God as "spread out" through the universe like an invisible gas? Although this might be the mental image which most naturally suggests itself to our minds, we should carefully avoid embracing it. After all, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And a spirit, unlike a gas, is a *non-physical* entity.^{2} If we think of God as being spread throughout the universe like an invisible gas, then we might be tempted to think of God as only *partially present* at any one place. For

instance, we might come to believe that there is a small amount of God in our bedroom, even more of Him throughout our house, and more still in the three-mile radius around our house. And this, I'm sure you would agree, is crazy!{3} We *don't* want to think of God's omnipresence in *these* terms.

Instead, if we want to think of God as existing everywhere in space (and many theologians would caution us against this), then we ought to think of Him as being *fully present* at every point of space *at the same time*. Now admittedly, this is a difficult concept to grasp. But an analogy may help to clarify the point.

A number of Christian theologians and philosophers have suggested that we should think of God's relationship to the world as similar to the soul's relationship to the body. On one construal of this view, the soul is held to be "spatially present in the body," but "not extended throughout it." Instead, it's thought to be "somehow wholly present at all points in its body." In a similar way, it is said, we can also think of God as being "spatially located in the universe" and yet "wholly present at every point in it."{4}

Of course, it must be emphasized that this is *only* an analogy. I'm certainly *not* suggesting that the world really *is* God's body!{5} The analogy is intended simply to help us understand *one way* in which God might be thought of as omnipresent. But it's not the only way.

God and Spacelessness{6}

Many Christian philosophers do not believe that we should think of God as *literally present in space*. Instead, they believe that God completely transcends space, existing "beyond" or "outside" the spatial universe which we inhabit. But if this is so, then how do they think the doctrine of God's omnipresence should be understood? Moreover, *why* do they believe that God is not present in space?

Let's take the second question first. Why think that God isn't present in space? Well, say these thinkers, consider the doctrine of creation. God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or "out of nothing." Literally nothing existed (except God) "before" He brought the universe into being.^{7} In other words, prior to creation, not even space existed. Rather, space is brought into being by God at the moment of creation.^{8} But if God does not exist in space *prior* to creating the universe, then why should we think that He is located in space *after* bringing the universe into being? According to this view, there just isn't any good reason for thinking that He is.

But wait a minute! If God isn't located in space, then how can it still be said that He's present everywhere? Doesn't this amount to a denial of God's omnipresence? According to proponents of this view, we should understand God's omnipresence to mean that He both *knows* what is happening everywhere in space and that He is *active* at every point in space.^{9} In other words, God not only knows what is happening everywhere on earth, He also knows what is happening elsewhere in our solar system and in every galaxy of the universe. Moreover, He is continually exercising His power to sustain the universe in being and He is able to act anywhere He desires throughout this vast cosmos which He has created. Hence, even if God is not *literally* present in space, advocates of this view still insist that He both knows what is happening and is able to exercise His power anywhere in the world at any time He chooses.

Having now considered the two major views regarding how we should understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, we'll briefly look at some of the difficulties that are raised by this doctrine.

Difficulties with Omnipresence

Recall how David in Psalm 139 affirms that there is nowhere he can flee from God's presence, for God is present everywhere. But this raises a difficulty, for elsewhere in the Bible David says something which seems to directly contradict this sentiment.

Pursued by Saul in the Desert of Ziph, David, who had the opportunity to kill Saul but humbly refused, pleaded with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 26:20). But wait a minute! If God is present everywhere, as David elsewhere affirms, then what sense does it make to speak of dying far from the presence of the Lord? How can one be far from the presence of the Lord if the Lord is present everywhere?

It seems to me that the best way of handling these difficulties is to make an important distinction regarding the way in which God is everywhere present. What I mean is this. Although God is present everywhere, He is *uniquely present* at certain times and places when He desires to reveal Himself in some special way.

The best example of this is the unique incarnation of God the Son in the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was one person with two natures, one divine and one human. According to His divine nature, He remained omnipresent even during His time on earth. Yet in his human nature, Jesus was limited (like all other men) to a particular time and place. And it was in this more limited sense that God specially chose to reveal Himself to us. Hence, in the Gospel of John we learn that God's grace and truth, His love and salvation, His blessing and glory, are all uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. [{10}](#)

In a similar way, concerning the example of David above, we can say that while God was certainly present in the Desert of Ziph, He had chosen to specially reveal Himself to the people

of Israel. He was thus present to the people of Israel in a way that He was not present to the other nations. It is in this sense that David pleads with Saul not to shed his blood “far from the presence of the Lord.”

The Importance of Omnipresence

Let's think about this in terms of a “good news/bad news” approach, beginning with the “bad news” first. Although God's omnipresence, considered in itself, is really only good news, there is certainly a sense in which sinful men and women, much like you and me, might be tempted to regard this doctrine as bad news. Why is that?

Well, if God is always present, then like it or not, every evil thought, word, or deed that we think, say, or do is always done directly in His presence! That's a sobering thought, isn't it? There is literally *nothing* that we can ever do in a hidden or secret way. Whenever we lie or steal, commit adultery or take God's name in vain, we do so in the presence of the God to whom we are all ultimately accountable. Indeed, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment we will even have to give an account for every “careless word” which we have spoken (Matt. 12:36)! This, at least for sinners like ourselves, is what we might call the bad news of God's omnipresence.

But as I said previously, the reality is that God's omnipresence is actually very good news. For it means that no matter what our circumstances, God is always present! When we're anxious or scared, God is there. When we're under pressure at work or having difficulties in a relationship, God is there. Yes; even if we're sick or dying, God is present then, too. David wrote in the Psalms, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). For the one who's been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God is always present is very “good news” indeed!

I hope you can see that the doctrine of God's omnipresence is not just an interesting issue for philosophers and theologians to ponder (although it is certainly that). It's also an extremely practical doctrine that is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives. For wherever we go, whatever joys we encounter or difficulties we face, God is there. And for the Christian, He is present as our Protector, Savior, Counselor, and Friend!

Notes

1. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. See, for example, Jesus' remarks in Luke 24:39: "Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."
3. I got this insight from William Lane Craig, "Doctrine of God," Part 8 [Podcast] (accessed August 2010), available from <http://bit.ly/9ruR74>.
4. These quotations come from the discussion in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 509-10.
5. Of course, some theologians (e.g., Process theologians) *do* believe that the universe is God's body. According to them, God is like the soul of the world (which is His body). This view is usually termed *panentheism*, which is not the same as pantheism.
6. This section is particularly indebted to the discussion of omnipresence in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 509-11.
7. I put "before" in quotation marks since, if God is timeless without creation, there really isn't literally any temporal moment "before" God brings the universe into being. The universe, along with time itself, simply has its beginning at the moment of creation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of communicating to our radio audience in the limited amount of

time available, it is much easier to simply say “before” creation.

8. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 510.

9. *Ibid.*, 510-11.

10. In this regard, please see John 1:1, 14-18; 3:16-21.

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Historical Cycles

Kerby Anderson provides an overview of four world-changing cycles: a political/cultural cycle, a generational cycle, a technological cycle, and a financial cycle.

Are there cycles in history? Yes, even though there is a linear trajectory in history, there are generational cycles we can observe. No doubt you have heard the phrase: “Hard times create strong men, strong men create good times, good times create weak men, weak men create hard times.” Or you may have heard: “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it often rhymes.” And you may have heard the phrase “the fourth turning” that predicts a crisis at the end of a four-fold cycle.

We are going to look at four of the most often quoted cycles: a political/cultural cycle, a generational cycle, a technological cycle, and a financial cycle. Today we take for granted democracy, capitalism, and the industrial revolution. These political, economic, and technological realities were not always in our world but came about because of revolutions.



One of the most significant revolutions took place 250 years ago. Andrew Wilson talks about this in his book, *Remaking the*

World. He describes 1776 as “a year that witnessed seven transformations taking place—globalization, the Enlightenment, the Industrial Revolution, the Great Enrichment, the American Revolution, the rise of post-Christianity, and the dawn of Romanticism.”

Some of the events in 1776 we know. That was the year the Declaration of Independence was ratified. It was the year when Adam Smith published the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776. It was also the year of James Watt’s invention of the steam engine that spawned the industrial revolution. Both capitalism and the industrial revolution led to a significant increase in life expectancy and the rise of social development.

In this article as we discuss each of these four cycles, we should remember this interesting fact: all these cycles seem to be converging today. The last time these cycles converged in 1776, the world changed.

We are fortunate to live in such a time as this (Esther 4:14). We should be like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) who were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do.”

What does the future hold? Only God knows. As the song goes, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” We may not know the future, but we can trust in the One who knows the future.

I think we are likely headed for a massive change in the future. But it is difficult to predict what political event or economic spark might inflame our world. Therefore, we should all be in prayer for our leaders and prepare ourselves for possible turmoil ahead.

Political/Cultural Cycle

Let us look at what appears to be an eighty-year political/cultural cycle. (It actually seems to average out to

about 84 years). Go back to 1848 and you have Karl Marx publishing the *Communist Manifesto* and other works. The political and social impact of his Marxist perspective swept through Europe, changed the political structure of many countries, and is still an influence today. This idea not only introduced a new way of viewing the world but was also responsible for removing the monarchy from most nation states.

Another important political change happened 84 years later in the 1930s. In Europe, you have the rise of Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini. In this country, you had the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt who signed into law a significant number of New Deal programs that vastly expanded the scope of government and are influential in our lives today. It is worth remembering that the federal government wasn't as large as it is today. Roosevelt was responsible for the creation of so many of the alphabet soup of programs and federal agencies. The following decades were the era of big government.

If you add another 84 years, you come to 2016. In Europe, you have the political battle known as Brexit and the beginning of some populist uprisings. In this country, you also had the rise of populism and a reaction to the size and scope of big government. That was best illustrated by the election of Donald Trump.

It was also a time of turmoil. In Europe, we had the farmer protests in the Netherlands and the yellow jacket protests in France. In the U.S., we had BLM protests and Antifa protests.

There is also a longer cycle that describes the rise and fall of empires. General John Glubb notices that most empires last about 250 years. If you apply that to the U.S., you find that we are entering the end of that cycle. One key date is 1776. That not only marks the beginning of the nation (Declaration of Independence) but the promotion of capitalism (Adam Smith and the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*). By the way, if you go back about 250 years before that you come to the

Protestant Reformation that began when Martin Luther nailed the 95 theses to the Wittenberg Door.

We are fortunate to live in such a time as this (Esther 4:14). We should be like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) who were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do.”

What does the future hold? It appears we are likely headed for a massive change in the future.

Generational Cycle

We now turn to looking at a generational cycle.

More than a quarter century ago, William Strauss and Neil Howe wrote their bestselling book, *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy*. In it, they argued that history could be understood as coming in turnings, which have cycles of four. Each cycle spans a length longer than human life, roughly 80 to 100 years. That unit of time was what the ancients called the saeculum. These four turnings of the saeculum comprise the historical rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction.

The first turning is a High – an upbeat era of strengthening institutions and weakening individualism. That is when a new civic order develops and the old values decay. The second turning is an Awakening – which is a passionate era of spiritual upheaval. This is when the civic order comes under attack from new values. The third turning is an Unraveling – which is a downcast era of strengthening individualism and weakening institutions. This is when the old civil order decays and new values develop. The fourth turning is a Crisis – which is a decisive era of secular upheaval. The values regime propels the replacement of the old civil order with a new one.

The authors predicted that political, economic, and social

upheavals would rattle the United States in and around the 2020s. The 2008 economic crisis and the changes just described from 2016 seemed to support the predictions made in the book.

Last year, Neil Howe wrote *The Fourth Turning Is Here*. The title tells it all. We are in crisis as illustrated by a government that does not seem to function, low public trust in just about any institution, political polarization, moral and legal chaos, and a collapse of families. He reminds us of the Abraham Lincoln quote that “a house divided against itself cannot stand” and that the government “will become all one thing, or all the other.” He also reminds us of other fourth turning crises in America: World War II, the Civil War, and the American Revolution.

We are fortunate to live in such a time as this (Esther 4:14). We should be like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) who were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do.”

What does the future hold? It appears we are likely headed for a massive change in the future.

Technological Cycle

Let's look at a technological cycle.

There appears to be about a fifty-year technological cycle, in which we see important technological revolutions. In the late 18th century, we saw the beginnings of what today we refer to as the industrial revolution. Most people lived on farms. This revolution brought people out of the farms into the cities and factories.

Fifty years later was the age of steam and railways that changed the world significantly. Up until that time, we had manpower and horsepower. Trains that run on steam and steam ships changed the world in significant ways. Now people could move faster and carry heavier loads over a longer distance.

Fifty years after that we had steel and electricity. Steel was important in buildings. Brick buildings could only be a few stories high. Steel allowed designers to create skyscrapers and to build bridges over larger sections of water. Electricity literally lit up the dark night and provided numerous conveniences that we take for granted today.

Fifty years after that we had oil, automobiles, and a revolution in mass production. Automobiles provided people with the ability to go wherever they wanted without having to walk, ride a horse, or catch a train. Advances in mass production enhanced the industrial revolution and made possible the vast array of products available to us today.

By the 1970s, we came into the age of information and telecommunications. This came about with the development of the transistor and then the microchip. Our digital world developed because of these inventions.

Today, we find ourselves in a world of fast computers, [artificial intelligence](#), and [genetic engineering](#). We have social media, but we also have social media censorship. We have creative graphics, but we also have deep fakes and growing questions about [what is real and what is fake](#). We can genetically treat and cure diseases, but we can also [genetically engineer humans](#). How much of this will be driven by politics or economics? It is worth noting this latest technological cycle raises significant questions and also coincides with the political cycles and the generational cycle.

We are fortunate to live in such a time as this (Esther 4:14). We should be like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) who were “men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do.”

What does the future hold? It appears we are likely headed for a massive change in the future.

Financial Cycle

In this article we have looked at four important historical cycles. Now we conclude by covering a financial cycle. You will notice that some of the financial cycles parallel the technological revolutions.

America moved from an agricultural society to an industrial economy to an information society.

If you look at the wealth cycles of nations, you notice something interesting about which currency was dominant. The financial superpower changes over time, on average about 100 years. Perhaps you have seen a chart that shows these changes:

Portugal – Portuguese Real (15th century)

Spain – Spanish Real (16th century)

Netherlands – Dutch Guilder (17th century)

France – Franc (18th century)

Britain – Pound sterling (19th century)

U.S. – U.S. dollar (20th century)

Where are we today? The U.S. and other countries around the world are experiencing a debt crisis. One significant reason for this is the fact that the dollar is no longer “good as gold.” For 5,000 years, money was gold. But protecting it and transporting it was difficult. Banks and nations held the gold and created paper certificates that represented the value. Sometimes, the amount of paper currency was not always backed by gold.

The greatest problem came in the 20th century. In 1944, the Bretton Woods conference fixed gold at \$35 per ounce. But by 1971, President Nixon closed the gold window and we have seen over the last fifty-plus years that the value of the dollar has continually declined. Also, the possibility of the U.S. dollar remaining the reserve currency in the world is questionable.

At the same time, this country and other countries are facing a significant debt crisis. It is easy to spend more when all you need to do is print more money. That leads to inflation and a devaluation of your currency.

When faced with a debt crisis, you only have a few options. You can default on the debt, which some nations have done. You can tax the citizens, but there isn't enough wealth in any nation to cover the size of those national debts. You could cut spending, but few politicians would ever consider that option. Instead, most countries (including the U.S.) print more money. Unfortunately, that can only last for so long. Just look at Weimar Germany or Zimbabwe or Venezuela.

We are fortunate to live in such a time as this (Esther 4:14). We should be like the sons of Issachar (1 Chronicles 12:32) who were "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do."

What does the future hold? It appears we are likely headed for a massive change in the future.

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Living With an Eternal Perspective

Sue Bohlin considers several ways to develop a way of seeing our earthly life as part of the much bigger picture that extends into eternity.

What Does It Mean To Live With an Eternal Perspective?

Years ago, after spending his whole life on the mission field, a career missionary made his final trip home on a passenger ship. One of the other people on his sailing was a celebrity, and as the ship made its way into the harbor, all those on board beheld a huge throng of well wishers at the pier with signs and instruments to celebrate the famous person's return.

The missionary stood at the railing, watching wistfully, knowing that not a soul was there for him. He said, "Lord, I've served You my whole life. Look at all the recognition and revelry for that famous person, and there's nobody here for me. It hurts, Lord."



He heard the still, small voice say, "You're not home yet, son."

I love this story that helps me keep in mind the big picture that includes the eternal, unseen realm, and the long picture that extends into the forever that awaits on the other side of death.

The apostle Paul had a firm grasp on what it means to live with an eternal perspective. We can especially see this in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In these verses, Paul provides three aspects of an eternal perspective that kept him from losing heart, despite living with profound physical persecution and assault such as being hammered with stones, whipped by a cat-o'-nine-tails, beaten with rods, and shipwrecked. He knew what it was to go without sleep, food or drink, sometimes he was cold and naked. The man *knew* what it was to suffer! (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

But Paul had a sort of spiritual periscope that allowed him to “see above” into the spirit realm while continuing to “live below” in this physical world. He saw the contrast between our bodies and our souls, how earthly affliction prepares us for glory, and the need to focus on the unseen and eternal rather than the seen and temporary.

Paul's Eternal Perspective

The apostle Paul showed us in 2 Corinthians 4 that he understood what it was to live with an eternal perspective. He understood that our bodies can be growing older and weaker on the outside, while our spirits are growing stronger, brighter, and more mature on the inside. I get that; as a polio survivor who has also needed both my hips replaced, I am very aware that I keep getting weaker the longer I live in this compromised body. But I also know the beauty and glory of Jesus making me more and more like Himself, day by day, so by His grace I can keep growing in vitality and joy on the inside! I may have diminishing energy in my body, but my spiritual energy capacity keeps getting bigger!

Paul also understood that the hard parts of living in a fallen world, much less living with the pains and trials of persecution, are merely a “light and momentary affliction” compared to what’s waiting on the other side: an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Even horrible pain on earth is still “light and momentary” compared to the infinite length and glory of eternity with Christ. We can see how the

Lord Jesus modeled this understanding as He faced the cross, and Hebrews tells us that He “despised its shame” because He was valuing the glory of the joy set before Him (12:2)

And Paul understood that we can shift our focus from the visible and temporary things of this world, to the unseen and eternal things of the spirit realm. We have to work at seeing the unseen and eternal. We do that with the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18). We do that by training ourselves to view everything through the lens of God’s word.

I’ve been working at developing an eternal perspective for years. For me, it’s about connecting the dots between earthly things and heavenly things.

I look at earthly things and wonder, “How does this connect to the spirit realm? How does this connect to what is unseen and eternal?” For examples, look at my blog posts, such as Glorious Morning Glories [probe.org/glorious-morning-glories/], Back Infections and Heart Infections [probe.org/back-infections-and-heart-infections/], Cruise Ships, Roller Coasters and Attitudes [probe.org/cruise-ships-roller-coasters-and-attitudes/], and Blowing Past Greatness [probe.org/blowing-past-greatness/].

Jesus’ parables are the world’s best examples of using the physical to provide understanding of the eternal. He was always connecting the dots between the things He was surrounded by—different types of soil, lost coins and sheep and sons, a wedding banquet—and explaining how these things related to the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the most important prayers we can ask is, “Lord, help me see Your hand at work”—and then intentionally looking for it. For years I have kept a “God Sightings” Journal where I recorded evidence of God intervening in my life and the lives of others I have seen. I love to ask my friends and mentees, “Do you any God Sightings to share?” to help them identify the

hand of God in their lives.

An Eternal Perspective on Suffering

As we talk about living with an eternal perspective, let's remember that we live in a permanent battle zone of spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who hates us because He hates God. He and his fellow demons continually attack us with lies and deceptions. Some are personal, but many of them constitute the cultural water we swim in.

When we forget that we live in a culture of anti-God, anti-truth, it's like going out in our underwear, needlessly exposing ourselves. Living with an eternal perspective means staying vigilant, donning our spiritual armor (Ephesians 6:10-18) and using it to fight back against the lies of the enemy.

Spiritual warfare is HARD. It means suffering. Sometimes physical, most often mental—because spiritual warfare is waged on the battlefield of the mind. But the suffering of spiritual warfare is temporary, because the vast majority of the believer's life will be spent in heaven where warfare of all kinds will be a distant memory.

But for right now, suffering is still part of life, and developing and maintaining an eternal perspective really helps us remind ourselves of the larger truth. Romans 8:18 says that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Being faithful when we're suffering means glory in the future.

My friend Holly has battled cancer three times on top of the horribleness of cystic fibrosis. She suffers literally every day of her life. Yet, with a beautiful, godly stubbornness, she reminds herself of what is true: “What if the worst thing happens? Oh wait, it can't. The worst thing that can possibly happen to anyone is to die apart from Christ and spend

eternity in torment. For me, to die means instant joy and relief in the arms of my Savior!”

Like [Joni Eareckson Tada](#), my friend Chris has lived with quadriplegia for almost fifty years. What comes to mind when I think of Chris is two words: “sweet joy.” Because of his eternal perspective, Chris knows his suffering is temporary, and he chooses not to give into self-pity. People are drawn to him like honey because of how he radiates Jesus.

And then there’s me. I’ve lived with a disability my whole life. As a polio survivor, I have walked every step with a [very noticeable limp](#). Living with an eternal perspective means that, by the grace of God, I know I will receive a beautiful, strong, perfectly healthy resurrection body in heaven. My polio days are limited, but my resurrection body days will be unlimited! Meanwhile, I get to see God use my disability for His glory and others’ good in ways I never would have imagined. It really is okay!

Remembering the Long View

Another aspect of living with an eternal perspective is focusing on the reality that our time on earth is short, especially compared to the never-ending life on the other side of death.

One of my favorite questions is to ask, “A hundred years from now, when you are face to face with Jesus in heaven, what do you want to be glad you chose today? Indulging your flesh and doing whatever you think will make you happy right now, or making choices that honor God and bless other people?”

Probably my favorite question remains an essential part of my eternal perspective: passing everything through the grid of the great question, “In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?” [probe.org/in-the-scope-of-eternity/]The frustrations of traffic? Not getting our way? A loved one who does not know

Christ? The answer determines what is worth getting upset about, what we should just let go, and where we should be investing time in prayer.

We can remember the long view by pre-deciding now that we will use our earthly days fully, engaged in ministry, as long as God gives us breath.

Years ago, my view of living with an eternal perspective was shaped by the story of a lady who decided to start college in her 70s. When they asked her why she would do such a thing when her life was basically over, she said, "Oh no! It's not over! I'm preparing for the next part of my life in heaven! The more equipped I can get on earth, the more ready I'll be for what the Lord has for me on the other side!"

Another lady was homebound because she was so disabled. She got the word out that every afternoon, her home was open for anyone who needed prayer. Some days it was like there was a revolving door, so many coming and going! She had a vibrant ministry in the waning days of her life because she was determined to use her remaining earthly days fully, to the glory of God.

One of my friends is a TSA [Transportation Security Administration, part of the U.S. Government] agent at a major airport. She diligently reminds herself daily that every traveler who comes through the security line is infinitely valuable because they are made in the image of God, and Jesus died for them. She showers kindness on them because they are so important. One of her co-workers, for whom work is just a job where he punches a time clock, once told her, "In twelve months you'll stop being nice to everyone." We don't think so. (Especially since she's already had this job for several years.) She works at maintaining an eternal perspective, seeing the unseen.

In the time you have now, live well, to the glory of God. Keep

reminding yourself that everything we do now has an eternal impact. Our choices, our behaviors, our words, ripple into eternity. Which is why we need to seek to do everything for the glory of God.

Eternal Perspective is What God Sees

As a mom of littles, Nicole Johnson was feeling sorry for herself when she met with a friend who had just returned from Europe. She writes,

“My friend turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, ‘I brought you this.’ It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I wasn’t exactly sure why she’d given it to me until I read her inscription: ‘With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.’

“In the days ahead I would read—no, devour—the book. And I would discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work:

“1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals—we have no record of their names.

“2) These builders gave their whole lives for a work they would never see finished.

“3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit.

“4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.

“There’s a story in the book about a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, ‘Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof? No one will ever see it.’

“And the workman replied, ‘Because God sees it.’^{1}

Living with an eternal perspective as we make choices and invest our time to glorify God is like building a cathedral that we won't be able to see finished.

It means living with the long view in mind, aware that the things we can see, hear, and feel are temporary, but the spiritual realm is permanent.

An eternal perspective means that the things you do that no one sees but God—the unseen and eternal—*they matter!*

God tells us in Isaiah that our purpose in life is to glorify Him (43:7). Paul puts a point on this in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

And that's the key to living with an eternal perspective.

Notes

1. thejoysofboys.com/monday-motivation-the-invisible-mom/

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The Old Testament and Other Ancient Religious Literature

Do similarities in the Old Testament with other ancient Near Eastern literature prove that it is all the same kind of thing? Rick Wade shows why it's not.

The Challenge

In the 1870s a scholar named George Smith revealed the discovery of both creation and flood stories in ancient Babylonian literature.^[1] Bible scholars were soon claiming that the writer of Genesis was merely borrowing from Babylonian mythology. Although competent scholars have since shown that the similarities between these accounts are largely superficial, the idea remains today in certain areas of academia and pop culture that the Bible is just another work of ancient mythology.



Although there are good reasons to see the Bible as very different from other religious literature, the problem for conservative Christians is in how similar it is to other ancient literature; it's because there are significant affinities that scholars made that leap in the first place. On the one hand, liberal scholars and a lot of ordinary lay people take the similarities to indicate that the Old Testament isn't any more divine than other ancient literature. On the other hand, conservatives, fearful of seeing the Bible lose its status, tend to shy away from the similarities. Most of us wouldn't say it, but we don't like to think there's much overlap between the worldview of the ancient Israelites and that of their neighbors. Where we run into problems is when we assume that God revealed Himself in ways that are always satisfactory to modern people, especially with regard to scientific and historical accuracy. Neither the giving-away-the-store approach nor the approach of turning a blind eye to genuine similarities will do. We must let the Bible be what it is and determine for us how we should understand and use it.

For all the similarities, there are fundamental differences that set the Bible apart. In this article I will spend more

time on the differences. Before turning to those, however, it would be good to mention a few similarities.

For one thing, there is similarity in the form that religious practice took. Temples, priests, prophets, and sacrifices were a part of the practices of other religions as they were of the Israelites'. Old Testament scholar John Oswalt notes, for example, that "the layout of the tabernacle and of the temple following it is essentially the same as the layout of contemporary Canaanite sanctuaries. Furthermore, the decoration of the temple seems to have been similar to that of Canaanite sanctuaries."[{2}](#)

There were similarities in law as well. For example, the "eye for an eye" injunctions in Exodus 21:23-25 are similar to some found in the Babylonian *Code of Hammurabi*. Both include punishments for striking a pregnant woman and causing her to miscarry.[{3}](#)

Even here, though, there are differences, specifically in the purposes of these two. Old Testament scholar John Walton points out that the ancient codes, or treatises as he calls them, were not rules legislated by authorities. Rather, they were collections of principles, learned over time, assembled to show the worthiness and wisdom of the king in his role of maintaining order in society.[{4}](#) "This," Walton writes, "was the most fundamental expectation of the gods."[{5}](#)

By contrast, the Old Testament law was an important part of the covenant between God and His people; the laws were, as Walton says, the "stipulations of the covenant."[{6}](#)

More could be said about similarities, but we'll turn now to the differences between the Old Testament and other literature of the ancient Near East.

The One True God

Two fundamental differences between the Old Testament and ancient myths are the biblical claims that there is only one true God and that this God is not to be worshipped by means of idols.[\[7\]](#)

Israel's neighbors were polytheists or henotheists, meaning they believed there were multiple gods but they worshipped only one, or one primarily. This is why the steward of Joseph's house could speak to Joseph's brothers of "your God and the God of your father" (Gen. 43:23) and why Pharaoh could say to Moses and Aaron, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land" (Ex. 8:25). The Egyptians had their gods, the Hebrews had theirs. The cultural "atmosphere" of belief in many gods was as normal in that day as the modern secular mentality is in ours.

By contrast, Yahweh declared that there was only one God and it was Him. "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God," Yahweh said. "Who is like me? Let him proclaim it" (Isa. 44:6b-7a; see also 45:5,6).

Further, the true God was not to be worshipped through idols. That was a new idea. Idols were very important to the ancients. They were the actualized presence of deities. The idol received worship on behalf of the god. An example of that worship was providing food for the god by presenting it to the idol. John Walton says that through such expressions, "in this way the image mediated the worship from the people to the deity."[\[8\]](#)

This entire understanding was declared false by Yahweh. Through Isaiah and Jeremiah God declared that idols were wood or stone, silver or gold, and nothing more (Isa. 44; Jer. 10). "Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols," God said through Jeremiah, "for his images are false, and there is no breath in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion" (Jer.

10:14-15a). Through the Psalmist, God asked rhetorically, “Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” (Ps. 50:12-13).

Transcendence vs. Continuity

One of the ways we distinguish the Old Testament from other literature of the ancient Near East is to note the difference between actual history and myth. The stories of the gods in other literature we call mythological. The word myth is often used today to mean false, but it has a much richer meaning than that.

In his book *The Bible Among the Myths*, John Oswalt gives several definitions of myth which have to do with such things as the definition of the word and sociological and theological factors and more.^{9} A central feature of all of them is what Oswalt calls “continuity.” By continuity he means an actual metaphysical connection between all things. A simple illustration of this principle is the claim, “I am one with the tree, not merely symbolically or spiritually, but actually. The tree is me; I am the tree.”^{10} In the ancient world, this continuity included the gods. The differences between nature and the gods were more of degree than of kind.

This connection is more than a matter of mere resemblance. Because the pagan gods were understood to be continuous with nature, what happened in nature was thought to be a direct result of the activities of the gods. If the crops didn’t grow or the animals didn’t reproduce, it must have had something to do with the gods. Moving in the other direction, people hoped to manipulate the gods by engaging in some ritualistic act on the level of nature. So, by retelling and acting out the mythical stories of the divine, ideal world, a connection was made between humanity and the gods. It was hoped that the outcomes of the mythical accounts would apply to the natural world.^{11} This direct continuity between earth and “heaven”

sheds light on such things as temple prostitution and fertility rituals. Through re-enactments of the mythological origins of the world, which involved the sexual activities of the gods, people hoped they could inspire the gods to make their crops grow and their animals fertile.

By contrast, the God of the Old Testament is not continuous with the created world. Yahweh is transcendent, above and separated in His very nature from the created order. This distinction marks a fundamental difference between the teachings of the Old Testament and those of the ancient myths.

This has several very important implications. I'll run through a few.

Being transcendent meant God could not be manipulated through rituals the way pagan gods could. Fertility rituals, for example, were meaningless because they had no relation whatsoever to how God created or governed the world. The Israelites engaged in certain ritualistic acts, but they were not for the purpose of making God do what they wanted. In fact, when they became substitutes for godly living, God told them to stop doing them. We read in Isaiah chapter 1 about how abhorrent the sacrifices and the rituals of the Israelites had become to God.

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of convocations—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you;

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood (Isa. 1:11-17).

The pagan gods demanded the appeasement of sacrifices. Yahweh looked for a change of heart and behavior.

Here's another difference. Because the various acts of the pagan deities recounted in myths were thought to be eternally recurring, time and space lost their significance. The acts of the gods were timeless. They couldn't be connected to particular moments in history.[\[12\]](#) Thus, the mythological view reduced the significance of the historical.

By contrast, in Scripture we see the transcendent God acting in history through specific events and persons. The people of Israel were called not to re-enact but to remember particular events in history, for it was in these things that the transcendent God of the Bible revealed Himself.

The transcendence/continuity distinction helps explain why idol worship was so strongly condemned in Scripture. It was more than just a matter of worshipping the wrong God. It showed a basic misunderstanding of the *nature* of God. To engage in idol worship was to give in to the idea of continuity between nature and the divine. This mentality was likely behind the creation of the golden calf by Aaron when Moses was on the mountain. The people had lived in a world where gods could be seen through physical idols. It was natural for them, when wondering where Moses and Yahweh were, to find reassurance in a physical representation of deity. But it was condemned by God.

A Few More Differences

Here are three more differences between the worldview and religion prescribed in the Old Testament and that seen in other ancient Near Eastern literature.

First, the biblical worldview regards humanity highly. In the Old Testament, we read that man and woman were created in God's image. They were the pinnacle of God's creative work. In the pagan myths, mankind was created merely to serve the needs of the lazy and conceited gods. Humans were only good for "food and adulation," as John Oswalt says.[{13}](#)

Second, Yahweh was concerned with people's moral lives. Among other ancient Near Eastern peoples, Oswalt writes, religion was "about sacrifice, ritual, ritual purity, prayer, offerings, and the like." Things like this were part of the covenant between Israel and Yahweh, but not the only things, and not even the most important, as we saw in the Isaiah 1 passage quoted earlier. Ethical obedience was and is an important part of our response to God. His people are to tell the truth, to respect other people and their possessions, to keep the marriage bed pure, etc. Similar laws can be found in some other religious codes, but for Israel they weren't just the laws of the land; they were aspects of a *relationship* with God that were grounded in the *character* of God.[{14}](#)

Third, the people of Israel could know if they were pleasing or displeasing Yahweh and why. They knew what they were required to do and not do, and they got feedback, typically through the prophets.

By contrast, other gods didn't seem so concerned to communicate their thoughts or motives to people. When hardships came for no apparent reason, people thought they must have offended the gods, but they couldn't know for sure what they had done or not done. Walton writes that "the minds of the gods were not easily penetrated."[{15}](#) By contrast, he says, "nothing in the ancient Near East compares to the extent of revelation that Yahweh gives to his people and the depth of relationship that he desires with them."[{16}](#)

By countering the idea that the Bible is just another example of ancient literature, I have not proved that the Bible's

message is true. The point is to clear away an objection that gets in the way of understanding. It provides a space for people to give more thought to the teachings of the Bible. The Bible is then able to speak for itself.

Notes

1. Gerhard F. Hasel, "The Polemic Nature of the Genesis Cosmology," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 46 (1974) 81-102; accessed online at www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/eq/1974-2_081.pdf.
2. John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 91-92.
3. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Mich.: Baker Academic, 2005), 31-32.
4. John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 290-91.
5. *Ibid.*, 295.
6. *Ibid.*, 299.
7. Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 57-58.
8. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 114-115.
9. Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, chaps. 3 and 4.
10. *Ibid.*, 43.
11. *Ibid.*, 42.
12. *Ibid.*, 43.
13. *Ibid.*, 70.
14. *Ibid.*, 77.
15. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 307.
16. *Ibid.*, 298.

Ancient Perspectives on Happiness

After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.

The Declaration of Independence says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[\[1\]](#) Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.

So what *is* happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness “results from the possession . . . of what one considers good.”[\[2\]](#) A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider *good*? Many things can be described as *good*: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us *happy* . . . at least, for a while. But is there a *good* that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we’re getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.



Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . *lofty*, shall we say, in order to experience *real* happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be

lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just “having a good time.” Instead, they thought there was an important *moral* component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness “comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking.”[\[3\]](#)

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don’t believe that this can be the *final* word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we’ll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.[\[4\]](#)

Epicureanism

Let’s begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, epicurious.com, creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the pleasures of a great meal.[\[5\]](#) But as we’ll see, Epicurus was not the total “party animal” that people often think.[\[6\]](#)

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it’s the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who’s been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his

non-virtuous counterpart.[{7}](#)

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn't need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods*. And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D. 250-325), believed that only the fear of God "guards the mutual society of men."[{8}](#) In his view, if people think they aren't accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even *immoral*—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this "can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus."[{9}](#)

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.

Stoicism

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it "was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy."[{10}](#) The Stoics' manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.[{11}](#)

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed “the goal of life” as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed “as maintaining one’s dignity and grace whatever may happen.”[{12}](#) The Stoics understood that things don’t always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we’re not prepared, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha’s teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, “Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well.”[{13}](#) We often don’t have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, “the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity.”[{14}](#) This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they’ll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there’s much to admire about Stoicism, as a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.[{15}](#)

Neo-Platonism

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if

it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, “the supreme transcendent principle” and the “ground of all being.”[{16}](#) Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One *not* by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, “Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus’s account.”[{17}](#)

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there *is* a clear distinction between Creator and creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that “all” of reality is “Divine.” According to one scholar, Plotinus tried “to steer a middle course” between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).[{18}](#) But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus’s view is certainly *close* to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus’s perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their “oneness” with the One. In Plotinus’s view, “Happiness resides in a person’s realization that she is one with divinity.”[{19}](#) According to Plotinus, then, realizing one’s “oneness” with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there’s much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of

God, creation, human nature, the meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while the system is very religious, it's *not* Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he's not pointing us to the one *true* God.

Augustinianism

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we'll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we've already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience *lasting* human happiness (and Augustine thinks that's pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God. [{20}](#)

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine's view quite nicely when she writes, "Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely." [{21}](#) In Augustine's view, happiness is a condition in which one's

desires are realized. Happy is he who has what" he wants," he writes in his little book on happiness.^{22} But he also believed that what we all really want is the *everlasting* possession of the *greatest* good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!

But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). And those who do are promised joy in His presence and "eternal pleasures" at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine's view on human happiness. In my opinion, it's far and away the best perspective that we've examined in this article, and I hope you'll think so, too.

Notes

1. Cited from the text of the Declaration of Independence at www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html (accessed August 26, 2011).
2. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, inc., s.v. "happiness," dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness (accessed August 26, 2011).
3. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3-4.
4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.
5. For more, check out www.epicurious.com

6. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.
7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 70-71.
8. Lactantius, "A Treatise on the Anger of God," in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 269; cited in Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 8.
9. Stanley R. Obitts, "Epicureanism," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 358.
10. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
11. Gary T. Burke, "Stoics, Stoicism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1056.
12. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 9.
13. The *Enchiridion*, VIII; cited in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
14. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 10.
15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry's discussion of Augustine's critique of Stoicism in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 14-15.
16. Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 756.
17. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 122.
18. Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1985), 467.
19. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 19.

20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry's discussion in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.

21. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 29.

22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 413.

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Four Killer Questions: Power Tools for Great Question-Asking

Sue Bohlin provides helpful information for use in helping sharpen the question-asking skills of fellow believers as well as in evangelism. These "understanding questions" help Christians sharpen their biblical worldview and help unbelievers delve into the inconsistencies of their own worldview.

Dr. Jeff Myers of Bryan College and Summit Ministries shares our passion for helping others develop a biblical worldview. One of the tools he offers in developing critical thinking skills is how to use the right question at the right time.



He suggests four "killer questions" to help anyone think critically. [\[1\]](#) The first question is, *What do you mean by that?* In other words, define your terms. The second question is, *Where do you get your information?* The third is, *How do*

you know that's true?, and the fourth killer question is, *What if you're wrong?*

Dr. Myers tells this story:

"A friend took a group of third graders to the Denver Museum of Natural History.

"Before he took them inside, he knelt down on their level and said, 'Kids, if anybody in this museum tells you anything, I want you to ask them, *how do you know that's true?*' Giving this question to a third grader is the intellectual equivalent of giving them a surface-to-air missile. These kids walked into the museum; all they knew was, Ask: *How do you know that's true?*

"A paleontologist was going to show them how to find a fossil. Apparently they had intentionally buried a fossil down in the soil sample and she said, 'We're going to find it.' Very clever, right? No, not with this crowd. 'Cause they started asking questions like, 'Well, how do you know there's a fossil down in there?' 'Well, because we just know there's a fossil down there.' 'Why do you want to find it?' 'Well, because we want to study it.' 'Why do you want to study it?' 'We want to find out how old it is.' Well, how old do you think it is?' 'About 60 million years old.'

"'Lady, how do you know that is true?'"

"She patronized them. She said, 'Well, you see, I'm a scientist, I study these things, I just know that.' They said, 'Well, how do you know that's true?' Anytime she said anything at all they just asked, 'How do you know that's true?' What happened next proves that truth is stranger than fiction. She threw down her tools, glared at these children, and said, 'Look, children, *I don't know, OK? I just work here!*'"[\[2\]](#)

Question #1: What do you mean by that?

The first question is, *What do you mean by that?* You want to get the other person to define his terms and explain what he is saying. If you don't make sure you understand what the other person means, you could end up having a conversation using the same words but meaning very different things.

When I was a new believer, I was approached on the street by some people collecting money for a ministry to young people. I asked, naively, "Do you teach about Jesus?" They said, rather tentatively, "Yesss. . . ." I gave them some money and asked for their literature (which was in the reverse order of what I should have done). Only later did I learn that they did indeed teach about Jesus—that He was the brother of Satan! I wish I had had this first killer question back then. I would have asked, "What do you teach about Jesus? Who is He to you?"

Get the other person's definition. Let's say you're talking to a neighbor who says, "I don't believe there is a God." Don't quarrel with him: "Oh yes there is!" "No, there's not." Second Timothy 2:24-25 says not to quarrel with anyone. Just start asking questions instead. "What do you mean by 'God'? What's your understanding of this God who isn't there?" Let him define that which does not exist! You may well find out that the god he rejects is a mean, cold, abusive god who looks a lot like his father. In that case, you can assure him that you don't believe in that god either. The true God is altogether different. If it were me, at this point I wouldn't pursue the existence of God argument, but rather try to understand where the other person is coming from, showing the compassion and grace of God to someone bearing painful scars on his soul.

Let's say someone says she is for a woman's right to choose abortion. You can ask, "What do you mean by 'woman'? Only adult women? What if the baby is a girl, what about her right to choose? What do you mean by 'right'? Where does that right come from?" Do you see how asking *What do you mean by that?*

can expose problems in the other person's perspective?

Question #2: Where do you get your information?

The question *Where do you get your information?* is particularly important in today's culture, where we drown in information from a huge array of sources. Information is being pumped at us from TV, radio, music, Websites, email, blogs, billboards, movies, and conversations with people who have no truth filters in place at all. Consider the kind of responses you could get to the question, *Where do you get your information?*

"I heard it somewhere." Well, how's that for reliable? Follow with another killer question, *How do you know it's true?*

"Everybody says so." That may be so, but is it true? If you say something loud enough, often enough, and long enough, people will believe it's true even if it isn't. For example, "everybody says" people are born gay. Doesn't everybody know that by now? That's what we hear, every day, but where is the science to back up that assertion? Turns out, there is none. Not a shred of proof that there is a gay gene.

Someone else may say, "I read it somewhere." So ask, in a legitimate newspaper or magazine? Or in a tabloid? Elvis is not alive, and you can't lose twenty-five pounds in a week. You might have read it somewhere, but there is a word for that kind of writing: *fiction*.

Did you see it on the internet? That could be a single individual with great graphics abilities pumping out his own totally made-up stuff. Or it could be a trustworthy, legitimate website like Probe.org.

Did you see it on TV? Who said it, and how trustworthy is the source? Was it fact, or opinion? Be aware of the worldview

agenda behind the major media outlets. Former CBS reporter Bernard Goldberg exposed the leftist leanings of the media in his book *Bias: A CBS Insider Exposes How the Media Distort the News*. Most of what you see on TV is what the Bible calls “the world,” and we are to be discerning and skeptical of the values and information it pumps out.

Don't be fooled by someone sounding confident and self-assured. Many people feel confident without any basis for feeling that way. Ask, *Where do you get your information?* It's a great killer question.

Question #3: How do you know that's true?

The third killer question is, *How do you know that's true?* This is probably the most powerful question of them all. It puts the burden of proof on the other person.

Most people aren't aware of what they assume is true; there's simply no other way to see the world. They often believe what they believe without asking if it's true, if it aligns with reality. If you respectfully ask killer questions like *How do you know that's true?*, all of a sudden it can begin to occur to folks that what they believe, they believe by faith. But where is their faith placed?

Sometimes, the kindest thing we can do for people is gently shake up their presuppositions and invite them to think.

The reigning philosophy in science today is materialism, the insistence that the physical universe is all that exists. Something is only real if it can be measured and quantified. We need to ask, *How do you know* there is nothing outside the matter-space-time-energy continuum? *How do you know* that the instruments of physical measurement are the only ones that matter? *How do you know* there isn't something non-physical, which cannot be measured with physical measuring tools? If all you have is a ruler, how do you measure weight? (And if all

you have is a ruler, and someone wants to talk about weight, it would be easy to deny there is such a thing as weight, only height and length, a lot like the materialists' insistence that since we can't measure the supernatural, it doesn't exist.)

At the heart of the debate over stem cell research is the question of the personhood of a human embryo. Those who insist that it's not life until implantation need to be asked, *How do you know that's true?* It's genetically identical to the embryo ten minutes before implantation. How do you know those are only a clump of cells and not a human being?

Postmodern thought says that no one can know truth. This philosophy has permeated just about every college campus. To the professor who asserts, "No one can know truth," a student should ask, *How do you know that's true?* If that sounds slightly crazy to you, good! A teacher who says there is no truth, or that if there is, no one can know it, says it because he or she believes it to be true, or they wouldn't be saying it!

We get hostile email at Probe informing us of how stupid and biased we are for believing the Bible, since it has been mistranslated and changed over the centuries and it was written by man anyway. When I ask, "How do you know this is true?", I don't get answers back. Putting the burden of proof on the other person is quite legitimate. People are often just repeating what they have heard from others. But we have to be ready to offer a defense for the hope that is in us as well. [\[3\]](#) Of course, when we point to the Bible as our source of information, it's appropriate to ask the killer question, "How do you know that's true?" Fortunately, there is a huge amount of evidence that today's Bible is virtually the same as the original manuscripts. And there is strong evidence for its supernatural origins because of things like fulfilled prophecy. Go to the "Reasons to Believe" section of Probe.org for a number of articles on why we can trust that the Bible is

really God's word.

There are a lot of mistaken, deceived people who believe in reincarnation and insist they remember their past lives. Shirley MacLaine claims to have been a Japanese Geisha, a suicide in Atlantis, an orphan raised by elephants, and the seducer of Charlemagne.[\[4\]](#) Here's where this killer question comes in. If you lose your life memories when you die, *how do you know* your past lives are real? When you're born into a new body and your slate is wiped clean, *how do you know* it's you?

So many people have embraced a pragmatic, expedient standard of, "Hey, it works for me." "It works for me to cheat on my taxes, as long as I don't get caught." "It works for me to spend hours on porn sites late at night since my wife doesn't know how to check the computer's history." "It works for me to keep God in his corner of the universe while I do my own thing; I'll get religious later in life." Well, *how do you know* it works? You haven't seen the whole, big picture. You can't know the future, and you can't know how tomorrow's consequences will be reaped from today's choices.

Let me add a caveat here. The underlying question behind *How do you know that's true?* is really, "Why should I believe you?" It can be quite disconcerting to be challenged this way, so be sure to ask with a friendly face and without an edge in your voice.

Question #4: What if you're wrong?

One benefit of this question is that it helps us not to "sweat the small stuff." There are a lot of issues where it just doesn't matter a whole lot if we're wrong. If you're agonizing over a restaurant menu, trying to figure out the best entree, what if you're wrong? It doesn't matter. You can probably come back another time. If you can't, because you're traveling and you'll never have another chance, is it going to wreck your life? Absolutely not.

Many of our youth (and, sadly, adults as well) believe that having sex is just part of being social. Many of them believe that sex qualifies as recreation, much like going to an amusement park. They need to be challenged: *What if you're wrong?* Besides the high probability of contracting a number of sexually transmitted diseases, there is the ongoing heartache of the discovery that "casual" sex isn't, because of its lasting impact on the heart.

The ultimate question where this matters is, *What do you believe about God?* What do you do with Jesus' statement "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by Me"?^{5} What if you believe there is no God, or that you can live however you want and God will let you into heaven because you're not a mass murderer? We need to ask, *What if you're wrong?* You will be separated from God forever!

It's only fair for Christ-followers to ask that of ourselves. What if *we're* wrong? What if we're actually living an illusion that there is a God and a purpose to life? I would say, "You know what? I still lived a great life, full of peace and purpose and fulfillment. Ultimately, if there were no God, it wouldn't matter—nothing would matter at all!—but I still loved my life. Either way, if I'm right or I'm wrong, I win."

These four killer questions are powerful to spark meaningful conversation and encourage yourself, and others, to think critically. Use them wisely, be prepared for some interesting conversations . . . and have fun!

Notes

1. Our fellow worldview apologist Bill Jack of Worldview Academy (www.worldview.org) has also popularized these "killer questions," but they go back all the way to Socrates.
2. "Created Male and Female: Biblical Light for a Sexually Darkened World" conference sponsored by the International Council for Gender Studies, October 10-12, 2003.

3. 1 Peter 3:15.

4. www.fortunecity.com/emachines/e11/86/duncan2.html

5. John 14:6.

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Talking About the Problem of Evil

T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.

What is Evil?

The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don't know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.



Atheist philosopher David Hume said, "Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?"

Let's address this. I'll give you a roadmap of where we're going. First, we need to address how one can even object to

evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I'll close with God's solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: "My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?"

Evil is not a "thing" that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or a phenomenon that exists by itself. It's like darkness, which is not a created thing; it's the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God's omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, "The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most perfect."

The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate *this* one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God's omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the "principle of sufficient reason."

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of "pre-established harmony."

Leibniz describes it this way: "For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best."

Human Free Will

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz,

this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: "The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone." God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God's instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, "God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so." John Stackhouse Jr. says, "God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings."

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga's argument like this:

"God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of 'compulsion,' is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This

sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God's love and to love God in return, but to go one's own way in defiance of both God and one's own best interest."

God created us with free will because our decision to say "yes" to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say "no" to Him.

The Greater Good

To review, so far, we've addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We've talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We've talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I've given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say "delicate" because this defense may not help a questioner much if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid's viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with

no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can't see it and we can't understand the larger picture of what He's doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: "Whatever doesn't kill me makes me stronger." Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.

The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous "King of the Jews"; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. *He* understands what it is to suffer. *He* has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced,

and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God's wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil. He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible's definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I've just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.

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The Contrasting Worldviews in 'That Hideous Strength'

Dr. Michael Gleghorn demonstrates how C.S. Lewis's 'That Hideous Strength' illustrates the cosmic war of good and evil through supernatural spiritual warfare.

A Study in Contrasts

In this article we're concluding a three-part series examining C.S. Lewis's "Cosmic Trilogy."^{1} We've already looked at [Out of the Silent Planet](#) and [Perelandra](#), which you can find on our website at Probe.org. Now we turn to *That Hideous Strength*, the third and final novel of the trilogy, originally published in 1945. In many ways, the story is a study in contrasts between two very different communities characterized by two very different worldviews.^{2}

On the one hand there is the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.), which might initially appear to embrace a naturalistic worldview, but which is actually governed by a kind of pragmatism that accepts whatever is useful for advancing its own nefarious purposes. On the other hand, there is the community at St. Anne's, which is generally animated by a Christian worldview.

Ransom, the hero of the first two novels, comes into this story as the "Head" or "Director" of St. Anne's, and he's a very different leader than the "Head" of the N.I.C.E. (as we'll see later). Whereas the first two novels largely took place on Mars and Venus respectively, this story takes place on Earth, specifically in England, sometime after World War 2.^{3}

That Hideous Strength is a long novel. It covers a lot of ground and deals with an incredible variety of ideas and issues. Because of this, we can only hit a few of the highlights here.

With this in mind, let's begin by noticing two important statements on the book's title page. First, the book's subtitle: "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups." This tells us something about the genre of the story. It's intended as a kind of "fairy-tale." But this is a "fairy-tale" for *grown-ups*. And indeed, much of this novel would be inappropriate for

children.

Second, there's a quotation from the 16th century Scottish poet, Sir David Lyndsay. In fact, the title of Lewis's book is taken from this quotation, for Lyndsay mentions "that hyddeous strength" with reference to the Tower of Babel, a story originally told in Genesis 11. The Tower of Babel, you may recall, was a monument to human pride and rebellion against the Lord. In response, the Lord came down in judgment and confused the languages of those building the tower, and they were subsequently scattered over the face of the earth.

If we are to correctly interpret Lewis's novel, then, we must not lose sight of these two clues. Lewis intends this story as a kind of modern-day "fairy-tale" that, in one way or another, also alludes to something like the Tower of Babel.

Supernatural Influences

Above, I mentioned Lewis's subtitle for the novel: "A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups." This, I said, tells us something about the genre of the story. Lewis intended the story as a kind of fairy-tale. But what *are* fairy-tales, and how might this help us interpret Lewis's novel?

On the English-Studies website, we learn that fairy-tales "are types of literature . . . featuring magical elements, mythical creatures, and moral lessons. Characterized by simple . . . characters, these stories typically involve a protagonist overcoming challenges with the help of magic or supernatural aid."[{4}](#) As we'll see, this description fits Lewis's novel fairly well.

Consider, for example, the concluding statement about "overcoming challenges with the help of magic or supernatural aid." In Lewis's novel, Ransom and the community at St. Anne's overcome the challenges posed by the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) with help *both* magical

and supernatural. From the depths of Arthurian legend, Merlin the magician returns to lend his aid to St. Anne's. Moreover, the community is also helped by powerful angelic authorities who can best be described as something like a cross between Christian archangels and Roman gods or goddesses.^{5} Hence, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn all descend from the heavens to help the community in its time of need.

And this helps us see an important contrast between St. Anne's and the N.I.C.E., for it turns out that *both* are receiving a kind of supernatural aid, though the source of that aid is very different. The Christian community at St. Anne's is receiving supernatural aid from loyal, angelic, servants of God. The N.I.C.E., however, is receiving aid from dark spirits, who are in rebellion against God. The leaders of the N.I.C.E. refer to these spirits as "macrobes," and recognize that they are "more intelligent than Man."^{6} While the good spirits communicate to the company of St. Anne's through Ransom, the "Head" of that community, the evil spirits communicate to the leaders of the N.I.C.E. through the decapitated "Head" of a former criminal, which is being artificially preserved in a laboratory. We thus begin to see how the contrasting worldviews of these two communities have led them into very different spiritual alliances.

Science and Magic

One of the strangest aspects of C. S. Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength*, concerns the return of Merlin to help the community of St. Anne's in their battle against the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.). Stranger still is the fact that the leaders of the N.I.C.E. initially hope to recruit Merlin to their *own* side in this struggle. But isn't the N.I.C.E. a scientific institute? Why would its leaders want to enlist the aid of an enigmatic magician from the days of King Arthur? It would seem that the governing principles of the N.I.C.E. are really rather different from

what one might expect from a scientific institute.

Consider, for example, the character of William Hingest. Lewis describes him as “a physical chemist” and one of only two men at his college “who had a reputation outside England.”^{7} Hingest is a true scientist. But when he visits the N.I.C.E. to find out more about it, he quickly decides to leave. As he tells Mark Studdock, another character in the novel, “I came here because I thought it had something to do with science. Now that I find it’s something more like a political conspiracy, I shall go home.”^{8}

Hingest realizes that the N.I.C.E. is quite different from a scientific institute. He rightly senses that there is something dark and corrupt at the institute’s core. As readers, we learn that the leaders of the N.I.C.E. are actually taking orders from demonic spirits. They want to recruit Merlin because they hope to make use of his powers to advance their own agenda. What they fail to realize, however, is that in the world of Lewis’s novel, Merlin is a Christian, and he joins forces with the company at St. Anne’s.

In his book, *The Abolition of Man*, Lewis described the birth of magic and applied science as “twins.” Both desired “to subdue reality to the wishes of men,” but only science was successful.^{9} In Lewis’s novel, however, the leaders of the Institute have stumbled upon a source of power that might arguably trump that of science, namely, the demonic “macrobes.” They want Merlin because he will increase their power still further. The leaders of the N.I.C.E. are not really interested in truth, beauty, or goodness, but only in the power “to subdue reality” to their own wishes. Like the ancient builders of Babel, they are in prideful rebellion against the Lord. And this is why, in Lewis’s “fairy-tale” novel, their work also must be destroyed.^{10}

The Problem of Violence

C. S. Lewis's novel, *That Hideous Strength*, has often been criticized for its alarming depictions of violence. Near the end of the novel, when the leaders of the National Institute of Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) are destroyed by Merlin and the heavenly powers, Lewis describes their deaths in rather grisly detail. Some are trampled and torn apart by wild animals, others are shot or decapitated, and one character chooses to be incinerated by his own hands.[{11}](#) Why does Lewis include such horrific scenes?

David Downing has a good discussion of this issue in his book, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C.S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy*. He first observes that "Lewis was writing" this novel "during the bleakest years of World War II and that he draws explicit parallels between the leaders of N.I.C.E. and the Nazis."[{12}](#) He notes that, like the Nazis, the N.I.C.E. also rely upon a "secret police" force. Like the Nazis, they too "control the press . . . use criminals for barbaric medical experiments" and "dream of creating a master race." Hence, just as it was necessary for the Allies to fight and defeat the Nazis, so also it is necessary for Ransom, Merlin, and the heavenly powers to fight and defeat the N.I.C.E.

But was it necessary for Lewis to describe the deaths of his villains in such "gruesome detail"?[{13}](#) Why not simply have the angelic-god Jupiter destroy the leaders of the N.I.C.E. with a well-aimed thunderbolt? Why does Lewis insist on narrating their deaths in such graphic terms? Downing argues that Lewis was using Dante's *Inferno* as a "subtext" for this novel.[{14}](#) He shows how the journey of Mark Studdock (a major character in the novel) into the heart of the N.I.C.E. parallels Dante's journey through the nine circles of hell.[{15}](#) As Downing observes, the leaders of the N.I.C.E. joined forces with dark spirits. They thus experience a dark end to their earthly pilgrimage.[{16}](#)

The violence in *That Hideous Strength* makes more sense when we remember the comparisons Lewis makes between the N.I.C.E. and the Nazis, as well as the many literary connections between his own story and Dante's *Inferno*. Moreover, we must not forget that such violence fits in rather well with Lewis's description of the story as a kind of "fairy-tale." Fairy tales, after all, often have a dark side, and Lewis's tale is no exception.

Babel and the Word of God

C. S. Lewis intended the final novel of his "Cosmic Trilogy," *That Hideous Strength*, to be read as a kind of fairy tale with allusions to the biblical Tower of Babel. We've mentioned several ways in which Lewis's novel resembles a fairy tale, but we've said little about its allusions to the Tower of Babel. Although Lewis draws several connections between the National Institute for Coordinated Experiments (or N.I.C.E.) and the Tower of Babel, we here have time to mention only a couple.

The story of the Tower of Babel occurs in Genesis 11. In that story, all humanity speaks the same language, and they determine to build "a city and a tower with its top in the heavens" (Genesis 11:4). They do this in order to "make a name" for themselves. But the Lord, who has told humanity to "fill the earth" (Genesis 9:1), comes down and confuses their language, thus dispersing them throughout the world (Genesis 11:8-9).

Like the builders of Babel, the leaders of the N.I.C.E. also want to "make a name" for themselves. The N.I.C.E. aims to achieve something like the deification of humanity, though this will only be accomplished by the destruction of virtually everything that makes human life worthwhile (and only a few, and eventually perhaps just one person, will be the beneficiary of their evil schemes).[\[17\]](#) For this reason, God

permits some of His loyal servants, the Heavenly Powers, to descend to earth and bring linguistic confusion to the leaders of the N.I.C.E., thus forcing them to abandon their project. [{18}](#)

Merlin the magician, who has joined forces with Ransom and the community at St. Anne's, is the human instrument through which the Heavenly Powers work to release the "curse of Babel" upon the N.I.C.E. The leaders of this institute have joined forces with dark spirits to achieve their ends. Hence, once the "curse of Babel" is in full force among them, Merlin calls out over the din of confusion: "They that have despised the word of God, from them shall the word of man also be taken away." [{19}](#) The inability of the leaders of the N.I.C.E. to understand one another plays a significant role in ending their tyranny, thus saving humanity from their evil intentions.

In *That Hideous Strength*, Lewis has contrasted two very different communities, with two very different worldviews. Presented as a kind of fairy-tale, with allusions to the biblical Tower of Babel, he has developed an intriguing story about the ongoing battle between good and evil.

Notes

1. Wayne Shumaker uses this terminology in the title of his essay, "The Cosmic Trilogy of C. S. Lewis," in *The Longing for a Form: Essays on the Fiction of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Peter J. Schakel (Kent State University Press, 1977), 51-63.
2. See Richard L. Purtill, "That Hideous Strength: A Double Story," in *The Longing for a Form*, 91-102, for an excellent treatment of this issue.
3. C. S. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength: A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-Ups* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965), 7.
4. See English Studies, "Fairy Tale: A Literary Genre," English Studies, english-studies.net/fairy-tale-a-literary-genre/#google_vignette (accessed October 29, 2024).
5. I discuss this issue in my first program on the trilogy:

“Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet,” which you can find here: [Smuggling Theology into Out of the Silent Planet](#)

6. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 257.

7. Ibid., 56.

8. Ibid., 70.

9. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 87-89.

10. Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 293-94.

11. Ibid., 343-358. See the chapter, “Banquet at Belbury.”

12. All the quoted material in this paragraph can be found in David Downing, *Planets in Peril: A Critical Study of C.S. Lewis’s Ransom Trilogy* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 152.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid., 94.

15. Ibid., 94-99.

16. Ibid., 99.

17. See Lewis, *That Hideous Strength*, 176-80.

18. Ibid., 320-58.

19. Ibid., 351. In the story, Merlin says this in Latin, but there is a translation in the footnote on this page.

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How to Kill Sin: John Owen’s The Mortification of Sin

Paul Rutherford provides an overview of the Puritan John Owen’s classic book The Mortification of Sin.

In my early twenties I confessed to a friend an [ongoing battle with sin](#). He suggested I read John Owen’s book, *The*

Mortification of Sin[{1}](#). I wish I had read it back then. It would have saved me so much pain in my battle against sin.

So I want to help you in that same way by sharing some of Owen's key insights in the battle against sin.



Let's begin with the title. Mortification, what does that word mean? Broadly speaking, it means to kill or put to death. The Latin root from which this English word is derived, "mort-" or "mors" means death. *Mortificare*—to kill.[{2}](#) Other examples of this root include mortuary, mortician, and mortgage.

Simply put, mortification means death, but note the dictionary also lists "shame" and "humiliation" as definitions as well. So mortification involves death. More to the point, Owen wants you to kill *sin*. More importantly, he makes a case that Scripture commands you to kill sin.

This message today is not for everyone. It's only appropriate if you believe in Jesus. Early in the work Owen gravely warns those who would mortify sin, but do so without first believing in Jesus.

I would warn you as well. Please don't sit here and read another minute if you have not put your faith in Jesus Christ for your righteousness, for your salvation. If you're reading this right now and have never made a confession of faith, and you're ready, please do so now. Just talk to God and tell him you believe that Jesus is Lord, that He died for your sins, was buried, and raised from the dead, and you are putting your trust in Him. Then tell someone you know who already believes. It will be the most important thing you do, ever.

If you're still reading, then let's press on. Owen discusses at length what it means to kill sin, how to do it effectively, and why you should do it.

But before we jump in, remember John Owen was a 17th century English pastor and theologian. This is not his first book, and at the time he composed it, he was Vice-Chancellor at the University of Oxford. Owen has academic credentials. But this book is more devotional than academic. Owen draws from personal experience. It is not merely intellectual. He meant for it to be practiced.

What is Mortification?

John Owen wrote *The Mortification of Sin* in England in 1656. Mortification means death, or in this case to kill. . . sin. That's what we covered in the previous section. This matters because your life is at stake here. In chapter two, Owen warns us with this now famous quote, "Be killing sin or it will be killing you." That is probably the most famous quote from that book.

Did you catch the significance of that quote? Sin will kill you. That's why this is a big deal. That's why this matters. That's also why sin's presence requires such a drastic response. It must be killed. James tells us that "[S]in when it is fully grown brings forth death."[3](#)

Your best option—the most effective option—your only real option is to *kill* sin. Just like John Owen said. Kill it. Or it will kill you. Because trust me. It will kill you—in every way: physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually—every way.

Owen quickly reminds us this is impossible in a complete, ultimate, or perfect sense, until Jesus comes back, not before.[4](#) So until then we mortify sin.[5](#)

Now let's talk about mortification. Let's talk about killing sin. What exactly does that mean? Sin is an abstract thing, not a biological organism. How do you kill an abstract thing? Owen's instruction is clear: "utterly destroy it" or, make it

cease to be.

Owen defines the process of mortification three ways: sin gets weaker, you fight against it constantly, and you have full success over it.[{6}](#)

So then mortification means to weaken sin, or drain it of its power. It means the desire to sin decreases in degree, frequency, and quality. That comes as you “crucify the flesh with its passions and desires,” as we read in Galatians 5:24.

Mortification also means to fight sin constantly. You have an enemy. Employ any means necessary to destroy his work. The contest will be vigorous and hazardous.

Finally, mortification is success against sin in any given moment. This isn't merely resisting temptation. Owen has more in view here; it is recognizing temptation, bringing it before Christ, pursuing sin to its root, and conquering it in Jesus' strength.

Before we discuss how to do this, for clarity let's talk about how not to mortify sin.

How NOT to Mortify Sin

Mortification means to kill, and the point of John Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin* is to kill sin. Nothing short of your life is at stake here since sin always leads to death.[{7}](#)

Sin is not to be trifled with. It cost Jesus His life.

Owen himself covers what mortification is NOT in the book, before he defines what it is. So now we will follow his lead.

Mortification is commonly mistaken. It is tricky to identify properly. Four things frequently masquerade as mortification, when they are in fact not. These four are: faking it, having a calm disposition, cross-addiction, and behavior modification.

Faking it, the first instance of false mortification, is making yourself look good on the outside, instances where outward signs of sin are obvious—compulsive spending, for example. You may choose not to buy something the next time you're tempted, but that outward choice is not the root of sin. The root is inside. It goes deeper.

The root is the belief that material will fill that void inside. Owen further points out hypocrisy as a real danger here. Not only did you not mortify the sin, you are now making it look as if you have.

Mortification is also not simply a calm disposition. Some sins are obvious, visible, even violent in nature. In these cases if you become more calm, more quiet, more gentle, it could appear on the outside as if the sin is gone. In fact it is not. Owen reminds us that mortification is more than a simple change in disposition.

Mortification is also not replacing one vice for another. For example, if the presenting sin is addiction to pornography, keeping yourself from erotic material may appear as victory unless you pick up the bottle. Now you simply exchanged pornography for alcohol. You exhibit a cross-addiction. This, too, is not mortification.

Mortification is also not mere change in behavior. Surely you have made a big change before—created a new habit, lost weight, something, even a New Year's resolution. You can force the behavior for a while—maybe even through February! You can make yourself do what you've resolved. But eventually, that old habit creeps back; unless some real changes are made, it's merely a shift in behavior. This also is not mortification.

What is mortification, then? How do you do it?

How to Mortify Sin

After all this preliminary discussion, you probably want to know how you can kill sin, conquer it, and be victorious, because if you don't it will kill you, as Owen himself says in the book.

Here's the bad news, though. *You* can't mortify your sin. You will have no victory over sin by employing any method I recommend to you. Now, don't despair! This doesn't mean you can't experience victory! God forbid. Rather, it is God's will for you to find victory over the curse of sin. What I mean here is that mortification is not something *you* do. It is instead something God does, namely the Holy Spirit.

Only the Holy Spirit can mortify sin, kill sin in the flesh. Only He is strong enough to put to death the old man.

So what do you do, then? Here are Owen's words. "Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin. His blood is the great sovereign remedy for sin-sick souls. Live in this, and thou wilt die a conqueror. Yea, thou wilt, through the good providence of God, live to see thy lust dead at thy feet." [\[8\]](#)

The way to mortify sin is to set *faith* at work. Put your faith to work. Believe in the work Jesus did on the cross. His sacrifice is your remedy. That's how you kill sin—you don't. You believe in the power of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, and let Christ kill it for you.

It's freeing really. Would you want the responsibility of killing the broken flesh within you? I don't. Owen goes on to add two more points of substance. First "fill your soul" with the provision of Christ. I might call that meditation. Meditate on Christ. Fill your mind with His provision.

The second point is to *expect* relief in Christ. Owen reasons that if Christ's blood is enough to make you righteous—and if the Spirit is strong enough to mortify your flesh, then expect

it's going to happen. It may not be instantaneous. Anyone who's been walking with Christ for some time will affirm this. It's a slow and difficult, often *painful* process, but definitely a good one.

So that is how you mortify sin. You don't. You let the Spirit do it. Your job is to believe by faith.

Conclusion

What have we learned so far? If you are following in the footsteps of Jesus, you need to mortify, or put to death, sin in your life. If you don't it will kill you.

This is not a popular message. I admit. Sin is not a fun topic. But Scripture is clear. Sin must be put to death. Owen's book, while dating over three hundred years back, could be neither more timely nor more appropriate for you today.

Owen admonishes the sincere believer to kill indwelling sin without delay. He warns the unbeliever this is impossible without Jesus Christ. Jesus is absolutely essential to the success and continued process of mortification. To do otherwise is the "soul and substance of all false religion in the world."[{9}](#)

If you believe in Jesus and you are stuck in your sin, maybe you're trapped in addiction, this book is for you. Mortify sin.

"Set faith at work on Christ for the killing of thy sin."[{10}](#) You believe in His Son for salvation. Believe Him now for the deliverance of your soul from the power of indwelling sin.

It is not easy. You will struggle every day against sin. The bad news here is that you carry the problem with you. Your flesh is broken. It remains unregenerate until the day of Christ. Your soul is secure eternally by the blood of Christ, and one day you will receive a gloriously new body. But for

now, we struggle.

But consider Jesus' promise in that struggle: "I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world."[\[11\]](#)

Mortification is not for the faint of heart. But it is good. Your sin does not define you. God does. And he says you are fearfully and wonderfully made.[\[12\]](#) He paid the price of your sin. It was an awful lot. But he loves you that much.

Trust him today. Trust in his Word. And trust in the community of saints He provided for you. Confess your sin to them today. Do you want to fully live? Then kill sin.

Notes

1. John Owen, *The Mortification of Sin*. (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House), 1996.
2. *American Heritage Dictionary*, 2000.
3. James 1:15.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:50-54.
5. Colossians 3:5.
6. Owen, p.64.
7. James 1:15; Proverbs 14:12; Genesis 2:17.
8. Owen, p.161.
9. Ibid., p.23.
10. Ibid., p.161.
11. John 16:33.
12. Psalm 139:14.