

“What’s My Purpose in Life?”

A dear younger friend of mine recently posted this question on a forum:

“Do you feel that you have a great mission or purpose in life?”

“I do feel like I’m made for something more than this, but whatever it is I can’t reach it, or find out what it is. I do feel as though I have a great purpose or mission in life—I’m sure I do!!! Why can I just not figure it out?”

“Was I born in the wrong time? My roommate says that I’m like a young person who thinks they were meant for more. She says hardly anyone here has a great life of purpose and I just have to accept reality. 99% of the people are just normal people—that there are not that many characters, priests, prophets, or heroes.”

“Does everyone go through life never figuring out what their great purpose is? There has to be a purpose beyond just surviving. Roommate says that my problem is that I think I’m born to be a superstar, a saint or a hero. She thinks I’m just unrealistic, and what I expect from and of myself is unrealistic. I think she’s a pessimist. I want to do something big. I don’t want a mediocre life.”

Similar to [C.S. Lewis’ argument](#) that our longings correspond to God’s plan for the fulfillment of those longings (such as experiencing hunger because food exists for us to eat, and experiencing fatigue because there is such a thing as sleep), I think my friend’s longing for the something bigger and something more, her disdain for a mediocre life, is indeed shaped by God’s call to love and serve Him in large and glorious ways. But we may have been waylaid by the “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” gospel, since many 20th-century Westerners seem to have directed their focus to

finding out this wonderful plan rather than on God Himself.

I don't see anywhere in scripture where we are called to find our purpose in life. I think God just wants us to obey what He's already given us. When we do a search for the phrases "God's will" or "will of God" in the Bible, we know for sure God wants us to do things like give thanks in all things (1 Thessalonians 5:18), be sanctified and avoid sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3), silence the ignorance of foolish people by doing good (1 Peter 2:15), and sometimes, suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong (1 Peter 3:17).

All the "one anothers" in the Bible are commands, so those are God's will as well. So our purpose in life is to please Him through obedience, which should grow out of our awareness that He loves us and made us for Himself.

Because we are made in the image of God, our purpose in life is to put Him on display. We—our bodies, our minds, our humor, our gifts and talents—are a display case for the glory of God. I think the specifics of how we go about that don't matter as much as we seem to think they do. Desiring to be truthful and transparent in serving as display cases for the treasure within matters more, I believe.

According to John 15, it is the Lord's pleasure—and thus His purpose for us—that we bear *much* (as opposed to *some* or *more*) fruit in us. That means Christlikeness; that means the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control (Galatians 5:22). So whether we are engaged in paid work or evangelizing on street corners, changing diapers or driving in traffic, putting Jesus on display is the most important thing. To do that, we need to continually immerse ourselves in His presence and His word, and hang around His people who are also immersing themselves in His presence and His word.

Right along with spiritual fruit is the topic of [spiritual gifts](#). Finding God's personal purpose for us will involve discovering which of the spiritual gifts He has given each one of us, and using them to build up the body of Christ and bless others. (They are found in Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4 and 1 Peter 4.)

And finally, 2 Corinthians 2 offers a delightful word picture of Christ-followers serving as "a sweet aroma of Christ to God" the Father, as well as bringing the fragrance of knowing Christ to people who are either being saved or perishing. That, too, is part of our purpose in life. I think that if we focus on what God has already told us pleases Him, obeying the commands He has already given His children, we'll get to the point of looking in the rear-view mirror of life and discovering, "Oh, *that* was my personal purpose! Cool!"

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/whats-my-purpose-in-life on Aug. 14, 2012.

"I Doubt the Existence of a Good God Who Allows a Baby to Suffer and Die"

I came across an analysis of the dilemma confronting theism due to the occurrence of the Holocaust. The very question as to the existence of God remains unsettled for me, and I pose the question whether there is any acceptable "theistic" explanation to the all-too-common scenario of a newborn who suffers an agonizing brief life and dies shortly after birth.

A traditional response to that tragedy usually revolves around the explanation that God is goodness and can only do good. Even though we (with our limited intellects) cannot appreciate it, we MUST have "faith" and or "trust" that even that agonizing death was for the "purpose" of some "greater goodness." Now while this may be a source of comfort to those who grieve for the baby (parents) the most important fallacy of the argument is that it is IRRELEVANT and of no value to the baby who suffered and died! That baby had neither the opportunity nor the intellectual maturity to reflect on there being some "greater goodness" to his/her suffering—as do those who are fortunate to survive tragedy, illness, the Holocaust. If one ascribes to a theistic belief system, there are numerous unacceptable consequences of this scenario.

1. A God who is omnipotent has chosen to allow that baby to die in suffering without granting him/her the benefit of realizing a "greater goodness." That God is unacceptable.

2. Traditionally, God is described as not only having created, but that He continues to actively create all things. This is an aspect of Divine Providence. If that is so, then God directly created the suffering of the baby—without any relief. Again, this is an unacceptable God.

3. If one says that God does not have the power to intercede in relief of the baby's suffering (i.e., God is NOT omnipotent) then of what value is God? Why place one's trust in God for help in any affairs?

4. If one says that God did NOT cause the suffering, then God is an ineffectual creator, and why should one trust in the ability of God to create goodness, to ensure that the sun rises each day, etc.?

I have not been able to find any source to resolve these "difficulties" and I hope that your organization might provide some insight. I will add that I am Jewish and am very

comfortable with that heritage. Being very familiar with Christian theology and respecting its belief system, I respectfully ask that you refrain from any attempts to convert me to another philosophy. Neither Jewish nor Christian theologies offer satisfactory answers. One is reduced (I fear) to the conclusion that God does not exist and that therefore life is essentially meaningless (nihilism). That is a position that I am desperately trying to avoid—as I am currently facing a critical health problem where my knowledge and trust in God's goodness would be of tremendous, if not life-saving, value.

Thank you for writing. You are well aware that there is no simple, cut-and-dried answer to the problem of suffering vis-à-vis the belief in the God of the Bible. I lay it out that way because, as far as I can tell, it is only in light of such a God that there is a (philosophical) problem at all. In some religions, it is accepted that their deity would be angry at times if, for example, people don't offer the right sacrifices (the reason Christians were disliked in the early church; their unwillingness to honor the local civic deities or worship the emperor was seen as a threat to their neighbors). Naturalistic atheists have no problem like it within the bounds of their worldview: suffering happens and that's that. We can work to alleviate it, but there's no God to be angry at. No, it's only because the God-honoring people of Israel and Christians believe in a God who is fundamentally good is there a problem at all. In other words, it's a problem posed to people who believe in an all-good and all-powerful deity who has claimed to be concerned about humankind.

You said you don't want anyone to try to convert you, and I won't do that. But you have to understand that religions and philosophies are systematic; they contain a number of beliefs that are interconnected. The current penchant people have for creating cut-and-paste religions is only reasonable if it's the case that no one can know what's true about such things,

or if it's been concluded that there really is no transcendent God, and that religion is merely a human invention created to meet particular needs or desires, or simply to offer a mythical explanation of life and the world. Your own religious/philosophical beliefs aren't clear; I see you've rejected Jewish theology as you have Christian. So I'll take Islam as an example. A Muslim's beliefs about particular issues that aren't laid out clearly in the Koran will be reasoned to in light of and in harmony with the nature of Allah as presented in the Qur'an. Those answers will only be acceptable (not just understandable, but acceptable) to a person who agrees on the presuppositions. The same is the case for me and my beliefs as a Christian. While you may not be interested in putting your faith in Christ, my thinking can only be understood in light of my basic Christian beliefs which are given in the Bible. Now, because there is some overlap in beliefs between different religions (explained in Christian theology by general revelation), it could be that you would find acceptable the picture of God I present if I can make it coherent with respect to suffering. But I'm thinking you will not accept it wholesale because the answer will involve more than just explaining how God could do things He does (or allows things He allows) given what the Bible says about His character; it will involve thinking about how to live with incomplete answers in light of settled answers, primarily regarding the crucifixion of Christ, the Son of God, and what that means for God's interest in us. So I'll aim at at least presenting a big picture that is coherent and understandable in light of the whole system of Christian belief (without, of course, presenting a whole systematic theology!).

To answer your question, I took the opportunity to re-read John Stackhouse's book *Can God Be Trusted?* the title of which, I think, asks the right question. I also scanned a few other books to help me think about the matter. I've read a good bit on the subject, and still find myself hoping I'll find the

answer to the dilemma. The fact that there is still no widespread agreement in theological and philosophical circles is good evidence for what so many have said: we simply don't have a final or comprehensive answer to the presence of evil and suffering.

This response will be very long for two reasons. One is that, while the problem of evil and suffering is often posed just to try to make believers in God look stupid, yours is one of the few I've received that shows a genuine interest in thinking the matter through. As such, it deserves a thoughtful response. Second, the problem itself simply can't be dealt with briefly. If you were a Christian who just wanted some reassurance, I could offer that more briefly. Because you apparently are not a Christian, I have to paint a bigger picture in order to situate the main point in a fuller context. And so I step out with a certain sense of fear and trepidation, knowing that the subject can't be dealt with summarily, but also knowing that many words can be like dust in the air, obscuring the view.

You've put me in a rather awkward position for two reasons. For one thing, you don't believe Christian theology has an answer to the problem of suffering, but it's from within that framework that I must obtain the answer (or as much of it as I may). So perhaps all I can do is re-state or possibly add something to what you've already heard. Second, you don't want to be converted. While I have no inclination to engage in any intellectual arm-twisting here, I will conclude that, even though I can make strides toward an understanding of suffering that might make sense to you—one that is consistent and coherent in the framework of Christian doctrine—if it's true it can only apply directly and fully to the person who is in a position to receive it; that is, from a place of faith in Christ. This isn't just a question about the nature of God; it isn't an abstract matter (as you well know because of your own illness). It's also a question of what God is doing in our

lives. We're talking about the acts (or apparent lack of acting) on the part of a Person toward people who are connected with Him. I'm not good at analogies, but just to take a shot at one, think of the difference between what one reads in a book about what makes for a good football player and what a specific coach does with the players on his team. The player can only experience the facts he's read in the book by getting on the field. And even then, the generalities of the book will be put into practice on the field differently according to particular circumstances and the wisdom of the coach.

Since I don't know what you believe about "God, man, and the world," I don't know how to even attempt to make sense of suffering within the framework of your worldview. In this matter, one size doesn't fit all, so to speak. My thinking about it will come out of, and be tested by, my larger framework of beliefs as a Christian. What this means is that, from one direction, once the Christian view of life and the world has been accepted as true, the believer's thinking about suffering will have to take into account Christian doctrines. From the other direction—for someone standing apart from Christianity—the sense one can make of suffering in light of Christian doctrine and particular historical events can induce a person to give the broader framework of belief a closer look. So while I won't try to directly persuade you to become a Christian, I do hope that any light I can shed on the matter will prompt you to give Christ a closer look. That move, from the problem of suffering to the claims of Christ, isn't a forced leap, for the Christian's thinking about suffering has to be addressed in light of the person and work of Jesus.

Your primary motivation for writing, I take it, is your own current experience of illness. When you think about God and what He might be up to or whether He is a safe place in which to rest your hope, you find opposition to that hope coming from a difficult situation: a baby who suffers and dies soon

after birth. To find a solution or a resolution in the most difficult cases makes it easier to think there is one for our own situation. So you ask what good can come from such an experience for the baby. He or she can't reflect on the good that has come from the suffering. Nor did the baby experience any greater good resulting from it.

It should be noted up front that the greater good defenses aren't accepted by all Christians. It would be impossible to know whether a greater evil has been prevented or a greater good produced in all experiences of suffering. We do know that good can come from suffering. Jesus learned obedience from the things he suffered (Hebrews 5:8). We read in the Gospel of John that it was necessary for Jesus to die "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (11:49-52). But these sufferings were accepted by the one suffering, a very different situation from that of the suffering baby.

A frequently posed answer to the problem of evil is the free will defense, but there is no way from the illustration you used to know how that would apply. We often distinguish natural evil (such as sickness) from moral evil. However, it isn't always possible to separate the two (which is why one theologian uses the categories of *evil endured* and *evil committed*). Surely there was nothing the baby did to bring about the suffering, but there could have been something the parents or the medical professionals did. One might claim that God should have prevented their blunders (if we can imagine any) from resulting in the child's suffering and death, but we would then have to extend that thinking to all instances where one person's actions harm others. Was the child an AIDS baby? Did her mother engage in promiscuous sex, resulting in her contracting HIV and passing it along to the baby? You may be thinking I'm stretching this all out of shape, but it's important to situate fictitious illustrations into real life types of scenarios for them to be meaningful.

But let's assume the best for the parents and the medical

professionals. No one did anything wrong, and the baby wasn't born in a time when a plague was raging. The baby simply suffered the worst of what this fallen world has to offer: suffering for just being born. And short of a message from God, there is no answer to the question why. We mustn't assume, however, that if we don't have the answer, there is no good one. Neither can we conclude that if there is a God He must not be good or powerful enough. The well-known story of Job, accepted as canonical by Jews and Christians, leaves us there with no answer to the why question. God allowed Satan to have his way with Job, a righteous man, and never gave His reason. What He told Job, in short, was that He knew more than Job did, that Job was in no position to tell God He was doing things wrong. (Isn't it peculiar, if this story were simply made up by some people who were inventing a religion, that it would be so inconclusive? Surely a story made up just to take a stab at understanding why good people suffer would offer some kind of answer.) We can't know whether, in the great scheme of things, it was better for the baby's life to be short. Of course, one's perspective on that will be informed by one's worldview. For the naturalist, there is no afterlife, so what we experience here on earth is it, and the early death is simply a tragedy. If there is an afterlife, however, what happens here on earth isn't all there is to it; death isn't the defining end.

Given (and I think it is a given) that there is no authoritative answer to the big question of why God permitted evil and suffering in the first place, nor can it always be discerned why particular instances of suffering are allowed, what shall we do? No alternative belief will take away the suffering; even if we believe suffering is an illusion, as some religions teach, it's still painful (I prefer my illusions to be pleasant!). So we wonder how to think about life and the world in order to make our suffering easier to abide. What are the options?

We can go the naturalistic route and just believe that there is no purpose behind it all, and do what we can to alleviate suffering. But there's no moral imperative behind that; life is bottom line just a matter of survival. And if there is no God and no moral imperative, why worry about anyone else's suffering besides our own? And regarding our own, there's no one to be mad at. We live, we die, we are annihilated.

But this brings us to a new problem, namely, why it is that suffering and evil make people rage if there is no God at all, if we're all just products of the natural process of conception? Bad things happen. Why keep trying to find an answer? It's hard to settle into an apathetic attitude.

We can go the (atheistic) existentialist route and try to deliver ourselves from this rage by establishing our own meanings. I think of Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Stranger* who murders someone and in prison finds freedom when he settles in his mind that there is no God and no hope. But that's artificial, even if we only take human experience as our guide. There's something in us that makes us think there is indeed more than this life, or, at least, that there ought to be. The afterlife plays a major role in religions in determining how people live this side of the grave. Where does that come from? The Old Testament says that God has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11), and human experience bears that out.

We can choose any number of other gods to believe in (besides the one of the Bible), but we won't find much satisfaction. There is a variety of explanations—suffering is an illusion; it results from upsetting the gods; we're caught in an eternal battle of good vs. evil. Mercy and love toward people are not the strong suits of many other religions as they are with Christianity. But that's why we have this problem of evil. We're used to thinking of God in Christian terms, and He doesn't seem to always play by the rules (funny how we like Him to play by the rules by exempt ourselves from them).

We can make up our own notions about God and the world that can make our suffering more livable, but our imaginations waver. A God that is no bigger or more metaphysically fixed than my own imaginings doesn't make for a stable foundation upon which to build a life. What we all want is what is real and can be relied upon, something that doesn't change with our states of mind or emotion.

We can believe in the God described in the Bible but believe He really isn't powerful enough to conquer evil. That isn't much of a God to believe in; we can do better with good medicine and education than with an impotent God.

The best choice in my opinion is take the Bible's description of God as true (that He is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful) and receive what the Bible has revealed in Jesus about God's concern for us even if He doesn't explain Himself in all matters, and this for a few reasons.

First, the reality of evil does not disprove the reality of the God of the Bible. Maybe we cannot imagine how the all-powerful and loving God could permit suffering, but our lack of understanding does not mean He isn't there. A famous syllogism that has often been used to disprove the God of the Bible is this:

- A good God would want to destroy evil.
- An all-powerful God would be able to destroy evil.
- However, evil is not destroyed.
- Therefore, such a good and all-powerful God cannot possibly exist.

A syllogism like this is only as strong as its premises. The first thing we need to do is substitute "the God of the Bible" or "Yahweh" for "God". The reason is that we think we know what a good and all-powerful God would want to do and when He would want to do it, but we should rather think in terms of a specific God. This syllogism surreptitiously assumes

particular things about God that may or may not be so, or may contain understandings that are hindered by being limited. What would Yahweh want to do and when and how would He want to do it? How would we know? We can only know (in so far as we can know) by seeing what He has revealed to us about Himself. We ourselves can have purposes for the things we do or don't do that can only be known if we reveal them. Much more is this the case with God.

The fact is that syllogisms can be constructed to "prove" most anything. In fact, they often are used just that way; it isn't immediately apparent that they assume what is to be proved. Here's another argument to consider about evil:

- *If God is all-good, He will destroy evil.*
- *If He is all-powerful, He can defeat evil.*
- *Evil is not yet defeated.*
- *Therefore, evil will one day be defeated.*

(Adapted from Geisler and Feinberg, Introduction to Philosophy, p. 323.)

This argument assumes God exists, which you might think is cheating. But the former syllogism made assumptions that require grounding that isn't stated.

The fact is that there are good reasons to believe God exists that outweigh the problem of evil. I gather from your email that you do believe God exists. You are questioning whether this is a God worth believing in. This problem can be a major intellectual, emotional, and psychological hurdle, but it doesn't end the discussion. There are many arguments out there for acknowledging the reality of the one true God, so I won't go into that discussion here. I'll just note that you have to admit it's a very odd situation for there to have been so many people who believed and still believe in God throughout history (and many who have died for their beliefs) despite this problem. And they believe this God is good even despite

their own suffering.

My response has grown very long, so I'll (finally!) get right to the main points.

First, God is a Person whose purposes can't simply be ferreted out by philosophical conjecture. He has to reveal Himself. We believe He's done that in Scripture. And in Scripture He hasn't bothered to explain Himself about everything.

Second, God's scope of vision is much broader than mine, and it's His purposes that are being worked out. Philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams noted that "the rationality of a person's behavior is in part a function of his purposes and his consistency and efficiency in pursuing them" (Adams, "Redemptive Suffering," in Peterson, ed. *The Problem of Evil: Selected Readings*, 184). As some have said, the logic of God's acts can more resemble the "logic" of a mountain range than a logically organized set of truths. In other words, one cannot start at one end of the Rockies and logically conclude the shape of the mountain range and where it will end. As one flies above the Rockies, one can see how one peak gives way to a valley and then to other peaks and valleys, but one cannot know all this merely using logic. Similarly, while there are some claims that are clearly contradictory to the nature and promises of God, we have to adopt a wait and see attitude for much of what He does. What we have is the broad framework of creation, fall, redemption, and future glory. In between there are events that we could not predict, nor can we always know how they will fit in the big picture.

Your illustration of the suffering baby doesn't tell enough. I've already broached the question of what might have happened on the human level to bring about the suffering. What came about as a result of the suffering? We don't know that either. Your point was that the suffering didn't help the baby any. I can't see how it could have. However, the baby's death isn't the end of the story. Whatever God's reasons for it, if King

David's claim about his son who died in infancy (the child of Bathsheba) applies to all children—that David would go to him after death; i.e., the child would enter the presence of God—then the baby's experience after death would completely overshadow all that came before (2 Samuel 12:15-23). This isn't to try to make heaven a justification for suffering; it's just to say that the game ain't over until it's over, and one has to step back and see the bigger picture before making a final judgment based upon one small part.

Third, God's purposes include providing for our redemption and for ridding the world of evil and suffering. "God shows His love toward us," Paul wrote, "in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). If God really is a "malevolent bully" in the words of Richard Dawkins, why did He send His son to die for our sins and to rid the world of evil? I said earlier that Christians can't give anything approaching a good answer for the problem of evil without taking Jesus into account. The reason is that in him we see God's attitude toward us and toward sin and its ravages, for he is the image of God, God in flesh, who reveals to us the Father (John 14:8-10). And He himself suffered both the rejection of people (which reached its climax in crucifixion) and the weight of the sin of the world as he died. The one who knew no sin was forsaken by the Father for our benefit. Furthermore, he did it to bring an end to the effects of sin: evil and suffering.

Understanding that God is working out purposes bigger than we can know and that they include bringing an end to suffering gives meaning to what we suffer now. We want God to act against such things, but He already has in the best way possible, the way that brings a final solution in a most surprising way. Theologian Henri Blocher offers the metaphor of Jesus as a judo player who uses the strength of the opponent to defeat him:

Evil is conquered as evil because God turns it back upon itself. He makes the supreme crime, the murder of the only

righteous person, the very operation that abolishes sin. The maneuver is utterly unprecedented. No more complete victory could be imagined. God responds in the indirect way that is perfectly suited to the ambiguity of evil. He entraps the deceiver in his own wiles. Evil, like a judoist, takes advantage of the power of the good, which it perverts; the Lord, like a supreme champion, replies by using the very grip of the opponent. (*Evil and the Cross*, 132.)

Jesus dealt with sin and its consequences by stepping into the worst it can offer. Writing during World War I, P.T. Forsyth said this: "Our faith did not arise from the order of the world; the world's convulsions, therefore, need not destroy it. Rather it rose from the sharpest crisis, the greatest war, the deadliest death, and the deepest grave the world ever knew—in Christ's Cross" (*The Justification of God*, 57). There won't be an eternal back and forth between the forces of good and of evil. Evil and suffering will end because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

In the meantime (and this is where the personal application fits in), we individually can find meaning and hope in our own sufferings even if we don't understand it all when we situate ourselves in the grand project of God on earth. Christianity doesn't only offer a particular way of thinking about evil and suffering that can reduce cognitive dissonance; it offers a way to participate in that reality that makes suffering meaningful in our own lives. This shouldn't be taken as implying we are an exclusive club with special rights and privileges that we dole out to those we consider worthy. This is simply how we understand the way things work, and anyone can participate who does what God requires (repent and believe the gospel).

How those "benefits" apply to given individuals, however, varies enormously. Like everyone else, Christians wonder, Why me when others don't suffer this way? Why these obstacles to godly things I want to accomplish? Why must I be a burden on

other people? God isn't only concerned with the interests of the person who is suffering, although He certainly is concerned with that person's interests. This is where the testimonies of Christians who have suffered are so meaningful. How is it that these people are able to find joy in life in spite of their hardships? Can they all really be delusional? I cannot myself offer any testimony as one who has suffered. I've lost a sister to cancer, and my wife has arthritis, but I haven't suffered as you apparently are. But I know there are people who've found joy despite the obstacles. (If you are interested in reading about people who've found hope in their suffering, I recommend the books *Where Is God?* by John Feinberg and *When God Weeps* by Joni Eareckson Tada. Tada is a paraplegic and has developed a ministry to people with disabilities.)

The bottom-line question, as I noted at the beginning, is this: Can God be trusted? Given this suffering, now what? If there are other reasons to trust God that outweigh this reason not to, then we must deal with that. It won't do any good to reject God because we don't like what He's doing, because there are consequences to that. We must step into the relationship He has offered and see where He takes us.

I'll draw this tome to an end with a quote from John Stackhouse:

In Jesus we see what we desperately need to see: God close to us, God active among us, God loving us, God forgiving our sin, God opening up a way to a new life of everlasting love. If Jesus is the human face of God, Christians affirm, then human beings have a God who cares, a God who acts on their behalf (even to the point of self-sacrifice), and a God who is now engaged in the complete conquest of evil and the reestablishment of universal *shalom* for all time. If Jesus is truly God revealed, then we can trust God in spite of the evil all around us and in us. (*Can God Be Trusted*, 120).

Because of Jesus, we can have hope. Not the “I hope it rains tomorrow” kind of hope, but hope as understood in the New Testament: confidence in the future based upon the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, all which demonstrate God’s love for us.

If you want to continue the conversation, please do write back.

Rick Wade

Posted August 13, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“How Could a Holy God Make Prophets Lie?”

Please explain the text of 2 Chronicles 22:18-22. The Lord put a lying spirit in the mouth of the prophets to lie. How does that conform to God’s holy nature?

Thanks for your question. This story is recounted in both 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 18. The question, as you rightly ask, is how such a story can be consistent with God’s holy nature?

There are a number of important observations to make about this passage. First, observe that in 1 Kings 22:1-12, Ahab asks Jehoshaphat if he would be willing to go to war with him to retake Ramoth-gilead. Jehoshaphat agrees, but wants first to inquire of the Lord. Ahab brings out 400 false prophets, who tell him what he wants to hear. It is clear that these are not true prophets of the Lord because Jehoshaphat asks Ahab if there isn’t a prophet of the Lord that they might yet inquire

of (see vv. 7-8). This is important, for Ahab has essentially attempted to call a bunch of false prophets before him who will merely tell him what he wants to hear (and has already decided to do).

Second, notice what happens when Micaiah (a true prophet of the Lord) is called. Of course, initially Micaiah sarcastically tells the king what the false prophets are also saying. It's clear that he says this sarcastically because the king reminds him to only tell him the truth in the name of the Lord. At this point, Micaiah, the true prophet of the Lord, tells the king the whole truth of God; namely, that the king's venture will not succeed and that the king himself will die in battle. In other words, the Lord, through His true prophet, tells the king the whole truth at this point. He even tells the king that He has put a deceiving spirit in the mouth of the king's (false) prophets. The Lord, through Micaiah, here tells King Ahab the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Third, notice that Ahab disregards the true prophet of the Lord, spurns his advice, and instead willfully chooses to follow the advice of his false prophets (the very prophets that Micaiah has just told him are speaking lies and falsehoods). The Lord has actually told Ahab the whole truth, but Ahab chooses to follow the advice of lying false prophets, rather than the advice of Micaiah, a true prophet of the Lord (as Ahab himself acknowledges Micaiah to be—see v. 8).

Notice, then, that God nowhere lies to Ahab here. In fact, he pointedly reveals to Ahab the whole awful truth about what will happen if Ahab goes ahead with his plans. It's true, of course, that God does permit deceptive spirits to speak through Ahab's false prophets. But it's important to remember that He reveals this truth to Ahab through His true prophet, Micaiah. It's also important to bear in mind that, given God's sovereignty over everything that happens, whenever lies are told or evil spirits (or men) do something, God has

sovereignly permitted them to do so. God created human beings and angels as free, rational, morally responsible creatures. Since such creatures are truly free, they are free to do good or evil. Whenever a free creature chooses to do something evil, God must sovereignly permit that creature to do so. However, as we see repeatedly in the Bible, God can take even the evil and sinful choices of His creatures, and bring about good from them (remember the story of Joseph and his brothers; see, in particular, Genesis 50:15-21).

In conclusion, then, although much more could be said, this is how I would briefly attempt to interpret this fascinating story. I hope this is helpful to you. God bless you!

Shalom in Christ,

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“If Jesus Was God, Why Did He Cry Out ‘My God, My God, Why Have You Forsaken Me’?”

If Jesus really claimed to be a god then why did he say on the cross, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”

Response #1:

Thanks for your letter. I find D. A. Carson’s comments on this passage helpful. Like him, I think that Jesus is conscious of having in some sense been abandoned by His Father. This would doubtless be related to the fact that, on the cross, he was bearing the sins of the world, thus causing God the Father to turn away from His Son.

His cry, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me," addresses God the Father as "My God." This is really not odd on the lips of Jesus, for we elsewhere read of Him referring to the Father in this way (see John 20:17). In addition, as the God-Man, Jesus was not only truly God (God the Son), but He was also truly man. It does not strike me as odd, therefore, that the man Jesus should refer to the Father as "My God"—indeed, it would not necessarily even be odd for the Son to address the Father in this way. For although God is one, the Father is a distinct person from the Son.

At any rate, this is essentially how I would understand Jesus' cry of dereliction.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Response #2:

My colleague Michael forwarded his reply to me. I have recently come across an intriguing, very different paradigm for understanding why Jesus would say these words, that I find myself thinking about a lot.

It could be that Jesus *felt* that He was abandoned by His Father because at the point He became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), He fully descended into the darkness and blindness of fallen and judged humanity—and sin makes us blind and deaf to the reality of God. At that point, like astronauts on the dark side of the moon experiencing being completely cut off from Mission Control, perhaps He couldn't have sensed that His Father's love for Him never changed (because God does not change; that's one of His attributes). As Michael has remarked to me, Jesus, as our sin-bearer, experienced "God-forsakenness" on our behalf. In other words, He experienced in some sense the same sort of "God-forsakenness" that those in hell will experience. He experienced the horrible reality of the consequences (or wages) of sin (Rom. 6:23).

The Lord Jesus could have cried out, “why have You forsaken Me” because that is the *effect* of sin on humanity—it can *feel* like God has forsaken us—but it doesn’t mean He has. He had promised, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6,8).

Secondly, there is a very compelling observation about what has been called “the cry of dereliction” that was a major light bulb moment for me when I heard it: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” is the opening line to Psalm 22. The Psalms are songs, so He wasn’t just quoting scripture, He was crying out the first line of a song very familiar to any Jews who were within earshot. And when we hear the first line of a familiar song, it’s like hitting the “play” button, and the rest of the song continues to play in our heads.

I think that when Jesus called out the first line of Psalm 22, he was reminding those around Him of the rest of the song, which not only makes it clear He was the fulfillment of the prophecies of crucifixion, but it unfolds into a song of trust and praise in Yahweh.

Anyone who knew Psalm 22 could have been struck by the fact that Jesus was a living picture, the very fulfillment, of the words of that song running through their heads:

6 But I am a worm and not a man.
I am scorned and despised by all!
7 Everyone who sees me mocks me.
They sneer and shake their heads, saying,
8 “Is this the one who relies on the Lord?
Then let the Lord save him!
If the Lord loves him so much,
let the Lord rescue him!”

11 Do not stay so far from me,
for trouble is near,
and no one else can help me.

12 My enemies surround me like a herd of bulls;
fierce bulls of Bashan have hemmed me in!

13 Like lions they open their jaws against me,
roaring and tearing into their prey.

14 My life is poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.

My heart is like wax,
melting within me.

15 My strength has dried up like sunbaked clay.
My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

You have laid me in the dust and left me for dead.

16 My enemies surround me like a pack of dogs;
an evil gang closes in on me.

They have pierced my hands and feet.

17 I can count all my bones.

My enemies stare at me and gloat.

18 They divide my garments among themselves
and throw dice for my clothing.

And yet there is a faith-filled insistence on praising the
Father despite what the Son was feeling:

22 I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters.

I will praise you among your assembled people.

23 Praise the Lord, all you who fear him!

Honor him, all you descendants of Jacob!

Show him reverence, all you descendants of Israel!

Verse 24 is especially powerful, since it would indicate that
Jesus knew His Father had not abandoned Him even if He
couldn't see or sense His presence:

24 For he has not ignored or belittled the suffering of the
needy.

He has not turned his back on them,
but has listened to their cries for help.

I think it's very interesting that there is a completely

different way of interpreting the Lord Jesus' plaintive cry on the cross. Compelling, even. I hope you find it helpful.

Sue Bohlin

Posted May 28, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“Is It Fair That People Born Into a Christian Home Become Christians and Everybody Else is Doomed to Hell?”

Hey I just read your [article](#) on God judging people for sins they didn't know were wrong. It was very good and helped me a lot but I still have a question. My brother is an atheist and we have been having some friendly debates on God and such. And the point he always makes that I cannot get over is when he says that I am a Christian because I was raised in a Christian home (as was he, but he says he fell away when he looked at the facts himself instead of believing just what he was told) so I am Christian. If I was raised in a Muslim home then I would be Muslim. And the same goes for any other religion. He has a good point. If I was raised in an Islamic family I would believe that Allah was the true God. Why was I so lucky to be born into the one right religion? So what is a good counter argument? I would really appreciate your help.

Also, he makes the point that, let's say a kid in North Korea who has passed the age of accountability dies. Does he go to heaven? If so then that means God is letting a non-believer

into heaven, right? If he doesn't and goes to Hell, then that seems a little unjust to let a kid who never heard of him go to Hell. Now I know Romans 1:18-32 says that everyone hears of God and I completely believe that and every other word of the Bible, but how can some kid in North Korea or any other given place have nearly as good of a chance as me to get into heaven? I would love any help that you can give me.

Thanks for your letter. These are very good questions. First, let me recommend a very good article by an excellent Christian philosopher that addresses some of your questions. It's entitled, "'No Other Name': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ": www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5220. Another helpful piece is this, called "Politically Incorrect Salvation":

www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=5223.

These articles, which you should probably read at least twice, will help you think through many of these issues at a very sophisticated level.

Here is my own brief response to your questions. This response is not intended to be exhaustive; I've referred you to the articles for a more thorough response.

First, I think that you are quite right that passages such as Romans 1:18-23 clearly teach that God has made His existence evident to all men (we can except, of course, very young children and the severely retarded, etc. Please see an article by Probe's Founder, Jimmy Williams, answering the question [if babies go to hell](#)). Since all men are the recipients of God's revelation in nature and conscience, they are morally responsible and accountable to Him for how they respond to this revelation. Unfortunately, the vast majority of these people reject God's revelation and they have no one but themselves to blame for this. It's very important that we always bear this in mind. God has made His existence evident

to all men, but the vast majority simply reject this evidence—and for this, each is personally accountable to God.

Now, although God is very gracious, and will often send more revelation even to those who reject the revelation they've already been given, He is under no obligation to do so. If people reject the revelation which God has given, He is not in any way obligated to give them more. They are responsible for what He has given, and what He has already given is more than sufficient for them to know that God exists and that they are morally accountable to Him.

But what if someone in an Islamic country or North Korea were to respond positively to God's revelation in creation and conscience? In that case, I think that we can safely say (on the basis of such passages as Acts 8:26-40 and Acts 10) that anyone who responds positively to God's general revelation, will be given yet more revelation (just as the Ethiopian eunuch and Cornelius the centurion were—both of whom became Christians, by the way!).

In other words, God has provided everyone with enough revelation to respond to Him in a positive way. For those who do, God will provide yet more revelation (including the gospel of Jesus Christ). But for those who do not, He is under no obligation to provide yet more light to those who reject what He's already given.

For a much more thorough explanation, please refer to the articles I mentioned. You can find more by William Lane Craig here: www.reasonablefaith.org

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted May 28, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“How Do You Answer a Person Who Says You Can’t Take the Bible Literally Because It Promotes Killing Homosexuals?”

How would you answer a person who says, “You can’t take the Bible literally because it promotes killing homosexuals” (Lev 20:13)?

There are a number of things that one might say to this, but I will mention just a few. In addition, I will not only speak to the issue of interpretation, but will also address some of the issues which give rise to a statement like this. Of course, we must also remember that there is oftentimes a lot of anger behind a statement like this. Hence, it is important to remember that while we always want to speak the truth, we want to be careful to do it in love. This is the most important thing to bear in mind in responding to someone making such a claim. We want to be kind, gentle, and patient in our response. But concerning the response itself, here are a few things that occur to me as I think about this issue.

First, this particular law was only given to ancient Israel under the terms of the Old Covenant. But God is not relating to anyone under the terms of this covenant today. Rather, God is now relating to all men under the terms of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8). Hence, this is not a law which should be implemented today. In addition, I think it is also important to point out that this passage does not PROMOTE killing homosexuals. This is simply false—and it is important to say

so. This particular law requires that those who engage in homosexual activity be put to death. Even under the Old Covenant, a person with homosexual inclinations or attractions, who refused to act on them, would NOT be put to death. What is at issue here is homosexual *activity*—not homosexual attraction. Hence, even interpreted literally, this law does NOT promote killing homosexuals. Rather, it stipulates that those who engage in homosexual *activity* are to be put to death. But again, it is important to remember that God is no longer relating to mankind under the terms of this covenant.

Second, the law reveals the awful truth about human sinfulness and the holiness of God. God takes sin very seriously and his holiness and moral perfection require that He deal with it as it deserves. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, homosexual behavior was not unique in meriting the sentence of death. Adultery (Lev. 20:10), blasphemy (Lev. 24:16), murder (Exod. 21:12), striking one's father or mother (Exod. 21:15), kidnapping (Exod. 21:16), cursing one's father or mother (Exod. 21:17), and other acts as well, all merited the death sentence under the Old Covenant. Even Sabbath violations received the death sentence (Exod. 31:14). Hence, homosexual activity was not unique in meriting the death sentence under the terms of the Old Covenant.

Third, God disapproves of ALL sexual sin—not just homosexual activity. God disapproves of adultery, fornication, rape, incest, bestiality, as well as homosexual sin. Again, homosexual sin is not unique in being prohibited by God. All sexual sin is prohibited. The Bible allows for sexual activity only within the confines of one man/one woman heterosexual marriage. Any kind of sexual activity outside of this is sin—whether that sexual activity be homosexual, heterosexual, sex with animals, etc.

Fourth, the moral law is based upon the morally pure and morally perfect character of God. If the Bible really is the

word of God, then homosexual behavior (along with all other sexual sin) is sin. All such activity, then, would constitute a violation of God's moral law.

Finally, I think we can agree that we should not ALWAYS interpret the Bible "literally." The Bible, after all, does contain a wealth of figurative and metaphorical language, and it would be inappropriate to interpret such metaphorical expressions literally. The problem in this case, however, is that the verse in question is not making use of such figurative or metaphorical language. Indeed, the writer is quite explicit in spelling things out for us. It would strike me as dishonest to suggest that this passage should be interpreted non-literally or metaphorically. What would it be a metaphor of? What would be the literal truth behind (or underneath) the metaphor? In addition, why should anyone think that God does not disapprove of sexual sin? What sort of argument or evidence is there for believing that God's attitude toward sexual activity is essentially the same as that of a modern secular American? Why should we think that sin (all sin) is not a deadly serious issue to an utterly holy God? It seems to me that the statement you mentioned simply makes some unwarranted assumptions about God's attitude toward human sin.

Of course, the good news is that God has provided atonement for sin through the substitutionary death of His Son, and His resurrection for our justification. Anyone who is willing to turn from their sin, and trust Christ for salvation, can and will be forgiven and saved. No one needs to die for their sins (since Christ has already done so). But everyone who rejects Him and His sacrifice will have to pay for their sin themselves. Hence, we want to communicate, I think, that God takes sin very seriously. But He has also provided for our forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross.

Hopefully some of this will be helpful to you as you continue to wrestle with an appropriate response to claims of this

sort.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted May 28, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“Is It Wrong to Baptize in the Name of Jesus?”

Did the Apostles baptize wrong in the Book of Acts since they baptized in the name of Jesus?

There is a debate that says believers must be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28: 19) rather than in the name of Jesus only as the Book of Acts records. The Jesus-only people are also modalists which means they do not believe in the Trinity but in Jesus Only, hence they baptize only in his name. The confusion lies in the different formulas for baptism in Matthew and Acts. The solution is that either formula is acceptable since they are both Biblical. What is not acceptable is the modalist theology behind the Jesus Only belief that denies the personhood of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Lawrence Terlizzese, Ph.D.

Posted Feb. 29, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“Can You Recommend Apologetics Resources on Different Levels?”

As a Christian, I find it to be of invaluable importance to remain current and educated in fields of history, science, logic and philosophy, etc. At age 20, I'm confronting more and more difficulty sharing Christ with a generation in a secularized society that will less and less have Him. Any books you might recommend? Thank you!

There are many good books and websites which address the concerns you have in one way or another. However, let me recommend two books and three websites that have personally been very helpful to me over the years.

1. An excellent popular-level book on apologetics and evangelism is *I'm Glad You Asked* by Ken Boa and Larry Moody – available [here](#).
2. A superb intermediate-level apologetics book is *Reasonable Faith* (3rd edition) by William Lane Craig – available [here](#).
3. An excellent popular-level website on apologetics is the Probe Ministries website here: [Probe.org](#).
4. An excellent scholarly-level site (with some popular-level material) is the Reasonable Faith site here: [www.reasonablefaith.org](#).
5. Finally, a really great site for biblical and theological issues is [bible.org](#).

I hope these resources prove helpful as you continue to

prepare yourself to give an account to all who ask about the hope that you have in Christ!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Probe Ministries

Posted 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“Does Sunday Church Violate the Sabbath Commandment?”

Hello Michael, I read your [article](#) on why Christians go to church on Sunday instead of the sabbath. Our Sunday school teacher gave us an assignment to find out how this goes along with the commandment “Remember the sabbath and keep it holy.” Are we breaking this command? Is there any scripture I can share with the class that explains this?

The command to observe the Sabbath is rooted in both creation and redemption. It was a non-negotiable command for Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. However, it seems to me that this is no longer the case for Christians today, for we are now called to relate to God under the terms and conditions of the New Covenant. Hence, I personally don't think that Christians can violate this command for I do not think it is still in effect (at least not as it was under the Old Covenant).

That the Old Covenant has been made obsolete is stated explicitly in Hebrews 8:13. Paul recognizes that there will be difference of opinion among believers regarding how one observes (or does not observe) certain days like the Sabbath

in Romans 14:5-6, 13. He clearly indicates that such observance is not necessary for salvation in Galatians 4:8-11. In Colossians 2:16-17 he says that we are not to judge (or let ourselves be judged) with respect to things like Sabbath day observances, for these things are but "a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." Finally, the author of Hebrews reminds us of that true Sabbath rest that remains for God's people today. This, I take it, refers to a "rest" that is available to us in some respects now, but will be fully and perfectly realized only in the future, in the new heaven and new earth. Insofar as this "rest" is available to us now, it is not limited to a single day of the week, but is rather a "perpetual" sort of "rest" that we can enter by surrendering ourselves completely to the will of God and trusting wholly in what Christ accomplished for us through His death and resurrection. In other words, we cease trying to earn God's favor by what we do and we "rest" in the fact that Christ has already done this for us! Properly understood, of course, this does not mean that we cease doing good works, which we are clearly told to do (see Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 2:14). It does mean, however, that we can get off the treadmill of trying to earn God's favor by what we do (and "rest" in the fact that Christ has done this for us).

The Sabbath day rest under the Old Covenant, then, is but a type or "shadow" of this fuller "rest" that we can enjoy in Christ—both now (through faith) and in the future new heaven and new earth.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with setting aside a day for rest each week, provided that one does not think that this gains them some sort of special favor with God, favor that is somehow not available to all who trust Christ for salvation. In other words, as I understand it, a Christian is free to set aside a day for rest, but is not required to do so. All Christians, however, are clearly commanded to set aside time for worship and fellowship with other believers (see Hebrews

10:23-25). This, as I see it, is the primary purpose for Christians to set aside Sunday each week. It is to be a day for worshiping the Lord and enjoying fellowship with one another, and encouraging one another to love and good deeds.

Of course, not everyone will agree with what I've written here. But this seems to me to be the New Testament teaching about this issue.

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted Nov. 28, 2012

© 2012 Probe Ministries

“Can You Recommend Resources for Sharing Christ in a Secular Society?”

Hello, Mr. Gleghorn! I want to thank you for what you do. As a Christian, I find it to be of invaluable importance to remain current and educated in fields of history, science, logic and philosophy, etc. Age 20, I'm confronting more and more difficulty sharing Christ with generation in a secularized society that will less and less have Him. Any books you might recommend? Thank you!

Thanks for your letter. There are many good books and websites which address the concerns you have in one way or another. However, let me recommend two books and three websites that have personally been very helpful to me over the years.

1. An excellent popular-level book on apologetics and evangelism is *I'm Glad You Asked* by Ken Boa and Larry Moody: www.amazon.com/Glad-You-Asked-Depth-Difficult/dp/B004IEA2Z2/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1323708380&sr=8-1

2. A superb intermediate-level apologetics book is [Reasonable Faith](http://www.reasonablefaith.org) (3rd edition) by William Lane Craig: <https://amzn.to/36sVinp>

3. An excellent popular-level website on apologetics is the Probe Ministries website here: www.probe.org

4. An excellent scholarly-level site (with some popular-level material) is the Reasonable Faith site here: www.reasonablefaith.org

5. Finally, a really great site for biblical and theological issues is this: bible.org

I hope these resources prove helpful as you continue to prepare yourself to give an account to all who ask about the hope that you have in Christ!

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

Posted Dec. 26, 2011

© 2011 Probe Ministries