“What is the Purpose of a Painful Death?”

I know that the Bible tells us that man is appointed to die. That from dust we came, and to dust we return.

My question relates to what purpose a painful, terrifying death serves in God’s plan. I realize that illness and tragedy can affect anyone at any age, but what purpose would God have (for example) for someone being trapped in a wrecked car and burning alive? I could give other examples of terrifying deaths that we all hear on the nightly news, but my question is: what is the purpose of the “way” we die? Why some die painlessly while others suffer a lonely, frightening death?

I don’t think I have the definitive answer, but as a person who has experienced various kinds of pain in my life, I know a little bit about the kinds of things God accomplishes in us during times of great pain.

A painful death is really just another life experience, so it doesn’t belong in a special category. One of the things that we unfortunately can’t know, because death prevents any communication with the departed, is the testimony of God’s faithfulness and power and glory in that horrible experience. His grace, presence and aid is available to those undergoing awful deaths if they are willing to receive it.

It seems to me that because pain can serve to develop character and deepen the heart, it’s entirely possible that a difficult death can be the final experience of pruning and preparation for life after death.

Those who “suffer a lonely, frightening death” are in a particularly wide-open position to experience the compassion and presence of the God who promised “Lo, I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20). Just as even the smallest light is

more appreciated in the deepest dark, I would suggest that the light of God's presence and love might be more apparent in a horrible death.

The testimonies of many of the martyrs who died excruciating deaths for the love of their Savior yet radiated God's peace and grace in the midst of great pain, is one of the things that leads me to this conclusion.

Granted, this would be about the death of believers. What is the purpose of a horrible death for unbelievers, I cannot say, but I still believe it has something to do with the light of God contrasted with the darkness of the heart.

The bottom line is that it is a mystery, I think, but this is the best I can do.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"My Hurting Friend Has Stopped Believing in God"

I have a friend who has had a rough couple of years. Her parents split up and she doesn't like her mom's boyfriend and she recently told me she has stopped believing in God though she has been brought up to be a Christian. She just told me and a friend all this stuff and we don't know what to say, could you please help?

I wouldn't worry about what your friend is saying right now about not believing in God. Those are the words of a broken heart. Often when people feel God has abandoned them or betrayed them because He has allowed something bad to happen,

they respond by saying, “OK, God, I’ll show you, I won’t believe in You anymore!” They don’t really mean it. . . they’re just hurting so bad they don’t know how else to respond.

If she were my friend, I would just be there for her, put an arm around her and hug her and love on her, and silently ask God to love her through me. She needs friends, she needs support, she needs to feel loved and cared for. That’s how she’ll eventually come to realize how God was loving her in her pain.

I also wouldn’t get into any arguments about God. If she says things like “Well, I don’t believe in God anymore, if God were there He wouldn’t let stuff like this happen,” I’d just nod and say, “Yeah, it really stinks what’s going on, and I don’t blame you for hurting so bad.”

Just keep in mind what her heart needs instead of what her mouth is saying. And love her, love her, love her through it. Later on you can tell her you were doing it in Jesus’ name.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

A Doctor’s Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes biblical references to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

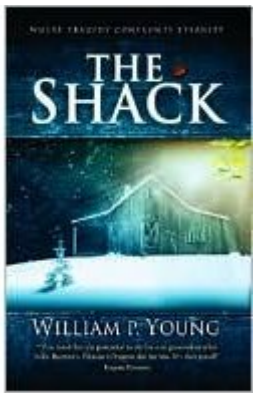
As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit his website and youll see what I mean.

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Response to “The Shack”



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel,{1} for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read “Is *The Shack* Heresy?” by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It’s a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It’s signed “Papa,” his wife’s favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*,{2} where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character’s questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of “How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?”

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don’t read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn’t have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my “wisdom journal,” a book I’ve been adding to for years with wisdom from others that I didn’t want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn’t. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about “doing Christianity.” It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

Fresh Insights

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

• God is warm and inviting
• He collects our tears in a bottle
• Jesus was not particularly handsome
• God is one, in three Persons
• The Holy Spirit is a comforter
• There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
• God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation
• God values what is given from the heart
• God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God

• God is compassionate toward the anguished question, “How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?”
• The substitutionary atonement of Christ
• The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled
• There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
• How good triumphs over evil
• The nature and purpose of the Law
• The healing nature of God’s love
• Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
• God’s omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
• In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as “a large, beaming, African-American woman” (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa’s reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

> *“Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so*

> *easily back into your religious conditioning.”*
>
> *She leaned forward as if to share a secret. “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.”*
>
> *. . . She looked at Mack intently. “Hasn’t it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you’ve been through, you couldn’t very well handle a father right now, could you?”*
>
> *He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful. (pp. 93-94)*

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack’s heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of “God is our Mother” garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

Deep Ministry

On his personal website, the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to "kill our independence" (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God's love looks like. I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn't just love me, He *likes* me.

An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

> *"We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. . . What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense to us." (p. 122)*

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ."

> *"We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way." (p. 145)*

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *serving*. God submitting to His creation? I don't think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with

husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack,* one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, “If you’ll let me, I’ll be the Papa you never had.” (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God’s eyes when they meet face to face, who can’t give themselves permission to rest from their “hamster treadmill” for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ’s bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant,

grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God's heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only "Christianity from the neck up," but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack.* Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger.* Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that "boys express affection aggressively."

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best "take-away" of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people's hostility toward the book isn't about what it actually says, it's about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like "heresy" and "dangerous" to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it's important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original

intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife's urging, "You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God." He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young's "out of the box" theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a "slice of God," so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul's view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—"Gandalf with an attitude," as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking "What is the author using this imagery to portray?" is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe

in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the heart of El-Shaddai ("the breasted one"). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father's and the Spirit's hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul's children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn't know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

The Shack presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually

have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise seminarian told me, "We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy."

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people's understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile

toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It's a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree. In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that's important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. "Controversies don't bother me," this wise believer said. "I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis, time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it."

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals', and it troubled me. As I prayed, "Lord, what's up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective," I believe He answered me: "He doesn't get everything right." Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn't get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don't know what our blind spots are and we don't know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with "getting your theological beliefs right." And not "getting everything right" is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this "heretical" book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is

that He knows Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and He’s using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there’s something to be said for that.

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Reflection on the Virginia Tech Shootings

We moved our household this weekend, so I had not heard anything about the shootings at Virginia Tech until that same night. Next morning, I began reading articles to bring myself up to speed. The situation hurts. It was a student at the university, not some outsider. The gunman was 23, only three years younger than me.

Another person from my generation lashing out in violence; this is not the first time it’s happened. This situation brings to mind several other recent occurrences, both locally and nationally. On a personal level, I recently found out that a guy from my high school who also graduated from my alma mater, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), committed suicide recently. He was 26, an accomplished musician, national merit scholar, and earned a computer science degree.

During my junior year at UTD, a friend of mine at a Christian university came home for Christmas. While she was in Dallas, she received word that her dormitory roommate had committed suicide. She was a bright girl with a promising future and was apparently from a Christian family.

A month after I had graduated UTD, a news report came out that a student drugged, raped, and assaulted another student—during

an exam study session.

Lastly, while reading about the Virginia Tech gunman's angst that finally snapped into a violent rage, I could not help but remember the Columbine shootings. That report came out my senior year in high school. The two teenage perpetrators were my age.

With all of these cases of violent crimes on campuses among young, educated people, I have to wonder, *What is wrong with my generation?* Why are these twenty-somethings breaking like this? Crime and violence are a part of the fallen world that we live in, but the inordinate amount of violent and sexual crimes on campuses is staggering.

My generation has received the most "information" from media than any other. We have seen the rise of technological advances that only Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) could dream of. We have grown up thinking that every opportunity and possibility is at our fingertips (or at the click of a mouse). We have some of the fastest, most efficient cars, the biggest malls, and some of the best plastic surgery that money can buy. The nation is rich, and although material resources may not satisfy us in the long run, they sure feel good right now. We have medications for nearly everything, and beauty products for everything else. But apparently all of the riches, technology, beauty, and opportunities still leave us in despair—for some, despair to the point of death. Why? Is this an artifact for only this generation, or does the Bible speak to the despair plaguing us?

Consider the words of Solomon:

> *"I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself… I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the*

> *treasure of kings and provinces… Also whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure… Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 2:4,7-8,10-11).*

Just as Solomon was blessed and lived in a time of education, materialism, and plenty, I think his hopelessness rings true of my generation as well. Compared to prior generations, we have it all, and yet it only fills us with despair that is really no different. There is a void that only God can fill. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes that the end of the matter is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments (12:13). In other words, when all is said and done, no amount of education, riches, or technology can compare to knowing the Lord through His Son Jesus Christ.

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Deadly College Shootings in U.S.

Some deadly shootings at U.S. colleges or universities, listed by number of fatalities:

April 16, 2007

A gunman kills 32 people in a dorm and a classroom building at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. The suspect then dies by gunshot himself.

Aug. 1, 1966

Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of

the University of Texas at Austin’s Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

July 12, 1976

Edward Charles Allaway, a custodian in the library of California State University, Fullerton, fatally shoots seven fellow employees and wounds two others. Mentally ill, Allaway believed his colleagues were pornographers and were forcing his estranged wife to appear in their movies. A judge found him innocent by reason of insanity in 1977 after a jury was unable to reach a verdict and he was committed to the state mental health system.

Nov. 1, 1991

Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including four members of the physics department, one other person is wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970

Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Oct. 28, 2002

Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor’s office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Sept. 2, 2006

Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Jan. 16, 2002

Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 15, 1996

Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Jan. 26, 1995

Former law student Wendell Williamson shoots two men to death and injures a police officer in Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 2, 2007

University of Washington researcher Rebecca Griego, 26, is shot to death in her office by former boyfriend Jonathan Rowan who then turned the gun on himself.

Aug. 28, 2000

James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Source: Associated Press

Accessed Apr. 17, 2007 © 2007 MSNBC.com

http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18137414/

A Christian Response to the Horror at Virginia Tech

Many of us found ourselves glued to the television, watching videos of the events surrounding the mass murder in Blacksburg, Virginia. A day like all other days for thousands of college students, faculty, administrators, and all the rest that make up the mini-city of Virginia Tech University suddenly turned into a waking nightmare, the kind of experience that happens on TV but never really happens to us. Or so we think. I've been to the campus in Blacksburg; it isn't the kind of place one would imagine mass murder. But where *would* one expect such a thing, except in far away places like Iraq?

In such situations, our emotions typically take the lead since it takes awhile to get all the information that informs our thinking. What emotions do we experience? Shock? Fear, as we think about students of our own there or at similar campuses? Sadness for the loss of life, especially for such senseless loss? Another sense we have, sometimes not till after the initial shock has worn off, is moral outrage, a deep-seated sense that what happened was wrong: not in terms of economics or simply the proper functioning of an organization, but in terms of moral wrong. Deep down we know there is good and there is evil, and this event was evil.

But upon what do we base this sense? Before you just brush the question aside with the ubiquitous "Duh!" or ask incredulously, "What kind of question is *that*?!" pause a moment and give it some thought. Why is such a thing wrong?

After all, if we push a Darwinian, naturalistic worldview to the limit, we might think ourselves justified in seeing this kind of horror as really no different from animals attacking and killing each other. Keep in mind that the Nazis were able to carry out their slaughter because they had relegated Jews to a lower level in the evolutionary chain.

The first point I want to make is that *Christianity explains our moral outrage*. It's explained by the fact that we are created in God's image and have in us a sense of moral right and wrong. The apostle Paul wrote that "the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts," that our "consciences [are] also bearing witness, and [our] thoughts now accusing, now even defending [us]" (Romans 2:15). God is the standard of moral right and wrong, and we reflect that knowledge in ourselves. Of course, we can deaden that knowledge; a conscience can be trained to ignore promptings to do good.

Have you seen someone get angry (or maybe you got angry yourself) when a person who commits such an evil act commits suicide immediately afterwards? Oh, I know: some people ultimately want the person to die himself. But there's something about being denied to express our moral outrage *at* the person. We want justice for the crime committed, and we don't always want it to be a quick and dirty justice. Frankly, we'd like the person to suffer and know what he's suffering for.

How do we explain our desire for justice? What I described above is more a desire for vengeance. However, we do want justice. We want the person to face up to the charges, to hear the condemnation (consider the trials where families of victims get to speak their minds to the accused). We want him to know he did wrong and to know he's going to suffer the consequences, and then we want justice meted out.

Along the same lines that Christianity explains moral outrage, it also *explains our desire for justice*. We know some things

are morally wrong and are deserving of punishment. And we want to make a strong enough impression on the guilty that he (or observers of the case) doesn't do it again. God is *very* interested in justice. A quick search in the New International Version lists almost one hundred twenty instances of the word "justice" in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love" (33:5). "Truth is nowhere to be found," God said through Isaiah, "and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice" (Isa. 59:15). And, "Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:15-17).

This isn't just an Old Testament concern. In the New Testament we have this promise: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31).

A question comes naturally to mind. If God is so interested in justice, why doesn't He fulfill it now? This is an extremely important question. However, it's one I'm going to forego for now (search Probe's Web site for articles on the problem of evil; Sue Bohlin's article "The Value of Suffering" is a good start). The long and short of it is that we don't know just what God is up to. We can hazard some guesses. C. S. Lewis said that suffering is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Let's say we *can't* give an answer to the question, Why is evil allowed? What then? If that's the primary criterion for accepting a particular religion or philosophy as true, we will be able to accept none, not even secularism!

What, then? Where does that leave us? Christianity does have

an answer to that: *Christianity offers hope*. Even in the worst of situations, the person who has received the grace of God in salvation has the hope of a future in which death has no place. This isn't "hope" as in cross-your-fingers hope, like, "I sure hope the game doesn't get rained out this weekend." In the New Testament, hope is presented as the assurance of the future. We have the hope of eternal life—of that life which has no room for death—by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The apostle Peter wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus proved that He had broken the hold of death through His own death on the cross by breaking free from the tomb and appearing live to hundreds of people. Because He rose and conquered death, we who trust in Him will, too.

Hope is a fundamental ingredient of Christianity. Faith enables us to say "yes" today to what we know we should do; hope enables us to say "yes" to the future, because it rests in the hands of the God Who loves us. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is in Romans. Paul wrote: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13). This is God's desire for us, to live in the (sure) hope that our future is secure in Him.

One more thing. Christianity isn't just some set of religious dogmas and practices that keeps some of us off the streets on Sunday mornings! *Christianity provides a way of life that minimizes such tragedies.* It provides both the framework within which we order our lives *and* the ability to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Blaise Pascal held out the value of Christian morality as an enticement to see if Christianity is true. Even if it isn't true, he said, look at the kind of life it calls us to lead! Thomas Jefferson, who so rejected the miraculous in the Bible that he edited out of the

New Testament all such things, recognized a high level of morality in its pages. And when you ask people who the best exemplars of goodness have been in history, Jesus is typically on the list, even the lists of those who don't believe He is the divine Son of God.

The point is that built into Christianity is a structure of life that prohibits people hurting each other. Of course, this isn't to suggest that Christians never do wrong! But it *is* to say that we have more than just pragmatic reasons for doing right. We do right to honor God, to honor people, because we believe in moral right and wrong. Sometimes we do the right thing—only because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the rewards! However, I would be dishonest if I didn't note that there *does* lie in our future many blessings for obedient lives.

But Christianity goes beyond simply providing a moral code. It also provides the power to follow it! The Holy Spirit somehow resides in us (one of the mysteries of the faith!), and He transforms us, changes us through a number of ways into the image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:5-17; 12:1,2; Gal. 5:16-26).

To sum up: Christianity explains our moral outrage at the mass murders at Virginia Tech this week. It explains our desire for justice, and guarantees that it will be carried out eventually. It offers real hope, hope that is sure, for those who suffer. And it provides a way for people to live with one another without having a reason to give in to such evil impulses.

It's likely that some people will read this who aren't Christians. If you're one of them, I'd like to ask you to consider thoughtfully what I've said about Christianity, but also consider what *you* believe. You may be an adherent of another religion or philosophy, or you may simply be a secularist who believes in God but believes He doesn't really have much to do with our lives. My question is this: If you

agree that the issues I've raised are important, how does your belief system answer them? If it *does* answer them, do the answers seem plausible? Is there good reason to believe them? If not, maybe the whole belief system needs to be evaluated.

If you'd like to know more about a Christian understanding of these issues, hunt around on our Web site for other articles. Or send us an e-mail. You can even use the old-fashioned method of calling on the phone!

We'd love to hear from you.

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Virginia Tech Massacre: Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I've found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they preferred I speak on death and dying: *One Minute After Death*. Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn't claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The

lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

Death's Shuddering Finality

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor Liviu Librescu, an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.{1}

God and Evil?

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"{2} He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

"Almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent," Coffin told *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, "and it's not God's doing. It's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God."

"When [people] see the innocent suffering," continued Coffin, "every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, 'God, how could you let this happen?' it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: 'How could you let this happen?'"{3}

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, "People who have never met you are praying for you…. In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God…. 'Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'"{4} Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

Notes

1. Laurie Copans, "Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings," Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie Reitman, "Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students," Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg, accessed April 18, 2007.
2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine's April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at

http://www.vbdems.org/, accessed April 18, 2007.
3. “Profile: William Sloane Coffin,” Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t, accessed April 18, 2007.
4. Text of the president’s April 17, 2007 speech at the Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

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Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician’s office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, “Have you been under stress recently?” Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life’s mission? Would life itself last much

longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you've excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents in recent years. "How did you cope?" I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. "But how did you deal with their deaths?" I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. "I guess I haven't," he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother's needs after her father's passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother's death, she felt quite somber. "People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around," she recalls. "That was very sobering." Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I certainly don't have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas that have worked for me and for others along life's sometimes challenging journey?

Grieve the loss. Don't ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or

God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

A little help from your friends. During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending, good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don't try to handle enormous loss alone.

Watch your vulnerabilities. In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. "Guard your heart," advises an ancient proverb, "for it affects everything you do."{1}

Look for a bright spot. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. "It was very difficult for me when they dropped me," he recalls. King says one can view firing as "a terrible tragedy" or a chance to seek new opportunities.{2}

Cherish your memories. Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling

experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don't become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to. . .

Turn the page. After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you'll emotionally process and respond to the common question, "Where do you work?" Perhaps you'll want to take a course, exercise and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

Sink your spiritual roots deep. I'm glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life's curve balls, I've had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ "become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He'll never let you down.

This article first appeared in *Answer* magazine 14:1 January/February 2007. Copyright © 2007 by Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Notes

1. Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
2. Harvey Mackay, *We Got Fired!…And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 150-153 ff.
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

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7 Questions Skeptics Ask – Radio Transcript

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend has questions:

> *How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard*

of Jesus?

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."{1} This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: How can you believe the Bible? Why do Christians say there is only one way to God? How does one become a Christian?

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,{2} an

increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands? His

reply: “[Expletive deleted] no!”

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, “I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong.” Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.{5}

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, “I don’t have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?”

I don’t have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I’ll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.{6} This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection{7} I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD.{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. Gods perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they wont need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and

self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.{16} Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."{17} That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him? To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.*

- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way? He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans "by grace…through faith… not…works"{18} was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds*

of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.

• Was Jesus' plan true? Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy{19} and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament{20} convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, "Why would God allow this to happen?" I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven't acted like Jesus. Maybe they're angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one's death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.

2. John 1:14.

3. John 1:45-47.

4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.

5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.

7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/ ; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.

13. Matthew 28:1-8.

14. Luke 1:26-2:40.

15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.

16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.

18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

19. A summary of some of the prophesies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

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7 Questions Skeptics Ask About the Validity of Christianity

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend questions:

> *How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?*

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."{1} This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: "How can you believe the Bible?" "Why do Christians say there is only one way to God?" "How does one become a Christian?"

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of

personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to

answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, “If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus’ hands?” His reply: “[Expletive deleted] no!”

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, “I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong.” Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.{5}

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, “I don’t have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?”

I don’t have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I’ll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.{6} This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection{7} I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD."{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. God's perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won't need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me.

C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.{16} Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."{17} That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him?*

To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.

• *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way?* He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans – "by grace…through faith…not…works"{18} was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.

• *Was Jesus' plan true?* Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy{19} and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament{20} convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith – not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, "Why would God allow this to happen?" I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven't acted like Jesus. Maybe they're angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one's death,

or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.
2. John 1:14.
3. John 1:45-47.
4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.
5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.
7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.
8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/ .

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.
10. Acts 10.
11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.
12. Luke 24:1-9.
13. Matthew 28:1-8.
14. Luke 1:26-2:40.
15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.
16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.
17. John 14:6 NASB.
18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.
19. A summary of some of the prophesies Jesus fulfilled is at

Rusty Wright, “Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?” 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/ .

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, “The New Testament: Can I Trust It?” 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/ .

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