

HANDLING
difficult
QUESTIONS

*only way to get you out of hell?
if you are good,
why are you here?*

GREG LAURIE

Handling Difficult Questions

by Greg Laurie

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Chapter One

With Truth, Love, and Boldness

Everyone has questions. We have questions about everything from the purpose of our existence to dealing with life's daily personal problems. Advice columns in the newspaper are filled with people's questions regarding life, love, and troubles. The "Dear Abbys" of the world are in the business of answering people's questions on a daily basis.

You don't have to be "Dear Abby" to field questions from inquisitive people. In fact, as a Christian, you will probably encounter more questions from those you are sharing your faith with than "Dear Abby" in her newspaper column. Regardless of the amount of questions you will face, the truth is that you *will* face some questions when you share the gospel—and you need to know the answers!

I had a best friend I went to school with from my early elementary school days. His name was Gregg. I remember that right after I asked Christ to come into my life at the age of 17, I said to Gregg, "I know you are worried that I am going to become a fanatic. But you have known me all of these years and I just want to tell you that I am not going to become one of those crazy Christians. I am never going to carry a Bible in public. I am never going to hang a cross around my neck. And

you will never hear me, Greg Laurie, saying, ‘Praise the Lord!’ or other Christian clichés.” Needless to say, my statements reassured Gregg. A couple of weeks passed by when we did not see each other and major changes were taking place in my life. My excitement about my new faith was growing daily and I could no longer contain myself.

I found myself down at the beach, handing out Christian tracts, talking to people about my faith in Jesus Christ, and who did I suddenly run into? You guessed it. Gregg! We both started laughing because I had a cross hanging around my neck, I was carrying a Bible, and the first thing I said to him without really thinking was “Praise the Lord!”

I started to share with Gregg how the Lord had changed my life. He seemed open and attentive, so I began to share the gospel. However, someone was eavesdropping on our conversation. As I seemed to be making some headway in helping Gregg find Christ, this man stepped over to us and said, “I have a few questions for you, Mr. Christian.” And, being the great theologian I was (I did have a whole two weeks’ worth of Bible knowledge, after all!), I said, “Fire away.” This man fired away his questions, one after another in rapid succession. “If God is so loving, how could He send anyone to hell? Are you saying that if people don’t believe in Jesus as you do, they are going to hell? What about the people in Africa who have never heard of the gospel—are they going to be sent to hell as well?”

The questions kept coming. My mind went blank. I was dumbfounded. I had no idea what to say. Feeling ashamed and embarrassed, I walked away humiliated. That day was a turning point in my life. I decided that I not only wanted to share the gospel, but I also wanted to know the answers to the questions that people ask. Now, I am not suggesting that we can know all the answers to everything. But, I do believe that the answers to these and countless other questions are to be found in God's Word.

The apostle Peter told us, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Peter 3:15). We need to be ready to answer with truth, love, and boldness.

Chapter Two

Preparing to Answer

The Greek word for *answer* in 1 Peter 3:15 is *apologia* (apologetic in English). The word means to give a verbal defense to anyone who asks for a logical explanation. The Bible is logical as well as spiritual. Clearly, there has to come a moment in every person's life where a step of faith is taken, but there is a logical progression to the truths that are found in the Scriptures. They fit together and they make sense. The more we understand the Word of God, the more practical we will see it actually is. I have also noticed that the Bible makes the world's philosophies appear illogical.

Some people use questions to try to get us off track when sharing the gospel. They hide behind the questions, using them as reasons not to convert. Yet, what these people are really doing is making excuses because they have no intention of converting and no real interest in Jesus Christ.

However, there are others who have honest questions about the Christian faith. And, if you can answer them, you may be rolling away the stone so they can come out of their tombs of unbelief. Maybe they will give their lives to the Lord right then and there, or maybe they will go home and think about the answers that you gave them. There will be times when you

directly lead someone to the Lord, and yet other times when you will be a part of the process. An important part of the process, I might add.

On a certain ocean liner, a passenger was lying in his cabin seriously ill. One dark night he heard a cry, "Man overboard!" and, while sensitive to all the excitement and hurry, he was too sick to give any help. One of the difficulties the rescuers had was that they could not see the man. Suddenly, however, a light shone out through the glass of a porthole. It happened to fall full on the struggling man in the water, so that they were able to throw him a lifebelt and then go to his rescue. Where did the light come from? From the sick man, who, feeling so distressed at his incapacity to help, managed to crawl out of his bunk, take the lantern down from the wall, and place it where it could shine forth.

When you are prepared to answer the questions that people have about God, you become that light shining forth in their dark world. You are helping light their way to the gospel—which will dispel all the darkness in their lives.

Chapter Three

Stay Focused on the Gospel

Many times people will try to sidetrack us when we share the gospel. Jesus was a master communicator. When He spoke with the woman at the well, He reasoned with her regarding her inner thirst and her need for God. He decided to put His finger on the dark spot in her life. He said, “Why don’t you go call your husband?” She said, “I don’t have a husband.” Jesus said, “That’s true. In fact, you have had five of them and you are living with a guy right now.” She said, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet” (see John 4:16–19).

Bingo. Jesus got her attention. He knew everything about this woman, and that made her a bit uncomfortable. It was then that she tried to change the subject (see John 4:20).

This will often happen when you are sharing the gospel. The moment you get into an area where people are under conviction they will try to change the subject. Before you are even finished answering their first question, they will fire off the second, third, and fourth. When they are uncomfortable you know you are getting through to them!

The woman at the well tried to get Jesus onto another subject. However, Jesus pulled her back to the main issue. “But the

hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:23–24).

Jesus reeled her back in and brought her back to the gospel. When you are sharing the gospel with people, remember to stay on the message of salvation. You are not there to convert them morally, politically, or socially. These are secondary issues. The main issue is the Good News of Jesus Christ. When people are truly converted they will be affected morally, politically, and socially.

“It’s too good to be true,” someone protested to George MacDonald about the plan of salvation. “No,” MacDonald replied, “it’s so good it has to be true.”

Chapter Four

The Three Most Asked Questions

Though there is an abundance of questions that people ask regarding God and Christianity, there are three main questions that always seem to come up in the course of sharing our faith. And, seemingly, they are three very difficult questions:

1. If God is good, why does He allow evil?
2. How can Christians say Jesus Christ is the only way to God?
3. How could a God of love send someone to hell?

Question One

If God is good, why does He allow evil?

This is not an easy question to answer. Sometimes the question takes on other forms such as, “Why does God allow tragedy? Why does God allow war and injustice? Why does He allow babies to be born blind?” Just take any of the horrible things that are happening in our world today and people will form it into the same type of question.

The question itself takes a look at God’s character. It assumes one of two things. Either God is all powerful, but not all good;

therefore, He does not stop evil. Or, He is all good, but He is not all powerful; therefore, He cannot stop evil.

When people ask you this question, they are implying that God is not good. They have placed themselves in a position to be the judge and jury of what is good or not good. The truth is we know that God is good because the Bible says that He is good. It's not dependent on what we believe or what we think. The Bible is the final authority on God's goodness—and God is the final authority on what is good! Jesus said, “ ‘No one is good but One, that is, God’ ” (Matthew 19:17).

There is no higher standard of goodness than God's own character. So the question is not “If God is good . . .” so much as, “Why does God allow evil?”

The Role of Free Will

People were not created evil, and this world was not created corrupt as it is today. God created human beings in His image. He created us perfect and innocent with the ability to live forever. However, God also created us to have free will—the ability to choose.

Many times we question God as to why He gave us the ability to choose rather than just making us like robots. When I look at my son, Jonathan, I want him to love me because he wants to, not because he is forced to do so. If I threaten him and tell him he won't get something if he doesn't tell me he loves me,

how meaningful is that? Yet, when he just comes up to me after dinner and throws his arms around me and says that he loves me, I know that he means it. He is choosing to love his old dad.

God gave us the ability to make our own choices. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve chose to sin. They chose to do the wrong thing. The apostle Paul told us the result: “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).

When we look at all the evil in the world we love to blame God. But the blame lies at our own sinful feet. The crime rate throughout our nation is due to men and women making wrong choices and following after sin rather than God’s standards. In fact, most of the things that are wrong in our country today are the direct result of disobeying God’s commands. God said, “‘See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply’” (Deuteronomy 30:15–16).

God has given us His standards but we have disobeyed them, and as a result, we have reaped the inevitable results.

Why does God allow war? The Bible tells us, “Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight

and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask” (James 4:1–2). People create wars because they choose to sin instead of obeying God.

Why does God allow famine? In India, you can literally see people starving to death while cows roam freely around. The people are not eating the food that God has provided them because they believe in a false religion that is contradictory to what the true Scriptures teach. Is God causing them to starve? No. He has made a provision to give them food, but they have chosen to disobey God’s standards and cling to false beliefs instead.

In the end, most of the evil that is in the world is a direct result of men and women using their free will to do that which is sinful instead of obeying God’s standards. Malcolm Muggeridge said, “The most extraordinary thing about human beings [is the fact] that they pursue ends which they know to be disastrous and turn their backs on ways which they know to be joyous.”

Unexplained Suffering

There are sufferings in the world that are hard to explain. Mental retardation, the death of a child, and cancer are just some that leave us wondering, “Why?” We don’t always know why God allows certain things, but we do know that on many occasions God has used a tragedy to bring someone to Himself. For example, read the following story:

A family in India was the first in its village to turn to Christ. Shortly after their conversion, everybody said, “The gods will go against you. You’re going to be cursed.” They were a little concerned about this. And then their child got sick. When the child got sick, everyone said, “See, the gods have punished you! See what has happened!” The family went to church and said, “Please pray for us. Our child is sick; the people are saying this is a punishment for becoming Christians.” The church prayed earnestly, but the child got worse and finally died. When they held the funeral, the first Christian funeral in the village, the people of the village heard the hope of the resurrection and their eyes were opened and many people came to Christ.

In spite of horrible outcomes, God possesses the ability to use these difficult situations in a wonderful way. Often times, God uses tragedy to get our attention. C. S. Lewis said, “God whispers to us in our pleasures, but He shouts to us in our pain.” Some people don’t hear the whisper of God. They need a shout! Perhaps it’s an emergency or a tragedy, but whatever it is, it is something that gets their attention and brings them to the Lord.

We also need to understand that there are many instances where God will intervene in a tragedy. I have witnessed God heal people with severe sickness and even intervene in situations where the doctors gave no hope at all. Certainly as believers we can and should call out to the Lord for His healing touch in our lives. *But there are times when, for His own purposes, He will not do as we ask.*

The Bible says there is a day coming when “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death,

nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

The moment we put our faith in Jesus Christ, He is in control of all our circumstances. Nothing can get through to us without going through His filter of love. Though we may not always understand our trials and sufferings, we can fall back on God’s promises to us. We know that He loves us and has given us eternal life (see John 3:16); that His thoughts toward us are good and not evil; that He gives us a future and a hope (see Jeremiah 29:11); and that He will never leave us or forsake us (see Hebrews 13:5).

On that final day when we stand face to face with God, He will answer all our questions. But when unexplained suffering comes our way, we can fall back on His many promises and rest assured that all things will work out for our good (see Romans 8:28).

Question Two

How can Christians say Jesus Christ is the only way to God?

If there ever was a question that causes agitation and hostility it is this one. People can’t accept that there is only one way to God. They find it narrow, insensitive, and intolerant. Tolerance is the watchword of the day. We are told to be tolerant of what people say, believe, and do. I don’t disagree with the concept of toleration. The dictionary defines *tolerance* as the “official recognition of an individual or a group’s right to hold

dissenting opinions, especially in religion.” However, we are not being asked to merely accept that someone can hold a different belief than ours—we are essentially being asked to accept their beliefs and disregard our own! When we don’t do that, we are labeled intolerant.

Love Is Balanced with the Truth

In the name of love, many Christian churches have bought into the tolerance movement and deviate from the gospel so as not to offend people. Some say, “Don’t be harsh and say Jesus is the only way. After all, they may love God in their own way.” It is important to remember that the river of love always flows safely within the banks of truth. It is not loving to proclaim something that is false. In fact, the Bible states that it is a hateful thing to deceive somebody (see Psalm 5:6).

A *Los Angeles Times* headline read, “No Religion has a Monopoly on God’s Truth, Clerics Assert.” This so-called Christian cleric said,

Is it possible to proclaim the truth of your own faith and at the same time agree that other religions are also paths to salvation? As paradoxical as that may seem, two religious thinkers, one Christian, another Jewish, say that must happen in the United States as we become a nation of growing religious diversity. This is called a theology of pluralism.

The article went on to say,

We are called to follow, but there is no blueprint. And if we do follow, we do so recognizing that we don’t see the whole picture. There might be non-

Christian companions with us who are also witnesses to God's truth. And for the sake of the Gospel, Christians need to be open to the Spirit's leading.

What this minister declares is both dangerous and false. For the sake of the gospel, we need to proclaim what is found in the Scriptures only! The Spirit will always lead us to the truth in God's Word, not anywhere else. Otherwise, people are dealing with a very different kind of spirit, and I can assure you, it is not godly! The blueprint that we follow is the Bible. A non-Christian is not a witness to God's truth. And, anything that contradicts God's Word is false! So how do we begin to answer the question? We need to base the question on absolute truth, not just opinion.

Sometimes people think we are arrogant when we state that Jesus Christ is the only way to God. They feel we are implying that we are better than they are. We are not better, but better off. We are just beggars telling another beggar where to find bread. Yes, we are saying that Jesus is the only way, but we are also telling them why we believe that to be true.

Why do we say that Jesus is the only way? Because Jesus said it Himself! " 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me' " (John 14:6). He also said, " 'I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture' " (John 10:9). We need to call out the Scriptures that declare Jesus is the only way: "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts

4:12). The Bible also says, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

There is no prophet, teacher, or guru who has ever walked this earth who was God and man in one person. Only Jesus holds that distinction. That is why His death was unique among other religious leaders and teachers. He alone was qualified to bridge the gap between a holy and flawless God and sinful, fallen humanity.

What about Sincerity?

Many claim that as long as people are really sincere in what they believe, they will get to heaven. Much of our culture is motivated by feelings and emotions rather than by thinking and logic.

If going to heaven were based on a person's sincerity, Adolph Hitler would be strolling through Paradise. But few would believe that a man like Hitler would enter God's kingdom. In fact, most would believe he is in hell. Hitler sincerely believed in what he was doing in exterminating the Jewish people. But what he sincerely believed was diabolical and horribly wicked.

It just goes to show that sincerity in and of itself is not enough. People can be sincerely wrong! Sincerity is not a gauge of good or bad. No matter how sincerely you believe something, that does not make it true! Truth is the determining

factor, not sincerity.

Don't All Religions Teach the Same Thing?

All religions do *not* teach the same thing. Yet, you will encounter many people who think that they do. Usually these people have never read about the various religions of the world, including reading the Bible. The reality is that all roads do not lead to God, and all religions do not blend beautifully together. In fact, they all contradict one another.

I completely believe people have a right to believe what they want and I support them in that. But that does not mean that we shouldn't engage in a healthy dialog about the differences in our beliefs.

That all religions are essentially teaching the same thing is simply not true. For instance, Christianity teaches that there is a personal God. In contrast, Buddhists deny the existence of a personal god. Hindus believe their god is formless and abstract and takes the form of many lesser gods. Christianity teaches that God is personal and that God created humans in His own image. Only the Bible teaches that He loves us and wants to have a relationship with us—something that is entirely different than the religions of the world.

We, as Christians, are so thankful that we know our sin is forgiven and that we are going to heaven. However, other religions teach a very different path to salvation. Buddhists

believe that salvation is by self-effort only because there is no personal god to help you. Hindus believe you achieve salvation by devotion, works, and self-control. Muslims believe that a person earns his or her salvation and pays for his or her own sins, but there is no eternal assurance. The Bible, in contrast, teaches that Christ died for our sins, and if we turn from them and put our faith in Him, we can be forgiven and know that we are going to heaven.

Lastly, the world religions all differ on their teachings about Jesus. Buddhists believe that Jesus Christ was a great teacher, but less important than Buddha. Hindus believe that Jesus was just one of many incarnations or sons of god, but not the Son of God. They also do not believe that Christ died for our sins. Muslims believe that Jesus Christ was only a man—a prophet equal to Adam or Noah or Abraham. They also do not believe that Christ died for our sins.

My point is not to slam other religious beliefs. But, you cannot believe in all of the above because they contradict one another. They cannot all be true. Only Christianity declares that there is a personal God who loves you. Only Christianity declares that Jesus Christ is the Son of God—both human and divine. Only Christianity offers forgiveness of sin as a free gift. Only Christianity assures eternal salvation for all who believe in Jesus Christ.

As we lovingly share the truth, people will become aware that all roads do not lead to God—just one, Jesus Christ!

Question #3

How could a God of love send someone to hell?

God doesn't want anybody to go to hell. In fact, He took drastic measures to ensure that we could be in heaven. When God first created Adam and Eve, they were without sin and enjoyed continual fellowship with God. However, when Adam and Eve chose to sin they separated themselves (and us) from God. In order to bring humanity back into fellowship with Himself, He sent His Son to earth to bear our sins and die on the cross in our place. When Jesus was raised from the dead, He assured that all those who would believe in Him would once again have fellowship with God. If we put our faith in Jesus, we can be forgiven of our sins and assured a home in heaven.

Does that sound like a God who wants to send people to hell? He wants us to go to heaven so much that He poured His wrath, anger, and judgment upon His own dear Son at the cross. He has made every provision for us *not* to go to hell!

Hell wasn't even created for people. Jesus said,

“Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’ ”
(Matthew 25:41)

God wants us to join Him in heaven. However, if we reject His offer of forgiveness, follow the devil, break the commands of God, and essentially live the way we want to live, we are

sealing our own fate.

God told the Prophet Ezekiel, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezekiel 33:11). And the Apostle Peter told us, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The Choice Is Ours

No one accidentally becomes a Christian. It happens by choice. You don't wake up one morning and say, “Something weird happened while I was sleeping. I have a strange new desire to pray and read the Bible. I think I accidentally converted last night!” You make a conscious choice to receive Christ. And, if a person ends up in hell, it is because he or she has chosen to reject God's offer of salvation and to resist all of the Spirit's promptings to come to the Lord.

It would be as though you were driving down the road and noticed workmen building an off-ramp to a freeway that had not been completed. At the end of the ramp was a 200-foot drop. There are many warning signs telling you not to drive on this off-ramp. However, you decide to pull off and drive through the warning signs, ignoring the workmen trying to get you to stop. You go over the side, plunging to your death. Who is responsible? In this day and age, the survivors or family members would probably sue the freeway crew or the

state. Who is really responsible? Of course it is the driver. The person disregarded the clear and obvious warnings that were in front of him!

If a person ends up in hell, who is at fault? God? No. God has done everything to forgive that person and pardon him. Who is at fault? The person. He or she made their own choice.

The Reason People Don't Come to the Lord

Why do people ask difficult questions? Some are genuinely trying to figure out who God is, but the questions block their way. However, many use the questions as a means to hide the real reason why they continue to reject the truth of the Gospel.

Jesus said,

“And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.” (John 3:19–20)

The real reason people don't come to the Lord is not because they are worried about the person over in Africa who has not heard the gospel; or because they think there are too many hypocrites in church; or because they can't understand why a God of love allows suffering; or because they can't understand why Jesus Christ is the only way to God. No, the real reason is because they enjoy the darkness of sin and don't want their deeds exposed.

Only God can convert people. Our job is to pray for them, share the truth of the gospel with them, and answer their questions. It is the Lord's job to open their eyes to see their need for Him.

In closing, I would like to share the following story that will encourage you to keep on witnessing to people even when it seems that there is no fruit from your work:

Every Saturday evening for over forty years a servant of God stood on a certain street corner handing out gospel papers to the passersby. And then he stopped. Discouraged because he saw so little fruit, he abandoned his post. Some years later he happened on the spot and a young man stood there and gave him a gospel tract. He stopped, and addressing the young man he said, "How is it that you are here tonight?" "Well, sir, it is like this. An old man occupied this corner for years; I was saved by means of a tract he gave me. Evidently the old man is in heaven now for I've missed him here, and so I am seeking to fill his place." Tears filled the eyes of the older Christian as the young man thus spoke. "I am the man who gave you that tract," he said, "and by the grace of God I mean to stand in my place until Jesus comes."

Let's stand in our place to bring the gospel to everyone we meet, handling his or her difficult questions with truth, love, and boldness!

If you have questions or would like materials to help you share the gospel, visit Harvest Ministries' Web site at www.harvest.org.

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