

ULTIMATE QUESTIONS

Life presses us with questions. It forces us to make decisions. Each moment. Every day. All of our lives.

What time should I get up in the morning? Which pair of socks best matches these pants? Yogurt or oatmeal or yogurt *and* oatmeal? Now, that's a tough one. Oh, and should I leave the kitchen window open when I go to work? Though relatively uncomplicated, even these decisions produce palpable pain for some.

Other decisions up the ante. How can I fit exercise into my schedule? Should I drive or fly to Montreal? Android or iPhone? Is this stock a good investment?

Again, difficult as they may be, these questions alight gently compared to matters of more consequence. What school should I attend? Which career should I pursue? Whom should I marry? How will I really know? Will I make the best decision? What if I don't? Will I suffer early-onset Alzheimer's like my father? Will there be a cure in time for *me*? Will this Diet Coke give me cancer?

Now the pressure is on. With their gravity, these decisions at times drop on us like lead weights. They bruise us, brutalize us, and break us, even paralyzing us with fear. One life to live; so many questions and so much *pressure*.

If only it would stop there.

In the deeper recesses of our souls, we face lurking questions, whose answers matter in ways impossible to express. Yet their enormity swells in our souls, and we know that *we* don't have the built-in competencies to deliver a final answer. Certainly not with any *confidence*.

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Even some remote questions thump our consciences. Is euthanasia legitimate mercy killing, or does it actually kill the spirit of mercy? What should I do for the starving children in Darfur? Does it matter if I don't really care?

Other questions strike chords of personal vulnerability. Will *I* face God one day? Does he care that I don't care enough about the children in Darfur? Will he care that I had an abortion? Do the Ten Commandments command *me*? What about life after death? Or really, what about *my* life after death?

Ultimate questions with ultimate stakes. Some questions really matter, and we really know it. Their burning prods press and unnerve us. Indecision over their relentless interrogation is itself a decision and merely perpetuates the pain, and despite our attempts to cool them off, these questions ruthlessly sting our hearts.

Is there any release valve for the pressure? Is there a way to know, to own, and to rest in real answers with genuine peace, confidence, and contentment? Can I *know* that I am ready to meet my Maker? Can I really know anything *for sure*?

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + This opening section raises many questions. What areas of life do they address? What are some key differences between them?
- + What makes some of these questions weightier than others? Which kinds of questions exert the most pressure on you personally?

WHAT ABOUT PHILOSOPHY?

While philosophy has tried its hand at the ultimate questions, its inconsistent and dense conclusions would suggest the answer is *no*, I really cannot know for sure. Even a quick survey

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of philosophical systems and their intramural clashes discloses that philosophy's cartography uncovers no hoped-for treasure. At the end of the day there is the end of the day. And the unknown tomorrow still comes.

Trust in intellectual power (rationalism) leaves us scratching our heads, as our minds suffer insurmountable limitations. We come to the end of ourselves long before most wish to admit. Trust in experience (empiricism) leaves us lost because no one can experience everything, and even if we could, by what measure would we determine which experience answers the ultimate questions? Other philosophical frameworks also come up empty, because they fill our souls with gnawing uncertainty, construing an impassible chasm between reality (things as they are) and perception (things as I perceive them).

This is not to say that philosophy does not get certain things right. But even when philosophers climb to various vistas and glimpse selected dimensions of reality with some degree of clarity, other dimensions they miss altogether. In any case, by what standard is their analysis judged? Who decides what philosophers assess correctly and what they miss?

In the end, even on the highest peaks of human thought we never get beyond *human* thought.¹ Philosophical inquiry left to its own devices births conclusions ranging only between skepticism and despair. When it comes to ultimate answers, philosophy renders its only shared conclusion: *we do not and cannot really know*. Any longed-for hope agonizingly turns to hopelessness.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ⊕ What are rationalism and empiricism? How do they both fall short of providing ultimate answers?
- ⊕ What is the problem with human philosophy?
- ⊕ What is philosophy's ultimate conclusion? Why?

HOW ABOUT RELIGION?

Frankly, religion serves us no better. The sheer number of religions in the world makes determination of a single religion's superiority a fool's errand.² Often religious identity is more a symptom of circumstances (where I live, who my parents are) than of penetrating conviction. The irony is, however, that religion has often been held with ferocious, even mindless, tenacity. Nearly every religion has its fanatics.

Tempered by the lessons of comparative religions, the modern era offers a smorgasbord for religious consumers. Now many in the world have opportunity to pick their religion, with motivations for such decisions ranging from personal temperament to sheer pragmatism to moral sympathy. In all cases, they suffer the same limitations as the philosophers—never getting beyond human analysis for obtaining ultimate answers.

The bond of culture and religion further exposes the uncertainty associated with religious decisions: “To one degree or another, religious beliefs have determined the patterns and expectations of all cultures.”³ It is not surprising then to find that cultural and religious relativism dominate the contemporary landscape, with cultural anthropologists often calling us to esteem all religions and cultures equally. Yet the stubborn problem remains. Putting all cultures and all religions on identical footing, in fact, intensifies the agonizing ambiguity of the soul. Both religion and philosophy leave us with our heads banging against a wall.

So what then? Where do we turn? Or, more disturbingly, is there really *anywhere* to turn? Are we cast astray, left alone on the island of our own minds to brawl through life and hope for the best? Are we abandoned to mere fate? Do answers to ultimate questions derive from nothing more than resourcefulness, probability, or luck?

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BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ In the past, what often shaped religious identity? What cultural realities shape religious identity today?
- ✦ Why does human religion leave us no better off than philosophy does?

THE WORD FROM ABOVE

A brief word is in order concerning the approaches considered thus far. The pervasive weakness in philosophy and religion is that they tender merely human proposals. They operate in a vicious circularity, because the answers all come *from* us. Even the confluence of the most brilliant human minds lacks the resources to deliver definitive answers to the harassing questions of our souls.⁴

If there are answers, they must come from outside and not from within. They must come from above, not from below. They must come *to* us, not *from* us. If there are answers, they must come from an objective and all-knowing authority. In short, they must come from *God*.

Has he spoken? Indeed he has. Before we explore the special way in which he has done so, we must comment on his universal speech. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” The psalmist, looking at the scope of the universe, notes the perpetual, unrelenting, clear communications from the Creator.⁵ God speaks in creation and his governance of the world, and he does not stutter.

In Romans, Paul expands this point, contending for universal accountability to the Creator on the basis of his personal communication with mankind.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness

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suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (Rom. 1:18–23)

Several features surface, but for our purposes we will note only a couple. First, God reveals himself. This revelation in creation—“general revelation,” as theologians call it—is plainly revealed (Rom. 1:19) and clearly perceived (Rom. 1:20). God intends all mankind to know him in this way; there is no one anywhere who does not *in this very real sense* know God. God reveals himself personally in creation, and by virtue of his self-disclosure, all men know “all the divine perfections.”⁶

Grasping the “god-ness” of God comes to us not by logical deduction; rather this understanding is “given to us, revealed to and in us, implanted in us, by the creative power and providence of almighty God the Creator.”⁷ To be alive then is to know that God *is* and that I am accountable to him. Consciousness of the one true God is an intrinsic feature of being human. To whatever degree we resist this claim evidences our personal suppression “of the truth” (Rom. 1:18).

A second inescapable truth, one in tragic conflict with the first, bursts forth. In the face of this God who speaks come hordes of *false* religions, in which mankind has pushed back against the creator God, substituting idolatry for true worship and obedience. As such, world history is a religious history, a display of both universal accountability and universal sinfulness. Just as

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history stages the perpetual speech of God's character, the same history delivers the responding human mutiny—yours, mine, and that of every other human being in history (with One exception, who will be noted shortly).

The types of nagging ultimate questions listed earlier are windows into our God-consciousness. We know that these questions matter *because* we know that we are accountable to God. We know that he alone possesses the answers, making our sinful, self-reliant responses less than flattering. The picture revealed through the windows is increasingly grim: the motivation for false religion is not genuine though ill-informed worship, but rather sufficiently informed but willfully false worship. Human history consists of diverse, yet willful and personal, defiance of the Creator. Our hearts are not a pretty place. And that is a universal problem.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ⊕ Where do the answers to our questions need to come from? How have we already seen this in this booklet?
- ⊕ What do we all know, and why? Why are we not always aware of knowing this?
- ⊕ What do the numerous religions in the world evidence? How?

THE ANSWER IS BETTER THAN WE COULD EVER HAVE IMAGINED

The answers to our ultimate questions will never come from us because they *cannot* come from us. We are both finite and fallen. We are dependent and depraved. We are small and sinful. We are creature and corrupted. Self-sufficiency wholly fails to address matters of ultimate importance before the creator God to whom we are wholly accountable. In the vicious circle of our stubbornness, we are left devoid of hope before God, barring *his* intervention.

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If there is to be an answer, it must come from God exercising mercy. For there to be any hope at all, he must act and speak to us savingly. And though under no obligation, he has done precisely this.

Not only has God created and spoken to us in what he has made, he has acted in grace and explained that grace in words recorded in the Bible. In fact, the words of the Bible come directly into our world of rebellious self-sufficiency, where we have attempted to solve our own problems, to make our own way, and to answer the ultimate questions of our souls *on our own*.

Into the tyranny of this philosophical and religious mutiny comes the word from God, which victoriously, redemptively, and exhaustively answers the torturous plight of our souls. This word, in fact, exposes how bleak our condition really is, delivering both a violent verdict of our sinfulness and the solitary solution to it.

This word comes from outside us. It comes from above. It comes with authority and power. It comes as the written Word of God, the only source of reliable answers, and *graciously* so.

Why is it the *only* source and why should we trust it? In short, because of what it is: *the Word of God*. Let us explore further.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- ✦ Left to ourselves, why will we never be able to get the answers we need?
- ✦ What has God given us, and why is it the solution to our self-sufficiency?
- ✦ What does God's gift to us say about his character?

WHAT IS THE BIBLE?

What is the Bible? This question could be (and has been) answered numerous ways. Speaking about its formal qualities,

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the Bible (from the Greek, “books”) or, as it is also called, the Holy Scriptures (from the Greek, “the holy writings”), consists of sixty-six books written over a period of approximately 1500 years, by the pens of forty different human agents. At the hands of these writers, an assortment of different historical, cultural, linguistic, and educational contexts along with a variety of literary genres combine to produce a deliciously diverse flavor in the biblical texts.

But notably, through this vast historical, literary, and stylistic diversity comes a unified message of how God forgives sinners. The Bible presents no mere philosophical or moral message, but is the gripping account of the plan of redemption promised, accomplished, and applied by God himself. God shows himself to be at work on the stage of history, and with sovereign mastery lays out an intricate plot concerning the birth, life, death, and *resurrection* of history’s Protagonist (Jesus Christ). In its multicolored splendor, the Bible speaks with one voice; it uniformly declares redemptive grace centered in Jesus Christ—the only sinless Man who is also the very Son of God, the Savior of sinners.

So when we say that the Bible is the *Word of God*, we mean that its source is God, its message divinely given, and, as God’s revelation, its character unlike any other document in the world. This does not mean that the Bible dropped like a parachute from heaven, oblivious to human context and history. On the contrary, it is, as we will see in the next section, an earthy book. But in its earthiness, it is marked by stooping grace: God enters the human context, accomplishes redemption, and speaks in understandable words to explain it.

Yet, though manifestly in human language and for humans, the Bible is nothing less than the very Word of God. While not a novel assertion, it is a sweeping one. The implications of this claim are comprehensive, categorically (re)shaping the way in which we should think about our lives and our world. Or put more properly,

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as *God's Word* it is to be trusted—completely and confidently. Truly *God's Word*, it demands our undivided attention.

But how can we be so sure? What makes the Bible different from other so-called holy books? What sets it apart from other religious, moral, and philosophical writings?

History attests to those who have believed the Bible unreservedly. To be sure, many have found the biblical redemptive message compelling enough to give their lives for it. Since they understood what Christ's death and resurrection meant to them, the sacrifice of their own lives seemed little to offer. Others, to be sure, have mocked the Bible and its message. As we consider the truthfulness of the Bible, it is surely important to remember that human response does not establish biblical truthfulness. The apologetic⁸ of zeal can carry us only so far, as martyrs have died for many causes.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON

- + What are some of the Bible's formal qualities? What is the Bible's overall message?
- + What do we mean when we call the Bible the "Word of God"? What does this mean about how we should receive it?
- + What does the faith of Christian martyrs evidence about the Bible? Why?

IS THE BIBLE UNIQUE?

So the question remains. Is the Bible different from other books? An assortment of arguments could demonstrate the uniqueness of Scripture.

We could survey the Old Testament prophecies and discover their fulfillment in the life, death, and resurrection of