

FOCUS[®]
ON THE FAMILY

the **21** toughest
questions
your kids *will ask*
about
Christianity

& how to
answer them
confidently



ALEX McFARLAND

Praise for

The 21 Questions Your Kids Will Ask about Christianity

“Why does God allow suffering?” “Does the Bible contradict itself?” If we’re honest, it’s not only our kids who ask these tough questions. Sometimes, it’s us! We could all benefit from reading Alex McFarland’s excellent book, which brings clarity to these faith-challenging issues.

—JIM DALY

President, Focus on the Family

Today’s generation of young people have adamant and insistent questions about Christianity . . . This is why I’m so excited about Alex McFarland’s new book. Rather than tiptoe around sticky, uncomfortable questions, Alex welcomes them with forthright enthusiasm. He genuinely *likes* young people; he gets their lingo, knows what irks them, and taps into their passion for honesty and integrity. . . . I highly recommend this book!

—JONI EARECKSON TADA

Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Every parent has been asked one of those questions that seemingly causes time to stand still. Your mind goes numb, blood rushes to your feet, your palms get sweaty, and all you can think to say is “Go ask your ____.” As a Christian parent desiring to give godly counsel to your kids, [you need to] arm yourself with biblically based materials. My friend Alex McFarland has written a book that should be one of the anchor books of every parent’s library.

—MIKE CALHOUN

Executive Assistant to the President, Word of Life Fellowship Inc.
Author of *Where Was God When: Real Answers to Hard Questions*

Alex McFarland has written a winner! . . . This book should be owned and taught by every youth pastor and parent!

—MICHAEL R. LICONA

Associate Professor of Theology, Houston Baptist University

Kids have questions. If they are not answered, they turn into doubts. If left unattended, they produce doubters. This is why the Bible commands us: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you

may know how you ought to answer each person” (Colossians 4:6, ESV). . . . If you are looking for a book that “puts the cookies on the bottom shelf” and that will even have parents putting their hands in the cookie jar, then this is it.

—DR. NORMAN GEISLER

Professor of Apologetics, Veritas Seminary

Alex McFarland has written this outstanding book to answer these questions and should guide many of the youth to ground their faith in Jesus Christ.

—ELMER L. TOWNS

Cofounder, Liberty University

I can still recall my high school speech teacher smugly inviting one of his pet students to give a controversial oration that attempted to convince the class that Jesus never really died on the cross, but was instead drugged until he revived in his tomb. As a new believer, I struggled with this oration. I was pretty sure the student’s claims about Christ were false, but I was ill prepared to offer any defense. Oh, how I wish I had been brought up with a book like this one.

—BOB WALISZEWSKI

Director, Plugged In (*pluggedin.com*)

I’d like to see this profoundly important book make its way into the home of every Christian family. Kids have tough questions about their faith, and Alex shows how parents can provide answers in a theologically accurate, relational, and fun way.

—JEFF MYERS, PHD

President, Summit Ministries

Through Alex’s books and lectures, he has literally obeyed Simon Peter’s admonition to “be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15, NKJV). Let me urge parents and grandparents alike to secure a copy and begin using it.

—DR. H. L. WILLMINGTON

Founder and Dean, Willmington School of the Bible

ALEX McFARLAND

the **21** toughest
questions
your kids *will ask
about*
Christianity

**& how to
answer them
confidently**

FOCUS
ON THE
FAMILY



TYNDALE HOUSE PUBLISHERS, INC.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask about Christianity

© 2013 by Alex McFarland

ISBN: 978-1-58997-678-8

A Focus on the Family book published by

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois 60188

Focus on the Family and the accompanying logo and design are federally registered trademarks of Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, CO 80995.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide (www.zondervan.com).

Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (HCSB) have been taken from the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*®. Copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible®, Holman CSB®, and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked (KJV) are taken from the *King James Version*.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*®. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. (www.Lockman.org).

Scripture quotations marked (NIRV) are taken from the *New International Reader's Version*®. Copyright © 1996, 1998 by Biblica, Inc.™ All rights reserved throughout the world. Used by permission of Biblica.

Scripture quotations marked (NKJV) are taken from the *New King James Version*®, (NKJV™). Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Italics in scripture quotations indicate author's added emphasis.

People's names and certain details of their stories have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. However, the facts of what happened and the underlying principles have been conveyed as accurately as possible.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission of Focus on the Family.

The use of material from or references to various websites does not imply endorsement of those sites in their entirety. Availability of websites and pages is subject to change without notice.

Editor: Marianne Hering

Cover design by Dan Farrell

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available at www.loc.gov/help/contact-general.html.

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 / 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

CONTENTS



Introduction: Theology Lessons on the Front Steps 1
How to Answer a Question 5

Part 1: Questions about God, the Father

1 Why Does God Allow Evil? 15
2 Why Does God Allow Suffering? 23
3 Why Is God So Unfair? 31
4 How Do We Know That God Loves Us? 41
5 Why Doesn't God Make My Life Easy? 49

Part 2: Questions about Jesus, the Son

6 Is Jesus Really God? 61
7 Did Jesus Ever Sin? 71
8 Why Did Jesus Have to Die on the Cross? 85
9 Why Is Jesus the Only Way to Heaven? 93
10 When Is Jesus Coming Back? 105

Part 3: Questions about the Trinity and the Holy Spirit

11 How Can God Be the Only God If There Is Also Jesus? 125
12 When I Pray, Who Is Listening—God, Jesus, or the
Holy Spirit? 133
13 Will the Holy Spirit Leave Me If I Keep Sinning? 143

Part 4: Questions about the Bible

14 Is the Bible *Really* the Word of God? 155
15 Are the Miracles in the Bible True? 165

16 How Can I Understand the Bible? 179
17 This Guy at School Says the Bible Contradicts
Itself—Is That True? 193

Part 5: Questions about the Church

18 Why Are Christians Such Hypocrites? 207
19 Why Do Christians Judge Everybody? 219
20 If Church Is Boring, Why Do I Have to Go? 231
21 Why Don't Most Churches Care about Pollution
and Global Warming? 243

Part 6: Questions Parents Ask and My Question to You

22 Questions Parents Ask 255
23 What Will Your Family Legacy Be? 263

Notes 273



Theology Lessons on the Front Steps

*[Children] are like wet cement. Any word
that falls on them makes an impact.*

—Dr. Haim Ginott, *Between Parent and Child*

When my niece Allie was five, she was *always* asking me imaginative questions about God. One day she arranged a pastoral Q-and-A session for me. I waited on the front steps of her house while she gathered several of her friends. An impromptu study group gathered around, and Allie announced, “My uncle is a preacher, and he can tell you what kinds of ice cream there will be in heaven.”

I forced back laughter as the tribunal of little faces turned toward me. Their expressions seemed to say, “Tell us, grown-up, and we *will* receive your words! What kinds of ice cream will we have in heaven?”

My heart just about melted, and my brain fumbled for an answer. I thought about what a privilege it was that, at least for a season, I was the go-to person whenever my niece had a question about God or theology.

Theological Emergencies

The questions children ask may often make us smile or even laugh, but consider this thought: Becoming the Christian Wikipedia for your kids

is both a God-ordained privilege and a relationship building block. Remember that when you're presented with questions like these:

"Are Santa's elves angels or humans?"

"Did the baby Jesus have to wear diapers?"

"In Sunday school we read from Hebrews, 'I will remember their sins no more.'¹ How can this be if God knows everything?"

But having an inquisitive child is no cause for alarm. Quite the opposite, in fact. As long as your child is seeking guidance from you, everything is okay. That's not an emergency; that's a gift. The true emergency is when your child *stops* coming to you for answers.

Me, a Theologian? Actually, Yes!

You, as a Christian parent, can be an effective responder to the tough theological questions your children ask. The main purpose of this book is to equip you to do just that. You can become an expert even if you've never read the Bible much before, and you don't know whether the book of Ezekiel is in the Old or New Testament. More than that, you can develop a relationship with your child in which biblical principles are lived out, not merely talked about.

I compiled these twenty-one questions after years of interacting with families, children, teens, and college students, and from dozens of personal interviews conducted during the creation of this book. I'm confident that virtually all the tough questions you'll face about God and Christianity are addressed within the pages of this book in one form or another.

As you use this book to prepare yourself for the questions your kids may ask, your understanding of God and biblical truth will also deepen. Rather than squirming when the tough questions arise, you'll begin to cherish the opportunity to have meaningful conversations about the Bible. *The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask about Christianity* is designed to be your primer and guide for giving answers that are not only scriptural but are also easy for kids to relate to and absorb spiritually.

Proverbs 1:8–9 promises certain benefits to the children who receive their parents’ godly teaching: “Listen, my son, to your father’s instruction and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. They will be a garland to grace your head and a chain to adorn your neck.”

What does this mean? Solomon was comparing the adornment of godly wisdom to the clothes and jewels of royalty. Parents are to impart to their children something comparable to, and even preferable to, a type of victor’s medal: God’s truth. And preparing yourself to answer questions and model truth can be rewarding in and of itself.

Christian parenting involves much more than sending our children off to Sunday school and Wednesday-night youth group. I was a youth pastor for many years, and I poured my heart out to the students under my care. But nothing can compare to the devotion, time, and love parents give to their own precious children. Sure, kids need a Christian community, and even mentors, but they need you more.

First, the Good News! But Then . . .

The good news is “*You can do this!*” You can learn how to better grasp the deep realities of Scripture, and you can also learn to effectively handle the challenging questions related to God’s Word. Because God wants everyone to know about Him, each person is promised the Holy Spirit’s help and guidance. First John 2:27 says, “His anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie” (NASB). Begin the journey, and God will come alongside you in a tangible way.

That’s not to say it’s easy. After more than a decade of hosting live radio call-in shows, I thought I had heard every possible question and variation thereof. But new, creative, and even odd questions about spiritual topics continue to be brought to my attention. A young lady recently called in to my radio program and asked about two passages from the book of Acts. She noted that the Holy Spirit was so present in the lives of Peter and Paul that people would be healed by simply coming into contact with objects that the apostles had touched. (An apostle was someone

who walked with Jesus during Christ's earthly ministry.) In Acts 5:15–16, even Peter's *shadow* passing over someone's afflicted body resulted in a healing. The caller asked, "Could God work through Christians in this way today?"

How do you answer such a question with only sixty seconds left in the broadcast? As succinctly as possible!

In about one minute, and by the time the radio program's ending theme music was starting, I had explained that God works in any way necessary that . . .

1. is in conformity with His sinless and perfect nature;
2. is in harmony with the rest of His written Word; and
3. is reasonable and logically meaningful.

I explained to the caller that Acts is about the early church's beginning. The Lord did whatever was necessary to bring and authenticate the gospel to the world, and part of that initiative included many miracles. Peter, Paul, and the other apostles had been in the presence of the risen Jesus, so it's fair to assume they had a level of anointing, power, and spiritual authority that they needed to do the job.

Could the Holy Spirit do such things again today? Of course. But we'll leave that to Him to decide if and when it's necessary.

My point in sharing this is to show that tough questions don't have to frighten you. With some basic tools and a growing understanding of God's Word, you can be ready for any spiritual questions your children present to you. Through your example, the message you want to pass on to your children is this: "Your word is a lamp to my feet / And a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105, NKJV). This book will help you and your family find God's path to biblical wisdom.



How to Answer a Question

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

—James 1:5, NKJV

Dr. Lester Morton served as an Old Testament professor at a small Methodist college in the South for many years. He was known for his liberal views on the Bible, which he openly and frequently expressed in the classroom. Many of his former students have told me that on the first day of his Old Testament survey classes, Dr. Morton informed them, “We are going to begin studying the Old Testament in Genesis chapter 12, because the first eleven chapters are a myth.” He spent most of the semester refuting the Old Testament miracles—creation, Noah’s ark and the flood, the parting of the Red Sea—and casting doubt on the authenticity of the books themselves.

One day Dr. Morton told his students about an incident that happened during his teenage years. Without a doubt, I believe this experience corroded his view of the Bible’s authority. The teenage Morton went to his pastor with a question about an Old Testament passage that seemed to contradict another passage. But when Morton approached his pastor, explaining his confusion and expressing doubt, the pastor responded, “You shouldn’t ask questions like that. You’re just supposed to take the Scriptures as truth.”

I believe this woefully inadequate response shaped Morton’s

theological views. Instead of receiving satisfying answers to his legitimate questions, he began to believe there were no good answers. Ultimately, this led to Morton sowing similar doubts into the hearts of a generation of young college students.

The answer Morton received is a rendition of another reply commonly used to deflect inquisitive young minds: “Because the Bible says so.” This is never a sufficient answer for the theological questions that arise from children and teens. When we give them such off-the-cuff answers with no real biblical basis or thought on our part, we are telling them that Christianity is not worthy of our time, effort, and intellect. Or worse yet, that Christianity and the Bible are not strong enough to bear the scrutiny of a serious study. Out of all the answers that could have been given in response to Morton’s question, “You shouldn’t ask” was one of the worst.

We shouldn’t be surprised or caught off guard when our children ask us tough questions about Christianity and the Bible. After all, they are immersed in a culture that aggressively questions and attacks the Christian worldview. And as much as we would like to think that we have the most influence on our kids, we are just one of many voices vying for their attention. By the time our children reach college, they will have been bombarded with so many conflicting intellectual messages that it may be difficult for them to distinguish God’s truth from what the world is telling them. If the answers we give to their questions about faith aren’t satisfactory or are laced with contempt toward atheists or other non-Christian groups, our children will begin to search elsewhere. And we may not like where they find their answers.

How to Use This Book

The 21 Toughest Questions Your Kids Will Ask about Christianity was not written as an encyclopedia of theological answers for you to look up on a specific topic and have a pat answer ready to read verbatim. Instead, I wanted to point you in the right direction and give you the tools, skills, and basic information to start your search for the answers to your child’s questions.

Regarding the content, my prayer is that this book will provide the foundation for answering virtually any question that comes along. You may be surprised at some of the topics in the book that are *not* addressed. Social issues, such as racism and sex trafficking, are not included. Neither did I tackle the teachings of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism) or the Jehovah's Witnesses. But we will spend sufficient time establishing the trustworthiness and authority of the Bible and the nature of God, which resolve ambiguity about countless issues.

For example, if your kids thoroughly understand the significance of Jesus' deity and work on the cross, then questions about cults will be much easier to explain. If your children are convinced the Bible's teachings on morality are trustworthy, then the dozens of questions regarding sex, marriage, and homosexuality will be more easily dealt with.

But you can't wait until your children ask a question to flip to this book's table of contents. You need to be prepared with some basic knowledge of the Bible before questions are asked, and then be ready to go deeper as the need arises. Read through this entire book. Develop the Bible-study skills taught in its pages. Build a library of study helps that will assist you in understanding and researching the Word of God. As your understanding of God's Word increases, you will be prepared for almost any question your children ask, or you'll know where to go to find the answers.

I refer to "your child" or "your children" throughout this book, but I realize that some of you may be reading this as youth leaders, teachers, pastors, friends, or relatives. In this light, we are all part of the family of God and as such have a responsibility to teach and train the children of the family, whether or not they are our own offspring.

The Question behind the Question

When children and teens ask questions about God, the Bible, Christianity, or something that touches on a spiritual matter, our first reaction may be to blurt out an answer. There are times when that approach is called for, but it's better to pause and think, *Why is my child asking this question? What information (or misinformation) is in her mind that may*

be influencing her? Has a recent event or circumstance in his life prompted this line of thinking?

Often, children are trying to come to terms with a complex issue and will find one point of that issue to ask a question about. It's like a jigsaw puzzle—they are trying to understand the entire picture while only looking at one piece. Our job is to listen to the question and try to figure out the entire puzzle by using their question and our knowledge of their lives. There is very often a question behind the question: a deeper, more personal issue they are wrestling with and may not know how to express yet. You, as the parent, must dig a little deeper to find the real heart of the matter.

Let's say your child comes to you and asks, "Why does God allow bad things to happen?" This seems like a straightforward theological question, right? But what if Grandma had been ill and has just passed away? The real question your child is asking may be, "Why did God allow Grandma to die? I prayed for her. Why didn't He answer my prayer?" This is a much more personal issue.

Or what if your child comes to you and asks, "Does God really send people to hell?" Again, this is another straightforward question. But what if the real question is, "Will God send *me* to hell?" Then your approach to the question will certainly be much different, because the question might indicate that God is working in the heart of your child to draw him or her to Christ.

One of the most effective ways to find the question behind the question is to begin by saying, "That's a great question. What do you think?" When you ask that question, you should remain quiet and allow your child to articulate what he or she is thinking while you listen closely. Listening is not just a good skill for children; adults benefit from it too!

Be sure to observe your child's body language while listening. Does your child look confused, fearful, under conviction, angry, or disappointed? Body language communicates the urgency of the question. Is this just mere curiosity, or is there a vital matter involved? These nonverbal cues are more pieces of the puzzle that can help you understand your child's real questions.

Once you get a better grasp on your child's question, it's a good idea to say, "Let me make sure I understand: You are asking . . . ?" Restating the question helps make sure that you aren't reading your own question into your child's question. It also can help children see their true underlying question, especially if they haven't even understood for themselves what they were really asking. Once you understand what the real question is, you are in a better position to give a satisfying answer.

You may also want to ask further diagnostic questions, such as "What led you to ask about this?" Was it something your child heard in school that prompted the question? Was it something your child heard on television? Did one of his or her friends say something that called into question your child's beliefs? This will give you additional clues to the origins of your child's doubt and will aid you in formulating an answer. As a doctor tries to diagnose an illness by asking diagnostic questions, we should ask questions of a spiritually diagnostic nature to get to the core of the issue.

Additionally, the approach you take when answering a child's tough questions about Christianity is just as important as the actual answers you give. Your tone, body language, and reaction to questions communicate just as much as actual words. Children are looking to see if adults really believe what the Bible teaches. For questioning children, our answers and interactions with them could mean the difference between faith and skepticism, conviction and doubt, or heaven and hell.

Guiding the Conversation

When giving an answer to a spiritual question, it's much more constructive to dialogue with your children rather than to give a monologue—which they may see as a lecture. In other words, talk *with* your children, not *at* them. Children often process what they learn much more efficiently when they are allowed to ask questions and add input into the conversation. One of the best ways to do this is to use the Socratic method of teaching.

Socrates was a well-known philosopher who had a unique method

of answering his students' questions. He would answer a question with a question. With this approach, Socrates would steer the conversation along by asking probing questions in an effort to help students arrive at answers on their own.

Consider how Jesus at times answered a question with a question:

A certain lawyer stood up and tested [Jesus], saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" (Luke 10:25–26, NKJV)

In this particular incident, Jesus challenged the lawyer to consider what he already knew about God when seeking the answer to his question. When you apply this method to answering the spiritual questions your children pose, you encourage them to draw on the knowledge they already have about God and apply it to their questions.

While you are talking with your children, consider peppering your conversations with questions like these:

- How do you know that to be true?
- Where did you find your information?
- Can you give me an example to help me understand your question?
- How did you come to that conclusion?
- What do you already know about this?
- Is this situation similar to any Bible stories you know?
- How could you look at this another way?
- What does God say about . . . ?
- What do you think might happen if . . . ?

If your children come up with answers on their own, it may lead to the formation of a firm conviction rather than just an accumulation of facts and knowledge. And when it comes to matters of your children's faith, convictions are better than knowledge because convictions aren't easily abandoned in the heat of the moment.

Don't Give Too Much Information

Eight-year-old Lewis came to his mother and asked, “Mom, what is sex?” After Mom went through a speech about the differences between men and women, dating, love, marriage, and what comes after, Lewis looked utterly confused.

She finally asked, “Do you have any more questions?”

He answered, “Yeah, we had to fill out this form at school, and it asked what our sex was. Am I an M or an F?”

Be careful that you don't give your children too much information. A question about Jesus coming back may not call for a detailed discussion of eschatology, pre- or post-tribulation rapture, and the prophecies of Ezekiel and Daniel as compared to Revelation and Thessalonians. A simple “We don't know exactly when, but here's how we can make sure we are ready when Jesus does come back” may be all your children need at the moment.

How much your children will understand will depend on their age. As they ask their questions, give them just enough information to be accurate and to satisfy their curiosity. Be sure to use language that is appropriate for their understanding and maturity level.

I believe that kids truly appreciate it when adults talk with them about God and life in plain language. Don't be surprised if you get the reputation around the neighborhood as the go-to grown-up for straight answers. God may entrust you with ministry opportunities that reach beyond the bounds of your immediate family.

If your children continue to ask questions, go deeper with them until they are satisfied with your answers.

It's Okay to Say “I Don't Know”

Believe it or not, “I don't know” is an acceptable answer as long as you follow it up with “Let's find out the answer together.” Too many Christians never talk about their faith because they're afraid that people,

especially their children, are going to ask them a question they can't answer. If your child asks you such a question, you could pass it off to a pastor or a Sunday school teacher, but that has three drawbacks: (1) It needlessly delays the answer; (2) it sends a clear message that "normal" or lay Christians don't have to know the Scriptures well or be able to defend the faith; and (3) you lose an opportunity to build a spiritual relationship with your child.

Unless you are a Bible scholar who spends hours upon hours in study, chances are that your little ones will eventually stump you with a question. That's okay! You can't be expected to know the answer to every question your children, or other people, throw at you about Christianity. But you can and should show a willingness to dig deep and find the answer.

No matter your background or current Bible knowledge, your willingness to invest the time in helping your children find the answers speaks volumes about your personal relationship with Jesus Christ. A favorite verse that is often used to emphasize the importance of Bible study is 2 Timothy 2:15. The King James Version renders the passage this way: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." The word *study* doesn't necessarily mean "hit the books" or "memorize information." Reading this verse in more modern translations reveals that the meaning points toward being diligent, focused, or committed. But the important principle is there: We are to strive for effectiveness and accurate knowledge of God's Word in our walk and witness. Nourish your own heart and mind with Scripture daily, and you'll also be prepping yourself for your kids' spiritual questions, which *will* come!

While this may seem like a daunting task, don't be afraid! God promises to provide wisdom to those who ask for it (James 1:5). You can pray for understanding (Psalm 119:73) and dig into the Word daily. When it comes to being ready to give effective answers to challenging questions, I truly believe that our Lord's invitation from Matthew 7:7 is applicable: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (NKJV).



Questions about God, the Father



Why Does God Allow Evil?

*Why God no kill the devil,
so make him no more do wicked?*

Friday, in *The Life and Surprising Adventures
of Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe

This question takes as many forms as there are people to ask it. One common variation is “Why does God allow evil people to live?” Another is “If God knew Adam and Eve would sin, why did He put the tree in the garden of Eden?” Adult skeptics will preface the question with presuppositions, such as “*If God is all-loving*, why does He allow bad things to happen to good people? *If God is all-powerful*, why doesn’t He do something about the suffering in the world?”

Almost every person with an active mind has wrestled with the question of evil. Some of the best and brightest thinkers in history have invested much of their lives and intellect in this subject. For the sake of clarity, I’ve divided evil into two chapters. Chapter 1 covers moral evil (sin), and chapter 2 covers natural evil and suffering (disasters).

Believe it or not, the problem of evil isn’t as difficult as most people make it out to be. While it can appear complicated, it’s certainly not a theological showstopper. Using a few cups of Scripture mixed with a healthy dose of logic, you can adequately address your children’s concerns. As your children mature, however, their questions will change, and you may need to revisit the related Bible passages and reexamine the problem of evil several times.



QUESTION RECAP: The reality of evil in a world that was supposedly created “good” presents Christianity with one of its most common objections. The apparent dilemma is this: If God is good, wise, and all-powerful, then why doesn’t He remove (or at least restrain) the evil in this world?

1. All evil present in this world is traceable to Adam and Eve’s fall into sin. That means every human is part of the world’s evil. Sin and evil are virtually the same thing.
2. God is patient and loving, however, and He has a plan that will rid the world of evil and evil people. Part of that plan involves Jesus’ death on the cross.

HOPE-FILLED ANSWER: Throughout Scripture, especially in the New Testament, we are promised God’s victory over sin and evil. Christ’s empty tomb is proof that sin and death have been fully conquered, and one day evil will be eternally removed.



Moral Evil—the Answer Begins in Genesis

The word *evil* appears in the Bible as early as Genesis 2. In verse 17, God gave Adam a single command, which Adam later passed on to Eve: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”

Did Adam and Eve eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil? Yes. So by the third chapter of Genesis, we arrive at the answer to the question about why there is evil in the world. The answer is that Adam and Eve chose evil, or sin, by disobeying God.

An ancillary question immediately follows: Why did God allow Adam and Eve to live when He said in Genesis 2:17 that they would surely die if they ate from the tree in the center of the garden?

The answer is this: Starting with Adam and Eve, throughout history

everyone has sinned, and sinning is “evil.” If God had destroyed Adam and Eve on the spot, there would have been no one left—there would have been no human race. However, there was still a penalty or punishment that was imposed on Adam and Eve and all subsequent human beings—physical degradation and death. Adam and Eve did not die immediately, but they did eventually die.

○ *Did Adam and Eve die
○ like everybody else?*

—ABIGAIL, age nine

Critics of the Bible argue that the serpent was correct when he said, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4). The skeptic’s line of reasoning is this: “God said that eating the fruit would cause death. But when Adam and Eve ate the fruit, they weren’t struck down. They *did not* die. They lived.”

What Is Evil?

If you have older children or ones who are philosophically minded, this material may help you.

Some people assume that evil is a “thing,” so if God created everything, then He must have created evil. The disheartening conclusion would then be that this world of suffering must somehow be the way God wants it.

Christian thinkers like Augustine and C. S. Lewis reasoned that evil is not a thing. Evil is not a tangible or physical object; it is a corruption of an otherwise good thing. Scholars use the word *privation* with regard to evil. Therefore, God was being truthful in His assessment of His entire creation, recorded in Genesis 1:31: “It was very good.”

Evil is a parasite that feeds on a host. God did not “create” evil when He set the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden of Eden. Evil is the degradation and corruption of something that otherwise is good. God *allowed* evil to enter the equation; He allowed *privation*. But it’s not accurate to say that He *caused* it or *created* it.

However, the wording in Genesis 2:17 literally means “When you eat of it, in dying, you shall die.” Even though Adam and Eve did not keel over dead right that instant, physical death became a part of the human experience and a consequence of human sin. But the subtle reality of Genesis 2:17 is this: *Sin’s entrance into the human experience meant that spiritual death would follow physical death.* “In dying, you shall die.” Think of it: a double dose of death for every person. The implications of this are tragic beyond description.

“In Adam’s Fall, We Sinned All”¹

As a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, sin was passed on to the rest of humanity. This bent for evil in humans is called sin nature. The onset of sin nature is where the question of evil turns personal and can present an opportunity to share the gospel. Most children (and many adults) think of evil as describing someone like Hitler, drug dealers, or Uncle Leroy who divorced six wives. When your children realize that they themselves are part of the world’s evil and that a penalty of death is required of them, then the need for God’s grace becomes apparent.

The Fate of the First Couple

Adam and Eve did die like everyone else. They were the first people to experience death. God had warned them not to eat of a certain fruit in the garden where they lived, but they chose to disobey Him and did it anyway. This caused Adam and Eve to begin growing older, and they eventually died. Because of their sin, the process of aging and death now happens to all people everywhere. Sin causes not only physical death but also that death within our souls, or what some call spiritual death. If it weren’t for the forgiveness offered by Jesus, Adam and Eve—and you and I—would be separated from God forever because of sin.

If your children ask, “Couldn’t God just snuff out all the wicked people in an instant?” you can explain that of course He could, but that would wipe out *all* of us. God defines evil as selfishness, anger, unforgiveness, untruthfulness, faithlessness, and so on. These “minor” sins are as odious to God as the things that most of us would say are “major” sins (such as murder, robbery, rape, torture, etc.). To understand salvation and to have a sound Christian worldview, it’s essential that this important fact become ingrained in your children’s hearts and minds: “*All* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The Parable of the Weeds

In the Parable of the Weeds, Jesus hinted at God’s patience and plans as He told His disciples this story:

The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed

The Sugar Test

Younger children may need a concrete example of how high God’s standard for purity is. A fun and simple way to illustrate this is with a cup of white sugar and one grain of salt. Show your children the sugar and then pour it into a bowl. Let them dip their fingers in the sugar and taste it. Next, take a pair of tweezers, pick up a grain of salt, and drop it into the sugar. Mix in the grain of salt. Let your children taste the sugar again. It should taste fine to them, since one grain of salt doesn’t affect their taste experience, but they have seen with their eyes that it’s not pure sugar anymore. Explain that God knows where that grain of salt is even if we can’t detect it, and until that grain is removed, the whole bowl is impure (evil).

weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

The owner's servants came to him and said, "Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?"

"An enemy did this," he replied.

The servants asked him, "Do you want us to go and pull them up?"

"No," he answered, "because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn." (Matthew 13:24–30)

This parable is easy for most children to understand. It demonstrates the patience of God to endure evil people but also shows that there will be consequences later. Simply put, delayed justice is not the same thing as the absence of justice.

As a result of Adam and Eve's disobedience, humans were no longer allowed in Paradise. Genesis 3:23 says, "So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken." In fact, God told Adam that he and all of his descendants were going to have difficult lives, a truth that continues to this very day:

To Adam he said, "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'You must not eat of it,'

Cursed is the ground because of you;

through painful toil you will eat of it
all the days of your life.

It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your brow
you will eat your food

until you return to the ground." (Verses 17–19)

The Answer Continues in the New Testament

So, are we stuck with evil forever? No. God does have a plan to rid the world of all the evil. He's just waiting for the perfect time to do it. The final step will be the re-creation of the world as described in the book of Revelation—but we're getting ahead of ourselves. The *first* step toward ridding the world of evil was sending Jesus Christ to earth in human form.

Children understand the concept of second chances. We've all heard them ask for a do-over when they play games. Jesus Christ is called the "last Adam" because He was humankind's do-over—the way to get rid of the problem of evil. In 1 Corinthians 15:45, the relationship between Adam and Jesus is explained: "So it is written: 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit." Because God knew that one day His Son, Jesus, would pay the price for sin and evil, He allowed humankind to live.

God Is Merciful

If your children question how God could allow so many evil people to go on living, ask them to consider Romans 3:25:

God gave [Jesus] as a sacrifice to pay for sins. So he forgives the sins of those who have faith in his blood. God did all of that to prove that he is fair. Because of his mercy he did not punish people for the sins they had committed before Jesus died for them. (NIRV)

According to this verse, God allowed humans to live because He knew that Jesus Christ would pay the death-penalty debt that was outstanding. Before Jesus came to earth, God established a sacrificial system so His people could offer a payment for their sins against Him. In fact, the Old Testament describes many different types of sacrifices—bulls, lambs, goats, and even birds. However, all these sacrifices were temporary;

they were not a complete payment for sin. Additionally, these sacrifices symbolically pointed toward the need for Christ. The one perfect sacrifice would be God's Son, Jesus Christ, who would have no sin nature and would live a perfect life of obedience to God. Because of His special pedigree and holy life, Jesus would be the One who could take the punishment for everyone else.

God's Son (and as such, the "perfect man") could do what the animal sacrifices could not. Hebrews 10:4 points out that "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Hebrews 10:10 explains how the relationship between God and fallen, evil people is restored: "We have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Jesus implied that children have, well, childlike faith (Matthew 18:3; Mark 10:14–15). (He said that adults need this type of faith every bit as much, but that's a separate story!) Simple concepts like the Sugar Test or parables like the Parable of the Weeds will resonate with children. And we need to tell our children that God is good. God is delaying punishment to give us a chance to accept His sacrificial offer of Jesus. In the end, there is a way home—and children can appreciate that.