

Frequently Asked Questions

4/4 2011 FAQ Series

Proverbs 1:1-7

01 30 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Scripture: 1 Kings 3:5-13

Introduction

In his book, *Children's Letters to God*, Stuart Hample compiled actual letters that boys and girls wrote to the Almighty. Some of their questions included, *Dear God*:

- *How did you KNOW you were God?*
- *Are you really invisible or is that a trick?*
- *How come you did miracles in the old days and you don't do any now?*
- *Do plastic flowers make you mad? I would be if I made the real ones.*
- *Instead of letting people die and then making new ones, why don't you keep the ones you got?*
- *I read the Bible. What does "begat" mean? No one will tell me!*

Today we are concluding our January worship series entitled **FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions**. The sermons have been based on a congregational survey conducted in December. This morning I am addressing a variety of different questions asked by God's children of all ages.

Creation and Evolution

One of the most Frequently Asked Questions concerned the Christian perspective on **evolution**. One person asked, *"Is it possible to believe in evolution and creationism?"* Another inquired, *"What does the Bible say about evolution and science?"*

Scripture does not directly address the relationship between **science and faith**. The reason is simple: the Bible *predates* a scientific understanding of the cosmos. In the Old Testament, people thought the world was flat and the center of the universe. The sky was a large bowl placed over the earth to separate it from a watery chaos. Genesis describes God's creation of the world within the context of this worldview.

Contemporary Christians experience a two to five thousand year time-warp when reading the Bible. The ancient understanding of the physical world differed dramatically from a modern perspective. Despite these differences, it is amazing how Genesis parallels many scientific theories today.

In his book entitled Confronting the Controversies, United Methodist minister, Adam Hamilton wrote:

Both the Bible and science agree that the universe had a beginning point. They agree that first there was nothing, and then there was light, and from this beginning all the galaxies of the universe were formed. Three millennia before scientists told us that the earth would have been formless and void for nearly a billion years before life began to appear, the pre-scientific story of Genesis

suggested this occurrence. Thirty-two centuries before Darwin proposed that life began in the seas, the author of Genesis told us that the first creatures God brought forth were in the seas . . . and three thousand years before chemists helped us understand that even human beings came from the same carbon compounds found in the earth, the writer of Genesis told us that God took the dust of the earth and shaped it into a human being and breathed into it the breath of life. (p. 38)

Christians AND scientists hold a variety of opinions about evolution. In my personal opinion, there is no conflict between a belief that God created the world and an allowance for some form of evolution. Adam Hamilton put it this way: “*Evolution is not the enemy of Christian faith; it is merely a way of talking about one possible process God used to develop the wonders of life on our planet.*” (p. 45)

I do not believe that we have to choose between science and faith. We believe that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth; therefore, no scientific discovery can challenge this belief. Indeed, science is a handmaiden of theology, revealing the wonders and intricacies of the Lord’s creative power from subatomic detail to galactic grandeur.

Judaism and Christianity

The next question asked about the relationship between **Judaism and Christianity**. The person wrote: “*Since Jesus was a Jew, shouldn’t we be both Jews and Christians? At the very least, shouldn’t we celebrate the events that the Jewish people recognize?*”

Christianity certainly flowed out of the Jewish faith. We share Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as the patriarchs of our Judeo-Christian faith. We recognize the Hebrew Scriptures—what Christians call the Old Testament—as a divinely inspired part of the Bible. Jesus and the apostles along with the early New Testament church were all Jewish.

However, we believe that God acted in **Jesus Christ** to form a **new covenant** with humanity. We are saved not by law but by grace, and we receive salvation not by works but faith. At the cross, God put sin to death. At the empty tomb, the Lord destroyed death’s power. Salvation comes by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament book entitled The Acts of the Apostles records the history of the first thirty years of the church. During these decades, the church exploded with new growth. It quickly grew beyond Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria into the entire known world. Many non-Jews were converted to the faith.

One of the earliest questions Christian leaders faced was, “*Does a person have to become a Jew in order to become a Christian?*” It was a controversy that threatened to split the church. Ultimately, delegates at the **Jerusalem Council** determined that non-Jews or Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism in order to become Christian. They also did not have to keep all of the kosher dietary laws, etc. If you want to read the full account of the debate, it is found in Acts 15.

We certainly appreciate and honor our Jewish roots; however, we believe that God did something radically different in Jesus Christ that birthed a new faith.

When is Jesus Returning?

Another FAQ was “*When is Jesus returning?*” Then the person added, “*May 2011?*” Apparently, s/he knows something that I don’t!

The short answer is, “I don’t know!” Now let me give a slightly longer answer.

The Bible testifies that God is the Lord of history. One author wrote: “*History is His Story.*” The New Testament also tells us that Jesus Christ will come again—this is often referred to as “***The Second Coming of Christ.***”

Let’s go straight to the source and hear what Jesus said about the subject: “*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” (Matthew 24:36) Christ went on to say, “*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*” (Matthew 24:42)

Let me repeat the verse: “*No one knows about that day or hour.*” Despite Jesus’ statement, this is a topic of great interest to many people. Over the centuries, a number of people have attempted to define the date of Christ’s return. Many here will recall how a number of people predicted that Jesus’ Second Coming would occur at the turn of the past millennium.

The next major event stirring up this debate occurs on December 21, 2012. Without going into detail, this is the date when the Mayan Long Count Calendar ends after 5,125 years. A number of books and movies have already predicted the world’s end on this date.

Let me echo a third time what Jesus said: no one knows the day or hour; and this doesn’t mean that we should worry about the week, month, or year! I will also repeat something that you have heard me say previously on this subject. I can tell you with absolute certainty that one of two things will occur in your lifetime: EITHER Jesus will return OR you will die! Our job is to be prepared regardless of the time. “*Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.*” (Matthew 24:42)

Salvation and Universalism

The next FAQ is longer and more involved: “*Why does geographical determinism decide a person’s salvation? Or does it? Is a devout Hindi or Buddhist doomed to separation from God after death just because they were born on the other side of the world? Or they had an ineffective missionary bring them the Christian faith?*”

There’s an old joke about an atheist who challenged a Christian with the question, “Why are you a Christian?” The person responded, “Well, my parents were Christians, my grandparents were Christians, and my great-grandparents were Christians, so I’m a Christian as well.” The atheist sneered and said, “Well, what if your parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had all been idiots?” The person answered, “Then I guess I would have been an atheist!”

The story gets at an important point. Oftentimes our faith is shaped by heredity and geography. Our family of origin and birth place can make a huge difference in our faith development. For example, compare an American child raised in a Christian home who is taken to church each week to a Chinese child raised in an orphanage who is only taught Communist beliefs—how could each be fairly judged by the same standard?

Paul wrestled with this question in the first chapter of Romans. In part, he wrote: *“For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”* (Romans 1:20) The apostle seems to say that the human spirit intuitively understand God’s nature and call on our lives—even if we have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Frankly, this is one of those times when I’m glad that I’m not God—and you ought to rejoice, too! I do know in my own theology that when it comes to law and grace that I always err on the side of grace.

Christians DO have an urgent mission to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with our neighbor. We don’t want others to miss out on the good things that God has done in our lives. Remember that the Christian faith is not just about life eternal—it’s also about life abundant. We can let God handle the forever more—it’s our duty and privilege to proclaim the good news here and now.

The Question of Why

One of the most frequently asked questions began with the word *“Why.”* It was phrased in a variety of ways. *“Why do bad things happen to good people?”* *“Why do bad things happen to children?”* *“Why did God make me so special with all of my allergies and asthma?”*

People of faith have wrestled with these questions since humans were able to reflect theologically. The book of **Job** in the Old Testament is the oldest short story preserved today. It too asks God the question of *“Why?”*

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian author, does a very nice job of summarizing our theological dilemma. He says that Christians believe these three statements:

God is all good.

God is all powerful.

Bad things happen.

Buechner goes on to say that one can reconcile any two of these three statements. But balancing all three at the same time is problematic.

Two significant clues are found in the opening chapters of Genesis. First, God created humanity in God’s image. This included the gift of free will. In effect, divine power is self-limited in allowing humanity the ability to choose.

The second clue is the story of the Fall. We live in a fallen world where bad things happen to good people. Sometimes we suffer the consequences of our own sin. Other times suffer consequences of others’ sins. And sometimes suffer for no apparent reason whatsoever.

We also need to claim in faith that God can use all things for the good of those who trust in him. Even suffering can be redemptive and play an important part in our faith development.

Hear the words of James 1:2-4: *“Consider it purse joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, lacking nothing.”*

Saints

The next FAQ was *“Does the Methodist Church acknowledge the Saints that the Roman Catholic Church has established?”*

In the Roman Catholic Church, **saints** are extraordinary, holy Christians who lived an exemplary life for Christ. They are recognized through a process called canonization. The Calendar of Saints associates each day of the year with one or more saints. Typically, a saint’s *“Feast Day”* commemorates the date s/he was martyred for the Christian faith. Patron Saints are advocates in heaven for particular groups or causes. Although Catholics do not worship saints, they do “venerate” them and see them as intercessors on their behalf in heaven.

In the United Methodist tradition, we go back to the New Testament meaning of the word *“saint.”* The term literally means *“holy one.”* The title is used in Scripture to refer to all believers in Jesus Christ. On *All Saints Sunday*, we honor all Christians who had died before us. We do not celebrate particular saints’ days (well, we do give lip service to Valentine and Patrick!) Nor do we venerate saints as intercessors for us. We believe that all Christians can come directly into God’s presence in the name of Jesus Christ. We believe that all Christians are saints, and this includes you and me!

Grace and Works

The last FAQ asked: *“I could use some help on the place of ‘works’ in the Christian life. I know our salvation is not dependent on works but grace. However, some passages talk about our being judged by our works.”*

This question gets at the heart of the Christian gospel. The relationship between **faith and works** can be challenging. Sometimes even Scripture appears to be contradictory. For example, Paul emphasized that works without faith is dead. However, James stated that faith without works is dead. Then they both used the example of Abraham to prove their opposing points!

Faith and works are actually two sides of the same coin. However, the order is important. Salvation comes by grace through faith. Grace means that it is God’s gift freely given to his people. There is nothing we do to earn or merit it. We receive the gift through faith or belief in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

THEN we are called to live out our lives in response to God’s love. This is where the works aspect of our faith comes into effect. We are called to bear the fruit of the Spirit in daily living, witnessing to God’s presence in our lives through word, deed, and attitude.

The Bible emphasizes repeatedly the linkage between our love of God and our love of neighbor. To do one is to do the other. We show our love for God by loving others. When we love others, we have loved God.

Conclusion

This concludes our FAQ series. If I didn’t get to your question, then I will hopefully address it at some point in the future. In the interim, the best way to know more

about God is to spend time in the Lord's presence through prayer, Bible study, worship, fellowship, and the other means of grace that the Holy Spirit provides.

Our Scripture lesson today reminds us: "*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*" (Proverbs 1:7) The only dumb questions are the ones we don't ask. Our uncertainties and doubts can lead to a deeper faith. So keep asking with the assurance that those who ask will receive.