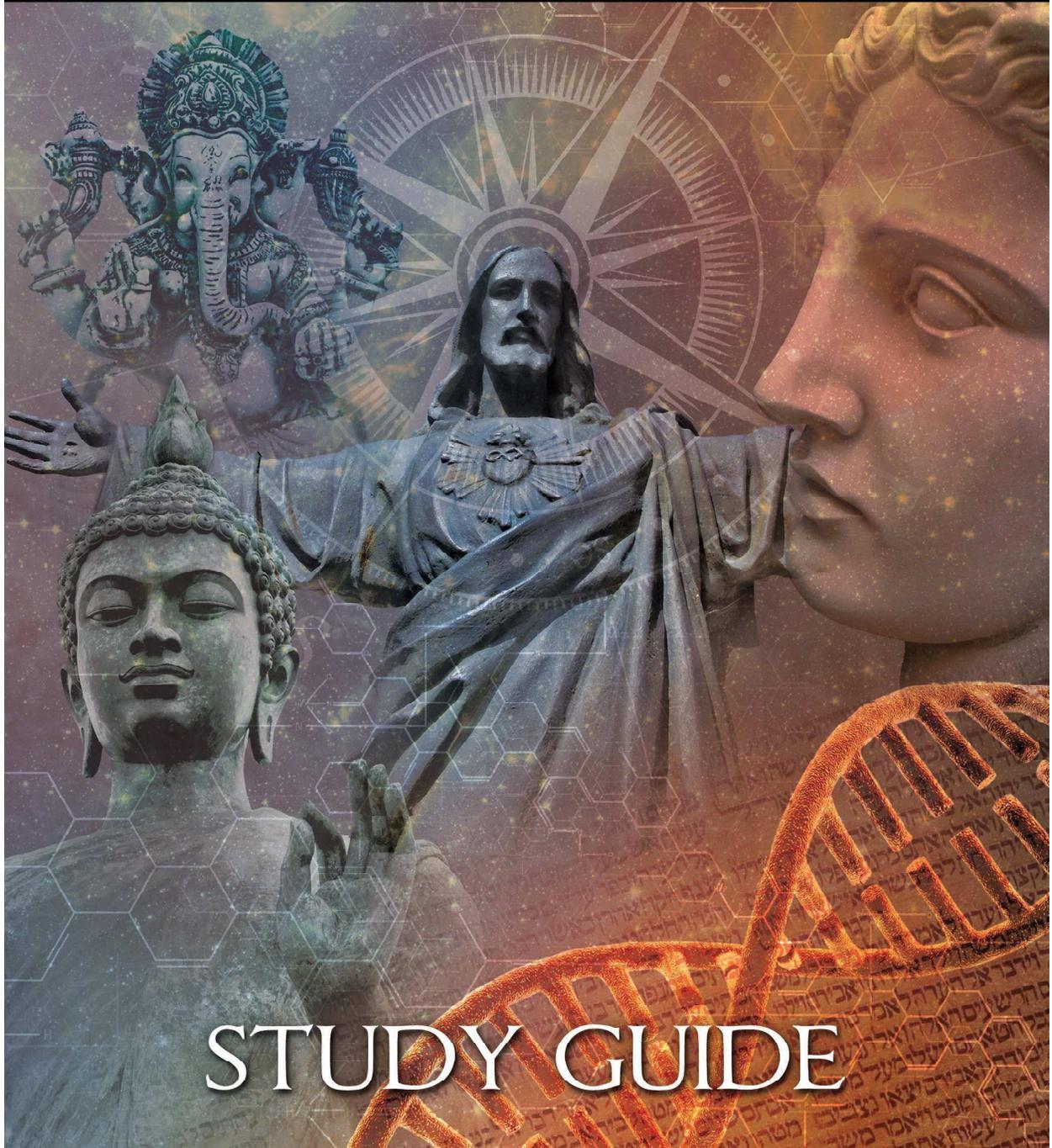


# BURNING QUESTIONS



## STUDY GUIDE

# Burning Questions

Exploring Where The Evidence Leads

## STUDY GUIDE

By Andy Bannister

with Anthony Bakerdijan

This study guide is designed to accompany the *Burning Questions* DVD. To order copies of the DVD, or to download the latest version of this study guide, please visit [www.burningquestions.ca](http://www.burningquestions.ca).

# Burning Questions Study Guide

## How to Use this Study Guide:

Thank you for getting this DVD series for personal or group study. We're thrilled that you are embarking on this journey through the *Burning Questions Study Guide*. The goal of this study guide is to help you or your group analyze and engage with the questions and issues raised in this DVD series.

The questions below are meant to guide you through the different themes explored in each episode. **You have the choice to either watch the whole episode before going through the discussion questions or you can watch the episode in parts and discuss each part as you go along.** This guide is designed to aid your discussion as well as help you on your own journey.

Here are some general pointers to get you started:

- 1. Commit to listening.** We all want an opportunity to be heard and understood. However, when discussing complex or controversial issues such as the existence of God or the reality of evil and suffering, we can sometimes forget to make listening a priority when we are confronted with views that are different from our own. Aim to listen and understand first before responding.
- 2. Share your thoughts.** Actively listening to your group members' comments fosters greater openness and facilitates a more fruitful discussion.
- 3. Reflect Personally.** Whether you're following this series individually or in a group, we encourage you to use the questions as guides for personal reflection. You may want to take notes while you watch and then write down your answers to the questions that accompany each episode.
- 4. Keep an open mind.** Don't be afraid to change your mind about an issue. Be willing to follow the evidence where it leads.

## **For the group leader:**

- 1. Facilitate open and honest discussion.** It is important that you help create an open environment where people feel comfortable to share their thoughts and feelings while helping people to not stray too far off topic.
- 2. Time Limit.** Each session should last no longer than TWO HOURS. This length should allow enough time to watch the episode and then discuss it together. You may want to structure your time together by first watching the episode together and then taking a 15

minute break (some refreshments can add a nice touch) before beginning the discussion portion of your time.

3. **Spark Discussion.** If discussion is slow in the beginning, here are some useful questions to help your group start examining the issues:
  - What do you think of person X's statement about...?
  - Person X suggested that... Do you agree or disagree?
  - Where do you think the evidence is leading by the end of this episode?
  - What stood out to you the most in this episode?
4. **Fan the flames.** At the end of each session group members will be invited to apply what they've learned through a practical "take home" component. Let people know that during the next meeting you will invite them to share their reflections from the past week. This way the group can keep each other accountable as well as encourage each other throughout the series.

Here are some specific directions:

- **Group Size.** We recommend that the size of your group range from 8 to 12 people. If you're screening the DVD to a larger audience, direct people to form groups of 4 to 6 people depending on the overall size of your audience.
- **Format.** Each episode runs for about 45 minutes. You may choose to watch an episode as a whole and then discuss what you've watched OR you can discuss the episode in parts as you go along. (*Our recommendation is that you watch the whole episode first before discussing it together.*)\*\*
- **Episodes.** Each episode is accompanied by a series of questions to help you engage with each other and to reflect upon the issues raised. Each episode is broken up into sections, so the questions provided will correspond with those sections.
- **Activities.** In addition to discussion questions there will occasionally be group activities. These activities are optional and can be used at your discretion.
- **Resources.** A resource section for each episode will be included if you want to dig deeper into any of the topics raised either in the episode or in your discussion.

*\*\* (Optional) You may want to pray together at the beginning and end of your time.*

# Introduction: Following the Evidence Where it Leads

Throughout life we are often confronted with circumstances that cause us to ask questions like: Who am I? Where do I come from? What is my purpose? What kind of person do I want to be? What really matters? What do I want out of life? For many of us, these deep questions raise profound existential, philosophical, and theological issues. This DVD series provides a unique opportunity to consider further how these issues are related to questions such as:

- Is there a God?
- Has science disproved God?
- How can a good God allow evil and suffering?
- How can there only be one way to God?
- Is the Bible trustworthy?
- Who was Jesus?

Whether you believe in God, don't believe in God, believe in many gods, or have yet to decide, the questions explored in this series are relevant to all of us. We invite you to join us on this journey as we explore these questions throughout the series.

The overarching question explored in this series is: *are you willing to follow the evidence where it leads?* In each episode a different question relating to faith and reason is examined through conversations with leading Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Buddhist, and Atheistic thinkers. Our hope is that through this series you and your group will be stretched, challenged, and ultimately, gain clarity and insight as you examine, weigh, discuss, and debate the various ideas presented.

# Episode 1: Is there a God?

## Introduction:

*“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life...”*

Viktor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*

Are we alone in a meaningless and purposeless universe or is there a higher power out there? The question of whether God exists has been hotly debated in our culture and provoked a myriad of responses ranging from skepticism to faithful belief. Where do you fit into this mix? Wherever you are on your journey, our hope is that you use this opportunity to dig deeper into these significant issues.

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks?

- a) Watch from the beginning to 8:40 and discuss questions 1 and 2.
- b) Watch from 8:40 to 24:23 and discuss questions 3 to 5.
- c) Watch from 24:23 to 34:55 and discuss questions 6 and 7.
- d) Watch from 34:55 to the end and discuss question 8.

## Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. Does religion provide simplistic answers to life’s questions? Is Peter Atkins’ characterization of religious faith as offering “feather-bed” explanations accurate? Why or why not?
2. Are all human beings inherently religious? Do you agree or disagree with the sentiment that faith is an innate “expression of the soul” common to all human beings? Why?
3. Is it necessary to have absolute proof for God’s existence? Is it possible to have absolute proof of God’s existence? Some philosophers suggest that belief in God

does not need to be based on evidence in order for it to be a reasonable belief.<sup>1</sup> Is it more fruitful to ask which worldview has better explanatory power rather than which has more evidence?

4. Richard Dawkins has famously stated that “faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate the evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, or even because of, the lack of evidence.” Why does Dawkins make faith synonymous with a lack of evidence? What evidence does he have for this conclusion? What is it about theism that makes belief in God appear inherently irrational?
5. How helpful is Pandit Roopnauth Sharma’s analogy of a person’s possession of many titles (i.e. father, husband, son, brother, etc.) for explaining the Hindu conception of God? What are its strengths? Flaws? How does this perspective lend itself to a view of religious faith as purely subjective? Do we really create God in our own image?
6. How would you characterize the different types of reasons given in favour of belief in a Triune God? Do you find them compelling? Why or why not?
7. Alister McGrath describes Christian belief not as a running away from evidence, but towards it. In light of his own story of coming to faith, how does his description help us think about the evidence presented by this episode?
8. Is it important to ask the question: does belief in God make life more meaningful? Why or why not? Does belief in God’s existence/non-existence make a difference in your life? Elaborate.

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

There have been two threads running throughout this episode: one thread speaks of how our longing for meaning and purpose in life points towards the existence of God; the second thread investigates the question of whether belief in a god makes sense. At the end of this episode, Stuart McAllister challenges viewers to consider whether the God we accept or reject is: (a) a human fabrication or (b) a God that stands above our own personal projections. This is an important challenge because we must ask ourselves if the way we conceive of God—whether as a divine bully and child abuser, an omnipotent, caring creator, or as a loving non-judging deity—corresponds to how

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<sup>1</sup> Notable philosophers who take this view are Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff.

he has revealed himself. Or, are we merely accepting or rejecting a notion of God that is a caricature that does not reflect reality?

How does your conception of who God is influence your reasons for accepting or rejecting belief in God? How do these reasons inform whether you think life has meaning?

## Stoking the Flames: Resources

### Books:

Craig, William Lane. *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008.

Eagleton, Terry. *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

Frankl, Victor. *Man's Search for Meaning*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1984.

Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York, NY: Riverboat Books, 2008.

McGrath, Alister. *Surprised by Meaning: Science, Faith, and How We Make Sense of Things*. Knoxville, TN: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

McGrath, Alister. *The Twilight of Atheism*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2006.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Plantinga, Alvin and Nicholas Wolterstorff, ed. *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983.

Spufford, Francis. *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2012.

Zacharias, Ravi. *Can Man Live Without God?* Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1994.

### Articles:

“God as Wish Fulfilment?” by Alister McGrath:  
<http://www.bethinking.org/does-god-exist/god-as-wish-fulfilment>

## Videos:

Tim Keller speaking at the Veritas Forum on the topic "Belief in the Age of Skepticism"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9fmKSwuoDE>

William Lane Craig speaking on the topic "The Case for the Existence of God"

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CACE\\_Q-iWU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CACE_Q-iWU)

# Episode 2: God and Science

## Introduction:

*“The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. He can be worshiped in the cathedral or the laboratory.”*

Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God*

Has science buried God? It is commonly believed that scientific explanations for the physical universe have rendered belief in God unnecessary and irrelevant. However, the history of science suggests that the link between science and religion is much stronger than popular perceptions. Indeed, the existence of committed Christian scientists raises questions regarding the oppositional narrative often used to describe the relation between science and religion. In this episode we explore the relationship between science and religion by considering the question: which worldview does science best fit with?

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks?

- a) Watch from the beginning to 13:54 and answer questions 1 and 2.
- b) Watch from 13:54 to 19:53 and answer questions 3 and 4.
- c) Watch from 19:53 to 28:49 and answer questions 5 and 6.
- d) Watch from 28:49 to the end and answer questions 7 and 8.

## Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. Peter Atkins takes the view that all ‘why’ questions can ultimately be answered by bundling together answers to the ‘how’ questions. Conversely, Andy describes *how* scientifically analysing the Mona Lisa painting can tell us a lot about its physical composition, but tells us very little about *why* it was painted. Do *why* questions, then, point towards the limits of scientific explanations? Or, is Atkins right to say that once we know *how* something works, we no longer need to ask *why* it does?
2. Underlying the view that science and religion are in conflict with each other is the belief that science can give an account of everything. According to Dr. Ard Louis, this view reflects a larger debate concerning the importance of the Humanities

(English, Philosophy, Theology, etc.). How does this debate impact our understanding of the relationship between science and religion?

3. Why is science unable to determine what makes a human life valuable? Is this theoretical gap something that will eventually be solved by science or is it an inherent limitation of scientific inquiry?
4. Consider the views put forth by Peter Atkins and Ard Louis concerning the role of religion in the birth of modern science. Although Atkins affirms that religion was the cradle of science, he also argues that religion is an old-fashioned and outdated means of acquiring knowledge about the world. Alternatively, Louis suggests that modern science has deep roots in Christianity that are not acknowledged and affirmed by certain atheistic scientists. What are the reasons for and against each position? (Optional: divide your group in two and hold a mini-debate with each side taking an opposing view.)
5. Considering the arguments presented in the previous sections, it appears that the oppositional narrative used to describe the relationship between science and religion is based more on a myth than on evidence. Following from this point, how should we understand the apparent conflicts between science and certain portions of the Bible?
6. The Fine-Tuning argument for the existence of God maintains that it is not the complexity but the *specified complexity* of the universe that points to God. Consider Peter Williams' description of the analogical relationship between the manner in which entering a correct PIN code to withdraw money from a bank indicates one's possession of intelligence; and, the ways in which the precisely balanced and tuned-for-life laws of physics suggest that an intelligent designer created the universe. Conversely, atheists like Richard Dawkins propose a theory of multiple universes in order to account for the favourable conditions of our universe. Draw on Andy's analogy of a judge analysing the evidence in a court case and compare these two views to answer the following questions:
  - a) How should we weigh the evidence? Do the three possibilities (infinite regress, the universe popped into existence out of nothing, or creation by an intelligent being) highlighted by Ard Louis suggest that the question of God's existence cannot be answered by science?
  - b) Based on the evidence provided, which starting point makes more sense: that God created the universe or the universe is an accident?

- c) Which view better fits with the features of the universe?
7. How do the limits of science point to “God-shaped” questions? Could it be that the more ‘how’ questions we are able to answer the more ‘why’ questions are generated?
  8. At the end of this episode Andy concludes that by ignoring the religious roots of science, atheistic scientists divorce themselves from the very values (integrity, truth, open sharing of information) that make science possible. Conversely, the cosmologist, Lawrence Krauss has argued that the principles governing scientific inquiry are inferable from reason; therefore, one does not need to appeal to religion in order to support these values. In light of all you’ve heard in this episode, do you agree or disagree? Why?

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

The writer of Psalm 5 proclaims that the heavens declare the glory of God—a sentiment that encapsulates the biblical theme of how the created order reflects the beauty and handiwork of God. In this episode we’ve been exploring the relationship between science and religion and whether there is an inherent conflict between the two disciplines. On the one hand, skeptics like Peter Atkins regard religion as an outmoded and vacuous method of acquiring knowledge in view of scientific explanations for how the universe works. On the other hand, we have heard from scientists who are committed Christians and claim that science is compatible with religion because each approach describes different parts of a larger picture. Indeed, if we were to rely on science to account for the “whole picture” then we would be unable to provide a basis for morality, or the value and purpose of human life. It follows, then, that those who would declare that science has buried God on the basis of its ability to offer explanations for the physical universe are premature in their declaration. Further, the fine-tuning of the universe provide compelling reasons for believing in the existence of an intelligent creator who is responsible for the order that make science possible. The question we are left with is which world view—atheism or theism—makes best sense of the evidence?

This week, reflect on the ways your worldview affects how one weighs the scientific evidence for and against theism.

## Stoking the Fire: Resources:

### Books:

Collins, Francis S. *The Language of God*. New York, NY: Free Press, 2006.

Harrison, Peter. *The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Lennox, John. *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009.

McGrath, Alister with Joanna Collicutt McGrath. *The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist fundamentalism and the denial of the divine*. London: SPCK, 2007.

Nagel, Thomas. *Mind & Cosmos: Why the Materialist, Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Numbers, Ronald L. ed. *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths About Science and Religion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, Naturalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Polkinghorne, John. *Science and Creation: The Search for Understanding*. London: SPCK, 1988.

### Articles:

"The Conflict Myth: Galileo Galilei" by Michael Smith:

<http://www.bethinking.org/does-science-disprove-god/conflict-myths-galileo-galilei>

"Isn't Science More Rational Than Faith?" by Alister McGrath:

<http://www.bethinking.org/does-science-disprove-god/isnt-science-more-rational-than-faith>

### Videos:

John Lennox speaking at the Veritas Forum on "Christianity and the Tooth Fairy":

<http://www.bethinking.org/does-science-disprove-god/christianity-and-the-tooth-fairy>

Francis Collins speaking at the Veritas Forum on "The Language of God":

<http://qideas.org/articles/the-language-of-god/>

# Episode 3: The Problem of Evil

## Introduction:

*“For more than half an hour he [the boy] stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony. under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed. Behind me, I heard the same man asking: ‘Where is God now?’ And I heard a voice within me answer him: ‘Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on the gallows...’”*

Elie Wiesel, *Night*

*“For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he [God] had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine.”*

Dorothy Sayers, “The Greatest Drama Ever Staged” in *The Whimsical Christian*

Irrespective of one’s worldview, the problem of evil presents itself as a matter that is both intellectually complex and intensely personal. In this episode, we examine the ways in which different worldviews (i.e., Atheism, Pantheism, and Theism) address the problem of evil and encourage you to consider which of these approaches best speaks to its intellectual complexity and personal significance.

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks?

- a) Watch from the beginning to 9:50 and answer question 1.
- b) Watch from 9:50 to 20:07 and answer questions 2 and 3
- c) Watch from 20:07 to 33:22 and answer questions 4 to 6.
- d) Watch from 33:22 to the end and answer questions 7 and 8.

## Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. There appears to be very little agreement among the views presented about the nature of evil and whether one can legitimately call actions “evil.” On the one hand, some argue that it is almost impossible to name evil; and, they suggest that what we perceive as evil is actually a matter of perspective, and is something that is ultimately illusory. On the other hand, others describe evil as an objective reality

that has an actual effect in our lives. What are the implications of these views for the ways in which one could respond to the problem of evil?

2. Dr. Anna Robbins claims that whenever we subject God to the test of our reason in order to make sense of evil and suffering, God will seem distant. However, if we affirm that God is present in the midst of our suffering we will find God there. Does the presence of God in the midst of one's suffering provide a way to reconcile the reality of evil and the goodness of God? Could this suggestion also be characterized as a form of wish fulfillment in order to cope with suffering?
3. Why do you think many people have experiences wherein their suffering strengthens rather than weakens their faith in God? Have you experienced your faith growing in the midst of pain and suffering? If you feel comfortable sharing, what was your experience?
4. What do you think of Andy's comment regarding the challenge faced by atheists who seek to justify their belief in objective morality while also denying the existence of God? Is it true that there is no basis for justice or human rights without God? Without God as a basis for morality, how does one differentiate between good and evil? What are the personal and social implications of these atheistic approaches to moral reasoning?
5. A number of the people interviewed in this episode make the point that asking how a good God could exist when there is evil in the world ultimately prompts reflection on the nature of good and evil. In short, one can only raise the problem of evil by referencing an objective notion of good. Does the problem of evil still exist without an objective morality? Which worldview seems best suited to address the problem of evil?
6. Does human freedom provide the basis for a viable explanation for the reality of moral evil?
7. Cheryl Nembhard shared how her image of God was shaped by the wounds inflicted upon her as a child. While not all of us have had similar experiences to Cheryl's, we all have wounds that shape our understanding of who God is. How do you think your personal hurts influence how you approach God and the problem of evil and suffering?
8. Christianity uniquely claims that Christ's death on the cross is the sign that God understands, identifies with, and is present with us in our suffering; and, that his

resurrection is a sign of future relief and restoration. Does this defining claim of Christianity demonstrate that God can be trusted in the midst of evil and suffering?

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

As we have seen throughout this episode, there are two dimensions to the question of how we reconcile the goodness of God with the reality of evil and suffering. The first is the intellectually complex philosophical question of how to make sense of seemingly irreconcilable options—the existence of a loving, all-powerful God and the reality of evil. The second is the intensely personal question of how to face suffering while still trusting in God? For many of us, it is this second question that really defines our struggle to reconcile the goodness of God with the reality of evil.

During the week, reflect on whether your worldview has helped you make sense of your suffering and provided comfort in the midst of pain. How has your worldview brought you comfort? In what ways can you share that comfort with those who are hurting around you?

## Stoking the Flame: Resources

### **Books:**

Keller, Timothy. *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*. New York: Penguin Group, 2013.

Lewis, C.S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009.

Lewis, C.S. *A Grief Observed*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009.

Plantinga, Alvin. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1977.

Stackhouse, John G. *Can God be Trusted? Faith and the Challenge of Evil*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2009.

Williams, Sarah. *Shaming the Strong: The Challenge of an Unborn Life*. Vancouver, BC: Regent Publishing, 2007.

Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *Lament for a Son*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.

## **Articles:**

“How Can I Believe in God When There’s So Much Suffering” by Michael Ramsden:  
<http://www.bethinking.org/would-a-good-god-allow-suffering/how-can-i-believe-in-god-when-theres-so-much-suffering>

## Episode 4: Which Religion is True?

### Introduction:

*“This gospel identity gives us a new basis for harmonious and just social arrangements. A Christian’s worth and value are not created by excluding anyone, but through the Lord who was excluded for me. His grace both humbles me more deeply than religion (since I am too flawed to ever save myself through my own effort), yet it also affirms me more powerfully than religion can (since I can be absolutely certain of God’s unconditional acceptance).”*

Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

*“The relativism which is not willing to speak about truth but only about ‘what is true for me’ is an evasion of the serious business of living. It is the mark of a tragic loss of nerve in our contemporary culture. It is a preliminary symptom of death.”*

Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*

Do all religions lead to God? Is it arrogant to say that there can only be one true religion? The popular view says that each of the world’s religions express a different but complementary part of the truth. Therefore, anyone who argues that there can only be one true religion is regarded as being arrogant. Does affirming the truth of your own religious convictions mean you’re arrogant? In this episode we will explore these questions by confronting the central question: Is it possible to affirm religious truth claims while remaining humble?

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks?

- a) Watch from the beginning to 12:34 and answer questions 1 to 2.
- b) Watch from 12:34 to 25:00 and answer questions 3 to 4.
- c) Watch from 25:00 to 32:25 and answer questions 5 to 6.
- d) Watch from 32:25 to the end and answer questions 7.

### Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. In his book *Humble Apologetics*, Professor John Stackhouse describes three kinds of pluralism which we encountered in our society as:
  - a) **Plurality** - meaning more than one choice (e.g. many flavours of ice cream);

**b) Preference** - many choices is a good thing (e.g. it's good that there are many ice cream flavours to choose from);

**c) Relativistic pluralism** - all choices are equally good (e.g. all ice cream flavours are equally good).

Which descriptions best reflects the views of the interviewees we've heard?

2. One of the views presented in this episode expressed the popular idea that there can not be a "one-size" fits all approach to religion. What are some of the criteria when forming their religious convictions? Is religious conviction a matter of "feeling" or is it the result of being "born" into a particular faith system? Discuss.
3. How does the argument that people often remain in the faith they were raised in hold up when considered alongside the fact that many people who convert to another faith, do so later in life? Further, if the world's religions are simply different paths going up a mountain (or many mountains), are religious conversions redundant? Discuss.
4. Rabbi Kaplan makes an interesting point: it is not the person raised in a religious home that is without the freedom to choose their beliefs, rather it is the non-religious person who is without choice. Since we are surrounded by secular and atheistic messages, being religious requires a conscious decision to adhere to the faith tradition of your family. Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. In discussions about religious pluralism, an idea that often resurfaces is the view that truth is relative. In this episode, Andy argues that truth, by its very nature, is exclusive. It has also been suggested that everyone—no matter how inclusive or "open-minded" he or she is—makes truth claims about reality. What are the implications of these statements for those who believe that truth is relative?
6. What roles do reason and evidence play when deciding which religion to believe?
7. Is it possible to affirm the distinctive truth claims of your faith while remaining humble?

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

We live in an increasingly pluralistic culture and for many who are motivated by a desire to be tolerant and inclusive, this means taking a relativistic view with respect to religion. This motivation is not a bad thing; however, relativizing the truth claims of the different religious perspectives expressed in this episode flattens their distinctiveness. It is important to remember that disagreeing with another's view is not bad in-and-of-itself, it's *how* we disagree that makes the difference. The question to consider is whether it is necessary to relativize religious belief in order to respect different viewpoints and perspectives. Is there a way to respectfully disagree with others on

important or controversial matters while still affirming your commitment to the truth of your religious convictions?

This week, imagine you are having a conversation with a co-worker concerning a recent headline in the news. Towards the end of the conversation your co-worker makes an off-hand remark with which you deeply disagree. Can you think of different ways that you can share your different view point without disrespecting your co-worker? Come prepared to share your ideas with the group next week.

## Stoking the Flame: Resources

### **Books:**

Newbigin, Leslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Warranted Christian Belief*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Qureshi, Nabeel. *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.

Stackhouse, John. *Humble Apologetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

### **Articles:**

“Don’t All Religions Lead to God?” by Amy Orr-Ewing:  
<http://www.bethinking.org/is-christianity-the-only-way/dont-all-religions-lead-to-god>

“Religious Pluralism” by Alister McGrath:  
<http://www.bethinking.org/truth/religious-pluralism>

### **Videos:**

Vinoth Ramachandra and Diana Eck speaking at the Veritas Forum on the topic “Why Tolerance is not enough”:  
[http://www.veritas.org/talks/why-tolerance-not-enough/?ccm\\_paging\\_p=3](http://www.veritas.org/talks/why-tolerance-not-enough/?ccm_paging_p=3)

Tim Keller speaking on “Absolutism: Don’t We All to Find Truth for Ourselves?” (Audio only):  
<http://www.bethinking.org/truth/absolutism-dont-we-all-have-to-find-truth-for-ourselves>

# Episode 5: Can We Trust the Bible?

## Introduction:

*“There are only two possible views of the gospel accounts. Either this is reporting as close to the facts as Boswell reporting on Samuel Johnson’s life or else some unknown writer in the second century without any known predecessors or successors suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic realistic narrative fiction. If these things didn’t happen the writer must have accomplished this or else it is nothing but a fraud. The reader who doesn’t see this has simply not learned how to read.”*

C.S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*

*Lay people are usually unaware that the scrupulous scholarly work achieved by modern biblical criticism ... represented by scrupulous academic work over about 300 years, belongs among the greatest intellectual achievements of the human race. Has any of the great world religions outside of the Jewish-Christian tradition investigated its own foundations and its own history so thoroughly and impartially? None of them has remotely approached this. The Bible is far and away the most studied book in world literature.”*

Hans Küng, *Judaism: The Religious Situation of Our Time*

*“Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”*

Jesus, Gospel according to Luke

How can a collection of books written thousands of years ago have any relevance for our contemporary context? How do we know whether the events described in the Bible actually happened? How do we respond to skeptics who claim the Bible is just a collection of myths and fables? In “Episode 5: Can We Trust the Bible?” we address the question of the Bible’s authenticity (as a historically reliable document and source of divine revelation) and consider its relevance for us today.

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks

- a) Watch from the beginning to 12:37 and answer questions 1 and 2
- b) Watch from 12:37 to 25:14 and answer questions 3 and 4
- c) Watch from 25:14 to 32:28 and answer questions 5 and 6
- d) Watch from 32:28 to the end and answer questions 7 and 8

## Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. How might the existence of historical manuscripts contemporaneous with Jesus' disciples support the Bible's reliability as a historical document?
2. Why is the authenticity of the biblical text important? Does the fact that it has been faithfully and accurately preserved lend support to the claim that the Bible is the word of God? Why or why not?
3. Do the textual variants within the New Testament and the large gaps of time between some of its copies of the NT undermine claims about the reliability of the Bible?
4. How do historically verifiable details within the Bible support or challenge the view that the biblical narrative is better understood as history rather than myth?
5. If the Bible is to be read historically, how do we understand the more fantastical elements, such as the miraculous?
6. It is commonly believed that people in the ancient world were prone to believing in the supernatural to explain what we now know to be natural phenomena. Yet, in the gospels, for example, we read of people doubting miraculous events (e.g. Joseph and the virgin birth, some disciples doubted the resurrection). Why would these details be included if people in the ancient world readily believed in the supernatural?
7. Even if we accept the historical reliability of the Bible, why should we live according to a collection of ancient pieces of literature?
8. Having considered the authenticity, historical accuracy, and the archaeological reliability of the Bible, does the confluence of these features provide evidence that the Bible is the divine revelation of God? Discuss.

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

We have spent a lot of time considering the historical reliability of the Bible. However, this is only one important aspect of deciding whether the Bible can be trusted. It is also important to consider what the Bible is and how to read it. In addition to the many historical accounts recorded in the Bible, there are also many other literary genres ranging from poetry and wisdom to letters and apocalyptic literature.

With that in mind, imagine reading a film review for an action film that you want to see. In this review, the writer criticizes the film for its lack of romantic and comedic elements. As you continue to read the review, you realize that the writer has completely ignored the genre conventions typical of an action movie, revealing his own set of preconceived assumptions about how he thought the movie should progress.

Similarly, when reading the Bible one can bring one's own set of assumption to bear upon the text, thereby missing its intended meaning. In view of what you have discussed during this session, would you consider committing time during your week to read—maybe for the first time—a section from the Bible, keeping in mind the section's genre? You might want to start with one of the four Gospels found at the beginning of the New Testament. As you read, pay attention to the literary genre of the text and ask yourself what the author is trying to communicate to his audience.

## Stoking the Flame: Resources

### Books:

Bauckham, Richard. *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimonies*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

Blomberg, Craig L. *Can We Still Believe the Bible?: An Evangelical Engagement with Contemporary Questions*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2014.

Fee, Gordon and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible For All It's Worth*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

Hurtado, Larry. *The Earliest Christian Artefacts*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.

Wright, N.T. *The New Testament and the People of God*. London: Fortress Press, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Simply Christian: Why Christian Makes Sense*. New York: HarperOne, 2006.

### Articles:

"The Historicity and Reliability of the Bible" by J.P. Moreland:

<http://www.bethinking.org/bible-jesus/advanced/the-historicity-of-the-new-testament.htm>

## Videos:

Dr. Peter Williams giving a lecture at the Lanier Library Lecture Series entitled “New Evidences the Gospels were Based on Eyewitness Accounts.”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5Ylt1pBMm8>

N.T. Wright speaking on the topic “Can a Scientist Trust the New Testament?”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PodVGMe3b3Q>

# Episode 6: Who was Jesus?

## Introduction:

*"[Christianity] is a personal relationship of love and loyalty to the one who has loved us more than we can begin to imagine. And the test of that love and loyalty remains the simple, profound, dangerous, and difficult command: love one another."*

N.T. Wright, *New Testament Wisdom for Everyone*

*"So what you're left with is: either Christ was who He said He was the Messiah or a complete nutcase. I mean, we're talking nutcase on the level of Charles Manson... The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, that's farfetched."*

Bono, *Bono* by Michka Assayas

The gospel accounts repeatedly show Jesus disrupting religious, political, and social categories. The early Christians made the audacious claim that Jesus was not merely a good teacher or prophet, but that he was the very representation of God on earth. His words and deeds consistently prompted extreme reactions—people either worshiped him or wanted to kill him; and, no one could avoid answering the question of who Jesus was. Right down to the present day, Jesus of Nazareth remains a controversial figure that prompts a response to this same question because the claim that he is Lord implies that no other authority is worthy of our worship and commitment. In this last episode we examine the evidence and invite you to consider the question: Who is Jesus?

Group Leader: Do you prefer to stop for discussion during the episode breaks?

- a) Watch from the beginning to 15:01 and answer questions 1 to 2
- b) Watch from 15:01 to 25:54 and answer questions 4 and 5
- c) Watch from 25:54 to 35:42 and answer questions 6
- d) Watch from 35:42 to the end and answer question 7

## Adding Wood to the Fire: Discussion Questions

1. Many of this episode's interviewees described Jesus as a good moral teacher who had achieved a higher level of transcendence/enlightenment because he submitted himself to God or the Divine. Following from this, some made the argument that Jesus's teachings complemented the claims made by their

religions. Consider for a moment how the alleged complementarity of Jesus's teachings with Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Atheism highlights his historical significance. Why do you think each interviewee wants to demonstrate Jesus's relevance for his belief system?

2. Rabbi Kaplan suggests that Jesus has no more personal significance today than Julius Caesar or Genghis Khan do. Following from question 1, how do we explain Jesus' lasting impact as a significant historical figure if he is nothing more than a good moral teacher?
3. Do the historical accounts of Jesus shed light on who he is and why he became the central figure of Christianity? What difference do these historical accounts make in relation to the views expressed by the interviewees?
4. Why is the claim that God entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ significant?
5. Does the evidence presented in favour of the historical reliability of Jesus' resurrection offer a compelling case for believing the Gospel accounts? Is the evidence conclusive? Why or why not?
6. How does something that happened over 2000 years ago have significance for us today?
7. What are your final thoughts/reactions/impressions about this episode? What are your final thoughts about the *Burning Questions* series?

## Burning Embers: Personal Reflection

Jesus Christ stands at the centre of the Christian faith. For this reason, Christianity is a faith that invites people to engage with more than just a system of beliefs, it is an invitation to embark in an intimate personal relationship with Jesus. However, this invitation only makes sense if Jesus' resurrection and the claims he made about himself are true. Although these claims seem fantastic, we have seen in this episode, there are good reasons for believing them to be true. Thus, if all that the gospels say about Jesus are true, the question we invite you to consider is: What difference does—or should—this make in your own life?

Throughout this series we have explored several profound and complex questions about the nature and existence of God, the relationship between faith and science, the problem of evil, religious pluralism, and the trustworthiness of the Bible. Whether this exploration has sparked an interest in these issues or rekindled your contemplation of their relevance, we invite you to continue your journey and follow the evidence wherever it leads.

## Stoking the Flame: Resources

### **Books:**

Baggett, David. Ed. *Did the Resurrection Happen?: A Conversation with Gary Habermas and Antony Flew*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009.

Dickson, John, *A Spectator's Guide to Jesus: An Introduction to the Man from Nazareth*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008

Stott, John. *The Cross of Christ*. Leicester, UK: IVP, 1986.

Wright, N.T. *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999.

### **Articles:**

“The Divinity of Christ” by Alister McGrath:  
<http://www.bethinking.org/jesus/the-divinity-of-christ>

“The Jesus We Never Knew” by Douglas Groothuis from  
<http://www.bethinking.org/jesus/the-jesus-we-never-knew>

### **Videos:**

Mary Jo Sharp speaking on the topic “Jesus and Pagan Mythology”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zb4cMs52-vk>

Dr. Craig Evans debating Dr. Bart Ehrman on “Does the New Testament misquote Jesus?”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FkRZgABquk>

Dr. Richard Bauckham speaking on “The Gospels as Historical Biography”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSwu-kiMSp8>

William Lane Craig speaking at Yale University on the topic “Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?”: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_NAOc6ctw1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_NAOc6ctw1s)

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