

Bible Answers 101

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Chapter 1

God

*M*any people told us that they believe in the existence of God, but they wonder about His character. What is He like? Is He detached from the world He created, or is He a micromanager in the details of our lives? It is easy to conceptualize God when staring into space or looking at a majestic sunrise. But how can God allow the tragedies that exist on earth? These are honest questions.



How can we find God?

I am really trying to find God. How do I know when I have found Him? I started searching about four years ago, and I'm still not sure if God knows I exist. Any insight would be helpful. Thanks.

Thanks so much for your e-mail and your honest question about finding God. You have been persistent in your search. Let's see if we can give you some insights.

First of all, here's a promise from God Himself: "If you look for me in earnest, you will find me when you seek me. I will be found by you" (Jeremiah 29:13-14).

Sometimes people wonder why God hasn't revealed Himself more directly than He has. We can't explain that except to say that many things about God are mysteries. If we could figure everything out about God, would He still be God or merely some human invention?

Here's what God says about Himself: "'My thoughts are completely different from yours,' says the LORD. 'And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

So we have to realize and accept the fact that God is very different from us, and we can't know Him like we might know another human being. Yet we can know God, and we can know about Him by accessing the clear and definitive clues He has left for us.

These clues are objective; they are testable. In fact, as you study Christianity and compare it to other religions, you will find that it is the only "testable" religion. It can be tested according to history, archaeology, science, and reason. (You can't test everything, of course, but you can test enough to give you a high degree of certainty that Christianity is true.)

But don't forget about the element of faith. God wants you to put your faith and trust in His promise to reveal Himself to you. As Almighty God of the universe, He could make His existence and presence painfully obvious to everyone, and He could force our allegiance and worship. Or He could buy our love and loyalty by blessing us with health and prosperity as long as we obeyed Him. But that is not how God operates. He wants our obedience and worship to be motivated by a reverential love for Him. We voluntarily believe what we have not yet seen.

Even Christians in New Testament times had to believe in things they couldn't see. The apostle Paul explained, "So we don't look at the troubles we can see right now; rather, we look forward to what we have not yet seen. For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever" (2 Corinthians 4:18). He later added, "We live by believing and not by seeing" (2 Corinthians 5:7).

We are accustomed to living in a world where we believe something only after we have seen it. With Christianity, we will see after we have first believed. When the apostle Thomas had a hard time with this, Jesus Himself said, "Blessed are those who haven't seen me and believe anyway" (John 20:29).

We know that God is aware of your existence; He already loves you. He is anxious to reveal Himself to you.



Did God create evil?

Recently I read your book *Knowing God 101*, and I have to ask you a question pertaining to something you said. You state that Satan was a created angel, and then you go on to say that God is incapable of creating evil. Therefore, Satan was created without evil. He became evil of his own free will. This doesn't make sense. God created Satan, so God had to create evil. Otherwise, how could evil come to be, even if we do have free will? The evil had to be there to begin with. Maybe you could elaborate on this topic further.

Theologians and philosophers have wrestled with this question for centuries. It's one of the big questions of the ages. The question is either phrased as, "How could a loving God allow evil?" or, as you are phrasing it, "How could a holy God create evil?"

The first question is perhaps a bit easier to answer. The reason a loving God allows evil—or anything that comes short of His perfect standard for that matter—is that if He didn't allow evil and sin, we would all be destroyed because all of us are sinners. We all fall short of God's perfect standard (Romans 6:23). He allows us to exist, even as sinful creatures, because He loves us. The Bible tells us that God will judge evil someday. Meanwhile, He is being patient, giving more time for people to turn to Him (2 Peter 3:8-9).

The second question—the one you're concerned with—is a bit tougher. You are asserting that God had to create evil; if He didn't, it wouldn't exist. Let's look at this from a couple of perspectives.

One viewpoint approaches the issue by assuming that God is what He creates. To assert that God created evil would mean that He is evil. If this is true, then God would no longer be holy. But God's holiness precludes Him from having any connection with sin. "God's holiness denotes not merely His separation from sin in the perfection of His own being, but His abhorrence of it and hostility to it" (A.S. Wood). In the presence of God's holiness, humankind becomes aware of its sin (Isaiah 6:3-8). Holiness is not merely one of God's attributes (such as the fact that He is all-powerful). It represents His essential nature. So if we say God created evil, then He is no longer holy. He is no longer God.

Another viewpoint focuses on the creation—that which God creates, be it angels, humanity, or the material universe. God could have created all beings and the universe without the capability of doing wrong, or of choosing wrong. But what good would that have been? If someone loves you, would you feel differently if that person loved you only because he or she had no choice in the matter? Of course you would. God is no different. He didn't want

beings who loved Him because they had no choice. He wanted beings who loved Him voluntarily, or of their own free will. So He created angels and humanity with the capacity to choose to love Him or not and to obey Him or not.

God created a perfect world, but it was a world full of choices. In fact, you could say that by creating it that way, He demonstrated His love and perfection. Had God created a world in which all creatures were obligated to obey and love, one could make the case that God did not create a perfect world, at least not by the standards of perfection as we would understand them.

Creating beings with the capacity to sin is not the same as creating sin. To use an analogy, let's say that a dad made a baseball bat out of a tree branch so his son could play baseball. But then someone stole the bat and used it to kill someone. Does that mean that the dad created a murder weapon? Even more, does it mean that the dad is responsible for causing the murder? Of course not. Our legal system recognizes the difference between the person who makes something for a good purpose and someone who uses that object to commit an evil act. The flaw is not with the maker but with the one who chooses to commit the evil.

God created Satan and the fallen angels for good, but they made their choice to turn that good into evil. The same goes for humanity. The difference between angels and humanity is that the angels have no chance for redemption, but we humans do. We have the opportunity to be made righteous, or perfect, through the perfect and sacrificial life of Jesus Christ. The love of God intervenes despite our sin.

Perhaps we took this further than you wanted. If so, we apologize! But we hope you can see our point. If not, let us

know! Thanks again for writing, and thanks for reading *Knowing God 101*.



Why does God allow children to suffer?

I am a chaplain in a prison, and recently an inmate asked me why God allows people to harm children. I explained to him that God doesn't allow these things. We are all sinners, and sadly, some are worse than others. The people that commit these tragic crimes make the choice to do so. Our free will allows us to make choices, and unfortunately, some people make choices that are terrible. He has now asked why God allows children to die in natural disasters when this is clearly not the choice of man. I'm sorry to say that this has me stumped. Could you please help me with an answer for him and for myself?

The whole issue of God allowing evil is a tough one. It takes a lot of thought—and prayer—to even begin to understand how a loving and holy God can allow the tragedies of child abuse and other horrors.

First, we need to understand that God does allow evil. If you didn't believe that He allowed evil, then you would have to believe that He is powerless to stop it when it happens. And we know that isn't true. As the sovereign, all-powerful God and Creator of the universe, God allows everything. Nothing good—or bad—happens outside of His control. But this is different from God initiating and causing the evil and suffering. As a holy and perfect God, He is incapable of evil, and He cannot cause evil.

Let's look at this another way. If God did not allow evil, He would have to destroy everything that is evil, including us (by that we mean all of humanity, not just Bruce and Stan). But in His great love and mercy, God not only allows us to live, but He has given us a way to get back into a right relationship with Him. (Read Romans 5:5-11.)

Even though God allows evil now, that doesn't mean He will allow it forever. The Scripture is clear that right now, God is being patient with us so that more people will repent. But His judgment of sin will come. (Read 2 Peter 3:8-10.)

Just as sin has infected the human race (such that we cause evil not intended by God), so the natural world is under the curse of sin, sometimes causing terrible disasters. In general, our world operates in marvelous ways. Simply by looking at the wonder of God's creation, we can see the glory of God (Psalm 19). At the same time, creation isn't perfect. Scripture says, "Against its will, everything on earth was subjected to God's curse. All creation anticipates the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time" (Romans 8:20-22).

Just as the earth groans under the weight of sin, most people groan in shock, dismay, and disgust at child abuse. But that is the effect of sin. Still, we can be confident that it will come to an end in God's timing.



Why do bad things happen?

I work with someone who doesn't really believe in God. His wife's sister was murdered a while ago, and he says, "If God has all the power in the world, why do bad things happen?" I am not really sure how to respond to him, to make him see that it is not God's doing, that it is because of sin. Also, how can I get him to open his eyes to Christ?

The question about how an all-powerful and all-loving God can allow suffering and evil is legitimate. Christians should be glad whenever people ask them this question because the people presenting the question are thinking

about God. Of course, Christians should be prepared to answer it. Unfortunately, the answer requires some thought.

The question of God and evil goes to the heart of free will. God created humanity with the capacity to choose between right and wrong. That's all well and good, but this freedom has a drawback. If we choose evil, then all kinds of bad things happen, as your friend at work has experienced.

But what's the alternative? If evil did not exist, we would not have free will. We would be creatures with no choice but to do good. All of us—including your friend—would be required to bow down to God through no choice of our own. Because God wants us to love Him willingly, He isn't going to force us to choose Him or to do what is right in all circumstances. Thus, evil exists because God loved us enough to give us freedom of choice.

Your friend might logically ask, "Even though God didn't initiate evil, why doesn't He do something to stop it once it happens?" God is going to do something about it—that's what judgment is all about. (When that happens, only those who have willingly chosen God by receiving Jesus will escape eternal judgment.) Yes, God is going to deal with evil, but that means He'll be dealing with us.

But again, because of God's love for us, He hasn't fully implemented eternal judgment yet for one simple reason. Here it is in 2 Peter 3:9-10:

The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and everything in them

will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be exposed to judgment.

Your friend at work is free to believe or not believe in God, but that doesn't change who God is. The other thing to think about is this: If there's no God, what's the alternative? The alternative is that we still have evil, but in the end there's no hope. When death happens, that's it. Game over. Nothing. But with God in the picture, we have hope. Hope that one day God will deal with evil, and we will spend eternity with God in absolute glory and perfection, with no evil and no suffering and no pain (Revelation 21:3-4).

The real question your friend should be asking is whether he or she has enough reason to believe that God doesn't exist. The argument that evil is in the world isn't a very good reason (although people frequently use it as a smoke screen so that they don't have to deal with the ultimate question).

Pray and ask God for wisdom as you talk with your friend. God has put you in a strategic position. Stay connected with your friend and let your light shine so that the presence of Jesus will be on display. Don't condemn honest questions about God, but simply recommend the life of faith in Jesus that you have chosen. Ask God to work through your answers and your life, and ask Him to open your friend's heart to His message. And be patient. God will work through you in His time.



What is the correct view of the Trinity?

The concept of the Trinity is hard to understand. I'm not sure if I'm on the right track. Here's what I think of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit existed as three separate Gods in heaven. God created the universe first, and then Adam and Eve's sin

brought sin and hell to our life, so Jesus was sent by God as a human to the world to redeem our sins and burdens. The very day that He went back to heaven as God after He was resurrected, Jesus Christ sent the Holy Spirit down to help us connect with Him and other brothers and sisters on earth. We may use Jesus Christ as a way of getting to know God the Father, who is the Creator of the universe. Please advise if there is anything wrong with my understanding.

You are right, the concept of the Trinity is difficult to understand, but there is a way to start out on the right track. Unfortunately, you aren't on that track!

God is one God (Isaiah 45:5). Believing in three separate Gods is called polytheism. Christianity is based on the biblical doctrine of monotheism.

God is one God in three Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. All three possess the qualities of God, and all three are distinct Persons, but they are not separate Gods. Again, the correct doctrine (teaching) starts with one God in three Persons. This is called Tri-unity. God is a triune God. The idea of tri-Gods (as you put it) is polytheism.

All three members of the Trinity have existed eternally. All three were involved in creation. Yes, God sent Jesus to earth. Jesus is God in the flesh. As Jesus told His disciples, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father...Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" (John 14:9-10).

You're to be congratulated that you're thinking about this difficult concept. Keep with it.



How do we know the Trinity exists?

I'm dealing with someone who says that the Trinity doesn't exist. He says that the "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" references are just references to the same God. He says it is like calling God by the names "Lord," "Heavenly Father," and "Almighty God." This doesn't sound right to me, but I'm not sure how to respond to him. Are there any passages in the Bible that could help me argue with him?

We'll be glad to give you some Bible references, but not simply for the sake of helping you win an argument. A correct understanding of the Trinity is important for your growth as a Christian (and for your friend's understanding of God).

Several times in the Bible we find the presence of all three members of the Godhead mentioned simultaneously:

- The Trinity is referenced in the work of Creation ("Let us make people in our image"—Genesis 1:26-27).
- We see the Trinity at the baptism of Jesus (with the voice of God the Father and the Holy Spirit descending as a dove—Matthew 3:16-17).
- Jesus Himself made reference to the three members of the Trinity when He told His disciples to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"—(Matthew 28:19).
- The apostle Paul gave a benediction that acknowledges the Trinity (see 2 Corinthians 13:13).

In these passages you have the Bible referring to the three separate Persons of the Trinity. The "Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit” references are clearly not interchangeable nicknames for the same entity.

Some people have tried to describe the Trinity with various analogies, such as a father (who is also a son and a husband), an apple (skin, meat, and core), an egg (shell, white, and yoke), and water (steam, liquid, and ice). At first glance these analogies seem to fit, but they fail under correct theological scrutiny.

Let’s take the father-son-husband analogy and see why it falls short. (In face, it’s heresy.) The Trinity is three distinct Persons in one being, and each one is fully God. Yet there is only one God, not three Gods. The problem with the father-son-husband analogy is that it describes one person—a man—who is engaged in three different family roles. That isn’t the Trinity. It’s an ancient heresy called modalism, which teaches that God simply exists in three different modes. That isn’t the orthodox, historic teaching of the Christian church.

God is one being, but He exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A man is one being and one person who may have three different roles. God is three Persons in one being. Three identities is not the same as three Persons. God has always existed eternally in three distinct Persons, yet He is one being. This is central to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Does this blow your mind? It did ours. We’ve given up trying to identify an analogy for the Trinity. We don’t think there is an adequate analogy to anything we know of here in the natural world. Maybe that shouldn’t surprise us since the Trinity is supernatural.



How can we respond to an atheist?

I have a 15-year-old nephew who does not believe God exists. Can you please help me? I need your

advice on how I can assist this young man, show him a way out of his atheism, and bring him to believe in God.

You have reason to be concerned about your nephew, but don't worry that he is an atheist. Young people this age normally have questions about serious issues, and God (and His existence) is often near the top of the list. He may not believe in God, but that doesn't mean he has good reasons to support his belief. Maybe he's upset at something, or perhaps he's being influenced by a friend. In any case, his "belief" probably doesn't mean he has thought the whole thing through and has concluded God doesn't exist.

Our best advice is to just be open to listen to your nephew. If he will talk with you, let him talk. Ask him to explain how he arrived at his belief. Resist the temptation to straighten him out or to "bring him to believe in God." Make clear that this is something that he'll have to decide for himself but that you're curious to know the basis for his belief and conclusions. He may just want someone to talk to but nobody will listen, so he's making a rather outlandish statement to evoke reactions.

If you listen and then respond with statements such as, "It seems to me..." or "I have found in my experience and study..." he may be much more likely to hear what you are saying. Don't react in a big way, such as saying, "What do you mean you don't believe in God! Are you nuts! You're on a fast track to hell, Bucko, unless you get your head screwed on straight." Of course, you aren't going to respond like that, but we're all tempted to overreact when the spiritual destiny of people we love is at stake. That usually doesn't get us very far.

For yourself, you may want to do a little preparation. Most Christians aren't very comfortable explaining the existence of God, not because they don't believe but because they don't feel adequately prepared. You may want to check out

our book *Knowing God 101*, which covers the basics on the issue of God's existence, His character, and so forth.

Finally, don't forget to pray for your nephew. Ask God to give you opportunities to talk, and ask God to give your nephew an open heart.



How can we help an agnostic?

I hope you can help me. My son has become an agnostic. I would like to bring him back into God's reach, but I'm not sure how. Every time I bring up the subject we get into an argument. I pray for him and hope that he will see the light, but I'm just not sure what else to do. He's had a tough time in his life. He's only 27 but has lived a lot. He had a drug problem in his teens and until he was about 23. He got himself off of them. He also has hepatitis (from the drugs). I try telling him prayer will help, but it hasn't done any good. (I've had breast cancer and feel prayer is what got me through it.) When we do actually talk about God, he says he's not sure what he believes, and he doubts that one entity controls everything. Can you help me in any way to help my son?

Our hearts go out to you regarding your son, but you are not without hope. Honestly, a young man like your son who has made some unfortunate choices is likely to feel as if he can't know God. As you know, that's the primary definition of an agnostic—someone who doesn't think God is knowable. (By contrast, an atheist doesn't think God exists.)

So an agnostic at least acknowledges the potential existence of God, but through various circumstances or lack of information, he doesn't think God can be known.

The fact that your son doesn't believe that one entity can control everything just shows that he hasn't thought his position through enough. That's okay. Don't push him.

However, you can challenge him to think his position through to its logical conclusion. Is he a reader? If so, you can suggest a good book, such as *A Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel or *More Than a Carpenter* by Josh McDowell, which is a bit simpler.

If he isn't open to getting more information on his own, you can simply talk with him (which means you may need to do some reading yourself). Don't press but ask questions. Ask him how he has come to his conclusions. Share with him how prayer has made a difference in your life, especially when you were facing your own life-threatening illness.

And continue to pray. God is faithful. He doesn't always answer in the manner and in the time that we would like, but His timing is always perfect.



Christianity: exclusive or inclusive?

In your Bible study on Ephesians, you state that Christianity is both exclusive and inclusive. These seem contradictory. What Scripture supports this idea?

Christianity is exclusive in the sense that it provides only one way to get right with God (see John 14:6 and Acts 4:12), and Jesus Christ is the exclusive path to God. Some people interpret that "one way to God" as intolerance on the part of Christianity. But in reality, Christianity is inclusive because a relationship with Christ is available to everyone. A person can be male or female, rich or poor, Jew or Gentile, slave or free...anyone can come to Christ Jesus (see Galatians 3:27-28).



Where did God come from?

Where did God come from? If you say He always was and always will be, you're not really answering the question.

Where did God come from? is an excellent and difficult question. The answer is based on both logic and faith.

First, the logic. Everything that exists must have a cause. Nothing comes from nothing. But does that mean God has a cause? No, if God had a cause, He would not be God. By definition, God is uncaused because an endless string of causes would be impossible. At some point a first cause must have gotten all the other causes going. The best explanation for this first cause is God, who by definition is uncaused.

This rule applies to the universe itself. Science now believes that the universe had a beginning, sometimes referred to as the Big Bang. The question is, where did the Big Bang come from? The only logical answer is that it was initiated by the first cause.

So what or who is the first cause? This is where faith comes in. You could simply believe that the first cause is an impersonal entity that is completely detached from the universe, or you could believe that the first cause is personal and has communicated with the created world in some way. No one can scientifically prove that the first cause is personal and communicative, but God has given us evidence. It's up to you to investigate.



Why would God create people destined for hell?

I have a friend who grew up going to Catholic school but now rejects almost everything about God. Her problem with Christianity is this: Why would God knowingly create people who are destined for hell? How do I respond to her?

Ask your friend why she thinks people are destined for hell. Show her from the Bible that anyone who believes in

Jesus Christ will not perish but will have everlasting life (John 3:16). Tell her that God doesn't want anyone to die an eternal death (2 Peter 3:9).

No person is destined for hell unless he or she chooses to go there by refusing Christ.

God loves us, and He wants us to be restored to a relationship with Him. Sin has broken that relationship, but we can get back into a right relationship with God. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).



Is it okay to ask God questions?

Do you think asking God questions and doubting God's sovereignty and faithfulness are synonymous?

They are not the same. Asking God questions is perfectly reasonable even though we may not always get the answers (at least not the answers we like). You can ask God through prayer, by studying His Word, and by talking with mature believers. On the other hand, doubting God's sovereignty and faithfulness is the same as doubting God's omnipotence and His truthfulness. In other words, asking questions of God is one thing; questioning God's character is quite another. Of course, one of your questions may be, "God, why did You fail me?" or "God, why do You allow suffering in the world?" It's okay to ask these questions because they have reasonable answers. But to say that God is unable to help you or powerless to prevent suffering would be the same as questioning His sovereignty and faithfulness.



Should I care whether or not God exists?

I'm 13, and I really need some help. I don't know if I should really care about all this God stuff or if He

really exists, and I don't know if I should feel anything special to know that God is in my life. Please help if it is not too much trouble.

Those are great questions to be asking. Many adults skip over them, so we're glad you're thinking about them. We happen to think thinking about God is very important. In fact, you can't help it. Everybody thinks about God in one way or another. Even people who don't think God exists think about God, which should tell you something.

You can't prove God exists the way you can prove that a chair or a dog or a person exists, because you can actually touch and see the chair, the dog, and the person. But you can know God exists based on the evidence in the universe. Here are three simple pieces of evidence for the existence of God:

1. The very fact that you and everybody else thinks about God points to His existence. If you were the only person who thought about God, then we could just say that you have an imaginary friend. But everyone thinks about God. That's more than just a coincidence.
2. Everything in the universe has a cause. If something doesn't have a cause, it doesn't exist. But what caused the causes? In other words, when you go back in the string of causes, there must have been a first cause to get all of the other causes going. An infinite string of causes would be impossible. And the first cause must itself not be caused. It must have preexisted. It is reasonable to believe that the first cause is God, who has always existed.

3. The universe and everything in it has amazing order, harmony, purpose, and design. If you saw a beautiful Ferrari sitting in your driveway, would you assume that it just appeared out of nowhere, or would you believe someone put it there? Would you believe that all of the parts and pieces assembled themselves, or would you believe that someone designed and built the car? The same is true with the universe. Everything is so fine-tuned for life that an intelligent designer must have been behind it all. You can't explain creation from random mutation or chance.

So what difference does God make in your life? Well, if God created the universe and everything in it, then He created you. Wouldn't you think that He did it for a reason? Don't you want to know if He had a reason? And if so, don't you want to know the reason?

You'll need to come to some decisions on your own, but let us give you a head start. We believe that God created you, that He knows you, and that He loves you. You aren't some uncreated, uncaused blob of tissue who came from nothing and is going nowhere. You are a significant human being created by God. You have a purpose that includes being in a personal relationship with God. That's why you should care about all of this God stuff.



Why should we fear God?

I don't understand why the first step in Christianity should be based on the fear of God. Why should I fear God, when I know He loves me more than anyone else ever could? He gives me everything I need. I am trying to learn more about the Bible, but I can't find this explained anywhere in my books or Bibles. Maybe you can

explain it to me. I know God is the most powerful being and that what He says, He will do, but I'm not afraid of Him. Should I be? Thank you, and I love your book *Knowing the Bible 101*.

The fear of God is actually an important part of the Christian life, but we think you misunderstand the terminology.

We like Chuck Swindoll's definition best: "To fear God means to take Him seriously and do what He says."

Fearing God has nothing to do with being afraid of God. The essence of God is love, not fear (1 John 4:8-10,18). The Bible always connects the fear of God with blessing. When we obey God and seek His will, we are doing what He says. You could say we are fearing God.

But always remember that love was what motivated God to save you, and the love of God will always be with you. But God is holy, and sin will always be an offense to Him. At the same time, His love isn't based on what you do but on what Jesus already did for you by dying for your sins. That's what John 3:16 is all about.



What is the right way to worship God?

In John 4:23-24, Jesus tells us that God is looking for people who will worship Him "in spirit and in truth." I'm not sure what that means.

Worshipping God in Spirit means recognizing that He is a Spirit and not a physical being confined to one place. God is omnipresent (present everywhere all the time), and He can be worshipped anywhere and at any time. This doesn't mean you look at a rock and worship God in the rock. God is not the rock; He is not the physical universe. (That is pantheism.) God is *transcendent* (that is, apart from us and our

physical reality), yet He is *immanent* (that is, near to us in every way). Worshipping God in truth means worshipping the one true God, not some idea we have about God that is based on our personal conceptions rather than how the Bible describes God.



Is it possible to not believe in God?

Do you believe people are for real when they say they don't believe in God? I think they are lying, and deep down they know they are lying. What do you think?

When dealing with people, you should take them at their word, at least as a starting point. In our Christianity 101 book entitled *World Religions & Cults 101*, we devote an entire chapter to the atheistic worldview (also known as naturalism). We talk about two kinds of atheists.

The “weak position” atheists say they don't believe in God because no one has provided any credible evidence that God exists. They want the burden of proof shifted to the theists. No one can categorically prove that God exists (you can't reduce God to a science experiment), but plenty of reasonable evidence points to His existence (as we discussed in *Knowing God 101*).

The other kind of atheist is the “strong position” atheist. This atheist firmly believes that God does not exist. Here, the burden of proof is on the atheist to prove there is no God, and that's not easy. More reasonable proof—from logic, science, history, and anthropology—points to God's existence than to His nonexistence.

Now, you asked a very basic question, and for that we can give you a pretty direct answer. Do atheists really believe that God doesn't exist, or are they choosing that position so

they can live their lives the way they want? We think you're right that they have to enter into a kind of self-deception, and here's why. Read Romans 1:18-20. Clearly the God of creation has made Himself known to His created beings. He has put the knowledge about Himself in every human heart. Whether someone admits that or not, the knowledge is there.

A reasonable person might wonder why the atheists spend so much time thinking about God if He doesn't exist.



Why should we suffer for Adam's sin?

Let's say I was a perfect, righteous, and sinless father. And let's say I had a son, and I told him that when he gets of age (let's say 15), he will not be allowed to commit any sin or be tricked into sinning by anything. He must be perfect like his father. So of course, the boy sins by age 15 and one month. When I find out, I come back and punish him by putting him in jail for life, but I don't stop there; I also make all of his kids and their kids and every generation of his seed go to jail upon birth. My question to you is this: Do you feel that the curse of all humanity because of Adam is honestly fair? I know God is perfect in all His decisions, but I just have a hard time accepting this "one strike and you're out" godly standard. What do you guys think?

We really admire the way you are wrestling with these issues of sin and God's fairness. You are a thoughtful person who desires to understand God and the way He works in our world and in our lives.

This issue isn't easy. It's probably the toughest issue of all, and many people reject God altogether because they can't reconcile it. You seek to understand while trusting God to do the right thing. This is such a healthy approach.

Centuries ago Anselm of Canterbury wrote, “I believe so that I may understand.” When you trust God by faith that He has saved you through the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ, you receive the gift of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

At the same time, your belief must lead to understanding—perhaps not a complete understanding, but a growing understanding in the person and the ways of our great God. Most people don’t take the journey to understanding that you are on. What a shame! Without the struggle and the reward of learning to know God better, our lives here on earth are so shallow.

Your illustration is an excellent one, but it doesn’t capture the absolute holiness of God. When we put ourselves in God’s place, we bring Him to our level. In other words, your illustration assumes that God would think the way we do (it’s called *anthropomorphizing* God). We think He should behave the way we would or the way we would like Him to.

Of course, you would have compassion on your own 15-year-old son. A father who condemned a son after one offense would be considered an unfit father. In fact, you would give your son a second and third and fourth chance. You would probably give him all the chances in the world.

But God is not us. He is God, and apart from Him there is no other. When He created humankind, He did so in His own image. He created us as sinless people but with the capacity to sin. He created us so that we could willingly love Him. With that choice came the capacity to sin. God clearly explained what would happen if humanity sinned. And He made the penalty harsh because of the nature of sin. Sin is so offensive to God that He cannot even be in the presence of sin. The very word “holy” means to be set apart from sin.

If you don't mind, let's take your illustration and modify it a bit. Let's say a judge tells someone who has never committed a crime, "If you ever commit murder, I'm going to bring you before this court and pronounce a death sentence. If you don't, you can live your life freely and without penalty. In fact, I'll even keep in contact with you. We can have lunch occasionally and develop a personal relationship."

Then, let's say this person goes out and defied the judge's order and murders someone. At first he tries to hide his crime, but the judge knows and quickly calls the offender before his bench. What do you think the judge should do? Should the judge say, "You know, that thing I said about giving you the death penalty, well, that was really more like a warning. It was just a suggestion. I know people make mistakes, so I'm going to give you another chance. Just don't go out and murder someone else."

Would you consider that justice? Would it have been unjust for the judge to tell the offender, "I told you exactly what would happen, and yet you went out and murdered anyway. Because you have violated my directive, I'm going to impose the sentence"? Of course not. But that's not where the story ends. Let's say the judge then told the offender, "The death sentence cannot be changed, but I love you. In fact, I love you so much that I'm going to take your penalty and give it to someone else, someone who has volunteered to die in your place. I've agreed to accept this substitute, not because of you, but because of the volunteer. Oh, by the way, this volunteer happens to be my only son."

That sounds preposterous, doesn't it? Yet that's exactly what God has done for us. It's the story of God. It's the story of His great love for us—the very people who have offended Him and violated His standard.

The Bible says, “But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8).

God bless you as you come to grips with the awesome love of God!