

TRANSCRIPT

An Undeceptions podcast.

John Dickson:

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Elon Musk:

I think this is actually fundamentally important for ensuring the long-term survival of life as we know it is to be a multi planet species. Again, I'm not trying to be doom and gloom here, but the fossil record does show that been many extinction events over the millennia and these are from meteors, from super volcanoes, from just natural climate variation, which it does become very severe, but at a pace that would seem slow to us. And then eventually the sun's going to expand and engulf earth and before we-

Kara Swisher:

Not trying to be doom. So the sun is going to explode is really your message. The sun is going to explode is how it's going down. So we need to go to Mars.

Elon Musk:

Basically expand and then incinerate earth.

Kara Swisher:

Okay. All right.

Elon Musk:

This is for sure going to happen, but not anytime soon.

Kara Swisher:

All right. So therefore we need.

John Dickson:

That's tech mogul, Elon Musk talking about the end of the Earth. He's chatting to Kara Swisher on the Sway podcast back in 2020, and he's arguing that there needs to be more innovation in space flight so that by the time the sun dies, humans will be long gone from the earth.

He's not crazy about the sun. The science checks out. In five or so billion years, the sun that sustains our solar system will die and the earth will be burned up in the process. This is not the most uplifting way to

start our seasonal Q and A episode but one of our listeners asked a question about the fading sun and whether it means that the universe itself, not just the humans in it has fallen from God's grace.

There are actually quite a few curly questions provoked by our recent Kingdom Come episode. Questions about the future of the universe, heaven and hell and all of that, as well as plenty of other questions about a bewildering range of topics, some of which push me to the edge of what I know, perhaps beyond.

Thanks so much for all your questions. Let's get stuck in. I'm going to hand over to producer Kaley and director Mark between my answers, just to catch my breath but first, I'm John Dixon, and this is Undeceptions.

Undeceptions is brought to you by Zondervan Academics, new book, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone, Volume 1, The Doctrine of the Word of God: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners and Pros by Marty Folsom.

Each episode at Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten and with the help of people who know what they're talking about, except for our Q and A episodes, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.

Kaley Payne:

Here's our first question sent in by Brad.

Brad:

Hi John. If Revelation, specifically Revelation 21, says there's going to be new creation. You have a new earth. How do we know if that sin will not permeate the new creation in the way that has permeated the current creation? Because I've always just felt that sin should have permeated this creation, but it has. So what do we know about the new one being a sinless creation?

John Dickson:

Oh, mystery of mysteries. Brilliant question. I should have asked that question in the episode itself. My own view is that God always intended this creation to be a signpost to something even greater and the something greater is entirely to do with the overflow of God's spirit. We're told repeatedly in the Old Testament that the future kingdom is one completely infused with the Holy Spirit, the animating principle of all things.

Until then the spirit is known in deposit form. That's actually what the Bible says in the New Testament. We're told that the spirit is a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. One of the key purposes of that deposit of the spirit in the life of the believer is to move us to will and do God's commandments and the implication is that when we receive the full down payment of the spirit in the kingdom come, we will all attain the fullness of life, the fullness of love and obedience forever.

That's why there'll be no sin in the new creation. So then the obvious question is why didn't God start things that way in the first place. And part of me wants to say just because, but then part of me would prefer to offer the analogy of a story, the best kind of stories you've ever read. The best novels have movement development, tension, and then resolution. Think of your favourite fiction book. Surely the only reason you love it so much is that the story moved towards the end point. You wouldn't have loved it if your author had chosen to start the story on the last page and then continue in that mode forever.

We appreciate the story and mastery of the storyteller precisely because of the movement from tension to resolution. I'm able to believe that something like that pertains to the movement of this world. We have glimpses of this spirit in this creation. They are glimpses of the kingdom come, but the full flourishing of the life of the spirit is what this whole story is moving toward. I dare to believe that everyone on that great last page will stand in wonder and praise at the story of God, the story of his creation and the story of us, his people.

Kaley Payne:

Here's another question about what we might expect in the new creation, this time emailed in from Russell. Director Mark will read his question.

Mark Hadley:

In the Kingdom Come episode, John asked whether there would be animals in the new Earth, but what I would like to know is will there be ecosystems and specifically food webs. As a brand-new Christian with a long term interest in ecology, I find Christianity's, anti-death focus hard to accept. Death is absolutely essential, both to the operation of ecosystems and the evolution of species.

It is fundamentally generative of vitality and dynamism. The Earth is materially finite, critters must die, and their molecules recycled for any new life to ever come about. Likewise for natural selection to take place, critters must die. That's God's created order and I marvel at it. To me it proclaims the glory of God, psalm 19.

Am I meant to instead see to some faulty product of a fall that needs to be restored by the new creation. I find that hard to swallow. It almost seems to echo the Platonist anti materialism that afflicts other philosophies and religions.

John Dickson:

Thanks for that. Again, where were you when we were preparing the episode? It's a fantastic question. I think the real answer is we just don't know with any precision or certainty, but I like your hunch and it's been my hunch for a long time. The fact is in God's original creation, plenty of things we're already dying and then living again as nutrients. After all, even if you imagine that Adam and Eve were vegetarians in the garden, which I don't personally believe, they were still eating plant life, right? Stuff had to die in the circle of life.

Given that as many scholars believe the garden is a picture of the future. As much as a statement about the past, I believe there will be a kind of circle of life in the new creation. The death that is ended in the kingdom come is human death, spiritual death. I'm not confident it refers to any other kind of death. I think if we put our mind to it, we could imagine all sorts of scenarios in which even animal life was not defiled in being killed for food, but that would be to get way into this speculative.

Kaley Payne:

Okay. Here's the question that inspired our episode opener. I've got to say I'd be open to a challenge to try and get some sort of Elon Musk reference into every episode somehow. I reckon he's so fascinating. Plus it'd be pretty easy, as easy as director Mark managing to get a Star Trek reference in, right?

Anyway, here's Mark reading the question sent to us from Paul.

Mark Hadley:

John, loved the episode entitled Kingdom Come. Here's the question. Dwelling on a new earth, when we think about cosmology, how far does the fall, the infection of sin, go?

Is the universe, as we know had fallen, is that fallenness seen in the limited life span of all the stars and planets we see in the night sky? When God created the sun, the stars they were called good, do they remain as good? If so, and I tend to think they do, what about the reality of their limited lifespan?

The sun is consuming the fuel that makes it the sun. It was created that way. The Andromeda galaxy is on a collision course with our Milky Way galaxy. Stars have limited lifespans. One day, the sun will darken. Does the Lord overturn everything? Puzzling to me when I think about living on the earth forever.

John Dickson:

I'm loving all these eschatology questions. Good on you. There are a bunch of things going on here at the same time. First thing I should say is that I'm of the view that creation has always had a measure of entropy or decay from the beginning. Obviously in the garden, according to Genesis 1 to 3, the fruit that was there had to grow, ripen and then be eaten. What's more we're given the very strong impression that Adam and Eve were not immortal, they were mortal from the beginning. Why? Because they had to rely on the tree of life in the garden just to be sustained in living forever.

There's nothing intrinsic in their bodies that would go on forever. They had to depend on the tree of life. That's how they were sustained. In the imagery of the garden this tells us that nothing, even in a good creation was in itself perfect and immortal.

I reckon the same was true of the stars from the beginning of creation. They have natural limitations and decline except where God sustains them, where God gives them existence and life. I reckon the curse on the creation described in Genesis, chapter three can be thought of as God loosening ever so slightly, his sustaining grip on creation.

And if all of this is correct, then in the new creation, we can say the same, that created matter is not in itself perfect. Not in itself unchangeable and immortal, but it can be sustained by the power of God for eternity. By the way, the last scene of the Bible in the Book of Revelation, in the new creation, we have the sudden reappearance of the tree of life from the book of Genesis. This tells us that humanity's resurrection life is not due to intrinsic factors in the new human body, it's due to God's ongoing life-giving power.

Kaley Payne:

We're moving on now to a question that frankly, I'm surprised hasn't come up until now. Here's director Mark reading this question from Craig.

Mark Hadley:

One question friends have asked me and I have issues answering, is how we manage to reconcile the Bible and the existence of dinosaurs and prehistoric man. The world accepts that dinosaurs were around millions of years ago while in the Bible, there is no mention of them and it does not present it possible that the world is millions of years old.

In their mind, the existence of dinosaurs, prehistoric artifacts and fossils is proof that the Bible cannot be taken seriously. I know that the Bible is not a scientific manual and to be honest, I don't know much or anything really about prehistoric matters at all. I'm a bit at sea in trying to ponder on this one.

John Dickson:

Thanks Craig. You may have picked up from previous episodes that I happen to accept all of the firm science about the age of the earth. It's really old.

Dinosaurs are only a problem if we hold that the earth is something like 6,000 years old, but I can't accept that the Bible actually teaches that the earth is that young. So my simple reply to the dinosaur question is just that there are great many creatures in the world that aren't mentioned in the Bible either because they're at the bottom of the sea, in different countries or in the case of dinosaurs because they were long before the writers of the Bible even lived.

But the thing is the science of dinosaur existence and their age seems to me pretty firm. Now, if you happen to believe that the Earth is 6,000 years old, this won't satisfy you so what I'd recommend is you go and look at the website, Answers in Genesis and they'll have some ways to square the science with that particular reading of the Bible. Thanks.

Kaley Payne:

I'm throwing in a gospel related question now and our listener Max is asking about three songs that are recorded in the Gospel of Luke. Songs attributed to Mary, Zechariah and Simeon.

Before we get to his question, which Mark will read for us, let us just read Mary's song from Luke, chapter one. Before this Mary has been told by the angel Gabriel that through a Virgin, she will give birth to a son, Jesus.

My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my saviour for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm. He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their Thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.

Mark Hadley:

Here's Max's question. In the Gospel of Luke, there are songs recorded for each of Mary, Zechariah and Simeon. I believe that Luke, like the other gospel writers is seeking to accurately record or write an orderly account in his words, historical events about Jesus and his account is reliable history.

So did Mary, Zechariah and Simeon actually sing these songs or is Luke taking some artistic license. If he's taking license, does that detract from the accuracy of his account or do you think it even matters?

John Dickson:

I know it sounds really implausible. It's a bit like watching a musical, where suddenly the actors break out into song. That only works because you know, the composers have worked hard producing the material and then placed them on the lips of the actors after the fact. So how on earth did Mary, for example, have a song ready to go for that situation?

I think these songs are heavily reworked hymns that reflect the real praise offered by these historical figures. We know that the speeches in the Book of Acts are essentially Luke's own attempt to summarize what he knows the apostles preached. There's no way these speeches are verbatim reports. I mean, for one thing that would mean the apostles only ever preached for about 60 seconds. No, it was perfectly acceptable in ancient historical writing for an informed author to compose speeches that are accurate representations of what was said by the key figures.

And I think something like this applies to the various songs we see in the first couple of chapters of the Gospel of Luke, but I'd want to add a couple more thoughts, ancient Judea and Galilee were hymn singing cultures. It was a daily practice for them to sing the Psalms, for example. This was so in the blood of the pious that I can easily believe that a devout girl like Mary or an old priest, like Simeon could break out into extemporary praise to God in a form that sounded very much like the Psalms that they said every single day.

Open any commentary on the Gospel of Luke and you'll see that these songs in Luke chapters one and two have resonance with Old Testament poetry and phraseology virtually in every line. And the only

other thing I'd add is that once these stories of Jesus birth and the story of the reaction of these pious ones began to be reported widely, I think Christian communities honed these poems of praise into the final form we find in Luke's gospel.

Kaley Payne:

I love how many of you are starting to record your questions via our website. It's so lovely to hear your voices. Our next question is from Chris.

Chris:

Hi John, my 15-year-old son, Billy is expressing his Christian faith in lots of different ways, which is really encouraging for me but at the same time, he's been dealing with doubts for a while now, which centre on his experience of growing up in a Christian family, surrounded by Christian beliefs.

If I understand him, right, his concern is that his upbringing and now encouraging him from a very early age to follow Jesus means that he feels he's not impartial enough in his decision making about what he believes. I've given him books like A Sneaking Suspicion to read, and we've listened to Nabeel Qureshi's excellent audio book, Seeking Allah, finding Jesus. But the problem with those is that they're written from a Christian perspective. He wants to read a book or some books that have been written by a non-Christian so that he can get their side of the story. I want to respect the kids' approach to seeking the truth. I don't really know what book I would get him to read. I'm not sure how I could come up with one book or even a few that covered off the major issues with Christianity from a non-Christian perspective.

I think what I'm looking for is the anti John Dickson. Like a thoughtful, considerate and humble advocate against Christianity.

John Dickson:

I'll be honest with you, Chris. I think atheist apologists for one of a better term are decades behind the Christian defence of the gospel. What I mean is that there are some really smart, compelling, sceptical writers out there. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins on a good day, Christopher Hitchens and so on, but they all tend to be the mirror image of the worst kind of fundamentalist Christian apologist of yester year.

They're all prone to a mean spirit, wild exaggerations, skewing of evidence, and sometimes much worse. There is probably a wide-open market for some mild mannered atheist to write a respectful knowledgeable critique of Christianity. One informed by the best scholarship and one that has a sympathy and respect toward those who find themselves compelled by Christianity.

I think that's the key, the best public advocacy for the Christian faith comes from those who are sympathetic to people's doubts about Christianity and can write or speak with a certain warmth and affection. There are quite a few Christians like that. I'm not aware of any atheist apologist like that.

Kaley Payne:

We've got a bunch more questions for you coming up so stay tuned. How is it possible to love our enemies? How can we help someone who has been hurt by the church? And if God knows everything, what's the point of prayer. That's all after the break.

John Dickson:

This episode of Undeceptions is sponsored by Zondervan Academics new book, Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone, Volume 1 by Marty Folsom. Karl Barth's monumental life work, Church Dogmatics is considered by many to be the most important theological work of the 20th century clocking in at 12,000 pages.

Reading it is pretty daunting. Marty Folsom's Church Dogmatics for Everyone offers an introduction to Karl Barth's theology in a user friendly and creative way and he's written it for the average person with summaries, context and visuals to reinforce Barth's main points.

"The gospel is not a truth among other truths," Barth once wrote, "rather its sets a question mark against all truths." Woo hoo, that is classic Karl Barth. There's none of that wimpy Christianity that dissects and qualifies Christian convictions to the point where they rock no boats and fuel no passions. This is confident Christianity, subtle, sophisticated, but not at all phased by the scepticism that was everywhere around Barth in the 20th century.

I reckon this isn't just a book for believers. Here's a challenge. Even if you are a doubter or sceptic, why not check out the thought of one of the most influential Christian thinkers of the 20th century, someone who is still studied today in every seminary and Bible college in the world, well every serious seminary and college. You can grab Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics for Everyone, Volume 1, by Marty Folsom on Amazon right now, or head to ZondervanAcademic.com for more.

In Tanzania over a third of girls are married before the age of 18. It's often because there aren't many other options, almost 70% of children aged 14 to 17 in the country aren't enrolled in secondary education and in a culture that doesn't highly value women, school is a really low priority for them. It's considered much more useful for a girl to be managing the home than traveling the often long distances to go to school. So they're pushed to be a homemaker as soon as possible.

Anglican Aid is working to prevent this. With local Christians, in Tarime in the Mara region of Tanzania what they're doing is offering local young women an alternative. They want to build the Tarime girls secondary school, which when complete will offer places to about 800 girls, giving them the opportunity to complete their secondary education, keeping them at school and avoiding young marriages.

You can help Anglican Aid in this important work, valuing women and championing education. It's an organization I really trust. Go to AnglicanAid.org.au to give today.

Speaker 8:

On our world lead, now Vladimir Putin taunted at the West during his speech today, and a dig at the United States, Putin declared an end to what he called the unipolar world. He also claimed Western

efforts to crush Russia's economy have failed. He has a point there, earlier this week, the New York Times cited a study showing that Russia's oil revenue is soaring despite Western sanctions. Putin additionally insisted his military will achieve all of its goals in Ukraine and if those goals include reducing almost everything to rubble, he's also on target with that assessment, an advisor to the mayor of...

John Dickson:

That's a clip from CNN back in June, 2022, reporting a combative speech from Russian president, Vladimir Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. After six months of bloody war that has seen the death of more than 10,000 people, including thousands of civilians, there's not much sympathy outside Russia for its president, which brings us to our next question.

Tracy:

Hi John, Tracy here from Perth and thank you so much for the podcast that you do. My question is I'm struggling with the war in Ukraine and as a Christian, we are meant to love everyone. So how do we love Vladimir Putin?

John Dickson:

Wow. I have the same difficulty. I even catch myself sometimes wishing for Putin's speedy demise. I probably shouldn't broadcast that. Anyway, but then I try to analyse that situation and my own motives. There is of course, something righteous about revenge. We often forget that God isn't against revenge. He just insists that he's the one who's best place to pull it off. Vengeance is mine says the Lord, the point being, we shouldn't take revenge because we'll inevitably get it wrong. But the revenge instinct can often be a righteous thing.

Okay. So what about Putin? When I return to the core idea of love, I can find a way to love Putin even without liking him and even wishing God would take revenge on him. In a recent episode, I can't remember exactly when, I discussed the definition of love given by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, he said that we love in so far as we will the good of the other and work for it. I think that's helpful. I don't have to feel warm and fuzzy about Putin, but I do have to wish for his good and his good is precisely that he discovers where he's wrong and pursues the path of peace.

So the way I love Putin is to wish for him to come to his senses and to work for that in my prayers.

Kaley Payne:

We're moving on now to answering a few questions about our recent episode on transgender, which is actually our most downloaded episode ever on the podcast. We did a live Q and A back in June for our Undeceptions+ subscribers specifically on this episode, we were overwhelmed with questions afterwards. It's such a complicated topic and the episode certainly gave me a starting point from which to think more deeply. Here's two questions we received from Susan and Kate. They can take it from here.

Speaker 10:

My question is so what now, if we are looking after one another and compassionate towards one another, regardless of their gender identity, then what would the Bible say about those gender identities that are not with their birth gender into marrying? What now? Is it classified as a homosexual relationship then? Does God recognize the validity of such a marriage or a union?

Speaker 11:

Where do gender diverse people who identify as non-binary fit into the discussion? And secondly, how should we approach pastoral care for gender diverse Christians who desire a romantic relationship, for example, a trans woman with a cisgender man. Thanks.

John Dickson:

Thank you for these questions. They are really important ones. In fact, in a section of the interview with Dana that we didn't end up playing for the sake of time, I did ask her what she thought about marriage and her prospects and so on, but I don't want to speak for her at this point. I just want to acknowledge that you've asked the right, good next question.

Let me give you my own view for what it's worth. My hunch is that for genuinely intersex people that is people with Klinefelter syndrome where their sex remains profoundly indeterminate, I reckon we need to let them choose their romantic partner based on their perception of who they are and who their complimentary sex partner should be. And this is because there's no actual way of conclusively determining whether they're male or female, but I must admit, I feel very differently about both transgender people, that is people who identify as something other than their biological sex and also about non-binary people, that is people who say they have no gender or sex, because I am a sex realist.

I believe the body really matters and does determine our life course to a high degree. Personally, I couldn't conduct the wedding of a transgender woman to another male or for someone who says they're non-binary though they're biologically male. I couldn't marry them to another woman.

As I've said many times before on the podcast, I think the only logical and wise understanding of marriage is that it's between a man and a woman, that is the only kind of human relationship that is oriented toward creating and nurturing shared offspring. None of which though should change how I personally interact with people who see things differently and then act differently. The principle of compassion, just like the principle of conviction never has to be sacrificed.

Kaley Payne:

Our next question is from Owen, a good one, having just heard about how to respond with love to people who are struggling because so often Christians have gotten our responses wrong. Here's Owen.

Owen:

Hi John. I have a question. I teach religion courses at the college level in a secular environment, and I have many students who have been hurt by either Christianity / the church or by groups that they believe are Christianity / the church. And I'm just curious, any advice on how to be with someone who has experienced that hurt and perhaps be a part of their healing journey to where they may even come to a point where they could trust in Jesus. Thanks.

John Dickson:

Wow, Owen, thanks for that. And thanks for your work. It's always really sad to hear the ways that Christians have made it difficult for people to see the truth and the beauty of Christ. I wrote a whole book on that called Bullies and Saints. I don't mean to turn this into an ad, but you might find some resources in there for your own thinking and caring for others.

For now, I think all I can say is two things. First, it sounds like you are coming alongside these people with great sympathy and a listening ear and that has to be the first, second and third approach. Please keep doing it as I'm sure you will.

The second practical thing I'd say is that it's important that people know that Jesus himself is outraged at the behavior of Christians who hurt people in his name. It isn't just a secular tradition to expose and criticize religious hypocrites. It's a tradition going back to Jesus, no one was more outspoken against religious abuse than Jesus was. Pointing people to this Jesus, the one we find in the gospels railing against the hypocrites, maybe that's the path toward faith for wounded people. And as people turn their attention to Jesus in this way and find themselves trusting him, it will slowly dawn on them that this same Jesus also envisaged a community of his followers embodying his love and hopefully this realization will allow them to give church a second chance.

Kaley Payne:

This question was sent to us by Tom asking about episode 59, The Refugee. Thanks director Mark.

Mark Hadley:

I found your episode on refugees troubling as I felt that it left some of the key issues unresolved. In Australia, the debate around refugees focuses mostly on how we treat refugees and asylum seekers who are not granted permanent protection in Australia. In the episode, you talked about a Christian response, not necessarily being open borders, but that it should involve significantly increasing the number of refugees Australia accepts. However, whenever we draw a line, there will be people who will be turned away. So my question is, do you think it's un-Christian to turn away any refugee who wants to reside permanently in Australia?

John Dickson:

This is so difficult. In some ways it's the same moral dilemma we all face with the money that we have in our pockets and bank accounts. Is it ever right to refuse, to use our surplus to help the poor? My own

attempt to resolve this one is to ask myself, am I trying to be generous to others in proportion to my wealth? And also am I being generous to the point where it hurts just a little bit, where it actually affects my life.

If I feel I'm adopting these principles, I don't have a bad conscience when I decline to assist another charitable cause that wants my resources. Something like this might apply to refugees. Yes, there are way more refugees than we can possibly accept into Australia or wherever. And we have limited resources, but given our great wealth in this country, I'm suggesting we could do a lot more. We could certainly afford to double or triple our refugee intake.

I certainly don't think the average Australian is hurting a little bit because of our refugee policies. So I'd say if we were more generous in our refugee intake, in proportion to our country's wealth, and if we actually felt it a bit, I think we could in good conscience, turn other people away.

Kaley Payne:

This question was recorded by someone who didn't leave their name. So hello if you're listening and recognize your voice. It's a question I reckon most of us have asked at some point.

Speaker 13:

If God can actually see our hearts, what's the point of praying to him, because when we actually pray to him we are saying what's in our hearts, but if God does know everything, what's the point in praying to him?

John Dickson:

Many, many people have asked this question because it's a really good one. The idea behind it is that everything is determined. So prayer has no function beyond perhaps aligning us with God's purpose. We can look at it the other way around though. What's the point of praying to God if he doesn't know everything, a God who doesn't know everything, can't possibly answer our prayers because he himself would be speculating about the consequences of his mighty actions.

I prefer to think that because God knows everything and can do everything it makes sense for us who don't and can't to bring our humble requests to him, knowing that his knowledge of all things is precisely what enables him to answer our prayers. It doesn't matter that he knew what I would pray for and he knew the way he would answer it, in prayer we are still ourselves participating in God's ordering and working of the world.

There is a lovely passage in a CS Lewis essay about all of this. I have all of his essays on high rotation in my audio books. Here's what he wrote in a 1945 essay titled *Work and Prayer*. And believe it or not, the essay was printed in his now out of print collection of essays titled *Undeceptions*. Woo hoo.

Anyway, here's the quote. I dug it out. It goes like this. "It may be a mystery why God should have allowed us to cause real events at all, but it is no odder that he should allow us to cause them by praying

than by any other method. Pascal says that God instituted prayer in order to allow his creatures the dignity of causality. It would perhaps be truer to say that he invented both prayer and physical action for that purpose. He gave us small creatures the dignity of being able to contribute to the course of events in two different ways. He made the matter of the universe, such that we can in those limits, do things to it. That is why we can wash our hands and feed or murder our fellow creatures.

Similarly, he made his own plan or plot of history, such that it admits a certain amount of free play and can be modified in response to our prayers. If it is foolish and impudent to ask for victory in a war on the ground that God might be expected to know best, it would be equally foolish and impotent to put on a Mackintosh, a raincoat, does not God know best whether you ought to be wet or dry?"

Kaley Payne:

Our second last question comes from Emma, who very helpfully is bringing us back to Jesus as we wind down. Thanks director Mark.

Mark Hadley:

Emma asks, hearing John talk in a lot of episodes about the amazing sacrifice of Jesus dying for us, a question came to my mind that I've been thinking about for a long while. We often talk about the greatness of Jesus sacrifice for us by dying on the cross and how that's the ultimate expression of love. But Jesus knew that he was going to be raised to life again, so was he really losing anything?

A similar situation for Christians who die for their faith. It doesn't feel that difficult of a sacrifice. If you believe that you are going to end up in a much better place, namely eternal life with Jesus, it could almost be seen as I know it has been in history as escaping this messed up world.

For me, I felt the bigger demonstration of love would be dying permanently. The willingness to sacrifice your whole existence. No promise of resurrection. Now that would be purely selfless, right? I feel like I'm missing some key point about Jesus and what he's done with this view. So I'd love to be undeceived in this.

John Dickson:

It's funny you should ask this because I had exactly the same question of my school teacher who shared the gospel with me back when I was circling Christianity. I can't exactly remember what she said, but it was something along the lines of what Jesus faced was far more than physical torture and death. The apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 5 said, "God made him who had no sin," that's Christ, "to be sin for us."

Now I can hardly plum the depths of all that means, but it at least means that the agony of Christ's death had to do with something more cosmic than bodily pain and shed blood. It had to do with the infinite and holy innocent son of God bearing and even in some strange sense, becoming the sin of the whole world. The love involved here, isn't just that Jesus was willing to endure hardship for a little while, it's the outrage of absolute majesty and purity experiencing crushing defilement for those who deserve nothing.

Mark Hadley:

Katie asks, I'm wondering if there's anything that is objectively only found in the Christian religion. I've heard many preachers or amateur apologists say something like only in Christianity does God become man or only Christianity has the concept of grace. However, I know at least the first one is not true as other religions have a story of a God becoming a man. Are there any things that only Christianity has?

John Dickson:

Thanks for that question. I used to feel passionate about demonstrating the uniqueness of Christianity. And then I heard Miroslav Volf, the Yale theologian and guest on this show argue that there is no particular virtue in uniqueness. What's more, I've always been struck by the argument of CS Lewis. Yes, Lewis again, that he prefers to think of Christianity as the ultimate true myth. The myth that confirms and fulfills all of the myths of humanity. His idea was that God loved and directed all humanity through all of time. So that despite human waywardness, there was always a glimmer of God's truth across every culture. I love that idea.

And I think the apostle Paul strongly affirms it in Acts, chapter 17 when he says that God determined where each society should live with a view to them seeking him and that even though they turned to the superstition of idol worship, some of ancient Greece's best poets, Paul says, got things exactly right and he quotes two of them when he says, "In God we live and breathe and have our being." That's a pagan poet. And then, "We are God's offspring." Again, that's a pagan poet.

So the first thing I want to say is that uniqueness doesn't really matter. Truth is what matters. Christianity is true in a way in which other religions are signposts to the truth, as well as blockades. That said, I do happen to think there are three unique thoughts within Christianity.

First, it's centrally focused on historical events. The core of the faith is about a man who lived in knowable time and space, who did certain things, who said certain things who died by order of the fifth governor of Judea and rose again, to be seen by people. This is a radical departure from the claims of every other religion, which usually focus on dreams or insights, divine dictation, visions, and so on.

Secondly, I sort of agree with the apologists you criticize in your question, the incarnation properly understood is unique so far as I know. It's not uncommon to have appearances of deities in human form. This happens in Greek mythology, as well as Hindu religion, but never are these human apparitions actual bodily human beings and never are they the embodiment of the fullness of God. They are always avatars of aspects of divinity. This is partly why Christianity had such a difficult time convincing Greeks and Romans in the first few centuries that the eternal God had become fully human.

And thirdly, and finally, I don't actually see the Christian doctrine of grace present in any of the other major religions of the world. Islam believes in a merciful and forgiving God, yes, but everywhere in the Quran, it said that God forgives in response to our deeds of charity, our prayers, and so on.

Likewise in Hinduism, the most popular path of salvation, the easiest path is bhakti, where your favourite God will as an act of kindness, deliver you from the ocean of birth, death and rebirth, but it's in return for your consistent devotion to that God.

While both of these Islamic and Hindu concepts speak of salvation and kindness, they never go so far as to say what Christianity says as the apostle Paul puts it in Titus, chapter three, one of my favourite passages. "When the kindness and love of God, our saviour appeared in Jesus, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy."

But as I say, if you don't like any of that, just remember that uniqueness isn't a special virtue and the wonder of Christianity is the way it fulfills the hopes of all humanity.

Kaley Payne:

We got so many questions that I asked John to answer a few more that we're making available for our Undeceptors, those subscribers to Undeceptions+, questions like what's with Israel's special position in the Bible? How might Christians fight against abortion without protesting at abortion clinics? And even if Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, why didn't the emperors that came after just revert Rome back to paganism?

We're also releasing the audio of our Undeceptions+ live Q and A where John answered a bunch more questions a few months back about transgender. If you want to hear some of that bonus content and tons of other extras, you can become one of our Undeceptors, just head to undeceptions.com/plus.

By the way, if you are playing along in our August competition celebrating 1 million downloads of the podcast our very last in-episode code word is question. And now I get to say it. Yes, I do. See ya.

Ooh, the credits. Let's see if I can do this from memory now. 1, 2, 3. Undeceptions is hosted by John Dixon produced by me, Kaley Payne, and directed by the unquestioning Mark Hadley. Editing by Richard Hamwi. Social media by Sophie Hawkshaw, administration by Lyndie Leviston. Our online librarian is Siobhan McGuinness.

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John Dickson:

An Undeceptions podcast.