

VIDEO

John Dickson (studio)

That's a report from *TODAY*, covering a recent US Congressional hearing about sightings of Unidentified Aerial Phenomena (UAP for short).

We know them better as UFOs.

I admit I find it weird that *aliens* are being discussed semi-seriously by the US Congress.

The idea of real-life E.T. is fun to consider - but it also gets nutty pretty quickly. And it raises theological questions.

Now, I'm not one for alien stuff usually - but I make an exception for the Undeceptions end-of-season Q&A episode!

How we think about God and Martians is just one of a bunch of questions we've received from you guys this season.

We'll also be covering some Old Testament History, casting an eye over what the Bible says about modern nation-states, and even exploring the origins of the devil.

I'm John Dickson, and welcome to our tenth Q&A episode of Undeceptions.

QUESTION 1

Our first question is anonymous - but it's one we've been meaning to cover for a while on the show.

A mysterious listener asks:

*With the US claiming the presence of Aliens....
there are so many questions!*

How does this affect the Christian belief system?

Does God love aliens too? Are Aliens angels?

What does this mean going forward if the bible teaches us that we are made in God's image??

ANSWER 1

Okay, the first thing to say is that I don't believe alien life is a statistical probability. You sometimes hear that kind of reasoning, even from christians, who reckoned that because the universe is so vast there is just a general likelihood that on one of the planets somewhere there will be other life forms. But I don't reckon life, or any kind of existence, is a matter of statistics. Everything that exists exists by the will of the mind behind the universe. For me, this is philosophically axiomatic. Nothing comes from nothing. The fact that there is something rather than nothing is, to my mind, only explained by the prior existence of something eternal, non material, and volitional, something with a will. In other words, God wills everything into existence and maintains its existence in every moment. So, if there are aliens, it's got nothing to do with statistical likelihood, and everything to do with God willing them into existence.

Now, I am perfectly open to God doing that. I wouldn't even be surprised if God has done that. But I don't think that poses any problem to orthodox Christianity or to the

notion that we are made in God's image or anything like that.

If God has made other creatures, it follows that he has a similar relationship to them that he has with any other creature on our planet or at the bottom of the ocean. God wills them into existence and he relates to them as an artist to a work of art. If those creatures happened to be sentient, I think that relationship is even two way. You may remember our episode on animals, where I toyed with the idea, grounded somewhat in scripture, that animals, in their own way, have a relationship with God, a kind of primal dependence and wonder toward the Cause of all things.

And if on other planets there are intelligent creatures who have a conscious awareness of God, I'm with CS Lewis in assuming that it is possible they have not fallen out of relationship with God and that they live in a state of perpetual unity with God—sort of like the angels, I suppose—and that they don't need redemption in the sense that we know it, again, just like the angels. But they are no less dependent on God for their existence.

But maybe those creatures are fallen, just like us, and they do need redemption. CS Lewis also wondered this. Could it be that Christ's redemptive work here on earth

was effective elsewhere in the universe? Possibly. Now we are really speculating.

All I really know is that, whatever exists, exists at the pleasure of the creator, and that the creator loves all his works, and that whatever we discover to be true about this in the future will simply underscore this divine love.

QUESTION 2

Our next question is “heaven” focused, and it comes from 10-year-old Peter! Here he is:

“If you have free will in heaven, how can it be that no one ever sins?”

ANSWER 2

Hey, Peter. Good question.

The simple answer is the Holy Spirit. In God's Kingdom, or what you call heaven, all of creation, including we ourselves, will receive the full outpouring, enveloping of God's life giving spirit.

We only have a deposit now, a small down payment. In the Kingdom everything is animated by the spirit. That is

the guarantee of our walking in fellowship with each other and with God and with creation itself, always.

That is not the case with our life now. Right now, we and creation are part of a decaying world. And part of that decay is our own wills, which are not powerful enough fully to obey. We will need God's full gift of the Spirit to do that. So, right now, you might be able to say to yourself, "I don't every want to sin again!" But the fact is: you will, and you know you will. I certainly know I will. But in the kingdom, in the power of the Spirit, I will not only be able to decide not to sin, I will be able to pull this off.

The obvious follow up question, then, is: Why didn't God start things this way, instead of going through the troubles of this time in creation?

The only way I can get my head around this is to think of things in terms of a story. The best stories move through a period of tension and battle, climaxing in resolution and relief. These stories are inherently more satisfying than a story which starts with the happy ending and just continues on like that.

I'm not saying we're all just living in a story. But I am saying that whatever it is that makes stories more beautiful for having moved from tension to resolution is

a faint analogy of why God might choose the path he has chosen for this creation, where now we don't have the full power to love God as fully as we want to, but in the future kingdom, because of the full gift of the Spirit, we will have that power.

Producer Kaley

We'll be back with more great questions after this short break.

READING

*“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of suffering.” - **1 Peter 5: 8-9***

John Dickson (studio)

That's a reading from the first Epistle of Peter.

It's addressed to Christians suffering persecution in the Roman Empire - specifically in Galatia, Cappadocia, and Bithynia (basically Turkey).

Peter is urging Christians in these areas to live obediently to God ... and he warns them that a real threat is posed to them by THE DEVIL HIMSELF!

Talking about the Devil like this is weird for modern readers; Western culture usually associates "The Devil" with folk tales, horror movies, and religious fanatics.

However, the Bible is pretty clear.

The Devil - Satan - is real, and he is active.

So ... why don't we talk about this *more*?

That's the thrust of our next question.

QUESTION 3

Chris asks:

"Should we still talk about Satan or the Devil, and in what context? Clearly, in the Bible, Jesus and others frequently referred to Satan as a person and tempter, but this seems to have fallen out of current Christian dialogue. Even the Lord's Prayer now says to deliver us from evil, not 'the evil one'.

"Is it because references to Satan/the Devil are not fashionable, and sound archaic, or are we saying that sin comes from somewhere else, like our innate rebellion against God or just our fallen human nature?"

ANSWER 3

I am sure there is a bit of embarrassment about the devil and Satan and all that in modern Christian circles. And I think part of that is because for the last 50 or so years, the media has portrayed the devil as a ridiculous figure. I can hardly say the word devil without thinking of a couple of Simpsons episodes, where the devil appears – as Ned Flanders with horns – and gets Homer to sell his soul for a donut.

If you get enough of this kind of betrayal, it becomes impossible to say the word devil, or Satan, without feeling like an idiot.

That said, these ridiculous portrayals of the devil are really just caricatures, cliches, exaggerations of the idea of the devil in late medieval art. So, in a sense, it's christian's own fault. They first tried to make the devil visually spooky, and then the modern media picked up the idea and ran with it into absurdity!

So I am of the view that we need to find a way to talk about the devil that doesn't trigger those silly images. And, actually, the best way to do this is just to read the Bible. Satan and the devil I mentioned there, but they are not given this ludicrous spooky persona.

In that one Peter passage just read, it is clear that Peter just means that the devil, a real evil being, is somehow behind the physical persecution that Christians are experiencing from Roman authorities. No one was dressed up in a Cape with horns attacking the Christians. It's just that the Romans had very bad ideas, and had believed some terrible rumours about the Christians, and as a result, they mocked Christians and sometimes locked them up and even killed them.

But behind it all is the central work of the devil, according to scripture: to deceive!!

Here's Jesus' famous teaching about the devil:

44 You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies. John 8

The devil harms, even murders, through lies. That makes perfect sense to me, and explains how the devil got the Romans to persecute the Christians, partly by convincing the Romans of terrible moral and religious ideas, and partly by prompting rumours about the Christians. We have ancient evidence of some of those rumours, to do with eating babies, having orgies, and so on. Christians had us hard time in the second and third centuries combating these rumours, but they eventually did. Truth dispelled lies.

We should talk more about the devil. But we should place it in the context of the lies that our world tells ... about violence, sex, unborn babies, money, refugees, power ...

And this is why, for me, the best work outside the Bible on the topic of the devil is the screw tape letters by friend of the pod CS Lewis.

READING

“Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy’s (God’s) ground...He [God] made the pleasure: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy [God] has produced, at at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He [God] has forbidden. ”

Question 4

We’re moving into some Old Testament questions now (thanks to all who tuned into our recent episode on Old Testament Violence!)

First up, we have a two-parter.

Rosey asks:

“It sounds like archaeological evidence is sketchy on whether or not the historical city matches the biblical account of the city of Jericho (from the Book of Joshua). How does archaeology work for events so very far back in the past? And if there really no were walls (or sizable ones at least) to come 'tumbling down' then what does that say about the veracity of the biblical accounts in that period?”

We've also got a similar query on this from Jackson, who got in touch with an audio question.

“I have a question about the historicity surrounding the Exodus narrative ... from my understanding its quite contested, and my question is how do we approach the Old Testament from a historical lens, and how does that affect the way we interpret it as a “ God-breathed” text?”

Over to you JD!

Answer 4

Thanks Rosie, and Jackson,. Look, the truth is there is nowhere near as much historical evidence for things in the Old Testament as there is for things in the New Testament. And that's not an indictment of the Old Testament. It's got to do with the nature of evidence from very different periods of history. There is an explosion of culture, writings, and architecture in the centuries immediately before and immediately after Jesus. As a result, we have, relatively speaking, a wealth of different kinds of evidence. Even so, most specialists would speculate that we probably only have in our hands today less than 1% of the literary and physical remains of the ancient world around the time of Jesus. And it's from that 1% that we have to make our judgments about things. 99% of the evidence is missing, which means we have to be really careful denying things that simply aren't mentioned in our 1%. How can you deny something when almost all of the evidence is missing?

And if that is true for the period around the 1st century it is doubly quadruply true of 10 centuries earlier, the period of king david, or 13 centuries earlier, the period of the exodus and conquest of Jericho.

Some evidence reminds. There are certainly ruins of giant walls around Jericho. It's just that things are so

fragmentary there is a lot of room for debate with perhaps a majority of scholars being somewhat skeptical about the biblical narrative and a solid minority of scholars who think the evidence supports, or at least is not contradictory of, the biblical evidence.

The same is true for the exodus. There is very little evidence for the exodus. But there is very little evidence of anything at all from 1300 BC. If there is 1% of surviving evidence from the 1st century, there is probably 1% of 1% of surviving evidence from the 13th century BC. Even still, there are three or four highly relevant pieces of evidence that at least lead some pretty sensible people to the conclusion that the Israelites had at one time been captives in Egypt and did (right around the time the Bible says) find themselves outside of Egypt in the land of Canaan. One of those pieces of evidence is the Merneptah Stela (stone monument) which says “Israel is wasted, its seed is not.” This comes from one of the sons of Ramses II, the possible Pharaoh of the Exodus story.

But here’s the thing: we did a whole episode on this. So, instead of letting me mash the details, go to Ep.46 The Exodus, with James K. Hoffmeier, Professor of Old Testament and Near Eastern Archaeology at Trinity

International University. It was a really compelling interview.

Question 5

We're staying in the Old Testament for our next question, which comes from Alison.

She writes:

"Hi there Undeceptions Team,

"A dear friend and I often have chats about the seeming misogynist perspective of the Old Testament writings. We love the bible, but there are some tough parts of the OT to grapple with as a Christian woman living in 2023. We grieve over stories of violence against women that don't seem to be explicitly condemned. Certain laws also would seem to perpetuate power imbalances between women (Deuteronomy 22:13-19) and seem to paint women as of little worth (Gen 19:7-8) or like property (Deuteronomy 21:10-14).

Men who are highly regarded by God (David and Solomon) seemed to treat women like objects. We are

curious why the protection of women wasn't a clearer mandate of living as part of God's chosen people. How do women read the bible without feeling angry and forgotten by God?

Thanks so much for the amazing work you produce, which is always thoughtful, kind and humble!"

Answer 5

Alison, your question is a good one. I feel the awkwardness as a man when I read these texts. I can only imagine what it feels like for you and your friends.

I don't claim to be able to resolve all these issues. That's not me just trying to be, what did you say, "kind and humble" or something. I just mean it. The older I get, the more comfortable i am not being able to resolve everything. I've come to realize that the ocean of things I don't know is probably about 100 times larger than I thought it was when I graduated university (back when I thought there were just a few lakes and ponds of knowledge to sail around).

So, when it comes to things like this, I often just ask myself is there enough solid and good stuff on the positive side of Ledger for me not to Chuck my faith in over the negative things. My answer is invariably yes.

And it invariably has to do with the solidness of Jesus himself, who, it's pretty clear, loved the Old Testament and thought it was God's word. I find myself willing to trust that he held the oceans of knowledge that I can barely glimpse.

But there's probably a little more to say than that.

For one thing, it is a basic principle of interpretation, especially of the Old Testament, that the Bible frequently reports things without condemning them because they are part of a larger matrix of teaching that helps the reader to know that we are not reading a moral example. I think of the Old Testament judge Jephthah (Judges 11-12) who pledges to offer and sacrifice the first thing he sees if the Lord gives him victory in a battle. It turns out to be his daughter. Or that horrible story of the concubine who was abused all night in judges chapter 19, then left for dead, then chopped up into bits and sent around Israel. When you're reading the book of judges, your mouth is just dropping, and you have little indication that the book is critiquing these awful events. Not until you get to the very end when you read this interesting little expression, "in those days Israel had no king everyone did as they saw fit!" That little bit at the end functions as a clue to Reading the whole thing. It turns out we are meant to read these

repugnant examples of human behavior as departures of God's will.

I reckon something like this holds for the examples you give. Genesis 19 has a man offer his daughters to the crowd. If we read this in the light of the whole Old Testament law, not to mention the whole Bible including the New Testament, we are meant to be shocked at this behaviour, even if, within the narrative, it is not criticized.

Then there are a few exceptions to this, where such behaviour is criticised. These should then provide the clues to Reading all the other stories. You mention King David, the most powerful man in the world, using and abusing women. I suppose you mean Bathsheba. David spots her naked, summons her, has sex with her, which must come very close to ripe, and then kills her husband. But if you turn over a few pages to second Samuel chapter 12, the prophet Nathan does indeed damn David in the strongest prophetic terms.

You explicitly mention one of the trickiest cases, one we mentioned in the episode with Dr Helen Paynter, episode 110, Violent Faith. It's the passage in Deut 21 where the law says Israelites can take female captives of war and marry them, after giving the women a month

to mourn the loss of her family. It's a hard one. In fact, a friend the other night at dinner said, "I wasn't happy with how that passage was dealt with in that episode!!" Hi, Mel, if you're listening!

Christians don't live by this law, of course. All of the Jewish law has been transposed by Christ's law. So, the question is: Would this law have made any sense in the original ancient setting? In particular, would the law have seemed just or bearable to the woman in this setting. I dare to say it would. It was normal to rape women in war. The Israelites were forbidden to do this. Where a pagan soldier chose to marry a woman, there would have been no obligation to wait for the period of mourning. Israelites had to. And, worse, in ancient cultures, if the man decided he didn't like the girl, he could have on-sold her. Deut 21:14 explicitly says Israelites cannot do that. They must let the woman go as a free woman. They must not 'amar' her, which means (mustn't) "treat as merchandise." I venture to say that in an ancient setting, where this woman's family is all killed in war, this kind of treatment, this kind of marriage, would have seemed just—by comparison to ancient standards—and at least bearable. I think. I'm not certain. All I'm certain of is that the new covenant of

Jesus transposes all of this into another key, the key of love and humility.

Alison, that's all I've got. I'm sorry I can't give more. But, as I said, it's Jesus that convinces me, Scripture is true and good, even where I can't find the interpretation that makes that clear. Bless you ...

Producer Kaley

We'll give John another quick breather, and be back with more of your questions in a sec.

John Dickson (studio)

Hey guys - if you've been watching the news chances are you've encountered some pretty strong opinions about our next topic.

We're about to talk about the state of Israel, and what the Bible has to say about it.

We'll be trying our best not to wade into any political or culture war territory here.

But ... Paul has a hot potato question.

Question 6

“I wonder if you can help us how to think of modern-day Israel as opposed to the nation of Israel, and even modern-day Jews. Are those three groups the same? How should we understand biblical promises? Are they to modern-day Israel and modern-day Judaism?”

Answer 6

OK, so this is basically a biblical question. But let me get out of the way my sociopolitical perspective.

I think the modern state of Israel has a right and necessity to exist. I accept that some terrible things were done in 1948, and afterwards, as the state of Israel was founded. The violence that erupted with the UN backed declaration of israel’s establishment led to hundreds of thousands of local Palestinians being displaced ... up to southern Lebanon, across to the West Bank, and down into Gaza. And later conflicts, such as when multiple Arab nations attacked Israel in

1967, the Israel victory led to Israel gaining even more territory and displacing even more people.

But to my mind, none of that removes the social and political necessity of establishing a Jewish state in that historic land following centuries of mistreatment of European Jews and, of course, the catastrophe of the Holocaust. And it should be remembered that while many powerful local groups, like Hamas and Hezbollah, have vowed to destroy Israel, 20% of Israel's citizens, and plenty of members of parliament, are Arab Muslims. Arabs live at peace in the state of Israel in a way that is not true for Jews in any Islamic country today. Just Google 'Jews in Iraq', 'Jews in Lebanon', 'Jews in Egypt', and even 'Jews in Jordan', and you'll see what I mean.

But here's the thing: My views on this are 100% historical and geo-political, and zero % theological.

In fact—to get to your particular question, Paul – I don't think the modern state of Israel has any theological significance at all. Zionism, the political support of a Jewish state, started out in the late 19th century as a secular solution to a European and Middle Eastern problem. It only picked up theological

significance—among Jews and Christians—in the decades that followed.

It is something of a coincidence that political Zionism was picking up steam just as the famous Scofield Bible was published in 1909. In passages like Ezekiel 37, where Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones coming back to life, the notes in the Scofield Bible explicitly describe this as a prophecy about Jews coming out of the nations back to Israel and the nation of Israel begin reborn. And so, when 40 years later, the modern State of Israel was born, fans of the Scofield Bible saw this as a glorious fulfillment of biblical prophecy, and the whole thing spawned an industry of Christian Zionism, where articles, books, and videos were produced interpreting many parts of the Bible as relating to modern Jews and modern Israel.

Let me not be subtle here. I reject all of this.

Just as political Zionism was an invention of the late 19th century, theological Zionism is an invention of the 20th century. It's a brand new idea, in this sweep of Christian history. The fact is: none of the greats of Christian history had anything like a Zionist perspective, not Justin Martyr, not Irenaeus, not Basil the Great, not Augustine, not Aquinas, not Luther or Calvin. It really is

a 19th century phenomenon, that came to full flourishing in the 20th century.

This should make us all suspicious.

I hold the view that was the majority view through virtually all of church history, namely that all of the apparently unfulfilled Old Testament prophecies about the full flourishing of the land of Israel are fulfilled in the promise, both old testament and new testament, of a new creation. The prophecies are not about a new political nation. They are about the culmination of creation, the renewal and surpassing of Eden. After all, that's what the land of Israel in the Old Testament always was: a new Eden pointing forward to the edenic blessing of the whole creation. I think there's no other way to read those Old Testament prophecies if you are wearing New Testament lenses.

As for the Jewish people themselves, I accept what the apostle Paul says in Romans Chapter 11, that descendants of Abraham who do not believe in Christ are—and here I quote—

"As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies for your sake; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, 29 for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. 30 Just as you Gentiles

were at one time disobedient to God and have now received mercy as a result of Jewish disobedience, 31 so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you."

There's a mystery there. In fact, Paul calls it a mystery in this passage. Somehow, descendants of Abraham are peculiarly loved by God (because of his promises to Abraham), and one day—who knows when, who knows how—these descendants of Abraham will receive the same mercy from God that Gentile Christians currently enjoy. They will receive their Messiah.

Question 7

Our next question comes from Joshua, and draws on another excellent podcast!

He asks:

"Dan Carlin on an episode of Hardcore History described early Christians as "ISIS-level fanatics ... in a peaceful sense." Is there a place for Christian fanaticism (in a peaceful sense) ... and do we just send them out on a mission?"

Answer 7

I kind of like Carlin's take on this, Joshua. Christian 'extremism' involves a zealous imitation of Jesus himself. That couldn't be bad for anyone. We can understand how an extreme devotion to a warlord leads nowhere good. An extreme devotion to a political dictator leads to nowhere good. But an extreme devotion to the one whose central story is one of self giving, and the love of enemy, that would be a gift to the world.

Dan Carlin also hits on another thing that has always struck me about the earliest Christians. They were weirdly confident, almost arrogant, while at the same time being humble and cheerful in defeat.

There is a paradox in the mindset of earliest Christianity (you find it right across the sources). Christians were narrow-minded ... and broad-hearted. They were assertive ... and humble.

On the one hand, Christians cheerfully critiqued the 'sacred cows' of Greco-Roman culture, whether idol-worship, sexual decadence, or the excesses of the rich. (The critiques are everywhere, from the New

Testament right through to Saint Augustine). There was no “hiding the ball” on controversial themes! Unlike some contemporary Christians, who think faithfulness is the same as never rocking the boat.

On the other hand, Christians also just as cheerfully accepted mockery and persecution for their views. They often responded by telling their persecutors they were committed to loving them no matter what people did to them. There was a strange submissiveness to the Christian outlook, right alongside the assertiveness.

Fredrich Nietzsche in his *Genealogy of Morals* argued that this early Christian submissiveness and willingness to lose was because they had a ‘slave morality’—where power, nobility, and wealth are viewed with suspicion and the downtrodden are celebrated. His logic was: if you kick a dog often enough, it’ll develop an entirely submissive outlook.

But our ancient sources point in the opposite direction, as I think Dan Carlin rightly hints. Christians walked and talked like they were the winners, not the losers! The wellspring of their ethic of non-retaliation and humility was, in fact, a victor’s mentality, not a ‘slave morality’.

I often read in classes here at Wheaton the open letter of Tertullian, a Christian leader in Carthage, to the

governor of the city, Scapula. It dates to 215, right in the middle of some awful mistreatment of Christians. Listen for the victor's mentality AND the cheerful willingness to put up with suffering:

We are neither dismayed nor greatly disturbed at the persecutions which we suffer from ignorant men, since we joined this way of life with the understanding that we pledged ourselves to enter into the present conflicts at the risk even of our lives. For, we are commanded by the teachings of our religion to love even our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. We, then, are saddened by your ignorance; we have compassion on human error. We worship one God, whom you all know, since nature is your teacher, at whose lightning and thunder you tremble, at whose benefits you rejoice. The rest of the deities you yourselves think to be gods, but we know to be demons. To Scapula 1-2.

There are two clear postures here: There is confidence—almost arrogance—that Christians are right, and the empire is wrong! Yet, there is also a cheerful resolve humbly to love even persecutors.

That's Christian extremism. May there be more of it today!!

Question 8

Our next question relates nicely to the Puritan episode we did recently.

Jim asks:

The Book of Common Prayer has influenced Christian worship ever since it was "published". What is its history? Upon what was it based? How far back can we trace specific works that precede it? I know it uses Psalms so that goes way back. What documents used ... can we trace?

Answer 8

Ha, thanks, Jim. Yes I mentioned the book of common prayer in that episode, only in passing to point out that the Puritans were not big fans. They thought it retained too much from the ancient and medieval. Therefore, it was too Catholic for their tastes.

But this is where I think the Puritans were dead wrong. They weren't wrong that the book of common prayer retained ancient and medieval traditions. They were just

wrong that everything from the Catholic Church is, by definition, tainted.

As we pointed out in our double episode on the Reformation (eps 91-92), the original reformers, luther, calvin and the rest, didn't think they were turning their back on the previous 1500 years of church history. They thought they were reforming, restoring, the actual Catholic faith. It's in that spirit that the English reformers conducted their work, not turning their back on the past simply to have some imagined pure fresh start. They believed that many traditions from the previous Millennium or more were true and could bolster people's dependence on the grace of Christ. As was made clear in that podcast, the reformation was really a renewal of the theology of Saint Augustine in the 5th. In that sense it remained truly Catholic, just not 'roman' catholic.

So, the basic approach of Thomas Cranmer, the principal architect of the english book of common prayer, was to reframe Christian devotion, including rewording some very ancient prayers, in order to make sure that people who used the prayer book would always realise that salvation is a pure gift of God's grace and that even the life of obedience comes as a gift. In fact, even the will to obey is a gift. That's very augustinian, and very book of common prayer.

Let's take a really important part of the prayer book, the so-called litany. This is the oldest part of the prayer book, and it's a simple series of confessions, praises, and petitions, that takes about 15 minutes. In fact just this morning my darling Buff texted me when I asked her how her day was going to say “just done the litany over a nice cup of tea”. For the record, I left her the cup of tea in a thermos when I left early this morning.

Anyway, elements of the litany go right back to basil the great in the 4th century and John chrysostom in the early 5th century. For example, the opening trinitarian petition: “God the father, creator of heaven and earth, have mercy on us. God the son, Redeemer of the world, have mercy on us. God the holy spirit, the strengthener, have mercy on us. Holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, three persons and one God, have mercy on us.” It's an awesome way to start prayer—and it just gets better from there. This originally comes from the ancient Greek church, was eventually adopted by the western Latin church, in other words the roman catholics, and was finally adopted by the English reformers. Good on them. I love the idea of not reinventing the wheel, spiritually speaking.

One of my other favorite prayers comes directly from the 8th century, specifically from Alcuin of York, who

was like the Secretary of Education for Europe under Charlemagne. It reads: “almighty God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden: cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

These are just two very specific examples of the general principle in the prayer book: if it ain't broken don't fix it!

I love the book of common prayer. It is the heartbeat of my daily devotion. When you consider its influence on English speaking Christianity, including today's 80 million Anglicans, who in one way or other still hear from and use the book, the Book of Common Prayer is arguably the most influential single book ever composed in the English language.

Question 9

We've reached our final question - a *really* good one!

It comes from Wendy, on Facebook.

She asks:

I love the 5 minute Jesus spots as it explains simple questions that kids want answers to. How would you explain living a Christian life to primary-aged kids?

Answer 9

Thanks for that, Wendy. I'm glad you like the five minute Jesus. It's funny. When producer Kaylee and director Mark set me down a few years ago to try and convince me to do a podcast, I had about 10 ideas of what the podcast should include. Kaylee and Mark said, nope. That's not the podcast you need to do! And they described instead pretty much what you hear each week now on under sections. But for one idea of mine they let through was, I'm happy to say, the five minute Jesus.

Anyway, how would i explain the Christian life to kids. Well, I start with the idea that I would teach adults: that Christian living is basically a life of gratitude for the grace and mercy of God toward me. I don't mean to get all prayer bookie, but one of my other favorite prayers come on which I say pretty much every morning, captures this perfectly. It says "we pray, Lord, give us I do sense of all your mercies, that our hearts may be

truly thankful and that we made it clear your praise not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service ...” In other words, devotion to God is the overflow of a heart that is thankful for God's mercies. It's not about chasing God's mercy to earn it. It's about joy in God's mercy that makes you want to obey.

so that's the principle.

How would I describe it to kids? Fun fact from the Dixon household. We were so keen to impress this point on our kids when they were young that we used to even joke about it. Having taught them repeatedly that salvation is a gift and that obedience is a response to that gift, we sometimes, out of the blue, would say i haven't quotes well, if you don't do this, God won't love you!” And we would wait for the kids to spot the error or noticed the wry smile on our face, and they would invariably say something like, “no way, dad, that's not how it works!” Teaching the doctrine and then joking about its opposite has left my children (now in their late teens and 20s) with a pretty high sensitivity to anything that smacks of mere do-good-ism.

Anyway, that's not really what you asked. That's just for free! I think for primary aged children, the way forward is

to offer analogies from daily life to explain the difference between striving to win something and joyfully responding to a gift. For example, you could ask them to imagine how they feel when there's a big school test, or when they have to give a speech in class, or when they are trying out for a sports team, or something like that. That feeling is what most religion is about. Trying your hardest to win a spot on God's team. Then, by contrast, ask them about how they feel when someone they love does something awesome for them. It could be the best gift they've ever had at Christmas or birthdays. It could be inviting them to some wonderful party or fun park. Asked them how they feel like treating that person, the gift giver, in that moment. In their own words, they will surely speak of gratitude inspiring love and kindness toward the loved one. That's what the Christian life is like. It's a life of joyful love toward God and his other creatures because of all that he has done for me.