

John Dickson

In January 2002, American President George W. Bush delivered a weighty State of the Union address.

In the previous year, America had seen the horror of terrorism play out on its shores, most memorably on 9/11.

The attacks led to the declaration of war “on terror”, and less than a month later, the US spearheaded a NATO invasion of Afghanistan to flush out the perpetrators.

Now a wartime leader, President Bush used the next State of the Union to make a serious point about America’s enemies.

“Axis of Evil” was a deliberate callback to the term “Axis Powers”, used to describe Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan in WWII.

60 years later, President Bush redrew these lines - the Communist, nuclear weapon-wielding dictatorship of North Korea, Saddam Hussein-led Iraq, and terrorist-backing, up-and-coming nuclear power, Iran.

Evil had again reared its ugly head, and America was meeting it head-on.

But like beauty, evil is in the eye of the beholder - and for the eyes of many beholders in the Middle East, *America* was the evil one.

Even now, the US is referred to as the “Great Satan” by some Iranian politicians, while the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in the first part of the 21st century saw the rise of a new wave of Islamic Extremism that still threatens to destabilise the region.

‘Evil’ is a slippery term.

Paul's letter to the Romans urges Christians to “overcome evil with good”.

But what is evil? Where does it come from? If God is sovereign over everything, why does it exist all? Even weirder: Does evil exist?

We've received a bunch of questions and challenges around this theme lately – and it's just one of the tricky topics we're going to hit ... in this ... our season 12 Q&A!

I'm John Dickson, and this is *Undeceptions*.

READING

8 Now the LORD God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. **9** The LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

...

15 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **16** And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; **17** but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.”

Producer Kaley

That's a few verses from chapter 1 of the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

It relates to our first question, which was emailed in by Denise. Here's her question:

- For years, I've struggled with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and the fact that it is a **created** thing. Since everything is created by God, in creating this tree—a living organism that has life in itself—does that mean evil is a created thing and that it is created by God? I understand that God is not evil, but being God, would He create evil as an aspect of man's free will? Because how can something that exists—in this case, evil—not be a created thing? If evil was not created, does that mean goodness is not a created thing either?

PS. John Brearley asked a similar question about evil:

How do we explain evil? It aint beautiful! Did God create an algorithm with a glitch? Or did he see that there was a place for evil to be created (engineered in) in order for mankind to know that God is sovereign over all – and can use all of it for his good purpose?

And this is the point where I say, I'm glad I'm not the one answering the questions.

John Dickson

Denise. There's a host of questions wrapped up in that question, and none of them is easy. First, I should explain how I read the tree of the Knowledge of good and Evil in Genesis. I don't think it was a real tree. I reckon that whole narrative functions more like a parable than concrete history that won't surprise.

Some listeners, I'm sure. The tree of life, the other tree there, represents the fact that human beings are inherently mortal. They're not immortal and need

to depend on the life of God for sustenance. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is also a metaphor, but it's a metaphor for the decision between good and evil.

It doesn't mean discerning good and evil. The whole story already assumes that Adam has moral discernment. He knows God told him it would be wrong to eat from that tree, so that can't be what it means. The word knowledge here refers to deciding between good and evil based on personal assessment rather than listening to the word of the creator.

So the whole narrative is actually about the way humans from the beginning were capable of refusing God's account of the good and evil and choosing for themselves what is right and wrong. And all of this leads me to say That it is not the case that God created a tree as an actual thing designed to lead Adam and Eve astray.

The tree simply represents the flip side of the very good reality that God gave humanity the capacity to reject the good. And this is one of the key insights of ancient theology, going back to St. Augustine, boom. Evil is nothing. Evil is no thing. What I mean is, evil doesn't exist as an independent entity.

It's rather a perversion of the good that does exist. The technical language for this is privation. Although evil has real consequences in the world, evil in itself is nothing but a departure from, or diminishing of, the good. Evil is darkness compared to light. There's a very real sense in which light is a thing, but darkness isn't.

It's simply the absence of light. Same with hate. Hate is a thing. Cold is, almost definitionally, The absence of hate or music. That's a thing, but silence is the absence of music. Goodness, love, grace. These are all things. Evil is the privation, the decaying, the corruption of goodness, love, and grace. We may say that God created the condition of evil.

That is the ability for humans to refuse the good, but that condition is in itself a good. It's the corrupting of that good that we call evil.

Director Mark

On November 1, 1755, a massive earthquake shook the Portuguese city of Lisbon, the capital of the wealthy Portuguese empire. The six-minute long upheaval crumpled cathedrals and buried neighbourhoods. Within the hour, a six-metre high tsunami crashed into the city's waterfront, all but levelling what was left.

By some estimates, the earthquake killed almost 50,000 people in a single day. It fell on All Saint's Day, an important celebration in Western Christianity at the time. Thousands were buried in the rubble of cathedrals. Many saw the natural disaster as a punishment from God.

Like many philosophers of the time, French philosopher Voltaire reflected on the carnage, unable to see the earthquake as compatible with a good, all-powerful God. How could a good God allow such suffering?

"The problem of good and evil remains an inexplicable chaos for those who seek in good faith," he wrote.

We've touched on these issues before on the podcast – you can have a listen to Episode 67 'On Suffering' or even Episode 82 'On Animals' for more. But our next question is from Dan, who I don't think really intended it as a question, but we've taken it as one... here it is:

- Consider this. How would the world look and function any differently if there is no God? Would there still be earthquakes and tornadoes and hurricanes and volcanoes if there is no God? Yes of course there would be. So please explain, how an all-knowing, all-loving God

created an earth that's trying to kill us. Why did the Christian God (if he's real), put in place natural disasters and all kinds of disease that is trying to eliminate human life? Christians, please try to use your common sense. Your God is not responsible for this, because your God is not real! God is man-made. Religion is man-made. Christians cannot reconcile the problem of evil and natural disasters.

John Dickson

That's awesome. And certainly your argument has been made by a lot of thoughtful people through history. So Well done. The first thing you ask is what would the world look like if there were no God and you pretty much say it would look like the world we have with all the earthquakes and so on. I need to stop you there and say, without God there wouldn't be anything.

The only reason there is something is that there is an eternal. first cause, which has lent existence to the other things. Pure being, which has graced existence to other beings. So that part of your question seems like a misunderstanding. On the classical understanding of God's existence, your question is like posing you.

What question would I be asking if I didn't exist? Doesn't make sense. But your main point is an argument to God's non existence from the existence of evil. And I reckon it's mistaken on a few fronts. The interesting thing is you'll find that atheist philosophers will agree with what I'm about to say on this problem.

The simple problem is, We just don't know that a good God would choose to end all suffering. We might be able to say that an all powerful God could end suffering, that seems perfectly logical, but there's no logical necessity to concluding that an all good God would end suffering. We may have a strong intuition or emotional feeling that God should end our pain.

That's perfectly understandable, but there's no way for us to demonstrate that a God of infinite wisdom and goodness couldn't have a pain. wise and good reasons for allowing suffering. After all, you and I permit all sorts of moderate forms of pain for moderate good ends. Think of the pain of a great workout, the pain of many medicines, the pain we accept as penalties.

For our children, or more seriously, the pain that we will inflict on criminals. Now, don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying that God allows our pains as penalties or as a workout or as medicine. But what I'm saying is if we can easily think of examples where moderate pain is permissible for moderate, but superior goods or ends, it's obvious that An infinitely wise and good God could have infinitely superior good ends for allowing suffering to exist in our world.

So the attempt to use suffering as a proof against the existence of a good, powerful, wise God just doesn't succeed as a piece of logic, even though I acknowledge it has real emotional force. So let's flip it around. It's just as logical to point out that an all good God would have to have very good reasons for allowing suffering to continue.

And therefore, given that suffering does exist, God must have very good reasons for allowing it. See, the logic can cut both ways. Your reasoning is a reflection on suffering that really starts with the assumption that God couldn't exist. My reasoning is a reflection on suffering that starts from the assumption that God does exist.

So, first, we have to work out what's going on. Whether there are good reasons prior to the question of suffering to think that an eternal powerful mind exists behind the universe. And I think the answer is absolutely. And with that in place, my reasoning about suffering is actually more logical than yours.

God must have extremely good reasons. Ends. in mind for permitting suffering. But there's something else to point out. The atheist is actually in a much worse position than the believing Christian when confronted by the

pain of the world. Atheism has no standard by which to judge one thing good and another thing evil.

As soon as you declare something to be evil, you assume there must be a standard of good, but how can you have an objective standard of good if there is no eternal goodness? Really, you're simply left with the observation, I don't like that earthquake. That's really all that's going on here. This is a point made really well by the Yale philosopher, theologian Miroslav Volf.

I want to read something he wrote. The very protest against God in the face of evil. in fact presupposes God's existence. Why are we disturbed about the brute and blind force of tsunamis that snuff out people's lives? If the world is all there is, and the world with moving tectonic plates is a world in which we happen to live, what's there to complain about?

We can mourn. We've lost something terribly dear, but we can't really complain. And we certainly can't legitimately protest. The expectation that the world should be a hospitable place with no devastating mishaps is tied to the belief that the world ought to be constituted in a certain way. And that belief, Volf goes on, as distinct from the belief that the world just is, is itself tied.

To the notion of a creator. And that brings us to God. It is God who makes possible our protest that there is evil in the world. And it is God against whom we protest. He concludes, God is both the ground of the protest and its target. Almost paradoxically, We protest with God, against God.

Producer Kaley

In 2022, astrophysicist and astronomer Royal Martin Rees told a reporter that the 21st century is special because it may be the one where humans destroy ourselves.

We have always been pretty interested in the end of the world. And we had a good look at why in episode 34, 'World's End' - go have a listen.

The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has kept its Doomsday Clock at 90 seconds to midnight in 2024. The group cited the war in Ukraine and Gaza, nuclear escalation, climate change and the acceleration of artificial intelligence as key factors in their decision to keep the clock set at the closest to global catastrophe it has ever been.

Our next question deals with 'eschatology' - the theology of the end of time - and how Christianity can contribute to a better idea of 'the end of the world' than the doom and gloom we see around us.

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- I have been thinking lately of the overt and visceral reactions exhibited by some people, including Christians I know, to the Ukraine and Russian war, though this is listening, or the present Gaza Israel situation. And they seemingly believe we live in the worst time ever. While there are many possible reasons, I am wondering if, particularly for Christians, some of the issue is related to a declining understanding of, or even interest in, eschatology. And this foundation of theological hope. My question, is how can we recover a biblical eschatology that will help Christians live and minister in the world today with a real hope?

John Dickson

We've certainly talked about this before on the show, but basically Christians have sometimes made terrible Mistakes on this topic, and it's turned a lot of people the other direction. They've obsessed about these last things. They've tried to use the Bible as a kind of roadmap to the unfolding of history, instead of what it really provides, a stunning portrait of God's ultimate ends for the world.

In the 1970s and 80s, there was a lot of weirdness and wackiness around the Bible. Eschatology. In 1970, the evangelist Hal Lindsay published his book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*. He also had *Satan is Alive and Well on Planet Earth* and the 1980s *Countdown to Armageddon*. That *Late Great Planet Earth* was the number one bestselling nonfiction book of the decade, according to the *New York Times*.

Lindsay saw revelation as all about predicting the geopolitics of his generation, from the founding of Israel in 1948 through to the Armageddon, where the Soviet Union invaded Israel, which he said would happen in 1988. And it continues today. In Australia, there was this Christian group who took out a full page ad in the *Canberra Times* arguing that all the economic troubles we're facing were foretold in Revelation, the plagues in Revelation, the name of the beast of Revelation 13, they revealed in the *Canberra Times*, Pope Francis.

Boom. As a result of all of this, a lot of sensible people, completely turn their back on eschatology. They don't want to be associated with the crazies, and perhaps that's fair enough, but you're not really going to track with Christianity very far if you reject all eschatology, because Christianity is fundamentally eschatological.

Everything Christians believe has a future element. The creation narrative in the book of Genesis isn't just a description of the past, it's a kind of promise of the restoration of all creation. King David in the Old Testament isn't just a remarkably successful, if flawed, king. He was a picture of the future.

of God's future king and future kingdom. Jesus made the kingdom of God the very center of his preaching. His healings weren't just acts of kindness. They were little previews of the restoration of all things in that future kingdom. That's something I know I've talked about on the podcast before. His death on a cross was an absorbing into himself, Of the penalty of judgment day.

His resurrection is described in the New Testament as a kind of deposit or down payment of the resurrection of all things in God's future new creation. And much of the ethical teaching of the rest of the New Testament has this future kingdom in view. We know the kingdom of God will establish righteousness and justice.

So Christians get to see. Busy now living according to justice, the kingdom will be characterized above all by love. So Christians live by the values of that eternal kingdom in our present day. It's as if Christians have seen the dawning of a new day just on the horizon. And so they live like the new day is already here.

This Outlook, this eschatological outlook, protects against various kinds of extremes we sometimes find. On the one hand, some choose not to get too involved in the world at all because they're waiting for the kingdom to come and sort everything out. But in the New Testament, the fact that God's kingdom Kingdom is coming is a reason, a really good reason to get busy for the kingdom.

Now, on the other hand, there are others who think they can build utopia, God's kingdom on earth, that their role is to take over. legislative bodies, the media, educational institutions, and everything else. But this completely misses the fact that in the New Testament, the future kingdom will never be the work of human beings.

It's the glorious miracle of God. The Christian's role before the kingdom is to live as little signs or previews of that kingdom by pursuing justice, love, peace, and so on. Always knowing. That we will never fully achieve those things in this world. I suppose there are others who are just despondent. They look at the injustice and the bloodshed of our world and they despair.

Eschatology tells us that God's kingdom will come and make all things well. And in the power of God's spirit, we can live by that future kingdom here and now. Eschatology gives amid. Dejection and a motivation to be busy in

God's work in the present. Don't give up on eschatology. Thousands of years, people have turned to the Bible for guidance and instruction.

BREAK 1

Producer Kaley

That's Charlie Rose interviewing author Michael Drosnin on his program back in 1997. In his best-selling book, 'The Bible Code', Drosnin claimed to have discovered codes in the Bible that predicted modern events, like the assassination of Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The book sparked a kind of 'bible code' industry, despite the code itself being thoroughly debunked.

A few years later, we got The Da Vinci Code - another Bible conspiracy theory with secret codes. That one was a work of fiction, but it's incredible success blurred the lines between fact and fiction and historians like John are still having to set the record straight.

Anyway, our next question is from Graeme, who says he's come across a guy called Chuck Missler who has found hidden ciphers in biblical texts... here's the question, emailed to us by Graeme:

- I've been taught that God speaks clearly through His word, not in riddles, and to seek such hidden codes or meanings is a form of Gnosticism and thus heresy. More recently I've come across a bible teacher called Chuck Missler who very much sees hidden ciphers in biblical texts, but he claims they are there not to 'reveal' the true meaning of the text, but rather to 'verify' the authenticity of the text. That is, they don't impart any new meaning beyond the plain reading of scripture, but they do act to show that the bible must have

supernatural origin. He gives the analogy of spies embedding a hidden cipher in their communications to verify they're really from them and not the enemy. This seems a different angle from the classic 'code cracking' of Revelation to predict the future that I've always been wary of. One example involves the Genealogy of Noah in Genesis 5 (genealogy is just the line of descendants) He claims the Hebrew meaning of the ten names from Adam to Noah run together as a sentence reads: "Man appointed mortal sorrow; the blessed God shall come down, teaching His death shall bring the despairing rest." I guess my first question is "is this translation of the Hebrew names in Genesis 5 at all accurate?" And if so, what does one do with it? Missler's take is that such insights validate the supernatural authorship of the bible, rather than reveal any new theology. My instinct is to still be very wary of such interpretations, but if the translation is accurate I would find it hard to simply dismiss it - it would be quite compelling. I would really value your help in navigating this stuff!

John Dickson

I had never heard of this particular Bible code, but it is part of a whole genre of secret meanings people find in the Bible, and I was about to have a go at giving you an answer, but I was sitting here on my. Uh, office studio in Wheaton.

And I thought I'd buzz up to floor five and ask a world authority what he reckoned. John Walton is one of the best known and widely published Old Testament scholars in the world today. I shot him a quick email this morning with your question in it, Graham, and he just, uh, answered it. popped down to my office for a live phone a friend.

Here he is. Okay. So John, thank you so much for coming down from your high floor down to the third floor, uh, for a phone a friend. Um, so what do you think of, um, the Reverend Dr. Professor Haer Missler's idea? Well, the,

the idea brings a bit of skepticism. The idea of, you know, if there are such things encoded, you know, how really would we recognize them?

Now, in this particular case, and I don't know what he does overall, but in this particular case with Genesis 5, he tries to build a sentence out of the, the names. And the difficulty with that is that These names, uh, some of them are not Hebrew that we know. If they're Hebrew at all. . Um, to me, for for instance, well for instance, ic.

Mm-Hmm, , um, we don't know that Hebrew word. Um, canine, uh, some say, well, that's a variant of cane. Well, maybe it is, maybe it isn't. But it's not cane. It's canine. Mm-Hmm. . And so we, we really don't. I don't have that one anywhere, uh, even in Methuselah's name, uh, Metushalach. Okay, shalach is not, I mean, it's a, it's not something would fit in.

Uh, people haven't known what to do with that. And he splits that word up. It looks like, cause he says something like his death shall bring. So he takes the word metu and treats it as death and then shalach as the Hebrew verb to send. But it's not. Really, that, it's, and he's splitting the word, and this is not a verbal form we would expect, and so, um, and we know the, the, the beginning part of that word, mutu, uh, we know it from Akkadian, it means man or husband, uh, we know it from Ugaritic, means the same thing, even in Hebrew, there's a couple times when it's used to refer to sort of people, um, so we know that word, and that's probably the one that's here, but we don't know what the second part of the name is.

So, the problem is that doing things like this, there's unrecognized Hebrew, there's other languages there. Generally, there's a lack of verbs, at least in forms that look like verbs. Some places he wants to make something a passive participle and it's not a passive participle. Um, and so those kinds of things.

I guess the bottom line is that these seem too speculative, artificial, contrived, to really persuade anybody of anything. Right. Okay. That's the problem. So if this was submitted in one of your Old Testament classes, out

of ten, what would you give this? I'd give it, go back to the, to the resources and do something different.

So zero? Yeah. This is, this is not anything like anything that I would want turned in, in a paper. Thank you so much, John. I'm so grateful to John for that. He was the expert guest for our episode on the flood, actually. That's episode number, Al, Kayleigh, come on, bring it home. Okay, episode 72. Well done. Go check it out.

There's a quick link in the show notes

Director Mark

Our next question relates to a few of our recent episodes - American Evangelicalism, Political Jesus and even Why Trust.

We'll link them all in the show notes.

- There are some Christians at my church from different backgrounds that believe believers should be responsible for preparing the world for Jesus' return through not just evangelism, but reforming things like the education system, health system, etc. Some are homeschooling because they don't trust the public system, and even buying farms and setting up "separatist" communities because they don't trust non-Christian leaders who are leading the country. They eventually leave our church because the differences are so significant. Where is that strain coming from? It seems particularly prominent with American Evangelicalism (and QAnon seems to be wrapped up in it as well).
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John Dickson

Thanks for that. I think you're right. There is an increasing movement of what is often called Christian nationalism, or perhaps more properly, theonomy, which just means God's law.

The feeling is that God has given a law about everything. What's true and good in the Bible. So it makes sense that everybody should obey it. Even those who don't believe a key text for this way of thinking about Christianity in the world is the so called great commission at the end of the gospel of Matthew.

Jesus said, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations. Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey. Everything I commanded you. Those who hold this theonomist view say that Jesus has given us the mandate to make everyone obey the teachings of Christ.

So this must mean through legislation, education, media, and so on. There are a couple of misunderstandings here, in my view, the expression in English, make disciples doesn't actually in the Greek. have the word make. There is no sense of forcing anyone to do anything. It's just the verb, meaning school your students.

This is then unpacked by Jesus in this statement as teaching people to obey the things he's taught. This is key for Jesus. Persuasion through teaching is the principle means by which people become believers. His students. We don't make the world do anything. This virtually rules out creating laws that forced society to follow Christian doctrine and practice.

I've said many times before, the only tools Christ has given the church are the Bible. Persuasion, prayer, service, and suffering. Persuasion is key. That's how we convey the whole content of the Christian faith. And there's a way to test this interpretation of the Great Commission. You only have to

open up the rest of the New Testament to see how the apostles thought they were meant to go about fulfilling this command Jesus gave them.

And never. Do we find them taking on Roman laws or reforming the education system and so on? What you find them doing throughout the whole book of Acts, which tells the story of the first 30 years of the church after Jesus, is persuading people. That Jesus is Lord, forming them into communities that then embody those teachings.

Then you constantly find them suffering for those teachings and doing so cheerfully. And then when you look at the letters the apostles wrote to the churches in the rest of the New Testament, you don't find a single word about Jesus reforming society through legislative processes. But you do find heaps about persuasion, prayer, service, and suffering.

We can also test this over the longterm over the next 300 years. Christians uniformly advocated for a persuasional approach to changing the world. I could read statements I probably already have in the podcast sometime from the letter to Diognetus or Tertullian or Lactantius. Even Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor, emphatically stated that Christianity must advance through spiritual persuasion.

not state force. You have to wait to the end of the fourth century before you get any Christians who think we need to force Christian laws on the population. That happens in the reign of Theodosius the first. He shuts down pagan temples. He punishes those who don't follow Christian laws and so on, but that is not foundational Christianity.

In short, I think the theonomist viewpoint arises from a kind of spiritual insecurity. Christian leaders look at the way the world is turning its back on Christ, and instead of turning to the old tools of persuasion, prayer, service, and suffering, they rely on worldly tools like political and legislative power.

A truly confident Christian knows that persuasion alone, through the power of the Spirit, can change the world. One last thing. None of what I'm saying

here means that Christians shouldn't get involved in education, in the health system, in politics. I think it's great when Christians go into public life.

I would just emphasize that their role in public service has to be characterized by persuasion, if it's to be Christian, they should make the case. And if people are persuaded toward the good, fantastic, things will move toward the good. If they're not, we graciously leave people in their error. This should rule out bully tactics, backroom deals, and other nefarious things that often characterize politics.

A Christian in politics will be all about persuasion, as well as prayer, service, and a willingness to suffer cheerfully.

Producer Kaley

Here's a question from Blake, which is asked on Facebook about our Augustine episode.

- I've heard a criticism of Augustine that some of his views were too deeply influenced by Greek philosophy which has in turn embedded itself in certain views/interpretations of Scripture in western thought up through today. This is of course a subjective area but would love to hear Dr. Dickson's (to the best of his ability) unbiased reflection on this. Does it have no merit, some merit but over stated, or more merit than we like to think.

John Dickson

Thanks, Blake. It's nice of you to think that I can be unbiased. When it comes to St.

Augustine, I think there is an element of truth in what you say or what you've heard other people say, but it isn't the total account of Augustine's approach to things. Augustine was self consciously trying to plot a path between two errors he saw in Greek and Roman culture. On the one hand, There was a devaluing of bodily reality that led to licentiousness and the excessiveness of Greek and Roman sex, drugs, and rock and roll, for want of a better expression.

On the other hand, this same Greek and Roman devaluing of physical reality and idealizing of spiritual and mental reality led many people toward a negative Asceticism, to the denial of all bodily pleasure, to the shunning of marriage and the elevation of the contemplative life. Augustine was deliberately countering both extremes by simultaneously stressing the goodness of physical reality, of the life we live in the body and God's creation, and the necessity of physical pleasure.

orienting that bodily life toward spiritual goods, especially toward God himself as the ultimate good. Now, the interesting thing is to ancient neo Platonists, Augustine seemed way too worldly, too much in favor of the goodness of creation. But to ancient Epicureans, he seemed Way too nerdy, too contemplative, too focused on higher ideals.

And I just reckon our world is far more like the Epicureans than the Neoplatonists. We look at Augustine and suspect he was too platonic, too caught up in denying bodily reality. But I think that might say more about our worldliness than it does Augustine's indebtedness. to Greek philosophy. This hints at the other thing I'd point out.

I doubt we today are any less influenced by our surrounding secular culture than Augustine was by the surrounding Greek culture. At least Augustine named his cultural excesses and sought to find a biblical balance between them. I wonder if there is as much conscious self critique in contemporary Christianity.

We easily see what we think are blind spots in the people of the past, like Augustine, but we don't see our own blind spots. Now, Blake, I don't know if that was unbiased. It probably wasn't, but I'm pretty sure there's something in it

Director Mark Mark

We've done episodes on The Flood and The Exodus and the Creation story in the Bible, talking to scholars about what influenced the creators of these stories, and why there are so many similarities between the Bible's creation stories and other creation stories in other cultures. Here's a question from Michael that is related:

- Were the ten commandments lifted / influenced from other ancient cultures?
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John Dickson

Your question, Michael, raises all sorts of interesting issues.

The first thing to say is that We should probably expect there to be similarities between Biblical culture and wider human cultures. Because not everything in pagan culture, law, religion, myth, art, and so on, is a departure from the good. If God created everyone, and everyone is created in the image of God, we should expect some significant overlap between human intuitions and the truth of God.

And this, of course, is a point made often by C. S. Lewis. He constantly said that Christianity is simultaneously the correction and the fulfillment of God's will. of human myth making and human speculation. There are plenty of

similarities between the Ten Commandments and things we find in surrounding Babylonian and Egyptian cultures.

Most surrounding cultures shunned murder. Which is the biblical sixth commandment. They shunned adultery, the seventh commandment, stealing the eighth, and even false testimony in court. That's the ninth commandment. These seem to be nearly universal moral intuitions, even if various cultures interpreted these things variously.

For instance, Many cultures thought nothing of killing an unwanted infant. They didn't think that was murder. But the Jews, from the beginning, outlawed killing an infant. But broadly speaking, there is this overlap. On the other hand, there are certainly some really unusual things in the Ten Commandments that didn't come from surrounding cultures.

culture. For one thing, the idea of one God worthy of all our worship, that is unique. That's the first commandment. Uh, so is the second commandment weird because it's about not creating idols or images of God. And that would have seemed plain strange to the surrounding cultures. The fourth commandment.

It's also pretty special. We know of no other culture outside biblical culture that gave everyone a day off every week. There's been a lot of research into the idea of the Sabbath, and no one can find a precedent. The Jews invented it. Or perhaps I should say God invented it and gave it as a gift to his people.

The other truly striking commandment is the 10th commandment against coveting your neighbor's goods. This is really interesting because it pretty much means that no one can end up keeping the 10 commandments. It's a weirdly internalized command. It's about your inner longings and motivation. And that is not the kind of command you find in wider cultures.

That command convicts us all and sends us rushing back to the God of mercy. And that is a uniquely biblical approach to morality.

BREAK 2

RAPID FIRE ROUND (Producer Kaley

Alright. We're going to do a rapid fire round - quick question, quick answers.

- Where did the desert fathers who perched on tall towers get the towers? Did they build them, or were they already there for some other reason? - **Peter (Facebook)**
-

John Dickson

They were stone pillars. Just like you might set up a pillar in an ancient street or an ancient temple. They built these little pillars out of stones and then put a platform on the top and then a little fence around it, a balustrade, so they wouldn't fall out when they slept. How they build it.

Sometimes they did it themselves. Sometimes locals would help them because people love the spectacle of people living up on the top of a pillar. So they were well into having a club all hands on deck. Let's create a pillar 50 foot high and watch the weirdo go up there.

- How can we use the Bible when navigating the topic of smoking weed? Especially in places of the world where it's legal, and when it comes to talking to kids about it?
-

John Dickson

Ah, to my mind, the consistent criticism in the Bible against getting drunk. Rules out smoking weed because unlike alcohol, marijuana and other similar drugs start working instantly after a puff or two.

Well, at least that's what director Mark tells me. It's quite unlike drinking beer or wine where you can have a whole glass where the focus is on the simple enjoyment of the taste and you're not sent straight into a state of mind that leaves you diminished. cognitively or morally or whatever, and I don't think this can be said of dope.

- Difference between faith and hope?

John Dickson

Ah, that's a good question. Faith and hope are intimately Related. If I had to distinguish between them, I'd say that faith in the Bible is usually trusting something in the past, something already completed. The biggest object of faith in the Bible is of course, Jesus himself.

When we say we have faith in Jesus, we're basically saying we trust the person narrated in the gospels, the teacher, the healer, the savior, the risen Lord. We trust that his great work is our salvation. That's faith. Hope is oriented exclusively toward the future. We hope in our own resurrection. We hope for the day of judgment when God will make all things well, overthrowing evil and injustice and so on.

But we could almost say that Christian hope is faith oriented toward the future. That's why I say faith and hope are intimately connected

Producer Kaley

Final question ...

How are we as Christians to grapple with survivor's guilt? More specifically, how do we deal with us being saved by God's wondrous grace whilst also living with the knowledge that others might not have had the same "shot at" grace that we did, or that some won't be saved? [Summarised by Kaley - how can I possibly rejoice in heaven with God, when I know many of my loved ones won't be there with me. - **Dan**

John Dickson

This is powerful. I reckon every thoughtful believer frets about this. The Bible makes clear that some people will fall under eternal judgment. And the Bible also makes clear that there are people who will be saved and have unending joy. So how does one reconcile those two things? Now, you may have heard me before refer to thought experiments.

This is where I speculate on a scenario that moderates or lessens a problem. And even if my speculation is wrong, the fact that I can propose a semi satisfying answer at least reminds me that God in his wisdom must have an even better, much better resolution than the one I've fantasized about. So, Here it is.

What if the experience of those under eternal judgment is horrific only relative to the exceeding glory of God's kingdom? Now, I know we have images in the Bible of darkness, fire, weeping, but they're all images. They're images of profound loss. But what if the meaning of those images is that compared to what people will miss out on in the kingdom, the experience of judgment is as bad, relatively speaking, as fire, darkness and so on.

When in fact, they remain in an existence which retains a sense of the goodness of existence and the continuing love of God toward them. And importantly, an existence which they acknowledge is the just penalty for their rejection of God. If this were the state of those under judgment, if I could be sure that they would continue to know the goodness of existence and the love and justice of God, this thought does moderate the survivor guilt of living in God's kingdom forever in joy.

Now, to be clear, again, I'm not proposing that my speculation is the actual solution to the dilemma. I'm saying nothing more than that. If I can come up with a thought experiment, I'm that somewhat relieves my sorrow at the thought of my loved ones missing out on God's kingdom, then God's actual resolution must be infinitely more satisfying.

I trust him to make good on the promise that somehow, despite loved ones falling under judgment, my experience of the eternal kingdom will be pure joy.

CREDITS



