

IF GOD IS GOOD, WHY IS THERE SUFFERING?

OPENING STORY

Viktor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist thrown into the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz in 1944. He observed that the people who survived were not always the physically strongest. When hope disappeared, the strongest bodies could die. But those who held on to meaning—who had a "why" for living—endured the worst conditions. He wrote: "The one who knows the 'why' for living can bear almost any 'how.'" Frankl's survival became the foundation of logotherapy—the healing power of meaning in the face of suffering.

KEY QUESTION

"If God is powerful and good, why does He allow so much pain in the world?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: ROMANS 8:28

"We know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

Three honest answers from Christian theology: first, freedom. God gave human beings the most precious and dangerous gift—the freedom to choose. True love cannot be forced. A robot that says "I love you" on a timer does not

truly love. When God gave freedom, human beings could choose selfishness, cruelty, and evil. Much of the world's pain flows from the misuse of human freedom. Second, soul-making. The world is not only a playground for comfort. It is a school. Without difficulty, courage cannot be tested. Without need, compassion cannot grow. Suffering, though painful, can be the raw material of the soul's greatest strength. Third, eternity. Our 80 or 90 years are very short compared to eternity. Present suffering, seen through the lens of an eternal future, does not disappear, but gains a larger context. And crucially, unlike any other religious founder, Jesus Himself entered suffering. He bled. He wept. He died. He did not watch from a distance and offer philosophical comfort. He came in.

THE BRIDGE

Buddhism says suffering is real and must be ended. Christianity agrees—and adds that God Himself has entered the suffering to rescue us from it. He chose to leave His heavenly home and enter our earthly home. He is Emmanuel, which means "God with us."

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Think of one time in your life you experienced pain or loss. Did anything good, stronger, or wiser come from it afterward?**
- **Read Lamentations 3:23: "Great is your faithfulness." Even in grief, this writer found something that did not fail.**
- **Write a short, honest letter to God about one pain you carry. He is not offended by honesty. He is moved by it.**
- **Discussion: How does it change your understanding of God to know that He chose to enter our world and share in human suffering rather than remain distant from it?**



THE SELF: WHO ARE YOU REALLY?

OPENING STORY

A grandfather spends a whole year carving a beautiful wooden chair by hand. Every curve is shaped with intention. He pours his love into the grain of the wood. Years later a philosopher walks in and says: "There is no such thing as the chair—only patterns of atoms in temporary arrangement. The chair is an illusion." The grandfather is silent for a long moment. Then he says: "And yet I made it. And I know it. And it is real to me." This tension captures one of the biggest differences between Buddhist and Christian views of the self.

KEY QUESTION

"Are you a temporary gathering of atoms to be dissolved, or a person known and loved by your Creator?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: PSALM 139:13, 14

"You formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

The Buddhist teaching of *anatta*—no permanent self—is among the deepest insights in human philosophy. It teaches that what we call "I" is only a temporary gathering of

form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. When the causes and conditions break apart, what seemed like "me" dissolves. This teaching aims to free the heart from clinging and pride. And it contains real truth: we are not the fixed, permanent egos we imagine ourselves to be. But Christianity moves in a different direction at this critical point. Every human being was personally created by God. God knows the number of hairs on your head. He called you before you were born. He formed you with intention. Your identity is not an illusion to be dissolved. It is a treasure that sin has wounded—and that grace can restore. The self in Christianity is not the enemy. It is the beloved.

THE BRIDGE

Buddhism seeks the end of suffering through releasing the self. Christianity seeks the end of suffering through healing the self and restoring it to the relationship for which it was made. Both care deeply about the same pain. But the destination is different: cool, quiet emptiness on one side, and warm, eternal belonging on the other.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Read Psalm 139 slowly this week. Notice every phrase about how personally God knows you. How does that feel?**
- **Reflect honestly: What do you find most beautiful or surprising about the God the Bible describes? How is this different from what you have believed before?**
- **Discussion: If your identity is real and eternal—not an illusion—how does that change the way you see your life's purpose?**
- **Prayer: "God, if you truly know me—my thoughts, my failures, my longings—speak to me this week. I am listening."**



TWO GREAT TEACHERS AND ONE UNAVOIDABLE QUESTION

OPENING STORY

C. S. Lewis was a brilliant Oxford professor who spent years denying the existence of God. He had read everything. He had argued every angle. Then, slowly, the evidence wore down his resistance. In his autobiography he described himself as surrendering to God as "the most reluctant convert in all England." Later Lewis argued that there is no safe middle ground about Jesus. A man who claims to be God is either a liar, a lunatic—or the Lord. There is no fourth option labeled "nice moral teacher."

KEY QUESTION

"Can we honor both the Buddha and Jesus equally—or must we choose?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: JOHN 14:6

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

The Buddha said: "I have found the way." Jesus said: "I am the way." This single difference is the greatest divergence in the history of religion. The Buddha presented himself as a discoverer—for example, a scientist who finds a natural law that was always there. If there had been no Buddha, someone else might eventually have found the same

truth. His claim is the claim of a great teacher. But Jesus makes a completely different kind of claim. He does not say He has found God. He says He is God in human form. He forgives sins—which only God can do. He claims authority over death—and backs it up with resurrection. He says our eternal destiny depends on our relationship with Him personally. This is not a teacher's claim. It is a divine claim. And it demands a personal response from every person who hears it.

He does not say He has found God. He says He is God in human form.

THE BRIDGE

We can deeply honor the Buddha's sincerity, his compassion, and his insight into human suffering. Christians do not need to diminish him in order to honor Jesus. But we cannot reduce Jesus to simply another wise teacher. His own words will not allow it. He claimed to be the Son of God—and He invites every person to investigate that claim for themselves.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Read the Gospel of Mark, chapters 1 and 2, in one sitting this week. Notice the authority Jesus claims—over sickness, over sin, over nature. How does that make you feel?**
- **Look up C. S. Lewis's "Trilemma" argument. Does the logic hold? Did Lewis miss a fourth option—that Jesus was simply a good teacher?**
- **Discussion: What would it mean for your life if Jesus' claim "I am the way" were true?**
- **Write: Who do you currently believe Jesus is? Be honest. And whom would you want Him to be?**



CAN THE BIBLE BE TRUSTED?

OPENING STORY

In 1947 some young shepherds in the Judean Desert accidentally discovered clay jars in a cave near the Dead Sea. Inside were scrolls—ancient copies of the Old Testament, hidden for nearly 2,000 years. When scholars compared these scrolls to the Hebrew Bible texts already in hand, they found something astonishing: the texts matched with extraordinary accuracy. The book of Isaiah, for example, was almost identical across 1,000 years of copying. The message of the Bible has survived the passage of time with remarkable faithfulness.

KEY QUESTION

"Has the Bible been changed and distorted over the centuries, or can it be trusted?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: ISAIAH 40:8

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

The Kalama Sutta encourages testing. So let us apply that spirit to the Bible. In ancient history, the more manuscript copies we have, and the closer they are to the original events, the more confident we can be. The New Testament has more than 5,800 Greek manuscript copies, with the earliest fragments dating to within 20 to 150 years of the events. Compare this to Julius

Caesar's *Gallic Wars* (10 copies, with a gap of 1,000 years) or Plato's works (200 copies, with a gap of 1,200 years). The Bible has more and earlier manuscript evidence than any other ancient text in the world. The Old Testament contains more than 300 specific prophecies about a coming Messiah—written hundreds of years before Jesus—that Christians believe were fulfilled in exact historical detail. The mathematician Peter Stoner calculated that the chance of fulfilling just eight of these prophecies by accident is 1 in 10^{17}. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide independent confirmation that these prophecies were not altered after the fact.

THE BRIDGE

Buddhist tradition also values careful transmission of the Dhamma. The Tipitaka was preserved orally through councils before being written on palm leaves. Both traditions take the faithful handing down of truth seriously. The Bible's historical evidence is not weaker than other ancient literature—it is considerably stronger. If the record is reliable, then the message it carries deserves our most serious attention.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Look up Micah 5:2, written about 700 years before Christ. Then read Matthew 2:1. Compare the prophecy to the fulfillment.**
- **Compare the manuscript evidence for the New Testament against one other ancient text you trust (Caesar, Plato, Homer). What conclusion does the evidence suggest?**
- **Discussion: If the Bible has been verified by history and archaeology to be reliably transmitted, what does that mean for the message it carries?**
- **Read 2 Timothy 3:16, 17—the Bible's own claim about itself. What does this statement about the source of the Bible say about the value of the Bible?**



NIRVANA AND ETERNAL LIFE: SAME GOAL OR DIFFERENT?

OPENING STORY

Imagine a man who has climbed the highest mountain in the world. After years of struggle he stands at the summit. He looks out over an infinite, silent horizon. One voice says: "You have arrived. Now release all desire, all self, and dissolve into the peace of emptiness." Another voice says: "You have arrived. Now come home—to the One who made you, who has been waiting for you since before you were born." These two voices describe the biggest difference between Nirvana and eternal life.

KEY QUESTION

"Is the deepest desire of the human heart to peacefully cease to exist—or to love and be loved forever?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: JOHN 17:3

"This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

Nirvana—or *Nibbana* in Pali—is the highest goal of Buddhism. It is the complete extinguishing of craving, the ending of the fire that drives the cycle of birth and death. It is profound, sincere, and deeply compassionate in its intent. It offers peace from suffering by ending the

self that suffers. Eternal life in Christianity is not simply "living forever." It is a perfect relationship. Jesus defines it Himself in John 17:3: knowing God and being known by Him. In this vision the self is not dissolved—it is healed, restored, and welcomed home. The difference is not which path is more morally serious. Both are serious. The difference is the destination. Nirvana moves toward cool, quiet emptiness—the ending of the flame. Eternal life moves toward a warm, full, unending relationship—the flame finally burning in its intended home. C. S. Lewis pointed to a clue in human nature: "If I find in myself a desire which nothing in this world can satisfy, the most reasonable explanation is that I was made for another world."

THE BRIDGE

Human beings fear death and long for love that does not end. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says God has "put eternity into man's heart." The longing itself is a clue—we were made for eternal relationship, not eternal extinction. Both Buddhism and Christianity take that longing seriously. But they point in different directions.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Sit quietly for 10 minutes. Ask yourself honestly: In your deepest heart, do you long for peace through emptiness, or peace through love and belonging?**
- **Read 1 John 4:16: "God is love." If the very nature of ultimate reality is love, what does that suggest about the destination of human beings?**
- **Write: Imagine that perfect love truly exists. What do you think it would be like? List three or four qualities that such love would have.**
- **Discussion: As you compare dissolution and Nirvana, with eternal life spent together with a loving Creator, what differences do you notice in how each understands peace?**



THE NARROW WAY: WHY ONLY ONE?

OPENING STORY

A doctor treating a patient with a rare and serious infection looks the patient in the eye and says: "Only this specific medicine can cure what you have. Nothing else will work." A bystander might say: "That is narrow-minded. Surely other medicines are also good." But the doctor is not being narrow. He is being honest about the nature of the disease. The specificity of the medicine follows from the specificity of the diagnosis.

KEY QUESTION

"Why does Christianity claim there is only one way to God? And is this claim arrogant or honest?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: ACTS 4:12

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

The "exclusive" claim of Christianity troubles many people, especially in Buddhist cultures that embrace flexibility and the idea that many paths lead to the same summit. But this objection is worth examining carefully. Buddhism and Christianity do not diagnose the same disease. Buddhism says that the problem is ignorance and craving, and the medicine

is wisdom, practice, and the release of the self. Christianity says that the deepest problem is sin—a broken relationship between human beings and their Creator. And a broken relationship cannot be repaired by one side accumulating good deeds. It requires reconciliation. If a husband betrays his wife and then spends a year doing good works for others, that does not automatically heal the marriage. What is needed is forgiveness, honesty, and the restoration of the broken bond. Christianity says that is exactly what Jesus came to do. He entered human history, took the full weight of human sin upon Himself on the cross, and opened the way back to the Father. This is not narrow-mindedness. This is being precise about the nature of the wound and the nature of the cure.

THE BRIDGE

By its nature, truth must exclude what is false. The answer to 2 + 2 is not "many things, depending on your perspective." It is 4. When Jesus says, "I am the way," He is not being culturally intolerant. He is making a claim about reality. The only question is whether the claim is true. And that is exactly what every honest seeker deserves the chance to investigate.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Read Romans 3:23, 24 and Romans 6:23. What is the "wage" of sin? What is God's "gift"? What is the difference?**
- **Think about this: Can you earn forgiveness from someone you have wronged, or can forgiveness be given freely only by the one you hurt?**
- **If God personally entered the world to rescue you, would you at least consider the offer before refusing it?**
- **Discussion: Can you think of any other way a broken relationship with the Creator could be repaired, besides the Creator Himself offering forgiveness?**



THE OPEN DOOR: AN INVITATION

OPENING STORY

In chapter 3 of the book of Revelation, Jesus creates a simple and arresting image: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him." Notice what is not included in this picture. He does not say: "I will break down the door." He does not say: "I will force my way in." He stands. He knocks. He waits. The door handle is on the inside. Only you can open it.

KEY QUESTION

"What is still holding the door closed—and what would it take to open it?"

BIBLE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 7:7, 8

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened."

EXPLORING TOGETHER

Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher, offered a way to think about the decision of faith. If God is real and you open the door, you gain eternal life and a relationship with your Creator. You gain what is infinite. If God is not real and you open the door, you lose nothing except some time. You

still gain a life of purpose, love, and community. If God is real and you do not open the door, you lose the opportunity to be reconciled with the One who made you, and you miss what is infinite. If God is not real and you do not open the door, you break even. When you map this honestly, opening the door to seek God is not superstition. It is the most rational, the most evidence-honoring, and the most heart-honest decision a person can make. The Kalama Sutta says: Test it for yourself. Jesus says the same: Ask, seek, knock. The Creator is not hiding in a maze. He stands at the door, waiting.

THE BRIDGE

Opening the door to Jesus does not mean abandoning your family, your culture, or your history. It means bringing all of it—the grief, the questions, the longings, the beautiful things—to the One who made you, and allowing Him to heal, restore, and fill what has been empty. You do not have to be good enough first. You do not have to have everything figured out. You come as you are. He meets you there. That is the whole message of the gospel.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

- **Pray simply this week—or even right now: "God, if you are real, I want to know You. I open the door of my heart. Come in." That is enough to begin.**
- **Read John 3:1-21. Nicodemus was a deeply religious scholar who came to Jesus with doubts and questions. Jesus welcomed him completely.**
- **If you feel ready to take the next step: Speak with a pastor or a trusted Christian friend. You do not have to make this journey alone.**
- **Write one sentence: What is the one thing that has been holding the door closed? Offer it to God today. He is not surprised by it. He has been waiting patiently on the other side.**

General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists