

DISCUSSION GUIDE

THE 7 BIG QUESTIONS

SEARCHING FOR GOD,
TRUTH, AND PURPOSE

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Discussion Guide

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Finding a friend or friends to discuss these questions helps your exploration. In the back and forth of conversation, fresh insights emerge. You can encourage and challenge each other to ask more questions and probe more deeply. If you are open to it, share more of your lives and the real struggles that give rise to your doubts and questions.

The questions assume you've read the chapter, so before discussing a specific chapter, aim to read or review it. Some people will read the whole book together; others benefit from picking the chapters that address the questions that most speak to them now. It will help you to have a Bible with you to look at the context of the mentioned passages.

Chapter 1

Does Life Have a Purpose?

This opening question invites us into a topic we often try to avoid. Many people fear the answer will lead to despair because there is no real purpose. Others seek the courage to face the darkness of nothingness. And some believe there is a clear purpose. Even if this is not a question you are not asking right now, create space for those to whom it might be essential.

1. Have you ever felt that if you found the right job, met the right person, or had more money in your bank account, then life would be easier? What are various ways you've sought significance or satisfaction?
2. What about other people's lives do you wish you had?
3. Read the quote from Jim Carey and discuss your reactions to it: "I think everybody should get rich and famous and do everything they ever dreamed of so they can see that it's not the answer." How does Carey's quote connect with what Solomon says in Ecclesiastes?
4. The author of Ecclesiastes, likely King Solomon, clearly affirms, "Everything is meaningless." Tragedy, failure, and loss can propel us to dark reflection, as also can the relentless boredom of daily life. Can you describe times in your life when you have felt that life is meaningless?

5. Can you share a time when you had an inkling that there must be some purpose in life? What hints do you see that might indicate there is a purpose?

6. Solomon says that God has "set eternity in the human heart" (Eccl 3:11). What do you think he means by that?

7. Do you think there will be life after this one? How might that impact a possible purpose in this life if there is an afterlife?

8. What's the difference between finding your purpose in life "under the sun" or finding it "above the sun" (in a relationship with God)?

Chapter 2

Is There a God?

Whether you are sure there is a god, sure there is not a god, sure you can't know, or not sure at all, these questions can help you think it through. Pause longer on the questions that spark your interest or challenge you the most.

1. What role - if any - did God play in your family when you were growing up? How do you think your upbringing impacts your beliefs about God now?
2. When was the first time you started wondering if God existed? When are other times in your life that you have wrestled with whether God exists or not? What makes it easy to believe in God? And what makes it hard to believe in God?
3. If you have access to a Bible, read Acts 17:22-34. The Apostle Paul had a conversation with questioners in Athens, Greece. What's your response to his speech? What stands out to you? What makes it easy to believe in God? What makes it hard to believe in God?
4. Bruce talked about absolute certainty and reasonable confidence. For instance, on a jury in the United States, you are asked to vote guilty or not guilty based on evidence beyond a reasonable doubt. How does this discussion apply to your confidence that God exists?

5. Before the New Testament, Plato and Aristotle argued there must be an uncaused cause, a first mover, something outside the universe that has always existed and was the ultimate cause of everything else. Paul says God is the Maker. How do you evaluate this evidence from logic and existence?

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Chapter 3

Why Does God Allow Pain and Suffering?

This question, "Why does God allow pain and suffering?" is one of the hardest because it's not just an intellectual question. It impacts us personally through our pain and the pain of those we love. We feel this question deeply, which makes navigating it difficult. The goal is not to solve the issue of pain and suffering but to wrestle with the question honestly and openly. As we discuss the topic, avoid common yet often unhelpful responses such as "Everything happens for a reason" or "You just need to pray harder."

1. Media bombards us by telling us we deserve to be happy. How do you think that affects our ability to navigate the pain and suffering in our lives? In what ways do we avoid feeling the weight of pain in our lives? In what ways might sheltering people from pain cause more harm than good?
2. On a scale of 1 to 10, how difficult is it for you to reconcile the existence of both suffering and God (1 = easy; 10 = impossible)? Why? Can you describe a time when your pain, or evil you saw, led you to question God? How do you explain evil in the world?
3. If there's a God, why do you think he allows evil in the world? What is the Christian view of where evil came from according to the creation story in Genesis 1-2?
4. If God created all things, and evil is a thing, then did God create evil? Explain how evil is not a thing but an absence of something.

5. According to the Bible, how does God feel about our pain and suffering? "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled." (Genesis 6:5-6, NIV)

6. What did God do about evil in our world? According to the Bible, explain how what Jesus did relates to our pain and suffering. "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." (Isaiah 53:4-6, NIV)

7. According to Christianity, what will God do about our pain and suffering? "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4, NIV)

8. Summarize the Christian view of pain and suffering. Where does it come from, and what is God doing about it? What is your response to this view?

9. Often our pain and suffering can feel isolating. Like the prophet Habakkuk, we cry, "where are you, God?" Author Tim Keller writes, "It can't be that (God) is indifferent or detached from our condition. God takes our misery and suffering so seriously that he was willing to take it on himself" as Jesus. How does that influence your understanding of God?

Chapter 4

Is Christianity Too Narrow?

As you work through this question, consider the meaning of key terms such as “tolerance,” “narrow,” and “exclusive.” Open your mind to look at the question in new ways. To answer it well, we also need to understand what “Christianity” really teaches.

1. What are some benefits of tolerance (agreeing to disagree)? How is tolerance a noble virtue? Put another way, how has intolerance damaged people?
2. What could be some dangers of "tolerance" if it is taken to mean that all beliefs are equally valid?
3. What is the Christian "gospel," the good news, according to the Bible? How is the Christian gospel an inclusive offer? John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." Paul further illustrates this when he writes that living peaceful, godly, holy lives "is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people." (1 Timothy 2:3-6)
4. How is truth, by its very nature, exclusive? Consider truths in math, science, and medicine. What are some examples of situations in which most people believe that narrow ideas are good?
5. How are some major world religions different on essential topics such as who or what is God, and how are you "saved?"

6. The statement "All religions are the same" is often an attempt to be humble and tolerant, but how could it be heard as arrogant and disrespectful to every religion?

7. Nearly every religion makes exclusive claims. What might be differences between being narrow and being narrow-minded? What could be differences between making a truth claim (that by its nature is exclusive) and being intolerant of others?

8. How could love be an even more powerful virtue than tolerance?

Chapter 5

Is Jesus God?

The last chapter ended with the key question, is Christianity true? That question depends on whether Jesus is in fact God. This question drives straight to the heart of Christianity so it's worth spending a good amount of time here.

1. Was Jesus an actual historical figure? In your opinion, why or why not?
2. Before encountering these ideas in this chapter, what has been your perspective on Jesus? How would you have described him?
3. What do you think about Jesus' claims about himself, such as, before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58)? And, add to his claims, his actions such as claiming to forgive sin, inviting people to pray to him, and accepting people's worship.
4. Since Jesus' deity, and thus the truth of Christianity, hangs on the reality of Jesus' resurrection, how do you evaluate whether or not Jesus rose from the dead? What evidence do you find compelling? What questions do you still have?
5. C.S. Lewis said that given what Jesus claims about himself, he could not be a great moral teacher, but rather an insane lunatic, an evil liar, or actually who he claims to be, the Lord God. How do you respond to this lunatic, liar, or Lord trilemma?

6. Jesus' first followers, who knew him well, were predominantly Jewish, and thus were committed to monotheism, that there is only one God. How do you understand their belief that Jesus, the carpenter from Nazareth, is God?

7. If you have a Bible, look at John 1, Colossians 1, and Hebrews 1 for a sample of writings by some of his first followers. Evaluate their willingness to be martyred for their belief in Jesus as God. What do you think about this?

8. Without money, without writing a word, without starting a school, a 30-something-year-old Jewish carpenter, who was executed as a criminal, changed the course of history. Nearly one-third of the world's population (about 2.2 billion people) identify themselves as Christians, which means they believe Jesus is God. What do you think of Jesus' overwhelming, improbable influence?

Chapter 6

Is The Bible Reliable?

Since much of our information about Jesus comes from the Bible, it's crucial to question its reliability. You may find that one aspect of another of this multifaceted question holds more interest. Spend time on the questions that relate to you or interest you.

1. What have been some of your concerns and questions about the Bible's reliability? Does anything about the Bible bother you?
2. How does archeology confirm the Bible's reliability?
3. How does other ancient literature from the Bible's time periods attest to the reliability of the Bible?
4. How have you struggled with the lack of access to the original manuscripts of the Bible and the potential inaccuracies in translations? What insights have helped you gain perspective on manuscripts and translations?
5. What apparent contradictions or inconsistencies in the Bible have concerned you? What could be plausible explanations for apparent contradictions and inconsistencies?
6. How have you wrestled with the myriad of different interpretations of biblical passages? Is it possible to adequately determine the meaning of a biblical text? How might anyone do that?

7. What does the Bible mean when it describes itself as "inspired?"

8. See 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." And 2 Peter 1:20-21 "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as the Holy Spirit carried them along." How can the Bible be both written by humans and breathed out by God?

9. How has the Bible exercised transformative power in history worldwide and in billions of lives? Have you ever allowed the Bible to be a means of transformation in your life? If so, what results have you seen?

Chapter 7

Can I Know God Personally?

Reflect on your discussion questions in the first six chapters. How have your thoughts and feelings developed? Where have you been inspired? Enlightened? Challenged? Encouraged? What are your next steps in exploring God, faith, and purpose?

1. Why might someone resist knowing God personally? What could block us from pursuing a personal relationship with God?
2. According to the Bible, how is God a relational, loving God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
3. If you have a Bible, open to these two passages. In Luke 19:10, Jesus says plainly that he "came to seek and save the lost." 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." Who are "the lost" to whom he's referring in these two passages of the Bible?
4. What does it mean to you to know God personally?
5. How might one develop a personal relationship with God?
6. John 1:12 says, "To all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." How is "salvation" a gift? How does one receive it?
7. Matthew 7:7 says, "if we seek, we will find; if we knock, the door will be opened." What might this mean?

8. How can you grow in a personal relationship with God? What kinds of things could you do to grow?

9. In what ways would you like to continue exploring God? How will you do it?

Explore God

I hope you found value in discussing these questions. If you want to further explore God and faith, check out the Explore God website, www.exploreGod.com.

It offers many videos and short articles from a diverse group of scholars and ordinary people. And there are other resources to help you with next steps to grow spiritually

If you are interested in more books and resources, check out www.brucebmilller.com.