

Got

Questions?

Fall 2022

This Booklet Belongs To:



Welcome

Everyone has difficult faith questions at some time in their life. Manchester UMC's 2022 Fall All Church Study is called *Got Questions?* This Sermon Series and All Church Study is based on difficult faith questions that we have. The questions were submitted by you, the congregation. Study groups are offered throughout the week on different days and at different times, so find one that works for you and get registered. We don't have to tackle our faith questions alone!

Register Now for a Small Group!

All Church Study groups are offered throughout the week on different days and at different times. Some groups meet in person. Some groups meet online. Groups will start the week of October 16th and will run for five weeks. This curriculum was produced in-house, and there is no homework for this series. Join one of the many small groups and attend as you are able! Register for a group at www.manchesterumc.org/questions.

How this study works

Your group will meet for five weeks. Each week's session will be based on that week's sermon. Sermons can be found on our Facebook page or YouTube channel:

<https://www.facebook.com/manchesterumc.stl>

<https://www.youtube.com/user/manchesterumcstl>

Each week your group will start with a short check-in. Then you will read that week's scriptures, sermon focus, and then move into the discussion questions. Lastly, you will close in prayer (provided). Please take turns reading. Please read the Small Group Guidelines before your first session. Other than that, there is no prereading or homework to participate in this study!

If you have questions or need assistance, we are glad to help:

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Small Group Guidelines

To help ensure a healthy and successful small group experience for everyone, group members should review and practice these guidelines during your time together.

SAFE GROUP

We will strive to create an environment where everyone can be real, open, and honest with their struggles and victories.

CONFIDENTIALITY

What is said in the group stays in the group.

LISTEN

Let's value one another during the discussions by really listening to what is being shared. Try to avoid thinking about how you are going to respond, or what you are going to say next.

PAUSE

Allow a pause in conversation after someone shares. Give the person sharing the chance to finish and the group the opportunity to consider what was just shared before responding.

SILENCE

It is important to allow silence in the group as it provides an opportunity for someone to share and for members in the group to process the topic or question being considered.

NO FIXING

We are not here to fix each other. Give encouragement; speak truth, and point to Jesus. Don't try to solve or fix each other.

NO RESCUING

When people are sharing something deeply personal, there can be a tendency to try to make them feel better about themselves by providing immediate condolences. This will often cause them to stop sharing. Resist the temptation to rescue people.

SHARING

Be sensitive about the amount of time you share.

BE SELF-AWARE

Be self-aware of how you are personally affecting the environment through your words, actions and non-verbal communication.

USE "I" STATEMENTS

It's easy to talk about the issues of others, but for our purposes, we want you to focus on yourself. Try to use "I" statements rather than "them", "the church", "us", "we", etc.

Introduction

Taking turns introducing yourselves to each other and share one sentence about why they chose to participate in this All Church Study.

Psalm

Psalm 119:1-16, 105 (NRSVUE)

- ¹ Happy are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD.
- ² Happy are those who keep his decrees,
who seek him with their whole heart,
- ³ who also do no wrong
but walk in his ways.
- ⁴ You have commanded your precepts
to be kept diligently.
- ⁵ O that my ways may be steadfast
in keeping your statutes!
- ⁶ Then I shall not be put to shame,
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.
- ⁷ I will praise you with an upright heart,
when I learn your righteous ordinances.
- ⁸ I will observe your statutes;
do not utterly forsake me.
- ⁹ How can young people keep their way pure?
By guarding it according to your word.
- ¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you;
do not let me stray from your commandments.
- ¹¹ I treasure your word in my heart,
so that I may not sin against you.
- ¹² Blessed are you, O LORD;
teach me your statutes.
- ¹³ With my lips I declare
all the ordinances of your mouth.
- ¹⁴ I delight in the way of your decrees
as much as in all riches.
- ¹⁵ I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.
- ¹⁶ I will delight in your statutes;
I will not forget your word.
- ¹⁰⁵ Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light to my path.

Epistle Lesson

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 (NRSVUE)

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and

is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that the person of God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.

¹ In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound teaching, but, having their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. ⁵ As for you, be sober in everything, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, carry out your ministry fully.

Sermon Focus

The Bible is one of the most alluded to texts in the entire world. We make reference to it through common turns of phrase (forbidden fruit). It's alluded to in poetry (see T.S. Elliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"). We see its influence in music, film and television, paintings, comics, philosophy, ethics, and the list goes on. It is worth noting what a powerful the Bible is considering its influence alone. And even with its massive influence in non-faith based areas of culture, the Bible remains the sole/primary religious text of Christianity.

The plethora of questions about the Bible that we received for this series was not surprising. Different Christian denominations and sects have different ways of understanding scripture. Some people believe in *sola scriptura*. "*Sola scriptura* means that Scripture alone is authoritative for the faith and practice of the Christian. The Bible is complete, authoritative, and true." Another word for that is *Biblical inerrancy*. Some Christians (like Methodists) believe in *prima scriptura*. "*Prima scriptura* views the Bible as authoritative—it may even be the "most" authoritative source—but it leaves the door open for other authoritative sources of revelation. *Prima scriptura* holds to the primacy of Scripture, but the Bible becomes one of several rules for faith and practice in the Christian life."

As believers in *prima scriptura*, we do not look to the Bible to answer questions about science, for example. We also understand that the Bible was written at a particular time period, and we take that into account. We believe that an illness like the flu, comes from a virus, not from someone sinning.

One of the reasons that the Bible remains such a mystery to people is because they just don't read it, or if they do read it, they attempt to read it alone. Reading scripture is not a practice, or a means of grace, that everyone is called to. Just like some people have a rich prayer life, and some do not; certain people may be more called to study scriptures. Most Christians didn't even have access to the Bible for the majority of our religions history, and if they did, most couldn't read.

The Bible is not just one book, it's a collection or a *canon* of books. These books fall into different genres. Reading the prophets is different than reading history. We don't read a blender instruction manual the way we read Shakespeare. We also wouldn't read Shakespeare's plays like we do his poetry. Genre matters.

Not only does genre matter but so does context. These books were written over a span of at least 1500 years. Understanding what was happening when and where is vital to scriptural engagement. And not only do genre and context matter, but the canonization process matters too. Why did *these* books get chosen? Which ones didn't get chosen and why?

To answer these questions a person needs to engage in Biblical studies or at least in a Bible study. It's best to do those studies with other Christians. We are meant to read the Bible together! And Bible study, as well as Biblical studies, is not meant to take away from devotional reading of the Bible. In the words of Rev. José Morales:

"Some worry that focusing on these literary technicalities will rob the Bible of its devotional quality. They believe we should just come to it with pure hearts that that's all we need to understand the Bible. On the contrary, St. Augustine the great African Bishop of the fourth and fifth centuries challenged the church he served to never pit the critical study of scripture against the devotional reading of scripture. In his book on Christian doctrine, he holds that rigorous study and sincere devotion, attention to genre and commitment to Jesus, together open us up to scripture and guides us toward interpretation that is true and life-giving. For Saint Augustine, true interpretation will lead us right through to the kingdom of love."

If you are really interested in learning about the Bible, there are classes at Manchester UMC that can help. Almost every January a two-week class called "Bible Timeline" is offered. There are multiple studies throughout the year. Please reach out to the church if you are interested in digging into scripture.

Discussion Questions

1. What's your earliest memory of encountering the Bible?
2. Are you a person who enjoys reading scripture? Why or why not?
3. Have you ever heard someone say, "The Bible clearly says..." How did you respond?
4. Do you resonate more with *sola scriptura* or *prima scriptura*? Why?
5. Have you every participated in an in-depth study of scripture? Describe that experience.
6. Have you every participated in devotional reading of scripture? Describe that experience.

Prayer

Holy God, Word incarnate, we thank you for the Bible. We thank you for a community to read scripture with. Guide our studies and guide our devotions. As word comes alive for every generation, time and space, we witness that your Word continues to bring life and truth to us here today. **Amen.**

Introduction

Have the group reintroduce themselves and share one sentence about their week.

Epistle Lesson

1 Corinthians 2:1-13 (NRSVUE)

¹When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the testimony of God to you with superior speech or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were made not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

⁶Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are being destroyed. ⁷But we speak God's wisdom, a hidden mystery, which God decreed before the ages for our glory ⁸and which none of the rulers of this age understood, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written,

"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him"—

¹⁰God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Gospel Lesson

John 3:5-8 (NRSVUE)

⁵Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' ⁸The wind^g blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Sermon Focus

Last week we talked about how not every single person is called to reading scripture as a spiritual discipline, even though reading scripture is considered a means of grace (a way to connect with God's grace). The same is true for spiritual practices. There will always be Christians who have a vibrant and rich prayer life. Those who find peace in quiet meditative space. Those who if given the option to be in a worship setting for hours a day, every day, would take it. Being a "spiritual" person is not a requirement to be a Christian. Yet, the

Christian church, and all of the major religions around the world, have a spiritual tradition. These traditions are called *mystic* or *contemplative* traditions. *Mystics* are people who seek to lose themselves in God.

The *contemplative* tradition in Christianity goes back to the beginning of the movement. But is first seen most fully in the Dessert Mothers (Ammas) and Fathers (Abbas) of the fourth century. They are known for their sayings that were written down and shared in the early church. These were women and men who lived a life of solitude, in contemplation and prayer, in the deserts, away from the cities of the Fertile Crescent. They would commune with God and they would also spiritually fight demons; both demons of Satan, and the demons inside of themselves. Many mystic traditions speak of a battle with the self, with ego, with desire. These mystics were no different. And they were the model for the monastics that would follow them.

The orders of monastics that may sound familiar are the Benedictine monks (sixth century) or the Franciscan monks (eleventh century). But the church has always had mystics—Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Thomas Merton and Richard Rohr, to name a few.

A favorite translation of the First Rule of the Benedictine Order goes like this:

Attend to these instructions,
Listen with the heart and the mind;
they are provided in a spirit of goodwill.

These words are addressed to anyone
who is willing to renounce the delusion
that the meaning of life can be learned;
whoever is ready
to take up the greater weapon of fidelity
to a way of living that transcends understanding.

The first rule is simply this:

live this life
and do whatever is done,
in a spirit of Thanksgiving.

Abandon attempts to achieve security,
they are futile,

give up the search for wealth,
it is demeaning,

quit the search for salvation,
it is selfish,

and come to comfortable rest
in the certainty that those who
participate in this life
with an attitude of Thanksgiving
will receive its full promise.

Some people want to sit with nature, and fight inner demons (like a Desert Abba or Amma). Some people want to chant and sing, light candles, work and pray all day in the name of God (like the Benedictine). Some people have these deep encounters with God; visions that are so beyond the ordinary they can only be from God (like Julian of Norwich). And, some people just don't.

So, if you don't resonate with the contemplative tradition, if you aren't one who feels called to commune with the Spirit, or mediate and pray often, that's okay. There's nothing wrong with you. If you are one of these mystic types, that's okay too. A person need not consider themselves spiritual or have mystical encounter to be a member of the Body of Christ, a part of the church, or a part of the faith tradition. In the words of Desert Abba Anthony of Egypt, "Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalize our brother, we have sinned against Christ."

Discussion Questions

1. Who resonates with the mystic tradition? What is that like? What are spiritual practices that you participate in?
2. In your context, do you feel like the church explains the mystic and contemplative tradition enough?
3. Where do you see the mystic and contemplative tradition being lived into at Manchester UMC?
4. What do you know about the mystic tradition in other religions?
5. Can you think of a person in the Bible who seemed like a mystic?
6. When do you feel (or have felt) "spiritual?"

Prayer

Spirit of God (*pause*). You meet us in every breath (*pause*). Help us surrender ourselves back into the present moment (*pause*). Quiet the voice in our minds and let us feel our lungs fill with air and our bodies become more aware of you (*pause*). For the gift of this moment we thank you (*pause*). Remind us that we can always meet you here in the present (*pause*). That we can always meet you in the breath (*pause*). **Amen.**

Introduction

Have the group reintroduce themselves and share one sentence about their week.

New Testament Lesson

Acts 2:22-24 (NRSVUE)

²² "Fellow Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³ this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴ But God raised him up, having released him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

Gospel Lesson

John 11:45-53 (NRSVUE)

⁴⁵ Many of the Jews, therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did believed in him. ⁴⁶ But some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done. ⁴⁷ So the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the council and said, "What are we to do? This man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸ If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." ⁴⁹ But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all! ⁵⁰ You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." ⁵¹ He did not say this on his own, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was about to die for the nation, ⁵² and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God. ⁵³ So from that day on they planned to put him to death.

Sermon Focus

Why did Jesus have to die? How can an all-loving God murder their own child? Why would God require the violence of the cross to make a loving bridge between God's self and humanity? Why does our salvation require Jesus' death? These questions touch on a few different areas of classical theology. Questions specifically around how Jesus Christ's death works to accomplish salvation for us, as well as the function and purpose of the cross, are questions of *atonement*.

Atonement theories arose around the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. There are three classical atonement theories: the *satisfaction* theory, the *moral influence* theory, and the *Christus victor* theory.

Satisfaction atonement states that God (in God's perfect nature) could not stand sin, and so God became human and "Christ took upon himself the penalty for our sins and made restoration possible." This theory was so widely critiqued that within 30 years the next theory, *moral influence atonement*, was introduced.

Moral influence atonement teaches that Jesus's life of love was a moral example of how we all should live. That Christ loved so deeply he was even willing to go to the cross (and perhaps so should we be willing.)

Lastly the *Christus victor atonement* theory assumes that good and evil are in a battle together, and that the powers of Satan and evil are real and present in the world battling for the souls and lives of humans. The forces of evil brought Jesus to the cross. This theory proposes that in the end, Jesus will be victorious, as proven in the resurrection.

All three of these theories have proven themselves problematic. They have been deeply critiqued and questioned by theologians.

Satisfaction atonement requires a God that can only make the world right through a deeply violent murder of his own child. In the words of Elie Wiesel, "Religion that glorifies suffering will always find someone to suffer." Or as Rebecca Parker questions, "Do we really believe that God is appeased by cruelty?"

Moral influence atonement teaches that people should be willing to bear an unjust cross to the point of violence, and even death—which is deeply harmful for populations of abused and oppressed people. This theory has been deeply critiqued by feminist theologians "who stumble over the theory's abusive potential."

And *Christus victor atonement* is focused so solely on humans. One has to wonder about the rest of creation, which evil has ransacked and abused. A good *Christus victor atonement* theory requires a supporting theological systematic that de-centers humans, and lifts the importance of creation and the cosmic nature of Christ, God and the Holy Spirit.

Christus victor atonement has been around the longest. There is evidence of it from the second century C.E. and it was also supported by C.S. Lewis. Even postmodern theologians employ *Christus victor atonement*:

Today, however, this model is also being mined by some feminist and other contemporary theologians for its subversive potential to bear the good news of God's reconciling love to broken humanity. In this model God is not seen as orchestrating the death of Jesus; rather the forces of evil carry Jesus to the cross. The apparent victory of evil is ultimately confounded through the resurrection by the mysterious, life-giving work of God. For those Christians across the globe whose existence is framed by life and death battles against the demonic forces manifest in global economic and political structures, this model may offer a way to understand God's atoning work as that which defies those structures and claims decisive victory for the loving kingdom of God.

This is helpful for many reasons. First, God didn't send Jesus to the cross. When the all-loving power of God works in this world, as it did through the life of Jesus (and others), often the forces of evil work actively to destroy them. Powerful people who were influenced by evil sent Jesus to the cross, not God. And God, who has the power to escape such a fate, didn't. Why should so many innocent people suffer, and Jesus be the only one who is free from that fate?

The victorious part of this theory gives us a resurrection in Christ, one that we too will share. Also, this theory leaves room for redemption, not removal of the actions of sin and evil. Jesus bears the wounds and scars of the terror of the cross. Just because we are promised victory and resurrection does not mean that the wounds, the suffering, and the damage were not real. Promised salvation does not give individuals the right to wound other people. Maybe Jesus didn't have to die on the cross. Maybe other people killed him and then God couldn't and

wouldn't let that be the end. Maybe an all-loving God never condones murder of another breathing human. Maybe God can redeem and resurrect even the most painful violence in our world, from our flesh to our memories and even to the ruined soil itself.

The final and main critique of this theory (brought to us by feminist theology) is that there is very little evidence, currently, outside of the resurrection of Jesus that points to this restoration and redemption of all things. As a personal witness, I can see this critique, especially on a systematic, intertwined, structural level. However, I also cannot deny the redemption and salvation of the members of the body of Christ that I know, on a personal level. I cannot deny the lifesaving function of the Spirit, or the ever-loving presence of God that I feel in my very flesh.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you struggle with the idea of Jesus dying for your sins?
2. What atonement theory resonated most for you?
3. If you were raised with Christianity, which atonement theory were you taught as a child?
4. What were your earliest impressions of the crucifixion?
5. So, did Jesus have to die to save us?

Prayer

God who saves, God who knows our suffering and the suffering of creation, God of redemption and resurrection, Executed God, we pray for the heart and compassion to witness to those in the world and in our community who bear the cross of suffering. Help us not to seek easy explanations before we first seek to be present with them, and serve them in whatever ways we can. Teach us to witness to the injustice and move us to wound less. **Amen.**

*References: Jones, S. (2008). Chapter 3 Jesus Christ. In *Constructive theology: A contemporary approach to classical themes* (pp. 170-172). essay, Fortress Press.

Introduction

Have the group reintroduce themselves and share one sentence about their week.

Epistle Lesson

1 Corinthians 15:51-54 (NRSVUE)

⁵¹ Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Gospel Lesson

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSVUE)

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”

Sermon Focus

Eschatology is the study of the “end times” or the “eschaton.” Broadly, eschatology covers many topics. The concepts of heaven and hell are not considered in “theology proper,” but are very minor headings under eschatology. So, what does the Bible really say about these topics? What are the major influences outside of our faith that have influenced our thoughts on these topics? What does Christian tradition say about them?

OLD TESTAMENT

Starting in the Old Testament, it is important to note that the Israelites’ emphasis was always about life here on earth, since it is here that Yahweh proves divine power and faithfulness. The contemplation or concern with what comes after this life was not a big deal, not the focus of the faith, nor was it written about at length in scripture. It was believed that people lived on

through their accents. Death was not considered a transition between this life and another life. "God is the God of the living, but not of the dead...the dead existed beyond death in the shadowy sphere of *Sheol*." *Sheol* is the closest concept to hell we get in the Old Testament.

Sheol is just darkness, nonexistence, it is not good or bad, it simply "isn't." A few patriarchs of the Old Testament avoided *Sheol* by being "taken up" by God (Enoch & Elijah). Though there is no clear promise of resurrection in the Old Testament, there are some verses that point to the idea. Psalm 49:15 says, "But God will ransom my soul from the power of *Sheol*, for he will receive me." A long life was considered to be a blessing from God, a sign that you were favored, a short life, the opposite. These blessings from God took place here, not in an afterlife.

By the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, the influence of Babylonian and Persian religions deeply influenced the Israelites Judaism. Both of these nations had pantheons of god, archangels, angels, the devil, archfiends and demons. And the Zoroastrianism (Persian) religion has an idea of afterlife that greatly influenced the surrounding populations.

Characteristic for Zoroaster's doctrine is a twofold outcome of history: an eternity of bliss and an eternity of woe, allotted respectively to good and evil people in another life beyond the grave. After death the soul of the deceased has to cross the Chinvat bridge, "the Bridge of the Separator" (Yasna 46:10), which stretches over hell, an abyss of molten metal and fire. For those who are good the bridge grows broader and broader for easier transit and subsequent ascent into heaven, where the pious soul will live in eternal joy. But for those who are wicked the bridge grows narrower until it is like the blade of a razor sharp sword, and the soul falls into the abyss of hell, where there will be eternal torment and suffering. There is also some kind of intermediate state for those whose good and bad deeds are in strict balance.

Zoroastrian religion also knows of a judgment and completion of the whole world: "At the last turning-point of creation... where thou wilt come with thy Holy Spirit, with thy Dominion" (Yasna 43:5.6). Then the "sphere of lies" will collapse and the final judgment will take place. This judgment also results in a transformation of the world. The Saoshyans, or savior, will come and bring the present world to its end. The dead will be resurrected, and both the wicked and the good will have to pass through a flood of molten metal. The good will pass without harm and enter the new world. The wicked will either be purified or burned; and the evil spirits will be burned. After this worldwide purification in the last days of the present crisis, Ahura Mazda's sovereignty will be complete, and together with him the good will enjoy a new heaven and a new earth.

Shortly after the idea of Hades was introduced by the Greeks. In the Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, Gehenna is mentioned as well. More on that in the next section.

Later Old Testament writings point to concepts of resurrection and afterlife. Daniel 12:2, for example, reads, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

NEW TESTAMENT

Because Jesus was Jewish it is vital to acknowledge that his teaching about our salvation and the Kingdom of God were about the here and now and took place on earth. Because Jesus lived in the time period he did, he was also aware of these other concepts that had mixed with

the Jewish tradition. Hell is mentioned 12 times in the New Testament, 11 of which come from Jesus. He uses the word, Gehenna exclusively for it. "Ge" means valley and "Henna" means Hinnom. Hence Gehenna means the Valley of Hinnom, an actual valley outside of Jerusalem, where trash was thrown. It had a fire burning all of the time to burn the trash and was called the "place of the gnashing teeth," because animals would bite and claw at scraps around the edge of the valley. Rob Bell summarizes those verses as follows:

James uses the word "Gehenna" once in his letter to refer to the power of the tongue (chap. 3), but otherwise all of the mentions are from Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew 5, "Anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell," and "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell." In Matthew 10 and Luke 12 he says, "Be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell," and in Matthew 18 and Mark 9 he says, "It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." In Matthew 23 he tells very committed religious leaders that they win converts and make them "twice as much a child of hell" as they are, and then he asks them, "How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Bell continues with the few other mentions of something like Hell in the New Testament:

There are two other words that occasionally mean something similar to hell. One is the word "Tartarus," which we find once in chapter 2 of Peter's second letter. It's a term Peter borrowed from Greek mythology, referring to the underworld, the place where the Greek demigods were judged in the "abyss."

The other Greek word is "Hades."

Obscure, dark, murky-Hades is essentially the Greek version of the Hebrew word "Sheol." We find the word "Hades" in Revelation 1, 6, and 20 and in Acts 2, which is a quote from Psalm 16. Jesus uses the word in Matthew 11 and Luke 10: "You will go down to Hades"; in Matthew 16: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it"; and in the parable of the rich man and the beggar Lazarus in Luke 16.

And that's it. Anything you have ever heard people say about the actual word "hell" in the Bible they got from those verses you just read.

Whether death is a "final" state or a "state of transition" is an idea that the New Testament is not clear on. Nor is the New Testament clear if our final resting/living place comes at the moment of our death, or if it takes place after the final eschaton (or both—perhaps we experience death and are taken to the eschaton). For Christians that believe that a relationship and faith in Christ are a requirement for eternal salvation and afterlife, there is debate about whether or not that can take place in a person's heart/soul *after* they have died. Early church father Origen even believed that God's work of resurrection and restoration of all things would not be complete until every demon, including the devil, was no longer in hell. "Theologically speaking, heaven can be the dimension of God, the source of salvation, and the integrating focus for the present and future blessings of salvation in the new aeon."

Lastly, it is really important to understand that the only place where hell is ruled by the devil is in the world of fantasy. Ideas of a Hell with a horned Devil date to Dante's *Inferno* (1320 CE).

Nothing, absolutely nothing exists outside of God's realm, Biblically speaking.

Jesus taught us that the Kingdom of God is at hand! We can spend our lives working on bringing that Kingdom here to Earth, partnering with God and creation and each other, or not. Why worry about the next place, when there's so much good to do, to witness, to work on, to rest in, right here?

Discussion Questions

1. What were you taught about heaven and hell?
2. What do you think about the early Israelite idea of life being for the living, and Sheol being for the dead?
3. Do you think the ideas you've learned about hell were more influenced by the Bible, Zoroastrianism, or Dante?
4. What do you think heaven is like?
5. How would God make sure that all of creation gets saved, like the early church Origen believed?

Prayer

God of eternity, God of the present, grant that we may better trust you, and have faith that you have made all of your creation for good. Remind us of the communion table of your compassion where all of creation will feast at the heavenly banquet. Show us how your grace makes all things new. **Amen.**

*References: Schwarz, H. (2000). *Eschatology*. W.B. Eerdmans Pub.
Bell, R. (2011). HELL. In *Love wins: A book about heaven, hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived* (pp. 67–69). HarperOne.

Introduction

Have the group reintroduce themselves and share one sentence about their week.

Old Testament Lesson

Genesis 3:1-22 (NRSVUE)

¹ Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden'?" ² The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, ³ but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.' " ⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die, ⁵ for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

⁸ They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. ⁹ But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" ¹⁰ He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." ¹¹ He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" ¹² The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." ¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." ¹⁴ The LORD God said to the serpent,

"Because you have done this,
cursed are you among all animals
and among all wild creatures;
upon your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman
and between your offspring and hers;
he will strike your head,
and you will strike his heel."

¹⁶ To the woman he said,
"I will make your pangs in childbirth exceedingly great;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you."

¹⁷ And to the man^[b] he said,
"Because you have listened to the voice of your wife
and have eaten of the tree
about which I commanded you,
'You shall not eat of it,'

cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
¹⁹ By the sweat of your face
you shall eat bread
until you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.”

²⁰ The man named his wife Eve because she was the mother of all living. ²¹ And the LORD God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife and clothed them.

²² Then the LORD God said, “See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever”—

Epistle Lesson

Romans 5:12-14 (NRSVUE)

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³ for sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam, who is a pattern of the one who was to come.

Sermon Focus

If there was a good answer to the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” we would already have it. We would be shouting it from the roof tops. It would be written on the inside of the Hallmark cards we send to grieving loved ones. And though philosophy, religion, and other fields have answered this question in part, none of the answers have been good enough for us to stop asking it.

It turns out there is such a thing as a bad question, especially if one is looking for an exact answer. “Why do bad things happen to good people?” is a bad question if one is looking for an exact answer. Perhaps a better question is, “Now that this bad thing has happened, how can I stay in relationship with God and with others?”

This week Pastor Winter introduced us to the basics of *theodicy*. *Theodicy* studies the problem of sin and evil. Here we are talking about not only personal sin but also corporate sin. When considering *theodicy*, let’s start with a Greek philosopher named Epicurus. When Judaism presented monotheism to the Greek philosophers, they critiqued the problem of evil this way: If your God is all-loving and good, how can bad things happen? Hence, the problem of evil. The Epicurean Dilemma goes like this:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

These are valid questions, and are not easily answered. The word *theodicy* even means, “justifying God,” explaining how God is good *and* God *at the same time*, given the reality of sin and evil.

For the majority of Christian history, we have basically held two ideas of why evil exists and how evil functions. The early church father, Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 CE), wrote about both. The first is called the *Adamic Myth*. The second is called the *Tragic Myth*.

The *Adamic myth* is Hebrew in origin and comes from the second chapter of the book of Genesis, the story of the first sin of Adam and Eve. According to this myth, all evil comes from the “human will’s subversion of God’s good creation” arising from people’s desire to try to stand in the place of God and be creator rather than creatures. In the *Adamic myth*, God had already created the world, a perfect place, and it was humans who deviated from the divine will of God and are therefore responsible for evil. (Let that soak in). We see this in the scriptures where people believed that bad things happened to someone, because they sinned or because their parents sinned. Suffering happens because someone sinned.

The *tragic myth* is found throughout cultures from all over the world, but is particularly emphasized in the Greek plays known as tragedies. In the Greek tragic worldview, “Evil is rooted in the finite conditions of human existence itself.” Because we don’t get to choose to be born or to die, fatality frames our very existence and our actions. In the *tragic myth*, free will does not account for the origin of evil. Humanity enters the world powerless and no act of choice can avoid the miseries that life offers. The *tragic myth* puts the origin of evil beyond human agency, in a world of evil.

It is not until the late modern era that we see new work in the area of theodicy. Modern theologians began to consider more deeply the social effects of sin and evil on a structural/corporate/systematic level, giving increasing attention to the effects of sin in unjust social, political, and economic systems. This was a big deal, because we began to talk about victims of sin (something we didn’t always do), even if not deeply. The modern era continued to use the Augustinian models of sin, meaning that it was still believed that structural/corporate/systematic evil was rooted in individual choices, rippling out aggressively from the individual. In other words, “sin was still considered primarily about individual choices.”

Moving into the postmodern era is when we finally see real focus on the *victims* of sin. Liberation theology criticized the emphasis on individual sin over collective evil. “Evil forces cannot be easily reduced to the effects of sinful choices of some set perpetrators, or to the individual. Evil forces are the powerful institutionalization and ‘normalization’ of perverse choices that metastasize without being provoked in an apparent way.”

This focus on the victims of such malevolent forces has led liberation theologians to talk about the suffering of “innocent” or “underserved” or “oppressed.”

This is a shift in language. This politically strategic rhetoric of powerless and undeserved suffering goes hand in hand with the liberation-theological call for solidarity with justice for the oppressed. Liberation theologians believe that the categories of structural or social sin get at the pervasive, systemic, and ongoing nature of massive evil better than an Augustinian or existentialist paradigm can alone.

More recently, a *post-structuralist* idea of how sin and evil function has begun to emerge. In the social sciences there is an ongoing debate over what is more influential, structure or agency. Is it the systems we are in, or our own free will? Do we actually have autonomy or are we at the whim of the systems? Does our sin root from our own agency (Adamic) or from the structure of the systems in which we function (tragic)? *Poststructuralism* considers both the object AND the system in order to offer any kind of analysis (be it in any field: psychology, anthropology, theology). In other words, "even so-called private or personal sin is linked to collective structures." And if we want to understand where or why evil happens, we must analyze both. *Poststructuralism* offers methods to do so, and then to also confront such evils. "One of the benefits of *poststructuralism* is that it can allow us to (pastorally and politically) look at history and contemporary context and analyze how resistance to domination arises, and contribute to the objective of fostering empowerment of and solidarity with those who are oppressed."

For example, much of Foucault's historical work investigates how individuals AND whole communities have been disciplined and regulated...by institutional mechanisms (penal systems, psychiatric medicine, education, religion). These investigations support his theory that power, even when it seems monolithic and centralized, upon closer analysis turns out to be a network of widely extended apparatuses. There is rarely a direct route from the peripheral, local authority mechanisms back to some centralized hub of institutional power. Power is something that circulates and is never located here or there, never in anybody's hands in any exclusive sort of way. Power is not just what my oppressor possesses; it is always a power relation.

This lack of a "centralized location of power" as well as its implied lack of a "centralized location of evil," matters greatly when we think about why bad things happen. The devil as a centralized location for evil does not hold up in this model. Sin no longer "ripples out." It metastasizes within the systems themselves with no central location, and those systems must be deconstructed to understand where and how said evil and sin are functioning.

Though there are a few more models to use when deconstructing and understanding how sin and evil function, the last we will seriously consider is *postcolonialism*. "*Poststructuralism* is very white and male, and extremely theoretical. It's very heady and western and affluent. For these reasons some postmodern theologians, especially those not from the first world, prefer to use a *postcolonial* model and theory instead of a *poststructuralist* one."

Many theologians have turned to *postcolonial* theory as a more indigenous theoretical way of addressing the sinful effects of colonialism in its various manifestations. In this theory oppressed groups can analyze why they may accept or reject aspects of dominant culture, shifting the analysis of the systems to those who hold the place of the "other." These theologians employ, in particular, the *postcolonial* concept of "hybridity." Botswana theologian Musa Dube describes hybridity as "the right to reap from both fields, from that of the colonized as well as the colonizer, and to use whatever they find life affirming....[H]ybridity is thus a pragmatic use of power and agency, reflecting a very grassroots and contextualized approach to cultural, economic, and political survival in contexts of pervasive structural evil."

In conclusion, the *Adamic Myth* states that we are the cause of evil and that if we each stop choosing to sin, there will be no evil in the world. The *tragic myth* states we do not have a choice, that sin and evil are byproducts of the fatality of our finite existence that we didn't

choose or ask for. *Poststructuralism* and *postcolonialism* give us the opportunity to lessen the sin and evil in the world, by focusing on the victims of sin and analyzing the systems that allow sin to metastasize into evil, and evil to thrive.

It is clear that the conversations and theories around theodicy, sin and evil, are ongoing. The movement has gone from focusing on sinners to focusing on victims, and that the interconnectedness of all things has come to the forefront of the conversation. We cannot work against evil and oppression if we do not understand how sin metastasizes into evil once it enters the world.

Discussion Questions

1. Share your thoughts on the Epicurean dilemma.
2. Using the four theories of theodicy above answer the question: "Why do people die of cancer?" Which answer provides the most hope and best possible future outcomes?
3. Where do we find hope in a world filled with sin and evil?
4. How is God's creation, outside of humans affected by our understanding of the function of sin and evil?

Prayer

O God, when there are no good answers we cry to you. Fill us with the assurance that you carry our screams and hold us in our anger, even when that anger is pointed at you. For those who suffer because of our actions, we ask forgiveness. Teach us, lead us, and mold us into the people you mean us to be so that the world can look as you envision it. **Amen.**

*References: Jones, S. (2008). Chapter 3 Sin and Evil. In *Constructive theology: A contemporary approach to classical themes* (pp. 117–159). essay, Fortress Press.



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