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Ask the Bible Anything

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If you want to know what you believe about the Bible, pay attention to the kinds of questions you ask of it.

Some of us refrain from asking questions entirely, perhaps equating a questioning spirit with an irreverent one. We tiptoe through the pages of Scripture as if it were a museum of fine art, each passage guarded with the words "Do not touch."

Others of us ask questions, but nervously and doubtfully worry that the Bible's truthfulness cannot withstand close scrutiny. We read the Scriptures as if we were handling antiques that may just break beneath too firm a touch.

But the Bible is neither a museum nor an antique shop, but rather a rough and durable world made for explorers. As we open this book, God bids us to climb the mountains of his majesty, dive into the seas of his mysteries, and bore down into the mines of his infinite mind. We cannot run too hard on these hills or gaze too deep into these stars. We cannot exhaust these oceans, silence these thunderstorms, or break these granite rocks; we can only be exhausted, silenced, broken, and captivated by them.

The questions we bring to the Bible pose no threat to this world. They only draw us deeper into its wonders.

Honour by Asking

Of course, *how* we ask questions of the Bible matters immensely – and we're getting there. But before we do, consider why we *must* ask questions if we aim to honour God's Word as we ought.

Consider, first, what kind of book the Bible is. Here we have a library of divine revelation: 66 books written over thousands of years in an array of literary genres. Parachute down into the Bible at random, and you may find yourself in poetry or prophecy, parable or epistle, proverb or apocalypse.

The Bible is not only diverse in its genres, but also in its literary styles. Though all the human authors "spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21), nevertheless, Isaiah is not Jeremiah, and Luke is not John. The light of God's truth comes to us from the same source, but only after passing through the multifaceted prism of human personality and perspective.

These two factors alone create enough diversity in Scripture, enough tensions, that we can say with John Piper, "If we do not ask seriously how differing texts fit together, then we are either superhuman (and see all truth at a glance) or indifferent (and don't care about seeing the coherence of truth)" (*Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, pp 94-95). But this is not all.

Hunt for the Truth

Consider also that the writers of Scripture did not always place their message on the lowest shelf possible. Although the central teachings of Scripture are clear enough even for children to understand, not all of the Bible is equally plain. Very often, God is not interested in merely handing us the truth; he instead wants us to hunt for it (Proverbs 25:2). Therefore, much of the Bible is filled with intentional difficulties, like this one:

Answer not a fool according to his folly,
lest you be like him yourself.

Answer a fool according to his folly,
lest he be wise in his own eyes. (Proverbs 26:4-5)

An observant Bible reader will notice tensions like this one all over the Bible – and not only between neighbouring verses, but between chapters in the same book, between books of the same author, and between the writings of different authors.

Why, for example, does God say, "I regret that I have made Saul king" while, eighteen verses later, Samuel says God "will not...have regret" (1 Samuel 15:11, 29)? Or how do we fit the orderly, cause-and-effect world of the Proverbs alongside the enigmatic Ecclesiastes? Or how do we square Paul's culturally savvy sermon to the Athenians (Acts 17:22-31)

with his commitment in Corinth to "know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2)?

Each of these tensions is intentional, not accidental. Often, the human writers themselves intend the tension; God always does. Why? So that, as we read our Bibles, we might "call out for insight and raise [our] voice for understanding"; so that we might "seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures" (Proverbs 2:3-4). In

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other words, so that we might rigorously, prayerfully *think*. And we cannot think well unless we ask questions.

Heart Behind Our Questions

We do not have a choice, then, of whether we will ask questions – only of how. And, as the stories in Scripture remind us, the *how* is more important than we often imagine. Mary receives a glorious answer to her question (Luke 1:34-38); Zechariah loses his voice (Luke 1:18-23). The disciples learn about the end of the age (Mark 13:4-37); the scribes leave embarrassed (Mark 11:27-33). Questions can invite either God's delight or his indignation, depending on the heart behind the question.

How should we ask questions of God's Word? Humbly, expectantly, and patiently.

Ask Humbly

When Digory and Polly meet Narnia's talking animals in C S Lewis's *The Magician's Nephew*, Uncle Andrew gapes on, horrified. While the children hear the animals speaking intelligible English, Uncle Andrew hears only the barks and growls of beasts. The narrator explains, "What you see and hear depends a good deal on where you are standing; it also depends on what sort of person you are" (*Magician's Nephew*, p 75). If our questions are going to uncover glory in God's Word, and not merely ink on paper, then each of us must be a certain sort of person – a humble one.

The most spiritually perceptive people in this world are not those with the finest mental equipment, but rather those who have been humbled most by grace. God reveals his counsels not to "the wise and understanding" but rather to "little children" (Luke 10:21). While the brilliant but proud grope through God's Word like drunk men at midnight, God "leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way" (Psalm 25:9).

When the humble ask questions of Scripture, they ask as subjects before a King, as creatures before a Creator, as redeemed sinners before the Holy One. Questions that put God to the proof will receive, not an answer, but a rebuke in return (Matthew 12:38-42; Romans 9:19-20). Questions that come from a lowly and contrite heart, however, earnestly seeking understanding – these are the questions God loves (Isaiah 57:15).

Ask Expectantly

The truly humble, however, do not stop at asking questions; they also expect that God has answers and "rewards those who seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). False humility may content itself to splash on the seashore of Scripture, speaking of all the mysteries beneath; true humility dives into the deep, searching for hidden treasure.

Too often, I suspect, many of us end the search too soon by consulting the treasures that commentators, gifted preachers, and study Bibles have discovered. To be sure, God often provides answers to our questions through the teachers, dead and alive, that he has given to the church (Ephesians 4:11), and we would be fools to limit our wisdom to what we can discover ourselves.

Nevertheless, we ask questions wrongly if we instinctively rely on others to supply the answers. We forget in such moments that "the Lord gives wisdom" (Proverbs 2:6). And what else can such an assurance mean except that, as we call out for insight, and raise our voices for understanding, and apply our minds and hearts to the text, and think harder than we thought we could, God himself will reveal more to us than we thought we were capable of knowing? We dare not limit the discoveries a redeemed mind, governed by faith and love, can make in the world of Scripture.

Ask Patiently

Finally, to humility and expectancy we add patience. For, if we are serious about asking questions of God's Word, we will eventually ask a question for which we can find no answer. We have asked humbly, we have asked expectantly, but, at least for the moment, our efforts have yielded only dust.

God, in his wisdom, has not seen fit to provide answers to all "the secret things" that so perplex us (Deuteronomy 29:29). In our universe, there are subterranean depths and galactic heights that no human eye can see. So too in Scripture, there are depths and heights of God's wisdom that we cannot now reach, but must instead approach with silent wonder.

Not all mysteries will become clear in this life; not all knots will unravel; not all puzzles will be solved. But

Christian faith does not ultimately rest in knowing all we would like to know, but rather in knowing Jesus Christ, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3).

Answers, glorious as they are, are not our final hope; Christ is. And when our knowledge falters, our communion with Christ need not. For here, we discover again what it is to "trust in the Lord with all your heart,

and lean not on your own understanding" (Proverbs 3:5 NKJV). Eternity will prove that such trust was not unfounded, even if some of us must cry along the way, "Help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).

In the meantime, undiscovered countries are still waiting for us in God's Word. Come and run in the fields of this revelation. Ride these rivers, trek these mountains, and fly as high as you can into these clouds. And as you do, expect to find treasure. Expect to find more of God.

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