

**BANNED**

**QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE**



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**QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE**

**CHRISTIAN PIATT**

**with Becky Garrison, Jason Boyett,  
Jarrod McKenna, and others not  
afraid of impertinent questions**



**CHALICE**  
P R E S S

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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## *Introduction*

### Why a Book about Banned Questions?

When I was younger, I had a Bible thrown at my head for asking too many questions during a Sunday school class. Granted, I was probably even more provocative than your average adolescent, but I really did have a lot of legitimate questions about God, my faith, Jesus, and the Bible.

The message I got at the time was that church isn't the place for such questions.

Seriously? If we can't ask the tough, keep-you-awake-at-night questions within our faith communities, then what good are they?

I left organized religion behind for about ten years, until I found a place where my questions not only would be heard and tolerated but also would be respected and wrestled with. Beyond that, the good people at Chalice Press had either the nerve or the lack of judgment necessary to offer me a book series to help others struggling with these same questions.

In these pages you'll find fifty of the most provocative, challenging or otherwise taboo questions that many of us have wondered about but few have actually asked. I assembled an incredible team of respondents to offer their views on these hard questions. Their responses range from the personal to the profound and from sarcastic to deeply touching. I'm deeply grateful for each of them and for their commitment to sharing their hearts, minds, and experiences.

The goal of this book is not to resolve these difficult issues once and for all, but rather to open up an ongoing dialogue that allows us all to talk more openly together about what we believe and what we don't, and perhaps more importantly, why we believe it.

I strongly believe that any faith worth claiming should stand up to rigorous examination and should also be open to change over time. I hope that this collection is one step in your continuing journey as a person of faith, whatever that may look like to you.

If you enjoy this book, be sure to check out *Banned Questions about Jesus*, the second book in the *Banned Questions* series, due out in autumn, 2011. And if you have questions you'd like me to consider for future editions, or if you think of a topic for another *Banned Questions* book, write me at [cpiaatt@christianpiatt.com](mailto:cpiaatt@christianpiatt.com) and tell me about it.

Christian

*Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect, handed down directly from God to humanity without error?*

**Craig Detweiler**

**Who is...?**  
**Craig Detweiler**

*I skipped second grade.*

**A**bsolutely. Scientific principles have only been applied to the Bible for a couple hundred years. An earlier era understood divine inspiration as a different kind of truth. Shoehorning the Bible into scientific standards may actually reduce the profound gifts that the Bible provides. Shakespeare is not intended to be crammed into a test tube. Surely the Bible operates on an entirely different plane and claim to authority.

For example, we know that love is a powerful, elusive, but tangible reality. Artists and musicians have given us countless ways to describe such a profound truth. Drugs have enhanced the physical side of sexual performance. Yet medical breakthroughs cannot make us more loving. Becoming more loving is a lifelong quest, rooted in prayer, perseverance, and careful attention to others.

Following Jesus (the core Christian route) involves so much more than the minutiae of the Bible. We may memorize countless verses, but we are still called to put them into practice. Jesus seemed so interested in how our convictions turned into tangible differences for our communities. He gave little time or attention to those who tried to trap him into semantic arguments about obscure interpretations of the Torah. The Bible speaks into our hearts and minds with both veracity and variety. It is meant to woo, to persuade, to challenge, not by nailing down the details but pushing us toward applying timeless truths for today.

Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?

## Jason Boyett

**Who is...**

**Jason Boyett**

*I can play the hammered dulcimer.*

**A.** Of course. Belief in the inerrancy of scripture—inerrancy is the theological word for the idea that the Bible is without error—is not a requirement for salvation. Let me be clear: A Christian is not someone who believes in the perfection of scripture. A Christian is someone who follows Jesus Christ.

Remember, the earliest Christians didn't even have the Bible as we know it. They had the Law and the Prophets on ancient scrolls. Certain churches had letters written by Paul. A few may have had the gospel accounts to read (and many certainly had other noncanonical gospels available, such as the gospel of Thomas). But they most likely wouldn't have made a big deal about whether or not these texts were free from chronological or scientific errors because they just didn't think that way.

The idea that the Bible's authority is tied to its lack of mistakes is an Enlightenment idea. In the grand arc of history, that's a pretty recent concept.

That's not to say the Bible isn't inspired or authoritative. It certainly is inspired in that it tells us the story of Jesus, from Genesis to Revelation. It is authoritative in that it is God's primary means of communicating with us. But the Bible is not part of the Trinity; to exalt it above the Christ whose story it tells, and whose salvation it reveals, is a bad idea.

## José F. Morales Jr.

**Who is...**

**José F. Morales Jr.**

*I'm a techno/house DJ.*

**A.** Nowhere in the Bible does it say that one must believe in the Bible (let alone believe it's perfect) to be saved. Moreover, the Bible doesn't claim authority for itself within its pages. That's why I contend with my fellow Christians who say that one must believe in the "authority of the Bible." For me, the awesomeness of the Bible is that it points beyond itself.

Q. *Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?*

And to what does it point?

First, the Bible points to the authority of God—not of the Bible! God is supreme above all, creator and sustainer of all life—life now and beyond the grave. I always say that the most important words in scripture are the first four: “In the beginning, God . . .”

Second, the Bible points to the good news of salvation. Now, salvation is defined in many different ways throughout scripture. So we should become familiar with the broad stroke with which the Bible paints salvation: God saves in creation, in gathering a community, in political liberation, in acquiring wisdom, in healing, and in the washing away of sin. In his book *Salvation*, Joel Green summarizes it best: Salvation is “God drawing near”—drawing near in creation, in the Temple, in Christ.

And we draw near to the Bible, the written word, because in doing so, the Living Word, whom Christians know as Jesus Christ, draws near to us (see Lk. 24:13–32). “They said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he [Jesus] was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?’” (Lk. 24:32).

God indeed has drawn near to save us—believe it!

## Nadia Bolz-Weber

Who is...  
Nadia Bolz-Weber

*I have four chickens in my backyard.*

A World Religions professor of mine in seminary told a story about New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan being asked what it takes to be a Christian. His answer? “If you’re dipped, you’re in.” What Crossan was saying is that your baptism makes you Christian. And when we are baptized, it is in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that we are not baptized in the name of the Bible. Why is this? Because the Bible is not the fourth person of the Trinity, even though it is often treated as such.

Again, this is where Lutherans get in trouble with some of our other Christian brothers and sisters. We believe that God claims us and names us as God’s own in the waters of baptism. The action is from God toward us, not from us toward God.

*Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?*

For a really great treatment on the difference between viewing the Bible as Divine Reference Manual and viewing the Bible as Living Word, see *Making Sense of Scripture* by David J. Lose.

## Christian Piatt

**Who is...**

**Christian Piatt**

*I once had a job cleaning out  
condemned apartment buildings.*

**A** There are two things to consider when dealing with this question: church history and human nature. One of the biggest reasons that Martin Luther resisted the authority of the Catholic Church the way he did, ultimately sparking the Protestant Reformation, was because he believed that people should not be beholden to the church in claiming what they believe about God.

So at the foundation of every non-Catholic Christian church is this value of the individual freedom of belief, at least in theory. But in reality, we humans aren't big fans of letting go of control, and church is certainly no exception. Although Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and all other Protestants supposedly have the liberty to interpret scripture without organized religion interceding and telling them what to think, we find plenty of examples where this still happens.

You know that old saying about those who don't learn from history being doomed to repeat it? For all the benefits of the church, we sometimes have selective amnesia when it comes to remembering where we came from.

Some religious leaders will say you can't be a Christian without claiming the perfect, inerrant authority of scripture. The good news is that you get to decide for yourself whether you agree with them or not.

Q. Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?

## Joshua Toulouse

### Who is...?

#### Joshua Toulouse

*I am currently pursuing my lifelong goal of spending the rest of my life in school. I really, really love school, and I hate the idea of living in the "real world."*

---

A. The Bible says that all scripture is inspired by God, or it can be translated as "breathed" or "spirited" by God. But nowhere do the scriptures claim to be handed down directly from God without possibility for error. While some traditions have understood scripture this way, it is certainly not a requirement for Christianity.

I choose to see the idea that scripture is inspired by God to mean that God inspired the writing of the scripture but also respected the humanity of those who were doing the writing. God recognizes that we are not perfect, and therefore nothing we create will be perfect either.

It is helpful to consider too that the inspiration of God regarding scripture doesn't end when the writing is complete. God is also inspiring those of us who hear or read scripture today. With this understanding, God is kept active in scripture, in that scripture can speak to us in new ways and on different levels now as opposed to when it was written.

The breathing or spiriting of God in scripture occurs today, just as much in our receiving of scripture as it was in the writing.

## Becky Garrison

### Who is...?

#### Becky Garrison

*Since 1996, I've been studying improv theater with Gary Austin, founder of the Groundlings.*

---

A. This concept of reading the Bible line by line is a relatively new way of interpreting scripture that would have been totally foreign to pre-Enlightenment Christians. Even the most die-hard literalist acknowledges that when Jesus was speaking in parables, his audience knew that he was using metaphors and symbols.

## Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?

To reduce the poetry, metaphor, symbolism, and other literary devices present in this holy book to a point where the Bible becomes a technical how-to manual misses the mystery behind the myriad ways that God has spoken to humanity throughout history.

### Jim L. Robinson

**A.** Of course! Christianity is not based on one's affirmation of scripture or the correctness of one's doctrine; rather, it's based on God's grace and our trust in that grace.

I don't buy the exact description of "inerrancy" that's such a crucial belief for some Christians. On the other hand, I believe that any perceived "errors" are not really in scripture but in human presuppositions about the texts.

The Bible is a human witness to the presence and grace of God. God interacts with humans and sometimes (by way of divine inspiration) some humans get it. They perceive and understand that presence and write down their experience. Down through history some of those writings have been collected to provide a standard by which succeeding generations can evaluate their own experiences.

As to "handed down directly from God," that's again a matter of definition. Yes, I believe that God is the source of the truth in scripture, but I don't believe that God dictated it word for word. The truth and the validity of the Christian witness are proven in the arena of history where God interacts with humans. We are known by the fruits we bear.

### Scriptural References

Matthew 7:24–29; 28:19; Mark 1:21–28; Luke 24:13–32; 2 Timothy 3:15–16; 2 Peter 1:20–21

### Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

- Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Hendrickson, 1999).
- Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).
- Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (HarperOne, 1997), especially chap. 7, "Salvation: What on Earth Do We Mean?"
- Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (HarperOne, 2003), especially chap. 3, "The Bible: The Heart of the Tradition."
- Ed Cizewski, *Coffeehouse Theology* (NavPress, 2008).

## Q. Can I be a Christian if I don't believe the Bible is perfect?

- Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know about Them)* (HarperOne, 2010).
- Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (HarperOne, 2007).
- Daniel Erlander, *Baptized, We Live: Lutheranism as a Way of Life* (Augsburg Fortress Press, 1995).
- Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good about the Good News?* (HarperOne, 2007), especially "Introduction" and chap. 1, "We Start with the Bible."
- Joel B. Green, *Salvation* (Chalice Press 2003).
- N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Scripture and the Authority of God—Getting beyond the Bible Wars* (HarperOne, 2006).

### Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. If you are saved by the Bible's lack of errors, what happens if you find a mistake in it?
2. How deep are you willing to go in Bible study? Are you willing to consider sources other than those that support what you already think you believe?
3. What kind of relationship should Christians have with the Bible?
4. Joel Green defines salvation as "God drawing near." How do you define salvation?
5. What makes someone Christian?



# Question

*If Adam and Eve were the first (and only) people on Earth, where did their kids' spouses come from? Did they marry each other? And if everyone on Earth but Noah's family was killed in a great flood, did Noah's kids sleep with each other? Isn't this a sin?*

## Christian Piatt

**A** Stories like these are challenging for those who take the Bible literally because they lead to some potentially creepy conclusions. Consider, though, that people of this time and culture were storytellers. Consider that they didn't have much hard science to explain the inner workings of the universe, but they did have parables.

There are two roots of the name "Adam"—one being "man" and the other being "earth," as in dirt. A common translation of the name "Eve" is "life." So while you can look at this story and say it's about two people named Adam and Eve, you can also think about it as a story about the beginning of "human life on Earth."

The story about Noah is an interesting one. It's also helpful here to think a little bit more broadly, recognizing that many cultures throughout history have yielded similar stories about floods and other catastrophes. Keep in mind, too, that folks back in those days didn't travel much, so their idea of what the world encompassed was pretty small. If a large area was flooded out, it might well seem to them as if the whole world—at least their world—was under water.

Like the story of Adam and Eve, the story of the flood and Noah's ark addresses the age-old questions of why bad things happen in the world and how we continue to endure them. This isn't to say that some form of inbreeding didn't take place back in those days. But considering the broader questions that these stories are meant to address helps to get us away from the little details we tend to get hung up on so often.

Q. *Did they marry each other?*

## Joshua Einsohn

Who is...?

Joshua Einsohn

*I don't mean to give any credence to astrology, but I do find it helpful when trying to understand someone's behavior . . . which I also find mildly embarrassing.*

---

A. This is the stuff that makes my brain explode when it's taken literally. The amount of tap dancing that is required to make these stories work exactly as they are told really confuses me. If the creation stories (note the plural there) were meant to be taken so literally, there would then be explanations of exactly how the fifth, sixth, and seventh humans came along. There would also be an explanation of why two creation stories are told at the beginning of Genesis.

If the flood story was to be taken literally, there would've been a verse thrown in about the very first lido deck and the accommodations made for the extra people so that Noah's kids didn't have to resort to incest.

The Bible does not answer all the questions it raises. Rather than bending over backward to try to come up with a literal rationale, why not assume that these stories were meant to teach, instruct, and give comfort? Just because Noah's family might not have been the only survivors on Earth doesn't make his story any less important.

In my physical sciences class in ninth grade, I made poor Mr. McCarthy insane by always asking why something worked the way it did. He would explain the physics behind it and then I'd follow it up with another: "But why?" Finally, I'd push him to his limit and he'd say: "Because God made it that way!" I asked if I could put that as the answer on the test and he was not amused.

Some things we have to take on faith because we can't understand them, but short of that, there is a logical explanation and we should strive to find it, even if the answer is: "It's a story to teach us a very valuable lesson."



## Scriptural References

Genesis 2; 6:5—10:32

## Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

- Marcus J. Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally* (Harper San Francisco, 2002).
- John Dominic Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Polebridge, 1988).

## Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. Do you think the stories in scripture are meant to be taken literally? Why or why not?
2. Can there be more than one interpretation of biblical stories? What are some different types of understanding you can think of (cultural, moral, historical, etc.)?
3. Jesus spoke often in parables. How did people react? Were they concerned with whether or not the stories he told were literally true?

*Aren't women treated poorly throughout the Bible? Why would any intelligent modern woman today even want to read the Bible?*

## Rebecca Bowman Woods

### Who is... Rebecca Bowman Woods

*I was born in Alaska, but I despise cold weather.*

**A** Growing up in the church, I learned the better-known stories of biblical women. By age ten or eleven, I had a few questions, such as: Why was Jacob allowed to marry both Rachel and Leah? Why was it such a big deal to be “barren”? Why didn’t Jesus have any female disciples (or did he)? And was Eve really to blame for . . . everything?

By the time I discovered the really awful Old Testament stories and the New Testament texts commanding women to be silent in church, cover their heads, and obey their husbands, I wanted nothing to do with the Bible, or frankly, with Christianity.

What convinced me was reading about Jesus. Even though the gospel writers were male, it’s clear that Jesus had an ethic of equality when it came to women. They supported his ministry and were among his closest friends. He rescued a woman caught in adultery from death by public stoning and then convinced her that her soul was worth saving, too. Some of his longest conversations in scripture were with women. When most of the disciples went into hiding on Good Friday, the women stayed by the cross, and women were the first to see the risen Jesus.

A closer look at the rest of the Bible shows a steady (if not sparse) line of women who played a role in God’s unfolding story. Alongside the “good girls” whose names I learned in Sunday School are those who challenged the status quo, made the best of bad situations, and followed God’s call to service, leadership, and ministry: Tamar, Deborah, Bathsheba, Esther, Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Joanna, Lydia, and Priscilla. These and nameless others demonstrate resourcefulness, strength, and courage—all the more remarkable considering their place in ancient culture.



## Becky Garrison

**A** While tradition tends to accord Mary with having found favored status with God (Lk. 1:26–38), let us not forget the women around Jesus who kicked some holy hiney. For example, Anna, the only woman designated a prophet in the New Testament, possessed the wisdom and foresight to see that this infant before her represented the Messiah (Lk. 2:36–38).

If Jesus truly wanted women stuck in the kitchen, he wouldn't have encouraged Mary to join the other disciples in their discussions. Instead, he would have encouraged her to hang back washing dishes (Lk. 10:38–42). Furthermore, when Jesus was told his family was looking for him, he replied, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" (Mk. 3:31–35). He would not have said "mother" had there not been females as part of his entourage.

All throughout his ministry, Jesus debunked the first-century Jewish tradition that treated women like property. His actions with the Samaritan woman at the well (Jn. 4:4–26), the woman about to be stoned for adultery (Jn. 8:1–12), and the female sinner who wanted to anoint his feet with oil (Lk. 7:36–50) marked him as a man who would break every holy law on the books so that women could be viewed as equals in the kingdom of God.

Let us also not forget that Jesus made his very first appearance as the risen Lord before a "lowly" woman (Mk. 16:9 and Jn. 20:11–18).

## Craig Detweiler

**A** The ancient world was quite patriarchal. Women were rarely afforded the rights and equality we've all come to accept as natural and God-given. Plenty of examples of abuse are found in the Jewish scriptures. Eve is blamed for original sin. Women are rarely counted in ancient censuses. They are not given power, property, or even a voice. In a particularly haunting New Testament passage, the apostle Paul insists, "As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the law also says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church" (1 Cor. 14:34–35).

So why read the Bible? Women may find themselves strangely moved by Jesus' relationship with the opposite sex. He goes out of his way to affirm the value of women who have seemingly been discarded by their culture. Jesus defends the woman caught in adultery. He pauses to refresh the woman at the well. He stops for a woman suffering from an issue of blood. He heals Jairus' daughter. He responds to the cries of Mary and Martha by resurrecting their beloved Lazarus.

## Aren't women treated poorly throughout the Bible?

If women find themselves discouraged by the ghosts of a patriarchal past, they may find Jesus a surprisingly liberating figure. He upsets the status quo by addressing women, affirming women, and befriending women, regardless of their social status.

### Marcia Ford

#### Who is... Marcia Ford

*I hitchhiked from New Jersey to Texas  
and didn't get killed once.*

Many—but not all—ancient cultures were patriarchal societies in which men had all the power and women were treated as possessions. While there were exceptions throughout its history, most notably the elevation of Deborah to the position of judge, Israelite society perpetuated that structure. While some see the Bible as condoning masculine control, others interpret the biblical perpetuation of patriarchy as a way of working within existing cultural norms.

This background is what makes Jesus' attitude toward women so astonishing. Jesus healed, delivered, and saved women as well as men and never discouraged women from following him. There's evidence that the women who traveled with Jesus were largely responsible for underwriting his ministry. Women were treated as valuable human beings, every bit as worthwhile as men.

Those who see the Bible as misogynistic often interpret Paul's teachings limiting the role of women as representative of all of scripture. But they fail to realize how much responsibility women had in the early church and how much the male followers of Jesus—including Paul—relied on women to provide for their ministries and even correct those who misunderstood the gospel, as Priscilla did.

Intelligent women today have much to learn from the Bible once they grasp the stunning message Jesus brought to the women of his day. Never before had anyone, especially a religious leader, offered them the hope and promise of a new way of living that Jesus did.

# Aren't women treated poorly throughout the Bible?

## Scriptural References

Luke 1:26–38; 2:36–38; 7:36–50; 10:38–42; Mark 3:31–35; 16:9; John 4:4–26; 8:1–12; 20:11–18; Acts 2:17; 18:24–28; Joel 2:28–29; Galatians 3:28; Matthew 26:13; Judges 4:4; 5:7, 31

## Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

- Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008).
- John T. Bristow, *What Paul Really Said about Women: The Apostle's Liberating Views on Equality in Marriage, Leadership, and Love* (HarperOne, 1991).
- Christians for Biblical Equality: <http://www.cbeinternational.org>.
- Loren Cunningham, David Joel Hamilton, and Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women: A Biblical Study of Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM Publishers, 2000).
- J. Lee Grady, *10 Lies the Church Tells Women and 25 Tough Questions About Women and the Church* (Charisma House, 2006).
- Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (IVP Academic, 1995).
- Liz Curtis Higgs, *Bad Girls of the Bible and What We Can Learn from Them* (WaterBrook, 1999).
- Craig S. Keener, *Paul, Women, and Wives: Marriage and Women's Ministry in the Letters of Paul* (Hendrickson, 1992).
- Virginia Stem Owen, *Daughters of Eve: Seeing Ourselves in Women of the Bible* (NavPress, 1995).
- Lisa Wolfe, *Uppity Women of the Bible* (Four DVD set, available at <http://www.livingthequestions.com>).

## Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. How do contemporary Christian women reclaim the legacies of Anna and Mary Magdalene?
2. How has your church used the Bible to either promote women in ministry or deny them participation in meaningful ministry?
3. Imagine being a first-century woman in Palestine who has only known a life dominated by men. What kind of impact do you think Jesus' teachings would have had on you?
4. Matthew 1:1–17, the genealogy of Jesus, includes four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (called the wife of Uriah). Locate, read, and discuss these women's stories in the Old Testament. What do they have in common? Why do you think the gospel writer included them in the genealogy of Jesus?
5. Are women better off today than in ancient times?

*How can a God be all-loving yet allow people to be thrown into hell?*

Jarrod McKenna

## Who is...?

Jarrod McKenna

*I think Žižek's right in insisting that trivial "interesting facts" about the author function as a form of propaganda to show we are "balanced"; that is, "I'm not just a crazy activist; I also like Scrabble and long walks on the beach."*

**A** The Bible doesn't say God is all-loving. In my work heading up an interfaith youth organization in Western Australia, I have often heard my Muslim friends speak of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah, including *Al Wadud*, "The Loving One." The Bible, however, makes a claim not just about an attribute of God but about the mysterious unknowable essence of the Holy Triune God—that God is not just loving, but that "God IS love" (1 Jn. 4:8).

The context of this verse is very important in responding to the question of hell. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Jesus not only reveals God fully but also reveals what it is to be fully human. You don't need to be a historian to know that it's hell when we reject God by living like we were made in the image of something other than the Love revealed in Jesus (1 Jn. 4:9–12). Tolstoy wrote, "Where love is, God is also." It's equally true to say "Where Love is not—that's hell."

Any talk of hell must come in the narrative of the Creator who has acted decisively to redeem all of creation, uniting heaven and earth in the nonviolent Messiah Jesus. We were made by Love, in the image of Love, to participate in the dance that flows between the Holy Trinity that is Love and that we see fully revealed in Jesus to be Love, and this Love will one day cover the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9).

To not eternally be fully human by participating in the dance of Love that is God is . . . hell. Hell is what happens when we willingly decide to collaborate with the dehumanizing forces of violence, injustice, and misery that will be no more when love is "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). That is why C. S. Lewis could write, "Hell's gates are locked from the inside."



## Jim L. Robinson

### Who is...?

Jim L. Robinson

*When I was nine or ten, a Sunday school teacher, frustrated with my incessant questioning, slapped me and reported my “disrespect” to my father, who inflicted great pain on my butt when we got home from church.*

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**A.** One explanation is that people make their own choices and reap the consequences. The rules are clear and there are no excuses. Another response would suggest that “hell” is the extension of a primitive reward-and-punishment worldview that is not really consistent with later writings in the New Testament.

The bottom line is that none of us knows the mind of God. We walk by faith, not by sight. No matter what we conclude, there is no guarantee that we’re “right.” Unfortunately, there are those who spout teachings about grace but who still believe you have to “get it right” if you want to go to heaven. It’s not grace if we have to do anything to get it.

Whatever I say is a statement of faith, not of knowledge. If we knew, there’d be no need for faith. Indeed, from one perspective, the opposite of faith is not doubt but knowledge; and if the New Testament is clear on anything, it is that we are justified by and through faith.

Personally, I prefer to err on the side of grace rather than rules, laws, and prerequisites. I find in scripture a movement away from law and toward grace.

I believe, projecting on the basis of that movement, that God does not “allow people to be thrown into hell.” I’m relatively confident that present-day teachings about hell will one day be revealed as a human misinterpretation of scripture—either in the writing, in the reading, or in both. However, that is a statement of faith, not of knowledge.

### Scriptural References

Isaiah 11:9; 1 Corinthians 15:28; 1 John 4:8–12

### Suggested Additional Source for Reading

- N. T. Wright, *For All the Saints?* (Morehouse, 2004).



*How can a God be all-loving?*

### Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. What is grace? Are there prerequisites to receiving grace? If there are prerequisites, is it really grace?
2. Can one “fall” from grace? How?
3. Do you believe in hell? What informs your understanding of it?

# Question

*What does “apocalypse” mean, and does the Bible predict one?*

## José F. Morales Jr.

**A** “Apocalypse” literally means “the unveiling.” Apocalyptic literature was commonly written during times of persecution. Revelation, for example, was written to an early church persecuted by the Roman Empire.

Revelation is commonly read as an end-time calendar. But that is not what it’s for. The author tells us—twice!—why he wrote it: “Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints” (Rev. 13:10; 14:12). The author John wrote to encourage the faithful to persevere.

John encourages (and at times frightens) the faithful by “unveiling” the true reality of things. He reminded them, and us today, that the oppressive kingdoms of this world will not last. “With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more” (Rev. 18:21). It encourages us by proclaiming that God, not evil (“the beast”), will have the last word. Christ will remain faithful to the end even if we haven’t always been. “Faithful” is a common title for Jesus in Revelation.

As for “the end times,” the Bible tells us many things. Yet there’s not full agreement on the details. The overwhelming areas of agreement are two.

First, there will be a final judgment. Not nice to hear, I know, but good news isn’t always nice. In *Surprised by Hope*, N. T. Wright asserts that judgment is when the wrongs will be made right. Call it prep for eternity! This may not feel good, but it is good.

Second, God will bring about a total renewing of all that is. “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17; cf. Rev. 21:1).

Thank God we can endure until the end because Christ, as always, is faithful.

## Becky Garrison

**A** Given I’m a satirist and not a scholar, I’d like to give a shout-out to the scholarship of Dr. Barbara Rossing, professor of New Testament at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. As Dr. Rossing reminded us, while the sensationalist and “nutty” *Left Behind* books have grabbed the media spotlight and made the bestseller lists, their depiction of the bloody and violent end-times differs from the way in which scholars throughout history have interpreted this book.

## Q. What does “apocalypse” mean?

Rossing defines apocalypse as a “pulling back of the curtain” to expose the evils of the world. Using this logic, prophetic books such as Revelation serve as a wake-up call about what will transpire if humanity remains oblivious to the telltale signs from God that something is amiss in our world.

Rossing also reflects on imperial violence. Revelation affirms that the system of imperial violence will be destroyed so that a new kingdom can be ushered in where the lion can indeed lie down with the lamb.

### Jarrold McKenna

**A.** Two days ago, in front of a sea of blue cops, a woman who I had not worked with before came up to me and thanked me for facilitating a gathering of over 150 climate justice activists in a nonviolent direct action at a coal power station. She then remarked, “If only we as a society could move past that ridiculous legacy of Christianity that wants the end of the world.” People around us smiled awkwardly and winced at the realization she didn’t know she was speaking to one of the prominent Christians in the movement.

After everyone had a laugh, I had an opportunity to share my faith in Christ and affirm the very real danger she named—Christians who read the Bible in ways that feed sadistic fantasies for hell “on Earth,” instead of heaven.

Like slam poetry, biblical apocalyptic language is “spectacularized” speech: a confrontational communication designed to wreck worldviews of listeners with words that open new realities describing time-space events infused with their theological significance. As N. T. Wright points out about Isaiah 13:10, instead of saying the empire of “‘Babylon is going to fall, and this will be like a cosmic collapse,’” Isaiah said, “The sun will be dark at its rising, and the moon will not shed its light, and stars will fall from heaven.”

This side of the resurrection, we can affirm in Christ the historical reality of Arundhati Roy’s now-famous poetry: “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.”

### Jason Boyett

**A.** Here’s the dictionary’s answer: “Apocalypse” is the anglicized pronunciation of the Greek word “apokalypsis,” which is usually translated “revelation” and which literally means “lifting of the veil.” The English word can have several meanings. Occasionally it is used as an alternate name for the New Testament book of Revelation. It can be a catch-all term describing a genre of prophetic Christian or Jewish writings from the centuries before and after Christ, for example, the apocalyptic passages in

the book of Daniel. But most often, it is used to refer to some horrific future event—like the chaos and destruction described in Revelation.

Does the Bible really predict an apocalypse around the time of Christ’s return? That totally depends on your view of apocalyptic prophecy. Many conservative theologians believe at least some of the bizarre events detailed in the book of Revelation are prophetic—that is, that they describe, in veiled language, something that will eventually occur. Others think these prophecies have already been fulfilled, most likely in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. during the Jewish–Roman War (this, they say, explains the apparent immediacy of some of Christ’s predictions, especially when he says “this generation will not pass away until these things have taken place” in Mt. 24:34). Still others explain apocalyptic literature not as prophecy but as encouragement for persecuted believers of that day and time, written in code.

The Bible’s apocalyptic prophecy is so cryptic that I am suspicious of anyone who claims to have figured it out.

## Joshua Toulouse

**A** “Apocalypse” literally means to show what is hidden, or to reveal. It does not have anything to do with an event that will end the world. The book of Revelation is an apocalyptic text that is also eschatological (a word that does refer to the end of the world), so for many, the word “apocalypse” has come to be understood as being eschatological, but in actuality, the word just means “to reveal.”

The Bible doesn’t predict, or even claim to predict, an apocalypse, although there are many times when it is apocalyptic in that it is revealing. The Bible doesn’t really predict an eschatological cataclysmic event, either. While some people read Revelation in that sense, it would be more properly read as a metaphorical vision speaking to a specific situation occurring at the time of the writing.

The Bible can be read to say that at some point (and it doesn’t give any real sense of when, considering it says “soon” and that was two thousand years ago) the present evil age will end and the age of the kingdom of heaven will be ushered in. As far as predictions go, however, the Bible isn’t very clear on the specifics.

## Scriptural References

Isaiah 24—27; 65:17–25; Daniel; Matthew 24; 25:31–46; Revelation 2:8–11; 4:22; 21, 22

## What does “apocalypse” mean?

### Suggested Additional Sources for Reading

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- W. Howard-Brooks and A. Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Orbis Books, 1999).
- Lee C. Camp, *Mere Discipleship: Radical Christianity in a Rebellious World* (Brazos, 2008).
- Kenneth L. Gentry Jr., C. Marvin Pate, Stanley N. Gundry, and Sam Hamstra Jr., *Four Views on the Book of Revelation* (Zondervan, 1998).
- John Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (Yale Univ. Press, 2003).
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- N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (InterVarsity Press, 1999).
- N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (HarperOne, 2008).

### Suggested Questions for Further Discussion/Thought

1. If the word apocalypse means “pulling back the curtain,” what do events like Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, and global warming reveal for us?
2. Why are some Christians so caught up in trying to predict the rapture, the second coming, or other “apocalyptic” events?
3. What are we to make of Jesus’ prediction that the disciples would see “the end of the age” come to pass in their lifetimes (Mt. 24) when it didn’t?
4. When you hear the term “final judgment,” what comes to mind? Do you believe there will be one? Why or why not?
5. How does our view of the end of things affect the way we live today?