



*ANSWERS TO TEN QUESTIONS THAT
BUILD A BRIDGE TO THE GOSPEL*

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Let's Talk: Answers to Ten Questions That Build a Bridge to the Gospel

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INTRODUCTION

When my granddaughter Stella was a toddler, she wasn't very good at playing hide and seek. She would hide in plain view and say, "Papa, find me!" Meanwhile, I'd be looking right at her.

I'd say, "Stella! I can't find Stella! Where is Stella?"

She would jump out, laugh, and then go back to the same hiding place again. I played along with Stella to humor her.

In the Garden of Eden when God called out to His wayward son, "Adam, where are you?" was He oblivious to the whereabouts of Adam? Of course not. God knew exactly where he was. He was saying, in effect, "Adam, I miss our times together. Adam, why did you eat of the forbidden fruit? Adam, why are you hiding from Me? Adam, I want to talk with you."

That is the heart of God. He says in Isaiah 1:18, "Come now, and let us reason together. . . . Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

If we learn nothing else in the Bible, we learn that God loves humanity and longs for fellowship and friendship with us. We learn that God doesn't want any person to go to Hell, and the best evidence of this is that He poured His wrath on His Son, who had never committed a single sin, so that we could be pardoned.

God searches for us. He cares for us. And He wants us to know Him.

God welcomes your questions. He invites you to ask them. The Lord says that those who seek Him will find Him. To educated men and women, He will come to them in a way they can understand. To little children, He will appear in a way they can understand.

I believe that if people are truly seeking God, He will reveal Himself to them.

What follows in this book are ten legitimate questions that people often ask about life, about the problems they are facing, or about what to

expect after death. While I don't claim to have all the answers, I want to point people to God's Word and tell them what it says about these things.

Each of these questions is also a bridge to the gospel—an open door to proclaim the hope that is found in Jesus Christ.

QUESTION 1: WHAT IS HEAVEN LIKE?

Have you ever tried to explain something to someone and couldn't quite find the words? Have you ever tried to describe something complex to a child? For God to describe Heaven to us in a way we could understand would be like trying to describe the beauty of Hawaii to a three-month-old baby. We're not able to comprehend, in our finite human understanding, all the infinite glories of Heaven.

In fact, the apostle Paul, who had the unique experience of dying and actually going to Heaven, said that he heard things so astounding they couldn't be told (see 2 Corinthians 12:2–4). Paul was essentially saying that he couldn't put his experience into words.

Heaven is beyond our comprehension. As Bart Millard of MercyMe sings,

*Surrounded by Your glory
What will my heart feel?
Will I dance for you Jesus
Or in awe of You be still?
Will I stand in Your presence
Or to my knees will I fall?
Will I sing hallelujah?
Will I be able to speak at all?
I can only imagine . . .*

What does Scripture tell us about Heaven?

For one thing, Heaven is an actual place. It isn't an "idea" or a "state of mind"; it's a location, like Miami or Chicago or Paris. We often think of Heaven in sort of a mystical way, and our minds gravitate toward the Hollywood version, where people in filmy white robes float around on clouds with little halos over their heads, strumming harps.

How boring! That is certainly not the Heaven of the Bible. The Bible uses a number of words to describe Heaven. One word it uses is *paradise*. In the Gospels, we're told that Jesus was crucified between two thieves. When one of those thieves, in the last moments of life, put His faith in Jesus, he said, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42).

And Jesus replied, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (verse 43).

Heaven is also compared to a city. In Hebrews 11:10, we’re told that this city’s architect and builder is God Himself. And then Hebrews 13:14 says, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (NIV).

We know that cities have buildings, culture, art, music, parks, goods and services, and events. Will Heaven have all of these things? We don’t know. But we can certainly conclude that Heaven will in no sense be less than what we experience here on earth—with the exception of all things harmful or evil.

Scripture mentions things in Heaven that we readily understand: a tree of life, a river, streets, and gates, for example. Heaven also has a book—the Book of Life—and we want to have our names written in that book if we want to go to Heaven.

Heaven is also described as a country. Hebrews 11:16 says, “They desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God.”

That heavenly country is so much better than earth. What do we like about earth anyway? We like the beauty. We like the joys. We like the love of family and friends and companionship. There are so many things that we enjoy on earth. God has given us these things; therefore, we don’t have to feel bad about them. But here is what we need to know: earth is not the original with Heaven being a copy; Heaven is the original, and earth is the copy.

The temple built in Jerusalem was a copy of the real temple in Heaven. Hebrews 8:5 tells us, “They serve in a system of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: ‘Be sure that you make everything according to the pattern I have shown you here on the mountain’” (NLT).

As C. S. Lewis wrote, “All the things that have ever deeply possessed your soul have been but hints of [Heaven]—tantalizing glimpses, promises never quite fulfilled, echoes that died away just as they caught your ear. . .” The real thing is Heaven.

The things that we enjoy most on earth will be waiting for us in Heaven, but in a perfected state. We will not miss out on anything. Heaven is the real place for real peace.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

Heaven is a paradise, a city, a country . . . and so much more that we can't begin to wrap our finite minds around. But your listener must know that it is promised only to believers. The decision to follow Jesus is not just for the here and now; it affects all of eternity. God is preparing a place for those who choose to follow Him, and it's more than one could ever ask for or imagine.

QUESTION 2: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I DIE?

How hard it must be for a doctor to tell a family who is anxiously awaiting news on the condition of a loved one, “I’m sorry. He didn’t make it.” How hard it must be to say to someone who just had a medical test, “I’m sorry, but you have cancer.” Yet a doctor must tell the truth.

In the same way, it is hard at times to deliver the whole message of the gospel. The apostle Paul said he had not failed to declare the whole counsel of God. When we share the gospel, we like to say things like, “God loves you. He will give you peace, joy, forgiveness, and the hope of Heaven if you will receive Jesus Christ into your life.” But we avoid using the words Hell or judgment because we’re afraid people will get offended.

However, the word gospel means “good news.” And before I can fully appreciate the good news, I need to fully know the bad news. Jesus did not come to this earth to be an additive in our lives. Jesus did not come just to give us warm, fuzzy emotional feelings. He primarily came to deliver us from an eternal judgment in Hell, and things like happiness, peace, and joy are fringe benefits. The big issue is eternity. We must not be afraid to tell people the truth—the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help us God.

We have a message to share, and it isn’t always an easy one. God loves humanity. He is ready to forgive humanity. God’s desire is for people to go to Heaven; He has done everything in His power to make a way. The chief end of man is to know God and love Him forever. But if people reject His loving offer, then they seal their own fate and secure their judgment. And if we are going to be faithful to declare the whole counsel of God, then we must tell people that.

No one gets out of this world alive; we all die. Death will come to every person. The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die” (3:1–2 NIV).

That time to die may come much later than you expected. Then again, maybe your life will be shorter than you had hoped for. We don’t know

when our lives will end, but we do know this: death is coming. Every second, three people in the world die. Every minute, 180 people die. And every hour, 11,000 people die. *This means that every single day, 250,000 people enter into eternity.*

Steve Jobs once said, “No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it.”

Some would say, “I think that when I die, that’s the end. There is no afterlife.” That’s a dangerous gamble to make. If they are right, there is nothing to lose, but if the Bible is right, then all of eternity is at stake.

The Bible tells us that after death we go to one of two destinations. Either we go to Heaven, or we go to Hell. Conventional wisdom is that most people are going to go to Heaven, and very few people are going to go to Hell. Yet that is the very opposite of what the Bible says. Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13–14 NIV).

The word Hell makes a lot of people bristle. They don’t like the idea of Hell. They don’t think it is right that God would send anyone there. Others will laugh about it and say that it will be one big party. Still others envision Hell as a cartoonish place with the devil sitting on a throne and holding a pitchfork. A lot of people will laugh off the very idea of Hell. It is one big joke to them. But Hell is no joke. What is Hell like?

1. On more than one occasion in the Bible, Hell is compared to a big garbage dump. In fact, the very word that is used for Hell in many New Testament passages is the Greek word *gehenna*.

Gehenna was a word used to describe a garbage dump outside Jerusalem during the time of the New Testament. Not only was garbage placed in this dump, but there were corpses as well. It burned day and night. There was always fire and smoke billowing from this horrid, stinking place.

So Gehenna was a term the people would be familiar with in Jesus' day. He used this word on a number of occasions to describe Hell, to depict its horrors, and to imply that the real place was far worse than even a place like Gehenna.

2. The Bible also compares Hell to a prison. One of the clearest pictures Jesus gave of Hell was when He described it as a prison. He told a parable about the king's servant who was sent to jail for cruel and unforgiving behavior. Then He added this warning: "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:35). Jesus was saying that going to Hell was like being cast into prison.

I receive many letters from prison inmates who listen to our radio broadcast, *A New Beginning*, and from many who have come to Christ listening to it. Every one of them writes about their hope of getting out soon and having a changed life. The hope of getting out is the only thing that keeps them going.

But for those who have been condemned to Hell, they won't get out. Once they are in, they are in for good. Once they are there, there are no other chances.

3. Not only does the Bible compare Hell to a garbage dump and a prison, but it also describes it as a place of outer darkness. Peter wrote about those who had eyes full of adultery and were experts in greed. He pronounced their doom by saying that the blackness of darkness was reserved for them (see 2 Peter 2:17).

Have you ever been in a very dark place—so dark that you couldn't even see your hand in front of your face? In certain parts of our country, like Alaska, there is prolonged darkness, where people sometimes will enter into deep depression and even commit suicide. Doctors have determined that we need light, not only to strengthen us physically, but also mentally. We need to see sunshine. And when we are not exposed to it, it affects every aspect of our body.

Jesus spoke of those who would be thrown outside into outer darkness (see Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). Yet He did not merely describe Hell as

darkness, but as the darkness, implying that it is infinitely worse than any physical, moral, mental, or spiritual darkness than any person has ever experienced on earth. It is not just darkness. It is the darkness—the darkest of all.

Heaven, on the other hand, is just the opposite. The Bible says that in Heaven there will be no night. There will be no fear. There will be no suffering or death. All of the pain and disabilities that we face in this life will be gone in Heaven.

I've described Heaven in the previous question, but I want you to realize that the glory of Heaven is more than having new bodies—and even more than the absence of darkness and sorrow and pain and death. The fact that Jesus Christ will be there is better than all the beauty and all the answers to all our questions. Think of the purest, highest, most ecstatic joy on earth, multiply it a thousand times, and you'll get a fleeting glimpse of Heaven's euphoria. As David wrote, "In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

You are not doing anyone a favor when you leave out the very real truth that there is a Hell. Tactfully and graciously let your listener know that they are on one of two roads today: the broad way that leads to judgment, or the narrow way that leads to life. Ask them which road they are on? If they are on the wrong one, then it's time to hang a U-turn.

QUESTION 3: WILL I SEE MY LOVED ONES AGAIN AFTER DEATH?

I heard the story of a Christian man who was on his deathbed and called his three sons into his room. To his two sons who were believers, he said, “Good-bye, my sons. I will see you in the morning.”

Then he turned to his other son, who wasn't a Christian. With sadness in his voice, he said, “Good-bye, son.”

The son answered, “Father, why did you say, ‘I will see you in the morning’ to my brothers, yet you said only ‘Good-bye’ to me?”

“Because you haven't put your faith in Christ,” his father told him. “I can't say I will see you in the morning. I'm just saying good-bye, because I don't think I'll ever see you again.”

The son began to weep. “But I want to see you again,” he said.

“You have to put your faith in Christ. Then we will be reunited,” his father told him. So his son became a believer that day.

The hope of the Christian is that we'll see our loved ones again. Death is not the end. It doesn't mean that we aren't sad when a loved one dies. We grieve like any person grieves. We cry. The depth of our sorrow is an indication of the depth of our love. If you love someone and they're gone, then of course you grieve deeply.

But as believers, we also have hope. We know we'll be reunited with our loved ones who have died in Christ. I believe that thinking about Heaven is one of the best things we can do when we're grieving. In fact, Heaven becomes much more real to us when we have loved ones there. We don't grieve hopelessly; we grieve hopefully. For the Christian, life on earth is as bad as it gets. Better things are coming.

People sometimes ask, “Will we recognize each other in Heaven?” That question always amazes me. As if we're going to forget everything—or be walking around in a fuzzy cloud of semi-awareness! We still will love,

but our love will be perfected. We still will think and remember, but our thoughts will be perfected too. We certainly will know each other in Heaven—and infinitely better than we knew each other on earth.

How do I know that? In Matthew 17 we read the account of Jesus on the mountaintop with Peter, James, and John. In those moments when He was transfigured before them, with His face shining like the sun and His clothes white as the light, He was seen talking to both Moses and Elijah. From the account, it's obvious that the disciples knew it was Moses and Elijah, though they were never told that fact or introduced to them. I doubt these two visitors from Heaven had little name tags on: "Hi. My name is Moses." Do you think Moses was standing with two stone tablets of the Ten Commandments under his arm, just to give them a little hint? No, but there was something about these two that made them instantly recognizable.

The disciples knew Moses and Elijah. And when we have been changed and encounter one another on the other side, we will know too. But I'd like to add just one thing. If you ever want to look me up in Heaven, don't look for a bald guy. Look for a guy with lots and lots of hair.

We will be aware in Heaven—more aware than we've ever been before.

We also need to remember that Jesus promises to wipe away every tear in Heaven. The pain and age and infirmities of this life are going to be gone. Heaven is the perfect healing. As 1 Corinthians 15:55 proclaims, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (NLT).

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

Eternal separation from our loved ones is unbearable to think about. Invite your listener to be reunited with other believers in Heaven by accepting Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

In Heaven, we will know more. We will love more. Our love for family and friends will be a stronger, sweeter, purer love. Death breaks ties on earth, but they will be renewed in Heaven. Heaven is a perfecting of the highest moments of our present Christian experience.

QUESTION 4: CAN MY LOVED ONES SEE ME FROM HEAVEN?

Sometimes people wonder whether those in Heaven know what is taking place on earth. Some would say no, but I beg to differ. I think Heaven is aware of what happens on earth.

However, I don't think our loved ones are sitting in Heaven, spending all of their time watching everything we do. But I do think there is an awareness of what is going on, and here are some verses that support that point:

- In Luke 16:19–31 we see that people in Heaven are aware of the fact that loved ones are not saved.
- Luke 15:7 informs us that when people believe in Jesus on earth, it is public knowledge in Heaven.
- From Revelation 6:10 we learn that people in Heaven may know about the passing of time and place of events on earth.

I am not a runner, but one little secret I have discovered is that I always seem to do better when there is someone watching, when there is someone cheering me on.

Hebrews 12:1 tells us, “Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” In the race of life, you are being watched by others who have gone before you, by those who have already run this race. We read in Hebrews 11 about the great men and women of God who served Him faithfully, and they are referred to as “so great a cloud of witnesses” in Hebrews 12.

Another version puts it this way: “Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins” (MSG).

I don't know how much your loved one in Heaven is keeping track of what's going on in your life, but I believe that if they were to convey any

message to you, they would tell you: Keep running. Look to Jesus as the one you are running for. He is watching you. He is urging you on. Run hard and finish well.

While we are on this topic, let me address another issue. I have heard people say of those who have died, “Now they are an angel in Heaven.” I understand this may be a comforting thought, but it is not biblical. People do not become angels when they die. Angels and people are different creations. As a matter of fact, people have a distinct advantage over angels in the sense that we are heirs of God’s grace. Jesus became a man (He was 100% God and 100% man) and He took our sins upon Himself when He dies on the cross for us. 1 Peter 1:12 says that when it comes to the gospel, angels desire to look into these things. Angels are amazed by the gospel at work in our lives.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

The Bible indicates that people in Heaven are aware of the fact that their loved ones are not saved, and that there is rejoicing in Heaven when people come to repentance. If your listener has a loved one in Heaven, it’s safe to assume that they earnestly desire for your listener to join them there when they die. That can only happen if they place their faith in Jesus Christ.

QUESTION 5: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

This is not an exhaustive treatment of a very weighty subject, but merely some thoughts for your consideration.

1. God will sometimes allow suffering and sickness to get our attention!

For instance, we may be rebelling against Him, and He wants it to stop. This was the case with the reluctant prophet Jonah. Psalm 119:67 says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey Your word” (NIV). So the Lord may allow a hard situation to wake us up to our real need—even something as tragic as the death of a child.

One person whose child died wrote me saying,

A person expects to lose a parent, maybe even a brother, sister, aunt, or uncle; but never a child. My son would have been 16 years old this year. It has been 15 years since his death. He was the person who brought me to the Lord. Because of his death I received my salvation. The comfort I found when I fell into God’s hands . . . God knows my pain; He lost a son too!

Fifteen years later . . . I still cry at Christmas; that’s when I remember his life and my loss. I still cry at Easter; that’s when I am assured I will see him again. I know I will never get over it because I don’t want to get over it. The intensity is less; but, like the joy of life takes the pain of birth away, I have found salvation through God’s Son because of the loss of mine!

God used unimaginable tragedy to bring this person to the Lord. Maybe something radical or tragic has happened to you lately: the death of a loved one, bad news from a doctor, a close brush with death. Or maybe something else has gotten your attention, and you hurt! Perhaps your marriage failed, your parents divorced, you got fired, your girlfriend or boyfriend dumped you.

It’s possible that the Lord is trying to get your attention in all of this hardship. Remember that God is in control of all circumstances that

surround the believer. As shown in the story of Job, the devil can do nothing in the life of the believer without express permission on the part of God.

But why would God give Satan that permission? Because Satan's attacks will show what you are made of. It will separate the real from the false, the wheat from the tares. When attacked, a real believer will turn to God. A nonbeliever will turn against Him.

People react in different ways to crisis. It seems you either turn to the Lord, or against Him. And the result is you either get better or bitter. Suffering does not create character; it reveals it.

2. Suffering helps us grow spiritually and makes us stronger in the faith.

It takes our faith from the realm of theory to reality, so we can start living out our faith in the real world.

A. B. Simpson said, "Temptation exercises our faith and teaches us to pray. It is like military drill and a taste of battle to the young soldier. It puts us under fire and compels us to exercise our weapons and prove their potency. It shows us the recourse of Christ and the preciousness of the promises of God. Every victory gives us new confidence in our victorious leader and new courage for the next onslaught of the foe."

Until then, we must depend on and trust God. That's what Job did when his whole world fell apart. He said, "Praise the name of the Lord!" He did not say "I understand it," but simply, "Lord, I trust You!"

3. Suffering can be used to prepare us for a special task.

This was the case with Joseph. His adversity prepared him for the task at hand. After being abandoned by his brothers and cut off from his people, he was still able to say, "God did it!" Not merely "God allowed it," but "God did it." But why did God do it? As Joseph said, "To save many people alive!"

You need to know that the experiences of your life can and will be used by God to help others. And when we have suffered, we can offer a special measure of comfort to someone else who is suffering.

Perhaps someone you know just found out they have cancer, and you are a cancer survivor; you can comfort them. Someone's child may just have died, and they feel as though they cannot go on another minute, much less a lifetime—if you have been down that road, you can comfort them like no one else.

“He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others” (2 Corinthians 1:4 NLT). When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with His comfort through Christ.

Perhaps the hardships of today are preparing you for great opportunities tomorrow. Warren Wiersbe quotes a professor of history who said, “If Columbus had turned back, nobody would have blamed him—but nobody would have remembered him either.” Wiersbe concludes, “If you want to be memorable, sometimes you have to be miserable.”

God will give you what you need, when you need it. Not before, never after, but when you need it. Corrie ten Boom used to tell a story:

When I was a little girl, I went to my father and said, “Daddy, I am afraid that I will never be strong enough to be a martyr for Jesus Christ.”

“Tell me,” said Father, “When you take a train trip to Amsterdam, when do I give you the money for the ticket? Three weeks before?”

“No, Daddy. You give me the money for the ticket just before we get on the train.”

“That is right,” Father said, “And so it is with God's strength. Our father in Heaven knows when you will need the strength to be a martyr for Jesus Christ. He will supply all you need—just in time.”

We may not be called to be martyrs, but we will all suffer in life. And God will give you the strength you need—just in time.

Finally, let me share a great passage with you: “We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). This does not say that suffering is good—suffering and pain are bad. They are part of living in a fallen world, which is not what God originally intended. But good can come as a result of our suffering. God can comfort us in times of suffering because He is good.

Before we accuse God unjustly, remember that it was unjust for Jesus to die for sins He did not commit. But from that injustice, God brought about the greatest good. As Philippians 2:5–11 states,

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Sometimes suffering comes as a result of evil people doing evil things. Some say, “Why does God allow this? He should judge them.” Know that the time is coming when God will judge every person and every sin that has not been forgiven through the sacrifice of Christ.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

It’s OK to tell someone the truthful answer of “I don’t know” when they wonder why God is allowing hardship in their life, but it can also be an opportunity to ask a question of your own: “Do you think God is trying to get your attention?”

God’s first priority is not our happiness or comfort, but our salvation and sanctification.

QUESTION 6: HOW CAN I FORGIVE THE UNFORGIVABLE?

A Sunday school teacher was talking to her class about forgiveness. She asked her students what a person needs to do to receive forgiveness from God. There was a moment of silence, and then a little boy raised his hand and said, “You have to sin.”

That is true. You have to sin. And all of us qualify. We sin more often than we realize. So yes, we have to ask God to forgive us. Most Christians understand that God graciously gives us His forgiveness, though we don’t deserve it. He tells us that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9 NIV).

That is amazing. We understand that for the most part. But here is where it gets tricky for some. Forgiven people should be forgiving people. We have received the forgiveness of God, and therefore we should extend that same forgiveness to others—especially to those who have wronged us.

As C. S. Lewis wrote, “Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive.” Isn’t that true? Forgiveness is great in theory, but it is much harder in practice.

I read about a study that was done on the topic of forgiveness. It revealed that 75 percent of those surveyed believed God had forgiven them for past sins, but only 52 percent had forgiven others. We have a problem.

The Scriptures say that if we ask God to forgive us, then we should forgive others. Life is filled with hurt and disappointments. We have people who hurt us. And guess what? There are people we have hurt as well. We need to learn how to apologize, and we need to learn how to forgive.

Some might say, “Wait a second, Greg. You don’t know what people have done to me. You don’t know what I’ve had to face in life. It’s unforgivable.”

No, I don’t know. But this is what the Bible says. And here is the most important reason we should forgive people who have hurt us: God

commands us to. I don't think we need any other reason, but there are a few others.

The Bible tells us, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you," and "bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13 NIV).

Failure to forgive others also can bring your prayer life to a screeching halt. Jesus said, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins" (Mark 11:25 NIV).

The bottom line is that forgiven people should be forgiving people. Yes, we have been hurt in life, but we have a choice. We can rehearse what happened, or we can release it. We can go over it again and again and again, justifying our anger and our bitterness, or we can put it behind us.

What does it mean to forgive? What it doesn't mean is condoning someone's bad behavior. I think sometimes we feel that if we forgive someone who has wronged us, we are condoning what they did. But that is not what forgiveness means. It is not dismissing what was done. It is not even necessarily reconciling with that person, because this isn't always possible.

There might be someone who has done something cruel or unkind to you. You forgive that person, but he or she still doesn't want to be reconciled to you. To forgive him or her simply means you are surrendering your right to get even. It means you will not pay back that person what they may indeed deserve. Instead, you put the matter into God's hands. The Bible tells us, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19 NIV).

There are 75 different words used in the Bible to describe forgiveness. In the New Testament, the primary word translated into the words forgive and forgiveness is one that means "to release, to let go of something, to free yourself from something."

Another term the Bible uses to describe forgiveness is canceling, as in canceling a debt. In other words, we have to keep a short account. This is especially true in marriage. If you want a marriage that lasts, you had better learn how to forgive. You will hurt and be hurt in marriage, and as Ruth Graham wisely said that a successful marriage is made up of two good forgivers.

We should be willing to forgive others. It comes down to this: when you forgive someone, you set a prisoner free—yourself. You can be the prisoner when you fail to forgive. You can be the one who is getting hurt more. To withhold forgiveness is not only detrimental to the person we are withholding it from but also to us. It harms us spiritually as well as physically.

A study that was done revealed that resentful people took 25 percent more medication than people who practice forgiveness. If you want to save money at the drugstore, then forgive. If you want to be a happier person, then forgive. If you want to be a healthier person, then forgive. Most importantly, if you want to be an obedient Christian, then you must forgive.

Forgiveness isn't giving in to another person. It is getting free of that person. It's been said, "The first to apologize is the bravest. The first to forgive is the strongest. The first to forget is the happiest." Just put it in your rearview mirror.

There is no greater example of forgiveness than Christ Himself when He hung on the cross. After He was crucified, after they ripped His back open with the Roman whip, after they pulled the beard from His face and He hung there at Calvary, He gave seven statements in total. The first one was, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34 NIV).

Did those Roman soldiers deserve forgiveness? Did those religious leaders deserve forgiveness? No, but Jesus gave it anyway. That is how God feels toward us. He loves us and will forgive us if we will turn from our sin.

We also need to keep in mind that there will be times when feelings of hurt or betrayal can resurface in us after we have forgiven. Sometimes

the devil wants to remind us of our bitter anger toward those who have hurt us. It is at those moments that we need to remember that we have forgiven and give that hurt over to the Lord. Forgiveness is like faith: it is a fact, not a feeling.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

Forgiveness goes against our natural tendency of putting ourselves first as human beings. It's counter to everything that we want to do. It's not something we can easily accomplish on our own. But Christ offers the power of forgiveness through His Spirit to those who are followers of Jesus Christ.

QUESTION 7: HOW CAN I FIND HAPPINESS?

Happiness is so much a part of the American mindset that it's actually included in our Declaration of Independence: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness."

But what is this happiness that so many Americans are pursuing? I think there's a lot of truth in Eric Hoffer's statement that "the search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness."

You actually can become a very unhappy person as you're trying to become a happy one. A *Psychology Today* article entitled "The Road to Happiness" pointed out, "Compared to 1960, the America of today has doubled spending power. . . . But what has this economic growth meant for morale? Over the same period, depression rates have soared. Teen suicide has tripled. Divorce rates have doubled."¹

The Bible gives a completely different view of happiness than our culture does. According to the Scriptures, happiness isn't something that should be sought directly; it is always something that results in seeking something else.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6 NIV). Being blessed, or happy (these words are used interchangeably in the Bible), is not based on circumstances. Rather, it is a deep, supernatural experience of contentedness, based on the fact that a person's life is right with God. As our will is aligned with God's, the rest of life will find its proper balance.

This flies in the face of popular wisdom that would essentially say that to be happy, you have to be successful, have the perfect physique, or be incredibly wealthy.

Psalms 1 gives us God's definition of a happy person: "Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night" (verses 1–2 NIV).

¹ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/199407/the-road-happiness>

Notice that God begins with the negative rather than the positive. He tells us what we must not do before He tells us what we must do. He warns us of certain things that can be perilous to us spiritually, certain things that we must avoid. If we want to be truly happy, if we want to flourish, first we have to guard ourselves against the things that harm us.

We are living in a time when it seems like everyone is watching their weight. And as the years go by, it seems like we have more weight to watch. Of course, when we're watching our weight, we become aware of things like calories and fat grams.

The same is true of our spiritual lives. We want to avoid the things that would hinder our spiritual growth. There are things we may engage in, things we may do, that could be detrimental to us spiritually. They may hold us back from the life God wants us to live.

Here are three questions you can ask about certain things and whether they will help you or hurt you spiritually:

1. Does it build you up spiritually? In other words, does it promote growth in character? The question isn't whether it's allowable or you can get away with it. Rather, is it spiritually constructive?
2. Does it bring you under its power? Something may not be bad in and of itself, but too much of that thing could begin to control your life. It has an allure, and you can't stop once you start. It's an obsession in your life.
3. Do you have an uneasy conscience about it? There are certain areas that might be a greater problem for some than they would be for others. You need to ask yourself if that thing is hurting you spiritually.

The blessed, or happy man of Psalm 1 doesn't "walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers." In other words, he avoids certain things that can hurt him in his spiritual life.

Also notice the progression—or maybe I should say the regression—in that statement. First he is walking, then he is standing, and then he is sitting.

If you stop and think about it, that is how temptation works. You're walking along, saying, "I'm not going to do that. I can control myself. I will know when to say no." But then you slow down a little. Before you know it, you're standing. Then you're looking. And then you're doing just what you said you wouldn't do.

How did you get there? It all started with going near that thing. That is why the Bible tells us to avoid even the appearance of evil. Keep as much distance from it as possible.

Don't get me wrong. To follow this principle is not to be overly restricted but to live in true freedom.

If you want to be a happy person, the Bible tells you how. If you want to be happy in the way the Bible defines happiness, if you want contentedness that comes from a relationship that is right with God, if you want your life to be in proper balance and harmony, then here is what God tells you that you must do. Don't walk in step with the wicked. Don't stand in the way that sinners take. Don't sit in the company of mockers. Let your delight be in God's Word. Meditate in it day and night.

It's simple, but it takes commitment. Be consistent and regular, and you will find happiness in the truest sense of the word.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

Ask your listener what they have tried in their search for happiness and gently lead them to the conclusion that more of the same is not going to change the outcome. Happiness is a byproduct of holiness. Getting right with God and finding one's identity in Christ is where happiness begins. That is not to say that by becoming a Christian they will never again feel sad or upset, but it will bring a joy and freedom that transcends circumstances.

QUESTION 8: CAN I CHANGE BAD LEARNED BEHAVIOR?

Have you ever looked at your life and felt that you always would be a victim of your circumstances? Maybe your parents neglected or abandoned you. Maybe there is a family history of alcohol and drug abuse.

You may feel as though your course is fixed, that you don't have a say-so, and that it's just the way it goes. But that isn't true. God can intervene. I know from experience.

I didn't have a father growing up; he just wasn't there. I was left to myself a lot. My mother was an alcoholic, and I could have gone that direction. I could have followed that course. But God took hold of me, and the cycle was broken. He can do that for anyone. I am just an ordinary person who took God at His word.

Maybe you are trapped in some lifestyle, some pattern of sin, or some addiction. God can break that cycle. The question is whether you want Him to break it.

The Bible tells the story of a man who had been paralyzed for a long time. Jesus said to him, "Do you want to be made well?" (John 5:6). We may wonder what kind of question that is to ask someone who can't even move. It's a very good question, actually.

Not everyone who is addicted wants to be delivered. Not everyone who is living a certain lifestyle wants to get out of that lifestyle. The question is do you really want to change? Do you really want to be free? Jesus can do that for you.

Even today God can make your life new. Maybe you have made some mistakes in life and have done things you regret. Maybe you are trapped in a cycle of sin right now that you don't feel you can ever break free from. Here is the promise of God to you: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

What old things have passed away? Your old sins. God not only forgives them, but He also forgets them. He promises in Psalm 103:12 that "as far

as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

You change when you truly follow Jesus. Old values, ideas, plans, loves, desires, and beliefs vanish, and they are replaced by new things. You have a new desire to know God and learn more about Him and a new desire to be led by the Holy Spirit and be used by God. You have a new desire to bring glory to God, and a new desire to one day see God in Heaven.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

God is in the business of changing people for the better. Ask your listener if they are ready to become a brand new creation in Christ, and then tell them how.

QUESTION 9: CAN I OVERCOME DEPRESSION?

Maybe you find yourself a little depressed today. I understand there is clinical depression and I am not speaking of that, but rather of those who may be “down in the dumps.” You might be in the doldrums even though you are in good health, you had a meal today, and you have clothes on your back and a roof over your head. Maybe you are down because you know someone else has it a little better—or maybe a whole lot better—than you do. If so, then I have a 10-step solution for depression.

Step Number 1: Do something for someone else who has greater needs than you.

Step Number 2: Repeat step Number 1 nine more times.

Not only has God told us it is happier to give than receive, but scientific research shows the same. It is well documented that volunteering elevates mood in most people. This phenomenon has been dubbed “the helper’s high.” It has been assessed biologically in brain-imaging studies. It has also been looked at in research on endorphins.

I have never experienced the “runner’s high” but I do know about the “giver’s high.” If someone asks you what you are doing on the weekend, you can say, “Getting high!” Whoa, what? “Yes, at church, giving to the Lord and serving others!” Proverbs 11:25 says that those who refresh others are themselves refreshed.

When we take our eyes off ourselves, it puts things into perspective. As a pastor, I visit people in hospitals. I can have the sniffles and be thinking, poor me, and then go and visit someone who is in critical condition. I leave just thanking God that I can walk out of the hospital.

The Bible tells us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (Philippians 2:3 NIV). In other words, never let selfishness or conceit become your motive in life.

Selfishness is at the root of almost all sins. Most of the quarrels and conflicts we have in life occur because self is either being threatened, challenged, or ignored. It is all about us. As James 4:1 asks, “What is

causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you?" (NLT). How true is that? We all want our own way. And that is prewired in us from the earliest days. The Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" (Romans 3:23 NLT). There is no getting around it: We are all naturally selfish.

Selfishness ruins so many things in life. Why did Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit? Because Satan told them, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5 NIV). They were selfish.

Think of all of the immorality in our culture today. Why do people have sex before marriage? They are selfish. They don't want to wait to commit themselves to each other. They want the fringe benefits of marriage without the commitment that goes along with it. And why do people commit adultery after they have been married? Selfishness. They don't care about their mate; they want to have a little fun.

Do you know someone that has a need right now? Someone you can reach out to? Someone who is hurting? If you wait to feel love for people, you will never do anything. If you wait until you feel like putting that relationship back together, it will never get put back together. Will you do it by faith? Will you do it in obedience? If you will, then you can live a joyful life. But if you run around living for self-fulfillment, then you will be miserable. If you will remember your purpose on earth is to glorify God and to love others, then you will find the personal fulfillment you always wanted. And you will find happiness as well.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

Selfishness leads to nothing but darkness and despair, but Christ said, "I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." Ask your listener if they would like to walk in the light of life by beginning a relationship with Jesus.

QUESTION 10: WHY DO I FEEL A SENSE OF GUILT?

Many people today feel a sense of guilt for one simple reason: they are guilty. The Bible says we are all guilty before a holy God. And all the psychological counseling in the world cannot relieve a person of that guilt. You can pretend it's not there or find someone else to blame for your problems, but the only real and effective way to remove guilt is to get to the root of the problem, which plainly is sin.

There are a lot of people today who have a guilty conscience. That is what Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, discovered. One day he decided to play a joke on 12 of his friends. He sent them all a message that said, "Flee at once. All is discovered." And within 24 hours, all 12 of his friends had left the country. I think that is having a guilty conscience. It was just a joke; nothing was discovered. But these people felt so guilty about something that they got out as quickly as they could.

Guilt can be good—it can be God's warning system to alert us to a problem. When I am beginning to do something wrong, guilt kicks in. It says, "Stop! Red alert! Don't go any further. This is a bad thing." Guilt is there to remind us we are crossing the line, and we should not go any further.

Do you have a guilty conscience? Maybe God is telling you something. Maybe you should pay attention to your conscience. Then you can be refreshed by the presence of the Lord.

How do you find the forgiveness of sins and the removal of guilt?

First of all, you must recognize your dire need for it. Jesus Christ is not some wonderful supplement you need to blend into your life so you can find happiness. He is much more than that.

I am not denying that being a Christian will make you happier. What I am saying is that happiness is essentially a fringe benefit. Happiness, peace, and joy are great things. But the bottom line is Jesus Christ, who can pardon you of your sin.

We are guilty people. Guilt is not a fun thing to experience. The only way

to get rid of guilt is to get to the source of it. Guilt is the result of sin; and the only way to eliminate guilt and sin is by being forgiven—and only God can forgive you.

Maybe you think you can do something to earn God's approval. No—there is nothing that you can do, even on your best day, to pay your debts. There is nothing you can do to settle the score. Forgiveness only comes through Jesus Christ, who went to the cross and died in your place.

Building a Bridge to the Gospel

The only way to deal with guilt is by dealing with its source: sin. Ask your listener, “Do you want to have your sin forgiven? Do you want to know that when you die you will go to Heaven? Acknowledge your sin, repent of it, and then receive Christ into your life.”

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

We have talked about ways to build a bridge to the gospel when conversing with people, but what exactly is the gospel?

Someone once asked the great British preacher C. H. Spurgeon if he could put his Christian faith into a few words. He said, “Yes. I can give it to you in four words: Jesus died for me.”

That’s what it comes down to. A good summation of the gospel is given to us by Paul: “Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4 NLT).

The gospel in a nutshell is Christ died for our sins and was buried and raised on the third day.

You may not be a theologian or the greatest intellect of all time. But you can tell the story of what Jesus did on the cross, how He died on the cross and shed His blood for us. There is power in that message. Time and time again I have watched it transform people, because God anoints it. He blesses it. And He uses it to penetrate the defenses that people put up.

Don’t be afraid or ashamed to tell people the message of the gospel, “for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

HOW TO BE SAVED

By now, you've probably noticed a theme emerging from these often-asked questions: the answer lies in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him" (Revelation 3:20). But only you can open that door to Jesus. Only you can ask Him to come inside. Only you can call upon the name of the Lord and be saved.

So, how do you open the door of your heart and welcome Jesus in? How do you "call upon the name of the Lord" to be saved?

You do it through prayer. Just pray a simple and sincere prayer like this one:

Lord, I know that I'm a sinner. But I know that You are the Savior, who died on the cross for me. I'm sorry for my sin. I turn from my sin. I choose to follow You from this moment forward. Thank You for loving me and calling me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen

If you prayed that prayer and meant it, I want you to know that God has just forgiven you of all of your sin, because the Bible says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

To find out more about what it means to follow Jesus Christ, please visit KnowGod.org. God bless you.