

**A Study Guide to
Christopher J. H. Wright's**

the

GOD

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DON'T

UNDERSTAND

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Introduction

Summary

It is often unexplained suffering that prompts some of our deepest questions to God. Seeing good people suffer and bad people flourish has always led God's people to question him. While God has revealed much about his character and purpose, we have to honestly acknowledge that there are many things we don't understand about him and his ways. That 'non-understanding' takes different forms and produces different reactions, but it need not alarm us. The Bible gives many examples of people who brought those reactions before God and addressed him boldly with their questions. Both our certainties and our lack of understanding are part of our faith and are to be incorporated into our worship of God.

Faith seeks understanding, and faith builds on understanding where it is granted, but faith does not finally depend on understanding. (p.20)

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. How do you feel about asking God questions?

2. Zechariah (Luke 1:5-20) and Mary (Luke 1:26-38) both asked questions of the Lord. One was rebuked; the other was not.
 - What was different about each one's questions?

 - What does it teach us about how to question God?

3. Jesus' question to the Father from the cross (Matt. 27:46) was a question that David had asked before him (and presumably many others in the time between David and Jesus). Read Psalm 22:1-5 (or the whole psalm).
 - What sustained David as he brought his question to God?

To me it is a profoundly moving thought that the word that introduces our most tormenting questions – "Why...?" – was uttered by Jesus on the very cross that was God's answer to the question that the whole creation poses. (p.19)

- How does the fact that Jesus was 'forsaken' by God become the answer to the suffering of creation?

4. Read Psalm 73

The writer begins by affirming his faith (v. 1). He then goes on to express anguish and confusion at the reality of life (vv. 2–14).

- What is it that really bothers him?

The writer of this psalm, Asaph, was a worship leader in the time of King David. In v. 15 he limits his protest to private communication with God, out of pastoral concern for those he leads. However, this psalm *is* now in the public domain – it's in the Bible.

- What might have happened if Asaph had not allowed himself to protest to God about the reality of life as he experienced it?
- How does that help us understand both the permission we have and the limits we should observe regarding our questions about God and his ways?

Verses 16–17 are the turning point of the psalm.

- Amidst all that he *did not* understand, what was it that the psalmist realised he *did* understand?
- How did this understanding change his perspective and emotions?

At the end of the psalm (vv. 23–26) the writer says he has 'made the Sovereign LORD my refuge' (v. 28).

- What was it about the Lord that restored his confidence?

Personal or Group Response

1. Are there situations on your mind where people are going through “suffering that seems utterly undeserved” (p.13)? (Maybe people known to you and loved by you; maybe a situation you have heard about.) What questions and emotions does this situation evoke in you?

2. Chris talks of five “different kinds of not understanding” (pp.15ff.), each one resulting in a different reaction.

- Can you identify a specific example of each for yourself:
 - something that leaves you angry or grieved?

 - something that leaves you morally disturbed?

 - something that leaves you puzzled?

 - something that leaves you simply grateful?

 - something that leaves you filled with hope?

- How do you feel about the prospect of never being able to fully understand these things?

- Does it make a difference to you that others, including Bible characters and eminent theologians, are also left with unanswered questions?

3. Use Psalm 73 as a basis for your own prayer. Personalise it by bringing specific issues and situations to God (vv. 2–14) and by bringing yourself into the ‘I’s of vv. 23–28.

Part 1: What about Evil and Suffering?

Chapter 1: The Mystery of Evil

Summary

The majority of evil and suffering in the world is caused, directly or indirectly, by human wickedness. This 'moral evil' is a result of our moral rebellion against God, which began when humans colluded with an already existing reality of evil. This evil spiritual force has exploited and amplified human sinfulness ever since so that every aspect of human personhood and life has been affected. The *ultimate* origin of evil however, is not explained in the Bible: we are compelled to accept the mystery of evil. We find this hard for the very reason that being made in the image of God means we have an inbuilt drive to understand the world. But evil does not belong to God's world. It is an intruder. It is not, therefore, to be understood, but to be resisted.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Genesis 3.

- The presence of the snake is not explained. It just slides onto the scene and plays an apparently small role. What does it actually do?

- Sin is a process. Can you detect several steps in vv. 1–6?

- What are the consequences of human sin for the relationships between:
 - man and woman (vv, 7, 12, 16)?

 - humans and the rest of creation (vv. 17–19)?

 - humans and God (vv. 8-13, 22–24)?

Job's whole book is a question hurled at God in the wake of his loss and suffering. God answers Job, but does he answer the question? (p.18)

2. Read Job 24:1–12

- In what ways are these things happening today?

- What is Job's accusation and question to God?

- After finally protesting his innocence, Job asks the Lord to answer him (31:35). By his cascade of questions to Job (chs. 38-41), what is God's answer?

- On what does God remain silent?

Personal or Group Response

1. In what ways do we participate in sinful systems that cause suffering to others (near or far)? While it's probably impossible to completely disentangle ourselves from such systems, we must surely do whatever we can to live ethically, in such a way as not to increase the suffering of others. What practical actions will you take, for example, in the area of shopping, campaigning, giving, recycling...?

2. In your human desire to understand, which path do you tend to go down as you "try to figure out for yourself" where evil came from? How has this chapter helped you question whether this is really a biblical path?

3. What is positive and actually affirming in the fact that we cannot fully understand evil?

4. The Bible shapes not only answers to our questions, but the questions themselves! Is there a specific situation where you have wanted to cry out to God “Why?! Where’s the sense in that?” In the light of this chapter, do you want to change your question to God? What will it be? Take your question and your emotion to him.

*We should resist the temptation that is wrapped up in the cry, “Where’s the **sense** in that?” It’s not that we get **no** answer. We get silence. And that silence **is** the answer to our question. There **is** no sense. And that is a good thing too. (p.40)*

Chapter 2: The Offence of Evil

Summary

We are most troubled by 'natural' evil because it doesn't seem to have any moral or rational explanation. There are serious theological problems with understanding natural disasters as simply either God's curse or God's judgement. While God might use such events as a warning, we are not at liberty to assume he caused them for that purpose. In our lack of understanding and our anger the Bible allows, even encourages, us to voice our lament and protest. It seems that it was precisely because they knew God that some of the Bible writers were so angry and upset: their cry comes out of a passionate concern for the very nature of God. In the face of unexplained suffering, lament must be expressed before genuine praise is possible. That is possible in the secure framework of faith in a certain future hope.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. As you come to read this chapter, have a specific natural disaster in your mind. Try to imagine the scene, the consequences, and the emotions if this had happened in *your* neighbourhood, to the people *you* live among.

2. Read Genesis 6:5–7
 - How is human sin described? Contrast Genesis 1:31 with 6:5.

 - How does God react to human sin and wickedness? Does anything surprise you?

3. Read Luke 13:1–5

Jesus had just rebuked people for their spiritual ignorance (They could forecast the weather but seemed unable to recognise either their own spiritual neediness or Jesus' identity as Messiah; see Luke 12:54–56). Perhaps in response, some people seem to have attempted an interpretation of a recent case of 'moral' evil.

 - How does Jesus correct their thinking about this and a recent situation of 'natural' evil?

- Does Jesus explain the cause of these incidents?
- How does Jesus use both these incidents?

3. Read Psalm 13.

- What is David's dominant question to the Lord in vv. 1–2? What fears does he express?
- What is David's overriding demand in vv. 3–4? What reason does he give to persuade God? (See also Pss. 30:9; 88:10–12.)
- Where is David's underlying confidence in vv. 5-6? Why then does he ask the question and make the demand?

4. What is biblical 'lament'?

Why is it that the people of the Bible who had a close relationship with God and were faithful to him seem to be the ones who protested the most about suffering and evil in the world?

Personal or Group Response

1. (a) If you read this chapter with a specific natural disaster in mind, what thoughts and feelings did you have about that situation?

(b) What would your objections be if someone explained this as 'God's judgement'?

(c) In what ways might that situation be used to further God's purposes?

(d) What questions were coming to your mind for God?

I am not waiting for an answer, but I will not spare God the question. (p.52)

2. (a) News of natural disasters elsewhere in the world may initially shock us, but we quickly move on to the more mundane details of our own lives. How can we use psalms of lament or passages of protest to educate and sharpen our numbed emotions to godly anger?

(b) When unexplained, undeserved pain and suffering are close to home, we feel the emotion more easily. How can the psalms help us then?

3. Anger is a human emotion – neither right nor wrong *per se*.

(a) What is destructive about wrongly expressed anger – both 'explosion' and 'bottling'?

(b) God teaches us how to express our anger about evil by giving us words to express it. Use Psalm 13 as a basis for your own lament (individually or as a group) about a specific situation (global or personal).

Whatever amount of lament the world causes us to express is a drop in the ocean compared to the grief in the heart of God himself at the totality of suffering that only God can comprehend. (p.49)

Chapter 3: The Defeat of Evil

Summary

The whole Bible is the account of God's unfolding plan to defeat evil and remove it forever from his creation. The cross and resurrection are central to that plan: the decisive moment of victory over evil and the guarantee of its ultimate destruction. The cross focuses our minds on three biblical truths that we must hold together: the utter evilness of evil, the utter goodness of God, and the utter sovereignty of God. At the cross, Jesus turned evil against itself to its own ultimate destruction. In the same way every evil is under his authority and nothing can happen that cannot be used by God to bring about his good purposes. From the throne at the centre of the universe the crucified Christ governs and interprets history. The Bible points us forward to the new creation and a reality delivered from evil forever.

We can only make sense of the world and all the terrible events that fill its history... if we look at them all from the perspective of the cross of Christ and all it accomplished. (p.63)

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. In Joseph's story we see the evilness of evil, the goodness of God, and the sovereignty of God all operating in the same story. Try to identify those same 3 elements at these two crucial points in the history of God's people:
 - (a) *The return of the Israelites from exile*
When Israel was held in exile in Babylon, Cyrus became king of Persia. He united with the Medes and conquered Babylon.
Read Jeremiah 25:11–14; Isaiah 13:14–19; 44:28–45:7; and Ezra 1:1–3

 - (b) *The beginning of the Christian church*
When the Christian church began it quickly suffered persecution.
Read Luke 24:45–49; Acts 1:8; 8:1–8

Not only did Jesus defeat all the powers of evil, he made them into the agents of his own victory and their own defeat. He turned evil against itself to its own ultimate destruction. (p.65)

2. Revelation 5–6
 - (a) The scroll of chapter 5 'stands for the meaning and purpose of history, the great plan of God for all time' (p.62). Why can no ordinary human being open it?

(b) Jesus is the only one who can open the scroll. What is the significance of his being (i) the Lion of the tribe of Judah, and (ii) the Lamb that was slain?

(c) The four horsemen of chapter 6 represent the harsh realities of human history. Identify parts of the world where these realities are clearly seen today.

(d) How did Jesus defeat evil on the cross? How, then, will he exert his sovereignty over the current forces of evil in the world?

Personal or Group Response

1. In what ways do we

- soften the seriousness of evil?

- underestimate the goodness of God?

- limit the sovereignty of God?

2. How should the future destruction of evil and life in the new creation affect how we live in the present? (e.g., with regard to social injustice, material accumulation, bereavement, evangelism, personal suffering, care for the environment ...)

What will you change in your life from now on that will reflect this?

3. As with previous chapters, bring a specific situation to mind as you read this chapter and apply the truths of Christ's victory over evil to it.

4. In the light of Christ's sovereignty over evil, and all that *will not* be in the new creation, use the song of Revelation 7:15–17 as the basis of a prayer of praise.

Divine sovereignty is not to be understood as everything happening just as God wants it to happen ... Divine sovereignty consists in God's winning the battle against all that has gone awry with respect to God's will. (Wolterstorff, quoted on p.53)

Part Two: What about the Canaanites?

Chapter 4: The Canaanites – Three Dead Ends

Summary

People try to lessen the difficulty of violence in the Old Testament in three main ways, all of which distort the meaning of the Bible. One way is to claim that the New Testament corrects an Old Testament problem, another claims that the Israelites misunderstood God's commands, and a third interprets the text allegorically to find spiritual truths rather than historical events. None of these options finds warrant in the text itself and so don't take the Bible seriously.

If it is hard sometimes to understand God in the midst of the things that happen in our own day or in our own lives, it is just as hard to understand why God said, did and commanded some of the things recorded in the Old Testament. (p.74)

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Hosea 11. What imagery is used to describe God's relationship with Israel?

- List the actions of the Lord toward Israel (vv. 1–4).
- Why is the Father (God) so concerned for the waywardness of his son (Israel) (vv. 5–6)?
- A stubborn, disobedient son could face severe punishment (Deut. 21:18–21). How does God as father respond to his disobedient son, Israel? (Hos. 11:8–11; cf. Isa. 49:14–16)

2. Jesus spoke several times about God's wrath. Read Matthew 10:14–15; 13:40–42; 18:32–35; 25:41–46.

- In each passage whom does Jesus say will be condemned?

- Is there anything that surprises you about what he says?

3. Read Psalm 106.

- What is the repeated theme of the psalm?

- In vv. 34–35, how did Israel express disobedience?

- What was the fruit of that disobedience (vv. 36–39)?

- What was the Lord’s response (vv. 40–46)?

The conquest is placed firmly within the whole unfolding plan of God in the Bible. (p.81)

Personal or Group Response

1. For each of the three ‘dead ends’:
 - Why is each one an attractive solution to the ‘problem’ of the Canaanite destruction?

 - In what way does this option not stand up when the Bible is read more closely?

2. How has your understanding of the Old Testament been challenged by this chapter? How will you read the Bible differently?

Chapter 5: The Canaanites – Three Frameworks

Summary

Issues surrounding the conquest of Canaan can be looked at within three biblical frameworks. Firstly, to see the conquest in the context of the whole Old Testament story makes it clear that it was a unique and limited act of God. Second, God's sovereignty and universal justice highlights both the legitimacy of God's judgement on the wickedness of the Canaanites and his moral fairness as he warned and later punished Israel for her wickedness. Third, God's ultimate plan to bless all nations with salvation and peace shows this act of judgement as a cause for ultimate praise.

The action of Israel against the Canaanites is never placed in the category of oppression but of divine punishment operating through human agency. (p.90)

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. We must see the detail of the conquest of Canaan in the bigger picture of the whole Bible story. Why is it important to remember that God's instructions concerning the conquest of Canaan were not "the background theme music of the rest of the Old Testament"?

2. Read Joshua 6:2–5, 15–25.
 - Why do you think v. 2 and v.16 are expressed as past tense?

 - In vv. 17–19, what does 'devoted' mean? Why was no plunder to be taken?

 - What happened to Rahab?

3. Read Joshua 2:9–13.
 - How did Rahab express what she had come to believe?

- Could other inhabitants of Jericho have been saved? Explain the reasons for your answer.

- Why is Rahab such an important character
 - in the Bible story as a whole?

- in this discussion about the Canaanites?

4. Read Leviticus 18:24–30 and 20:22–24.

- Why did the Lord remove the previous inhabitants of the land?
- What would be the reason if Israel herself were to be removed from the land?
- What does this tell us about the Lord God?
- Why is it important to refer to the destruction of the Canaanites as ‘judgement’ rather than ‘genocide’?
- What difference does it make that the Israelites were warned of and then experienced God’s judgement for themselves?

5. Read Psalm 67.

- To what end does the psalmist ask for blessing on God’s people?

- How does the psalmist recognise God's international justice and sovereignty and its effect on the nations?
- Read 1 Kings 10:4–9. How is this passage an example of what the psalmist is singing about?

*The overall thrust of the Old Testament is not Israel **against** the nations, but Israel **for the sake of** the nations. (p.98)*

Personal or Group Response

1. "Foreigners living among you must be treated as your 'native-born'" (Lev. 19:34). If this was true for Israelites who had just lived through the horrific 'unique' event of destroying those in the land, how much more must it be true for us? What are practical applications for you of the following instructions: Ex. 23:12; Lev. 19:9–10, 33–34; Deut. 10:17–19; 24:17–18; 26:12–13
2. Equal justice. In what ways can we slip into thinking that God will judge others but not us? (This might relate to our Christian identity, our national identity, our social standing ...)
3. How has God's great plan for the nations made an impact on your life? How can you live actively engaged with his plan (e.g., with respect to the choices you make in the use of money, time, gifts, energy ...)?

Chapter 6: The Cross – Why and What?

Summary

One of the mysteries of the cross is why God should love us so much to save us through the death of his Son. The only explanation we can find is simply the fact that God is love and it is this that motivates him to redeem us. In previous chapters we saw that sin affects the cosmos on many levels, and the same is true for us. Sin has left us alienated, enslaved, guilty, dirty, dead, under God's wrath, and in need of forgiveness. Yet the cross meets each of these needs. Through the cross we are reconciled to God, redeemed, given new life, justified, forgiven, etc. What makes all of this possible is Jesus' substitutionary death, which is the core reality of the cross. Jesus took our place, bore our suffering, and did for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Jeremiah 31:1–6. Here Jeremiah is prophesying to God's people who are in exile as a result of their covenantal unfaithfulness.

- What promises does God make to Israel in these verses? How do they display God's grace and mercy?

- Why does God promise to restore Israel?

- What is significant about the fact that God's love is 'everlasting'?

- How does this correct any false assumptions about our goodness being the reason for our salvation?

- How does the promised restoration of Israel serve as a model for our salvation?

2. Read Colossians 1:13–23.

- What different metaphors does Paul use in these verses to show what the cross has accomplished for us?

- Notice who is doing the actions in this passage. What does this tell us about our salvation?

- What do we learn about the fullness of the gospel in these verses? How does this impact or shape the way we present the gospel to others?

3. Read Exodus 12:1–13 and Mathew 26:26–29.

In Exodus 12, God provides a way for his people to be spared from the final plague he will send on the Egyptians, and he institutes the celebration of the Passover as a reminder of his saving actions. In Matthew 26, Jesus gives new meaning to Passover by applying it to himself.

- In Exodus, what does the Lord command his people to do in order to be spared from his 'passing through' the land of Egypt?

- How does the lamb act as a substitute for the firstborn son?

- What does Jesus want his disciples and us to understand about his death by linking it to the Passover?

- How does Jesus' substitution surpass the substitution of the lamb?

Substitution is not a metaphor for what God did; it is what he actually did. God actually did choose to put himself in a place where we should be, to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. (p.123)

4. Why might we, or others, find the truth about Christ's substitution difficult to accept? How can we help ourselves and others to see it as the good news that it is?

Personal or Group Response

We will never understand why God has chosen to love us, other than the revealed truth that God is love. It is simply and essentially God's character and nature to love. (p.114)

1. How does an understanding of God's unearned love help you to think rightly about your identity and value? How does its truth impact the way we live with each other as members of Christ's body?

God in Christ substituted himself in order to bear in himself what we would otherwise suffer because of our sin, and to gain for us what we would otherwise eternally lose. (p.121)

2. For each accomplishment of the cross listed in this chapter, think through the following questions:

- What difference does its truth make to your daily life?

- How does it transform your relationship with God, the church, and the world?

3. Chris Wright mentioned that he finds the cleansing power of the cross especially precious. Is there an aspect of the cross that you find particularly significant?

Chapter 7: The Cross – How?

Summary

In the previous chapter we saw that the substitutionary death of Christ lies at the very heart of the cross. However, in recent days there has been much debate regarding the nature of that substitution, and in particular the aspect of *penal* substitution that sees Christ bearing the divine punishment for our sins. Rather than clarifying the issues, the debate has sometimes added confusion to our understanding of the cross as some arguments have set in opposition things that the Bible holds together: namely, God's love and God's anger, the Father and the Son, guilt and shame. A full biblical picture shows that these are false contrasts, for the Bible teaches both to be true. As we approach the question of how the cross achieves atonement, we must hold these truths together.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Have you encountered different arguments about what happened on the cross? If so, what were the arguments and how did they differ?

2. Read Romans 5:6–10

- How does Paul describe our state before God when Christ died for us?

- This passage speaks of *all* of us being God's enemies, not just people who have committed horrible atrocities. In what ways do all of us prove ourselves to be God's enemies?

- What do we deserve because we are his enemies?

- Yet how does God demonstrate his love for us?

- What does this passage teach us about God's love and God's anger?

3. Read Hebrews 10:5–10; John 10:14–18; Galatians 1:3–4.

- What do these verses tell us about the role of the Father and the Son in salvation? How do they act together?
- How does this help you to better understand the nature of the Trinity and the relationship that exists in the Godhead?
- Have you heard the gospel explained in a way that sets the Father against the Son, even unintentionally? How can we make sure we present their *partnership* when sharing the gospel?

4. Read Ezekiel 36:16–32.

- What do vv. 17–19 tell us about the reason for the exile? How had it been misunderstood by the nations? What were the personal consequences of this for Israel?
- What prompted God to restore Israel to her land?
- God promised to go beyond simple geographical restoration in vv. 24–30. What would God do for Israel?
- How would this remove her shame (v. 30)?
- How does this act as a model for the cross?

- How does the fact that the Lord has removed our shame impact our relationships inside and outside the church?

This act of divine forgiveness and 'at-one-ment' will not only deal with the sin that broke their relationship with God, it will also deal with the shame that was the consequence of God's displeasure. (p.137)

Personal or Group Response

1. Do you have questions regarding penal substitution as a way of understanding the 'how' of the cross? How has this chapter clarified some of the issues for you? What deeper appreciation do you have for the cross?

If God didn't love the world, he wouldn't be angry with evil. If God were not angry with evil, he could not really claim to love the world. Anger is the totally justified reflex of love when it is betrayed and frustrated. (p.129)

2. Have you encountered a situation where you, like Miroslav Volf, have come to see the goodness of God's anger? How did it impact your understanding of the cross?

3. In light of what you have learned in this chapter, how can you relate the gospel in meaningful yet biblically faithful ways to the postmodern generation?

Chapter 8: The Cross – According to the Scriptures

Summary

The cross is simultaneously the moment when Christ takes on the worst of human sin and when he takes on God's punishment for sin. To understand this we must see Jesus' death in light of the story of Israel, for Jesus is the fulfilment and climax of that story. In his death Jesus relives the exile, and what is true about the forces behind the exile is also true for the cross. In both, divine judgement is working through human agency. Israel received God's punishment through the Babylonians, and Jesus through the Roman and Jewish authorities. What makes Jesus different is that he did not deserve it. As we look at the Scriptures and think about the morality of justice, we see that sin does deserve to be punished, and punished by God. On the cross, Jesus assumes on himself the worst we could do to him but also the punishment we deserved. In this there is still great mystery, but mystery that leads to praise.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Isaiah 49:1–7.

- What does this passage tell us about the identity of the Servant? How do we know the Servant will be a 'new' Israel?

- What is the role of the Servant and what will the Lord accomplish through him?

- Turn to Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12, where we see the story of the Servant further unfolding. What will the servant accomplish for Israel and the nations? How will it be accomplished?

- The New Testament clearly understands Jesus to be the Servant. How does Isaiah help us to understand what is happening on the cross?

2. Read Colossians 2:13–15.

- According to these verses, what two things are dealt with because of Jesus' death?

- What are the cosmic and personal effects of Christ's triumph?
- What do these verses have to say to those who are victims of injustice and oppression?

3. Read Romans 1:18–32.

- What does this passage tell us about the consequences of sin?
- Are these consequences the result of an impersonal moral force, or are they God's personal response? Explain your answer.
- How does this passage highlight what we need to be saved from? How does this add to our understanding of what happens on the cross?

Wrongdoing has painful consequences that are deserved. Wrongdoing that goes completely unpunished leaves us deeply unsatisfied – and as I said, this is not merely a lust for vengeance but reflects a deep moral truth about God and his universe. (p.150).

4. If God did not punish sin in the end, what impact would that have on our world? What impact would it have on our understanding of God's justice?

Personal or Group Response

Above all, the life and death of Jesus the Messiah must be understood within the framework of the story of Old Testament Israel. For it was in fact the culmination, the climax, and the destination of that whole story. (p.143)

1. How has this chapter helped you to understand better the connection between Jesus and the Old Testament? Are there any steps you can take as a group or an individual to study this deeper?

2. What have you learned about God's sovereignty through this chapter? What confidence does this give you both now and for the future?

3. The double truth of the cross is that Jesus not only took on the worst of what we could throw at him, but he also took on the punishment we deserved to have thrown at us. What should our response be to such a glorious truth?

Chapter 9: Cranks and Controversies

Summary

Speculation over the ‘end times’ is nothing new. Throughout the whole of church history there have been those who predicted the return of Christ in their generation. Today, however, such speculation has become something of an industry. We need to be cautious as we hear and read these theories, and we must make sure we always test them against a careful study of Scripture. This is especially true for theories that centre around complex or dogmatic understandings of three particular areas: the millennium, the rapture, and the land of Israel. We must make sure that it’s the Bible and not popular opinion that shapes our beliefs in these areas.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Matthew 24:29–51.

- In vv. 36–44, what does Jesus say his return will be like? What does he compare it to?

- How does this passage warn us against speculating about ‘the day or the hour’ of Jesus’ return?

- How should we be living in the here and now as we wait for Jesus’ return?

- What impact might too much speculation have on daily Christian living?

- What do you think is dangerous or unhealthy about getting too wrapped up in ‘end-time’ theories?

In spite of Jesus' warning that we would not know the day or the hour of his return (since even he did not), and in spite of telling us that our prime task is simply to be ready for it by getting on with faithfully doing what he has told us to do, people still insist of defying Jesus' warnings. (p.160).

2. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11.

- What does Paul say about the 'day of the Lord' in these verses?
- How should our reaction to the Lord's return be different from that of unbelievers?
- What should we be doing since we know that the Lord is coming back?
- How do these verses warn us against unhealthy speculation about the exact time of the Lord's return?
- What do you think is the line between honest study and reflection about the 'end times' and unhealthy speculation? What might be signs that our speculation has crossed the line?

Personal or Group Response

1. Are there areas you have been challenged to think about more carefully? If so, what are they? How will you go about studying them further?

We need to ask whether our beliefs in these matters are shaped by the recent popular 'folk Christianity' in our surrounding culture, or by thoughtful understanding of the Bible for ourselves. (p.168)

2. How can you help others in your church community to sort through the mass of 'end-time' teaching that's out there? How can you make sure that your beliefs are being shaped by the Bible rather than by popular opinion?

3. What is reassuring about the fact that the last days have already begun in Jesus' earthly ministry? How should this impact your everyday Christian life?

- What events will unfold when Christ comes back?
- These letters were written to a church undergoing persecution for their faith. How would these passages have encouraged them to keep going in Christ in the midst of suffering?
- Chris Wright speaks of the reign, the return, and the redemption of Christ, which these passages also point to. How do these truths impact you as a community of believers in the here and now? How do they impact you individually?

3. Read 2 Peter 3.

- In vv. 3–4 Peter warns us about scoffers who will deny the certainty of Christ's return. Where do you see this same attitude today?
- What evidence does Peter give to show that Christ really is coming back?
- How does this give us confidence as we wait for his return?
- According to Peter, what does this mean for the way we live now?
- How do Peter's words motivate you to share the gospel? What will this mean for you as a community of believers?

In other words, we can be entirely confident that not one human being will depart from the throne of God's judgement with any legitimate complaint of being unfairly treated. God's justice will be infinitely right and true and beyond reproach. (p.185).

Personal or Group Response

1. In what situations do you need to hold onto the confidence that Christ is reigning, returning, and redeeming? How do these truths transform times of suffering and hardship?

The whole creation looks forward to God's coming, because when he does he will put things right ... There will be justice and restoration when Christ returns. (p.177)

2. How do you normally react when justice is not done or when you have been wronged? How does knowing that there will be justice in the end transform the way you deal with these situations now?

It is our lives that prove the reality of our faith (or not, as the case may be). I will be judged on the evidence (my works), and they will show publicly and beyond doubt whether or not my life has been built on trust in Christ (my faith). (p.188)

3. What are the marks of genuine faith? On the day of judgement, will your life show them? If not, what steps do you need to take to make sure this is the case?

4. We all have questions about the justness of God's final judgement: 'What will happen those who died as babies or children? What about those who never heard the gospel?' What foundations has this chapter laid for you in thinking about these questions and the justness of God's judgements?

Chapter 11: The New Beginning

Summary

The Christian's final destination is not heaven but the new creation. Heaven is a safe waiting place until Christ returns and the earth is transformed into the place of our eternal life with him. The new creation will be without sin, a redeemed city with the essential elements of the original garden. This renewed earth will enjoy healed international relations and be filled with 'the accumulated cultural richness of human civilisations'. The people of the new creation will be ethnically and culturally diverse, enjoying renewed physical bodies, intimacy with God, and fulfilment in work.

Bible Discovery: Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

1. Read Isaiah 65:17–25.
 - What will be the main characteristics of this new earth?

 - What will be continuous with this earth? In what way will the new creation be different?

 - Is there some aspect of the new creation described here that you are particularly looking forward to?

*We are heading for a **new** reality, it is not a fundamentally **different** reality. We are not leaving the created order for some other 'spiritual' order. Rather we will be leaving the old **sinful** order of things and will find ourselves in a renewed, restored, redeemed creation. (p.193)*

2. Read Revelation 21:1–5. There will be:
 - a new physical order (vv. 1, 4–5). How do Job 19:25–27 and 1 Corinthians 15:35–38, 42–44, 49 help us understand that?

 - a new quality of life (vv. 1b, 4b). How will no 'sea' (p.193) and no pain or death change life?

- a new intimacy with God (vv. 2–4a). How do these verses communicate the intimacy we will enjoy with God?
3. “I will be your God and you will be my people” is a covenantal refrain throughout the Bible. It reaches its great fulfilment in Revelation 21:3. Look at the other occasions in which the promise is stated (references below). What is the context in each case? How does that context help us understand what life in the new creation will involve?
- Exodus 6:7.

 - Deuteronomy 29:13.

 - Hosea 1:9-10; 2:23.

 - Jeremiah 31:33; 32:38.

 - Ezekiel 11:20; 37:23, 27.

 - 2 Corinthians 6:16.

 - 1 Peter 2:10.

Personal or Group Response

1. What difference does it make that Jesus did not merely 'come back to life' but was 'raised from the dead'?

2. If the new creation will 'start with the unimaginable reservoir of all that human civilisation has accomplished in the old creation', how does this affect the way you view and do your work and your hobbies?

The point ... is not that we will be freed from all work, but that the work we do will be freed from all frustration. (p.211)

3. Bring to mind a really good day at work. Why was it good? In what ways will working in the new creation be better than taking a never-ending vacation? How can this vision of future work help you with the bad days at work now?

4. Most of our talk about the future (inside the church and in our evangelism) is simply about going to heaven rather than the new creation.

- How is the hope of a new creation so much better than just 'going to heaven'?
- How do you need to change the way you think about your future hope as a believer?
- How will this change the way you share the gospel, especially in regards to the future Christian hope?

