

The background of the entire image is a serene landscape painting. It depicts a person from behind, standing on a long wooden pier that extends from the bottom center towards the middle of the frame. The pier is made of dark wooden planks and has several vertical wooden posts along its sides. The person is wearing a dark jacket and light-colored pants. They are looking out over a calm body of water, likely a lake, which reflects the warm, golden light of a setting or rising sun. The sun is positioned directly in front of the person, creating a bright, hazy glow that fills the sky and the water. The sky is filled with soft, white and yellow clouds. In the distance, there are rolling hills or mountains covered in dense green trees, also reflected in the water. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

TOUGH QUESTIONS *that give* HOPE

Ted Sleeper

Tough Questions That Give Hope

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Tough Questions That Give Hope

Table of Contents

Preface	1
Chapter One: Why was Jesus crucified?	3
Chapter Two: Why was Jesus raised from the dead?	7
Chapter Three: Why did Jesus ascend into heaven?	9
Chapter Four: Why will Jesus return?	13

PREFACE

Tough Questions That Give Hope

There are four questions at the heart of the Gospel, four questions at the very core of God's work of salvation for us all. Four questions, therefore, that we should all be able to answer:

1. Why was Jesus **crucified**?
2. Why was Jesus **raised**?
3. Why did Jesus **ascend** to heaven?
4. Why will Jesus **return**?

I think all readers will recognize the importance of these questions, but do you feel you have good Bible answers if you had to explain these issues to an inquirer? We will see as we proceed that these questions dig deep inside our hearts. Why? Because the answers are meant to provide fundamental guidance to our lives of faith in Christ.

I hope that what follows will help strengthen all readers in their personal journey of faith.

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

CHAPTER ONE

Why Was Jesus Crucified?

The Problem of Sin

Consider the human problem the crucifixion of Jesus is meant to address:

*For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ **died for our sins** according to the Scriptures; (1 Cor 15:3)*

*(Jesus) was delivered up because of **our offenses**, (Rom 4:25)*

*so also Christ was offered once for all time as a **sacrifice to take away the sins of many people**. (Heb 9:28 NLT)*

We may be familiar with these words that connect our sins and offenses against God with the crucifixion of Jesus. But if we are going to truly understand these words, we need to fully understand the problem of sin and how it originates in us.

Consider what we are told about sin:

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the **lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life**—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15-17)*

*Let no one say when he is tempted, “I am tempted by God”; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. **But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed**. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. (Jas 1:13-15)*

*And (Jesus) said, “**What comes out of a man, that defiles a man**. For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” (Mark 7:20-23)*

These passages are probably well known. John, James, and the Lord Jesus are all very clear: When we seek to put our desires above everything else and seek to satisfy these desires without restraint, then the sinful behaviors Jesus lists will be produced by us. This is what “sin” is; this is why we so easily find ourselves in opposition to our God. Look again at the behaviors Jesus lists, these behaviors destroy relationships, they bring destructive evil into the lives of our families, our neighborhoods, our cities, our countries: they destroy the world in which we live. **This is the problem with sin.**

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

God's Solution

To address the problem of sin, God sent His own Son into the world as a sacrifice for sin: “John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” (John 1:29).

But, how does Jesus’ **crucifixion** and death address this problem of sin? Consider what these passages tell us:

*For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: **He condemned sin in the flesh**, (Rom 8:3)*

*He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, **not as I will, but as You will.**” (Matt 26:39)*

But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, (Gal 6:14)

The crucifixion of Jesus exposed and condemned sin in the flesh where it is found. How did the death of Jesus do this? First, by demonstrating in Jesus’ own struggle with his flesh that the “world” in him was truly crucified when he died on the cross. Yet his crucifixion should never have happened. It only happened because of the sin of those committing this crime. Their sinfulness and unrighteous behavior was fully exposed and justly condemned before all who could see.

Our Response

The important question to now ask is, how should we respond when we recognize these truths about ourselves and that we are really no different than Jesus or those who unjustly condemned him? Paul answers this for us in the last bit of the quote from Galatians 6:14: “But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, **and I to the world.**”

Once we fully absorb this powerful image and testimony about ourselves and sin, can there be any other response than this—we need to be crucified **with** Christ! “And those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal 5:24).

This is the outcome God is looking for in us, the recognition that we belong at Jesus’ side, putting to death **our** flesh. And when we acknowledge this before God, and we submit to our “death” in the waters of baptism, God forgives our sins through His grace:

*In Him we have redemption through His blood, **the forgiveness of sins**, according to the riches of His grace (Eph 1:7, Col 1:14)*

*But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation [i.e., a place of reconciliation] by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance **God had passed over the sins that were previously committed**, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3:21-26)*

*Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And **by him all that believe are justified from all things**, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses. (Acts 13:38-39 KJV)*

*Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that **henceforth we should not serve sin**. For he that is dead is freed from sin. (Rom 6:6-7 KJV)*

So God “justifies” or counts us as being righteous by our faith in Christ, so we are no longer under the condemnation of sin. Through Christ’s sacrifice we are reconciled to God. Righteousness is now defined as believing God and putting our trust in Christ, rather than a righteousness from keeping a set of rules.

What, then, does God want? God wants men and women to **change** the way they live. To do this, we need to:

- Acknowledge the true source of our sins and failures before God—ourselves.
- Turn away from our old life of sin—this is what repentance means.
- Follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus, seeking to follow his way of life.
- Focus all our efforts on being faithful to our God, in living by faith in what He has promised in Christ Jesus His Son.

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

CHAPTER TWO

Why Was Jesus Raised From The Dead?

The Problem of Death

What is the human problem solved by the resurrection of Jesus from the grave? We know the answer to this:

*Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having **been raised from the dead, dies no more**. Death no longer has dominion over Him. (Rom 6:8-9)*

*And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now **Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. (1 Cor 15:17-21)*

What is the problem with death? It is **real**, and it is **permanent**. Yes, this is what we believe, but how do we know what happens to us when we die? Whether there is any life after death or not? In what way does the resurrection of Jesus help us understand death? And how does the resurrection solve the problem of death? “And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead**, that in all things He may have the preeminence.” (Col 1:18).

“Firstborn”... that is a powerful statement. It means Jesus, when God raised him up from the dead, was raised to a life he never possessed—to eternal life. We need to let the power of this thought settle in: If Jesus had to be raised up from the dead, it means he shared the exact same nature as we do. If he was not raised, Jesus would now be dead and forever gone. Death is not anything mysterious, it is the end of all life. Jesus’ only hope of escaping this was by being raised up, brought back from the dead, and given a body that would **never** die again. “that the Christ would suffer, that He would be the **first** to rise from the dead,” (Acts 26:23).

This is the other side of the word “firstborn”: It means that God intended **others** to also rise from the dead. Jesus was meant to be the first of many! This is where the “hope of the resurrection” originates.

*I [Paul] have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that **there will be a resurrection of the dead**, both of the just and the unjust. (Acts 24:15)*

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

*And when I [John] saw Him, I fell at His feet as dead. But He laid His right hand on me, saying to me, “Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. **And I have the keys of Hades [the grave] and of Death.**” (Rev 1:17-18)*

Another remarkable verse. Jesus’ resurrection to life eternal is the **assurance and proof** that others can share this resurrection. But even more, notice that God has given to Jesus power over death and the grave. This means Jesus has his Father’s power to raise us up from the dead whomever he desires and to give these people unending life.

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28-29. See also John 11:23-26)

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus. (1 Thess 4:13-14)

Our Response

What should our response be to God’s wonderful provision for us mortal and feeble creatures? We need to:

- Acknowledge our conviction that death is real and permanent.
- Confess helplessness in the face of death and the hopelessness of life apart from God.
- Live in hope of the resurrection and eternal life by becoming a faithful follower of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER THREE

Why Did Jesus Ascend Into Heaven?

The Great High Priest

And He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up his hands and blessed them. Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven. (Luke 24:50-51)

We know that Jesus did ascend into heaven as all the Gospel writers affirm. But what is not as easily answered is **why**. Consider carefully what we are told about his ascension.

*But I say to you, **I will not drink of this fruit of the vine** from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom. (Matt 26:29)*

*And it is yet far more evident if, in the likeness of Melchizedek, **there arises another priest** who has come, not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but **according to the power of an endless life**. For He testifies: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." (Heb 7:15-17)*

Here is the reason that Jesus needed to ascend to the throne of God: He was going to become our great High Priest in the very presence of God in heaven itself! Jesus' reference to not drinking wine until he came as King in God's Kingdom on earth is actually an allusion to one entering into the priesthood under the Law:

*Then the LORD spoke to Aaron, saying: "**Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink**, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations, that you may distinguish between holy and unholy, and between unclean and clean," (Lev 10:8-10)*

The difficulty, of course, is that Jesus was from the tribe of Judah and could not lay claim to this exalted position of service before God. This is why the passage in Hebrews chapter 7 is so important. Here we are being told that Jesus was qualified to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek. How? Because his new, immortal nature qualified him to be a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.

Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man. (Heb 8:1-2)

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

The Problem of Human Nature

What problem did the priests have to deal with?

*For every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on **those who are ignorant and going astray**, since he himself is also subject to weakness. (Heb 5:1-2)*

Simply put, a priest had deal with human nature. But what's the problem with our nature? What is God trying to teach us about ourselves through the system of priests?

*Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but **the flesh is weak**. (Matt 26:41)*

*I find then a law, that **evil is present with me**, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to **the law of sin which is in my members**. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Rom 7:21-24)*

Clearly, as Paul so powerfully expresses it, we are incapable in our own strength of saving ourselves from the evil inclinations that are within us. A religion of rules cannot save us, no matter how hard we try. We desperately need someone who can help us with our weaknesses!

Our Need: A Human Priest

How can a human priest help us? Consider what was written in Hebrews 5:2 above. A human priest is able to have compassion on us because he knows what we are experiencing from his own experiences with his fleshly weaknesses. This is what fits Jesus so wonderfully for this role:

*For it was fitting for Him [God], for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason he is not ashamed to call them brethren... Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, **He Himself likewise shared in the same**... Therefore, in all things **He had to be made like His brethren**, that he might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. **For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.** (Heb 2:10-11, 14, 17-18)*

who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned

obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, (Heb 5:7-9)

Jesus **had** to be made like us, subject to the same weaknesses and the same struggles with temptations, sharing the exact same fleshly nature. Only in this way could Jesus be fully qualified to help us:

*Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. **Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.** (Heb 4:14-16)*

God's Answer to Our Need

Step back now and consider how having a human high priest at the right hand of God in heaven makes our salvation from sin [and death too] possible:

For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever. Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, (Heb 7:28-8:1)

*But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore **He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.** (Heb 7:24-25)*

This is what we need to recognize about Jesus: **Jesus really is our savior.** We often only think of this in terms of his sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. But God, in raising up Jesus to sit at His right hand in heaven, has provided for us someone who works each and every day in our lives to transform us into men and women fit to live forever with him and his Father. There is no problem too difficult to overcome if we are only willing to submit to his work of love.

That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:17-23)

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

Our Response

What should our response be to this utterly amazing provision God has given us in His Son?

- Acknowledge our desperate need, that is, stop hiding our weaknesses.
- Seek God's wonderful help at His throne of grace through the Lord Jesus.
- Submit to God's saving work through His Son in full and complete trust in the experiences of our lives.

CHAPTER FOUR

Why Will Jesus Return?

Why will Jesus return? What is the human problem the return of Jesus is meant to solve? We probably know the answer to this fairly well.

*Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which **He will judge the world in righteousness** by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)*

Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet 3:13)

Then the seventh angel sounded: And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever!" And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God, saying: "We give You thanks, O Lord God Almighty, The One who is and who was and who is to come, because You have taken Your great power and reigned. The nations were angry, and Your wrath has come, and the time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name, small and great, and should destroy those who destroy the earth." (Rev 11:15-18)

The problem that needs to be addressed is human rule. The world needs a ruler who will rule in righteousness!

The Problem: Human Rulership

Why is a ruler like this needed? What's wrong with man's rule? Man's rule is driven by inherent selfishness and pride. Violence, corruption and every evil prosper under his hand. Man's rule has ruined this earth and the lives of all on this planet. Simply put, man has ruled this world in **unrighteousness**!

In the days before Noah's flood, this is what God saw: "Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." (Gen 6:5-6).

In those days, God was deeply grieved in His heart over man's behavior. Is our world today really any different? Can man on his own terms and in his own ways ever succeed in overcoming man's basic selfish nature? This world desperately needs a **Divine King** to rule this world in true righteousness.

TOUGH QUESTIONS THAT GIVE HOPE

God's Solution: Jesus' Return

How will Jesus' return solve the problem of evil?

*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until **the times of restoration of all things**, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:19-21)*

There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon Him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. His delight is in the fear of the LORD, and He shall not judge by the sight of His eyes, nor decide by the hearing of His ears; but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of His lips He shall slay the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of His loins, and faithfulness the belt of His waist.

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:1-9)

He will judge Your people with righteousness, and Your poor with justice. The mountains will bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness. He will bring justice to the poor of the people; He will save the children of the needy, and will break in pieces the oppressor. (Psa 72:2-4)

Jesus will be a true judge, looking on men's hearts, not their appearance, nor the bribe in their hands. And, he will be a ruler who will care especially for the poor and helpless in this world. Even the animals will present a picture of peace and joy when God's way of life is brought into all the world. And the best is left to the end of his rule: "Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. **The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.**" (1 Cor 15:24-26).

Our Response

Knowing these things that have been declared, what should our response be to God's wonderful provision for our world to come?

- Acknowledge our collective failure to rule this world in the righteousness and kindness that this world has needed.
- Pray fervently for God's Kingdom to come.
- Until that time live as a sojourner in this present world, holding fast to that life that is in Jesus, and looking for the return of Jesus and God's Kingdom on earth to bring at last true and lasting healing into the lives of all.