

## MYTH: All the Answers are Available • 1 Corinthians 13:12

Ken Jennings became the all-time winner on the Jeopardy television quiz show appearing in seventy-five shows with 2700 correct answers and winnings in excess of \$2.5 million. I can't even pronounce some of the answers and questions that seemed so easy for him.

Even if you're not a Jeopardy watcher you probably know that the host gives the answers and the contestants have to give the correct questions to those answers. The answer that brought the champion down was this: "Most of the firm's 70,000 seasonal white-collar employees work only four months a year." Ken Jennings answered, "What is Fed Ex?" The correct answer was: "What is H&R Block?" Not even Ken Jennings has all the answers!

Recently I came across what is called The World's Easiest Trivia Quiz. See how you do with this quiz. Grade yourself and see how smart you are.

- 1.) How long did the Hundred Years War last?
- 2.) Which country makes Panama hats?
- 3.) From what animal do we get catgut?
- 4.) In which month do Russians celebrate the October Revolution?
- 5.) What is a camel's hair brush made of?
- 6.) The Canary Islands are named after what animal?
- 7.) What was King George VI's first name?
- 8.) What color is a purple finch?
- 9.) Where are Chinese gooseberries from?
- 10.) How long did the Thirty Years War last?

When we hear questions like these we may be tempted to think we are pretty smart—that we can answer absolutely anything. And if we don't know the answer, we know we can look it up somewhere because all answers are available.

Today, and for the next few weeks, we are considering a few of the myths of Christianity. Myths are popularly held beliefs that often are not factual. Some myths are harmless while others can

be dangerous.

This week's myth of Christianity is that all the answers are available. It is sometimes expressed in the bumper sticker that says JESUS IS THE ANSWER. Driving down a highway behind a car that has that bumper sticker you may wonder just what the question is. You try and figure out questions for which JESUS may not be the answer. It all depends on what the question is. The danger is not that Christians are completely confident in Jesus for eternal life. The danger is when we start to think we have the final answer to all questions just because we are Christians.

Perhaps you know Christians who insist they can come up with the right Christian answer to politics, economics, science, medicine, relationships and just about everything else. There's an assumption that if you study the Bible hard enough and long enough and consult with the right people then whatever the question is the answer must surely be available.

The truth is that such an attitude borders on arrogance. Besides being unbiblical, it reflects a spiritual immaturity. One of the signs of maturity is not

in the answers we give but in the questions we ask.

The first New Testament record of Jesus saying anything was when he was twelve years old and visiting Jerusalem with his parents. Luke includes the story in his biography of Jesus (Luke 2:41-46) to show how amazingly

smart and mature Jesus was for his age:

*Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives of friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the*

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*temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.*

Questions are a mark of maturity. It takes great depth to know what to ask. This leads us to our first principle in dispelling the myth that all the answers of life are available to Christians. It is the principle that God knows everything and we don't. 1 John 3:20 teaches that *"God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."*

God is omniscient. He knows the end from the beginning. He knows all the questions and he knows all the answers. But that doesn't mean that he tells us.

The sin in the Garden of Eden was to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was to claim knowledge equal to God. Adam and Eve wanted to have all the answers. They wanted to have knowledge that was on a par with the knowledge of God.

The Old Testament book of Job is the story of a man who suffered enormous loss and pain but never knew why. God knew, but Job didn't. He died without ever finding out why.

Questions about the timeline for the fulfillment of prophecy were frequently asked by Jesus' disciples. He had an amazing answer for them in Matthew 24:36: *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."*

While the Bible teaches that Jesus was and is God and that God knows everything, Jesus didn't know. How can that be? Well, we conclude that when the Son of God became human he took on human limitations during his years on earth. If there were questions Jesus and the angels couldn't answer then we need to realize that there are questions we cannot answer.

Sometimes the answers seem so obvious but they are actually more complicated than they appear. Let's go back to The World's Easiest Trivia Quiz and see how we did.

1.) How long did the Hundred Years War last? Answer: 116 years (from 1337 to 1453).

2.) Which country makes Panama hats? Answer: Ecuador.

3.) From which animal do we get catgut? Answer: Sheep and horses.

4.) In which month do Russians celebrate the October Revolution? Answer: November.

5.) What is a camel's hair brush made of? Answer: Squirrel fur.

6.) The Canary Islands are named after what animal? Answer: Dogs. (The Latin name is *Insularia Canaria*—"Island of the Dogs").

7.) What was King George VI's first name? Answer: Albert. (When he came to the throne of Great Britain in 1936, he honored the request of Queen Victoria that no future king would ever again use the name Albert.)

8.) What color is a purple finch? Answer: Crimson.

9.) Where are Chinese gooseberries from? Answer: New Zealand.

10.) How long did the Thirty Years War last? Answer: Thirty years (1618-1648).

All of this is a call to Christian humility. We need to admit that there is a lot we don't know and avoid arrogance in the midst of our ignorance.

Does this mean we can't be sure of anything? Of course not! Maybe I can't explain why God allows hundreds of thousands to die in a South Asia tsunami, but I do know that it was a great tragedy and that God cares about those who are suffering. Maybe I can't explain why God permitted the Supreme Court to legalize on-demand abortions in its 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* ruling, but I do know that it has resulted in a moral travesty that runs contrary to the Bible's teaching that human life was created in the image of God.

Faith includes certainty and mystery. St. Paul said it well in 1 Corinthians 13:12, *"Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."* The point here is that there are some things we can know for certain and there are many things that are not yet knowable. God has given to us partial knowledge, and that knowledge is real and dependable. But it is partial. There is a lot more that we don't know.

So what do we know? St. John wrote in 1 John 5:13, *"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."* The Bible teaches us here and elsewhere that we can know for certain that belief in Jesus Christ guarantees to us eternal life.

As Christians we claim the promise in Romans 8:28 that *"we know that in all things God*

*works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*” Faith in God gives Christians absolute confidence that God is working for good in our lives even when all the evidence and emotions seem to indicate that what is happening in our lives is bad.

Hebrews 11:6 tells us that *“without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.”* We can be certain that faith in God is required. No one can deny the existence of God and then claim the benefits of God.

Let’s try to put these biblical concepts together. Christian faith is a combination of certainty and mystery. There are some things about which we are absolutely convinced. And there are a million unanswered questions. Both are matters of faith. We believe what God has told us and we trust God for what he has not told us. Either way we have trust, belief, faith and confidence in God.

The danger is when we get these things mixed up. We all know people who aren’t sure of anything. That is a heartbreaking tragedy because we can be absolutely sure of God, salvation and the truths of the Bible. And, we all know people who confuse their faith until they expand their certainty to include medical treatments, political parties, denominational distinctions and God’s will for the lives of other people.

God has given us the answers to the list of life’s most important questions. Let us have unwavering confidence in these areas. But God has left a million questions on his mystery list. For those we must have humility and tolerance. Don’t get the lists mixed up.

All of this leads to a very practical concern. Some of the questions with which we most struggle seem to be on God’s mystery list. Why does a child get sick or die? How do I cope in a difficult marriage? What does God want me to do

with the money I’ve made and the success I’ve experienced? Who should I marry? Which house should we buy? How do I live with deep wounds from someone I trusted?

The Bible clearly instructs us to exercise wisdom. It is one of the primary and most important teachings in the Bible. Wisdom is taking the information clearly taught in the Bible and applying it to the situations we face and the questions we have.

When we read the New Testament book of Acts and some of the writings of St. Paul we often come across lines that say “they decided” or “it seemed right to them.” They didn’t have a verse from the Bible; they didn’t have certainty about which direction to go or what to do. They took the information they had, made the best decision they could and trusted God for the outcome. That is called “living by faith”. Wisdom is the application of God’s truth to

our immediate situation.

If anyone should have more answers than the rest of us you would think it would be Jesus’ brother, James. He grew up with Jesus. He was a follower of Jesus, leader of the church and author of part of the New Testament. What he learned was that he didn’t have all the answers for life’s problems and that he needed to “hang in there” with faith and ask God for wisdom when he didn’t have all the information he needed. He opens the New Testament book that bears his name, James 1:2-5, by saying:

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*

James is saying that there are lots of things in life we don’t have the answers for so we must ask God to give us guidance on a day-to-day basis. Where the Bible is clear, be certain. When we

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don't know, be careful. And when deciding what to do, ask God for wisdom.

Let's get really practical about this. In the 2004 general election, analysts claimed our nation was more divided politically than ever before. I'm not sure that's accurate, although I observed some attitudes and actions by Christians that saddened my heart. On both sides of the political divide and over many political issues there were Christians who elevated their opinions to the level of absolute certainty. They would not speak, or at least would not speak kindly, to those who differed. Family members threatened each other. Deep friendships were fractured. Churches were divided.

We need to beware of the assumption that we have all the answers. We need to hold tightly to the truths of the Bible and hold loosely to the mysteries of the moment. Even when we are convinced that our opinion is correct, we need to heed the exhortation of the New Testament to respond and handle in love the differences of conviction and conclusions of answers of others. In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 and 12-13 Paul writes:

*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.*

*Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.*

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

For those whose struggle is not too much certainty but too many questions, I offer you the story of Gracia Burnham. She and her husband Martin were missionaries in the Philippines who were held captive by terrorists for more than a year before she escaped and he was killed. Here is what she wrote:

Sometimes I wonder, "Why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? Why does Scripture lead you to believe that if you pray a certain way, you'll get what you pray for?"

People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't.

I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life's supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I learned I don't know as much about God as I thought I did. I don't have him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God—and I'm not. The world is a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations.

Here is a woman in the crucible of life's experience, such that I can only imagine, who trusts God for certainty and for mystery.

Let us clearly grasp that our faith and confidence are not in answers to every question but in God himself. We Believe in Him. We are grateful to him for the answers he gives. And we trust him for what we do not know.

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