

DIALOGUE WITH AN ATHEIST



Jesse C. Jones

Dialogue With An Atheist

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"The cover art is based on the concept of looking
through the window of one's World View."

Rex Morache Cover Artist

We are forever grateful to Rex for more than simply the cover art --
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Jesse C. Jones

Preface

Several years ago I was invited to a party at a neighbor's house. One of the attendees was the husband of a friend of the hostess, and in describing this person to me the hostess mentioned that he was a medical doctor who claimed to be an atheist. I immediately took this to be a challenge, and responded that I would purposely single this person out at the party to see if God would begin to work in his heart. Later, during the party, I drew him into a discussion, which led to my giving him a book that I hoped would provide some answers to the problem he had with evil in the world. This was a book written by Bob Mumford entitled: "The Purpose of Temptation". A dialogue subsequently ensued that lasted for several months. I would give him books to read, he would respond with a written rebuttal, and I would reply. I wish with all my heart that I could say that my efforts were successful in getting my new acquaintance to reconsider his unbelief, but such was not the case. He later relocated to another part of the country where his family subsequently broke up, and he finally ended it all by taking his own life.

When I heard that he and his family were relocating I had a very uneasy feeling about their future, but I had no idea that it would end as it did. During a later return visit by his wife I tried to express my concern, but in looking back on this I feel that my efforts were pretty much ineffective since I did not know what to tell her. In retrospect I should have recognized the possibilities

here, for I am very aware of the hopelessness in the life of those who do not know God. I could possibly have been a more effective witness, and I certainly could have been a more effective intercessor for this man and his family had I spent more time talking to God about their situation, and being more proactive.

Later, in talking to God about the purpose of this encounter I began to feel that I should try to document some of the discussion that transpired, especially that concerning the mindset of a very intelligent person who had seemingly known God as a young man, but then turned away, and became very hardened in his rejection of God. The dialogue given here is my attempt to respond to this urging that I believe came from God.

I have taken the liberty of editing my respondent's rebuttal in many cases. Some of his characterizations of God I just could not bring myself to repeat. That said, some readers may feel that I have included material that is offensive, and for that I apologize. My answers to my respondent's comments have been expanded in an attempt to do a better job of explaining how I interpret God's word as applicable to his statements and analogies.

As references I have used the King James Version (KJV), the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT), the Revised Version (RV), and Recovery Versions of the Bible, as well as the Interlinear NIV Hebrew - English Old Testament (OT), and the Interlinear Greek - English New Testament (GNT). I have also used Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words; Vincent's Word Studies in the New Testament; Moulton's

Analytical Greek Lexicon; Harris, Archer, and Waltke's Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament; and Webster's New World Dictionary for word interpretation. All biblical quotations are from the KJV of the bible unless noted otherwise.

Dialogue With An Atheist

Atheist: A person who rejects all religious belief, and denies the existence of God.

Introduction

The relationship with my Medical Doctor friend began at a party given by a neighbor. When my neighbor, who was the hostess, invited my wife and I to the party she mentioned this man, and commented that he was an atheist. Like the proverbial "bull in the china closet" I immediately took this as a challenge, and made up my mind to engage this man in conversation, hoping God would use me to minister to him. The discussion that night between the two of us culminated in my giving him a book to read that dealt with temptations, or trials. This opened a dialogue between the two of us that took place over several months. He would read (or more accurately, scan), books that I provided and send me his comments (identified as "Rebuttal" herein). In turn, I would respond to his comments, and forward another book for him to consider. As indicated in the preface, I was not successful in winning him to God. In fact, he later ended his life; in some perverse way fulfilling a desire to be essentially in control of his own death, as expressed in one of his rebuttals.

Hebrews 10:26-27, 29 say, "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, and unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?"

When I heard about his death I felt like I had failed God, as well as my friend. I questioned God as to the purpose of the whole episode, and questioned myself about the failure of my witness. Looking back over this incident I know I should have put more study and thought into my responses to his rebuttals. I should certainly have spent more time talking to God about this man's unbelief, and the effect it was having on his family. I do not know whether there was a way to win this man back to God, or not; but one lesson I learned from this is that when God urges us to do something, we need to do it "with gusto", with everything we have. God has a backup plan for everything He does, and I relied on that in this case; but if this encounter was arranged by God, He would have had someone else (a pinch hitter) available when I struck out: that did not happen.

May God let me encourage anyone that reads this to be diligent in your efforts pursuant to God's urgings? Be unflagging in the assignments that God gives you, and you won't have to second-guess yourself when the episode is past.

The critiques received from my friend are included in this booklet entitled as "Rebuttals". My replies are identified as "Responses".

Rebuttal Number 1

Temptation

I read the book you advised me to consider. It did not provide a personally satisfying apology for the presence of evil in this world. I continue to have difficulty finding a "good side" to pain, suffering, and death. While reading the book I was stimulated to think more deeply about the religious idea of temptation. Mumford presents the idea that God uses temptation to determine "what we are", and "where we stand". If God does exist, I would also accept the idea that God uses not only temptation, but pain, suffering, and death to test a person's true nature. Where you and I disagree would seem to be in the identification of the true nature of the temptation God uses. For example, the popular Christian concept of the original temptation of man was to disobey God and arrogantly seek to become more like Him. But, let me play the devil's advocate.

What if the original temptation was to remain in a state of bliss in the Garden, a state free from pain, suffering, or death, in exchange for an eternity of ignorance about the knowledge of good

and evil? The original temptation of man may have been idyllic bliss forever in return for a certain level of ignorance about reality.

When Adam and Eve chose to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they showed God what we are as human beings. Man resisted the temptation to leave all well and good. Man showed that he was capable of freely choosing to travel a harsher uphill road in return for knowledge. He demonstrated his courage and inherent thirst for knowledge by defying the Supreme Being. Man resisted the temptation of "ignorance is bliss".

Temptations are always a part of the human condition. The challenge is being able to identify which ones are good for us and which ones are bad. I am reminded of a saying which rings true in this regard, "Good judgment comes from experience, and experience, well, that comes from making mistakes." I continue to find fault with an omnipotent Supreme Being who begrudges man his little mistakes along the way in the search for good judgment.

Response Number 1

Temptation

I believe you are confusing the biblical word temptation with enticement, or inducement. In the Bible the word "temptation" always means "test" or "trial".

In his book "The Purpose of Temptation", Mumford says that we can be tempted with either good or malicious intent. Since God only

wants "good" for those that belong to Him, the temptations He brings, or allows, in the life of a believer are never with malicious intent, but always for our good.

I see this as being like the relationship between a godly father and his child. The father only wants to do good for the child, and any trial or test he engineers, or allows, in the life of his child is for the child's good. Neither God nor the father allows trials that could lead to evil (sin), for they both desire only good for their children. To make sure we did not misunderstand this, the book of James records the fact that God does not tempt man with evil. In other words God does not structure temptations (tests) to draw men into evil, but He does improvise tests to determine their strength and faithfulness: the agape love of believers.

James 1:12-13 1599 Geneva Bible says: *"Blessed is the man, that endureth temptation (affliction whereby the Lord trieth him): for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord promised to them that love Him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth any man."*

In commenting on verse 13 the Geneva Bible says, "The third part of this Epistle, wherein he descendeth from outward temptations, that is, from afflictions, whereby God trieth us, to inward, that is, to those lusts whereby we are stirred up to do evil. The sum is this:

Every man is the author of these temptations to himself, and not God: for we bear about in our bosoms that wicked corruption, which out of length proceed wicked doing, and in conclusion followeth death the just reward of them."

The tests God arranges in our lives are thus external as were the enticements offered to Jesus during His forty days in the wilderness. The same applies to the tests of Job, as devastating as they were. Both Jesus and Job learned the lessons taught by the tests, just as we are to learn from tests we encounter in our lives. Evil we bring on ourselves, and the source is within us, manifested by lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life which 1 John 2:16 clearly says is not of the Father.

As you indicated, it is true that some trials brought on by God cause pain and suffering; however, this pain and suffering results from the evil and imperious desires within us, and not from the test itself. God will chastise us when we do something wrong that needs to be corrected, but it seems obvious that He would never use death for teaching or correcting us. God chastises and trains those He loves: as believers we are His adopted sons and daughters. His purpose is to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ through sanctification, and He will go to great lengths insure that His correction and training achieves its purpose.

Although I do not agree with your assumption about Adam's reason for choosing to disobey God, there is an element of truth in your statement that Adam chose "idyllic bliss forever in return for a certain level of ignorance about reality". I believe God's mandate

regarding eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil was a prohibition against rejecting His guidance in their lives. God's instruction would have led to such knowledge when they were properly prepared and mature enough to "know about" evil, but not "know" evil.

With knowledge comes responsibility: we have to learn to use new knowledge with good judgment. I really feel that we are often better off remaining "ignorant" about certain evil things that occur in our world. Heinous acts are perpetrated every day, many of which I would rather not be exposed to. I do not see that these acts increase my knowledge in any helpful way, and once I have seen them, they certainly lower my threshold of tolerance for the next, and worse evil act. As a society we have come a long way in what we tolerate in sexual innuendo and sexual acts on movie and television screens, and in other ways in our daily lives.

I do not believe this increased "knowledge" has been good for us as individuals, as a society, or in our nation. This so-called "ignorance about reality" is a two-edged sword. When we allow the murder of an unborn child and identify it as merely the product of conception and not a person, Satan's program is advanced by this "knowledge of evil". The very thing you claim Adam took victory over is at play here: ignorance concerning the value of human life versus the "right" of a woman to do with her body as she chooses. Is this the "reality" that you refer to? I would argue that it is, and that God was hoping to spare Adam and Eve this "reality".

When Adam disobeyed God the enticement Satan used was "... *your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as gods [God]*". As with all of Satan's enticements, they are never fully truthful, but they contain just enough truth to hook the subject. The serpent failed to tell Adam that God could not be tempted by evil, but he (Adam) could be; thus, he would not be like God. He would have the image of God, but the nature of Satan. Adam did learn something by allowing himself to be hooked: 1) fear - to be afraid of God and hide from Him, 2) self-consciousness - to be aware of, and be ashamed of being naked, and 3) good relative to evil - how good his life had been up to that point compared to the evil of a life separated from God. Adam probably felt like many of us do when we indulge wrong thoughts by turning them into action. Adam's mistake in judgment in the Garden was much greater than just indulging his lusts: he knew that God said he would die, but he chose to believe Satan and follow Eve.

Adam's choice here was to "know" evil (receive the nature of Satan) and lose God's guidance (through death of his human spirit), or to choose life and to continue living in communion with God. Adam chose to "know" evil, and he passed the sin nature he received as a result to all his descendants. Although God rightly held Adam responsible for this decision, I have always felt that Eve played a key role in Adam's choice. Adam was Eve's "cover" in relation to God, and she chose to discuss God's command with Satan without the protection of her "cover". Satan was wise enough to approach Eve first, and she succumbed to his lie. Then Eve persuaded Adam, for

they were one "flesh" (Eph. 5:31). Nevertheless, Adam was responsible to God for their (joint) actions, and it was Adam that passed the sin nature on to mankind.

I often hear believers talk about being mad at, or cursing God. This is totally incomprehensible to me. I do not believe that any man or woman could stand in the presence of the creator of the universe and everything that is in it, and curse Him, defy Him, be mad at Him, or anything except to fall on their face in fear and awe, and pray for mercy. Anyone that feels that they could express bravado, or contend with God in such an encounter, has a very different conception of God than that expressed in the Bible, especially the OT. J. I. Packer in his book entitled "Knowing God" says that the idea that God's attitude toward us is affected by whether or not we do what He says has no place in the thought of contemporary man, and any attempt to show the need for fear in God's presence, or for trembling at his word, gets written off as impossibly outdated.

I agree that temptations (trials) are a part of our lives, but there is a different set of choices involved for believers versus unbelievers. The unbeliever has no protection against the enticements of Satan, other than the guidance he has received (and accepted) from godly people influencing his life. Satan will bring enticements into his life that will insure that he does not escape his (Satan's) rule; his goal is to completely destroy men's lives. For the believer, God will allow Satan to go only so far in the testing process: he is restricted by a boundary he cannot exceed.

The book of Job describes this process in a way we can understand. God has a protective hedge around the believer that Satan cannot penetrate, and unless God lowers the hedge and gives him permission, he has no access. Even when God lowers the hedge Satan dealings with man are controlled by strict guidelines and limits. Unfortunately, from the believer's point-of-view, we lower the hedge ourselves through our own thoughts and actions: we fail to "keep" ourselves (1 John. 5:18).

Rebuttal Number 2

Does God Exist?

I've succumbed to the temptation and tasted the fruit. I've dared to do the unthinkable for you - to conceive God as a simple figment of the human imagination. I've blasphemed the Holy Spirit; and in your mind, the hedge around me has been removed and now Satan can attack me! I've been awarded the seal of damnation! Wow! I've got to be pretty stupid or just plain evil. Or maybe, I can show God something He doesn't seem to know. What could that be? God is wrong for designing a world filled with pain, suffering, and death. If I had as much power as He supposedly has, I'd do better. My standards are apparently higher than those of God (judging by the way He allows His underlings such as Satan to sadistically abuse us).

Let's begin with two gigantic assumptions: suppose God exists and the Christian bible is the revealed word of God. These are two huge assumptions given the lack of objective evidence for either. Belief

in God requires faith or, in more transparent language, belief in something for which there is no evidence only because of powerful wishes for that thing to be so. An additional leap of faith is required to accept the Christian bible as a source of revealed knowledge, given the thousands of conflicting books generated by human culture over the past several thousand years attesting to the same claim. Nonetheless, I propose that we suspend rational criticism about these two starting point assumptions. Let's simply assume they are true.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth". This is the famous first verse of the bible, but there is a striking 'sparsity' of information about what God thought about and did prior to this act of creation. The first hint that God had any companionship prior to man comes in Genesis 1:26, when God says, *"Let us make man in our image"*. This is thought to be simply a reference to the divine manifestations of this Supreme Being: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. There are about 300 references in the bible to angels, which were thought to have been created by God before the Genesis creation events. Surely these entities might have provided some amusement or companionship to God.

The Bible tells of a former archangel - Satan - who challenged God's supremacy, and fell from the exalted state of companionship with God. We are left with the impression that God was not alone prior to man and that His companionship was less than perfect. Take a moment and try to imagine the particulars of the existence of

such a Supreme Being - a supernatural entity who lives forever with extraordinary powers to manipulate nature. With a single thought, God can will into existence billions of stars! With a single thought, God can construct billions of life forms! And with a single thought, God can will anything He wishes to disappear forever! This being we've postulated would have incredible powers indeed. Picture this omnipotent being existing for billions and billions of eons doing countless manipulations of nature to interest or amuse himself. Then, suddenly the thought occurs in the mind of God to create man! Why? Well, the standard answer is that such a question is a mystery, which will be revealed once we are in His presence. Nevertheless, God must have had a good reason.

Why would a perfect God have any need to create man at all? The bible does little to shed light upon this purpose except to suggest that God simply wished to create man out of His boundless capacity for love. We are told that at the end of the first chapter of the first book of the bible that God was initially pleased with the creation of man, "*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good*". In the last chapter of the last book of the bible the followers of Christ are assured everlasting life from the fruit of the *tree of life* in heaven. Revelation 22:3 says, "*No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him.*" The nature of this service is not made clear. Nevertheless, we are clearly exhorted to enthusiastically desire any service, which is required in return

for eternal life in God's presence, especially when compared to existence outside the gates of heaven.

God's initial pleasure with man was quickly replaced with a curse upon man. The Bible tells us that this curse of suffering and death was inflicted upon man because of a single act of disobedience whereby man ate from the *"tree of knowledge of good and evil"*. We are told that Eve *"saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for wisdom."* Man exercised his free will in the garden of Eden to actively choose knowledge and wisdom, at risk of death, over blissful ignorance! Why punish man for exercising inherent curiosity to seek knowledge?

The Greek philosopher Epicurus pondered the question about why God allowed evil into the world and summarized his thoughts thusly,

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is not omnipotent.

Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.

Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?

Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?

The responsibility for evil requires a scapegoat. If God is given the responsibility then there exists the logical contradictions considered by Epicurus. In the Christian religion, the scapegoats are Adam and Eve. The Bible clearly saddles man with the

responsibility for bringing pain, suffering, and death into this world. God is absolved from any responsibility. In fact, God's allowance of death into the world is seen as an example of divine justice from a loving, but strict, father figure. But is such a view justified? Inexperienced human beings were given an order not to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Apparently, according to the story, it would be fair to say that Adam and Eve were ignorant of the difference between good and evil to begin with. They had never experienced any lesson in the consequences of disobedience (not even a single spanking from a parent for sneaking a cookie). For that matter, since they had no knowledge of good and evil, they could not be held responsible for doing something bad. Adam and Eve, who were innocent as infants in the issues of good and evil, were, nonetheless, subjected to the full level of punishment available at the first act of disobedience. This was inappropriate.

Humans were created with an innate curiosity and free will. To be human means to yearn for knowledge, to experiment with nature, and to try to learn. It is almost inconceivable that God could not have predicted that Adam and Eve would choose to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil! A God who would condemn a naive man and all his offspring to pain, suffering, and death for the simple act of trying to acquire knowledge of the world should be held in contempt. It's like a parent ordering a baby not to cry. It is in the nature of a baby to cry, so it should come as no surprise that a baby would disobey a parent's order to be quiet. A parent who would

kill a baby for crying should be held in contempt by society as an extreme example of malevolence.

The introduction of evil in the world to test the reasoning ability of man may have resulted in a fundamental flaw in reality. Logically, the responsibility for evil in the world must rest with someone. Many people in the world refuse to believe that God could have any responsibility for the environmental difficulties man faces. The Christian tradition fashions a God as too loving to have played the major role in providing natural disasters, or disease processes. Man's disobedience is blamed as the reason for the hardships we now experience. God placed man on earth with a single command - do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but He endowed him with free will. Thus, man exercises this freedom and explores his world seeking knowledge. Man eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil: an outcome that was completely predictable. If God was so disappointed with the response of His new creation, then why did He continue the experiment? Why didn't He terminate the project immediately and proceed with some corrected creation. Why? The answer is simple - the experiment may have actually worked! Disobedience may have been the endpoint that God was seeking in the creation of man.

God is an intelligent being with incredible powers; He is at the apex of all reality. He has no peer. He has no real companionship. Could the reason for man be God's loneliness? Is the purpose of man's creation just to supply another voice in the choir - a race of "yes" men to stroke a supernatural ego? Or could the ultimate

purpose of man be companionship? Sure, God could construct an infinite number of robot like life forms with predictable programming, but ultimately this solution would be boring. The value of companionship depends on independent thought - an ability to be contrary when that companion fails to see things the same as you.

Another fundamental characteristic of man's reality is the lack of proof for the existence of God. We are born into a society in which, a significant majority of the population are certain that God exists; despite the lack of absolute physical proof of his existence. We are told to simply have "faith" in God's existence and his ultimate goodness. We are told that the only evidence that is required for such belief is the evidence of an ancient collection of written works (the bible) attesting to God's existence and plan for mankind. Our environment tends to predispose us toward a belief and acceptance of God as a loving father-like figure who despises evil. In return for this belief in a loving and just God, we psychologically claim eternal self-preservation, and immunity from death!

Why would God purposely make even His physical presence obscure from man? Why does belief in God require suspension of logical reasoning skill? It is almost as if God is purposely providing man an ability to choose atheism rather than belief in a Supreme Being. God knows that critical logical analysis of reality yields an unavoidable conclusion that He is responsible for evil - even if evil

flows from Satan. God created Satan, and thus, ultimate responsibility rests with God.

It boils down to the following simple choices: 1) embrace God and reject the logic that makes Him the originator of all evil, 2) embrace God and all the evil He has created, or 3) embrace reason and reject God by denying His existence, and choose to blame all pain, suffering, and death on a natural evolved system which is ultimately indifferent to any individual life form. Of course, there is a fourth choice, which many a hesitant, fearful individual might choose: embrace ignorance and commit intellectually to neither absolute acceptance nor rejection of God.

This amounts to essentially choosing not to take a side in the issue of God's tolerating pain, suffering, and death that man endures. If reality is essentially a test of both courage and intellectual integrity, then agnosticism essentially set up a person for defeat by default. By refusing to embrace God enthusiastically, the person fails the test of standard Christian ideology. By refusing to acknowledge the fundamental flaw in reality - that God is totally responsible for all evil, the person fails the test of either courage or intelligence. If life is basically a test, then taking the position that one will simply "sit on the fence" embracing the essential ignorance characterizing the human condition is a no win strategy. The other very fundamental characteristic of man's reality is that the only hope of escape from death appears to lie in adherence to some religious faith. The only hope of escape from an inevitable quick end to this existence lies

in the belief in an afterlife which happens to require belief in God and some ritualistic behavior that persuades Him that you are worthy of heaven. Interestingly enough, the acceptance that man is ultimately responsible for evil in the world is basic to the usual belief system - such a deduction absolves God of any responsibility! Like a toady sycophant, we are supposed to overlook the most glaring flaw in the whole of creation, and obsequiously accept the complete blame. In return, we hopefully glean God's favor for not objecting to his scheme, and thus hopefully secure eternal self-preservation in a state free from pain or suffering. What a deal! The only catch is that we have to suspend our intellectual integrity, abandon reason, and perhaps obtain eternal life; or embrace reason and lose any hope of heaven.

Response Number 2

Does God Exist?

It would take a full theological study to answer all the questions you have brought up in this Rebuttal. Obviously, I am not equipped to provide that, but I'll do the best I can to respond to the questions you raise.

God tells us in Romans 1:19 GNT, that He has made the truth about Himself plain to us: *"... because the thing known of God is clearly known within them, for God revealed it to them."* God has planted knowledge within us of His power (manifested by His creation), and

of His divinity (manifested in the orderliness and bounty of nature). Yet, this does not lead to a personal relationship with God, which can be known only by the revelation of Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ.

I see the hand of the Master Designer in everything that surrounds us, and when I look deeper into organisms such as the human body, I see complexity that is totally incomprehensible. I recently read a book by Philip Yancy and Dr. Paul Brand entitled: "In His Image", that draws analogies between the many of the systems within the physical body, and the body of Christ. It would be an understatement to say that I was totally amazed at the perfection in God's design. Consider just one of the miraculous systems within the body: the immune system, which has the ability to protect the body from disease. There is a joke among immunologists that when asked how the body can possibly prepare every type of antibody needed, they replied that the body has the astounding ability to manufacture whatever defense is necessary through a process of mystery and chemistry at the molecular level referred to as GOD (an acronym for Generator of Diversity). I would suggest that these immunologists are correct: the One behind the mystery is the Great Chemist/Biologist of the bible, the Creator and Master Designer of everything. But it is not just in the human body that we see God's unbelievable innovation, if we look seriously at just about every living thing surrounding us we can detect a perfect design plan in its concept. The problem with most of us is that we seldom ever really "look".

In years past we were blessed in America by having a Christian heritage, with Bible believing churches, and God-fearing parents. I was raised in such an environment and, as a result, believed in God and, for the most part, lived a "good" life while growing up. However, the Godly guidance and training I received from people I grew up under, and with, was not strong enough to protect me from worldly enticements later in my life. I was one of many who knew about God, but did not really "know" Him. The Recovery Version of the Bible explains the difference in believing Him, and believing **into** Him in their comments on John 3:16: "Believing into the Lord is not the same as believing Him. To believe Him is to believe that He is true and real, but to believe into Him is to receive Him and be united with Him as one. The former is to acknowledge a fact objectively; the latter is to receive a life subjectively."

Many English versions of the New Testament interpret the original Greek phrase, "*into Him*" as "*in Him*"; e.g. the KJV interprets the Greek word "ἐἰς" as "in", whereas the correct interpretation is "into".

There is a big difference in believing **in** God, and believing **into** Him. I spent much of my life believing "in Him". Fortunately, He knew what it would take to change all that, and He began arranging experiences in my life that finally culminated in a full-

blown encounter with Jesus Christ. When you have such an encounter there is never any doubt thereafter: Saul/Paul is a good example. Lest you think my encounter may have been due to an overactive imagination, let me add that I had seven witnesses with me, all of which experienced the same encounter. It doesn't take such extreme measures for everyone, God knows what it takes to draw us to His Son (Joh. 6:44), and after we have believed *into Christ* He gives us the assurance whereby we "know" that we are His children (Ro. 8:16).

The Bible is just a history book until you have the One who guided the writing of it (through the prophets and apostles) to give you understanding. The Holy Spirit was the spiritual force behind the writing of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16, 2 Pet. 1:21), and I believe it is impossible to understand it without His guidance. Thousands of prophecies given in the Bible have been fulfilled and validated. I read recently that there were over 300 OT prophecies about the first coming of Jesus Christ that were fulfilled in NT times. Still, I believe the clincher in realizing that the Bible is God's written word is finding some of those hidden gems yourself, and realizing that some guiding spiritual force had to be behind its preparation.

After spending the past twenty years really "studying" the Bible, I have concluded that it is one of the least understood, and least appreciated extant miracles. Most people who identify themselves as Christians do not spend any significant time studying this miraculous book, and, as a result, they have little understanding

about what it teaches. I was one of these so, so "Christians" for a significant part of my life.

In regard to why God created man I agree with you that His purpose was to have a "friend", a friend (actually an adopted son) for eternity. I believe friends are those that are willing to tell us the truth, even when it hurts. God did not want a companion who was basically a puppet (lackey, flunky, stooge), but someone with whom He could share love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance. I believe God enjoys a good laugh, and He must enjoy the spontaneity of many of the goofy, and sometimes brilliant, things His "friends" do. I have always believed that God looked forward with expectation when He brought all the beasts of the field, and all the birds of the air, to Adam to see what he would name them (Gen. 2:19). I imagine God had a hard time restraining Himself when Adam came up with names like rhinoceros, kangaroo, and chimpanzee. He probably laughed as hard as He did when He created them.

I would add that God wanted a man He could "reason" with, and share humor, spontaneity, and surprise. God seemingly wanted this kind of relationship when He created man, and therefore He had to give man the freedom to act independently, without hindrance. To achieve this kind of relationship He had to give man the freedom to choose the very antithesis of His own nature: evil. God is totally and entirely good so He had to create evil, and He had to prepare an emissary (Satan) to entice men to choose evil. He also had to make evil enticing, otherwise there would be no real attraction, and no

real choice: God wanted a relationship in which man would choose to be His friend. Thus, Adam was given this capacity: what we call "free will".

When God warned Adam in Genesis 2:17 that he could not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, otherwise he would die, He was telling Adam that if he disobeyed this command he would totally separate himself from God: they would no longer commune with each other. Adam chose to follow his wife (and Satan), and disobey God's command. In this he was not deceived (as was Eve), he knew what he was doing. Adam chose to succumb to the desire of his wife and disobey a direct command of God.

When Adam was created he was given the freedom to choose good or evil. He did not have a sin nature, nor did he have a godly nature, but he had a living human spirit by which he communicated with God. What he would become was up to him: he was receiving guidance from God, but he was exposed to enticements from the world, engineered by Satan. When he chose to "know" evil he cut himself off from God's input: his human spirit was no longer able to commune with God. In the OT death was understood as being cut off from God, but Adam began to die physically as well, for he was no longer connected with the source of life. Thus, he gave up "free will": he was no longer able to choose between two sources of guidance: he was limited to input from only one (Satan).

Adam now began to develop a sin nature since all his decisions were influenced by Satan. Over a period of time Adam's heart became hardened: he developed a stony heart. Over a period of

approximately 1650 years things got so bad that God commented in Genesis 6:5, that the thoughts of men's hearts were evil continually. Wickedness was so great that God decided to give up on His first experiment with mankind. Thus, He brought a great flood, but chose a man (Noah) to carry the ancestral seed of the Messiah into the newly cleansed earth. Noah was the grandson of Seth, third son of Adam. Seth was chosen by God to be head of the messianic line, introduced in Genesis 3:15 when God promised to bring a Savior who would bruise Satan's head. God made a covenant with Noah and his sons (Gen. 9:1-17), and gave them a token (the rainbow) of assurance that He would not destroy the earth again by flood.

The legacy of being born with a dead human spirit, and an inclination (or nature) toward sin, has passed from Adam through Noah to all mankind, with the exception of Jesus. These are two of the things that God stated He would change when men believe into Christ.

Ezekiel 36: 26-27 says, "A new heart will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh". And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

This scripture says that God will "quicken" your dead spirit to make it alive once again, and will "erase" the thought processes (stones) we have stored so we can begin to consider new guidance from

the Holy Spirit through our human spirit. This hard and stony heart is what is referred to as our sin nature, or the old man. This is the thing that is "put off" when a person comes to Christ (Eph. 4:22). This does not mean that men no longer sin, but that they are no longer slaves to this old nature. They now are restored to the spiritual condition of Adam before he "knew evil", they are now truly free, and can exercise choice between good and evil in the spiritual decisions they make. Notes on Ezekiel 36:24-28 NIV say, "I am going to transplant your value system and give you a new world view". In addition, He gives us a "soft heart" (a heart of flesh): one that can objectively evaluate the two sources of guidance it receives, and act accordingly.

There is certainly no question that God created evil. Isaiah 45:7 says, *"I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things"*. So the choices you enumerate do not include the only one that makes any sense: embrace God and recognize that He had to create evil for man to have choices, and be able to choose the good rather than the evil. God took a great risk when He created man with the freedom to disagree, and to do things totally contrary to His will. He took the chance that entailed the possibility that man could become an enemy, rather than a friend. But this He had to do for a relationship based on true friendship to have any chance of developing. Adam was not forced in his choice to "know" evil. The freedom to disagree, argue, and reason with God was given to him when he was created, and in all probability he had exercised this freedom in his

relationship with God prior to this incident. The enticement that Satan used in this temptation was the same one that Lucifer (later Satan) himself succumbed to previously, "*you shall be as Gods*". However, I think it is doubtful that this enticement "hooked" Adam, for he was not deceived. I believe the reasons behind his choice were strongly related to Eve's influence.

From what you have said it seems that your impression is that most Christians are drawn to God out of fear. While I believe that human beings often get "serious" about the direction of their life when placed in dangerous situations (no atheists in foxholes), I do not think that believers join Jesus Christ in His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection through fear, but rather through love. When you join Christ in this way the Holy Spirit begins a work of death within your psyche, or mind, the goal of which is to conform you to the image of Christ. I believe the death sought in this is that of the "id", that part of your mind that is regarded as the reservoir of the libido, the source of our sexual urge or instinct, and the driving force behind all human action. The id is dominated by the pleasure principle and impulsive wishing; its impulses are restrained through the development of the ego and superego: the conscious and unconscious conscience. This is a very painful process, for it entails our giving up old habits, beliefs and desires that we have spent years developing, and coming to love. It is the giving up of our selves to willingly become a slave to God. To quote, in part, an anonymous document entitled "The High Calling", that describes this relationship: "*The Holy Spirit will put a strict watch*

on you, with a jealous love, and will rebuke you for little words and feelings or for wasting your time, which other Christians never seem distressed over...He is to have the privilege of tying your tongue, or chaining your hand, or closing your eyes, in ways others are not dealt with. Now when you are so possessed with the living God that you are in your secret heart, pleased and delighted over this peculiar, private, jealous guardianship and management of the Holy Spirit over your life, you will have found the vestibule of heaven".

Rebuttal Number 3

Narcotic Effects of Christianity

I have experienced the narcotic effects of Christianity - I publicly attested to faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior for a full 20 years. I attended church regularly, engaged in aggressive proselytizing activities, and even did some lay preaching from the pulpit. My belief and commitment to fundamental Protestant Christian ideology during these 20 years was firm and unquestioned by my family and friends, and any occasional stranger who engaged me in discussion about religion. I can still remember the warm cozy feeling of self-contentment which filled my mind with thoughts of a blissful immortality. The feeling that the Creator of the entire universe knew and cared about me and my problems, and would ultimately take care of all my

needs forever, gave me a powerful emotional comfort. I'm sure that it does the same for you.

I sacrificed reason on the altar of this emotionally comforting ideology for 20 years before I consciously decided to value truth and rational thought above my emotional wants and wishes. The change was cathartic and, I'll admit, a little scary. It's hard for any man to accept his own mortality and the finality of death. It's hard for any man to accept the predominate role of chance in natural events - that man ultimately has scarcely any control over nature and that nature is, in the end, neutral to his fate.

Suppose a chance atmospheric convergence of forces occurs unpredictably at a certain time place which then spawns a tornado which then demolishes a house, killing an infant in the process. Nature made no value judgment regarding the worthiness of this infant's continued existence - the infant was simply by chance in the wrong place at the wrong time. No right or wrong here - just chance destruction and loss of life. The author of the last book you sent me seemed to think the whole idea of chance was a myth. He would seem to prefer to believe that at the very instant of creation of the universe it was entirely preordained and predestined for that tornado to have developed several billion years later and kill that particular human infant. I think this is an absurd position!

I understand the allure of a totally deterministic universe for the religious mindset. For many years I also rejected the notion of chance events playing any significant role in my life or in the universe. It is unsettling to accept the role of chance events in

nature and how life can be changed significantly in a negative way by completely unpredictable forces of nature. When I was a youth I adopted an identity which was very rigid and controlling. I deluded myself that in the matter of my own eventual death, I'd still be essentially in total control - not in the specific details, but that by believing a certain religious faith and practicing certain rituals attesting to belief and commitment, I could nonetheless control my own eventual demise. I could live forever - despite what the physical evidence might otherwise suggest (flat line EEG and EKG, cold motionless body, decaying flesh, etc.).

One of these days it is entirely possible that as I age my mind may lose the clarity of thought I now possess about the whole issue of God. I hope this will not happen, but I'm a realist concerning the possibility. I should very much like to end my life with the courage to keep my eyes wide open until the very last breath - the courage and integrity to value reason and truth above base instinctual emotional needs and wishes. Actually, I'm amazed that I've been sober from the intoxicating allures of religion for the past 12 years. Being an atheist carries few emotional advantages in a society in which 95% of the population believe in God and an afterlife.

Did you realize that public acknowledgment of atheistic beliefs was a capital offense in the western world until about 500 years ago? Even today there is not a single individual with some authority over me who is not a believer. Even the money I use to buy food for my children carries the words, "In God We Trust". The

majority of the people living in this country truly believe that should an atheist die denying God - regardless of the morality that person demonstrated during his lifetime - he would justly deserve everlasting torment of unspeakable suffering. No there aren't a whole lot of emotional advantages to being an atheist. It takes a lot of courage, and a lot of respect for the truth. It's astonishing to me that the human mind allows any individuals of our species clarity of thought, disconnected from animalistic emotional needs. I consider this capacity, insofar as I do possess it, to be my greatest accomplishment as a human being. Any attempts on your part to try to take this achievement from me is, at best futile, and, at worst, insulting. Likewise, any attempts on my part to disabuse you of dreams of blissful immorality is, at best futile, and at worst, cruel. I consider this letter my last communication with you concerning this issue.

Response Number 3

Narcotic Effects of Christianity

Of course, it is impossible for me to know whether your earlier involvement in church indicated that you "knew" Christ, or that you just knew about Christ. I spent a good portion of my life knowing about Jesus Christ, and believing that He had forgiven my sins, but it wasn't until I had a real encounter with Him that I really "knew" Him. To really "know" Him is a life-changing event. This is one way

to recognize that you have had a real experience with Christ: has your life changed? Have you died to self, and allowed the Holy Spirit to begin using your vessel for works that will survive the refiner's fire (1 Co. 3:13)?

Do you have the witness in your spirit that you are a child of God (Ro. 8:16). Are you beginning to bear fruit of the Spirit (Ga. 5:22-23)? Have you found your place in the body of Christ, and is He manifesting gift(s) of the Spirit through you for the benefit of the body (1 Co. 12:1-31)? If your earlier relationship manifested these characteristics, it was probably real, but you did not mention any of these things when describing your experience. Assuming that your relationship with Jesus Christ was genuine, then your falling away is more difficult to understand. As you know, many Christians subscribe to the idea that if you are once saved, you are always saved. The Bible never says this exactly, but there are scriptures that may imply this belief. One of the ones that I believe is most telling in this regard is John 17:12, where Jesus is praying to the Father and says that He has lost none of those whom the Father has given Him (except Judas). He was referring to the apostles in this case, but extension of this to all of the elect seems very much in line with the context of this passage of scripture. Nevertheless, there are many scriptures that imply that it is possible to fall away (Heb. 6:6), face judgment and fiery indignation (Heb. 10:27), have the Lord say that He never knew you (M't. 25:12), and have your name erased from the Book of Life (Ex. 32:32-33).

I have difficulty accepting your statement that believers spend time feeling warm, cozy, and self-content about a future blissful immortality. The problem with this is that we have so little understanding about life after death that we cannot envision what it will be like. It is difficult spending time thinking about something we have so little understanding about. Maybe this is why God provided so little information in the Bible about the millennium and heaven, He did not want us to be overly influenced by all the great and unbelievable things that are there, and our earthly minds could not conceptually cope with such information. This is basically what Paul said about his vision of Paradise: it was not lawful to utter what he heard there. God wants us to be drawn by love for Christ just as the disciples were, and not by a cozy, blissful immortality in the future. One thing we do know about the future: our relationship with God the Father, and Jesus Christ his Son will be one based on love, just as it is here on earth. I agree with you that one important facet of our relationship while on earth is knowing that the Creator of the universe knows me, and cares about my problems. This is one of the most important revelations I had after my encounter with Christ.

I would have to question your statement about sacrificing reason, and deciding to value truth, and rational thought. Where did your basis for recognizing truth come from? You have to provide input to a computer for it to provide any useful data, and the brain is no different. Our human brain cannot decide on its own what is truth and what is fiction, it must receive input in order to make

fundamental decisions. The important thing here is: what is the source of the input? There are only two real choices available to us: good or evil. I think there is overwhelming evidence that God is the source of good and Satan is the source of evil. Your point-of-view seems to be that neither God nor Satan exist, and all the unbelievable complexity of design in humanity and the universe just happened. You must have a lot of faith!

I agree with your statement that man has had little control over nature in the past. There is a cause and effect law that applies to weather conditions, just as it does to most other things in our world. Catastrophic weather comes from prior weather conditions that integrate over time, sometimes resulting in destructive, and dangerous, occurrences. At the same time, our very existence depends on our environment, which, in turn, depends on energy from the sun, water vapor from ocean and other surface water evaporation, rain from this condensed water vapor, and the earth's greenhouse effect which controls the earth's temperature. Since recorded time the earth's climate has been extraordinarily beneficial to mankind. However, in the 21st century we are beginning to recognize the changes to the earth's heat balance supposedly from man's activities.

As with other major elements in our universe, God designed this vast and imponderable system of interacting subsystems to provide a relatively benign environment for man to enjoy. Since this is a dynamic system driven in large part by the energy received on earth from the sun it is infrequently subject to abnormal events. The

environment is always striving for balance: in engineering vernacular, equilibrium. Thus, we find movement (wind) in our atmosphere always trying to equalize temperatures, pressures and moisture content. This principal of striving for balance seems to be present in just about everything God created. Everything God created He called good, but He teaches that striking an appropriate balance in all things is what He expects. Man is expected to draw a proper balance in eating, drinking, sex, work, play, etc. The atmosphere is always attempting to average everything, and this leads to our concern about severe weather.

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden He controlled the weather's tendency for variability by causing a mist to rise at nighttime, thereby providing water for plant growth and for drinking purposes. This provided a very stable atmosphere by controlling the earth's temperature, and thus the tendency for violent weather. He changed the method of watering the earth later, causing it to rain. It may have been when Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden that this change occurred, for Adam was advised at that time that he would have to till the earth by the sweat of his face to have bread to eat. He would thus have to depend on rain to cause his crops to grow rather than the nighttime mist. This is important because the earth's temperature then began to fluctuate, resulting in considerably greater variability, and a more open-ended weather system.

God's involvement, or lack thereof, in your example of the tornado killing an infant is difficult for man to understand.

After the recent hurricanes in Louisiana, Mississippi, and the East Coast, God received both blame and credit by Christians and others, as well. My understanding of this is that God has established physical laws in the universe to provide the control necessary for the overall system (and all subsystems) to work in the way He envisioned in His master design concept. I do not believe that this concept contemplated the need (or desire) for minute-by-minute, hands-on-control.

God does not normally turn gravity on and off to keep people from being hurt in falls, He does not normally tweak the sun to keep people from getting sunburned, He does not normally relieve stresses in the earth's crust to eliminate or lessen the severity of earthquakes, He does not normally accelerate the tree growing process to lessen the impact of carbon dioxide on the atmosphere, He does not normally interfere with the capability of the body's immune system to combat diseases for it was so equipped when He formed us in the womb, and He does not normally interfere with the weather pattern to keep tragedies like the one you mentioned from happening. In short, God does not normally override (or interfere with) the operation of His grand design unless and until those that love Him call out in dire need and importunity, or if a need of great import arises beyond the capability of the built-in corrective mechanisms provided. Such was the need to cleanse the earth of wicked men in the days of Noah, to cause the sun and moon to stand still in the Israelites battle against the Amorites, to withhold rain pursuant to Elijah's prophesy against Ahab, to free the

Israelites from Egypt, for Samuel's call to God for thunder and rain because of the Israelites wickedness, to cause the shadow of the sun to retreat ten degrees in Ahaz's dial, to cause an earthquake to deliver Paul and Silas from prison, and to alleviate the apostle's fear of a storm while in a boat. In all of these miracles God interfered with the established patterns to achieve the desired result, but these were exceptions to the norm. I do not believe that God is setting in heaven with His hand on a weather control knob controlling every weather event on earth.

When God is rejected by individuals, or by nations, He will no longer provide the care and protection He promises in His Word. I believe this is strongly evidenced by what has happened to the US during the past few years: we are no longer a God fearing nation, and God will not provide care and protection for those who reject Him. God certainly has the power to do anything, but He has established a spiritual entity (the Body of Christ: the church), to represent Him and to do His work on earth during the so-called "church age". In this action He chose to limit Himself to working through believers that are willing to give Him control of their lives (through the Holy Spirit). Jesus Christ is in heaven at the right hand of the Father acting as Mediator of the new covenant, making sure that those the Father has given Him make it into eternal life. He still intervenes directly when necessary, but the church is actually God (Christ) on earth. I might add that we (the church), have done a less than adequate job of conveying His love, and "being" Him on earth. This is why we see evil making greater

and greater encroachments in men's lives and why we see Daniel's prophecy about "*finishing the transgression*" being fulfilled.

We have seen and heard about a significant number of horrendous weather occurrences in the past few years. I cannot help but wonder if all this upheaval is not related to the fact that we seem to be coming to the end of the time of man's rule of the earth, and the start of Daniel's seventieth week.

Colossians 1:17 says that "*...he is before all things, and by him all things consist*".

Vincent's comment on this passage of scripture says, "Christ not only creates, but maintains in continuous stability and productiveness. 'He, the All-powerful, All-holy Word of the Father, spreads His power over all things everywhere, enlightening things seen and unseen, holding and binding all together in himself. Nothing is left empty of His presence, but to all things and through all, severally and collectively, He is the giver and sustainer of life....He, the Wisdom of God, holds the universe in tune together. He it is who, binding all with each, and ordering all things by His will and pleasure, produces the perfect unity of nature and the harmonious reign of law.' " Things seem to be "coming undone" all around us; it is suggestive of God gradually letting go (being rejected?) as we approach the end.

Closure

As we have opportunity to minister to unbelievers we need to keep several things in mind. God is the only One that can change a person's heart: all we can do is to approach the opportunity with prayer (and fasting when led), asking God to use us in whatever way He sees fit to minister His Word. If we feel real (agape) love for the person who is the object of our ministry, I believe God will respond to our effort in one way or the other. However, this does not mean that the person we are praying for will immediately become a believer into Jesus Christ. God chose believers before the foundation of the earth (Eph. 1:4). This is addressed by Paul in Romans 9:18-21: *"Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter the power [a right] over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another to dishonour? God is our Creator and thus is the Father of all men (Eph. 4:6), but He is the spiritual Father only to believers (Ro. 8:14; 2 Co. 6:14-18).*

When God begins to draw an unbeliever He washes them to make them clean, renews their heart, and quickens their spirit (Ez. 36:25-26). They are now ready to join Christ in death and

resurrection, receive the Holy Spirit, and enter sanctification. This can take a long time, or it can happen in the blink of an eye. When Peter went to minister to Cornelius and his family they received the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues before he finished presenting the gospel (Ac. 10:44); and Jesus told the thief on the cross that he would be with Him in Paradise that very day. On the other hand there are other instances mentioned in Acts in which receiving the Holy Spirit came some time after belief in Christ (Ac. 8:14-17). I was one that did not believe into Christ and receive the Holy Spirit for many years after I received Jesus as Savior.

I have talked to many believers who have had the same experience. God seems to know when a person is ready to believe into Christ and receive the Holy Spirit, and He will bring about whatever situation is necessary to precipitate that result: e. g. Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for they were to be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence (Ac. 1:4). The point that I want to make here is that God is in control of these events, even though He uses believers in the process. When we minister in this way it is vital that we listen for God's guidance in the words we speak to the penitent. Of course, they (the penitent) will not be prepared to understand God's election of believers, and this is not a pertinent subject for discussion with an unbeliever.

We see little in the way of repentance for sin, and receiving of salvation in America today. Satan seems to have been

victorious in convincing us that we are no longer a Christian nation. I believe this should motivate those that believe into Christ to be emboldened to pray and seek opportunities to witness to unbelievers. The time seems to be getting short and God needs willing workers to do the preparatory work in drawing those He has chosen. I hope that this sad story will encourage those that love God to stand, and not retreat, as soul-winners in this battle of life and death.