

QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WHO IS THIS JESUS?

MATTHEW 21:1-17



The Heart of the Matter

We Christians are notorious for answering the wrong questions — questions no one is asking. And when we do answer the right questions, we often do it in a way that doesn't connect — we either fail to identify with people's struggles or fail to answer in terms they understand. Christians need to take time to answer a few of the more significant biblical questions people have. And many of those questions have to do with the identity of Jesus. Who is He? Why did He come? What did He teach? How can I connect with Him? These are the same questions asked centuries ago by people who lived when Jesus did. Let's see how Matthew's gospel answers these questions.



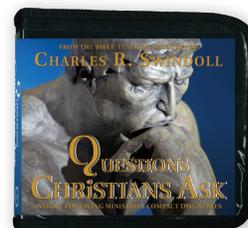
Discovering the Way

1. Some Background Information

Matthew 21 appears to be a simple story, but between the lines we find a historical context that we often overlook. The triumphal entry took place only one week before Jesus's crucifixion. It began the last act in the drama of His life, occurring at the time of Passover, the single most significant season of celebration in Jewish life. Jerusalem was packed with people, including pilgrims. Within the crowded streets of Jerusalem we find Jesus's disciples, plus a growing number of followers who had listened to His teaching and witnessed His miracles. But the majority of those in the crowd just happened to be there and didn't know much about Jesus.



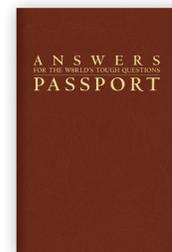
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2. An Unusual Celebration (Matthew 21:1–17)

Jesus's journey toward Jerusalem took Him along the dusty road from Bethany to Bethphage, over the crest of the Mount of Olives. Just before He reached the city, He paused to give His disciples some last-minute instructions. Then Jesus entered the city on a donkey, received the praise and the questions of the crowd, and cleansed God's temple.

- Jesus and His Disciples (21:1–7)
- The Messiah and His Multitude (21:8–9)
- The Savior and the City (21:10–11)
- The Lord and the Temple (21:12–17)



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Passover

The Passover masses rumbled as they questioned, “Who is this Jesus?” Why did Jesus choose to enter Jerusalem during this important Jewish celebration?

The traditional Passover meal finds its roots in God's rescue of His people from Egyptian bondage. Before they fled for freedom, God commanded His people to sacrifice a lamb at twilight, spread the lamb's blood on the doorposts of the home, roast the lamb whole over a fire, eat bitter herbs and unleavened bread with the meal, and consume the meal while dressed to leave at a moment's notice (Exodus 12:3–11). Then the Lord passed over their homes as He struck down all the firstborn males in Egypt (12:29).

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The Passover feast, which commemorated God’s mercy and deliverance, was celebrated throughout Jewish biblical history, if not regularly, then at least during times of faithfulness and obedience. By New Testament times, the Jews had added several elements to the traditional celebration, including the consumption of four cups of wine symbolizing God’s redeeming work (Exodus 6:6–7): the cup of sanctification (“I will bring you out from under the burdens”); the cup of deliverance (“I will deliver you”); the cup of redemption (“I will also redeem you”); and the cup of praise (“I will take you for My people”). When Jesus drank from the cup at the Last Supper—itsself a Passover meal—many scholars believe He commented as He drank from the third cup, the cup of redemption (Matthew 26:27–28). Jesus had entered Jerusalem as the Lamb who would be led to slaughter—the Redeemer who would give Himself, not just for the Jews but also for you and me.¹



Starting Your Journey

The majority of the people in the crowded streets of our lives still have the same question: *Who is this Jesus?* And Matthew’s account of the triumphal entry gives four answers to this most crucial question:

- *Jesus is a courageous Man.* It took inner strength to enter the hostile city, to stand alone, and to clean up the temple.
- *Jesus is a humble King.* He didn’t demand royal treatment, and He took time to meet people’s needs for healing.
- *Jesus is a patient Lord.* He willingly waited for His crown and accepted the insults and misunderstandings of the chief priests and scribes.
- *Jesus is the sinner’s Savior.* Even though many of the bystanders didn’t know the fullness of Jesus’s identity, they cried out, “Hosanna!” which means, “Save us *now!*”

How would you answer questions about Jesus? Do you help others understand Jesus’s identity?

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, “Exodus,” in *Insight’s Handbook of Old Testament Backgrounds: Key Customs from Each Book, Genesis–Esther* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2013), 14.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
CHRIST IS RAISED, BUT WHAT ABOUT ME?
1 CORINTHIANS 15:12–57



The Heart of the Matter

Epitaphs are strange things! Some of them are profound. Most of them are brief. We've all read tragic epitaphs . . . and even a few that make us chuckle! In his immortal work on the martyrs, written in the sixteenth century, John Fox listed some of the epitaphs that appeared in the catacombs beneath Rome. He found a few of them etched into the stones of Christians' graves. Fox found other epitaphs on non-Christian graves. The difference is remarkable!

One Christian's gravestone reads: "Here lies Marcia, put to rest in a dream of peace." Another records, "Victorious in peace and in Christ."

Some non-Christian epitaphs, more grim and depressing, read: "Live for the present hour, since we are sure of nothing else." And another: "Traveler, curse me not as you pass, for I am in darkness and cannot answer."¹

So what accounts for the difference in these inscriptions? One word—*resurrection!*



Discovering the Way

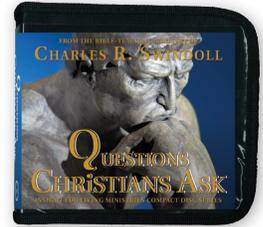
1. Background on the Resurrection

Christians don't have to dread death. Death is not the end. We can look forward to life after death—physical life in new bodies fitted for eternity. But some believers either doubt this truth or it doesn't affect their everyday lives. In the Old Testament, Job wondered whether he would really rise again after death—doubt crept in when he considered his own resurrection (Job 14:14), but Job didn't question whether his Redeemer would rise again (19:25).

And in the New Testament, Martha believed in the resurrection, but she felt overwhelmed with grief over her brother's untimely death and Jesus's apparent lack of concern (John 11:21–22). But Jesus reminded Martha that the resurrection of all human beings depends on *His* resurrection.



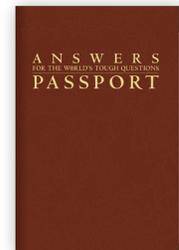
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2. Christ Has Been Raised (1 Corinthians 15:12–57)

Some Christians in the Corinthian church voiced their doubt about Christ's resurrection. So the apostle Paul responded by reminding them that if Jesus didn't rise from the grave then the Corinthian believers wouldn't rise either. And if Christ didn't rise from the dead and defeat sin and death, then Christians still bear the weight of their sin and have no hope for the future. Like Paul and the Corinthian believers, we all should thank God that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead, conquering sin and death.



DIGGING DEEPER

What Will Resurrection Life Be Like?

At the end of time, God will liberate every created thing from the curse of sin. He will raise Christians to eternal life and establish the new heaven and the new earth—the place we call *heaven*. The heaven we look forward to does not resemble the heaven portrayed in movies—a place where people play harps, wear flowing white robes, and sit on fluffy clouds for eternity. That sounds boring to Christians and non-Christians alike! And thankfully, that's not what God promises.

Rather than spend our time sitting on clouds, in our resurrected bodies we'll enjoy perfect physical health and all the God-honoring activities that bring us joy. And though halos won't float above our heads, we will bear the image of Christ, finally resembling His righteousness (Philippians 1:6). In the

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eternal state, following our resurrections, we will live with immortal bodies—unbound by physical restraints (John 20:19–20) and immune to disease and death (1 Corinthians 15:53–55). Believers should indeed look forward to physical resurrection!

Our hope for resurrection should affect our lives today. Christ-followers should live holy lives, honor God with their bodies, and view other human beings as valuable in God’s eyes. Christians—as good stewards—should also respect and care for the planet God created (Genesis 1:26–28).²



Starting Your Journey

Like Martha after her brother’s death, most of us have felt our hope ebb and the tides of disillusionment and loneliness take over. Is it possible that we have never really stopped to consider our Christian basis for hope and how it should affect our lives?

In moments of loneliness and pain, do you remember the hope you have in Jesus? Is your hope in this life based on the resurrected Christ or on your bank account, friends, and career? How can your hope in your future resurrection change your life today?

ENDNOTES

1. *Fox’s Book of Martyrs: A History of the Lives, Sufferings and Triumphant Deaths of the Early Christian and the Protestant Martyrs*, ed. William Byron Forbush (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 11–12.
2. Adapted from Insight for Living, “Will We Have Wings, Harps, and Halos in Heaven?” in *Understanding Heaven Passport* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2013).



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

HOW CAN I WIN OVER WORRY?

ISAIAH 40:27-31; MATTHEW 6:24-34; LUKE 10:38-42;
PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7



The Heart of the Matter

No one will ever know how much energy the human race has wasted through worry. In our breakneck-paced culture, worry has reached epidemic levels. We are the most anxious among all of God's created beings. We have numerous phobias. Our diseases are often emotionally induced. We can trace many of our battles with common problems, such as insomnia, obesity, alcohol and drug addition, pessimism, and headaches, to deep-seated unrest in our souls. What nervous, tense creatures we are! Surely God did not design our bodies to endure such self-imposed stress. Nor does this intensity represent the way His children should model His message of peace.

Today, we want to think along scriptural guidelines as we rediscover a life characterized by rest instead of rush, calm instead of confusion, peace instead of panic, tranquility instead of turmoil.



Discovering the Way

1. Human Analysis of Worry (Luke 10:38-42)

Many of us can identify with Martha, a conscientious, responsible woman who wanted to prepare the perfect meal for Jesus. But as she rushed around trying to check everything off her to-do list, she perfectly exemplified a worry-filled life. Whether in Scripture or in the lives of those around us, we all have witnessed the faces of worry: anger and impatience, rush and hurry, fear and panic, pessimism and criticism.

Worry does a lot of damage to those who live with it:

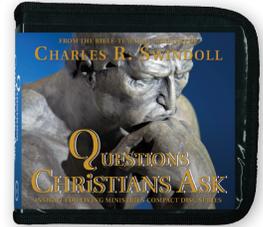
- *Spiritually*: It assaults our faith.
- *Physically*: It steals our health.
- *Emotionally*: It destroys our peace.



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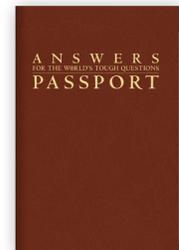
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2. Divine Alternatives

When we can see a storm on the horizon, we often search for shelter of our own instead of resting in God's Word. And far too many of us blame our humanness for our misplaced focus. We excuse, analyze, discuss, rationalize, and allow our feelings to control us rather than disciplining ourselves to listen to God.

We often seek out these man-made wells to cool the blistering effects of worry in our lives:

- *Self-Reliance*: “Try harder! You are responsible for your own destiny.”
- *Possessions*: “Accumulate more! What you have determines who you are.”
- *Catharsis*: “Tell more people! If I dump my worries on others, I will feel better.”

But God's Word gives us three divine wells that provide relief from overwhelming worry:

- *A Willingness to Wait* (Isaiah 40:28–31)
- *A Commitment to Christ* (Matthew 6:24–34)
- *A Priority of Prayer* (Philippians 4:4–7)



DIGGING DEEPER

A Thirsty Soul

The world we live in gives us many reasons to worry. While the Lord wants the troubles in life to create a thirst in us for Him, we often seek out water sources of our own only to find out that the water is contaminated.

The first century provided just as many reasons to worry as the twenty-first century. Cultural pressures and religious expectations left many parched, including a Samaritan woman in Sychar (John 4:5).

The Samaritan woman had sought out man-made wells to quench her spiritual and emotional thirst. She had moved from man to man trying to find love and rest (4:16–18). Finally, her actions had pushed her out of the community. As an outsider, she had nowhere to turn. To avoid the glares and accusing eyes of

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ISAIAH 40:27-31; MATTHEW 6:24-34; LUKE 10:38-42; PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

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others, she went out at an odd time of day to draw water from the well. At least she could find a way to satisfy her physical thirst.

But she had no idea who would be waiting for her at the well to give her access to the eternal spring of life.

Jesus sat down at Jacob's well, exhausted from His journey (John 4:6). As the woman dropped her bucket down the long shaft to the underground spring, Jesus said, "Give Me a drink" (4:7). To break the ice, Jesus reminded the woman first of her physical thirst, then of her spiritual dehydration.

After breaking down the woman's moral and religious barriers, He said: "Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life" (4:14). The Samaritan woman believed Jesus and from then on drew from His spiritual well.

Often it takes anxiety-producing circumstances to remind us of our need for a divine water source. By dipping in the God-ordained wells of patience, commitment to Christ, and prayer, Christians can find sustenance in the midst of a spiritual drought.



Starting Your Journey

Through newspapers, TV, Facebook, the Internet, and other information sources, we are bombarded daily with reasons to worry. When anxiety overwhelms us, what can we do practically?

For a few minutes, allow a specific worry to surface in your mind. Then think of a divine alternative and begin applying it.

Worry:

Divine Alternative:



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK WHAT'S NECESSARY FOR VICTORY?

ROMANS 8:31-37; 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27; 1 JOHN 5:4, 7



The Heart of the Matter

Victory in Jesus Christ. It's what many Christians want. It's what we've been promised by Christ Himself. But we often find ourselves asking, "Why don't I experience more victory in Christ?"

Isn't it interesting, in passages on Christian victory, the Bible doesn't mention one time the blare of a bugle or the stomping of an infantry or the clanking armor of a soldier or the bursting sounds of battle on the landscapes around us? The victorious life finds its source in Christ Himself and in our quiet submission to the empowering work of the Holy Spirit.

So, why *don't* we experience more victory in the Christian life? Each member of the family of God has championship material deep down inside. But many of us have begun to believe in the flabby philosophy of our times. We have neglected the spiritual disciplines and opted for comfort and mediocrity. So now what do we do to find victory?



Discovering the Way

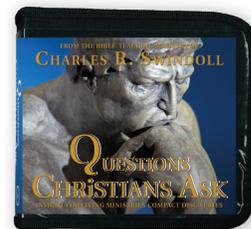
1. Five Things Victory Is *Not* (Romans 8:31-37)

Before we can understand what the Bible says about spiritual victory, we must learn how *not* to define it.

- Victory is *not* a once-for-all accomplishment.
- Victory is *not* an emotional high.
- Victory is *not* a dream reserved for supersaints.
- Victory is *not* an independent achievement.
- Victory is *not* something that happens to us as we passively wait and remain uninvolved.



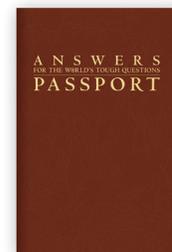
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2. Four Things Victory Includes (1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

Of all the wrong teachings about Christian victory, passivity is the most dangerous to us. Spiritual victory in the Christian life requires:

- *Action*: The apostle Paul used athletic terms to describe the spiritual life.
- *Aim*: In order to achieve victory, we must shoot at the right target.
- *Discipline*: Christians must exercise good, old-fashioned self-control.
- *Reward*: An imperishable, eternal crown awaits Christ-followers!



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Paul's Inspiration

Games were incredibly popular in the Greek and Roman world. Competitions between men were held throughout the empire. The exhibitions took place in gymnasiums, theaters, and amphitheaters. The games at Olympia, Greece, were the earliest version of the Olympics, and Paul himself may have witnessed the Isthmian games near Corinth, which took place every two years. Initially, the games consisted of a single, nearly two-hundred-meter race—a lap around the stadium. Later games added longer runs, wrestling, and boxing (1 Corinthians 9:26). Winners at the games received crowns or wreaths.¹

All the winners of the Isthmian games collected perishable prizes—money, education for their children, an olive or celery wreath for their heads. Modern-day Olympians receive medals. But wreaths wilt and medals tarnish. Only the Christian's reward will last forever—it will never rust or collect dust! Do you believe that?



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

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ROMANS 8:31–37; 1 CORINTHIANS 9:24–27; 1 JOHN 5:4, 7



Starting Your Journey

According to 1 John 5:4–7, spiritual victory has three prerequisites:

- *Birth*: We must be born into God's family.
- *Faith*: We must trust in God's overcoming power.
- *Truth*: We must rely on the Holy Spirit to give us victory.

Where are you on this journey to victory? What principles from this lesson can you implement to gain victory? Do you need a change in perspective, attitude, or action?

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, "First Corinthians," in *Insight's Handbook of New Testament Backgrounds: Key Customs from Each Book* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2012), 44.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
IS MY NEIGHBOR REALLY LOST?
LUKE 10:25-37



The Heart of the Matter

Isn't it amazing? We get so busy with our Christian activities, traveling to and from church, engaged in things that will ultimately gain eternal rewards, that we walk by, drive by, live beside, and if we're honest, virtually ignore those around us. It's hypocritical for Christians to say that we want to reach the world for Christ if we won't even walk across the street and befriend our neighbors. If we say we want the lost in the remotest parts of the world to know Jesus, but we don't share His story with those around us, we lie.

Let's all begin playing our part by finding out what our neighbors need and meeting those needs—especially their need for Christ. Let's start living as good neighbors to the people God has placed in our paths. To help us begin doing that, let's eavesdrop on a conversation held in the street back in the first century between a lawyer and the Lord.



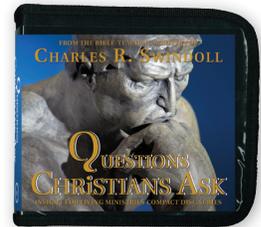
Discovering the Way

1. Who Is My Neighbor?

We can spend long hours, valuable energy, and millions of dollars working out strategies, initiating crusades, establishing medical clinics, building translation stations, and praying that governments will open up their countries to the gospel. As wonderful as these efforts are, haven't we missed a basic ingredient? Outreach begins not overseas but close to where we live—across the street, in our offices, at the gym, and in the shops we frequent. Let's learn from Jesus, not only the identities of our neighbors but how to *be* a good neighbor.



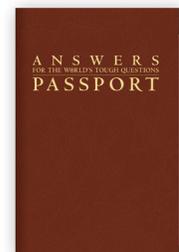
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IS MY NEIGHBOR REALLY LOST?
LUKE 10:25–37

2. **The Real Question: Am I a Merciful Neighbor?**

In this parable, Jesus confronted the lawyer's prejudice and complacency—and perhaps our own as well. Jesus answered the lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" from an unexpected angle. Jesus turned the question around and asked, "Are you a good neighbor?" Let's take Jesus's concluding question to heart and prepare to make our own personal response.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY
Who Were the Samaritans?

When Jesus told a story and cast a Samaritan as the protagonist, His audience cringed. But why did the Jews hate the Samaritans so much?

Second Kings 17:24–28 records how King Sargon of Assyria repopulated the area of Samaria in Israel after he carried away the captured Israelites. Sargon sent pagan people from Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sephar-vaim to settle in Samaria. Samaritans, then, were likely the mixed-race people who came from intermarriages between these pagan groups and the few Israelites who remained in Samaria after the exile.

The Samaritans were also a syncretistic people who mixed the worship of Yahweh with the worship of false gods. So, the Lord sent lions to kill some of them. In order to try to appease the Lord, they asked the king of Assyria to send one of Israel's priests to teach them the customs of God. One of the exiled priests returned to Samaria and probably took a copy of the Torah with him. But this priest most likely taught the inhabitants the idolatry of Jeroboam (2 Kings 17:27–31).

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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
IS MY NEIGHBOR REALLY LOST?
LUKE 10:25–37

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The Jews despised the Samaritans for changing a few key facts in the Torah. They replaced Mount Ebal with Mount Gerizim as the mountain where Moses commanded the Israelites to place the stone tablets upon which were written the words of the Law (Deuteronomy 27:1–4). And as time passed, the Samaritans began to worship at a sanctuary on Mount Gerizim, which they claimed that Joshua built.¹

But Jesus’s parable illustrated His love for all people regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds. And Jesus asks us to join Him as His redeeming work continues to break down barriers and prejudices today.



Starting Your Journey

Reaching the world for Christ doesn’t begin in some foreign land but within our own hearts. Those of us who have received Christ’s compassion must consider whether we’re willing to act on Christ’s command to extend compassion. If we are willing, we will start seeing everyone as our neighbor.

Our closeness with Jesus Christ often indicates the degree of compassion we have for others. As we encounter others on the road of life, are we like the Pharisee, who ignored the pain of an untouchable? Or do our actions resemble the Samaritan, who put the needs of a dying man above his own?

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, “Second Kings,” in *Insight’s Handbook of Old Testament Backgrounds: Key Customs from Each Book, Genesis–Esther* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2013), 113.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WHAT MAKES A REBEL RETURN?

SELECTED SCRIPTURES



The Heart of the Matter

Haven't you wondered what it is that causes some wanderers to return to the Lord? And though we pray constantly for loved ones who have wandered from the faith, why don't they come back? Or if they do, it may take a *long* time. Is there a particular pattern found in Scripture that reveals why some people's hearts soften and others don't? If so, does God's Word always impact rebels in the same manner? These and other questions have probably troubled our hearts, but we seldom ask them out loud. Today, let's seek the Lord's counsel as we attempt to uncover the reasons an individual will admit his or her error, turn around, and come back to the Lord as a humble, repentant child of the King.

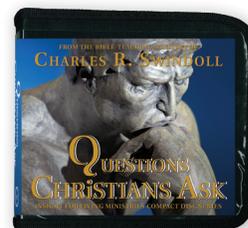


Discovering the Way

1. An Issue In Need of Consideration (Isaiah 55:6–7; 1 Corinthians 5:3–13)
Why do some people kneel in humility when confronted with wrong while others dig in their heels and resist? Let's bring the issue closer to home. Suppose that sinning person is your friend or even your spouse. What would you do if they refused to repent? Conversely, how would you respond if this rebel came back and wanted to restore the relationships they have damaged? Let's take a look at Scripture for some answers.



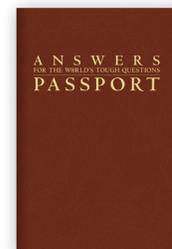
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHAT MAKES A REBEL RETURN?
SELECTED SCRIPTURES

2. An Analysis of Four Changed Lives

Many stories of changed lives weave through Scripture. One common trait connects all these stories—a genuine, penitent spirit. Each life shows the various means that God uses to bring a rebel home.

- A King: David
- A Preacher: Solomon
- A Prophet: Jonah
- A Son: The Prodigal



DIGGING DEEPER
God and the Rebel

Sometimes it takes a Nathan to say, “You’re wrong!” Other times, dissatisfaction with the sheer boredom and emptiness of the world pushes people back to God. Although we dread it, sometimes God uses calamity. Still other times, the love and acceptance of home turn them around.

Although the methods may vary, God never changes.

First: *He is a jealous Groom.* When His bride flirts with the world and embraces sin, He never yawns and looks the other way. (See Exodus 34:14; Ezekiel 39:25–29.)

Second: *He is a sovereign Lord.* When His servants rebel and run, He pursues. (See Jonah 1.)

Third: *He is a compassionate Father.* When His children come back, He forgives, accepts, and affirms them. (See Psalm 103.)



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHAT MAKES A REBEL RETURN?
SELECTED SCRIPTURES



Starting Your Journey

There's nothing easy about true repentance. Voluntarily bringing up our own sins is like uncovering a wound and asking someone to touch it. But could it be that God is trying to get our attention through one of the means discussed above? Or maybe God wants to use you as a means of leading someone to repentance. It will require patience, pain, constant prayer, unconditional love, grief, and self-examination. But it's worth it!

Spend some time studying the following references, and answer the question, "Is there someone for whom God could use me as a means to encourage repentance?"

Proverbs 25:11–12; 27:5–6, 17

Matthew 18:15–17

Galatians 6:1

Ephesians 4:29

1 Thessalonians 5:14–15

2 Thessalonians 3:6–15



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
CAN “ORDINARY PEOPLE” MAKE A CONTRIBUTION?
ACTS 8–9



The Heart of the Matter

Evangelism and discipleship were never designed to be ministries limited to “the pros.” One of the archenemies of evangelism is false propaganda—wrong ideas that get embedded in the Christian’s mind before the truth can find lodging.

The propaganda sounds something like this: “Christian service is for superstars—spiritual giants like the apostle Paul, Hudson Taylor, and Jim Elliott. It’s not for ordinary people like me.” It’s almost as if a sinister force creeps into every church nursery and whispers, “Psst, hey kid, wake up! Being a missionary is for superstars and pros, and you don’t qualify. Now go back to sleep.” So, many of us grow up believing that serving God is for somebody else. Let’s take some time to examine the truth.



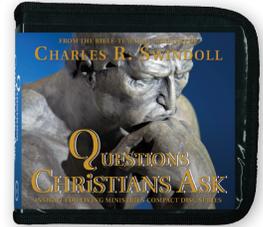
Discovering the Way

1. Regarding Giants, Celebrities, and Superstars

If we take a closer look at the superstars of ministry, we find that they struggle with the same things we do: doubt, temptation, greed, self-pity, prayerlessness, and selfishness. But God often does the most extraordinary things through His anonymous children. Ordinary people talk to others about Christ, disciple more “important” people, and help others get started in successful ministries. If you think of yourself as a plain, ordinary person without superstar qualities, take heart. There are no insignificant people in God’s economy!



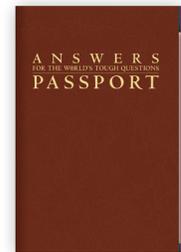
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
CAN “ORDINARY PEOPLE” MAKE A CONTRIBUTION?
ACTS 8–9

2. Ordinary People Doing Unlikely Things (Acts 8–9)

Let’s look at a few ordinary people in Acts 8 and 9 who did some unlikely things because they allowed God to use them. These people are not the most obvious ones in Scripture—or even in these passages in the book of Acts. But they are significant because they found ways to use their gifts.



GETTING TO THE ROOT
A Lesser-Known Encourager

Barnabas exemplified a servant of God, who not only accepted his supporting role but excelled in it. As the apostle Paul’s partner in ministry, Barnabas encouraged and supported him from the beginning—even before others trusted Paul (Acts 9:26–28).

So what made Barnabas such a good friend to Paul? The name *Barnabas* literally means “son of prophecy,” but Acts 4:36 renders it “son of encouragement.” In both the Old and New Testaments, prophets proclaimed God’s Word, served as His spokespeople, and reminded God’s people to obey Him. Perhaps Barnabas reminded Paul of Jesus Christ’s words on the Damascus road (9:3–6) and encouraged Paul to keep walking in faith when he faced persecution and trials.

When the young, struggling church needed reinforcement, Barnabas, a godly man who yielded to the Holy Spirit, “began to encourage them all with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord” (11:23). Barnabas then found Paul and urged him to take a leadership role. Barnabas recognized the gifts and calling God had given Paul, and Barnabas took second place. May we all value the role of encourager as essential to the work of God!



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
CAN “ORDINARY PEOPLE” MAKE A CONTRIBUTION?
ACTS 8–9



 **Starting Your Journey**

Don't talk yourself out of serving the Lord because you're not apostle material, you can't walk on water, you don't have a high enough GPA, or you have never taken a course in seminary. If God has transformed your heart and you present yourself to Him, He will use you!

Are you willing to serve in obscurity? Do you value eternal significance over worldly importance?



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WILL YOU LEAD OR LAG?
EXODUS 18:1-27; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:33



The Heart of the Matter

The ministry of a local church resembles an iceberg, not because it's cold and clumsy but because much of what goes on happens beneath the surface, away from public awareness. Every significant ministry survives because of faithful, consistent, dedicated servant-leaders. While some of the leaders have highly visible positions, known and seen by many, most do their work behind the scenes, seldom recognized or applauded by the public.

Just as an iceberg reveals only a tenth of its mass above water, so the visible leadership of a church only comprises a small portion of its ministry. Whether or not you fill a visible role, God cares about good leadership—the kind mentioned in Scripture, modeled by men and women who served their generations with integrity and refused to lag behind because of pressure, demands, or ingratitude. God still requires the same kind of leadership today to sustain His ministry. Strong and determined yet gracious and godly are the qualities we witness in those we will study in this lesson.



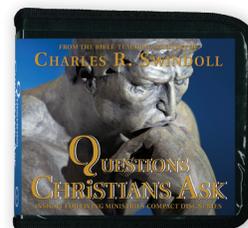
Discovering the Way

1. Statement of What Pleases God (1 Corinthians 14:33)

God is pleased when things are handled according to good organizational principles. In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul attempts to correct the disorder and confusion that had stifled the first-century church at Corinth. Let's learn why confusion displeases God and why He prefers order.



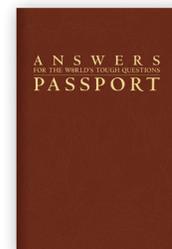
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WILL YOU LEAD OR LAG?

EXODUS 18:1-27; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:33

2. Principles for Good Leadership (Exodus 18)

Moses is one of the most visible leaders in the Old Testament. In fact, four books trace his career: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And one entire chapter in Exodus focuses on his leadership style. In this chapter, we see Moses's need for organization and how God used a wise man to teach Moses some important principles for good leadership, such as:

- One person, no matter how gifted, can't do a big job all alone (nor should he or she try).
- Highly visible leaders are still needed, but their role must be limited.
- Accomplishing a big task is a job for many . . . but each person should be selected carefully.
- When there is proper management, leaders don't wear out and harmony prevails.



DIGGING DEEPER

*Leader as Intercessor*¹

Deuteronomy 9 recounts Israel's rebellion in spite of God's lavish provision and faithfulness to His covenant. When Aaron led the people in an idolatrous building project, God put His foot down. He intended to destroy Aaron and all of Israel, but Moses interceded. After Moses's outburst of anger toward the people, in which he destroyed the tablets of the Ten Commandments, he prayed. For forty days and nights, Moses lay prostrate before God and begged Him to show mercy (Exodus 32:11-13). And God answered Moses's prayer.

Moses modeled through prayer the Christian leader's response to disobedience and immorality both inside and outside the church. In humility, we should plead with God for justice and mercy. So the next time you get upset at the latest celebrity infidelity or church scandal, don't gossip. Instead, pray. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed" (James 5:16).



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WILL YOU LEAD OR LAG?

EXODUS 18:1-27; 1 CORINTHIANS 14:33



Starting Your Journey

God has established several leadership roles in the church. Those who fill these roles must lead effectively and must be chosen according to the guidelines outlined in Scripture. Character, not popularity, reflects God's criteria for leaders. Officers, pastors, elders, and leaders must not simply operate efficiently in their areas of responsibility; they must serve as models for the rest of us. And we must willingly follow those whom God has placed over us.

If God has placed you in a leadership role, how can you model His character to others? If you do not occupy a leadership role, how can you lighten your leaders' loads?

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, "Deuteronomy," in *Insight's Bible Application Guide: Genesis–Deuteronomy—A Life Lesson from Every Chapter* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2012), 123–24.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WHY ARE WE SO BLESSED?

PSALMS 67, 103



The Heart of the Matter

How many times we have said to someone, “I am so blessed!” Or, “God has certainly blessed us.” Or, “We were blessed to be born into this family . . . in this free country.” These are true statements, humble declarations of gratitude that often come from our lips. But have you ever gone one step further? Have you ever asked yourself *why* you are so blessed? Most of us find ourselves eminently blessed. We are the recipients of so much from God’s gracious hand. Perhaps one of the most significant blessings we have received is the privilege we have of living in a spiritually enlightened age with numerous churches and ministries prospering all around us. On top of this, there are books, films, small Bible-study groups, and various media ministries designed to encourage us and equip us in our growth . . . in a free country where our only limitations are time and energy. *Why?* Why all these tremendous blessings? These Psalms 67 and 103 answer that question.



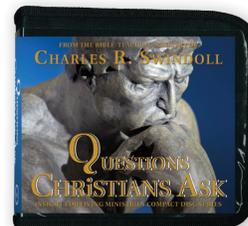
Discovering the Way

1. For a While, Count Your Blessings (Psalm 103)

Imagine yourself on a mountaintop, removed from the city concrete. God’s creation stands out in bold relief: majestic clouds against a deep-blue sky, snowcapped mountains, rolling green hills, and crystal clear rivers winding through rocky ravines. It’s amazing how elevation changes our perspective. What blessings come to mind as you close your eyes and feel the crisp air on your face? Are you healthy? Do you have a family and a home? Has God given you happiness, hope, and heritage? Many of us have a tendency to focus on what’s wrong, which gives us a distorted picture of life.



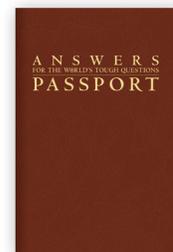
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK

WHY ARE WE SO BLESSED?

PSALMS 67, 103

2. For a Change, Ask Why (Psalm 67)

As nice as it would be to relax on a mountaintop and recall how God has blessed us, that's not why He blesses us. God's blessings are never an end in themselves. He wants us to serve as a channel to share them with others. Have you ever stopped to think about *why* God has poured His benefits into your life? Psalm 67 offers some penetrating insight into this question.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

Blessing God

We talk a lot about God's blessings. But what does it mean for us to bless God? When we bless God, we acknowledge that all power, provision, success, and prosperity in our lives come from Him. And if prosperity doesn't describe our lives, then surely we have experienced love from friends and family. Whatever we have, whether or not it tops the charts of worldly riches, we have received it from God. Truly, "every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17).

In Hebrew, *barak*, or bless, means to kneel. When we bless God, we adore Him on bended knee. *Barak* refers to the humility of the one giving the blessing, such as when Christians praise and worship God.¹

In Psalm 103, David blessed God and recognized His sovereign and gracious gifts in David's life. But most of all, David blessed God for His character—His holiness and forgiveness; His power to heal, restore, and satisfy our deepest needs; His perfect and righteous judgment; His compassion, grace, and covenant faithfulness; and His role as Creator, Sustainer, and supreme King over everything.

May we bless the Lord, not only for His gifts to us but also for His character and faithfulness. And may we help others to do the same.



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHY ARE WE SO BLESSED?
PSALMS 67, 103



Starting Your Journey

Now that we know that God wants us to share His gifts with others, what do we do first?

1. The greatest blessing we have received is salvation. If we have received grace through Christ, we must begin sharing His message with others. Gratitude motivates evangelism.
2. We must live in a way that highlights God's love and distinguishes us from those who live without Christ.
3. Since people will rarely approach us and ask about Christ, we must take the initiative to go to them.
4. As evidence of our faith in God's provision, we must give away our material possessions, to the church and to those in need.

How has God blessed you? How do you think a lack of gratitude affects your relationship with God and your generosity toward others?

ENDNOTE

1. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006), 138–39.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHAT IS MY RESPONSE TO GOD'S BLESSINGS?
MATTHEW 25:14-30



The Heart of the Matter

Jesus's favorite method of communication was storytelling. And He was a master at it! His stories aren't fairytales or pointless pieces of ear-tickling fiction. They are stories that carry strong and penetrating messages. To this day, some of the deepest theological truths ever taught are wrapped within the plot of a parable once told by Christ. The parable we are considering today appears on the surface to be about a man and his slaves, but in actuality it symbolizes the Savior and His followers. Read it closely. Think it through. See if you don't agree that it has a great deal to say about how we are to respond to the blessings of God.



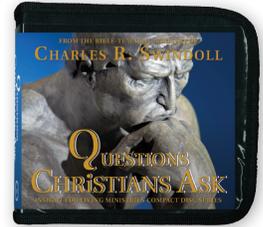
Discovering the Way

1. Reminders Regarding God's Blessings

In the Christian life, we have the option of stewarding the blessings God has given us or using them with only our own aims in sight. We have the freedom to choose either response, and each response has a set of corresponding consequences. But only one option truly reflects God's heart. Let's first review a few general truths about God's abundant blessings and how He wants us to use them.



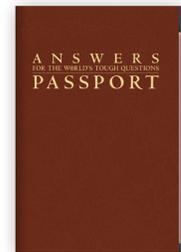
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHAT IS MY RESPONSE TO GOD'S BLESSINGS?
MATTHEW 25:14–30

2. A Story: Right and Wrong Responses (Matthew 25:14–30)

God blesses us in order to draw attention to His grace and mercy. He blesses the just and the unjust. Matthew 25 records a story told by Jesus that shows how different people respond to God's blessings and how their responses impact their lives. As we turn to this story, we need to step back in time, slip on some sandals, and listen to Jesus speak. Jesus shared this parable not long before He was arrested, taken to court on trumped-up charges of blasphemy and treason, and finally crucified. As He faced imminent death, Jesus wanted to prepare His disciples for His absence and return.



DIGGING DEEPER
Christians: A Talented Group

While many people believe that Jesus's parable of the talents in Matthew 25 refers to the abilities or "talents" God gives us, it teaches us about stewardship—how we manage the resources God has entrusted to us.

In this parable, Jesus tells about three servants, to whom their master apportioned his money before leaving on a long trip. The master gave each servant a different number of talents—or "bags of silver" (Matthew 25:15 NLT).

The talent was the largest unit in Hebrew currency. The Hebrews used the talent to measure gold, silver, bronze, and other metals.¹ While most Christians don't live their lives with multiple bags of silver lying around, we must take responsibility to steward and *multiply* the riches we have received, whether we have one bag of silver or five.

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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHAT IS MY RESPONSE TO GOD'S BLESSINGS?
MATTHEW 25:14–30

Continued from previous page

So how can Christians who may not go to work as investment bankers *multiply* the Lord's talents? We must work hard for the money we earn and develop an attitude of generosity (Ephesians 4:28). We must make responsible purchases within our means and extravagantly invest in eternal things (Matthew 6:19–21). Remember—God doesn't bless us so we can build bigger barns, climb ladders of social status, and live at ease (Luke 12:15–21). As we prayerfully give to our churches, to brothers and sisters in need, and to ministries and charities, God multiplies His resources and changes people's lives for eternity.

Though many Christians may not *feel* rich—with little silver to spare after paying bills—many of us have more discretionary cash than we think. God expects us to know how we are spending His resources, so that we can maximize them to further His kingdom.



Starting Your Journey

Just like the men in Jesus's parable, we're all the Lord's servants. God has assigned all Christians various responsibilities that correspond to the talents He has given us. Some of us are two-talent people, some are four-talent people, and most of us are one-talent servants. God always gives us exactly what we can handle and enough to fulfill the role He wants us to fill. But it's our choice whether we share His blessings and talents with others or hoard them for ourselves.

Do you have a particular possession, ability, or relationship that you want to keep hidden from God because you're afraid of what He will ask you to do with it? Will you choose to release control of that blessing so God can use it to bless others?

ENDNOTE

1. Merrill F. Unger, "Metrology, Measures of Weight," in *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 844.



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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET GOD'S CALENDAR?
MATTHEW 24:3-14



The Heart of the Matter

Today's world seems fascinated by and preoccupied with the future. Bestselling books are often those that offer predictions and warnings concerning future events. Astrology continues to captivate people by the millions. Even the film and television industries have made a bundle from science fiction and futuristic fantasy ideas dreamed up in the minds of imaginative producers. But invariably, one major subject is overlooked or denied altogether—the return of Jesus Christ. Few things are more clearly set forth in all of Scripture. This single prediction is woven through the teachings of Christ, especially during His final months of ministry, as well as the writings of the apostles. In this section of Matthew's gospel, Jesus is with His disciples on the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem across the Kidron Valley. They are full of questions, and He graciously responds to their concerns.



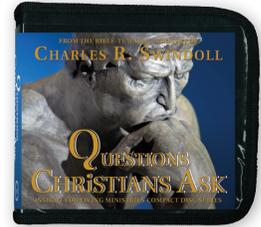
Discovering the Way

1. What Gives World Missions Its Urgency?

Christians often talk about the importance of evangelism, both at home and around the world. Our churches send out short-term teams to other nations to share the gospel as well as recruit those who stay behind to pray and give financially. But what gives this crucial mission its urgency? In Matthew 24 and 25, Jesus reminded us that our evangelistic efforts have a deadline. Often Christians forget that time is running out for those who don't yet know Christ and that their eternity is at stake. Jesus urges us, the workers in God's field, to get busy harvesting the world for Christ. Because when Jesus returns, world missions will come to an end.



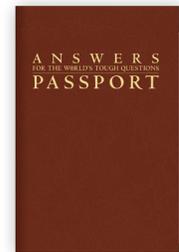
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QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET GOD'S CALENDAR?
MATTHEW 24:3-14

2. Then How Are We to Interpret Current Events? (Matthew 24:3-14; 2 Peter 3:1-4)

Matthew 24 opens with the disciples seeking to speak with Jesus privately. They asked Him three questions because they wanted to know how they would recognize Jesus's return. They already knew that an indefinite period of time would separate His departure and His return. The disciples knew Jesus would fulfill His promise; they just didn't know when. Jesus responded with an answer that unfolds throughout Matthew 24. It includes a warning, signs to watch for, and predictable end-times events.



GETTING TO THE ROOT

*The Rapture*¹

Wouldn't it be great if we could take a peek over God's shoulder and catch a quick glance at His prophetic calendar? In a way, we can. Though the Bible doesn't give the exact dates and times of future events, serious students of Scripture can pretty much determine the order of events to come. And the next event on God's prophetic calendar is the rapture.

The word *rapture* never occurs in the Bible but comes from the phrase "caught up" in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. And though the rapture hasn't occurred yet, it could at any moment.

Jesus made it clear in John 14:1-3 that those who take part in the rapture will be only those who choose to believe in Him while they're alive on earth. On that great catching-up day, Christ will take His followers from earth to live with Him in heaven during the seven years of tribulation that will occur on earth. They will, in the words of Jesus, escape the "hour of testing" (Revelation 3:10). On that glorious day, Jesus will "descend from heaven" with a loud command, an angelic shout, and blaring trumpets,

Continued on next page



QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET GOD'S CALENDAR?
MATTHEW 24:3-14

Continued from previous page

bringing with Him the souls of New Testament saints (1 Thessalonians 4:16). At the Lord's command, the physical bodies of those "who have fallen asleep . . . in Christ" will rise to reunite with their souls (4:15, 16). And then all who have committed their lives to Jesus, who are alive at the time of the rapture, "will be caught up" to meet Him "in the air" (4:17).

All of this will take place "in the twinkling of an eye." Christians will exchange our old, earthly bodies for new, heavenly ones (1 Corinthians 15:51-55) and will live in the Lord's presence forever (1 Thessalonians 4:17). What a wonderful message of hope for all who follow Christ (4:13, 18).



Starting Your Journey

So how can we develop a sense of urgency for a world without Christ? First, we should recognize that the goal of history is to display God's glory and that He stands at the center of its unfolding events. Second, we must catch a world vision by understanding that Jesus didn't die for a certain ethnicity or for one country; He died for the entire world. It's easy for us to sit back and think that we have plenty of time to tell our neighbors, relatives, and coworkers about Christ. But we don't know when Jesus will burst onto the scene and carry out divine judgment.

Do you feel a sense of urgency to share the gospel? Do you truly care about the eternal destinies of others? If not, pray that God would burden your heart with the truth that time is running out.

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, *End Times Prophecy Passport* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2011), 4.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK
WHY DO WE THROW ROCKS AT EACH OTHER?
EPHESIANS 4:25–32



The Heart of the Matter

Ours is a strange generation. Spoiled might be a better word. There are more churches today than ever before. We have an abundance of good teaching, close fellowship, support groups for a wide spectrum of needs, caring Christians, and the hope of even more well-trained young men and women soon to be graduated from excellent and dedicated institutions. In the United States, the opportunities for employment and career advancement have seldom been better, and the challenge to reach a lost world for Christ has never been greater or brighter. And yet . . . infighting, negativity, and hurtful assaults between Christians are at an all-time high. At a time when we have every reason to pull together and work in harmony to get the job done, it seems as though some would much rather weaken the ranks and hinder our effectiveness. Today, let's go back to some of the basics that our indulged era seems to have forgotten.



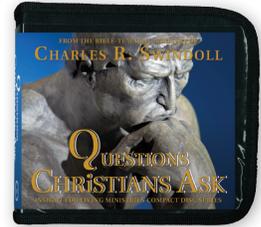
Discovering the Way

1. Statement of the Problem

When little boys stand on the riverside and throw rocks at unsuspecting frogs for fun, we laugh. But when adults hurl insults at each other, we frown. Sadly, even Christians stand on the bank throwing rocks at each other. We throw some of these verbal stones in sarcastic sport. We throw some out of anger to pay others back. And we throw other painful rocks in self-righteous indignation, like the religious leaders who wanted to stone the woman caught in adultery (John 8:3–11). In the end, the way Christians sometimes treat each other turns people away from Christ instead of toward Him.



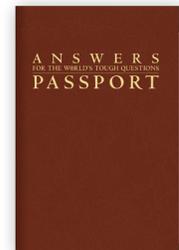
Tools for Digging Deeper



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by Charles R. Swindoll
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Wrath, *thumos*, refers to a strong, passionate, sometimes violent wave of fury. **Anger**, *orgay*, refers to a constant state of heightened anger toward someone.² Wrath and anger work together to sweep away love like a rushing torrent.

Clamor, *krangay*, refers to one or more voices shouting loudly as in a quarrel.³

Slander, *blasphemia*, is harmful, abusive, false words meant to destroy someone's reputation.⁴

Malice, *kakia*, refers to a vicious, mean-spirited mind-set toward another, including hatred and wishing the worst for someone.⁵ Malice destroys fellowship.

GOOD FRUIT

Kindness, *xraystos*, describes a loving, benevolent attitude toward others.⁶

Tenderheartedness, *eusplagxnos*, speaks of having softhearted, compassionate feelings toward others.⁷

Forgiveness, *xarizomai*, is probably the most crucial trait that maintains the unity of the church. Forgiveness conveys showing oneself to be gracious by freely forgiving, just as Christ forgives.⁸



Starting Your Journey

The primary distinguishing marks of a Christian are love and unity. We live out our faith before a watching world. What they see will influence their eternal destinies, either for good or for evil. The Lord has given His church quite a responsibility: to draw others to Him by loving and forgiving each other. Therefore, let's put down our rocks and pick up our crosses!

Do you have rocks aimed at anyone? If so, how can you turn your negatives that tear others down into positives that build others up?

ENDNOTES

1. Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 813.
2. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 461, 720.
3. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 565.
4. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 178.
5. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 500.
6. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1090.
7. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 413.
8. Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1078.



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