

IF YOU COULD ASK GOD
ONE QUESTION

PAUL WILLIAMS | BARRY COOPER

For Susannah, Bethan and Joshua

If you could ask God one question
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Paul Williams and Barry Cooper | September 2007

WHERE TO BEGIN?

“Martin,” I said to my friend, “if you could ask God one question, and you knew it would be answered, what would it be?”

Martin looked serious. I could tell this was going to be something deeply felt, possibly quite emotional.

“Is Elvis *really* dead?”

I blinked.

“*That* would be your question?”

“Yes,” said Martin.

Trying to be sensitive, I suggested, “It’s not really a matter of life and death though, is it Martin?”

He thought for a moment.

“It is if you’re Elvis.”

The Bible itself is full of people asking God questions. But if you could ask God one question, what would it be?

Maybe you’ve already read the contents page of this book and spotted the question you’d most like to ask. If so, let me encourage you to read the book from start to finish, rather than jumping in at the relevant point. Very

often, the answer to one question lays the foundation for one that follows.

And if it sometimes seems that I've given short shrift to a big question, let me apologise in advance and point you towards www.christianityexplored.org, where you'll find some suggestions for digging deeper. Whatever questions you want to ask God, it's my sincere hope that this book will go some way to helping you with them.

“But Paul,” you might be saying, “how do we know that God even *exists*? After all, if he's really there, why on earth doesn't he prove it?”

Now *that's* a good question...



**"IF YOU'RE REALLY THERE, GOD,
WHY DON'T YOU PROVE IT?"**

"This morning, boys and girls, we're going to do some painting. You can paint anything you like, and if you don't know what to paint, just paint what you did at the weekend." The primary-school teacher watched as the children got their plastic aprons on and started to paint enthusiastically.

After a while, the teacher walked around the room to see how they were getting on. Some were painting mummy and daddy in the park, others were painting the seaside, and some were painting the animals they'd seen at the zoo. Eventually the teacher stopped over a particularly shapeless and colourful painting.

"That's very nice, Scott," she said encouragingly. "What is it?"

"Oh, that's God," said Scott.

"But no one's ever seen God," said the teacher.

Scott looked up at her.

"They have now."

It's not only small children who paint pictures of God. Think of the thousands of different people who've been

doing just that since the dawn of time. There've been gods in the shape of animals, gods in the shape of fire or water, gods in the stars and the sun, distant gods, inner gods, benign gods and fearsome ones. And I guess if I were to ask *you* to paint a picture of God, it would probably be different from Scott's and different from mine. Perhaps you'd just leave the paper blank.

But would any of our pictures be more accurate than the imaginative doodlings of a small child? The only way we'd know is if God decided to reveal himself unmistakably, once and for all.

Steve joined the staff of the newspaper I worked for, and we used to talk all the way through lunch about the important things in life. And then, when we stopped talking about football, the conversation sometimes turned to God. "Listen," he said, "I'd believe in God if he were to come and stand in front of me. If I could meet him, talk to him and touch him. If only I could see him, *that* would prove his existence. *Then* I'd be convinced."

I sat there silently evaluating the odds of God suddenly appearing in the *Bedfordshire Times* cafeteria. (To be fair, there had been a brief visit from the mayor recently, but having sampled the Spanish omelette, I didn't think he'd be returning in a hurry.)

But just imagine. Imagine what it would be like to physically meet God. To actually *see* him, *talk* to him, *touch* him. To actually sit down and eat with him.

Philip was another man with a similar request to Steve. I've never met Philip personally, but you can read about him in the Bible. He said to a man called Jesus, "Show

me God – that’s all I need”.¹ And Jesus seemed surprised that Philip could ask such a thing.

Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? *Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.*²

Yes, you read that right. Jesus is saying, *Once you’ve seen me, all the questions, all the guessing games, all the bets about what God is like – well, they’re all off.* Even more so than the Spanish omelette. “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”

And actually, although my friend Steve can’t physically touch God, or see him, or eat with him, there were many thousands of people who did just that. Many of them – wanting to keep a record of these extraordinary events – made sure to write down what happened, so that people like Steve, people like you and me, could know for certain that, yes, God does exist. As we read the Bible, these witnesses tell us again and again, *God does exist. And we should know. Because we met him.*

But didn’t they just make this stuff up? Jesus never actually claimed to be God, did he?

It’s funny you should say that, because Jesus *did* claim to be God. Repeatedly. Although not always directly.

When Jesus said, for instance, “I and the Father are one”,³ he wasn’t just making some vague claim to be “in tune” with God. He was actually claiming to *be* God. And if you need convincing of that, just look at the way

¹ John 14:8, my paraphrase.

² John 14:9, my italics.

³ John 10:30.

the religious leaders reacted at the time:

[They] picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"

"We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, *because you, a mere man, claim to be God.*" (John 10:31-33, my italics)⁴

As you can see, they were in no doubt about what Jesus meant when he said, "I and the Father are one". And Jesus makes no attempt to correct their thinking on the matter, even though they are about to try and kill him for it.

Not only does Jesus not correct them, he carries on repeating the claim, in ways that were unmistakable to the people that heard him. People who were familiar with this prophecy, for example:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them ... I myself will tend my sheep ... declares the Sovereign LORD ... I will shepherd the flock with justice. (Ezekiel 34:11, 15-16)

And what does Jesus say, in the light of that six hundred year-old prediction?

I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11, 14)

In other words, *I am the Sovereign Lord you've been reading about.*

And that statement, "I am the good shepherd", is even more astonishing when you realise the deep significance

⁴ John 10:31-33 means the book of John in the Bible, chapter 10, verses 31 to 33.

of that simple phrase, “I am...”. Those two words on the lips of Jesus are unimaginably shocking. About fifteen hundred years before Jesus walked the earth, a man called Moses was told by God that he (Moses) would lead God’s people, the Israelites, out of captivity in Egypt. Moses is doubtful, and thinks the Israelites will be too. He wants some way of proving that he has indeed been talking to God himself:

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?”

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ ”
(Exodus 3:13–14)

God tells Moses his name, and his name is I AM.

Now fast forward to Jesus’ time, where once again we find Jesus talking to the religious authorities. This time they’re talking about Abraham, a man who had been born some two thousand years before Jesus said the following:

“Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.”

“You are not yet fifty years old,” the Jews said to him, “and you have seen Abraham!”

“I tell you the truth,” Jesus answered, “before Abraham was born, *I am!*” (John 8:56-58)

To even say God’s name was something to be done with great reverence and fear, *but Jesus actually applies the*

name to himself. As you might expect, the religious leaders again pick up stones and try to kill him for making this extraordinary, blasphemous claim.

And this is not – by any means – the only occasion when Jesus used that unique and telling phrase, “I am”. He also said:

I am the light of the world. (John 8:12; 9:5)

I am the bread of life. (John 6:35, 48)

I am the true vine. (John 15:1)

I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25)

I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

These words are not only stunning, they are stunningly dangerous.

I know that if I were to say, “Why don’t you support a proper football team like Leeds?” to a gang of heavily tattooed Manchester United fans, then the next thing I’d see would almost certainly be the inside of an ambulance. There are certain words, spoken in certain circumstances, that will eventually get you killed.

And yet Jesus made a habit of it. He insisted quite unashamedly that he was indeed God, the Lord of everything, Creator of heaven and earth. He even said these things while on trial for his life before the highest religious court in the land:

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?”

“I am,” said Jesus. (Mark 14:61-62)

Anyone can *claim* to be God, though, can’t they?

Absolutely. Lots of people like to blow their own horns,

like rap artists, or boxers at a pre-fight press conference.

Take Muhammad Ali, for example. He was one of the greatest boxers the world has ever seen, and listening to the things he said to his opponents before he even entered the ring, you suspect he won fights without throwing a single punch.

I have wrestled with an alligator! I done tussled with a whale! I done handcuffed lightning, thrown thunder in jail! ... Only last week I murdered a rock, injured a stone, hospitalized a brick. I'm so mean, I make medicine sick!

Again and again he would claim, “I am the greatest”. In fact, according to Ali, there was only one thing he found hard: “When you’re as great as I am, it’s hard to be humble”.⁵

But there was one thing Ali knew better than most: if you’re going to talk about yourself in that way, you will be the laughing stock of the whole world – unless you back up the talk with action. And that is exactly what Jesus did.

It is no ordinary human being who *can* actually handcuff lightning and throw thunder in jail. Let’s face it, ordinary human beings can’t even *predict* the weather accurately, let alone control it. But Jesus was different.

He was asleep in a boat, and his close followers (referred to as “disciples” in the Bible) were at the oars. Suddenly, a fierce storm hits the lake they’re rowing across, and the boat is in danger of sinking. And this is no storm in a teacup, because it prompts the disciples – several of whom are fishermen, familiar with extreme conditions –

⁵ Quoted at www.imdb.com/title/tt0118147/quotes accessed 13th July 2011.

to wake Jesus with the desperate cry, “Master, Master, we’re going to drown!”

What Jesus does next is astonishing:

He got up and rebuked the wind and the raging waters;
the storm subsided, and all was calm. (Luke 8:24)

So much for the weather forecast. Jesus tells the storm to stop. And it stops. The disciples, unsurprisingly, are dumbfounded: “Who is this? He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him.”

I cannot tell you how much I’d love to have that power. I always avoid travelling by sea if I can. The worst time was when my wife and I were on a cross-channel ferry.

As we drove onto the ship, the crew began to secure all the vehicles with ropes, which I have to say was not an encouraging sight. As everyone else went off to enjoy a hearty meal at the on-board restaurant, I found a seat just outside the toilets. This proved wise, because shortly afterwards I started to feel ill. Really ill. In fact, I don’t think I – or anyone else – have ever been so sick.

When I could stand it no longer, I looked up at Caroline, and like a little boy on a long car journey I said in a pathetic voice, “Are we nearly there yet?”

As it happened, we hadn’t even left the harbour.

What I wouldn’t have given to have gone up on deck, said to the wind and waves, “Be quiet!” and had them actually obey me. It would annoy the surfers further up the beach of course, but imagine it! To have that kind of power. Only one person in all of human history has ever done anything like it.

Impressive, but it could simply have been a coincidence, couldn't it?

It could've been – if it had been an isolated incident.

People who spent any time at all around Jesus witnessed the most extraordinary things. And not just those who were on his side. People who wanted to kill him often witnessed miracles in his presence, and they never tried to deny any of them. Why? Because everyone knew that these miracles actually happened. They were beyond question. The only thing people disagreed about was *how* Jesus was able to do these things.

Things like feeding five thousand men with the contents of a small child's packed lunch. Walking on water. Effortlessly curing sickness, paralysis, blindness, deafness. Bringing the dead back to life.⁶

When Jesus walked the earth, he behaved as if he owned the place. Looking at the evidence, it's easy to see why.

Is Jesus the real thing? Couldn't he somehow trick people into thinking he was who he said he was?

It would certainly be an impressive series of tricks. If they *were* tricks, it is incredible that none of his enemies were ever able to expose him as a fraud at any time during his life, or since. And, unlike con artists, it's not as if Jesus used his apparent power to gain a life of wealth, worldly status, sensual indulgence or luxury. Quite the opposite, in fact. He associated himself with the poverty-stricken, the unloved, the outcasts with contagious diseases. He

⁶ If you'd like to read about these incidents, look at Mark 6:30-44; Matthew 14:22-33; Luke 4:40; Matthew 9:2-7; John 9:1-11; Mark 7:32-34; Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25; Luke 7:11-14; John 11:38-44.

welcomed children with open arms and treated women with a dignity that was unheard of at the time.

But there's another reason to believe that Jesus is the real thing. For many hundreds of years before Jesus lived, biblical writers had been predicting in detail the birth, life and death of the Christ. Some of these prophecies could conceivably have been fulfilled intentionally by Jesus, like the prophecy which specified Galilee as the place where most of the work of the Christ would be done.⁷ But many others could not. You cannot pre-arrange your own birthplace, for example.⁸ Unless you commit suicide, it's very difficult to pre-arrange the exact circumstances of your own death.⁹ And it is seemingly impossible to predict (accurately) that three days after your death you will live again – of which, more later. The fact is, Jesus perfectly fits the picture painted by hundreds of prophecies written in the Bible hundreds of years before he was born.

A few years ago a member of the royal family came to visit the church I was working in. Before she arrived, there were frantic preparations to make sure everything was ready for her. Junk was cleared away, walls were given a fresh coat of paint, carpets were rolled out. The last job of all – by royal command – was to fit a brand new toilet seat, which became affectionately known as

7 "In the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan..." (Isaiah 9:1)

8 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Micah 5:2)

9 "A band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing." (Psalm 22:16-18)

The Royal Throne.

We did everything in our power to prepare for the arrival of our royal visitor, and we were pleased to do it because it was such an honour to have her among us.

A man called John the Baptist did a similar kind of thing. He was intent on preparing the way for the Christ, and announcing his arrival. He lived at the same time as Jesus, he knew all about the prophecies, and when John heard of all the amazing things that Jesus was doing, John sent his followers to ask Jesus explicitly, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?"¹⁰ Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."¹¹

His words carry a deliberate and unmistakable echo of a prophecy written seven hundred years earlier:

Say to those with fearful hearts,

"Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come ..."

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened

and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer,

and the mute tongue shout for joy.

(Isaiah 35:4-6, my italics)

Your God has come, says Jesus. All the prophecies are fulfilled in me.

10 Matthew 11:2-3.

11 Matthew 11:4-5

Now, I don't know what your background is, but it may be that you're so familiar with the miracles of Jesus that they don't have the impact they once did.

But just think about it for a moment: who can give sight to people who have been blind from birth? Who can open deaf ears, enable hopelessly paralysed people to walk, control nature, cure incurable illnesses? Who can bring corpses back to life *with a word*? Doctors? Spiritual gurus? Holistic practitioners? I have watched people die, and maybe you have too. Ultimately, there was nothing that anyone could do to stop them dying, and the inevitability of our own death proves the same sorry fact. There are some things that are simply beyond our capacity as human beings.

So what Jesus did – repeatedly and effortlessly – was truly superhuman. He demonstrated, beyond reasonable doubt, that he is more than just a man. However staggering the implications, Jesus' words and actions graphically prove that he *is* God.

As we sat in the cafeteria of the *Bedfordshire Times*, my friend Steve wanted proof of God's existence: "If you're really there, God, why on earth don't you prove it?"

It seems to me that when Jesus walked the planet, God did, on earth, prove it.