



The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith

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If we are honest, we have to admit that there are many things we don't understand about God. We do not have final answers to the deep problems of life, and those who say they do are probably living in some degree of delusion. There are areas of mystery in our Christian faith that lie beyond the keenest scholarship or even the most profound spiritual exercises. For many people, these problems raise so many questions and uncertainties that faith itself becomes a struggle, and the very person and character of God are called into question. Chris Wright encourages us to face up to the limitations of our understanding and to acknowledge the pain and grief they can often cause. But at the same time, he wants us to be able to say, like the psalmist in Psalm 73: "But that's all right. God is ultimately in charge and I can trust him to put things right. Meanwhile, I will stay near to my God, make him my refuge, and go on telling of his deeds."

The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith Details

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Lyndon says

Very accessible theological reflection on four "tough questions" of faith - the issue of evil and suffering; God's wrath, especially in relationship to the Canaanites (God's command for their destruction); the cross of Christ itself; and what happens in the last days. These are admittedly four of the author's big concerns (and not necessarily the 'hardest' of all issues), but they generally represent some of the pressing stumbling blocks that concern people of faith (and those without faith) when it comes to understanding God and God's plan for the world. A key take-away is that God, being God, is not always understandable. But what we do need for life and salvation (even more than we need) has been given to us by God. If you like to sincerely wrestle with issues that seem inscrutable, this book is a good starting point for discussion.

Jamey Hinds says

Refreshingly open and challenging.

Trevor says

On the conquest of Canaan:

"Israel's practice of herem was not in itself unique. Texts from other nations at the time show that such total destruction in war was practiced, or at any rate proudly claimed, elsewhere. But we must also recognize that the language of warfare had a conventional rhetoric that liked to make absolute and universal claims about total victory and completely wiping out the enemy. Such rhetoric often exceeded the reality on the ground.

Admittedly this does not remove the problem, since the reality was still horrible at any level. But it enables us to allow for the fact that descriptions of the destruction of 'everything that lives and breathes' were not necessarily intended literally. Even in the Old Testament itself this phenomenon is recognized and accepted. So, for example, we read in the book of Joshua that all the land was captured, all the kings were defeated, all the people without survivors (such as Rahab) were destroyed (eg. Josh. 10:40-42, 11:16-20). But this must have been intended as rhetorical exaggeration, for the book of Judges (whose final editor was undoubtedly aware of these accounts in Joshua) sees no contradiction in telling us that the process of subduing the inhabitants of the land was far from completed and went on for considerable time, and that many of the original nations continued to live alongside the Israelites" (pages 87-88).

Tim says

Excellent book from a top-notch theologian! Wright is one of my favorite authors, and this book only solidifies his place near the top of the list. In both content and tone, this is a great book.

I purchased this book expecting that he would tackle the problem of evil and OT violence (he does, and it's

all very good), but my favorite part of the book ended up being the sections on the cross and on end times. His presentation of the atonement is one of the most concise yet thorough treatments I've seen (reminiscent of John Stott in *The Cross of Christ*). Very balanced - Wright is among those who can affirm multiple biblical metaphors for atonement without feeling the need to throw penal substitution under the bus. And his defense of penal substitution is a robust one.

The chapters on the end times were excellent as well - gently debunking many of the more common but biblically questionable assumptions about Christ's return, making the connection between heaven and the new earth, importance of bodily resurrection, etc. I found him to be at least as accessible as NT Wright, yet in more concise form, and with less timidity on issues like judgment.

Highly recommended!

Robert Durough, Jr. says

While working through the unread books in my library, I realized I still had one more by Christopher J. H. Wright that I had forgotten about: *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*. Wright here works through four of the big questions people often have when struggling with God and the Bible: evil & suffering, destruction of the Canaanites, the cross, and thoughts on the end of the world. He addresses each of these issues through faith, scholarship, and trust, honestly and humbly admitting his own struggles along the way. The book is easy to read and understand, despite the subject difficulty. (This isn't necessarily intended for those looking for the kind of thorough academic arguments as found in other works of Wright, but still both a useful and helpful starting point.)

If I ever get the chance to meet Chris, I'm going to thank him and give him a giant, awkwardly lasting man hug. His *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (review) is still my top recommendation (a bit too academic for some, but I encourage taking the journey anyway), with *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (review) in an easy second (more of an expansion on a particular aspect of the former, and much easier to read). *The God I Don't Understand* is a helpful addition!

Beth Peninger says

What I love about this book is the permission it grants to not understand God fully, to have doubts and questions about things he says or does. Too many times those with doubts, questions, and hesitations are quieted with Christianese sayings and guilt. But the most devoted believer of Christ will have their moments/seasons of doubt, of misunderstanding, of wondering if it all is for naught. Frankly, when I run into a believer who hasn't been unsure, who hasn't questioned God, who hasn't doubted, who hasn't scratched their head in confusion over something God has done then I am suspect of them actually being a sincere believer in Christ. The tried and true believer in God has walked the road of questions and confusion and remained steadfast. Something in our human nature seems to say that if we don't understand something or we have a doubt about something then we cannot believe in it/them. That is simply not true. When it comes to God, in my own personal life, it isn't true even when my flesh nature would try to convince me otherwise. I have seen enough of God's work in my own life and the lives of others to trust him completely even when something happens that I don't understand. I am getting to a place where I am okay not knowing all the

answers and as Wright points out in part 1 of this book, we really don't want to know all the answers even if we think we do. Some things are only for God to know, can you and I be okay with that? I am, you?

There's a great section in the beginning of the book addressing the common statement, "How can a good God allow such horrible things to happen?" I loved how Wright tackled that uninformed statement head on.

The book is broken up into four parts. I felt like parts 1-3 really did speak to the title of the book but part 4 was a little confusing and Wright himself acknowledges that it takes a departure from the premise of the book but he felt strongly it needed to be added. Part four was good, it just didn't flow, in my opinion, with the theme of the book.

Wright writes easily, easy to read and you get the sense that it kind of just flows from his brain to the paper. There isn't a sense of struggle in his writing, he gets his points across in ways that convey ease and his convictions. His honesty that he doesn't have all the answers and still seeks to discover answers is refreshing. Some teachers/Pastors make the same claim but you know as they make the claim that they are doing so under false humility. I sense Wright to be sincerely humble about it all. Without knowing it would be, this title was a timely read for me since I have found myself struggling lately with the trend of believers saying they believe God's word but clearly don't. I've really found myself wrestling over the infallibility of God's word versus what other, respected teachers have been saying. Wright addresses that very topic to start off his book, so as I said - it was a timely read.

Kjersti says

This book was a gift to me, from one of my former teachers. And, let me tell you, it's an amazing book. It brought me back to connecting faith in God with difficult theological questions – questions of faith. I think ultimately, as Christians we have to trust that God knows best – that he is good, and that 'good' is what he is, was, and always will be. Really great book.

V says

first, this book was good in that it made me want to read the bible. Wright quotes extensively from the bible, especially the old testament, and provides just enough context to make me want to read the story (instead of seeing isolated quotes).

equally important, it helps me think about some of the sticking points of Christianity (why is there evil in the world? why did the old testament God help Israel demolish the Canaanites?) without presuming to have some kind of neat solution.

I would recommend this book to Christians who are troubled by some of these sticky points. I think it might be frustrating for people less familiar with Christianity and, in particular, the Bible. He writes to an audience he expects to be somewhat familiar with the Bible -- it was even a little hard for me, and I've been Christian all my life.

Wendy says

This is definitely as the subtitle says ~ A Reflection ~ Mr Wright is writing about those questions, from a scholar's perspective, that just don't get answered definitively by the Bible. He uses his own experiences for

illustrations so it's not just a theoretical interpretation but also has humour and reality situations. In the Preface he states: "To know God, to love and trust him with all one's heart and soul and strength, is not the same as to understand God in all his ways" Isaiah 55:8-9" I believe that that is an important point to make especially to those who ask for answers to everything before they will believe. God doesn't answer all the questions that we have. Mr. Wright points out that one of the questions that isn't answered is about evil. That God says in effect don't question it, just reject it. An interesting stance. The book is divided into 4 topics, Evil, Canaanites, the Cross, and the End Times. His beliefs and understandings about what the bible says in these cases are interesting and not run-of-the-mill. This book would make an excellent small study group project but I would want someone in the leadership to be acquainted thoroughly with the bible and what it actually says.

This is a good book worth studying.

David Campton says

There is much to commend this book. The author is intellectually rigorous and honest, whilst remaining true to a conservative evangelical theological framework, with its thorough-going Biblicalism. It was refreshing for someone from this theological strand admit to "gaps" in the Bible's ability to answer theological, philosophical and moral questions, and to have him state his position in such a humble and irenic fashion. In this he is clearly following in the footsteps of his mentor and friend John Stott, but with more than a little N.T. Wright thrown in. However it wasn't entirely satisfying, first because, in many ways I thought that the most interesting elements that he was addressing lay in the lacunae that he doesn't understand, and claims that the Bible is silent on (eg. the origin of evil), but also because he increasingly abandons the rubric of his title and spends more on the elements that he does understand rather than explicitly stating those dimensions of God's actions that he doesn't understand, eg with the cross/atonement and the last times. In the section on the last times (which was slightly less irenic in tone as he was rigorously opposing the sensationalist speculation of Hal Lindsay, Tim La Haye and others with their "Left Behind" theology) I was entirely in sympathy, but in his section on the atonement I am not convinced by his arguments regarding the substitutionary theories of the atonement being the key ones simply because of Jesus' physical substitution for us on the cross. This seems to confuse a physical reality with the spiritual dynamics that the various theories of the atonement are meant to explore. I think he was very shallow in his exploration of more contemporary theories, indeed I found his casual dismissal of theories based on solidarity to be crass, especially since it is such understandings that frequently resonate with those going through difficult times. I was also intrigued by areas that he didn't get deeper into including creation, sexuality and eternal punishment, but perhaps he understands God's mind on those areas better than I do. However, his rigorous approach to a Biblical approach to the end times suggests that perhaps he was not writing this book for me or those like me, but as a defense against those who would claim to be evangelical, but actually hold a fundamentalist position that actually owes very little to the Bible.

John says

I've been reading through Christopher Wright's book, The GOD i Don't Understand." I have been led to

worship & tears again & again. In reading his chapter, "The Cross--How?" I came across this section that was water for my thirsty soul:

We may have no control over what other people think of us, but that need not destroy the proper sense of dignity and self-respect that comes from know the affirmation of God himself...the same person, alone with God and the memories of the past, can quite properly feel the most acute inner shame and disgrace. It is not, however, a destructive or crushing emotion. Rather it is the core fuel for genuine repentance and humility and for the joy and peace that flow from that source alone. When I remember my sins I know that God does not. From his side they are buried in the depths of the sea, covered by the atoning blood of Jesus Christ, never again to be raised to the surface and held against me. And it is only in the awareness of that liberating truth that I can(or even ought) to remember them. For this is not the memory that generates fresh accusation and guilt--that is the work of Satan the accuser. Satan's stinging jolts of memory need to be taken straight to the cross and to our ascended High Priest, for

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there
Who made an end of all my sin.

No, this is the memory that generates gratitude out of disgrace, celebration out of shame. It is the memory which marvels at the length and breadth and depth of God's rescuing love that has brought me from what I once was, or might easily have become, to where I am now, as a child of his grace....

...That is why I said that, of all the things that lead me to speak of the God I don't understand, the cross is top of the list.

Sink your teeth into these promises...

Hebrews 10:17, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."

Isaiah 43:25, "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

Hebrews 8:12, "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."

Psalm 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Micah 7:19, "You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea."

Do you believe that? How I am thankful for the amnesia of an omniscient God!

John Martindale says

Gee.... Goodreads should have a half star. 3 stars would seem to many and yet 2 stars seemed to few, I wish I could have given it two and half stars.

But yeah, The first part of the book deals a little with suffering. He believes we can't understand and likely never will, and coming from what seems a theistic evolutionist persuasion, there is even more mystery. Indeed the curse doesn't easily explain all natural evil, it only explains thorns.

Wright shows how the bible is filled with angry outburst, laments and complaining towards God, so God must be pretty cool with us expressing our hurt and confusion. So I suppose I need not burn my art and stop writing songs. :) One of the main points he makes is that God is sovereign and will fix everything in the end.

I do get the impression he is coming more from a Reformed theological perspective, yet he is nothing so fierce as John Piper.

The section on God commanding the slaughter of the Canaanites was my favorite part of the book. He primarily tried to show what the bible itself says about the event. Rather than concocting some philosophical explanation. His point was it was not genocide, not racially driven, not a holy war. It must be understood that it was judgment and God chose Israel to be his tool. The story starts with God sparing Rahab the Canaanite because of her faith. God repeatedly tells Israel it was not because they were special or righteous that he drove out the Canaanites, but that it was because of the Canaanites wickedness. We see later God using evil nations to be his tool of judgment on the Israelites.

Now this does not soften the ugly fact that God uses terrible means to bring about his end, as in the crucifixion of Christ. He rarely rains down fire and brimstone, typically he uses evil men to do wicked stuff, in order to discipline. It's a very unsettling mystery. How can the God who is good and is never the author of evil and who does not tempt anyone to sin, at the same time be behind every imaginable war and monstrosity, in order to bring about His ultimate good end? It seems to God that the end justifies the means. God seems to be the cosmic utilitarian, it's hard to get around it, God's ethics scare the poop out of me. It's one of the things I don't understand and I don't like about God.

After these first few chapters, the book just meanders into random areas that don't seem to have much at all with tough questions of faith, the rest of the book did not belong if you ask me. He writes about the death and resurrection of Christ, the final judgment, the new heaven and new earth, and he dishes all the end time garbage. That was one thing that humored me, from his perspective, we should want to be "Left behind"!!! Because it's the wicked that are swept away and Jesus comes to earth and the righteous welcome him here.

"The Canaanite" By John Martindale (Inspired by this book)

"So how would You want Israel to take the babies lives?
Perhaps bash their little heads against a rock?
Or quickly slice their throats with a knife?
Or crowd them in a building and burn them all alive?

Oh I wish you had just rained fire and brimstone down
You who alone have the right to strike one to the ground
Oh I could have stomach this, it would have even seemed nice
Compared to using your people to do your dirty work in the night

Sometimes God I do not like You
What kind of God are you anyways?

Is this not the poison sprinkled in the lake
Corrupting the whole making it unfit to drink?
Is this not the stain on the front of the garment
Though small in size, making going out in it unfit

But maybe I should only focus on the good
And sing happy songs like Christian should
But this is hard when I don't like you
What kind of God are you anyways?

Sometimes God I cannot like You
But Lord still I won't walk away
Oh God right now I do not like you
But still I cannot turn away"

benebean says

So far I'm enjoying his discussion. I'm not always sure I definitely agree with everything, but that doesn't bother me. Mostly I feel privileged and grateful that the author was kind enough to share some of his inner dialogue and thoughts on these difficult and hairy issues.

Every now and then I wish he would explain some of the logic behind arguments he doesn't agree with before dismissing them, so instead of just saying, some people think this, but I don't agree, it would be more like some people think this because of such and such reason, but I find this evidence/reasoning insufficient because of *insert reason why*. That way I wouldn't just have to take his word for it.

also, passages like, "But there is no evidence that our planet has ever been geologically different from the way it is now, or that animals were ever nonpredatory, or that tectonic plates in the earth's crust were somehow stationary before the human species emerged and sinned." make me really nervous... because at the very least there is Biblical and archeological/geological evidence that the earth was in a very different state at one point-- namely before the flood. It is clearly stated there was no rain before the flood but that the garden was watered by a mist that came up over the land. Also, when the flood came the Bible says :

"In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on the same day all the fountains of the great deep burst open, and the floodgates of the sky were opened. The rain fell upon the earth for forty days and forty nights." - Genesis 7: 11-12

which sounds to me like some very big changes. Additionally, the *natural environment* would appear to have changed since in the genealogies in Genesis, after the flood, everyone suddenly had shorter lives. Also, about the tectonic plates, I'm no geologist, but there is Biblical evidence to at least question whether they were in fact always broken, since the Bible says the earth was divided in the days of Peleg (Genesis 10).

anyhow, all that really makes it seems like I'm a lot more huffy about the whole thing than I really am. Like I said, I'm actually really enjoying the discussion. I'm just a little nervous about taking his word for things-- although to be fair, I'm listening to an audiobook, so these things might be explained in footnotes in the printed version.

I really like his interpretation of the Revelations passages (horsemen of the apocalypse and opening of the scroll). He isn't so much focused on eschatology, but uses the passage to explain the relationship between God and evil/suffering.

Johnny says

Honest yet hopeful.

Openly honest about what he doesn't understand about God and yet still full faith in the God he doesn't understand. Well written and personally helpful for me. Love his appreciation of all of scripture and his cross-cultural insight.

David says

Christopher Wright is now alongside NT Wright as a favorite, must-read Bible scholar! Wright is right (I know, that's cheesy).

In this book Wright discusses things about God he does not understand. These are not just intellectual difficulties. When he discusses the work of Christ on the cross he does not fully grasp the majesty and beauty of it (who can?).

Each chapter is readable, thorough and brilliant. I have read other books on these same topics and Wright comes at them from a slightly different angle. First he talks about evil and brings the reader to focus on the Biblical truth, what we can know, that evil will be defeated by God. The second part is on the question of how a loving God could ordain the extermination of the Canaanites in the Old Testament story. Third he discusses the cross, looking at the what, why and how. Finally, and my favorite part, he looks at the "end times", helping us move past so much of the garbage out there and get to what the Bible really says in all its wonder.

Highly recommended.
