

By What Authority?

- Where did I come from?
- Why am I here?
- Why is there evil, pain, and suffering?
- What is the solution to man's greatest ill?
- Where am I going?
- What is man's greatest good?
- How can I know anything for certain?

Have you ever lain awake at night and realized, as if for the first time, that you are a unique person? That you exist as you and not anyone else? Have you ever debated a coworker about the reason for some terrible crime (such as 9-11)? Have you ever wondered what to make of all those newspapers reporting people's near-death experiences, complete with bright lights and voices? Have you ever asked yourself exactly what you should want for your children? If so, then you have delved into **ultimate questions**.

Ultimate questions are overarching questions about life. The way you answer ultimate questions (such as those listed above) determines the way you think and feel about your experiences in life. Ultimate questions are easy to ask but tough to answer. They are difficult questions because they do not ask about personal preferences (such as "Do you like Coke or Pepsi?") or opinions (such as "Does my tie match this shirt?"). Ultimate questions are difficult because, by definition, they ask about what is **ultimately true**.

Something that is ultimately true is true all the time, regardless of how many people know it or don't know it, believe it or don't believe it. A claim about what is ultimately true is a grand claim indeed. Some people would even call such claims arrogant or wrongheaded.

However, it is impossible to live life without certain assumptions about ultimate reality. It is impossible to live life without answers—whether or not we say them out loud or even think them—to ultimate questions. Just as someone who strongly believes particular answers to ultimate questions will live according to those beliefs, someone who merely lives and acts is living *as though he has already answered the ultimate questions*. Some people have elaborate answers to ultimate questions; some people offer simple answers. Some people feel strongly about them; others couldn't care less. Some people have thought a lot about them; others have not. The question for you is, Will you have a good answer or a bad answer, and how will you know which is which?

Answering ultimate questions is difficult. Answering ultimate questions with confidence that your answer is, in fact, ultimately true is even harder. Answering these questions knowing that billions of other people will think you are wrong is downright unsettling. How do we start thinking about ultimate questions? We have to answer them sometime, and we have to start somewhere. Perhaps the first ultimate question we could ask ourselves is, *How can I find true answers to ultimate questions?*

If you were to stand on a city street and cry out, "*How can I find true answers to ultimate questions?*" (or if you were to enter your question into an Internet search engine) in today's global society, it is easy for

people of all stripes to get to you to help you answer your questions. Hindus, New Age advocates, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, psychologists, political analysts, scientists, philosophers, your barber—all sorts of people make claims about ultimate truth. Is there a reasonable way to sort through the truth claims? Perhaps we should start with reason ... but then we have to ask, How are we sure that our sense of reason is itself reasonable? Do we choose reason simply because it's reasonable? How do we explain the human mind itself?

Really. Think about it. Can you make even your own sense of reason your ultimate starting point? If reason is your ultimate starting point, you mean that human reason explains all things. If you make reason your starting point, by definition you cannot explain reason by anything else. (If you did, that other thing would be your ultimate starting point.) And do you *want* your own reason to be your starting point, seeing as you can be—and have been—mistaken about things? You will probably have to start somewhere outside of reason. Now, starting at a point *outside* your own reason does not mean that you have to *throw out* your reason. However, your ultimate starting point *needs to be able to explain your own sense of reason and all your experience as well.*

Face it. The human brain is too small to interpret ultimate reality on its own. Yes, reason does seem to work, and scientific investigation is productive, but both have too many problems to function as bedrock for resting our answers upon. We need a starting point that can be a sure authority to clearly, consistently, confidently, and correctly describe ultimate reality. It needs to answer life's ultimate questions. It needs to explain how we even *have the ability* to ask and answer life's ultimate questions.

The Bible claims to be such an authority. The Bible claims for itself the authority of the Creator God, who is the ultimate, personal source of reality. The Bible claims to explain human rationality, human creativity, human purpose, human value, human morality, human immorality, human salvation. The Bible tells us some things about ourselves that we may not like to hear, but even then, the Bible explains what it is about us (our sin) that makes us recoil at what the Bible says.

The authority of the Christian Bible in history has been disputed. Obviously, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and atheists (to name a few groups) reject the ultimate authority of the Christian Bible. Christians have done sound scholarship to refute charges against the Bible. It is not the purpose here to discuss that debate. Our question here is, *Where can we find an authority that adequately and accurately explains everything else?*

Even people who accept the Bible have differences. Roman Catholics and Protestants have some of the sharpest differences. If the Bible is truly the final authority, then the ultimate test of a church's truth rests on its degree of faithfulness to the whole of the Bible. Will any church be 100% accurate with its interpretations of the Bible? Probably not. But the Bible claims that it is sufficiently clear for even a child to understand the most important teachings (2 Tim. 3:15).

To find what the Bible says about ultimate reality takes time and study. Biblical teaching about ultimate questions is spread out across narrative books, books of poetry, prophetic writings, letters by Christian apostles, and gospel accounts of the life of Christ. We can be glad that there has been two thousand years of Christian study to summarize Bible teaching on these points. After my study of the Bible, I find that it is not only an adequate and accurate authority to answer our questions, but it is the *unique and necessary authority* for explaining human existence. This is not just theoretical knowledge: it has not just changed the way I think about ultimate questions; it has changed my nature and the way I live!

This tract can only begin to summarize what the Bible says about ultimate questions. You cannot afford to ignore these questions. You cannot afford to ignore the Bible's claims. You may be waiting for deity to give you a sign that you will accept, but by waiting for such a sign, you presume that God has not already spoken. If God has spoken, you are obligated to listen. By what authority will you assert that He has not spoken? By what authority will you judge anything? I challenge you to study first the summary of biblical teaching below, and next to pursue these questions by reading the Bible itself, and finally to seek out a church that faithfully teaches the Bible.

Where did I come from? An everlasting, self-sufficient God, who neither changes in His nature nor speaks falsely, created everything from nothing. Man was created uniquely in God's image—as much like God as a creature can be. God created all things originally good. He continues to sustain the world, its natural processes, and human culture, whether or not He is acknowledged. (Psalm 90:2; Malachi 3:6; James 1:17; Titus 1:2; Genesis 1–2; Colossians 1:16–17; Daniel 2:20–23)

Why am I here? You are here for the pleasure and glory of God, not ultimately for yourself. You are here to work under God in creation. Our most basic obligations can be summarized as loving God and loving others. (Revelation 4:11; Genesis 1:26–29; Matthew 22:36–40)

Why is there evil, pain, and suffering? By a willful act of disobedience, the first man Adam plunged the whole human race into sin (rebellion against God) with him. God is justly offended and may justly punish sinners. He has cursed the earth so that in addition to moral evil, there is natural evil (death, pain, and suffering) as well. (Genesis 3:1–19; Romans 5:12–21)

What is the solution to man's greatest ill? God maintains His justice in punishing sin, but in mercy Jesus Christ, the God-man, willingly bore God the Father's wrath upon sinners. Sinners who rely on Christ's dying in their place enjoy forgiveness from God and a right relationship with Him. (Romans 3:23–5:11; Hebrews 2:14–18; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:1)

Where am I going? God has made you with an eternal soul. Sin has made you mortal—your body will die. God justly sends all sinners to an eternal hell; however, those who rely on Christ's righteousness are seen as righteous by God (even though they still sin) and will live forever with God. (Hebrews 9:27; Romans 14:11; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Jeremiah 23:5–6; 1 Corinthians 1:30–31; Revelation 21:1–8; John 1:12–13)

What is man's greatest good? A relationship with God both now and forever gives meaning and joy to all existence. (Ephesians 1:1–14)

How can I know anything for certain? The Bible says trusting God as a starting point for knowledge enables us to see things as they are; Christ's death not only brings about our forgiveness, but also restores our knowledge of God and His ways. God has revealed Himself in nature and in His Word. (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 19; Colossians 2:2–3; 3:10; Romans 1; 2:14–15).