



**REALLY?**

# Untruths Uncovered

**M**any untrue things are said about God, Jesus, the Bible and the Church. Let's expose some false narratives as we walk toward Easter this year. We are not trying to win arguments, but to begin conversations with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15). Each week's sermon will provide a thoughtful question, so you can start a conversation with a skeptic or non-believer. Ultimately, Easter morning declares the greatest news. Everyone said Jesus was dead, and that death would hold Him forever. Really? Guess what—Jesus is alive again!

## REALLY? • Hebrews 5:11-6:3 • Tim McConnell • March 4, 2018

Driving in to work the other day I got behind someone in a Jeep with a tire cover on the back that read, "Not all who wander are lost." Was that yours? I admit, I had always taken that saying as an attack on Christianity. I thought it meant, "You people who commit to beliefs are too judgmental and narrow-minded. Wandering is fine. Lostness is fine. I'm a wanderer but don't call me lost. I wish you church people would just go away." Maybe that is what some people mean by it. I'm not sure. I assumed it was a quote from John Muir, or Audubon, or some other naturalist, and I thought "Yeah, right. How many backcountry hikers go out there with no compass, no map, no GPS, no plan, and just wander into the woods? None! So why can't we look at the spiritual life the same way? Not all who wander are lost. Phooey!" Then I looked it up. It's actually from a poem in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, a Christian allegory by a committed Christian author who wrote the poem to point out that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover and not all is as it appears on the face of it: "All that is gold does not glitter; Not all those who wander are lost." Aragorn, who looks like kind of a chump at this point in the story is actually going to be king. God has more planned than we see. So...I really shouldn't have cut that guy off. Sorry.

We are trying to learn how to enter conversations that matter, conversations about tough questions we hear others saying about the Christian faith. It isn't always easy! We get defensive. We assume the worst sometimes instead of assuming the best, and giving the other person the benefit of the doubt. We sometimes get aggravated at other people's spiritual posture before we even truly understand where they are. We need to learn to be more like Jesus with this stuff. 1 Peter 3:15 is our guide, "But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect." With Christ within you as Lord, always be ready to answer. Don't walk away from the holy conversations, but be ready, be prepared to give a reply to the questions, a reasonable defense, a thoughtful response, to explain the hope that is in you. And always with gentleness and respect.

So we have asked about God—isn't God something we made up? We asked about the Bible last week—why do you vest so much authority in one ancient book? Today we take up a pretty tough one. This is a big idea to wrestle with. Faith kills thinking and crushes creativity. To commit to faith is to check your brains at the door. Here's where we are going to get: Every painting needs a canvas and frame; every thought needs language and grammar; deep commitments of belief don't end thinking, they begin thinking and spawn creativity. You might think following Jesus narrows your mind, but I'm telling you a step toward Jesus blows your horizons open.

Let's try to understand the argument. Faith kills thinking. Once you submit to some set of predetermined religious beliefs, you stop thinking, your creativity dies and you become a zombie repeating other people's mantras. Christian doctrine is a straightjacket for your brain. I think a lot of people steer clear of Christianity because they think if they enter the church they have to check their brains at the door. Not just the left brain, the intellectual reasoning side, but the right brain creative side too! You check your whole brain at the door! Then you look down at your claim ticket and can't remember what it belongs to. You know, it's understandable. From the time we are little kindergartners it seems our primary task is self-definition, figuring out who we are. What do you like, Timmy? What do you think? What do you want to believe? It becomes our primary job. It's easy to see how a non-believer could look at you as a follower of Jesus and think that you have abdicated your most sacred duty. You have given up your responsibility of defining yourself and handed the keys to another. In their mind, it's almost criminal. But faith isn't supposed to be the end of thought. Faith drives us to seek understanding. You can test this now, or talk about it in your Life Groups, but every system of thought begins with faith commitments. Faith always underlies thinking in a serious way. You have to believe first in order to pursue an argument. The theorem is presented, then the experiments are constructed to test it.

Jesus doesn't want us to stop thinking. Jesus doesn't intend to narrow your mind. A step toward Jesus will blow your horizons open. In our study

of Hebrews we come to a moment where there is frustration. The readers of that sermon (it's kind of a sermon sent from afar) are taking it on the chin here because they are not thinking, they are not growing intellectually, they have stopped learning. I find verse 11 very convicting: "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand." (Hebrews 5:11) You're not even trying anymore. In that verse, the "this" being discussed is Jesus—the role that Jesus plays as our High Priest, connecting us to God and God to us through his once-for-all sacrifice on the cross, and opening the door for us to enter the eternal "rest," the eternal life with God. I want to hear more! But, Hebrews says, that is going to be too difficult. Because you have stopped trying to understand. You're not supposed to stop thinking. You're not supposed to stop learning. No one ever said to check in your brains. Now I can't teach you more, says Hebrews, because you refuse to grow adept at the basics. You were never supposed to stop thinking once you started believing.

Who are these people who stopped trying to understand? It would help to say a word about context here, but that's hard to do. We can't quite place this writing in context. Early tradition held that Hebrews was a sermon written by Paul in Hebrew and later translated into Greek by someone else, which accounts for some of the weirdness in the language. But Paul is not in the text by name. It has no introduction like Paul's letters and the church really isn't sure in the end who wrote it. But this passage sounds a lot like Paul to me. What is clear is that the people receiving this letter are a group of new Jewish believers in Jesus, a group that grew up Jewish in some city far from Jerusalem but who now believe in Jesus and are learning to follow Jesus and leave behind their old ways. Just like Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:2, these folks are stuck on milk. Spiritually, they can't move past the basics because they still want to be spoon-fed the baby food.

Then we get an outline of the basics, the elementary school stuff of Christian thought. Everything I need to know I learned in kindergarten, right? But it's worth asking, do we have the basics down? "Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation

of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment." (Hebrews 6:1-2). Repentance—turning away from wrong patterns and toward healthy patterns; turning around. For this bunch, turning away from dead works, from empty religious rituals. We have to learn how to stop trying to earn our way into God's grace by our actions and receive God's grace by Christ's actions. Faith—we are saved by grace through faith. We put our hope and trust in Jesus Christ. Baptism—that's the "cleansing rites." We enter this new life through the waters of baptism. Laying on of Hands—this is how believers pray for one another for healing, and it is how we pray to commit someone to the work they have been given by God. Do we know how to care for one another's needs and bless one another into our vocations? Resurrection—without the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, our faith is in vain. Accept that. If someone finds the bones of Jesus, it's over! Do we live as those who follow Christ, the conqueror of death? Lastly, Eternal Judgment—many Christians prefer a teaching that excludes this, but it is elementary to Christian faith. Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead. We don't judge; Christ will come to judge. But all judgments will be conferred on that day. These are the basics. From here we don't stop thinking. We start thinking.

Now, your conversation partner feels like if you accept these things you have given up your responsibility. But I say, you have just begun. A step toward Jesus in faith won't leave your mind behind, it will blow open your horizons and you will start thinking more than you ever have! I've been digging into some stuff on Jonathan Edwards this week. You might not think much of Jonathan Edwards because you were made to read "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in high school, but Edwards was a genius—he was a thick reader of Locke and the Enlightenment thinkers as well as Calvin and Augustine. If I understood what I was reading, Edwards said we can get stuck in a trinity of the self: me, myself and I. I am myself, I know myself, I love myself. But this trinity is very unsatisfying. What I am is imperfect, what I know of myself is incomplete, and I have a hard time loving myself because I find unlovable qualities within me. But when the Holy Spirit enters that

system, it breaks open. Now I see something truly worth knowing, truly worth loving, truly worth being—something perfect and holy and beautiful. I see God! “What’s the point?” The skeptic says, “I don’t want to follow Jesus because I don’t want my mind to grow small.” I say, “I’m worried that you will never escape the tiny workshop of yourself until you allow God to open the window and blow in His Spirit.”

Faith in Christ doesn’t kill thinking; it begins an endless adventure of intellect and creativity. When Jesus found Nathanael he was sitting under a fig tree, engaged in the small contemplation of his circumscribed life, He said, “Get up, buddy. Let’s go.” Nathanael looked up and saw Jesus, who then said to him, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that...Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:50-51). There’s much more to see when you follow Jesus. I sit with young couples preparing for marriage and tell them, your love has brought you face to face, but unless you turn and walk shoulder to shoulder toward Jesus, this is over. You can’t just stand there staring at each other and expect things to last! A step toward Jesus blows open your horizons. Faith doesn’t kill thinking. Christian doctrine is not a straight-jacket. If you checked your brains at the door, please pick them up. Do we commit to core beliefs? You bet. But these doctrines only serve to launch our minds and creative juices, like the canvas for the artist.

So then, imagine a community committed to curiosity. What would it look like if every one of us got up like Nathanael from under the fig tree and walked toward Jesus? What if we got solid on the elementary stuff and dug into the thicker things? Maybe our friends who are skeptical look at us and can tell we are not going deeper, we are not growing intellectually, we are not expanding in creativity—maybe they can tell we have given up on trying to understand. Faith doesn’t kill thinking, but laziness does. A commitment to curiosity. A devotion to digging in. A passionate pursuit of the love and knowledge of God. That might just turn the tide and reveal the kind of adventure of the mind Jesus always intended.

## STUDY GUIDE

### REALLY? • Hebrews 4:6-13

#### **UP:** Connect With God Through Spending Time in God’s Word

- What do you notice about our passage? What questions do you have after reading the passage?
- What does it mean to harden your heart? How does a hardened heart keep us from hearing God? Has there been a time or an issue in which you feel that you hardened your heart toward God?
- Re-read verse 12. What does it mean that the Word of God is alive and active? Think of a time when Scripture cut through and spoke deeply to you or into a core issue in your life.
- What does it mean that God’s word is authoritative and trustworthy? (See also: Proverbs 30:5 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17)

#### Going Deeper:

What is a word, phrase, or thought from today’s passage that God seems to be lifting up as significant for you? How does it speak to a current situation in your life? How is God inviting you to respond?

#### **OUT:** Connect With the World Around Us by Joining God in God’s Mission

What are some answers you have heard to this question: how do you think the Bible is different from other wise books?

Try it out: ask someone this question this week. What do you notice when you raise that question? What do you learn from their response?

#### **IN:** Connect With the Family of God

Spend some time praying for our church family. Pray that God would lead us into spiritual conversations with people around us. Pray that we would be led by the Holy Spirit.