

More of Your Questions

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Introduction.

- A. One of the most important concepts in Scripture is stated in Romans 14:12, which tells us that each one of us will give an account of himself to God. We are individually responsible for whether we have obeyed the law of God or not, and that means that we are individually responsible for knowing that law in the first place. It is critically important, friends, that each one of us study and understand God's will for ourselves.
- B. One of the paths to understanding that we have here is that question box mounted on the wall by the door. It's something that anyone can use to pose a question that I will sooner or later preach on. Some questions merit an entire sermon; others get grouped into a "Your Questions" sermon, like the one I'm about to preach. We haven't had one of those recently because of the series on "I am" statements in the book of John that we've just finished, but I have not forgotten the questions, and now the time has come to address them.
- C. I have to say, friends, that these are challenging sermons to prepare. The brethren here are good enough Bible students that I just don't get questions of the "What must I do to be saved?" variety. Many of these questions address controversial topics; just as many of them are answered by the Bible either indirectly or not at all. Nonetheless, I believe it's important that I give the best answer I can. Let's look at five of these answers that I came up with in response to more of your questions.

I. Wise Men, the Devil, and God Repenting.

- A. The first question that we have to address this evening is about the wise men. It asks, "**How old was Jesus when the wise men from the east came to worship Him, and can we guess where they were from, and why they were called wise, and did the gifts they brought have any special meaning?**" In order to answer this series of questions, we need to begin by turning to the relevant Scripture. In order, we're going to be looking at Matthew 2:1-2, 10-11, 7, 16. Interestingly enough, it's this last Scripture that we have up on the slide that gives us the answer to the first question. Denominational tradition places the time of the arrival of the wise men on January 5th, as though Jesus was born, then a week and a half later, the wise men show up to worship Him. It's a nice story, but it's probably not true. Look at the way Herod reacts. The passage tells us that he determined the EXACT time of the star's appearance, and hence of the birth of Jesus, and then, when the wise men don't return, he kills all the male children two years of age and younger. That makes it sound like he's expecting Jesus to be about a year old. Probably what happened, then, is that Joseph and Mary came to Bethlehem for the census, stayed a year, went to Egypt, and then went back to Nazareth.
- B. The second and third parts of this question have a connected answer. The word translated "wise men" in our Bibles is actually the same word that is translated "sorcerer" in the story of Simon the Sorcerer. That's why the wise men are also called "magi." However, this is misleading, because we have no evidence that these men practiced magic, and in Koine Greek, this same word *magos* also refers to the priests of a religion in Persia called Zoroastrianism. These priests were very learned, and devoted much of their attention to tracking the movements of the stars, which is both why they are called "wise" and why they showed up in the first place. Obviously also, if these are Persian priests, they came from Persia. As for the fourth part, there does not appear to be any special significance attached to gold, frankincense, and myrrh other than that they were all valuable commodities one might bring as a gift for a king.
- C. That brings us to the second question on our list, which is much shorter, and asks simply, "**Is the devil a fallen angel?**" To this question, the best answer I can give is "I don't know." It is commonly said that the devil is a fallen angel, and this opinion is largely based on portions of Isaiah 14, especially Isaiah 14:12-13. This sounds fairly convincing at first, but there are several points that make it much less so. In the first place, the word "Lucifer" here is a big-time translator's gloss. All the Hebrew literally says there is "shining star," which is much more ambiguous, but the translators had an opinion about what it meant and ran with it.
- D. Second, in context, Isaiah appears to be talking about something very different from the devil. From about Isaiah 13 to Isaiah 24, God describes a coming "day of the Lord," a time in which the nations around Israel will be punished for their wickedness, and Isaiah 14 fits right into this overall scheme. Consider, for example, the clues that we are given about the subject of this prophecy in Isaiah 14:4, 17. Isaiah is not told to take up a taunt against the devil, but against the king of Babylon, and the "star of the morning" language of 12-13 is part of this taunt. Note also in this taunt that the subject is described not as a spiritual being, but as a man. It would be great if Isaiah 14 gave us a nice pat answer about the origin of Satan, but that's not actually the case. Nor are there other passages in the Bible that supply us with a clear answer, but that's really OK. We don't need to know where Satan comes from to get to heaven. As long as we're convinced that the devil is real, that he hates us, and that we need to protect ourselves from his temptations, we know all we need to.

- E. Now that we've dealt with the devil's origin, we can move on to the next question, which inquires, **"Did God have to repent, and in what verse?"** To understand what's going on here, we have to understand that words in the English language don't necessarily have the same meaning today as they did four hundred years ago. Just to give you an example, four hundred years ago, the word "state" meant the same thing as "nation." Today, though, when we talk about states, we're generally referring to one of the smaller units within the single nation of the United States of America. A similar shift in meaning happened to the word "repent." Today, we use "repent" exclusively to describe the process of turning away from sin, but that's not a meaning the word has always had. For instance, look at the way "repent" is used in the 1611 King James Bible in Genesis 6:6. Now, if we apply our definition for "repent" to this verse, it looks like God thinks He sinned, but that's not at all what the text means. We see what it actually does mean when we look at this verse in the New King James Version, a translation that's less than 100 years old. The point is not that God somehow got mixed up in sin, but that the evil that men did caused Him to regret having made them in the first place.
- F. As for the issue of whether God has to repent in the way we mean "repent" today, the answer is "No." We see this fairly clearly in James 1:13. This passage tells us that God cannot be tempted by evil. Nothing can even make God want to sin, so God never sins, and God never has to repent.

II. Heaven and Musical Instruments.

- A. The third question on our list for this evening asks **"What will heaven be like? Will we have a memory of this life? Will we know others without being introduced?"** This is certainly an important question to all of us who have friends and loved ones who are faithful to God, especially loved ones who have passed over before us. Will heaven be a reunion with them, or will we fail to even recognize them?
- B. The answer to all these questions is actually tied up in the answer to the first question. There are many possible Biblical answers to the question of what heaven will be like. Some of them, like the golden street and gates of pearl described in Revelation, are obviously not meant to be taken literally. A description of heaven that we can hang our hats on, though, is found in 1 Thessalonians 4:17. To be a Christian, friends, is to be devoted to Jesus, to love and admire Him so much that we pattern our lives after His and devote all of our efforts to pleasing Him. And yet, for all this, none of us have actually seen our Lord. Our reward, then, is the opportunity not just to see Him, but to dwell eternally with Him. Heaven is being with Jesus.
- C. Because this is true, we can safely answer the second and third questions by saying that we WILL have a memory of this life. When I was first born, I had absolutely no idea who Jesus was, and probably would not have cared at all if He had appeared in the delivery room. However, as I grew older, learned about Jesus, and became His disciple, Jesus became to me the most important person ever to live. The significance of Jesus to me, the thing that makes Him my reward, is my experience of serving Him as preserved in my memories. I have to remember Jesus; otherwise, heaven loses its full importance. If I remember Jesus, then I will also have the capacity to remember everyone else in heaven, and won't need to be introduced.
- D. Our final question for the evening is a little more ferocious than the others. It asks, **"Can we sing hymns and spiritual songs with instruments of music when we are NOT in worship services and still be pleasing to God?"** Unlike all the other questions we've looked at tonight, this one has a very real application to our lives, but it's still as difficult to answer as the others. Before I give you my take on this subject, I want to recall to your minds a sermon that I preached about six months ago on Romans 14 and matters of conscience. The point of Romans 14, and indeed the point of that sermon, is that we need to be convinced of our own position on difficult issues, but that we should neither judge nor despise those other Christians who honestly reach a different conclusion than we do. The issue of instruments in private worship is a classic matter of conscience. I know plenty of Christians out there who have honestly and prayerfully studied the issue, yet have reached a different conclusion than I have. I do not agree with them, but I must accept that they are accountable to God, not to me, and acknowledge the possibility that I may be the mistaken one.
- E. Having said that, I believe that the passage that is most relevant to this discussion is James 5:13. This passage is clearly speaking to Christians in an individual, non-assembly context, and it is just as clearly a command to sing. Just as the command to sing in the assembly in Colossians 3:16 excludes the use of the instrument, so too this command to sing when not in the assembly must exclude the use of the instrument.
- F. There are a lot of paths this interpretation can take us down, and I think it's important to explore one of the most obvious: just what "worship" is. Scripturally speaking, song worship is something that occurs both internally and externally. We both sing and make melody in the heart, and if either of these elements is absent, we are not worshiping in song. There is a difference between mere singing and worship, and this difference becomes important when we consider the massive amount of choral music written to spiritually themed texts. I see no problem, for example, with a Christian belonging to a school or community choir and singing such a text with instrumental accompaniment, provided he does not use the text to worship. Of course, this too is a matter of conscience; your mileage may vary. Furthermore, this only begins to hint at the complexity of the issue, and each one of us needs to sincerely and uprightly consider where we stand on it.

Conclusion. In this, as in all else, we must consider the account of our lives we will give to God.