

Dear God, why don't you make yourself clearer?

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[0 : 00] Christmas is the Answer especially with interested non-Christians in mind, where we try to answer some of the big questions that people often have for God.

And if that's you today, welcome. We're very glad you're here and we hope that you'll find this morning of benefit. And last week, we kick off this series by asking, Dear God, what's the point? And if you were not here last week, the basic thing that I suggested was that if you really believe that this world has intrinsic meaning, if you cannot accept that life is meaningless, then it's only logical that God must be in the picture.

Otherwise, any attempts at finding meaning for your life would fall flat. And I went on to suggest, probably too briefly, that not only must God be part of the picture, knowing Him is actually the point of our lives.

Again, if you want to know more, you can listen to the entire talk again on our website. Someone was asking me last week about how to access those talks.

[1 : 37] Well, just look again in the bulletin and all the instructions are there for you to know how to download those talks. Or else just like our Facebook page, which is also on the bulletin.

But here's another question that people often have. Most of us in Malaysia probably accept that God exists.

But if so, where is He? Dear God, why don't you make yourself clearer? Surely if you're interested in us, you will become much more obvious about it.

Anthony Flew is one of the most famous philosophers of the 20th century. And in 1968, he tells what has become a well-known parable in his field.

Suppose there's a jungle, he says, and the two explorers are walking through that jungle. And they stumble upon the clearing, where they see many flowers growing and even many weeds.

[2 : 37] And so the first guy, let's call him the believer, says, it's a garden. So there must be a gardener. But the second guy, let's call him the skeptic, says, no, there isn't.

And so they pitch their tents, and they set up a watch, and they wait one entire day, but no gardener ever comes. And so the skeptic says, see, no gardener.

But the believer says, no, no, no, there must be, here's a garden. The gardener, I think, must be invisible. And so they set up an electric barbed wire, and they patrol it with dogs, in the hope that they can catch an invisible gardener that way.

But nope, it doesn't work. No one walks into the fence, no dog picks up on any scent. And so the skeptic says again, no gardener.

But the believer says, no, no, no, no, it's not just that the gardener is invisible. He's intangible. That means you can't really touch him. And he moves in mysterious ways.

[3 : 54] And the skeptic says, oh, whatever. Your gardener might very well exist. But if he's so shy, what's the difference between your gardener and an imaginary gardener?

And I hope that brings home to us what the problem is if God has not made himself clear. You see, you could very well tell me that God exists.

He's just invisible. He's intangible. You can't touch him. He moves in mysterious ways. But if he doesn't make himself clear at all, then how can I really know?

How can I know what he's like? Or in a multicultural setting like Malaysia, we might ask that same question in a different way. How do I know which God is actually the gardener?

How do I know which God is actually the gardener? Now, that's actually a very reasonable question. The gardener could be the God of the Christians.

[5 : 12] But then again, it could also be the God of Islam, the one Prophet Muhammad talks about. Or maybe the God I should honour is actually Topecong. Or maybe all three are the gardeners.

Or the sceptic is right. There really is no gardener after all. Now, you guys can keep insisting that your God is the gardener. But how can I know?

Can I actually know? And hey, if it turns out that the gardener is the God of the Bible after all, perhaps we could employ the Bertrand Russell defence.

What's that? Well, Russell was another famous philosopher. He's perhaps even more well-known as an atheist. He once wrote a book called *Why I Am Not a Christian*, which used to sit on my father's bookshelves.

And someone once asked Russell what he would say if he died and discovered that the God of the Bible existed after all. Russell answered, Now, if it is true that God has not made himself clear at all, then what are the options left open to us?

[6 : 39] Well, broadly speaking, you're left with two options. Option one is to say, let's forget God. He's not coming anyway if he exists.

Let's just live our life based on real-world facts. And that's the option Anthony Flew takes. He thinks that the Christian is just like the believer in his story, simply fantasising about a gardener that might or might not exist.

Now, the Christian might be right, but we can't really know. And anyway, it doesn't make a difference because the hypothetical gardener never shows up.

So, it's best to live based on what you can see, not on what you can't see. And so, if you've ever heard anybody say, ah, religion is a private thing.

You can believe what you like, but don't impose it on the rest of us. Then he's likely decided to take option one. Believe in your gardener, but don't let it get in the way of the real world.

[7 : 50] And so, that's option one. What about option two? Well, option two says, let's embrace all the religions. Since we don't know for sure which religion shows us the gardener, why not embrace them?

Oh, that's a good insurance policy, isn't it? Just believe what makes you happy. In the end, all religions are basically the same, are they not? And that's an attractive option to take in a multicultural society like ours.

Now, here's a comment made by our chief minister while officiating at a recent function. All religions, he says, teach their followers to live in peace, respect one another, and do good deeds.

And he's simply reflecting a view that many people have, isn't he? In this kind of thinking, sure, all religions are superficially different, but in the end, they're the same in substance, are they not?

So, our Muslim friends might meet in a mosque, our Buddhist friends in a temple, we Christians meet in a church, and yes, we all celebrate different festivals, Hari Raya, Wesadeh, Christmas, but at their core, they are really the same.

[9 : 17] And you can absolutely understand why many people find option two attractive. If I can affirm my Muslim friend in his beliefs, and he can affirm his Hindu friend in her beliefs, and then we can all go out together and have fun without ever fighting, well, that has to be a good thing, is it not?

We want harmony, we want tolerance, we want open-mindedness. And this sounds like that's the best way to achieve it. Just say that we're more or less all believing the same thing, and it doesn't really matter too much, as long as we all get along just going to do good stuff, and not killing each other.

So those are the two options. But what if there's a third option? And what if the third option takes a very different path to the first two options?

What if the third option says, let's rethink our question? What if God did actually make himself clear?

What changes? And why do we think he's not clear if he has been? And let me show you today that the Bible says it's actually the third option that's the right path to get onto.

[10 : 48] And so let me try to give you the Bible's answer today under three points. The first point is really the main point, and the two other points kind of grow out of the first point.

So here's point one. The Bible claims that through Jesus, God has made himself clear. Through Jesus, God has made himself clear.

In other words, to the question, dear God, why don't you make yourself clearer? The Bible answers, well, he has. That's precisely the claim that lies at the heart of the Bible passage that we just heard our brother Leonard read out this morning.

Look down to the end, to John 1 verse 18. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in the closest relationship with the Father, that's Jesus, has made him known.

And that's quite an astonishing claim. You see, what if, in that parable about the garden earlier, the gardener himself did show up?

[12:11] Let's say that the believer and the skeptic were arguing about what the gardener is like. Perhaps the believer suggests that the gardener is actually an elderly man with a hunchback who speaks with a stutter and he likes the wrong dayak.

Meanwhile, the skeptic says that, no, no, no, no, the gardener is really a teenage girl who is unusually strong. She has green fingers who can switch between Hokkien and Bahasa Indonesia effortlessly and she likes bunga kantan.

But then, the gardener himself shows up and then he turns out to be a young man, six foot tall, he has a slight limb, but otherwise, he's pretty strong and healthy.

He can speak fluent, Visaya and Berawan and who turns out to like durians. Well, the debate is over. It's clear who the gardener is and what he's like.

We've seen him. And we can say what he's not. He's not an elderly man. He's not a teenage girl. Instead, he is this six foot tall young man.

[13:28] And that's what the Bible is claiming. We can put an end to all arguments about who God is and what God is like, the Bible says.

How? Just look at Jesus. He gives you a picture-perfect glimpse of God. You see, this sentence that I just read to you, which was also on the screen, it comes from a book in the Bible called The Gospel of John.

It's written, no prizes for guessing, by a man called John. And it's quite simply an incredible book. On the face of it, it's quite ordinary.

It's a biography of sorts telling us about someone Jesus met, someone he knew very well, someone he went fishing with. But the thing is, the person he's telling us about is simply extraordinary.

His name is Jesus. And John tells us straight up that he's come to realize and be convinced that in meeting Jesus, he's actually met God himself, the creator of this universe, the one who will one day judge this earth.

[14:55] I've met him, John says. I saw him in the flesh. I've heard him with my very own ears. I've even touched him.

I've met God. And now John is telling us about this person. Now we know that he's not making Jesus up.

Rather, John says that they are eyewitnesses. For example, in verses 7 and 8, he says that there's another guy also called John, John the Baptist, who is one such eyewitness to what Jesus has done.

And John is certainly not the only witness. This man, Jesus, is mentioned in passing in many other historical sources of that time, none of them Christian.

I'll just give you two examples. The Greek historian, Talos, somewhere along around AD 55, in the third volume of his histories, mentions that an eclipse of thought had happened while this particular guy, Jesus, was being crucified.

[16:09] So he assumes the existence of this man. Another writer, Mara ben Serapion, sometime just after AD 70, refers to this man called Jesus and says that he's a great king and teacher.

And then he compares Jesus to other great Greek men like Socrates and Pythagoras. And so clearly, John is talking about an actual person, since other non-Christian historians refer to this person called Jesus as well.

There is no good reason to think that John is writing myths. And if you want to do more research on the nature and reliability of John's writings, you can.

And I've put down at least one book on your outline if you're interested in that sort of thing, The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel, and there's plenty of other books in our church library as well. But let me suggest to you that the best thing to actually be doing is to read John's gospel for yourself. and see for yourself that it doesn't read like an Iban legend or a Chinese myth. He's writing history with the intention of helping you see that Jesus is God introducing himself.

[17:30] And if you were to keep reading on John's biography of Jesus, you soon realize that Jesus is doing all sorts of amazing things.

He's at the wedding and turning water into wine. He's out teaching a great crowd and then he feeds 5,000 men when there appears to be only enough food for 10 people at best.

He goes into the tomb of a dead man. And then just by speaking, he tells this dead man, get up. And this man does.

He's doing stuff that no one else is doing. And the reason he can do this stuff, Jesus says, is because he is the great I am, which is a Jewish way of saying that he's God.

Look at him. And he is looking at God. And I want to suggest to you that if it is indeed true that God has made himself clear in Jesus, that has certain far-reaching implications.

[18 : 48] Firstly, it means that we can no longer say, ah, let's embrace all the religions, just pick the one that makes you happier as they're all the same anyway, aren't they? Yes, at first glance, that sounds like great humility.

And that might be a reasonable position to take if God has never made himself clear. But if God has made himself clear, then to take this option is no longer a sign of humility, it's just lazy.

Why? Let me explain. None of you in this hall have ever met my friend Yui Jiro. But let's say that you've heard a rumour of who he is.

Let's say that you've heard that he's Singaporean, he's single, he's an artist, he really likes country music. But now, I actually bring my friend Yui Jiro in here to meet you, and you guys talk to one another, and it turns out that he's Japanese, he's married to a lovely girl called Mana, they have two children, he's actually a physics researcher, and he doesn't like country music.

And tomorrow, someone comes up to you and asks you, by the way, have you met Brian's friend Yui Jiro? And you say, yes, yes, yes, yes, we've met. He's Japanese, he's married, he's into physics, etc.

[20 : 17] But that person says to you, oh, but I heard the rumor that he's single and he's Singaporean. And you say, no, no, no, no, I'm sure he's Japanese, I mean, I've met him.

And the person says, oh, you know what, actually, we cannot be sure, right? So let's just say that both of us are right, you know, whatever makes you happy, right, and whatever makes me happy.

Now, that would be nonsense, isn't it? Of course you are sure. you've met Yui Chiro, you know he's not Singaporean, and you will very reasonably insist that you're right.

And when you do, you're not being arrogant. to be sure about a person that you've actually met and know is reasonable.

And actually, that person who came up to you, well, he can go and find out, can't he, with a bit of work? He could just ring me up and say, hey, Brian, you've known Yui Chiro for a long time, and you know him quite well.

[21 : 21] Actually, is he Japanese or is he Singaporean? He can be sure by going to find out. But if he simply insists on his own position, oh, we can't be sure everybody is right, without ever taking the time to find out, he's simply being lazy.

And so, if it is true that God has really made himself known in Jesus, that means we can go and find out who God really is. We just need to figure out who Jesus is.

And doing that means we eventually have to rule out options. Just like Yui Chiro can't be single and married at the same time, so Jesus can't be God and not God at the same time.

And if Christianity says that Jesus is God, and Islam insists that he isn't, and in fact it's blasphemy to think that he is, well, they both can't be right, can they?

It's a substantial difference. You see, people often think that the world's major religions are superficially different and substantially the same, that's what I said earlier.

[22 : 40] So they might say, for example, oh, all religions believe in prayer. But actually, it's the opposite. The world's major religions are superficially the same, maybe they all believe in prayer, but they are substantially different.

Let's take the simple matter of how many gods there are. Hinduism says there are many, many, many gods. Islam and Christianity both insist that there is only one god, and Buddhism, strictly speaking, says there's none.

Now, you don't need to have gotten an A in mathematics to know that that's clearly a substantial difference.

And so you need to work out which one's the right one. And that means a lot hinges on the identity of Jesus.

If you believe he's God, then the matter is settled. You know who the gardener is. And if you don't, then you can go ahead and forget Christianity altogether.

[23 : 52] Jesus is either of supreme importance or he's of no importance. The one thing he isn't is moderately important. For if Jesus really is God making himself clear to us, well, here's the other implication.

We must live our lives based on who he is and what he says. If Christianity is true, then God has become a real world fact, if I may put it that way.

He has entered the real world. And so if you want to live your lives based on real world facts, then you need to base your life on him. And that's the other big implication.

you can submit to Jesus or you can reject him. But the one thing you cannot do is to ignore him. Because ignoring him is already a form of rejection.

You can't really be neutral in relation to Jesus. But if God has made himself clear, then why is it that he's not obvious to us?

[25 : 05] why is it not obvious to us that Jesus is God in the flesh? And we come to point two of what the Bible says today. God has made himself clear, but we are willfully blind.

God has made himself clear, but we are willfully blind. Look at John 1, verse 9 to 11. It should also be on the screen. The true light that gives the light to everyone was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

I wonder if you've ever tried talking to conspiracy theorists. For instance, there's a whole group of people out there who strongly believe that man never landed on the moon.

They say the whole thing's a hoax. So, for example, they say that there are no sign of any stars in the photos of the moon landing, proving that they are fake.

[26 : 15] Never mind that the landings happen during the lunar daytime, and any star would be outshorn by the sun's brightness, or the sunlight reflected from the moon's surface.

Or, they suggest that these photos have implausibly high quality. They say those kind of photos could never be taken out there in space, even though it's shown to them what sort of high-tech cameras are being used and how they work.

It doesn't matter what evidence you show them, there's always another explanation. It's the same with people who say that the Earth is flat.

They exist too, you know? And so, you might say, wow, why don't you look at these photos from space? See, they show that the Earth is round. And they might say, no, no, no, no, those photos are fake, don't be fooled.

And so on. You see, regardless of the evidence, they simply don't want to be persuaded. And interestingly, that is how the Bible presents human beings.

[27 : 24] He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. You see, our question this morning, dear God, why don't you make yourself clearer assumes that he hasn't and therefore we're off the hook.

It's God's fault. He should have provided more evidence. If he did, we would all believe. That's the Bertrand Russell defense, remember? Not enough evidence, God.

But what's really interesting is that the eyewitness testimony of John tells us that this simply isn't the case. The people who lived during Jesus' time had all the evidence they needed.

They saw Jesus doing many amazing miracles like the ones I've mentioned already. He turned water into wine, he fed the 5,000, he even raised the dead.

And no one ever disputed that. when the enemies of Jesus plotted against him, one of the things they didn't try to do was to discredit his miracles.

[28 : 36] You would have thought that that would be the first thing you would try to do if you wanted to discredit Jesus. But the evidence was simply overwhelming. Think about it.

When Jesus' friend, Lazarus, died, everyone would have known. After all, he lived in a village where everyone knew everything.

That's kampong life for you. And you would have likely attended his funeral. But John says, Jesus raised him to life.

And so after his funeral, suddenly you see Lazarus walking all around the village. He's up and about. And that's not the kind of evidence that you can easily falsify.

I mean, if you wanted to show Lazarus is still dead, that's pretty easy, isn't it? You should just go to his tomb. But in the face of such evidence, there were many who still didn't believe.

[29 : 39] Why not? Because the Bible says we have chosen to be willfully blind. We refuse to see. Because if Jesus is God, that means I'm no longer in charge of my own life.

And maybe we don't want that. I remember back in university when I was helping out in a group for interested non-Christians once. And there was this graduate student, a smart guy, who had been with us for quite a number of months, looking at the Bible, trying to work out who Jesus is. And over those few months, he asked question after question, which the leader patiently answered. But he was still resisting. And so at one point, he asked, what if Jesus isn't God? But he's just an alien sent by some alien race from outer space to communicate with the human race? things? Now, this was a serious question.

And the person asking it was not a stupid person. This was a post-graduate student enrolled at one of the leading universities in the world.

[31 : 02] And I remember being quite astonished that he would say something like that. And then I realised that he was searching for some alternative explanation, any explanation that would explain away Jesus.

And he was willing to even believe that Jesus might be an alien rather than God. Because if Jesus is God, well, that would mean he would have to change his life.

And my leader said, well, you can believe that if you want, that's your right. But you've read the eyewitness testimony, you've seen the evidence, does that make the best sense?

And so this is the question before us. Faced with the evidence, how would we respond? Now, it might be that you're here as a non-Christian, and actually you haven't really had the chance to read the story of Jesus and look at the evidence for yourself.

Now, that's alright. by all means, investigate. Read the Gospel of John. Ask, why is it that Christians believe that Jesus rose from the dead?

[32 : 17] Ask your Christian friend why they believe that. But here's the challenge for you. If the evidence is there that Jesus is God, would you be willing to give your life over to him?

Or would you resist consistently seeking for some alternative explanation? Maybe you're afraid that if you give your life over to Jesus, what will happen is that your life is going to look significantly worse.

Oh no, if I become a Christian, I can't do this, or I can't do that anymore, you might reason. But this brings me to my third and final point for today. Through Jesus, God has made clear that he can become our father.

Through Jesus, God has made clear that he can be our father. Just look at verse 12, also on the screen. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

You see, this is the claim of Christianity. In Jesus, God didn't just come into the world and say, ta-da, you didn't know what the gardener was like before.

[33 : 46] Now you do, I just came here to show my face. No. He had a bigger mission than that. He came to die on the cross.

He revealed himself to do good to you. You see, this is the claim of Christianity. John puts it this way. He says, God is light and we are dark.

God is light and we are dark. And light and darkness cannot walk together. When you enter a dark room, there's no light. But when you switch on the light, the light chases the darkness away, as it were.

Light and darkness cannot coexist. And the Bible says that God is pure light. He is pure goodness. But we are tainted with darkness.

We are not purely good. In fact, there are parts of our hearts that are dark indeed, although no one else can see it. And when we honestly examine ourselves, we know that, I'm sure.

[34 : 56] And so light and dark cannot coexist. God and us can't coexist. We can't be children of the light. That's the problem.

But here's the good news. The Bible says Christmas is the answer. Jesus was born, John says, so that you who were naturally an enemy of God will become a child of God.

You will be received as a member of God's family. And wonderfully, that means that you know God as Father. You know God as someone who loves you.

You know God, as verse 14 puts it, as someone full of grace and truth. Someone who isn't always there to point the finger at you, but rather someone who always wants the best for you.

Someone who will show you the truth and will never lie to you. You know, in John's Gospel, in chapter 4, Jesus talks with a Samaritan woman.

[36 : 04] And we won't have time to look at that story today, but I'll encourage you to read that little episode for yourself later on. That's in chapter 4, where Jesus meets a Samaritan woman. And I want you to ask this as you read that story.

Is the way Jesus talks with her, full of grace and truth? I think you'll find that it is.

And that's Jesus simply making God's character clear. This is who he is. And wouldn't you want to be in a relationship with someone who overflows with grace and truth?

love. But the only way you will know God as this father is if you receive Jesus as he is.

It's if you receive Jesus as the one who makes God clear. And what Jesus does is to reveal God as the saviour.

[37 : 07] Christmas is really all about God coming to save you from the darkness that lurks inside our very own hearts. What Christians have traditionally called sin.

And verse 4 puts it in an especially poetic way. In him was life and that life was the light of all mankind.

And so the question is, do you accept that Christmas is the answer? You see, if this is what Christmas is really all about, you really can't be neutral regarding Christmas.

If Christmas is God making himself known in Jesus, and Christmas is about God coming to save us through Jesus, then you can choose to do a couple of things. You could, of course, accept it.

That's what I'm hoping you'll do today. You can receive Jesus as he is, as God and saviour. Or you could reject him.

[38 : 07] And you could reject him, either because you don't accept that this is the problem, we are dark, you don't accept that we have darkness in our own hearts, that we cannot fix on our own, so you reject the diagnosis.

Or, you could reject Jesus because you don't accept that he is the only one who can fix the problem. And so you accept the diagnosis, but you don't think he's the right doctor.

You might think that another religion or another person can fix that problem for you. But the one thing you cannot do is to remain neutral.

If this is who Jesus claims he is, then you need to find out if it's true or not, if he is really the right doctor or not. the one thing you cannot say is, I wouldn't bother.

Because to say that I wouldn't bother is simply another form of rejection. You can't say, I'm not sure, I can't be sure, because you can be sure.

[39 : 21] You just need to check out who Jesus is. And to say, I'm not sure, but I'm going to find out, is very different from saying, I'm not sure, and I'm not going to find out.

One is honest seeking, the other is willful blindness. And so if you're not a Christian here this morning, well, make sure that you find out more about Jesus.

At our newcomer's corner, you can pick up a copy of a biography of Jesus written by another one of Jesus' followers, a guy called Mark. I'm sorry that we don't quite have any John's Gospels at the moment, but you can read that biography of Jesus written by Mark.

You can look on our website as well and see when the next Christianity Explored course will be run. And that's another chance for you to explore in a little more in-depth who this Jesus really is.

But of course, the best thing you can do is just to read the Bible for yourself and actually talk to your Christian friends this morning. But this morning, to the question, Dear God, why don't you make yourself clearer?

[40 : 39] The Bible's answer is crystal clear. He has. The real question is, are you ready to accept the answer?

answer. So as I finish now, I'll leave you to ponder on that, to talk to your Christian friends, as I invite the musicians now to come up and to sing our closing song.