

CHAPTER 13

BUT WHAT ABOUT . . . ?

QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK REGARDING HOW GOD WORKS IN NATURE

Among the many views on origins presented in this book and on this website, none are free of theological or scientific challenges. All face certain difficult questions that must be pondered. To help you think through some of the key issues, we've put together a list of questions that Christians often ask about origins. Some of the questions have no simple answers, and we know that the answers we suggest won't satisfy everyone. In some cases, we ourselves aren't completely satisfied with the answers we suggest, but they offer ideas that we've found helpful as we've worked through these issues. They represent the best we can offer at this time.

20. Why would God use such a long, slow process when he could have created everything instantly?

We don't know. But we can say that long slow processes are just as glorifying to God as instantaneous miracles. Parents of a newborn baby can praise God for the "miracle" of a new child, even though they also know it took many months for the child to grow in the womb. Parents see God's hand at work even though the development of the baby happened over a long period of time.

Scientists have discovered amazing processes by which atoms, stars, planets, and new species can develop over long periods of time. In fact, the system of natural laws appears to be designed for this slow development. The laws of nature are finely tuned to allow atoms to fuse and stars to burn steadily. The mechanisms of evolution allow species to adapt to changing environments and permit ecosystems to become complex and rich. Christians can praise God for designing an elegant system of natural laws that produces the abundant variety we see around us, even if those processes take billions of years.

The Bible shows that God often works through long processes in human history as well. God took centuries to develop the nation of Israel and give it a land. God also took many more centuries to finally bring the promised Messiah. As Christians today we experience the Holy Spirit working in us over the many years of our lives to sanctify us and bring us to a greater knowledge of God. God sometimes chooses to work slowly rather than quickly, but it is no less God's work.

21. How could it have all happened by chance?

Unfortunately this question is confused by two different meanings of the phrase "by chance". "By chance" can have a scientific meaning ("in a scientifically unpredictable way") or a philosophical meaning ("without God"). When weather forecasters say there is a 20 percent chance of rain today, they are using the first meaning.

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Rainfall is a chance event in the sense that people can't scientifically predict rainfall with perfect accuracy. But the unpredictability of rainfall in no way requires the second meaning ("without God"). Many Bible passages (for example, Prov. 16:33) teach that God is in control of weather and other events that are unpredictable from a human perspective. That means God is in control of random genetic mutations. Evolution did not come about "without God," even if it did include scientifically unpredictable processes like mutations.

In fact, God might use scientifically random processes as a fundamental part of his design. Sometimes human engineers and artists use random processes to achieve beautiful and clever results. For example, some mathematical equations can be used to produce a colorful geometric display. A human artist might use a computer to generate random variations of the equation to produce a whole series of artistic paintings based on related equations. (Some examples can be viewed at www.random-art.org.) Similarly, human engineers sometimes use random variation to control complex dynamic systems. (If you're interested in learning more, look up *genetic algorithms* on the Internet.) If humans can use randomness in such creative and useful ways, surely God could as well.

22. *If evolution is true, doesn't God seem weak and uninvolved?*

A philosophy called Deism teaches that God initially created the universe and the laws of nature, but since then God has simply let it run on its own without any involvement. Deism not only denies that God is involved in the natural world since creation, it also denies that Scripture was inspired by God and that God is at work in human history. It denies the incarnation of Christ. These are not scientific claims but worldview statements.

Evolutionary creationists reply to Deism by saying that God is powerfully involved in nature, working through it and sustaining it even if God's involvement is not always immediately obvious to human eyes. They say that evolution is a good scientific model of what happened, but that God was involved in it and governing it throughout. They also say that Scripture was inspired by God, that God is at work in human history, and that God himself came to live among us in the person of Christ. These claims cannot be proven scientifically but are based on faith.

By faith, we know that God is in control of the ordinary events of our lives even when we don't directly see God's hand. In the same way we know by faith that God is in control of all natural processes, including physical processes like gravity, which happen so regularly that scientists can write equations describing them, and biological processes like birth, mutation, and adaptation, which we see occurring all around us.

Similarly, we know by faith that God can control the formation of planets and the development of species, even if these processes take billions of years. Our faith is rooted in the biblical teachings about God's governance of sunrise and sunset, rainstorms and drought, seedtime and harvest. If the theory of evolution is true, God is no less involved in it than he is in any other part of nature.

23. *Does evolution imply that God doesn't do miracles?*

If the evolutionary creation view is correct, God chose to create plants and animals using natural mechanisms rather than miracles. Some might worry that the lack of miracles in natural history calls into question the idea that God does miracles at all. In fact, this worry is one motivation that leads some people to choose young earth creation or progressive creation views. If they can find evidence that God did miracles in *natural* history, it would support the Christian belief that God has done miracles in human history.

Evolutionary creationists reply that a lack of evidence for miracles in the natural history of the world before humans existed does not prove that God never does miracles. God is all powerful and can do miracles whenever he wishes. Perhaps God chose not to perform scientifically detectable miracles before human history, choosing to reserve those for his personal interactions with humans. Because of the special place in creation that God gave humanity, God could have waited to use miracles until he revealed himself and began to relate to us personally.

24. *Shouldn't there be some sort of proof in nature that God created it?*

It's understandable why Christians would want to see proof of God in nature. This desire, in part, motivates some Christians to try to find scientific proof that the earth is young or that the theory of evolution is false.

If he wanted to, God certainly could plant evidence for miracles all over nature. God could also perform obvious miracles for every human being who ever lived, but God chooses not to do that. The Bible teaches that God did perform dramatic miracles, and sometimes people responded to those miracles with faith. But at other times these miracles did not result in lasting faith in God. When the Israelites came to Mount Sinai, they saw a whole mountain covered in lightning and billowing smoke; amidst the thunder they heard the voice of God (Ex. 19). It was so fearsome that they begged Moses to be God's spokesman and committed themselves to doing whatever God said. But days later, they made a golden calf to worship. When the Israelites went to Mount Carmel in the time of the prophet Elijah, they saw God miraculously send fire on Elijah's sacrifice in a contest with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18). Did this cause everyone present to turn from Baal to the Lord? Days later, Elijah had to flee for his life. When the Pharisees saw Jesus perform many miracles, they certainly understood that no one could do miracles apart from God (John 3:2, 9:16). Despite these miracles nearly all the Pharisees rejected Jesus, and many called for his crucifixion.

These and other Scripture passages reveal that even when faced with obvious proof of God's existence, some people choose not to respond in faith (see also Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31).

In Romans 1:20, we read: "Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse." One way to interpret this passage is to say that nature must provide proofs of God's existence in the form of something that science cannot explain. Some proponents of Intelligent Design theory point to the genetic complexity of living organisms as one such proof. Other Christians say that it would be strange for God to bury such a proof of his existence in ways that only modern genetic science could detect.

Does Romans 1:20 actually teach that nature provides these sorts of proofs of God? Consider the context of verses 21-23:

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

These verses show that Paul was thinking about the pagan idolatry of his time. People steeped in this idolatry took one created thing (like the sun or the moon or the sea) and called it a "god," or they took one aspect of creation (like fertility or death) and worshiped it. Instead of worshipping the Creator, ancient pagans took one part of the creation and looked to it for hope and meaning in life.

In this sense, modern scientific atheism is somewhat like pagan idolatry. Such atheists take one aspect of nature—the regular functioning of natural laws—and turn it into a "god." It becomes the foundation of all their hopes and beliefs about the world. An example of this view is found in the atheistic writings of chemist P. W. Atkins:

Scientists, with their implicit trust in reductionism, are privileged to be at the summit of knowledge and to see further into truth than any of their contemporaries. . . . They are the beacons of rationality, lighting the trail for those who wish to use that most powerful and precious of devices, the human brain. . . . Science, with its currently successful pursuit of universal competence through the identification of the minimal, the supreme delight of the intellect, should be acknowledged king.

—"The Limitless Power of Science," *Nature's Imagination: The Frontiers of Scientific Vision*; J. Cornwell, ed. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Ancient pagans and modern atheists alike have rejected the true God revealed in the regular functioning of natural laws and made a created thing into an idol. The answer to the ancient pagans was not to claim that the sun or the sea or fertility didn't exist but to put these things in their proper place as things God created. Considering today's context, Romans 1:20 teaches that the answer to modern atheists is not to deny the regularity of natural laws or to look for miraculous breaks in them but to put natural laws in their proper place as God's creations. Of course, God certainly uses miracles at times to reveal himself. But Romans 1:20 does not seem to teach that nature *must* contain miraculous proofs of God.

25. Would humans be less significant if God created us through common ancestry with animals rather than through special miracles?

The idea of human evolution raises concerns about human significance. If we evolved from animals, are we nothing more than animals? Even if humans share a common ancestry with apes and other animals, our line of descent diverged from other animals at some point. Something different happened in our line of descent that did not happen to apes or other animals, something that makes us unique among life forms on earth.

Our significance, however, does not primarily lie in our biological uniqueness but in how God chooses to relate to us. In Genesis 1-2 God did more than create our bodies. God chose to reveal himself to human beings, establishing a relationship with us beyond the relationship God has with animals. God blessed humanity and declared it very good. God gave humanity a commission that was not given to other animals: to name the creatures and to exercise stewardly dominion over God's creation.

While God continues to care and provide for animals, throughout the Old Testament we see God doing dramatically more than that for human beings. God revealed himself personally to his people through word and action. God established covenants with them and answered their prayers. Although humanity is small compared to the size of the universe, the vastness of the created world is not meant to belittle us but to proclaim the vastness of God's promises (Gen 15:5) and God's love (Ps. 104:11-12). Our significance is based on our standing in God's eyes, not our physical size or uniqueness.

Beyond all this God himself chose to become incarnate as a human being, to take on our very form. Christ humbled himself and took on a human body. That alone raises the significance of humanity. "God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

How can our significance depend on whether we share a common ancestor with apes? God has done things for humanity that go far beyond his relationship with any other species. Our significance and worth in his eyes is undeniable, regardless of what we discover about *how* God created us.

26. How do I worship God if God used slow natural processes instead of miracles to create each animal and plant?

In the Bible the most frequent references to the natural world are in the context of worship, of praising God as the Creator. Yet in the church today, the most frequent discussion of the natural world is in heated debates over origins. It is important to consider how the origins debate affects one's worship and prayer life.

Although Loren transitioned from a young earth view to an old earth view without it particularly affecting his worship and prayer life, Deborah found that it had a significant effect on hers:

I grew up hearing a young earth creation view, but as an adult I began to investigate origins for myself. Over a year or two of reading books and discussing the issues with other Christians, I decided that an old earth view, with at least some evolution, was the best way to reconcile the evidence in nature and in Scripture. But after reaching that intellectual conclusion, I took another few years to re-pattern my worship habits to match it. For instance, what should I think about while singing hymns like this one?

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful—
the Lord God made them all.

Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings—he made their glowing colors, he made
their tiny wings.

The purple-headed mountain, the river running by, the sunset, and the morning that brightens up
the sky.

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small, all things wise and wonderful—the
Lord God made them all.

—Cecil F. Alexander, 1848

During my upbringing I sang hymns such as this while picturing God walking through the Garden of Eden, creating each type of bird and flower and mountain with a separate, special miracle. But now I had decided that God made these things through natural processes over millions of years. If God made birds and mountains using evolutionary biology and tectonic plate motion, for what do we praise God?

Over the years, I have found many good answers to that question, some of which you've encountered throughout the book. One answer is to remember that a scientific explanation doesn't rule out God's action. God is just as involved in natural processes as in miracles, and those natural processes are just as divine and glorious, although less mysterious. When considering natural processes, we can praise God with some understanding of how God governs the natural world. In a limited way we have the privilege of "thinking God's thoughts after him." For example, now when I sing hymns about God creating mountains, I picture God using the flow of magma under the earth's crust to push the Indian continental plate into the Asian plate, raising up the snowy heights of the Himalayas.

I now find myself praising God for the glory of the *system* in addition to each individual thing in the system. Not only did God make individual mountains, but God carefully designed a whole system to make all the mountains on earth. When I sing hymns about God creating flowers, I think of the evolutionary mechanisms God designed to produce not just a few kinds of flowers, but an extravagant abundance of every variation of size, shape, color, and scent. God designed a system that creates abundant beauty and also makes each flowering plant well suited to thrive in its environment.

Ultimately, the best answer to this question is to worship God for the *who* and *why* of creation, not the *how* and *when*. God is our sovereign, all-powerful Creator, and he declared all things good.