

Book Review

The God I Don't Understand – Christopher J.H. Wright

Those of us who have read *The Shack* will be aware that it tackles many of the difficult questions of the Christian faith: including the problem of evil, suffering, and life after death. *The Shack* is unusual in that it addresses these issues through a work of fiction. As many will know, this unconventional approach has attracted a range of opinion: from the highly critical and sceptical to those who believe it has the potential to transform lives.

Whether you have read *The Shack*, loved it or hated it, or whether you have no intention of ever reading it, the reality remains that the theological difficulties it addresses are ones which most people struggle with at some point in their lives. Aware of these struggles, Christopher Wright has similarly attempted to find a way of helping people tackle them in his recent book, *The God I Don't Understand: reflections on tough questions of faith (2008)*. While *The Shack* provides helpful initial insights and reflections into these questions, Wright provides a much more robust, academic and thorough exploration of them with conclusions drawn strongly from the Biblical text. Four main areas are addressed: evil and suffering, the God of the Old Testament (specifically the problem of the Canaanite massacre), the cross and 'the end of the world'.

Each of the four areas are explored from an honest and humble personal perspective, and far from presuming to have all the answers, Wright is very open about his own wrestling with these issues. He takes the reader on a journey, considering meticulously what he considers the Bible to say about these questions, encouraging the reader to grasp as much as possible, whilst advocating a recognition and acceptance of the limitations of our human understanding. Wright doesn't pretend that to accept that which we do not understand is easy, and suggests pain and grief is often an appropriate response as we lament and cry out to God. Such an approach is particularly evident in the first section which addresses the problem of suffering and evil.

Throughout the book Wright carefully weighs the whole of the Biblical evidence on these matters, considering the full scope of God's relationship with humanity throughout history, whilst at the same time helpfully placing the texts in their historical and social context. This approach to the Bible is used in all four sections of the book. However, it becomes particularly constructive in the second chapter, which considers how we understand the violence in the Old Testament, and in particular the problem of the destruction of the Canaanites. Difficult passages of Scripture are not avoided, but consideration is given to what the Bible as a whole has to say about God's plan to bring blessing to all the nations and his overall plan of salvation.

In the third section, the book addresses the topic of the cross: The *why* – why did Jesus have to die? Why did God send him? Why was it necessary? The *what* – what did the cross accomplish? What was it for? And the *how* – how did the cross work? Finally, Wright considers how the cross relates to the whole of Scripture and what it means that Christ died "according to the Scriptures." In this section some of the controversies surrounding the cross are addressed, including the recent debates as to whether the atonement is to be interpreted in penal terms. Wright also sets out how we are to

understand the cross as both God's love and God's anger, as both human wickedness and God's judgement, and how it is a work of both the Father and the Son.

Then, in the final section, questions of 'the end of the world' are raised, beginning with an exploration of some of the controversies and myths surrounding the end times before moving on to form a helpful outline of what we can understand based on the biblical texts. This includes the return of Christ, the final judgement, the resurrection body and the new creation. In this chapter, and indeed throughout the book, Wright does not assume that everyone will agree with him, or presume that his interpretations are necessarily correct. Rather, he presents them as his understanding based on what he believes the Bible says, but at the same time invites the reader to examine, explore, analyse and conclude for themselves based on the evidence. In this sense, Wright invites the reader to join with him in humbly struggling together with these questions.

Considering that this is not a lengthy book and that it raises issues theologians have wrestled with for some time, Wright succeeds in addressing the questions he asks in considerable depth. Even more impressive, despite the theological depth, the book is comfortable reading, presented with great clarity with biblical texts consistently and widely used to support the questions and arguments. Wright also skilfully weaves in to many of his reflections extracts from hymns, demonstrating how Christians throughout the centuries have sought to understand and respond to these issues.

One of the book's strengths is that although it deals with complex theological questions, far from keeping this an academic exercise, Wright consistently draws the readers attention to the relevance of these questions for how we live, the response they should prompt in us and the action they subsequently require. In this way, the book is not just a helpful aid to our thinking and understanding, but has practical application as to how these tough questions can impact the way we live. As such I would highly recommend it to anyone struggling to reach a deeper understanding of the tough questions of faith, but equally to anyone who may have already reached an acceptance of these questions but is left wondering what that then means for the way they live out their faith or how to respond to others facing these challenges.

I would consider that the greatest success of the book is that although it acknowledges there are still many questions we cannot answer and that there are limits to our understanding, far from leaving me with a sense of frustration at this, I found it actually inspired me to a greater sense of awe and wonder about God. As I read, I felt as if Wright was taking me on a journey – a journey that in the first two sections (evil and suffering, the question of the Old Testament God) encouraged me to cry out to God with my pain, grief and even frustration at lack of understanding. Then in the final sections (the cross and the end of the world) led the pain and grief to a place of trust, recognition of God's sovereignty, and ultimately wonder and awe at the creator God, intimately and actively involved in creation throughout history. Like Wright, there are still many things about God that I don't understand. Paradoxically, not understanding, far from causing us to lose faith, can actually prompt in us a greater desire to worship the God whom we do not understand, but whom we can know to be trustworthy and sovereign.

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