

Transcript 140

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Often on the podcast we discuss frequently asked question or a controversial question, or something that's hot in the current culture. Today we're kind of covering one that wasn't even on our radar, not in the sense, and we've got a lot of questions about in the past. But for whatever reason in the past couple weeks we've been inundated with questions about this. Seems to come and go. The topic is, does the Bible teach that there is a flat earth? To some you may find this hilarious that we're even talking about it, but believe it or not, this is a common enough question. I have no idea what's driving the recent increase in questions or interest about it, but so here we are discussing does the Bible teach about flat earth?

Shea Houdmann

And joining me today is Jeff. He's the administrator of bibleref.com and Kevin, who is the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. So Kevin, why don't you start us off? Does the Bible teach that there is a flat earth?

Kevin Stone

Well, no, it does not teach that there is a flat earth. Of course, I live in Kansas and that's the big that's the big thing I always hear is that you know, Kansas is so flat. You gotta come visit because it's not flat. And the Bible, when we're talking about the Bibles teaching on the on the shape of the earth well, Bible doesn't really deal with the shape of the earth. But there are some passages that people twist and take to mean that there are, that the earth is flat. And they'll they'll go so far as to say that if you know if you if you don't accept the flat earth theory then you are denying the Word of God. You know, because this is what Scripture teaches. And so and I've got 3 passages here, 3 places in Scripture that some people draw out of these things out of these passages that the earth is flat. One is Revelation 7:1 which says, I saw 4 angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth. And so we've got the four corners of the earth. That sounds pretty much like a like a square or a rectangle or something, something flat. And this is where they get the idea that you know people will point to this and say see earth has corners. It's not round. It's not, it's not spherical, it has corners. Well, this is one example in the Bible of idiomatic language. The phrase the four corners of the Earth is an idiom. And it is simply referring to every distant location.

Kevin Stone

We divide our compass up into 4 cardinal directions, north, south, east, and west. And you take those four and you can describe it idiomatically as the four corners of the earth. And we still use this idiom today and we around Olympics time. The Olympic Games rolls around every four years. Every now and then invariably, you'll hear somebody saying that athletes are coming from every corner of the world. By that they don't mean that the world has actual corners, and neither does the writer of scripture mean that the earth has actual physical corners. The writer of revelation here, is simply saying that at one point in the coming tribulation period, God's going to cause all wind to stop blowing from the north, south, east, and the west. The wind is going to be still and it will be ceasing at God's command. Part of the judgment on the earth.

Kevin Stone

Another idiom that we see sometimes used by the flat earth conspiracy theorists is Psalm 75, verse 3 which says, when the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm. So here God speaks of the pillars of the earth. He's the one who's holding those pillars firm. Well, some say well that that sounds like the earth is flat and it's being supported by pillars from underneath it. And so God's the one who speaks of the pillars. He's the one who is holding those.

Kevin Stone

We see the same idiom also in First Samuel Chapter 2. But in in both cases in First Samuel 2 and in Psalm 75 we're we're speaking of poetry. These are both poetic passages, you know, much of the Bible was written in poetry, and with poetry comes a lot of idiomatic language and metaphors and similes. And and we don't want to. We want to recognize it for for what it is. We want to appreciate the poetry for what it is and the beautiful way that it expresses truth. We don't want to start taking it all so literally that we destroy the poetry. That would be a great loss for the beauty of scripture. And here in Psalm 73, we have the the founding of the Earth being likened to the building of a house. This is just a, this is metaphorical language, so like a house has pillars that support its roof and and all the rest. So this is being used as a picture of how God made the earth. And the point is that God made it very firm. That God is in control of it even today. Hey, you know if I built a house you would worry about its pillars falling down, it's roof, collapsing and all the rest. I'm not a house builder, but the psalmist here is saying that God's house, so to speak, the world that he made is very firm. And even when everything seems to be going wrong in this world and people are quaking for fear, God is going to still be sustaining the world. He's going to hold those pillars firm. But it's poetic language. It's it's idiomatic.

Kevin Stone

Which we also have another idiom used in Deuteronomy 13, verse seven and Moses here warns the people of the gods of the people who are around you, whether near you or far off from you from one end of the earth to the other. Now this one is the ends of the earth is used I think we counted up 28 times in the King James version. And this phrase is similar to that of the four corners of the Earth. It's idiomatic, it's metaphorical, and there's the biblical writers are simply speaking of the farthest reaches of the inhabited world. As you know, you can go anywhere you want, the ends of the earth and you're still going to find the truth of God there. And this is very plain actually, in Psalm 67, verse seven, which says, may God bless us still so that all the ends of the earth will fear him. Here the ends of the Earth is obviously not referring to a geographical feature. But the ends of the Earth is referring to people, people who live in the uttermost reaches of the Earth. The people who are the farthest from us, they are fearing God. And so poetry is beautiful and much of the Bible is written in poetry. We need to accept it and appreciate it for what it is.

Jeff Laird

Poetry is a good thing for us to recognize in Scripture, and it's also important for us to recognize when the Bible is actually speaking on a topic and when it's not. And this is not one of those circumstances where the Bible says anything. There is no place in Scripture where it makes any sort of reference to the actual shape of the Earth. And that's important to emphasize because there are other mythologies that specifically talk about things like discs or cylinders or squares, cubes, things like that. They're the only

places that we have references in the Bible that people take are these sorts of poetic, idiomatic references. There just isn't anywhere that it talks about that. So that first of all, we got to recognize that. That this is just not something the Bible addresses. And the danger of that is that that means that people can take verses and read them the way they sort of prefer. I've seen people read some verses in Scripture saying that they indicate a spherical earth. You know there's verses that talk about God sits on the circle of the earth, and people have said, see? That's a reference to his sphere. It just it just doesn't say anything one way or the other. It's not a topic that's especially important. And you know there, there's things we can talk about about history and what people did and didn't know about the shape of the earth, and when they knew it. All those things are worthwhile and interesting, but sometimes it's just a question of understanding how do we handle this in the first place? You know, for the most part, you aren't really having conversations as a believer with people about does the Bible actually say this or not? It's mostly just about why would, why would a person believe this anyway? What's leading a person into this this mindset and what do you do about it? And I think it's important to remember that people believe things for reasons. They're not always great reasons, but they there is something that causes a person to take certain interpretations.

Jeff Laird

And the flat earth thing is like a lot of other conspiracy theories. It is rooted in something that's real but misunderstood. So it is in the conspiracy theory standpoint. And the problem is that for a lot of people in the flat earth mindset and it has very little to do with religion per se, it has everything to do with not trusting the experts. And one of the worst things that we can do when somebody's in that circumstance is just tell them, well, you're stupid and you're wrong. And you're a fool and you just need to accept this. The whole reason that they're doubting this is because we actually do have evidence that sometimes the so-called experts have been wrong. We do have evidence that sometimes authority figures have lied to people for their own reasons. We do have reasons to think that established science sometimes overturned. What we don't want to do is, we don't want to say no, you just need to listen to the experts. Listen to the science. Listen to everything just because. We should acknowledge you're right, there's times where people have said things that turned out to be incorrect. There's times where people have said things that have turned out to be a lie. That really does happen. That is a thing and it is something that that goes on.

Jeff Laird

But let's take a look at this actual scenario that we're looking at right now, and usually what you find out with the the flat earth issue is that it's it's like a lot of other conspiracy theories. Some of these points are difficult to understand. Not everybody is going to be able to sit down and grasp the geometry that Greeks in 500 BC used to figure out the basic size of the sphere of the earth. It's not necessarily an intuitive thing. And as human beings we have this natural tendency to want to say if I can't understand it, it cannot be true. And that's a dangerous place to be because we don't want to be in a position of gullibility. We don't want to say well, I'm just not that smart, so I guess whatever people say is whatever people say. But there's this this habit of us to say if I don't fully grasp, but if I don't understand it, it can't be true. And that affects our spiritual lives.

Jeff Laird

We see that a lot of times with things about God's nature, about theology, translations of the Bible, all sorts of things, we see where people get stuck in that mindset that says I don't understand it but I'm sticking with this belief because this particular belief is either simpler or easier, or it meets some particular need or idea. So I think if anybody's listening and they for whatever reason feel attracted to the flat earth concept, or if we're talking to people who are in there, we we need to acknowledge this is not about people lacking intellect. This is not about people being paranoid or gullible or stupid. It really is rooted in real things that we really see, but at the same time, Scripture never says anything that would suggest that the earth is flat and the shape of the earth at this point in time is proven about as obviously as you could say, does Jeff have a beard? You know, I know, deep fakes exist and everything else like that, but its pretty hard to deny. And to deny the stuff that we see in thee in the idea of what the earth is really shaped like takes an awful lot of conspiracy thinking. So we deal with this as believers, once we get through the idea of what Scripture says and doesn't say, we do need to remember that people have their reasons for why they believe this, and we should try to acknowledge the semi legitimate reasons why people are skeptical and why people lean to this instead of just throwing them under the bus and saying, well they just must be stupid because they're not.

Shea Houdmann

When I remember back when the first time Got Questions received a question about the flat earth and I was like I didn't even know this was still a thing. I mean in my mind, once Columbus didn't fall off the edge of the earth trying to get to India and accidentally discovering the Caribbean, it was pretty much settled science from that point on. And but it's not an accurate telling of the story, but that was kind of my mind, so I had no idea there were still people who believed this. And I've run across people who will say that Australia doesn't exist, at least in the sense that it's not on the opposite side of the planet. I've heard people say that people who pretend to be Australians are actually hired actors of the conspiracy mongers, and trying to convince us that the earth is a globe. I've heard people say that when you're on an airplane and you're flying a really long flight and you're high enough up, you can actually see the curvature of the earth. That's actually, essentially a movie that they're playing on the airplane windows. So some of these, wow, the depths that people will go to argue for the conspiracy theories it's, it's, it's mind-blowing, especially when at least from a Christian perspective they become so convinced of that the verses that Kevin talked about earlier are teaching flat earth. That to them, this is the I have to defend the faith, that earth cannot be a globe because the Bible clearly teaches that it's flat, And it's just so so disturbing that they invest so much time and effort into something that's not even necessary. That NASA is not a satanic conspiracy to attack the Bible. I mean, that's it's the depths of some people will go.

Shea Houdmann

But like Jeff said, we don't want to argue with them in a way that we're missing the they're stupid like, no. Let's point them towards, you need to read these verses in the Bible differently and therefore thereby be a little more open minded to other possibilities. I like Jeff that you explain that some people will say, although the Bible absolutely clearly teaches that the earth is a sphere based on these other passages and it's at most, the Bible allows for that understanding, and with some of those passages, so we don't want to go either direction. But again, the the Bible is not a geographic textbook, is not a scientific textbook in the sense is it's not designed to when God was speaking of scientific things, he used the language of the common understanding of that time to communicate spiritual truths. He did not feel it was necessary to communicate to people living in 2000 BC that the earth is a globe that's

floating in space actually revolving around the sun. And the earth revolves around the sun. The moon revolves around that. He didn't concern himself with explaining those things because in the terms of what he was trying to communicate, those things are not that important. But again it blows my mind that to some people, the flat earth issue is so important that they will get hostile, angry, belligerent with any even fellow believers who buy into the conspiracy that the earth is actually a globe that revolves around the sun. And I've chosen to not make this a major focus of Got Questions or definitely of my life. But for some people, this is the end all be all issue, and that's some that is something to be concerned about way more than the issue itself.

Kevin Stone

And I'm glad that God Questions Ministries does not make this a major point to try to refute all of these types of things. But how do you engage people who are holding to the flat earth theory? You know, this is for a lot of people, it's a conversation stopper. As soon as it starts coming out that they believe in a flat earth, it's like OK, I'm out of here, walk, they walk away. And but you know, I don't think that's the proper response just to not even engage at all. But how do we engage with these types of conversations? And it's not just flat earth, but there are a lot of conspiracy theories out there now politically, medical conspiracy theories, a lot of different stuff that people really latch onto and it becomes a very important part of their belief system. And a huge topic of conversation usually when you meet them. You guys have any tips on how we engage and how we speak the truth and love and try to present the truth of what the Bible says.

Jeff Laird

Usually the best way to go about it is to try to approach somebody by asking precisely what it is that they think and what they believe just to understand accurately what exactly is it that you think. What exactly is it that you believe? Why do you think this? And then you pick your battles. You know if you're at a family function with 17 people around and your 85 year old uncle wants to argue about whether or not the earth is flat. Probably not the most opportune time to get into that. But if it's a private conversation, maybe a press a little bit more to find out what the reasons are.

Jeff Laird

And you're right also Kevin, that the way we approach this is important because it's not just about flat earth. There's a lot of different topics where the same basic idea comes up, whether it's theological it happens when it's science, you know, regardless of what a Christian believes about topics like the age of the earth or evolution or anything else like that. It is still possible to have incorrect ideas about something that you feel you have to stick to simply because that's your perception of what your view means. And that can be difficult, because then when you have doubt about one little sliver of it, you start having doubts about the rest of it. So at least in my experience, I think it's a question of just standing firm on the idea that Scripture does not in any sense say such a thing. And theologically, that's easier. Because if we can at least get to that point where somebody can agree, you're right. The Bible doesn't demand, and it doesn't forbid a particular stance on there. Well, now we can, now we can open this up to something reasonable to where a person can say OK, now know spiritually that you know there's a lot of different ways that a person could approach the idea.

Jeff Laird

But definitely true, truth and love is something that's important. I think we, we, we also don't want to waste an excessive amount of time on the idea. In other words, there is a. There is a sense in which you can give too much credit to something that and I I know we're talking about speaking truth and love, but it is an idea that in the context in which we're speaking is vaguely ridiculous. This is not something even on the level of like the moon landing, where there's there's a certain level of explanation for how you could have a conspiracy to make people think this happened when it never really did. This is like telling people the color blue doesn't really exist. It's very difficult to actually have this belief and to hold to it. So to some extent we don't want to waste an excessive amount of time on it, but we do want to take people seriously, just mostly by starting with asking what do you believe in? Why? Explain this to me.

Kevin Stone

Yeah, that's good.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah all three of us have been involved at Got Questions long enough that we become more discerning about which conversations are worth having and which ones are ultimately going to be a waste of time. And at Got Questions we love dealing with truly important questions, majoring on the majors, minoring on the minors. So often when I run across someone like this, whether it's online or in person, I really try to focus it's like, are you sure that this is really worth the amount of time and emotional and mental energy you're pouring into it? In many cases, focusing them back on the gospel and our OK, whether the earth is flat or whether the earth is a globe, that doesn't change the message of the gospel. And why are you spending so much time focusing on this? And I've never heard you once say anything about pointing someone to faith in Christ for salvation. So I'm not saying that method is often successful, but that's usually what I try to go is to really force them to think more about why are they dedicating so much time to something that the grand scheme of things is not a foundational issue of the faith?

Shea Houdmann

But then also there are two verses in proverbs that I like to point to, and again, I'm by saying using the word fool and not saying stupid and saying someone who's unwise and someone who is dedicating so much time to something like this as being unwise. Proverbs 26:4-5. Verse 4 says, answer not a fool according to his folly, unless you be like him yourself. Verse five says, answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes. And some people look at these two verses. They they contradict each other, and in the sense they do. But what they're doing is presenting a no win situation. That if you answer a fool according to a folly, you're going to be like him. So if you spend so much time arguing with someone on an issue like this, you're going to look just as foolish as he does. At the same time answer fully, folly lest he be owning wise in his own eyes. There is a time when we are to correct someone. We're to point out the error of his ways. So these two verses are present. It's a difficult decision to know which direction do I go? How can I correct this person without appearing like him? That's very difficult to accomplish, so requires a lot of discernment. It requires a lot of prayer for wisdom. Like the Lord is this worth my time? Is it worth me engaging with this person on this issue? Or is it just going to make things worse? So that's kind of the approach I take. I think generally speaking, I avoid getting into arguments on the these things. Non essentials of the faith. But at times if I really think there's a possibility of making some progress with someone, I will engage on a issue like this, but it's it's difficult because I

know that the three of us none of us are interested in wasting our time and often that's what conversations like this result in.

Jeff Laird

And it's good that we're bringing up that idea in Proverbs that the core of what that is really saying is that sometimes you need to correct somebody so that they don't keep doing something foolish, but you don't want to imitate the style of their foolishness. So if somebody's involved in, let's say it's flat earth or something like that, we don't want to go off and assume all this scientific mathematical historical expertise that we don't have, that they don't have, because now we're answering the fool according to their folly. We're just doing exactly the same thing this person is and not approaching it the right way. So it's we do need to be careful about the way that we actually go about it and and that starts with enough humility to say look, there's some things we don't fully grasp and get. Let's converse about this instead of just looking at other people and assuming that there's something blatantly wrong with them. And to that person it's important. We may not understand why it's important, but to them it is. So we need to treat it like it's important at least in that context.

Shea Houdmann

This has been the Got Questions podcast on discussing does the Bible teach there's a flat earth? I guess in summary, there are some verses that, if interpreted strictly literally, can lead to that conclusion. But in context, it's very clear that they're using poetic or idiomatic language. So no, we do not believe that the Bible teaches a flat earth and we do not in any sense believe that the earth is flat. I think the crux of our conversation has been more along the lines of how to deal with conspiracy theories like this and how to they point people towards investing their time in more important things.

Shea Houdmann

So I hope our conversations both been both informative and also interesting to you. And again, speaking the truth in love. That's a repeated theme of our podcast. And all these controversial issues that we discussed. Speaking the truth in love, Ephesians 4:15 is something we always want to go back to. Joining me today was Jeff the Administrator of bibleref.com and Kevin, the managing editor of Got Questions Ministries. And thank you for tuning in. Come back next time for another interesting conversation on something else that we're getting hit with a lot lately. Got questions? The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them.