

Transcript Podcast 77 – Billy Hallowell

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast with Shea Houdmann, president of Got Questions ministries.

Shea Houdmann

Welcome to Got Questions podcast. Through our 20 years of answering people questions about angels and demons are always near the top of the list in terms of our most frequently asked questions.

It's not really just like one question in particular, but just like everything, anything related to the topic, it's hugely popular. Lots of people asking about them, I get it. It's exciting. It's interesting.

This whole spiritual world that as Christians we know is out there, but we can't see it. Can't taste it, can't touch it, but it still impacts us.

So the mysterious nature of it, I think, really drives us to ask questions, to wonder. So today's podcast episode with me, Billy Hallowell. He is the journalist for CBN News. The author of the recent book *Playing with Fire*, so Billy, welcome to the show.

Billy Hallowell

Hey, thanks for having me.

Shea Houdmann

So when people are asking us these questions, I've noticed there tends to be common errors on both sides. One, some people think there's a demon or Angel involved in absolutely everything, and another side that basically kind of ignores the spiritual realm, ignores the influence of demons ignores even the possibility of spiritual attacks, so in your research as a journalist in writing, *Playing with Fire*, what do you find is the more common mistake that people make?

Billy Hallowell

Yeah, that's really interesting because I think the error is really prevalent on both ends, but the side that I tended to find they're both troubling and they're both troubling for a variety of reasons, they lead you down a strange theological path.

I think for me the area that I became most interested in was the side that sort of pretended this wasn't happening or didn't want to think about it or didn't want to talk about it, particularly in the church.

Because and this is the part that is so wild to me. When you look at Hollywood and how they deal with scary movies and horror films, and this genre that just keeps growing, they are actually in Hollywood and I just before I say this, I want everyone to listen to very carefully to what I'm saying.

I'm not saying they're doing it theologically properly, but they are talking in Hollywood about a church subject, the demonic infestation and all these different topics, more than some churches are.

And now they're not doing it accurately again, but they're talking about it more, and that was really eye opening to recognize and to see.

And when we went out and started actually asking some questions of church leaders, it became very apparent that the vast majority of church leaders and these are not just pastors, these are people who, you know. They believe in, obviously in the demonic realm. They believe this is real that this exists. They may have different viewpoints and how it manifests, or what it looks like, but when you ask them, is your church dealing with this issue? The vast majority of them said no.

Shea Houdmann

So you may have even partially answered this question already, but what led you to write *Playing with Fire*? What were the things maybe even going on, that you've observed? Or you in your own life that may have made you especially interested in this topic?

Billy Hallowell

You know, it's interesting because I did not want to write *Playing with Fire* to the point of, you know, sitting on this book contract and praying about it for months and sort of hoping that it would go away.

The reason for that and I and I've been really open about this in interviews because I think it's important. I think a lot of us as Christians are probably in this camp of we know it's there. We know it's real. We don't really want to deal with it and we find it a little strange. It's hard to make sense of it. It doesn't feel as mainstream as the other elements of our faith are because, let's face it, weird. I mean, faith is something that is incredibly complex. There's so many different pieces to the puzzle.

But when it comes to this, I really felt like, OK, you know, and let me just give you the background on this 'cause I think it's important I was offered a book contract to write a very similar book a few years ago. I rejected it. I prayed about it. It didn't feel right. I walked away from it and when this opportunity came back, things were much different. I was in a different place spiritual, and God literally dropped this project in my lap and made it very clear that even though I wanted to run from it, I needed to do it.

And so what I will say to you is at the time when I started this, I love tackling topics that are difficult topics in the church that maybe, yeah, I wrote a book about the end times. I've kind of gone into these things that are popular topics, but sometimes certain facets of the church don't want to deal with them. So anyway, God kind of made me do this. He dropped it in my lap and I will tell you that writing this Book I have never been closer to my faith before working on the project, I would go a couple of days without reading Scripture. I would sometimes you know, maybe not be as prayerful as I could be.

And writing this I was the closest to God I've ever been, and that has continued for me since. And so there was just so many amazing blessings that came out of it. But really, it was something that God was sort of like. OK, you're going to do this and I followed him kind of blindly into it and it was a great experience, yeah.

Shea Houdmann

You mentioned before like even like pop culture's influence on how we what we think about angels and demons. And then to give you an example, several years ago it's made out maybe 10 years ago we started getting all these questions about is it true that in the end times Gabriel is going to switch sides and join Satan's rebellion and the first time you get it, that's going to be kinda weird. But then, like 3rd, 4th, 5th, 10th time like where in the world these questions coming from.

And it turned out, I think it was the movie Constantine starring Keanu Reeves, where that was a plot point of the movie, and so it's something like that can happen in pop culture.

Even a movie that really wasn't that popular can stir up lots of questions. So in your research what are maybe some of the other things that you noticed and why is it so important for us to base our beliefs about angels and demons on the word of God rather than what popular culture is telling us?

Billy Hallowell

Well, it's interesting, right? Because look at our culture. We're moving away from faith at least nominal faith, right? You look at the numbers you're seeing the stats have gone from 78% of the country saying they were Christians in 2007 to about 65% now. Some polls are showing it's even lower and we can have a whole theological debate about what's actually happening. Are people just shedding a label or a name, but the point is, they're at least shedding the label. And yet they're flocking to movies that talk about the demonic they're flocking. They are flocking out to get tarot cards and all.

I mean, there's so much going on culturally with these with these issues, there's an intriguing interest there, and yet culture is moving away from faith, and it's because Hollywood and the media they've sort of put out you know here come and get scared, come and get freaked out. Come and watch this movie and that starts to become the baseline of what people actually think about these things, right. Even if they say they don't believe.

But they're they're very intrigued by it, and we actually see from data that almost half the country believes in the demonic. They even people who aren't Christian, so so it's a very interesting dynamic.

As believers, though, we should understand what Scripture says about it, and so you know in *Playing with Fire*, I spend a lot of time kind of going through scripture looking at the stories of Jesus healing people of possession. I had never really looked exclusively at that content, right?

You know, we read it. We go through scripture. We encounter it. And we kind of move on, but but really looking at what is evil, what does that look like and listen just like everything else, there is a lot about this topic that is not definitively given to us.

We we don't know, for instance, all the stories go back and read them of people who become possessed or who Jesus encounters. He encounters them after their possession. We don't know how those individual people ended up in that state, but scripture does give us some ideas of how that could happen. So my point is that as believers, we need to understand what we know and what we don't know and we need to proceed from there.

But we don't want to fill the gaps with what Hollywood is telling us, right? About this topic, that is, that is very dangerous. And it's also not theologically accurate.

Shea Houdmann

Yeah, even with the title of your book being *Playing with Fire*, how in, in your research and your experience are people opening themselves up to demonic influence and even possession by some of the things going on in our culture.

Billy Hallowell

When you start to dive into the stories of people who and I tell a number of these stories in the book of people who have had extreme interactions in that they feel like they've been possessed and they've been healed and they've gone through all of this, there are so many different arenas in which spiritual warfare happens for the vast majority of people, including Christians, spiritual warfare is something that's going to be a part of life. That doesn't mean you're going to be possessed or you're going to deal with. I mean, possession seems to be a relatively rare phenomena, and there's a lot of debate around it, right? But there are some very specific things that do seem to really open people up. And again, there's debate around it and my job as a as a journalist and as a Christian isn't to tell people what to think, but to present stories and information.

And one thing we know from Scripture, especially when you look back at the Old Testament and also the New Testament. But in the Old Testament we are told do not mess with divination. Do not try to speak with the dead. Do not consult psychics. The list goes on and on and on.

This is something the Bible doesn't say that these things aren't real. Scripture says don't play around with them. Don't engage with them. And in the modern era, one of the most disturbing things to sort of watch right now.

I was in Barnes and Noble the other day, and I'm looking at the games they have out and there's the Ouija board in the middle of all the game sets, right next to the coffee shop, as though it's just monopoly, right? And that is, that has become a very ingrained thing. And it comes in ebbs and flows. We've seen the Ouija board and I have a whole chapter on it. Dates back to the mid 1800s mid to late 1800s. And it's something that has been again used for a long time, but we're watching this strange sort of resurgence of these things.

And as you dig into the stories, it's not so much about the Ouija board as it is using the Ouija board to try and connect with something. And, you know, going to psychics seeking out these spiritual answers in arenas that we are told not to do that right, that seems to be for some people, not for everyone. Look 90% of people who touch A Ouija board probably never have any other issue happen in in their lives, at least anything they can discern, but for some people these do seem to be doors that are that are opening, you know, repetition of sin.

That's something you know, some theologians and experts would speak about, you know, continuing to sin over and over and over again in a certain arena. You know drug and substance abuse. There are a lot. There are a lot of these sort of interesting discussions about openings potential openings and again, I think it's really up to people to look at that data and try to understand, but the reality is when you go back and I think the part of the Bible that has really been illuminated, most for me has been Ephesians 6, Ephesians 6:10. When you start to look at what is going on in that portion of scripture, it really is one of the most telling pieces of the New Testament that I will admit I have read a million times I've read through it and I've just kind of continued but this idea that we need to live as Christians and it's a pretty simple idea.

Living as Christians and not just living as Christians recognizing that as believers we are living in a realm in which there is a spiritual battle that this is going on around us whether or not we recognize it, and so when you see that there's a spiritual battle and I'd love to even unpack that more you have to recognize that you don't want to go on the wrong side of that you don't want to start tinkering with the things we're told not to.

Shea Houdmann

Absolutely kind of leading into my next question, so this will date me a little bit, but I remember I was probably 6-8 years old and my older sister being the loving big sister that she was talked me into watching the movie Poltergeist with her and I was absolutely terrified. So I from that day forward, I've never had any interest in watching like the horror movies and to me like zombie movies those sort of things don't bother me. I don't have any interest in seeing them, but I know they're not real.

It's the movies who portray the clearly the demonic that frightened me because I know that actually is real. Whether what exactly happened, the movie could happen in the real world. That's one thing, but the fact the demons are real is very real because Scripture is so clear, so kind of leading in my question: to what extent or even at all, should Christians fear, demonic activity?

Billy Hallowell

Yeah, I think this is where the core of Ephesians 6 comes in, because when you start to dive into the scripture it basically tells you pick up your shield. You know you're going into battle. You can't let me let me say that you can't win a battle and you certainly can't win a war if you don't realize that you're in one. And so when we go back to that first question that we talked about when it comes to you know what's more dangerous? What's more, you know of a focus for me. If we're not talking now, we don't want to obsess over these topics, right? Again, we don't want to go on that side of it's all we talk about. I know there are Christians who are in that camp. It's all they can talk about. Everything is evil, everything is demonic. But the reality is, we're told in Ephesians 6 that there is evil happening that there is a battle that we need to be prepared for that that we need to be on alert.

And guess what, the solution is living as believers, being Christians, trusting the word of God and not just saying that oh I said a prayer one day and I never have to worry about it again, right?

This is a lifestyle. Of being a Christian. So when people ask that question, do we need to fear it?

No, I don't. Christians who are solid believers do not have to fear the demonic at all. In fact, we have authority over it. Do we need to be aware that this is real?

Absolutely, do we need to be on guard? Yeah, are we gonna face spiritual warfare in our lives? Absolutely. I think every Christian has and will. And so the question really is, how healthy are we as believers? And this is not me preaching at anybody, it's actually convicting to me too because making sure we're on that straight and narrow path and that we are, you know, protected in that way, it really depends on how well we're living that faith.

Shea Houdmann

Here's a interesting question. I would love to get your take on that goes right in line with what we're doing. Guessing the question something along the lines of how can you tell the difference between either demon possession or even demonic oppression, influence and like a psychological disorder or a like a physical disorder?

Because there's some of the examples in the Gospels of Jesus casting out a demon sound kind of like epilepsy or sound like some other physical disorder, so in your research how do we discern the difference?

Billy Hallowell

Yeah, that was a really important thing when I started writing *Playing with Fire*, recognizing that this is a very controversial arena, right where mental health meets, you know, spiritual health and you know consulting with a number of experts who work in the psychology realm, right?

I spoke with a nurse who ran a psychiatry hospital actually and really trying to understand for these people who are believers what did that look like? How do you determine that difference? The reality is that there's a real danger when we talk about seeing a demon under every rock. Well, what happens if you treat every single thing that is going with somebody acting mentally unstable, you're treating it all like it's demonic. There are examples I share in the book of people who have died because of that of, you know, cultures who are trying to treat what they believe to be demonic when they're very well may be something that is actually medical and mental going on with that person.

One of the things that was really interesting to unpack was the connection between mental and spiritual health, which makes sense. I mean, our physical and our mental health are connected right? All of these different.

So so when you start to dig into that, there are a lot of really uncomfortable arenas. Suicide, right? I mean suicide is a huge area of concern, right? Is it spiritual? Is it mental? And when you start to talk with people about it, recognizing that many times these things come in unison or somebody is struggling with a mental issue and that becomes sort of a weakening point for them that they can then be spiritually attacked because of that. And then people who spiritually have gone into a realm of you know, let's say satanic worship, which is something that exists. There are people who actually, you know, cover a little bit of this in the book - they start to worship Satan and you sort of open yourself up to these things.

So the actual question of how do you determine it?

The main thing when you're dealing with deliverance or exorcism, and there obviously the terminology here gets crazy. And I attempt to unpack that in the book as well, but when you're dealing with that, you want to make sure that anybody you're working with that they are investigating and exploring and making sure that they understand what is going on with that person before they do anything.

So any good faith leader who's approaching this. They would really be looking at that. That, and you know, I am an evangelical. I do look at the Catholic Church in the book because they tend to have a system, and again, there's a lot of debate here as to whether or not their tactics work, but the point is they have a system of anybody who comes into the Catholic Church and is looking for healing, they would undergo an evaluation before anybody would do anything to help them spiritually.

Actually, and so we have again a lot of examples of people who would just do the wrong thing and they would go to treat something without knowing. But one simple thing, just to kind of round this out.

I spoke with one Deliverance minister who said and this almost sounds too simple. But it is interesting, he said, listen, you know any time I've tried to heal somebody who has a spiritual affliction, the demonic entity responds, and there's a change. When I'm dealing with somebody who is not responding to any of those things. You know it. It becomes and I don't want to oversimplify, but it becomes much easier to see it, there is potentially something mental that is happening with that person. So needless to say, it's complicated, but there are ways to differentiate between the two.

Shea Houdmann

For sure, so let me let me pester you with another common question we receive, and from my theological background, the answer to this question was a definite no. But then in my history with got questions and meeting several other people. My theological answer is no, but I don't know if I'm absolutely convinced as before, so the question is, can a Christian be demon possessed and someone who's they're truly saved, they've truly received Christ as their savior by grace through faith. Can that person become demon possessed or is it a matter of terminology? There can be severe oppression, affliction attack, but not actual possession? What did you discover in your research? And I know, trust me, I know there are many different viewpoints out there on this.

Billy Hollowell

Yeah, this was one of the hardest questions right? And I think you know, for me in my job in this was to go out to everybody and say tell us like tell us what the answer is and I want to bring it all together and let people decide.

My struggle with this issue has been if you've truly accepted Christ. That the Holy Spirit cannot live alongside evil inside of you, right? And you mentioned depression. It is really interesting having interacted with some Christians who have fallen away from their faith. They still believe they were believers, but they've started going to psychics, so they started going into this realm and they started experiencing spiritual issues as a result of that, the idea that they felt that the entity was still outside of them and not inside of them, but was still having some control over them is really interesting. I guess this all boils down to another important question which would be, do you believe somebody can lose their salvation?

If the belief is that a person could inherit, could have the Holy Spirit and lose the Holy Spirit as a result of you know no longer walking with God. And again, this is another tricky territory here and in the theology world, as you know, then of course you would believe that it's possible for a Christian to be possessed because they would no longer have the Holy Spirit at that point if they've descended so far into that realm. Now, if you believe that a person cannot lose the Holy Spirit, then I think what you're dealing with is a scenario where maybe you have less of your faith sort of raging and you're living less of your faith out, but you've allowed evil in a little bit more, and so it's a fine line.

My answer is no as well. I would side with you on that and say I don't believe that that is possible for a person. My belief and feel free to push back or challenge me on this is that if a person Has lost the Holy Spirit, They never really had it in the 1st place, right? That that is sort has sort of always been my theological understanding.

I know there are plenty of people who would push back on that, and so in that case, if you never really had it, then of course you could. Essentially, find yourself in that sort of predicament. I do think no matter what, if you're a believer, you know that if you start messing around with things you shouldn't, that you are opening some doors and that there can be a real impact on your life.

It may not be that you're going to become possessed, but that you can have that oppression intensify.

Shea Houdmann

Oh for sure. And we just recently recorded like 2 episodes on this eternal security in an episode. So it's fresh on my mind and I'm fully on board with you on this. That I do not believe a Christian can be possessed. This doesn't make sense. I mean when you talk about like a spiritual being inhabiting physical body, I know it's not as simple as there's not room for the Holy Spirit and a demon inside of you. But it's not dealing with spatial things.

At least in a physical sense, but it doesn't make theological sense that the Holy Spirit would allow a person blood bought in Christ to then kind of come under the complete control of a demon so, but no, that's I've heard enough people, even family members who definitely were a believer who the oppression was strong enough that it closely resembled possession.

So it's just yeah intriguing to hear stories like that and I know you did as well and in your research on the book that maybe leads really well into my final question for you and just for our listeners to know, we'll include links to where we can learn more about Billy and his book *Playing with Fire* in the show notes and on description on the YouTube channel when the video goes live and also at podcast.gotquestions.org, but Billy for my closing question, why shouldn't we play with fire?

Billy Hallowell

Listen, we look through Scripture and we see those stories. You know, Hollywood's out there making these movies and they're terrifying everybody. But when you read the accounts of people who have faced intense spiritual warfare in the form of possession, it's incredibly disturbing.

And you know you look at that and you look at what we're promised. You look at the goodness that we're promised in a life with Christ, and it's hard to imagine why I think that the flesh you know seeks the things that would lead you toward *Playing with Fire*, right? The answers that we don't have, we want to know the future when we don't have it.

That's where trust in Christ comes in when you read the stories of people in the modern era who claim to have gone through these things and you see what they've gone through and where they are now in the healing they faced.

You can't imagine why you would ever play around with these. Yeah, we talk about familial health, right? Yeah, I'm a parent. I have two kids. Why would I ever subject my children to this?

And we see even generationally some of these things that have gone on and on and on, and there's a lot of debate around, obviously, how that works right spiritually, but the point is, staying healthy, being healthy people requires having a healthy relationship with Christ and so we absolutely should not go down any path that's going to open us to any of these sorts of things.

And you look at our culture right now. And it's really interesting from a 30,000 foot level as you sort of watch what is happening and you watch that detachment from faith you know again, it's really about the individual level. The reason culture is changing is because people individually are changing the dysfunction that results from that that we are now watching. Why would we want that in our lives?

I mean, at the core, we want to honor Christ and that's why we shouldn't play with fire. But I believe that when you look at those stories and you understand what can happen, but you also understand the healing.

That is an essential piece of this puzzle, and I would just add as a final note that it really helped me to understand the goodness of Christ and the gospel message by looking at evil when I really understood this is what evil is. This is what it looks like. Satan comes to kill and destroy and to remove us from our faith. And to harm us when you look at all of that, it points you back to your need for Jesus.

And that was really the most powerful thing for me to see that healing, but also our need to have that relationship with him

Shea Houdmann

Amen, well said Billy.

So this has been the Got Questions podcast with Billy Hallowell. He's a journalist at CBN and also the author of *Playing with Fire* and some other books, and again we'll include links where you can learn more, so this has been the Got Questions podcast.

Thanks Billy for being on the show

Billy Hollowell

thanks for having me.

Shea Houdmann

Got questions> The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.

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