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Questioning our questions

'Atheism never composed a symphony. Never painted a masterpiece. Never dispelled a fear. Never healed a disease. Never gave peace of mind. Never dried a tear. Never established philanthropy. Never gave an intelligent answer to the vast mystery of the universe. Never gave meaning to man's life on earth. Never built a just and peaceful world. Never built a great and enduring civilisation.' – Charles M. Houser

On a number of occasions I have enjoyed sitting with friends, tucking into food and grappling with issues raised when we have started with the question, 'If you could ask God anything, what would it be?' It's a great discussion starter. Sometimes the topics raised are deeply personal, whilst others are quite straightforward, though genuinely felt, questions of belief. The response, though, is never dull.

There is a Middle Eastern proverb that says, 'It is more difficult to ask a good question than it is to give a good answer'. You just have to listen to a toddler and it is clear that naturally human beings ask questions, and want answers. It is how we learn. Sadly, there is a danger in our busy world that we simply live by rote. If our leisure time is consumed by soaps, soccer and stardom then there is a danger that we will cease to question anything! Could it be that some of the issues that concern us are not those highest on God's agenda? Perhaps we are missing the point even when we ask questions; so, are we thinking through the right questions? Supposing we were to ask God what He wants us to know, how would He respond? If God is there, is He silent, or does He communicate? And if He does speak, what does He want to communicate to us? What is He passionate about? What is on the mind of God? Is what concerns Him, the same as what bothers us?

Douglas Coupland's book *Life after God*, which was published in 1994, caused quite a stir. He concludes it by saying:

Now – here is my secret:

I tell it to you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray that you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need

*God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone.
I need God to help me give, because I no longer seem to be
capable of giving; to help me be kind, as I no longer seem
capable of kindness; to help me love, as I seem beyond
being able to love.*

That's quite an honest admission! Christians have good reason to believe that God is, and that neither Douglas Coupland nor anyone else need be left in a frustrating quandary. God has not just wound up the world like a toy, and left it so that with curiosity He can watch it unwind. Rather, He is interested, involved, and even *in* the world that He has made. God is concerned and communicates.

I would like to get into the mindset of art gallery security officers! When I have half a chance, I pop into galleries and am left in awe at the amazing, accurate and artistic beauty created by strokes of a brush, pen or knife, and portrayed on canvas. I could stare for ages, yet I notice the security guards sitting apparently bored and disinterested. Is that how they are supposed to be? Are they paid to look indifferent, to bite their finger nails and gaze into space? Or have they become desensitised to the value and beauty that hangs yards away from them? Likewise, I fear that many brought up in the Western countries may similarly have lost the wonder and awe of God's world and the good news of Jesus. Familiarity may

have bred contempt, or at least disinterest. However, to those willing to look, there are treasures, that God wants us to know are worth discovering.

It is fundamental to the Christian message that God has revealed Himself to the world He has made. We are often given the impression by the media that human beings are on a long search for God. Sometimes educationalists convey the idea that God is on top of a mountain, and people are making their way to Him using different routes, but all going in the same direction. These may be intriguing ideas, but they are far from the God who has made Himself known.

Christians believe that the Bible is God's message to humanity; that when we open it to read, we are in effect opening the mouth of God and allowing Him to speak to us. The Bible makes it clear that men and women are not actually looking for God, but rather running away from Him. We are wanting to do our own thing.

God has made Himself known in various ways. The world and the universe around us are wonderful. As we will see, all of creation has been ruined; but there is still something magnificent about the world in which we live. Whether it is the infinitesimally minute DNA structure that makes us as humans, or the enormity of space and the billions of stars, there is evidence of design, and therefore a designer. To gaze through either a microscope

or a telescope provides evidence that there is order, intricacy and design to all that we see. To pause and look at a delicate snowdrop which pushes itself through the hard frozen winter soil, or to wonder at a beautiful sunset, is a reminder that God is infinite in His creativity, orderly in His design, and extravagant in His provision. That is why, contrary to what is often thought, so many great scientists of the past and present had or have a robust Christian faith.

However, God has not only shown us that He exists, but also what He is like. He has done this through the Bible, and through the man Jesus. As well, God has been at work in history, and the lives of individual men and women, making people aware of Him, and bringing people into a personal relationship with Him.

So God has not left us in the lurch, groping in the dark to try to find truth, as the media would have us believe. He wants us to know ultimate reality; He has no desire for us to fumble through life, existing but blinkered or blinded to spiritual truth. God wants us to know about Him, and actually to know Him.

The nineteenth-century poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's parents disapproved so strongly of her marriage to Robert that they disowned her. Almost weekly, Elizabeth wrote love letters to her mother and father, longing for everything to be sorted out between

them. They never once replied. After ten years of letter writing, Elizabeth received a huge box in the mail. She opened it. To her dismay and heartbreak, the box contained all of her letters to her parents. Not one of them had ever been opened.

Today those love letters are among the most beautiful in classical English literature. Had her parents opened and read only a few of them reconciliation might have been effected. Similarly, God has spoken to us, making Himself known to the people He has made. Sadly, what He has said is often neglected or even rejected. God is there; He is not silent, but in practice He can be silenced if we refuse to listen. It is easy to do, in effect, what Elizabeth Browning's parents did, and throw God's love and message back in His face.

If we are open to God, we will find that He disturbs our presuppositions. Throughout our lives we are bombarded with our secular age's attitudes to life. Living in a post-Christian era we pick up attitudes that are antagonistic to the world view that God has made known to us. God is marginalised; conveniently kept at a distance; only to be consulted in times of trouble. We will find that God's agenda can be quite different from that of the government, the media or even our peers. It is amazing what we accept without ever really questioning. Jesus confronts the beliefs and behaviour, which are

contrary to what is right, and that can be disturbing. As we read the Bible, we will probably find that what it says is quite different from the view of the Bible that we were taught in Religious Education lessons years ago. It is a thrilling and exciting book, making God known to us, and focusing attention on Jesus Christ. Just the realisation through reading, that the Bible is not religious thoughts of human beings of long ago, but God vibrantly speaking to us today, is overwhelming.

God's priorities are very different from our materialistic, pleasure-seeking society. But then our society offers little to those who are wondering what is the purpose of life, or to those who are grieving because they have messed up their lives, or to those who have lost a loved one, or to those who are considering what happens when a person dies. The Bible does not dodge the straightforward questions of where have we come from, why are we here and where are we going. There are answers to these issues.

We discover these answers as we look at some of the themes of the Bible, examining what God wants us to know about Himself, and about ourselves. The restlessness and emptiness, which often characterise our lives, need not be the norm. In finding answers to life's biggest questions, there is freedom and joy to be discovered.

In the Book of Proverbs in the Bible, there is a chapter where wisdom, which is the knowledge of God,

is portrayed as a woman prophet preaching in places where people gather in the city. She is drawing attention to herself, like a wayward woman, but making a very different kind of offer with her encouraging invitation:

‘Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favour from the Lord. But whoever fails to find me harms himself; all who hate me love death.’¹

1 Proverbs 8:32-36, see also 1:21-22