

I Have Some Questions...

Everything You Were Too Afraid to Ask God



Week 1 – ...about Evil

Check - In

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... as we're investigating questions, let's start with something fun you're curious about. What's a subject you enjoy learning? Are an amateur ornithologist? Maybe you dabble in quantum physics on the weekends? Perhaps you have an abnormal knowledge of Taylor Swift trivia? Discuss!

Opening Prayer

God of Understanding, thank you for your patience with our doubt, and grant us the courage to bring our questions before you.

Introduction

Have you ever looked at a situation where, after someone said or did something confusing, you stepped back and said, "umm... I have some questions?" (It happens often with me and the kids. "I get that you want to build a ramp to jump your bike off, and using the rotted log

and cardboard *is* resourceful, but umm, I have some questions.”) Our faith works the same way. We, as humans, are naturally curious. It’s in our blueprints to be curious. We want answers. We want to understand. We explore, we research, we study... because we want to explain things. We went back to the moon for the first time in 50 years

even though we already discovered it’s not made of Gouda. Why? Because we want to explore even further. And so, as a species, we strive for answers to help us explain our experience. And in this regard, our faith is no different. When life doesn’t make sense, we want answers. When something doesn’t match up to our sense of justice or fairness, we want an explanation. When things don’t go the way we think they should, we want God to help us with the why? There is so much we don’t understand... and that can be unsettling, scary, infuriating. And so, we ask questions. In this series, we’ll take a look at your questions, and though there’s no guarantee we’ll solve them all... we’ll struggle with the answers together. Let’s dive in...

Setup Question: Your turn. God just walked in, sat down next to you, and said, “I’ve got 30 minutes before I have to get back to making the Universe tick. What questions you got?” What do you ask?

Scripture

Before we get into the answers, let’s take a look at a story from Jesus’s life that can help us understand our doubt and questions. At the point where our story picks up, Jesus has established his ministry,

and done many miracles. He's gathered his disciples, and sent them out to preach and teach and perform miracles themselves. On this particular day, Jesus is up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John. He's been hanging out with the ghosts of Moses and Elijah, (different story for a different day.) But when he comes back down off the mountain, there's a ruckus in the crowd. They are arguing with the disciples over a man who brought his son to be healed. He claims the boy is possessed by an evil spirit that causes seizures, but when he asked the disciples to heal the boy, they couldn't. And here's where our story picks up...

Read Mark, chapter 9, verses 20 through 24.

Spoiler alert, Jesus heals the boy, everyone goes home happy. But it's this line from the boy's father that is our focus today, "help my unbelief." He's desperate to help son and in this desperation comes to Jesus for healing, even though he has doubts. How often do we feel this way? We know that God is present and loving and powerful, but we still have questions about life, about faith, about everything. Jesus's response is very telling, and will kick off our series. But first...

Question 1: Consider this story. What stands out to you? Who do you identify with in the story? Have you ever felt like the father, desperate for God's help, but full of questions? Have you ever felt like the disciples, wanting to help but not being able to get it right? Maybe you identify with Jesus, frustrated with the ineptitude of the people around? (Careful with that one.)

Series Setup

We're starting this series with this story for a good reason. Look at how Jesus responds to the man's "unbelief." At first, it sounds like Jesus might have gotten a little offended when the father asks, "heal him, *if you can*." And Jesus goes, "what do you mean, if I can?" (The best way to get a guy to do something is to question whether not he can. "Could you carry that for me please, I mean... *if you can*." He'll give himself a hernia trying.) But then the father gives that great line, "help my unbelief." And what does Jesus do? Does he rebuke him? Does he run the guy off? Does he tell him, "sorry dude, no faith, no miracle."? In other places, Jesus seemingly performs a miracle precisely because of the person's faith or the faith of their friends. But here, the guy is admitting to his doubt. He's saying he has questions. And what does Jesus do? He heals the boy anyway! Jesus is telling the father, (and us,) "it's okay to have questions. It's okay to not understand and want answers. It's okay to have doubts and fears and uncertainty." You may have grown up in, or are used to, faith traditions that did not encourage questions. You may have even been punished or rebuked for asking. But here, in this story, Jesus is saying, it's okay to come to me with the things you don't understand." In this faith community, it's okay to bring those questions. You won't be judged. We don't claim to have all the answers, but we'll struggle with the questions together.

Question 2: What has been your experience with questioning your faith? Were you part of a faith tradition that encouraged questions

and conversation? Or were you discouraged from it? Maybe you're a person who simply believes and has no doubt?

Reflection

As we've collected questions over the last few weeks, one major category has stood out above them all. That is, many of your questions can be summarized by this one... why do bad things happen? It's an issue theologians have argued over for centuries, usually phrased, "why is there evil in the world?" But we ask it now because this one, more than any of the others, is so deeply personal. We ask this question because WE experience suffering. Because we feel the suffering of those around us. We see all the horrific things that happen in the world, like war and natural disasters and tragedies, and we can't help but ask the Creator of that world, "why?" There is no quick, easy answer, but we'll look at a few possible responses from the philosophers and theologians over the course of history.

First, bad things don't happen because you didn't eat your vegetables, or because you "deserved it" or didn't have enough faith. Bad things don't happen because the world is sinful and God is punishing humanity. Instead, the big thinkers of history have divided this question into two parts, because there really are two sources for the bad stuff in the world. And the first source... us. Humans. We are one source of the bad things that happen in this world. Every decision we make has the potential for good or bad results. Even some of the most heinous atrocities in our world's history are the direct result of human decisions. Humans are messy, so our decisions are messy. So

then the question becomes, why doesn't God intervene? Well, it's a matter of free will. When we were created, we were given the ability to choose. If God *didn't* give us free will, we may as well be mindless robots. And then what's the point of Creation? That would be lame, and God is anything but lame.

Instead, we developed a sense of right and wrong, and the ability to choose good or bad. And if God intervenes, it wouldn't be free will, would it? If God gave you the ability to choose, but ONLY let you make the right or good decisions, it's not really free will, is it? True free will comes with the ability to choose good or bad. Anything less isn't really free will. So to have TRUE free will means that we had to have the ability to choose. And the ability to choose good and to love God, has to come with the ability to choose bad. And so, to those who asked these questions... Why do children and babies and the innocent suffer in this world? God, why did you allow bad things to happen to us? This is part of the answer... our free will was nonnegotiable, and with it came the ability to choose those bad things.

Question 3: How do you feel about this response? It may not make you feel better, but does it at least provide a sense of understanding for some of the bad things that you had questions about? Does it fall short? Where do you still have questions?

"Okay, but what about things we *didn't* cause?" One person asked, "why are there tragedies like flood and famine and fire?" or, "what about suffering from mental illness and disease?" Well, theologians

suggest a second source of “bad things” in the world, what they call natural evil or natural suffering, simply, the effects of the natural world we live in. This includes stuff like floods and famine and fire... even diseases, cancer, illness, anything we don’t have control over in our decision making that still can cause suffering.

When it comes to natural disasters, the responses are pretty straight forward: natural disasters are just the effects of this big, beautiful, powerful, terrifying blue marble we live on. And those things are just the result of how our world has to function in order for us to have this planet on which to exist at all. Earthquakes are the result of tectonic plates that are necessary for us to have an inhabitable world. The air currents and weather systems that cause hurricanes and tornados are the result of the same processes that create the seasons and life cycles and food we need to exist. “Well, what about disease, cancer, illness?” In some cases, even that is still just part of the way our world and our bodies have to function. We are organic beings, and eventually all organic material breaks down. Sometimes that breakdown happens in different ways. And so, some of it is just how our human bodies function.

But again, we can ask the question, why doesn’t God intervene? God could divert a tornado, or stop an earthquake. God could keep my loved one from getting cancer, or my child from getting sick. It doesn’t have anything to do with free will, so why doesn’t God stop it? One response is, some of it kinda does *at least* overlap with human decision. We choose to live in Kansas where a tornado can whisk us

off to Oz. We choose to smoke which can lead to lung cancer. Our choices can lead to negative consequences in our own bodies or impact the effects of natural disasters. So even some of the suffering that is caused by “natural evils” is still impacted and amplified by our human choice. The other response, we’ll close with... but first...

Question 4: How’s this response hit ya? Is there a disconnect between understanding something and “feeling” it? Consider a natural “evil” you’ve experienced... does this make the questions surrounding it any less disconcerting?

Closing

The final response to all this, and one we won’t shy away from is this, “I don’t know.” There just seems to be a category of things that no explanation will suffice. When a child is diagnosed with cancer, when innocent suffer, when a loved one dies unexpectedly... and none of the previous responses apply. It wasn’t the result of free will. It can’t be explained away by natural causes. And God chose to do nothing. What about that? The only response at that point is, “I don’t know.” All the logic in the world won’t explain why it happened or why God didn’t stop it. A lot of the bad things in the world can be explained by our free will and decisions, and the natural way the world works, but there’s just a list of things that no amount of logic can explain.

The only thing we can say at this point is, let’s look one last time at our Scripture. Jesus looks upon us as he looked up that father and

son. He sees our struggle and our suffering, and has compassion... and walks with us through our suffering. God looks down on us and says, "my child I know you're hurting, and I know you don't understand, but I will sit with you in your pain, and I will hold you if you let me." We may not know what God was thinking, or why God will let some stuff slide, and not other stuff, but I can tell you that he loves you... and if it doesn't appear he's intervening, he's walking by your side, holding you in the suffering.

So, why do bad things happen? Why is there suffering in the world? Sometimes, it's our bad decisions or our lack of making a good one. Sometimes, it's simply the result of this big beautiful world we live in, and these amazing but fragile bodies we're given. Sometimes, I don't know. But I do know, that no matter what, just as Jesus did for this father and son, he listens to our unbelief, sits with us in our struggle, and holds us when we suffer.

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations
and close in prayer.**