

Questions

GOD ASKS US



Introduction to the Study

God continues to seek conversation with us, not for conversation's sake, but for deepening relationships with us. And God enriches these conversations through the questions that God asks us. Have you ever wondered why God would want to ask us questions? In his book *Questions God Asks Us*, author and minister Trevor Hudson offers several reasons for us to consider:

To begin with, God wants to enter into a conversational relationship with each of us. One way in which God shows this deep desire is by asking questions. They are the same questions that God asked the people of God throughout the Bible. When we start hearing them as addressed to us, we receive a glimpse into those things that God wants to talk about with us. Our answers draw us into a relationship of deeper sharing and intimacy with God.... Second, God gives greater dignity to us by allowing us to wrestle with the questions rather than simply giving us the answers.... And third, a question has greater power to transform us than a straightforward answer, especially when it comes from God who knows exactly what questions to ask.

As we set out on this study, we will explore five questions from the Old Testament and five questions from the New Testament. In the process, we will engage the stories in which these questions are asked, and we will personally explore God's question in the context of our own lives (see the section "Answering God's Question" at the end of each lesson).

1. Where are you? (Genesis 3:1-13)
2. Where is your brother? (Genesis 4:1-9)
3. What is that in your hand? (Exodus 4:1-4)
4. What is your name? (Genesis 32:22-32)
5. What are you doing here? (1 Kings 19)
6. What are you looking for? (John 1:19-38)
7. Who do you say that I am? (Mark 8:27-29)
8. Do you want to get well? (John 5:1-9)
9. Why are you crying? (John 20:11-18)
10. Do you understand what I have done for you? (John 13)

God wants to have a two-way relationship with us, and as Hudson reminds us, we "cannot have that kind of relationship without listening and speaking...these ten questions provide a starting point for a deep dialogue between God and yourself." The ultimate goal, moreover, is for us to explore these questions together with others. Hudson writes, "Something really good can happen in our lives when we share our personal experiences of engaging God's questions with other significant people in our lives."

Questions have the power to transform us much more than answers, and as we begin a new year, I'm excited for us to consider the challenging questions God asks. As we wrestle with these questions in our own life, may we find ourselves in a whole new world of conversational relationship and discipleship with God.

Where Are You?

The first question that God asked in the Bible comes from the Creation story in the book of Genesis. You may remember the garden setting. Soon after our first ancestors had been created, they broke the one and only rule they had been given. The consequences, of course, were tragic – closeness with God and with each other was destroyed by separation. Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to hide from each other, and they hid from God behind some bushes in the garden. Then we read these beautiful words: “But the Lord God called to [them], ‘Where are you?’

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 16

There’s a certain kind of joy and depth that comes from being asked a good question, or many good questions. Where are you? In your heart, in your mind, in your journey? How does that feel? What are you hoping for? What are you afraid of? Questions, and the exchange of feelings and understandings they invite, open the door to deep intimacy. They bridge the chasm between *knowing about* and *knowing*.

Read Genesis 3:1-13. It’s striking that the Creator of the universe chooses not to relate to the world at a distance, but takes on human form, goes for a walk among the creatures, and personally engages them regarding recent events. The writer of Genesis presents a deeply profound understanding of how God chooses to enter into the life of the world and relate to God’s creation. Even more, this God comes to the man and the woman *after* their sin; God does not leave them or walk elsewhere.

As the man and woman were ashamed in each other’s presence (3:7), they now realize their guilt and shame in the presence of God. The sound of God walking in the garden in the dusk’s coolness implies the intimacy that God and humanity enjoyed in Eden prior to the transgression. And this is the tragedy, because the loss of that intimacy is apparent to the humans. They were ashamed to be in God’s presence, and so they hid themselves “among the trees of the garden.”

Scholar Bill Arnold writes that the Bible has “no portraits of divine pathos more tender than Yahweh’s voice in Eden intoning: ‘*Where are you?*’ Only a single word in Hebrew, this rhetorical question evokes the stern but loving voice of a father addressing a child.” The question is not meant to elicit information about their whereabouts, as though God is confused by their absence. Rather, God is encouraging introspection; why exactly are they there, beyond the trees, hiding from the Lord who has provided all their needs and blessed them abundantly?

Hudson writes, “I wonder how Adam and Eve felt when they heard God calling them. Were they afraid, wondering if God was going to pounce on them and punish them? After all, they must have known they had broken God’s heart. Or did they feel something like I did as a child when my parents came looking for me? Did God’s question cause them to realize how much God longed for their company?”

God’s Searching Heart

God comes to find us in our hiding. God’s “walking” in the garden suggests a habitual action – a sign that this was something God often did for relational intimacy with humanity. What’s surprising is that sin and shame don’t drive God away. Instead God asks a question — showing that God wants to retain the relationship. Can we be fully known, fully seen, and not be rejected by God? Yes. God fully knows who we are and still draws near in conversation and connection.

Read Luke 15:1-10. God desires an intimate relationship with each of us. Consider how this is the same message that Jesus shared about God. The stories Jesus tells in Luke 15 center on something that was lost (“one” of the ninety-nine sheep, “one” of the ten coins, and even “one” of the two sons). The shepherd, the woman, and the father in these stories evoke images of a God who not only actively seeks out individuals who are lost (note the emphasis on the “one” out of the ninety-nine and the ten), but also rejoices when they are found. This is a God who actively seeks restoration: “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6; Psalm 86:15).

Unlike the English word *repentance*, which implies contrition and remorse, the Greek word *metanoia* has to do with a change of mind and purpose — a shift in how we perceive and respond to life. When God finds us when we are lost, our usual ways of perceiving and responding to life are transformed. And when this happens, there is great rejoicing over the “one sinner who repents” (15:7). Sinners *repent* because they know they are *lost* and thus can open themselves to the transformation that comes with God’s *finding* them.

Jesus’ parable wonderfully illustrates God’s searching heart. God, Jesus says, is like this woman [who searches tirelessly for the lost coin]. God looks for each one of us until we are found. We are loved with an unlimited love, with an everlasting love, with a love that will never let us go. God passionately desires an intimate relationship with each one of us. Our hearts have been fashioned for this divine connection, and nothing but a close and personal relationship with God will ever satisfy our deepest longings.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 18

Coming Out of Hiding & Opening Our Hearts to God

As we grow up, we tend to hide our real self from each other and God, and sometimes even from ourselves. Hudson writes, “We hide because we believe that if we are ever known for who we really are, we will not be acceptable. So we go through much of our lives continually projecting images of who we are not...In the words of the Adam and Eve story, we cover up our nakedness with the fig leaves of pretense. Not surprisingly, our relationship with God and other people are often characterized by a sad superficiality and lack of intimacy.”

Yet it is God who calls us out of hidden isolation and into intimacy. God’s question calls Adam and Eve into openness and authenticity with him, and it invites us “to come out of hiding, to take off our fig leaves, and to become more real.” To be called out of hiding is to be called into vulnerability and honesty about who we really are, and “our relationships with God and others change for the better when we begin to do this.”

The witness of Scripture is clear: The God who speaks is also the God who listens. Written into the praying lives of biblical men and women is the passionate certainty that when we speak to God, we are heard. We can be certain that everything we communicate to God is heard, even when we struggle to believe this is true. Growing in a prayer life of sincere conversation depends our intimacy with God’s transforming Spirit, allows us to discover our true selves, and changes the way we relate to others.

Regularly praying the Psalms trains us in how to speak to God. Originally written as both the prayer book and the hymnbook of the Jewish people, the Psalms were prayed by Jesus and his followers. They serve us today as God’s gracious resource for the building of a faithful, honest, intimate prayer life. Eugene Peterson writes: “In the Psalms we do not primarily learn what God says to us, but how to honestly, devoutly, and faithfully answer his words to us...The Psalms train us in answering God.”

Finally, speaking to the God who listens not only leads us closer to the Father’s heart, but also awakens us to our neighbor. We come to our Abba Father never as an only child, but with fellow brothers and sisters, whether they are physically present or not. Hudson reminds us that we are surrounded by people “who find it hard to believe that they matter to God....They feel that God does not care. These are people for whom God’s searching heart aches. But they need someone to put flesh and blood on the divine compassion before they can experience God’s loving question, ‘Where are you?’ When we are found by God, divine love flows naturally into the way we relate to others.”

Answering God’s Question¹

Where are you, at the present moment, in your relationship with God? God longs to be in one-on-one conversation with us. And so God takes the initiative in coming toward us and asking this question. Think about this for a moment. We are not starting the conversation with God from scratch. God has already begun it. We just need to plug into the conversation that is already going on. One way for us to do this is to respond to this question. Here are some suggestions:

1. **Begin by telling God what is going on in your life at the moment.** Identify and name the feelings that are present in you. Express them aloud to God and let them go in your prayer. Share with God your deepest longings, your joys, your sorrow, your shame, your fears. Build this honest sharing of feelings and longings into your dialogue with God. It’s not a question of giving new information to God but a matter of learning to speak openly with God about everything in your life and then experiencing the closeness that this kind of transparency brings to your relationship with God.
2. **Consider using the Psalms to lead you into this conversation.** Choose your favorite psalm. If you don’t have a favorite, start with Psalm 23 or 103. Allow the words of the psalmist to become part of your own praying heart. You may discover the psalm directing your attention to God in praise and thanksgiving; it may connect you more intimately with some aspect of your own life experience; it will certainly provide vocabulary with which to pray. Following this, share with God whatever is on your heart and mind.
3. **You may also want to respond to the challenge of this question: to make God’s love real for others.** The God we meet in the Bible looks for every human being, no matter who he or she is or what he or she has done. Each person has a special place in God’s searching heart. God longs for every human being to know that place—especially those who suffer and are in pain. Obviously you cannot reach out to everyone who is suffering. But in your conversation with God, you can ask, “Lord, who falls within my care? To whom can I bring your love.” And then listen.

¹ Portions of this section are excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 22-23

Discussion

1. As you look back on your life, who are some people who have asked you good questions? (Perhaps it was a teacher in college, a parent, a friend, a mentor, or a spouse). How did it feel to be asked good questions? Can you recall a particular question that had a lasting impact on you?
2. Do you agree that questions have the power to transform us more than answers? Why do you think God asks so many questions throughout the story of scripture?
3. What are some of the most common ways that we sometimes hide ourselves from God and from those around us?
4. In your experience, what is the value of putting your experiences into words and actually speaking them to God and someone who is safe? What benefits come with that kind of honesty and transparency?
5. When did you first become aware of God's love for you? What events or people in your life have reminded you of this love? How did they do this?
6. Based on the practices listed in the previous section, how will you answer God's question in the week ahead? Pray that each person will commit themselves to honest and open dialogue with God about where they are right now, perhaps even using their favorite Psalm as a starting point, and to make God's love real for others through their words actions toward them.