

Sunday 7th January 2024. God's Questions. 'Where are you?'

Tom Yacomeni

Genesis 3v1-13 The Fall

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?"

2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, ³ but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'"

4 "You will not certainly die," the serpent said to the woman. **5** "For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. **7** Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. **8** Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

10 He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid." **11** And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

12 The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

13 Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

Today we are starting a new sermon series called 'God's questions' which looks at occasions in the Bible when God asks people about their life, their faith or their situation. The questions God asks not only reveal a lot about his character and priorities but they are very deliberate, they are perfectly timed and carefully directed. When you look at the Bible and see that God is asking a question, we have to take stock and ask the same question of ourselves. So this is a perfect opportunity at the start of a new year to reflect on some of these thought provoking questions and see how God might be leading us in the months ahead.

The first question God asks in the Bible is addressed to Adam, who was naked, afraid and hiding.

‘Where are you?’ He says.

Of course, God knew exactly where Adam was and why he was hiding.

God knows everything there is to know about us. Even before he formed us in the womb, he knows us. He knows when we sit down and when we rise, there is no place we can go that is out of his reach.

And yet, just as he asked Adam where he was, he is asking us this morning ‘where are you?’

The first amazing thing to note about this question is that despite our human condition and the sinful state of our hearts, God comes searching for us. Right from the outset of the Bible God is like the patient Father, looking out for the return of his prodigal son. Most religions aspire to reach new levels of self-discipline and enlightenment. But the Judeo-Christian worldview begins with a God who searches for his people and more than anything desires a relationship with humanity.

God could have simply condemned Adam and Eve for their disobedience, wiped them off the face of the planet or banished them immediately from his presence, but instead he takes the opportunity to open a dialogue. The original language carries with it a sense of loss and heartfelt grief.

“Where are you?”

Adam and Eve had just fallen from grace. Tempted by the devil to eat the forbidden fruit they suddenly become self-aware, and are gripped by fear, guilt and isolation. Their shame at their disobedience and exposure caused them to remove themselves from God’s presence and hide.



It is worth noting that the first time Adam directly addresses God in the Bible it is a confession: “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

But despite this being the initial low point for Adam and Eve, we need to recognise that this actually also marks a glorious point of inflection.



The moment when repentance begins. Adam is now truly dialoguing with God and so begins the redemption plan for humanity.

In his book ‘Metanoia’ Alan Hirsch argues that the church has lost sight of the gift and necessity of repentance for the change and transformation we desperately need. The Word *Metanoia* is the Greek word for repentance – it is the word Jesus used at the beginning of his ministry when he said ‘The time has come. The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!’

metanoia

Metanoia means far more than simple regret for our past actions. Hirsch says ‘the best translation of Metanoia is “paradigm shift” – or perhaps more colloquially, the experience of having your mind blown’.

When God asked Adam ‘where are you?’ he was inviting him to start the process of metanoia. To recognise the reality of his situation, but also to start understanding the world in a whole new way.

Richard Niebuhr wrote 'The Christian responsibility 'to repent' demands more than simply expressing feelings of regret for moral wrong-doing and a vague desire for reform. [Rather,] it involves the recognition and rejection of various false frameworks for understanding the world itself.'

Metanoia renews our relationship with God, bringing with it an intense desire for him, deep gratitude, and a growth in self-awareness that increases our freedom to love. This clearly has huge implications for fruitful discipleship as well as for faithful living in the Kingdom.

I wonder what false frameworks of thinking God is wanting to challenge in us as we come to the start of a new year?

The devil deceived Adam and Eve by sowing seeds of doubt about the integrity of God's character and the commands he issued for their wellbeing. The serpent's lies created a false framework of understanding when he said 'you will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' And when the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food, pleasing to the eye and desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.

False frameworks of thinking are created when we choose worldly wisdom over God's wisdom. Metanoia repentance is the necessary first step in opening our eyes to deceptive wisdom that might appear to be good, pleasing and desirable, but actually can lead us down the wrong path to isolation, fear and shame.



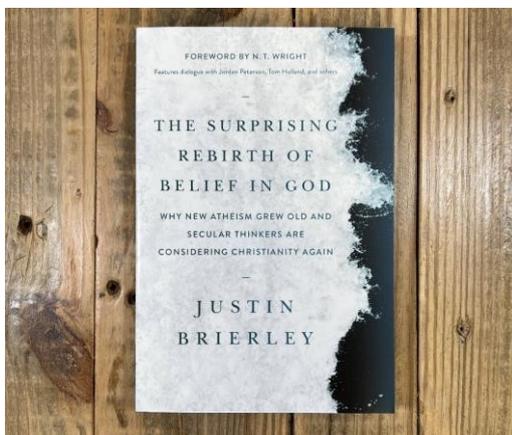
Just after Christmas we took a few days to go away to North Wales. On the journey home there was a new section of road that clearly hadn't been registered yet with Google maps. My Satnav started taking me in completely the wrong direction and it was only when I woke up to the fact something was amiss that I was able to turn around and re-join the correct route.



What if 2024 is set to be a metanoia year, where we need to be ready to wake up and have our directions reset by God, and perhaps un-learn some of our false patterns of thinking and instead embracing God's wisdom in a new way?

The last few years have brought a shaking to the world resulting in bewilderment and confusion. As God's wisdom has been pushed to the margins, increasing conflicts, advancing AI, the pandemic and environmental catastrophe have raised levels of fear and anxiety particularly amongst the younger generations. An anxious nihilistic malaise is beginning to be the dominant characteristic of what has sadly been dubbed the 'Doomer' generation.

But there are signs that the world is waking up to the fact that a rejection of God and his values may have been taking us down a negative path.



Justin Brierley recently published a book called 'The surprising rebirth of belief in God – why new Atheism grew old and secular thinkers are considering Christianity again' and it details surprising conversations with influencers, journalists and secular thinkers who are concluding that God and particularly Christianity actually does start to make the most sense of science, history, culture and the search for meaning.

It was telling to note that 2023 concluded with renewed calls for assisted dying to be legalised following the BBC's interview with Esther Rantzen. The arguments can appear good, pleasing and desirable. But what if Christians are called to a different way of thinking which patiently upholds the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of family and the sanctity of community under God's just and gentle reign? The path may be harder and few may choose it, but we need to be careful to follow the narrow road that leads to life.

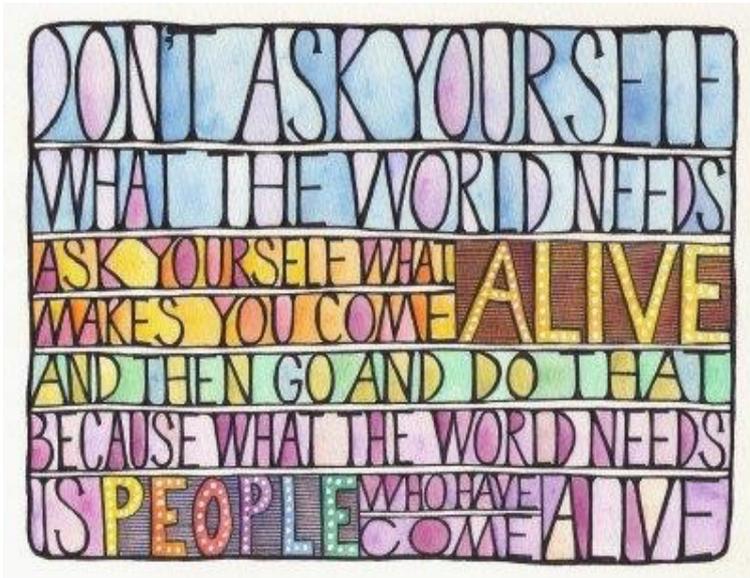
It will take great patience to demonstrate the life and message of Jesus in ways that can help the world take note. But what if the values God is calling us to embrace in the year ahead are more to do with patience, holiness and integrity rather than instant success, achievement or notoriety?

Patience, holiness and integrity means we walk together along what Eugene Petersen called 'a long obedience in the same direction'.



Instead of quick wins we look to follow God's directions and seek his promptings. It means finding out what God is calling us to do whether that be visible or behind the scenes. It starts by asking the question 'Where am I?' and praying for the Lord to show us how we can move forward step by step into the works he has prepared for us to do. Jesus came, he said, to bring us life and life in abundance.

Howard Thurman said 'Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.'



So All Saints, where are you? What would make you come alive spiritually in 2024? Perhaps you need to start by being reconciled to God and coming out of hiding to dialogue with him. Instead of being naked and afraid, the story of the Bible is all about God in Christ saying 'Do not be afraid!'. We can come to him for forgiveness, a new start, and a whole new way of thinking.

I asked the ministry staff team on Thursday what coming alive spiritually would look like for them. One answered that what would really make them come alive is praying for more people and seeing them healed and whole.

Another is praying for a wonderful miracle this year, outstanding signs of God's power for all to see.

Another talked about us encountering the manifest presence of God in worship, and another would love to see people going deeper in theology with small groups developing an organic zeal for God and his word. As we go out into the community more, others would love to hear more testimonies of people who were once feeling lost now being found. One member talked about the church working so well that ministry flourishes.

What I would love to see is people with different gifts, skills, and talents all working together for the glory of God in this community. In the church, out on the streets in the schools, in the pub in the shops in people's homes. My job this year is to say to you 'if God is calling you, yes you can!' I was really encouraged yesterday when Sandy Hewitt shared how she has been praying for several weeks about how she might really make a difference for God in 2024. And she happened to see an appeal in the newsletter for people to go in to WASPS to hear children read. She knew this was the answer. During her years in education she had seen what a dramatic impact learning to read can have on a child's life. She remembered helping a youngster who

couldn't read and discovering years later that he went on to study English and ended up writing extraordinary scripts for musicals.

So perhaps as I come in to land I wonder if we can ask ourselves where we are and what would make us come alive spiritually in 2024. Perhaps we could frame it in terms of the greatest commandment 'love the Lord your God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.'

For spiritual fitness our heart needs to be alive and healthy emotionally, Intellectually and actively.

If you are spiritually lacking emotionally, perhaps ask for prayer today for the Holy Spirit to fire up your senses. If you are feeling intellectually dry, perhaps God is prompting you to sign up for theological study. Or perhaps you are feeling lethargic in your activity for the Lord. Is there a team you can join or a new way of serving in 2024?

Finally, are there patterns of thinking we have slipped into that we need to recognise and reject as ungodly or untrue? Let's pray for the truth to set us free. All Saints, the Lord wants you to come alive spiritually in 2024!

Let's pray and ask the Lord to show us where we are, so we can change our thinking and follow his ways.