

God I want some answers ... now

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne February 1, 2009

Questions for Heaven

Words and music by Chris Rice

*Feel the sun in my eyes, swat that clumsy fly
Woke me up from a dream about Heaven
Smellin' coffee downstairs, yawn a quick little prayer
And get up at a quarter to seven
Mirror catches my stare, got some nice pillow hair
And I smile all the way to the bathroom
Scratch my whiskery chin, now my cranium swims
With questions I can't wait to ask you
Like why did you bother with so many stars?
Do you ever play tricks on the angels?
And what happened to all of those dinosaurs?
Where's the Garden of Eden?
And what causes de ja vu?
I guess in Heaven I'll learn, I'll be waiting my turn
To ask about quasars and feathers
I hope the line isn't long, I hope your patience is strong
It's a good thing forever's forever
Do our jokes make you laugh?
What's your favorite cartoon?
Can you tell me what's out past the edges?
And what about UFOs, taste buds, and tornados?
Why do we dream?
Oh, and what causes de ja vu?
Time to call it a day, time to turn off my brain
It's already half past eleven
Reach to turn out the light and close my sleepy eyes
And save up the questions for Heaven
I'll save all the questions for Heaven
I'm saving up questions for Heaven*

Intro to reading and reflection: Have you ever been told you ask too many questions? Ever been scolded for being too inquisitive? Well you won't hear that from me, though I will ask you (John) not to interrupt the services and to hold your questions til later ... Questions are necessary if you want to learn anything. Even so, some folk have believed questions could be asked anywhere except in church, or of God. But there's a difference between asking God questions and questioning God's ways. One seeks understanding, the other complains. The difference between the two comes through one of the trickiest parts of the Bible. It's called the book of Job. If you ever thought you were having a bad day, you've got nothing to compare with Job, who even though he was faithful and did all things well, still had everything go wrong. His farm fails, his home is destroyed, members of his family die, He begins by asking God

the age old question: "Why? Why God? Why has all this happened to me?" By the end of the story, though, Job has stopped looking for answers, and started pointing fingers at God. That's when, according to the story, God shows up and asks Job a few questions of his own. Here's a part of what God asked of Job:

Job 38, 40, 42 (The Message)

God spoke to Job: "Where were you when I created the earth? Tell me, since you know so much! Who decided on its size? Certainly you'll know that! Who came up with the blueprints and measurements? How was its foundation poured, and who set the cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in chorus and all the angels shouted praise? Have you ever gotten to the true bottom of things, explored the labyrinthine caves of deep ocean? Do you know the first thing about death? Do you have one clue regarding death's dark mysteries? And do you have any idea how large this earth is? Speak up if you have even the beginning of an answer ... I have some more questions for you, and I want straight answers. Do you presume to tell me what I'm doing wrong? Are you calling me a sinner so you can be a saint? Do you have an arm like my arm? Can you shout in thunder the way I can?" And Job said, "I admit I once lived by rumors of you; but now I have it all firsthand—from my own eyes and ears and I will never again live only by rumors ..."

You know when someone says, "Tell me, if you know so much" things aren't going well. And when it's God telling you off like that, it would be good to reevaluate your position. Job does. And he learns something from all of this. You and I can too. Job answers back to God, "I admit I once lived by rumors of you." Job means that for most of his life he went along on what other people told him about God. He had no personal experience of God before, no direct contact, no communion with God. He knew about God but did not know God personally, he did not have a relationship with God. Until now. Now, having seen God face to face so to speak, Job is ready to accept God's answers, even if he doesn't understand them all. Job finds that he has found the answers he needs simply in God's presence. As King David had written in the Psalms, a book Job no doubt knew by heart: "It is in your presence we find the fullness of joy O Lord." [Psalm 16] So while God may not answer every one of your questions about dinosaurs and quasars and black holes, his presence is enough to answer the longing of your heart. And that's enough to bring me to my knees and be amazed at God ...

Insert prayers and worship music here

Intro to the message: Today we're starting a three week series which asks about what you really want from God. That's why we asked you to fill in these cards on your way into church. We're asking you what questions you would most like to have God answer. I'll look through them and see if there are any I can help you answer in weeks to come, though it goes without saying I'm not God. Still, most of us have questions, or even doubts. There are things you want to know, right? Like what really did come first, the chicken or the egg? Some questions like that may just be a matter of curiosity. But then, a lot of your other questions may have to do with something bigger, like trying to understand why something has happened or looking for meaning in your life. Those questions can get really complicated, and they carry a lot of emotion with them. One of you may want to know why you were abused as a child, another why your husband has had an affair. You may wonder why your child has to suffer with a learning disability, or why a parent died of cancer, even after you prayed and prayed for them to get better. Those are the really big questions. In between these two extremes are the other questions about how to get along and make it through life. You wonder how you will make ends meet, or how to deal with conflict in your relationships. What does God say about sexual desires and what's the real deal with parenting?

Well, that's a lot of ground to cover for this morning. However, they all start with a first question you need to ask. That question is simply this: Can we really know any answers? Are there truths out there to be found, or do we each make up the truth for ourselves? Well OK, that doesn't sound right to me ... something about making up the truth sounds wrong from the start. Only for many people, including, according to some polls, a majority of folk under 40, there are no absolute truths. None. Nothing is absolutely good or bad, everything is up for grabs. No absolute truths ... except for the absolute truth that there are no absolute ... OK, so that idea is just wrong by definition. But the problem comes down to who gets to decide what's right and wrong, what's real and what's true? I think that's where people have trouble with God.

We here in this country have become so delighted with freedom we don't like anything that limits those freedoms. So the idea that God gets to choose what's right and wrong may sound bad to some folk. They don't want God telling them what to do. OK I get that, but there's a difference between God telling you what's right and wrong and leaving your choices up to you, and saying there are no rights and wrongs except what you choose. On the whole I'm not that concerned about letting God be in charge of truth. I figure he's better at it than I am in the same way I'm not upset by letting the pilot fly my airliner or the dentist care for my teeth. I don't have to be in control of everything to be free. Indeed, when it comes to the truth, Jesus told his followers that it is the truth, God's truth, that ultimately sets everyone free. *"And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* [John 8:32 NLT] I like the sound of that.

So let me encourage you to look for the truth and not just make answers up. For a Christ Follower, this truth is tied to the Spirit of God. Spirit and truth go together, or in the words of one famous church leader from centuries ago, what you and I need is to begin with at least some faith in God and then seek more understanding. For instance I have faith that there is truth and I can know it, and ultimately, no matter where I discover truth, it will lead me back to God. That's why I don't get all

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upset about science and faith. Sometimes scientists get a bit on my nerves, like the ones who think there is no God because God does not like to be experimented on and they have not been able to prove God's existence. Like anyone ever could ... But I know this about science. It will never disprove God's exist-

ence or his ways. It can't. Who do you think created science in the first place? God. So I seek the truth and the spirit both, I seek for God's ways because in them I find the truth I need to make my way through life. Jesus explained this in a famous part of the Bible, in a discussion with a woman who was full of her own questions for Jesus ... Jesus responded to her: *But the time is coming—it has, in fact, come—when what you're called will not matter and where you go to worship will not matter. It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit.*" [John 4:23-24 The Message]

It's not whether you're a Baptist or a Methodist, a Protestant or a Catholic, God is interested with who you are and the way you live. Jesus applauds this woman's pursuit of truth, only then as the story proceeds, he corrects some of her notions about what's true. You know what the woman did next? She thanked him for showing her what's real about God. She wasn't upset that someone had a different notion of truth than she did, and she didn't complain that she had been wrong. That's an important part of the pursuit of truth. When finding the truth is more important than you being right, the truth does set you free.

Most people I meet are on a pursuit for truth. I'll bet most of you want answers too. I'm just trying to get you to look for answers beyond yourself, to look for answers with the one who is the source of all truth: God. That's what's behind the radical claim Jesus made when he said, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me."* [John 14:6 NRSV] Now I realize that claim makes modern folk uncomfortable. Aren't there a lot of different truths? A lot of different religions, and each with a valid path to God? Well I don't believe it is my place to tell people in every other religion

they are wrong. No one died and left me in charge of deciding who goes to Heaven and who goes to Hell. But as a Christian I do believe Jesus was God with us. That's not a claim any other religion makes. And when he says he's the one way to the Father, it makes perfect sense to me. There may be other ways to know God. Folks, even the Bible recognizes that there are those who know God and respond to him without ever hearing about him in the Bible. There may be other ways to learn about God, but you can only learn to have a relationship with God the Father by meeting Jesus God's son. Otherwise you'll know about God, like Job did, through hearsay and rumors. But that's not the same as having a relationship with God the Father.

The bigger deal in what Jesus said was this claim that he was the truth and the way. Not a truth, not a way, but the truth. Not this truth or that truth, not true about some things and wrong about others. Jesus claimed to be the source of truth. Can you accept that? I do, and that changes how I look at everything else in my life. I mean, once I accepted Jesus as the source of truth, I wanted to know what Jesus says about handling conflicts or handling money, about raising good kids or about not raising hell with my neighbors. And more importantly still, by trusting Jesus to show me what's true in life, I no longer question this part of the Bible or that. As another famous author wrote: [GK Chesterton, Orthodoxy]: *"This is, in conclusion, my reason for accepting the Christian religion and not merely the scattered and secular truths out of the religion. I do it because the thing has not merely told this truth or that truth, but has revealed itself as a truth-telling thing."* The truth telling thing. That's Jesus, and that's why I want to learn more about what he did and said, and how it applies to my life. That's why I worship and read the Bible and attend a small group. I want the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And I find it in Jesus.

So where are you looking for the truth these days? Where do you start when you want an answer to one of your questions? I told the crowd at the Spirit Cafe this week, it really does matter where you start from. Ask for directions from Mapquest and you not only need to know where you want to go, you need to state up front where you are starting from. It makes a difference. As a Christ Follower that's just the bottom line for me. Maybe it's not that way for you, or maybe you'd like to have that kind of faith but you're not there. OK. At least let me show you why I believe in God's truth, and how it can work for you in your life.

For example, take the three kinds of questions we started asking this morning. There are those questions where you are curious about dinosaurs and space. If science can't answer them for you, those are questions you might as well save up for Heaven. I can't help you there. But God can help you with the two other kinds of questions.

Like with how to deal with the issues of daily life. God has a lot

of answers to offer on these issues. But how often do you start here ... and how often do you start by doing what you think is best or what someone else told you to do? Does God even come into the picture when you think about money or relationships? Remember where you end up depends on where you start. OK, it's not like you should expect God to have left specific answers in the Bible to questions like *"Which boyfriend should I marry?"* or *"How generous should I be to my kids with their allowance?"* Looking for answers from God is not the same as playing with one of those crazy eight balls. Remember how they worked? Ask a specific question, shake the ball, and turn it over to reveal an answer like, *"Not likely,"* or *"Outcome cloudy at this time."* Still, God has left behind answers in the form of guidelines for living that can help you with the specific challenges you face. Of course, they only help you if you use them. The Good Sense workshop can help you make good choices about your finances, give you a budget, and strategies for keeping on your budget and a plan for getting out of debt ... all based on guidelines in the Bible. But none of that will help you if you don't learn about them. For those of you who are having a hard time at work with someone who is spreading rumors or talking behind your back ... did you know God has some specific advice for how to deal with that issue? It's in Matthew 18; I've used the process God outlines there before and seen it work wonders.

Only too often I think people simply dismiss what's in the Bible. They confuse something that is old with something that is out of date. Not the same thing. Certainly the Bible comes from other cultures, so it takes a little work to understand it. And it comes through other languages, so it can be misunderstood if not studied. Take for example the old saying, *"Spare the rod and spoil the child."* [Proverbs 13:24] A lot of parents would be horrified to take that at face value. Or what they think of as face value. "Not to spare the rod" has been described by many as an excuse to beat your child. How could the Bible prescribe that kind of parenting. Just goes to show how out of date the answers in here are, right? Or ... wait. I seem to recall from another famous passage in the Bible something about: *"The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil ..."*

Do you remember why you don't have to be afraid? *"His rod and his staff they comfort me."* The rod comforts me? Am I a masochist? Or is something else going on here ... and oh yes, back there with the sparing the rod verse. Can you see how it is possible some folk have misunderstood this phrase or taken it out of context? Yup. I find when people complain about God's answers they are often reacting to the simplistic answers Christians have given, not the truth God offers. It's always easy to poke fun of fundamentalists, but it's a lot harder to poke holes in the fundamentals of God's truth. And the truth will out, sooner or later, and that's why I think studying the Bible not only on your own but also in small groups, is so important to growing as a Christ Follower. How else will you both learn the truth and see how to apply it in your life? Something better awaits you.

Excuse me folks, but it will do no good later to say, *"Oh if I*

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had only known better. "Well you can know better. And knowing better means you can live better. Following God's ways means you're less likely to mess up things by doing it the wrong way. You may not want to admit it, no one ever does want to admit it, but so many of the problems you and I have to face are really no more or less than self inflicted wounds, brought on by bad choices we've made, all because we did not follow the guidelines God has offered to show us a better way. Of course the good news here is that by learning God's ways to have better boundaries, or to deal with conflict or to handle money or to keep from giving in to sexual temptations means you can have a much healthier and happier life. You've got the power to make it happen ... with God's help.

Finally there are those questions you have that run deep, where you are seeking for the meaning to life and the answer to "Why." What kind of answers does God offer you for those kinds of questions? I think God answers those questions the way he did for Job. God shows up and his presence takes away the need to ask "Why."

A father grew tired of the persistent questions of his four year old daughter. The big game was coming on soon, he was tired, just wanted some peace and quiet, at least for a few minutes. He'd already played four different games with his daughter. And he loved her, but he wanted to rest. So he tore a page out of one of his magazines that showed a map of the world on it. He tore it into small pieces and gave it to the child. "Here's a puzzle for you to do," he said, "Daddy's going to take a rest and so don't bother me until you finish putting the pieces all together." Dad figured he had just bought himself a good fifteen minutes or more. His daughter at three, did not know how to read much and did not know a Tanzania from a Turkey. But it wasn't a minute or so later, just as he had settled down on the couch and closed his eyes, that he heard his daughter saying, "Come see, come see." Dad growled, "I told you not to get me until you had put the thing back together." She said, "I did it I did it." Sure enough she had put the page together. Only she had it backwards ... The girl explained, "I didn't know how to put the map together, but on the back there was a picture of a face, and I knew if I put the face together the rest would be in the right places."

That's how it works for me too. Like Job I can claim that seeing God face to face puts an end to my questions. In God's pres-

ence I may not fully understand "Why" things have happened the way they have in life, but I no longer care, because God's presence takes away my need to ask. It's something CS Lewis said (and something we talked about Friday at the Spirit Cafe). Lewis grew up not being religious, not caring about God. He had prayed for his mom to be healed, but his mother died anyway and Lewis lost all faith in God. Only later, in his pursuit of truth he realized what God offered:

I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen. Not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.

– CS Lewis from *Is Theology Poetry?*

I believe, but that does not mean I fully understand it all yet. I believe, and believing leads me to ask questions, to seek more of God. For I believe when I see him face to face, I'll see the answers to everything else. Until then, I'll trust in God and I will live in awe of him ...

Till I see your face

Words and music by Hillsong

*The greatest love that anyone could ever know
That overcame the cross and grave to find my soul
Until I see you face to face
And grace amazing takes me home
I'll trust in you
With all I am I live to see your kingdom come
And in my heart I pray you let your will be done
Until I see you face to face
And grace amazing takes me home
I'll trust in you
I will live to love you, I will live to bring you praise
I will live a child in awe of you
You are the voice that calls the universe to be
You are the whisper in my heart that speaks to me
Until I see you face to face
And grace amazing takes me home
I'll trust in you
I will live to love you, I will live to bring you praise
I will live a child in awe of you*