

Life's Big Questions (Week 4):

If God is real, how do I connect with him?

Key Concept:

Connecting with God

Bible Study:

Mark 15 Bible

RECAP

Last week, we discussed the question of forgiveness in our relationships with humans (horizontally) and in our relationship with God (vertically). We saw how forgiveness with God mirrors forgiveness with other humans--fundamentally, forgiveness is the payment of a debt. We saw how Jesus paid the debt for humanity, making forgiveness possible between God and mankind and also making it possible for us to forgive ourselves. This week we will add to the canvas of forgiveness another of life's big questions, which is this: if God is real and able to forgive me, how do I connect with him?

To answer this question, we'll use Mark 15 as a jumping off because it features six different ways that people try to connect with God.

1. CONNECTING WITH GOD: THROUGH TOUGH QUESTIONS

Some of us grew up with parents, teachers, coaches, and mentors who helped us connect with God. Others of us did not. Regardless, as we get older, we have questions, and ignoring them can be spiritually lethal. Tim Keller discusses the spiritual benefit of addressing (rather than ignoring them) when he states, "A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic."¹ Each week we have been exploring life's tough questions to help build a vibrant, gritty faith that can withstand the storms of life and begin to answer the questions we face in the modern world.

¹Keller, Timothy. *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. New York: Dutton, 2008, pp. xvi-xvii. Print

Mark 15 helps frame a question that has been a deal-breaker for many people in connecting with God relationally. In short, here is the question--how can there be a good, loving, and all-powerful God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world? This is, without a doubt, one of the thorniest of all questions, especially if it isn't just a philosophical question. For some of you, it's become personal, and you find yourself saying, "God, how could you allow _____ to happen to me or to my beloved _____?"

While we won't be able to deal with this difficult question exhaustively, let's consider a few short responses:

1st Response: We're Toddlers Seeing The Tip of an Iceberg

When facing horrific tragedies, people often respond with the well-worn cliché, "There is a reason for everything." If they believe in God they may add, "God has a reason for everything ☞." Yes, He does, but there is a very good chance we will never know what that reason *is*, particularly on this side of heaven.

Sure, there are exceptions, like that of Joseph in the Bible. God granted Joseph prophetic, almost telescopic-like insight into his suffering, allowing him to say to his brothers, "do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you" (Gen. 45:7).

Yet, even when we think we've figured out the reason for our suffering (like Joseph did over 20 years later!), we are undoubtedly seeing the tip of the iceberg. Under the surface, we know God is weaving and working all things for good in the lives of untold numbers of people and places we don't know, and never will, until heaven (Rms. 8:28). Can you imagine the ripple effects of God's saving works with millions of people in the nation of Israel and the surrounding nations who were saved through Joseph's life? Joseph may have had prophetic insight, but he was still like a toddler seeing the tip of an iceberg. Put bluntly, we're toddlers in comparison to God, and that is generous.

2nd Response: We're Toddlers Who Can't Even See the Tip of the Iceberg

Remember the objection: how can there be a good, loving, and all-powerful God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world? Part of the problem is that often times we can't even see the tip of the iceberg. Forget about what is below the surface and all the things God is doing in others lives through our suffering--we can't even see anything above the surface. There is no tip of the iceberg. We can't see any good and justifiable reason for our suffering or anything good that God is working out of it.

In response, picture a loving parent who has the power to keep their child from suffering through the intense pain of vaccinations. We've all had (or can imagine) a toddler screaming bloody murder as the doctor vaccinates them, with eyes ping-ponging between the evil man sticking them and the traitor they formerly called mom or dad. The toddler cannot see any good reason for their mom and dad to allow a man in a white coat to stick a horrifyingly painful needle into their arm, and neither can we as God allows an injection of suffering into our lives. Any rationale offered about short-term pain for long-term gain seems like pure jibberish to a toddler. "Just make it stop," toddlers, like us, scream! Yet, we must remember: just because we can't see God's reason for our suffering doesn't mean he doesn't have one. Nor does it mean God doesn't exist. It simply means we're toddlers who can't see a reason for the present suffering or make any sense of it whatsoever.

3rd Response: The Cross Reveals the Character of God

Let's put the toddler analogy to bed and approach the question through a different angle.

Remember the question: how can there be a good, loving, and all-powerful God when there is so much evil and suffering in the world?

Goodness: The cross is like a magnifying lens on God's goodness because it shows his radical generosity. Just as we celebrate the goodness (no, greatness!) of soldiers who gave their lives for our freedom on Memorial Day, Christians memorialize the cross because it is an ever-present reminder of the extravagant, generous, goodness of God.

Love: Giving your life for someone else is widely recognized in our world today as the supreme act of love. As I John 3:16 says, "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us."

All-powerful: Death holds tremendous power over all of us. It casts a long shadow. On the cross, unlike all other gods, God suffered death in all of its fullness. He suffered the fury of death and hell for three days. Then the Resurrection happened and everything changed. Jesus forged a key that unlocked death's door. Death lost its death grip on humanity. The power of God was on full display. Life and hope and joy burst into bloom. The sad things became untrue. The joy that was set before him on the cross was realized as Jesus joyfully demonstrated the reality of his promise, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die" (John 11:25). No power can compare. Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, was a very powerful man. He had no power over death. He, like all rich and powerful men before him, died. Jesus was different. Death couldn't stop him. The grave couldn't contain him. And it can't hold us down either...if we're one with Him. But more on that later!

2. CONNECTING WITH GOD: THROUGH DREAMS: (Mark 15:15)

Having taken a few moments to consider how we connect with God through tough questions (like the problem of evil), let's consider a few more ways we can connect with God. Many people throughout human history have connected with God through dreams. In the Muslim

world today, one of the primary ways that people are connecting with Jesus is through dreams. This shouldn't be surprising because God told us in Acts 2:17, "I will pour out my Spirit...young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams." Repeatedly in the Bible, God connects with humanity through dreams. Joseph received a dream about his life and interpreted dreams God gave to others; God connected with Daniel, Pharaoh, Jacob, Abraham, and so many others through dreams. Sometimes people responded in faith to the dream; other times, they responded with a hardened heart.

Pilate is an example of a man who responded with a hardened heart to a dream that God gave his wife. Pilate was a politician, the governor of Judea. His wife came to him terribly troubled by her dream God gave her and she implored him, "Don't have anything to do with that innocent man" (Matthew 27:19). God gave both Pilate and his wife a message: this man standing before you is innocent.

Pilate was standing at a fork in the road. He had to make a monumentally large choice and he knew the answer: Jesus was innocent. Not only did his wife have a dream, but he stated himself, "I find no basis for a charge against this man" (Lk. 23:4). To make the choice even clearer, he also realized it was "out of self-interest that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him" (Mark 15:9).

Despite the clarity of the choice, Pilate was swayed by one haunting factor that kept him from connecting with God that day by putting his faith in Jesus. **"Wanting to satisfy the crowds,** Pilate released Barabbas to them" (Mark 15:15). Wanting to satisfy the crowds. The phrase is haunting, not merely because of the impact it had on Pilate, but primarily because of the impact it has had on untold numbers of us who fail to connect with God for this very reason. We want to satisfy the crowd around us. We want to be card-carrying members of the "cool crowd." We are so afraid of what our family might think, our co-workers might think, our progressive friends might think, and on and on we go "wanting to satisfy the crowds." Like Pilate, we're approval junkies and people pleasers, and we're afraid our relationship with Christ won't be well received.

(3) CONNECTING WITH GOD: THROUGH OPPORTUNITIES (Mark 15:17-20):

God opens and closes doors. He reveals himself to us over and over again in our lives. Put simply, He shows up in our lives, often when we are least expecting it, and we have an opportunity to connect with Him. The Roman soldiers provide a good example of a God-given opportunity to connect with God. For them, it was just another ordinary day at the office. They were doing what they had been ordered to do. As any other person in the military can well attest, if you are under orders, then you carry them out, and they were under orders to crucify a man. The man, it turns out, was more than just a man; he was God in the flesh, but they completely missed this life-altering opportunity to encounter God.

Tragically, they missed a life-altering opportunity to connect with God because....they.....were..... too.... busy. Much like the soldiers, we can miss out on God revealing himself to us because we are “too busy.” How many times have you found yourself saying, “I’m just crazy busy right now. This will pass.” Only something else comes up and the frantic pace keeps up and the “God question” becomes the can that keeps getting kicked down the road, eternally.

(4) CONNECTING WITH GOD: THROUGH SIGNS (Mark 15:29-30, 36)

“God, if you will just give me a sign, then I promise I am all in.” Many a person, in many a fox hole, has struck a bargain with God. “If you will get me out of this jam, then I swear I will follow you all the days of my life.” Sometimes it isn’t a foxhole—we just want God to do something only God can do. Many a person has asked God to reveal himself in a way that isn’t natural, but supernatural.

The people in Christ’s day weren’t unlike us when they said, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (Mark, 15:30). They wanted Jesus to prove his divinity by giving them the exact sign of their request. In a sense, they wanted Jesus to be their personal genie who says, “Your wish is my command.”

As is often the case, Jesus refused to grant their wish. Why? Why doesn’t God give us the specific sign we’re asking for in so many instances? For starters, no sign will be enough. Humans have an infinite capacity to rationalize things away. “Sure, Ricky may have been “raised from the dead,” but was he really dead? Maybe he was just in a coma and the doctors missed it? Etc., etc.”

Second, a sign only lasts so long. Experiences come and experiences go. We live in a world that constantly screams, “God, what have you done for me lately?” In fact, Jesus told a story about a rich man who felt like he didn’t get the signs from God he needed and he didn’t want his five brothers to end up disconnected from God, like him. He begged Jesus to bring someone back from the dead. Surely, a sign like that would do it. Jesus responded, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead” (Lk. 16:31). In other words, “They have a Bible. If they aren’t compelled by the story of the Bible, no sign will do it.” We all have a story, and our story fits inside of *THE* story about God’s great love rescuing us from sin and death through the cross and the Resurrection. If that isn’t enough, no sign ever will be enough.

(5) CONNECTING WITH GOD: THROUGH FAITH (Mark 15:39)

Previously, we've seen 3 fruitless ways to connect with God. Now, we'll lay out the one (and only) way to connect with the God of the Bible: through faith. We'll spend more time discussing what faith is in another lesson, but for now we'll briefly define faith. Faith, in sum, is a choice to trust Christ.

Perhaps the faith of one man in Mark 15 will illustrate what faith is. One man in this chapter stands out. One man makes a choice to trust Christ. This man wasn't a Jew. He was a Roman, a hardened soldier who was a high-ranking military officer. Undoubtedly, he had fought in many campaigns and seen many men die, but he had never seen a man die quite like this.

Shocked by his courage, stunned by his kindness, and frightened (no doubt) by the mid-day blackened skies, he cried out, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" (Mark 15:39). Therein lies faith. Here you see a courageous decision to go against the crowd. Defying his colleagues, disregarding the mocking religious leaders, one Roman soldier chose Jesus, even if it meant being at odds with those around him. Connecting with God requires us to make a choice to trust Christ. Are we willing to choose to place our faith in Jesus, come what may?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you find compelling about the answers provided for the problem of evil and suffering?
2. What additional thoughts or questions do you have about the problem of evil and suffering?
3. We discussed different ways to connect with God. Which do you most struggle with?
4. Which ways do you most identify with in connecting with God that we discussed in this chapter?

