

## “Questioning God”

Psalm 13

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One of the greatest privileges we have as human beings, as creatures created by God and in God’s own image, is to be able to ask BIG questions, to ask those most BASIC AND FUNDAMENTAL questions- not like what shall I wear today or have for dinner this evening but questions about the purpose or meaning of life and one’s place in it. It’s one of the qualities that clearly separate us from the animal kingdom and it goes to the very heart of what makes us human- questions like “Why are we here?” and “How should we live?” and “What is truth?”- these are UNIVERSAL questions which have challenged persons in every age and every culture. Even before I entered high school, I wrestled with such questions and it was the MAIN reason I started out a philosophy major in college. However, where I had hoped that they would FINALLY be resolved once I became a Christian, I found that even after years of college and seminary followed up with MORE studies in graduate school, the hunger for such answers never abated but only became MORE acute. I think I was INITIALLY attracted to Jesus because I thought he would somehow provide me with the kind of clear and immediate answers I was always seeking, only that was never the case. Over time, I discovered that the Bible is NOT some kind of an answer book and that Jesus is NOT a spiritual version of “Dear Abby”- as someone who could dispense easy and convenient advice to some of life’s most profound problems.

As someone who thinks of himself first as an educator, I believe the HIGHEST purpose of education is not that by getting a degree, one might then secure a better job. As important as that MAY be, education for me is not primarily about making a LIVING as it is about making a LIFE. When I was teaching ethics at the local college back in Iowa, in my very first class I would write on the board the Latin inscription “Sapere Aude” meaning “Dare to think for yourself.” That has become a kind of personal motto: “Dare to think for yourself and don’t let others do the thinking for you.” You see, I’ve always felt that a GOOD teacher should NOT do the hard work that the students THEMSELVES must be doing such as providing them with the answers to many of life’s deepest questions. Rather, it is to provide them with the CRITICAL TOOLS to think about such matters and then to encourage them to search for the answers THEMSELVES- the answers to such questions as “Why am I here?” “Is there a God, and if so, why does a good God allow so much suffering to go on?” “Does suffering have a purpose?” “What is death and is there anything AFTER I die?” etc. Only human beings can ask such questions and striving to make sense of them is one of the most important responsibilities we human beings can ever undertake.

The author of Psalm 13 had such questions. It seems he is near death although we are not given any information regarding the nature of his suffering. It begins with a four-fold lament- a series of questions in which he asks why he has been forsaken by God. It’s not death or illness that he laments as his sense of communion with God- “WHERE is God when I cry out to him? WHY won’t God respond? Does God even CARE about the trials and sufferings of the creation? Is God CAPABLE of hearing such cries? ALL these are implied in the psalm’s opening verses. The writer does not want to feel separated from his God.

Like the psalmist, how many times have you found YOURSELF in a crisis situation and wondered why you were going through what you were and where God was in it all? Years ago, I attended a group discussion followed by a lecture at the University of Northern Iowa by Dr. Bart Ehrman- head of the Religion Department at the University of North Carolina. He is not only regarded as one of our country's finest religious scholars but before he became a leading academic, he served as a church pastor. He attended Princeton Theological Seminary--one of our denomination's pre-eminent seminaries--where he received both his Masters of Divinity and a Ph.D. But then after much internal struggle, he found he could no longer reconcile the notion of a good God presiding over a world in which there is so much sickness and suffering, injustice and death. In order to be honest with himself, he had to admit that there could be no God in control. Eventually, he abandoned his faith in Christ and Christianity altogether.

In his book *God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question- Why We Suffer*, Ehrman explains that one Christmas Eve in England, he went to church with his wife (who remains a devout believer with a robust faith) and her brother, and it was during that service that he came to the conclusion that he could no longer intellectually support the idea of God. It occurred during the congregational prayer when a layman stood up in the aisle and prayed that God, who had once come into the darkness to make a difference, might now "come into the darkness again." Over and over, he used that as a kind of refrain, that God might now "come into the darkness again." As he listened to that prayer, tears suddenly welled up in his eyes, but they were anything BUT tears of joy. They were tears of frustration. He said:

*If God had come into the darkness with the advent of the Christ child, bringing salvation to the world, why is the world in such a state? Why doesn't he enter into the darkness again? Where is the presence of God in this world of pain and misery? Why is the darkness so overwhelming?...Why are the sick still wracked with unspeakable pain? Why are babies still born with birth defects? Why are young children kidnapped, raped, and murdered? Why are there droughts that leave millions starving, suffering horrible and excruciating lives that lead to horrible and excruciating deaths? If God intervened to deliver the armies of Israel from its enemies, why doesn't he intervene now when the armies of sadistic tyrants savagely attack and destroy entire villages, towns, and even countries? If God is at work in the darkness, feeding the hungry with the miraculous multiplication of loaves, why is it that one child--a mere child!--dies every five seconds of hunger? Every five seconds.*

For him, the darkness had become way too deep, the suffering too intense, the divine absence too palpable. Where he acknowledges that some people think they know the answers or aren't even bothered by such questions, he wasn't one of them. He had been thinking intensely about those questions for many years. He had heard the answers, and even though he once "knew" and was satisfied with such answers, he was now no longer. The interesting thing about his presentation at UNI that day was that most of us who had shown up to hear him that afternoon were not atheists or agnostics- persons who could sympathize with his anti-theist position. Rather, we were persons of FAITH who could identify with the kinds of questions that had troubled him for so much of his adult life. That was certainly the reason I had gone!

Who HASN'T struggled with questions such as this? Hopefully, we ALL have. When a child dies or your spouse leaves you or perhaps the doctor has just informed you that you have a terminal illness, it seems THEN you are forced to come face-to-face with such questions as "Why does such stuff happen? Has my life accounted for anything? What is it all about?" And

is it necessary for me to add that countless persons have chosen to END their lives because they have NEVER found an acceptable answer to such questions, have NEVER discovered whether their lives held any kind of purpose or meaning.

You see, it is impossible for any serious Christian and seeker after truth to NOT be troubled by these deeper questions posed by life. Dr. Timothy Johnson, who for many years has served as the medical editor for ABC News and has reported on health-care issues for *Good Morning America*, *World News Tonight*, *Nightline*, and *20/20*, is also a Christian minister. In fact, he went to seminary with the intention of becoming a pastor before he ever went to medical school to become a doctor. Several years ago, he wrote a memoir about faith which wound up on the New York Times Bestseller list called *Finding God In The Questions: A Personal Journey*. In it, he demonstrates through his own life that regardless of how long you may be a Christian and a churchgoer, the questions never stop coming. He says that:

*For many people religion provides answers (or at least a sense of security) to the big questions of life. For others the absolute claims of religion raise more questions than they answer. I have lived on both sides- and in some senses I still do. My path of faith has wandered through both doubt and belief, often at the same time.*

He says that for some time now, he has grown comfortable with intellectual and spiritual doubt, that he welcomes it as a companion that stimulates him to check and recheck his faith and to see what it is he REALLY believes. He has learned that he can no longer simply accept the teaching of theologians or the dogmas of the church, that he has to find out what's truly real and meaningful for HIMSELF. That can only come when each of us does the hard work of studying and thinking deeply and critically about our OWN walk with God. Johnson says that at this point in his life, he finds himself continually needing to find answers to the BIG questions of life that are both intellectually and spiritually satisfying. For instance, he has a growing fascination with the tension between both the hard-nosed demands of scientific reasoning and the dramatic spiritual and ethical ideals found in the teachings of Jesus. He also has a growing anguish born of being materially privileged in a world of terrible suffering caused by poverty.

And such questions NEED to be asked because as children of God, we need MEANING. There is an anxiety in us about life itself: how are we to live it? What are our values to be? What is it that awaits us? Is the universe empty of God and thus without providence and purpose? We can avoid them TEMPORARILY but eventually we ALL have to come face to face with them again. In 1946, psychologist Viktor Frankl published *Man's Search For Meaning*, a book which would revolutionize the world of psychotherapy. The year before, he had been released from Auschwitz concentration camp where during his imprisonment he observed something that would change his life. He said that those who had made peace with life and their own tragic situations, those who could find meaning in the world REGARDLESS of how ugly or brutal it might sometimes be, lived much longer than those who had no found NO meaning in the world or in their own lives. Frankl eventually concluded that the meaning of life can be found in every moment of living, that life never ceases to have meaning, even in suffering and death. The inner hold a prisoner has on his spiritual self relies on having a faith in the future, and that once a prisoner loses that faith, he is doomed. In it, he quoted the words of the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche: "He who has a WHY to live can bear with almost any HOW."

Let me close by restating what I said earlier, that as human beings, we never have a total perspective on LIFE much less on God, that our understanding of the Divine, the world, and of

ourselves is always partial or incomplete. As the Bible says, “we know in part and see in part” and “we see through a glass darkly.” This is because our lives are EQUALLY partial- we are incomplete beings. There is something amiss within EACH of us and as a result we are NEVER completely at home or at any place in this universe; we are afflicted with desires which no natural happiness will ever satisfy. Therefore, like a person without a country, we wander from one place to another, moving from one thrill to the next, seeking rest and fulfillment but never finding any. This was perhaps what Peggy Lee lamented when she sang “Is that all there is?” or the band U2 when they sang “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.”

Thus, you can say that all our “questioning” is really a form of “questing,” an act of searching for that which we hunger and thirst for but never seem to find. What we often fail to realize is that God has PLANTED those desires deep within us as one way of drawing us to himself, of reminding us that our completion and fulfillment can never be found within but ultimately OUTSIDE of ourselves. St. Augustine maintained that we were originally created for a DIFFERENT world, that we were made BY God FOR God and thus GOD is our country, our home towards whom we all aspire. He claimed we all had a kind of homing instinct within us that oriented each of us in God’s direction which is why he could say, in the words of his famous prayer, “O God, you have made us for yourself alone, and our heart is restless till it rests in you.” Thus, we are endlessly dissatisfied and disappointed for nothing LESS than God will ever really fill our need. No matter how happy our lives are, part of this restlessness never goes away, this restlessness that provides a tantalizing glimpse of our longing and need for God. Perhaps none of us will ever understand the “meaning” behind so many questions which never seem to find clear or even final answers such as why we are here, how are we to make responsible decisions in a world filled with so many confusing and irresponsible options, how can God love something as disagreeable and even maladjusted as each of us may be.

This became more evident to me after listening to a podcast in which Stanley Hauerwas, the now retired professor of ethics at Duke Theological Seminary and regarded by many as one of the greatest theological thinkers in the world today, was interviewed. In his autobiography *Hannah’s Child*, he is honest in recounting the hellish marriage to his first wife which he endured for twenty-five years, even after she fell prey to mental illness and became completely psychotic. He confessed that he still doesn’t understand much of it and is hard-pressed to find any real meaning or lessons derived from that horrible chapter in his life. In retrospect, what he CAN say is that “the ability to live well is the ability to often live without explanation,” that sometimes everything just happens for no reason we can ever understand or discern or point to, at least on THIS side of eternity, and that we just have to learn to live here, without satisfactory explanations or suitable endings. We just need to go on living together, searching for beauty and meaning and hope with lives frequently marked by our own worst moments or with enduring pain or even with grief that never seems to let us catch our breath.

We see such faith in the author of Psalm 13, how in spite of the mystery and questions he has regarding his plight, he refuses to give in to cynicism or despair. He CONTINUES to trust in God’s love and rejoices in his salvation REGARDLESS of how dire his situation becomes, ultimately confessing how “God has dealt bountifully with me.” In the same way, despite all the mystery and lack of clear answers, God exhorts US to remain still faithful. We are encouraged to trust in God’s presence and goodness IN SPITE OF what we often interpret to be his absence for in the moment of our greatest need he is there all the same, holding us tightly with those invisible arms of support. Thus, in the end, we often find ourselves having to settle for the same

answer St. Augustine did which is that the only REAL answer we as a people of faith CAN have is only by living WITH God and IN God will ANY of us ever find our completion, our happiness, and our wholeness. Let us pray...

*Heavenly Father, thank you for always hearing us and for taking our questions and concerns so seriously when we ask them. We don't always understand your ways for your ways are not our ways and your thoughts are not our thoughts and yet we trust in you all the same. May we never forget that you are with us even when we can't see or sense you, that you are always deeper than our doubts. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.*