“Beyond a Reasonable Doubt”

John 3:1-21

Series: Love the World  Week 1. Loving the Seeker

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“Why?” It’s the one question we start asking as toddlers and never stop. There are enough mysteries in the universe to keep us asking “Why?” for all eternity. For example, one comedian has asked…

- Why is it called a hamburger when it's made out of beef?
- Why do you drive on a parkway and park in a driveway?
- We have beef, chicken and liver flavored cat food. Why isn't there mouse-flavored cat food?
- Why are there five syllables in the word monosyllabic?
- Why are they called apartments when they're stuck together?
- You tell a man there's 400 billion stars and he'll believe you, but tell him a bench has wet paint and he has to touch it? Why?

Why? Probably the most asked and least-answered question in the English language. And when you bring up the topic of “God” the “Why?” questions swarm like pollen-starved bees. “Why did I get cancer, God?” “Lord, why did my husband leave me?” “Why is there so much starvation in our world?” “Why is the ebola virus wiping out so many lives?” “Why do hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes devastate, displace and destroy so many?” “Why is there always war going on somewhere in the world?” Why God? Why?

“Why?” often gives birth to doubt. And like children, doubts come in many varieties and sizes. There is the doubt ignited by a crisis. Paul Borden tells about a Christian man who, six months before retirement, was laid off. The company finagled it so he lost all his benefits. He prayed, "God, I want to be a good husband. I want to be a good father. I'm going to go to church. I'm going to spend my life serving you," and six months before retirement, whatever security he had was taken away. Now he says, "God, that's not fair! I don't know if Christianity is worth it!"

Doubt arises when belief, like a crumbling row home, collapses. A childhood, Sunday school faith disintegrates in the face of “modern science” or college classes. In the late 1940s, Charles Templeton was a close friend and preaching associate of Billy Graham. He effectively preached the gospel to large crowds in major arenas. However, intellectual doubts began to nag at him. He questioned the truth of Scripture and other core Christian beliefs. He finally abandoned his faith and made an unsuccessful attempt to persuade Billy to do the same. He felt sorry for Billy and commented, "He committed intellectual suicide by closing his mind." Templeton resigned from the ministry and wrote a book, Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith.

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1 John Stumbo, "God's Sovereignty: The Ultimate Question."
2 Paul Borden, "Doubts in Belief," Preaching Today
Doubt can be due to a drift away from God. If you don’t feed your faith it starves from spiritual malnutrition. I have sadly watched brothers and sisters in Christ whom I love become preoccupied with their weekend vacation home, sports games, chores or jobs and just drift away. The current of attractions and distractions carry them farther and farther out to sea because they were not tied to the anchor of Jesus Christ.

And doubt can even be the result of religion. There are many practical atheists sitting in churches. These are believers who claim it all depends on God, but act like it all depends on us. Instead of drawing on the power of the Spirit through prayer, instead of seeking God’s will in all things, instead of following Jesus every day of the week, we keep Him locked in a box on Sunday morning. Nicky Gumbel, the leader of Alpha, once found a satirical article with the headline, “God to Leave Church of England.” “Sources close to God report that, after years of deliberation, the Lord has decided to leave the Anglican Church. Friends of God say that the controversy over women priests has led the Almighty to the decision to go to Rome. One highly placed Anglican bishop says, “Losing God is a bit of a blow. But we’re just going to have to get used to.”

Nicodemus is a highly religious man. He is a Pharisee – one of the strictest forms of Judaism. More than that, Nicodemus serves on the elite council of the Sanhedrin – the highest court of the Jews. He should be immune to doubt. Then he meets Jesus – an uneducated rabbi from up north in Galilee. This carpenter turned preacher performs wonders and teaches truths Nicodemus has never seen or heard. Suddenly, the rules, the rituals, the religion he obeyed since childhood are shaken. He feels drawn to this new teaching. But his colleagues on the Sanhedrin must never know of his doubt. So under the cover of darkness he approaches Jesus. “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For No one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him” (John 3:2).

Before Nicodemus can launch into an investigation of Jesus’ theology, the young Rabbi sends the old Pharisee’s head spinning by saying, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again” (v. 3). What? Entrance into heaven requires a second labor and delivery? Now Nicodemus is dumbfounded. “How can a man be born when he is old?” he asks. “Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born?” (v. 4) Yet Jesus is not speaking of another trip to the maternity ward. What is needed is not a physical but a spiritual birth. “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit” (v. 5-6). Nicodemus is left clueless. “How can this be?” (v. 9)

That’s where doubt leaves us. “How can this be?” “How did this happen?” “Why did this happen?” “Why?” Our search for logical conclusions brings us up short. Doubt is not dangerous. It is part of being human. Doubt is not something to fear. It is not the sign of weak faith. It is never destructive so long as we do not let it rule us or drive us to despair. As a matter of fact, doubt can shape, sharpen and strengthen our faith, if we are willing to place it in God’s hands. The great mistake we make when handling doubt is the belief that rational explanations will dispel it. “Give me an answer, then I will believe.”
On April 8, 1966 – Good Friday – the cover of Time magazine was draped in black. It bore one single question, “Is God Dead?” The article within claimed that science was responsible for the death of God. Science was so successful that “what cannot be known by scientific methods seems uninteresting, unreal.” Churches would soon fade away. Nearly forty years later, Newsweek magazine responded to Time with a cover story entitled “Spirituality in America.” What it found is that “Americans are looking for personal ecstatic experiences of God. Everywhere we looked (there was) a flowering spirituality.” After surveying a variety of spiritual pathways, everything from Catholics and Pentecostals to Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and even Wiccans, Newsweek found that spiritual seekers are not looking for rational answers to dispel their doubts. They are hungering for an encounter with the living God.

The old secular, scientific approach just doesn’t go far enough. David Brooks, a New York Times columnist, confessed: “Like a lot of people these days, I’m a recovering secularist. Until September 11, I accepted the notion that as the world becomes richer and better educated, it becomes less religious. This theory holds that as history moves forward, science displaces dogma, and reason replaces unthinking obedience. It’s now clear that the secularization theory is untrue.” We yearn to know God. Even Charles Templeton, who tried to talk Billy Graham out of preaching, who wrote a book criticizing Christianity said about Jesus, “I have to say I adore him! Everything good I know, everything decent I know, everything pure I know, I learned from Jesus. He is the most important human being who has ever existed. And if I may put it this way, I miss Him.” At this point Templeton’s eyes filled with tears and he wept freely.

Jesus is the key to our doubts. As we learned in our recent sermon series on world religions, Moses brought down the Torah. Muhammad wrote down the Koran. The Buddha taught the eight fold path. But Jesus gave us Himself. While Nicodemus endured that dark night of the soul, Jesus said, “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came down from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:13-15). Jesus is God in the flesh. He is the personal experience of God that Newsweek says everyone is seeking. What’s more, He is the kind of God who is willing to enter our personal hell – our sin, our pain, our doubts and our devastation – and lay down His life for us. That’s the God we are looking for.

David Mains, director of Chapel Ministries, was sitting in a dentist chair when his orthodontist asked David if he would go with him to see a movie. "I've seen this film five times already," said the orthodontist, "and each time I break down and weep at the same part of the story. I'm hoping you can help me understand why that scene in the movie makes me cry." "Sure," David said. "What movie is it?" He thought it would be some sentimental film like The Notebook. His orthodontist replied, "Terminator 2." When David sat with his friend through the movie, the orthodontist broke down as before. It happened in the scene where the Terminator gave his life to save the life of a child.

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4 The Week magazine (1-30-04), p. 14
5 Lee Strobel, The Case for Faith (Zondervan, 2000), pp. 7-23
coffee after the film, the two men talked. The orthodontist hinted at an inner longing for a father's love. David identified the sacrificial love, so poignantly displayed in the movie, as a picture of God's love. "I believe that's what you are looking for," David said. "Your tears are proof of that." The orthodontist agreed. Together they bowed in prayer and a middle-aged orthodontist received the forgiveness and love of his Heavenly Father.\(^6\)

God did not send us a rational explanation. He did not send us a rule book. He did not send us more rituals. He came Himself. "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him" (John 3:16-17). During this series we will learn how to love the world. God is not sending us to give rational explanations, rule books, or ancient rituals. He sends us to personally share His love with the world, to help seekers have a personal encounter with the living God who came to earth in Jesus. Growth Groups are one of the very best places to have that personal encounter with God and His people. I strongly encourage you to join one today and invite someone to join you so together you can get to know the God who so loves you.

Believing in Jesus will not dispel all doubt. Trusting in Jesus means you have Someone who will guide You to the other side of doubt. Missionary Gracia Burnham and her husband Martin were held captive by terrorists in the Philippines for more than a year. During the rescue her husband was killed. Gracia writes: “Sometimes I wonder, ‘Why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't.’ Her questions made her realize it isn't always easy to comprehend God's nature: “I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life's supposed to be. But in the jungle, I learned I don't know as much about God as I thought I did. I don't have him in a theological box anymore. What I do know is that God is God—and I'm not. The world's in a mess because of sin, not God. Some awful things may happen to me, but God does what is right. And he makes good out of bad situations.”\(^7\)

Jesus invites you to be born anew. It's a second chance at life. It’s the opportunity to rise up beyond a reasonable doubt and see that Kingdom of God is breaking into this world all around us. Betty Maxfield, survived the September 11\(^{th}\) attack on the Pentagon, "I should've been dead,” she said. “I was, for some reason, saved. My question now is, what am I supposed to do with it? I just can't go waste it. I thought I was living my life well before, but obviously there's more that I can do to say thank you for my life and a second chance at it."\(^8\)

Jesus wants to save you and give you a second chance at life.

Make the most of it.

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\(^6\) Contributed by Greg Asimakoupoulos.
\(^8\) Brianna B. Piec, "Pentagon Survivor," *Chicago Tribune* (3-22-02)