

Difficult Questions, Certain Answers

Difficult Questions

Why does my life seem so empty? Why do I find it so hard to improve myself? Why does that the long-awaited raise I just got (or house, car, professional success, boyfriend/girlfriend, etc.) seem like such a letdown? Does anyone else feel like the American Dream isn't all it's cracked up to be? Isn't there more to life than this? And what about after this life? What comes then?

As human beings, we all grapple with questions and struggles that no mere machine could understand. This is because we are not just machines. We are uniquely created in the image of God, and we will never find the answers to the deepest questions which confront us unless we hear from him. Until then, all we can do is try to cover up our doubts, fears, and guilt by chasing pleasures which always let us down in the end, or working for goals that can never be enough to satisfy us at our deepest level of need. We may have all the entertainment that money can provide; but in those rare moments of soul-deep truthfulness, we realize that in all our flurry of activity, we are still lacking one thing: *a purpose that is great enough to satisfy us forever.*

The Purpose for Which We Were Made

Fortunately, God has not left us without providing certain answers to all of these questions. We were made in his image¹, to enjoy fellowship with him² and glorify him forever³, ruling over all the earth in love and righteousness⁴, and dwelling with each other in peace and unity⁵. Until we experience that purpose, and know what it is to have the joy and peace of fellowship with God instead of running from him in guilt and shame – what it is to find pleasure in *him* instead of chasing the fleeting pleasures of what he has created – we will never be truly happy.

Our Great Problem

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- 1 Genesis 1:26-27
 - 2 Psalm 16:11; 17:5; 65:4
 - 3 Isaiah 43:7; Revelation 4:11
 - 4 Genesis 1:28
 - 5 Psalm 133:1; John 13:34-35

But unfortunately, we have a massive problem. Our first father, Adam, listened to the temptation of the Serpent, disobeyed God in the Paradise of Eden, and forfeited all of the enjoyments that God had created him for. Instead of delicious fruits, he had to contend with weeds and thistles. Instead of meaning and satisfaction, he had to live a life characterized by toil, travail, and vanity, which would end in certain death. And instead of fellowship with God, and love and peace with humankind, he was overwhelmed by guilt and shame, and driven out of God's presence into the dog-eat-dog world of betrayals, hatred, violence, and prejudice that we all know today⁶.

And the problem is even greater than this: we were all in Adam when he fell, and so we have all inherited the same corrupted nature and the same curse of sorrow and despair⁷. We were made to enjoy God: but now we all hate God⁸, and would rather hide from him, pretend he doesn't exist⁹, try to satisfy him on our own terms¹⁰, and make him into the sort of deity that we would prefer¹¹. We don't like the just and holy God who will not overlook sin, so we make him into a god that will let us rebel against his commandments and follow our own desires, and never punish us. We are immersed in a world of hurts and pains, we condemn others for doing the same things we have done, we have no mercy for those who offend us but demand mercy when we have offended others, we are hypocrites and actors, selfish and sinful, and the whole world is spiraling out of control. And in the background, in those places of the mind where we are too frightened to go, we know that there is a God whose patience will one day end, and who will judge the world in holy justice.

God's Great Promise

Even though the image of God that we were created with has been distorted, we still retain enough of it to know what the just thing would be for God to have done to Adam and to all who were born

6 Genesis 3:17-19

7 Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:19; 1 Corinthians 15:22

8 John 3:19-20; 8:42-45

9 Psalm 10:10-11; 14:1

10 Genesis 4:3-7; Jeremiah 7:22-24

11 Exodus 32:1-8; Romans 1:19-23

into his image: he should have judged us all. If someone severely wrongs us – rapes and murders our daughters, say – we feel that it would be a great travesty just to let him go. But we have murdered and raped God's image, despised his law, spat in his face, as it were¹². Deep down, we know that this world is not right, and we know that God should not just let us go. This is why God's first response to Adam is so surprising: instead of immediate punishment, God gave Adam an incredible promise: he said that he would send a man, born of Adam's line, to defeat the Serpent who had first tempted us to sin, rescue us from our misery, and bring us back into his presence¹³.

The bible is a long and complicated book, but it's simple enough to understand the basic point of it if we keep this one principle in mind: the whole bible, after this first promise in Genesis 3:15, is all about what God will do to keep that great promise without violating the holy justice of his nature. Immediately after this promise, we see the worldwide effects of Adam's sin: from the first, the world is filled with violence, hatred, and selfishness, until God's patience runs out, and he suddenly destroys the entire world with water – but he does not forget his promise, and so he graciously rescues one man, Noah, together with his family, and assures him again that he will send his promised Savior, who will not finish his work until humankind is accomplishing its original purpose, glorifying God by enjoying fellowship with him in peace and unity with one another¹⁴. A little later, when the world has again become corrupt, God remembers his promise and calls out another man, Abraham, promising that through his line will come this promised Savior, and that he will overturn the worldwide curse and bring an eternal blessing to people from every nation¹⁵. And so throughout the rest of the Old Testament we find humanity's failures and God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. When Abraham's line is in slavery, God remembers his promise and delivers them from Egypt through his servant Moses¹⁶. When they have forsaken him and turned to their own ways, God remembers his promise and gives them a great king, David, declaring that the promised Savior will come through his

12 Romans 3:10-19

13 Genesis 3:15

14 Genesis 6-9

15 Genesis 12:1-3

16 Exodus 1-15

line, and reign over his people forever¹⁷. But finally, after countless rebellions, God has had enough. He casts off his people, and gives them over to punishment, scattering them through the world. It seems as if his promise has been forgotten at last¹⁸.

The Fulfillment of the Promise

But God had not forgotten his promise. So one day, when the whole world was corrupt and evil, and the cruel Roman Empire held sway over all the civilized earth, God finally sent his promised Savior, from the line of Adam, Abraham, and David¹⁹. But he did not then come as a glorious, conquering King. His work was different – with less pomp and fanfare, but much greater and more difficult. If you remember our problem, you will appreciate how vast this Savior's work had to be. Not only were we deceived by the Serpent²⁰; not only are we blinded, corrupt, and dead in our sins²¹; not only do we have to be given new life, changed in our inmost natures, re-made into God's image which we have horribly marred²²; but we also have to be reconciled to God²³, whom we have rebelled against, and who is too just to overlook sin²⁴.

Because God is holy, he has infinite and terrible wrath against our sins, which his patience and forbearance is restraining for now, but which will some day rain down with immense fury, as it did when he destroyed the world in Noah's day²⁵. It is great enough to be delivered from the devil; it is greater yet to be delivered from our own selves, and changed in our very natures; but who could ever deliver us from the great and holy God whose very nature demands that we be punished? What sort of Savior could that be? How can God be just, and still fulfill his promise to forgive us, pronounce us righteous, and bring us back to his presence²⁶?

That is the task that Jesus came to accomplish. God's justice

17 2 Samuel 7

18 Hosea 1:6, 9

19 Galatians 4:4-5

20 2 Corinthians 4:3-4

21 Jeremiah 13:23; Isaiah 64:6; Ephesians 2:1-3; 4:18

22 Ezekiel 36:26; Colossians 2:13; Ephesians 4:22-24

23 Romans 5:8-10; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Ephesians 2:15-18

24 Habakkuk 1:13; Exodus 34:7

25 Isaiah 13:9; Romans 1:18; 2:4-6; Ephesians 5:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9; 2 Peter 3:3-10; Revelation 6:16-17

26 Romans 3:23-26

demands that we be condemned. His wrath against us is immense. But Jesus came to be a wrath-absorbing sacrifice for our sins²⁷. He came to take our sins upon himself, stand condemned in our place, and experience the full effects of God's condemnation of us as a wicked and perverted race²⁸. And so upon the cross God crushed his only beloved Son, exiled him in great fury from his presence, and satisfied his righteousness and justice²⁹. Because Jesus was one of us, of the seed of Adam, it was fitting that he be our substitute, and take our punishment³⁰. Because he was God, his being was infinite enough to absorb all of God's infinite wrath, and still overcome it by rising from the dead³¹. Because he was perfect and spotless, he had a sufficient righteousness to give us so that we might enjoy the reward of God's presence³². This is the great salvation that the promised Savior accomplished: God had promised to bring back to himself a people chosen from every nation on the earth; then Jesus came down from heaven, took all of their sins upon him, absorbed God's wrath against those sins, gave them his own flawless righteousness, and rose victorious from the dead, having defeated the Serpent and having won eternal life in the presence of God for all the people that God had promised to save.

The Effects of Jesus' Great Victory

Jesus won a great victory on the cross, and ensured the fulfillment of God's great promise to Adam. But he has not yet seen all the fruits of his great victory. Now, he has sent his Spirit into all the world to open the blinded eyes of his people³³, to grant them faith and repentance³⁴, to apply the forgiveness of sins and the free gift of righteousness that he has won, and to begin to change them into his own image³⁵, so that they might one day inherit a new earth³⁶, created in righteousness, where they will live as they were designed to live, glorifying God by enjoying fellowship with him

27 Romans 3:24-25; 1 John 2:2

28 Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24

29 Isaiah 53:10; Matthew 27:46; Acts 4:26-28

30 Hebrews 2:10-18

31 Acts 2:24; Romans 1:3-4; 1 Corinthians 15:12-21

32 Philippians 3:9; 1 Peter 2:22-24

33 John 16:7-14

34 Acts 5:31; 11:18; Ephesians 2:8-10

35 2 Corinthians 3:17-18

36 Matthew 5:5

and dwelling in unity with each other³⁷. Some day, the full fruits of Christ's great sacrifice will be gathered from all the earth³⁸, and he will return to judge the world in righteousness³⁹. All who have not bowed the knee before him, crying out for his forgiveness and mercy, he will judge with all the holy wrath of God. All those who have come to him in faith, and who await his appearing with joy and hope, he will bless with all the rewards that his own perfect life deserves⁴⁰. Today, just as in the days of Noah, the world is corrupt, and people are going about their daily business in complacency, never considering that it is only God's great forbearance that keeps the world from utter destruction. Soon, that forbearance will be ended, Jesus will return in great glory, and the wicked world will be destroyed⁴¹. All will bow down before him⁴². Will you bow in terror and despair, only to be cast away from his presence, knowing that you will have to endure the horror of his wrath for all eternity? Or will you bow in great joy and triumph, knowing that you are saved by his coming, and made an heir of the new heavens and earth, where all will be joy and peace, because God is dwelling among men in love? *Today* is the day of salvation⁴³! God *now* commands all men everywhere to repent⁴⁴ – and his patience will soon run out. Repent and believe on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ⁴⁵! “For all who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved”⁴⁶.

37 Revelation 21:1-4

38 Matthew 24:14; Revelation 5:9

39 Acts 17:31

40 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10

41 Matthew 24:36-39; 25:31-46

42 Philippians 2:9-11

43 2 Corinthians 6:2

44 Acts 17:30

45 Acts 16:31

46 Romans 10:9-13