

3. The First Question God ever Asked a Man

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as I said a few minutes ago, we're continuing in this little series of sermons in which we're looking at various great questions of the Bible. Great questions which the Lord God asks of men and women from heaven.

And today we're turning to the very first question that God ever put to a man. It is arguably the most searching question that is asked in the whole Bible. So let me read the passage in which this is found, Genesis chapter 3, verses 1 to 13.

And you'll see that great question comes in verse 9. So Genesis 3, verse 1. Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, did God actually say, you shall not eat of any tree in the garden? And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, you shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden.

Neither shall you touch it, lest you die. But the serpent said to the woman, you will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

[1 : 1 7] So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and that it was a delight to the eyes and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

And she also gave some to her husband who was with her and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. And the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, where are you? And he said, I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.

He said, who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat? The man said, the woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree and I ate.

[2 : 2 8] Then the Lord God said to the woman, what is this that you have done? The woman said, the serpent deceived me and I ate.

May the Lord make this word a blessing to us today. Well there it is in verse 9, the first question ever asked by God of a man. Where are you?

Now if we're to understand the weight and the forcefulness of this question, we need to have something of a glimpse of what the Garden of Eden was really like. The Garden of Eden was paradise.

John Milton chose just the right word in the title of his great poem, Paradise Lost. Look at the features of this garden that are described in Genesis chapter 2.

Look for example at chapter 2 verse 9. And out of the ground, the Lord God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was in the midst of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

[3 : 2 8] So there were trees there. Every tree that is pleasant to the sight. Cedars of Lebanon, Scots pines, eucalyptus, giant redwoods, oaks, rowans, silver birches.

But also every tree that is good for food. Oranges and plums. Pears and limes and cherries. Pomegranates. And there was water there, flowing in four rivers.

The Pishon, the Gihon, the Tigris and the Euphrates. There was gold there, we're told, and precious stones. And there was work to do there. The tilling of the soil.

But it wasn't back-breaking labour. It was sweet and pleasant work. And there was companionship in this lovely Garden of Eden. First of all with the animals whom Adam named, thus expressing his rule over them.

And then with his wife. And he says of her in verse 23, At last, this is the one for me. And then supremely companionship with God himself. We're not told much about the sort of conversations that God had with Adam.

[4 : 31] We just get a little snippet of it there in the middle of chapter 2. But when you consider what the whole Bible says about the relationship between God and man, I think we can be certain that in the Garden of Eden, the conversation that the Lord and the man had together was a delightful conversation.

Adam loved to hear the words that God spoke to him. God loved this man and his wife deeply. And they loved him. To be in the Garden of Eden was to be with God, without a shadow of mistrust or misunderstanding between them.

Just think of the happiest moments in a really happy marriage, and your glimpse of pale reflection of the kind of relationship that God enjoyed with Adam and Eve in the Paradise of Eden.

But then there came this moment in chapter 3. You might call it the worst moment in the history of the world. The moment when Adam and Eve rebelliously asserted their independence of God. It was the moment that changed everything. It was the rebellion, the fall, the fall from grace, the entry of sin into the world, bringing in its train the horrible reality of death.

[5 : 40] And God's voice, which had always been so sweet and delightful to Adam, now became a voice of terror. After this moment of disobedience, the Lord came walking down through the Garden of Eden, and he called out to the man, and he said, Where are you?

And Adam did not come running joyfully to meet him, because Adam was now in hiding. Where are you? And Adam replied, I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked.

So I hid myself. Now in that question, and the answer that Adam gives to it, we have the reality and the tragedy of the human race.

God searches for man, and man hides from God. That's the reality. People on the media who speak about religion will usually turn that situation on its head, and imagine that the real situation is that noble men and women are somehow searching around the world for an elusive God, a God who's in hiding.

But it was never like that. Jesus said, When he came, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. Now I want us today to think of some of the hiding places, the wretched hiding places that we devise for ourselves so as to conceal ourselves from the Lord God.

[7 : 01] Because God still calls out today, Where are you? And like Adam, man is in hiding, not wanting to be found, not wanting to be confronted with reality, because he's ashamed of his rebellion.

So what are some of the hiding places that people construct for ourselves today? I'd like to mention five. First, it's man's attempt to hide from God which lies at the root of all atheism and agnosticism. The atheist says, I believe that there is no God. The agnostic says, it cannot be known whether there is a God or not. Now some people who would claim to be atheists or agnostics are crude and unthinking in their position.

They say, I don't believe, not because they've really thought long and hard about it, but because it's convenient for them to profess atheism or agnosticism. Their concern is really just to live for the day-to-day pleasures of this world.

If you were to come out on the streets of Glasgow here on a Friday evening or a Saturday evening and ask some of the young adults who are rioting around in our streets if they believed in God, many would say, no, I don't.

[8 : 12] Not because they could marshal arguments in favour of atheism, but simply because it's a convenient way of avoiding serious thought about life. But there are other people who would produce arguments for atheism or agnosticism.

Why? Because such arguments appear to give respectability and credibility to their atheism. Some such folk are university professors, people who hold PhDs.

Although in their heart of hearts they know that they're made by God and are accountable to Him, they strongly desire to retain their independence of Him.

And therefore, they fortify their hiding place, they shore it up with atheistic arguments. But what they're really doing is deceiving themselves into thinking that it's okay to continue to be a rebel against God.

I have my reasons, they say. I have arguments and I'm sticking to them. But God says to them, where are you? The truth is that most so-called intellectual difficulties with the Christian faith are actually a cover-up for a moral refusal of God.

[9 : 20] If I'm determined to live a life of self-centered, self-gratification, I may well devise some kind of intellectual smokescreen so as to keep God well away from me.

I read the other day of a brilliant lawyer who was not a Christian. But this lawyer had a friend who was a Christian. And he said to his Christian friend one day, surely you don't believe, do you, that Jesus rose bodily from the grave?

And his friend replied, I certainly do. And if you'll allow me to, I'll set down the evidence on paper carefully. And if you'll carefully study it, then I think you will come to believe it too. So the lawyer said, please do.

So the Christian set it down on paper, gave it to his friend. The lawyer went away and read it carefully. And then he came back to his friend. Well, said the Christian, what do you think of it? And the lawyer replied, I'm now convinced that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead as revealed in the four Gospels.

Well, praise God for that, said the Christian. The lawyer said, hang on, don't move so fast, for I'm no nearer being a Christian now than I was before. You see, I thought that my difficulties were intellectual.

[10 : 30] But now I come to think about it, I realise that they're moral. Now that man at least was honest. He came clean. He refused to be a Christian not because of genuine intellectual questions, but because he didn't want to submit to the Lordship of Christ.

To take refuge in atheism or intellectual difficulties is a wretched hiding place. Secondly, there's the hiding place of busyness.

A person imagines that his life is so busy, so busy with work and family concerns, perhaps with hobbies and recreations and sports, that he hasn't got time to think about God. It's all very well for you church people, he says.

You've got time to go off to church on a Sunday with your hair combed nicely and your Bible under your arm. But you know, I've been so busy, busy, busy all week with my work and all Saturday with my family and my sport and my hobbies, I need to spend my Sunday mornings in bed with the Sunday Times.

A man's got to have a rest, hasn't he? So that man constructs a fortress around himself which he calls my busy, busy life and in effect he's saying to God, you stay out of here.

[11 : 37] I've got my life all worked out, thank you, and I don't want you poking your nose into it. So this man appears to be very busy but in truth he's in hiding.

Then thirdly, there's the hiding place which you might call my life is a Bible-free zone. In other words, the life which refuses to have anything to do with the Bible.

Let me ask friends, have you ever been in that particular hiding place? I don't want to have anything to do with the Bible. It's an odd fact of the publishing world. That the Bible, for a very long time, has been the world's number one bestseller.

But you have to ask how many of the Bibles which are published and sold every year are actually read. I guess that in Britain today, the great majority of households, perhaps apart from Hindu or Muslim households, do have at least one Bible.

But the question is how much of those Bibles actually read? I can't help having a wry smile on my face when I listen to the final few minutes of Desert Island Discs. Do you ever listen to Desert Island Discs?

[12 : 45] It's this program where you imagine that there's a person cast away on a desert island. They have to choose, I think, eight records they'd like to have with them. And the interviewer asked them about their life. Roy Plumley started it back in the 1950s or whatever it was.

Michael Parkinson did it. Old Parky for a year or two. Then Sue Lawley ran it for many years. And I think that nice Scots girl, Kirsty Young, is the one who does it these days. But after the final disc is over, the presenter always says to the castaway, now you're allowed to have one special luxury on your desert island.

You have, of course, the full works of Shakespeare and the Bible, but what would you like to have as well? And different people say, well I'd like to have a Jersey cow because I want to have some milk or I'd like to have my piano there with me so I can play my sonatas.

Now I think to myself, but Kirsty, is your castaway really going to read this Bible? You've got the works of Shakespeare and the Bible, but the Bible, Kirsty, is the world's least read bestseller because people are in hiding from God.

I mean, it's one thing to have a Bible in your house, but it's another thing to read it. When I was working as a parish minister down in England, I would sometimes visit elderly folk in their own homes who were not church members.

[13 : 58] You know, I'd go there because there was a funeral or some other tragedy or difficulty had happened. And quite often, as I was taken in, and the best china was brought out and the vicar was brought a cup of tea and so on, I'd sit there in the front room and the elderly person would say, wait there a moment, vicar, I want to show you something.

And he or she would go into the back bedroom and I could hear them rummaging around in drawers and things. And a minute or two later, they'd come back and say, look at this and present me with a black King James version of the Bible.

Look at the fly leaf inside. This was given to me by my godmother when I was baptised in 1921. And the person would show me this book with great pride. But my heart would sink because I could see that this Bible was in pristine condition, bought in 1921 and never opened.

The pristine Bible speaks of men and women who are in hiding from God. That home that I visited was a hiding place from God. The words of God were there in the back bedroom, but the owner of the Bible is a stranger to God.

I have a friend down in London whose name is Vijay Menon and you'll guess from that name Vijay that he's from India and Vijay was a Hindu brought up in a strict Hindu home and he was converted to Christ when he was in his 30s.

[15 : 19] And he's a very enthusiastic evangelist and Vijay sometimes carries a Bible around him inside a black briefcase and sometimes on purpose he'll lay this briefcase down near somebody and if somebody makes to pick up the briefcase or to touch it he'll say be careful mind that briefcase there's dynamite inside.

Then he'll open the briefcase and reveal a Bible. But really he's not exaggerating for a moment. A book that has the power to turn a person's life inside out and upside down the power to rearrange the contents of a person's head and a person's heart it is no exaggeration to compare that book with dynamite.

The Bible blows to pieces all our godless views of life. So if we hide from the Bible perhaps possessing a copy even having it by the bedside but never actually reading it we're in hiding from God.

Where are you says God to somebody I'm not listening but you have a Bible don't you? Yes but I read it about as much as I read the thoughts of Chairman Mao. The fact is that when we begin to read the Bible seriously we are confronted by the real God and we discover that he's not some shadowy figure from a distant past.

He is present and he deals with us. He probes our life. He searches our commitments and if we want to remain in control of our own lives we shut the Bible and put it down as quickly as we would a hot brick.

[16 : 49] Then a fourth hiding place is the attitude of mind that sees Jesus as no more than a rather fine example of human life.

Now quite a lot of people occupy this hiding place and regard him as just a fine man just a wonderful example of how to live life with love and compassion and balance and sanity and mercy and fortitude.

If we regard him like that simply as a fine example of humanity we can thoroughly domesticate him. We say for example Jesus was so good with the outcasts of society he would lift them up and include them.

Wasn't that wonderful? And he was so good with babies and little children. Ah, what a kind man he was. Let the little children come to me. Don't stop them. The kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

And he was so humble with his friends as well. On the night before he died he took a towel and a basin of hot water and he washed the feet of his disciples. He did the thing that only slaves would

do.

[17 : 55] What a lovely example he sets of kindness and compassion and humility. So friends let's do our very best to follow his example. Now if we focus on only those aspects of his life he becomes no more than a kind of revered older brother who sends us starry eyed with admiration and respect.

What a lovely man he is. Let's be lovely like him. Oh do let's. Now Jesus is so much more than a nice man. Yes, he does set us a wonderful example of how to be compassionate to folk whose lives have become unhinged.

But when we read the full account of his life in the Gospels we are confronted by somebody who is altogether more than a man. Think of the very first words that he uttered in Mark's Gospel.

The time has come the kingdom of God is here repent therefore and believe the good news. In other words acknowledge that you've all lived as rebels against God and come to him and believe the news that he has sent his son to rescue you from death and hell.

This is somebody who is more than just a man. This is somebody who speaks with authority. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me he says in Matthew's Gospel.

[19 : 10] This man is God incarnate who speaks with the authority of God. His voice is the voice that wakes the dead. The voice which ultimately will welcome the repentant into heaven and banish the unrepentant to perdition.

If we just read his life selectively and only notice him when he speaks kindly to those who are down we're in hiding from him. We've reduced him to being just a fine human being.

We've stripped him of his deity and therefore of his authority to command our allegiance. A person who regards Jesus as only a gentle and compassionate man is running away from God.

Then fifth and last it's possible to hide from God by being a church member who has never really repented and submitted to Christ.

If you like Christian by profession but not truly turned around and born again. It's possible to attend church regularly to give regularly to church funds to put across the appearance of being a staunch member of a local church and yet in reality to be still disobedient and unrepentant.

[20 : 32] Jesus himself alerts us to this very danger in Matthew's Gospel chapter 7 when he says not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day the day of judgment many will say to me Lord, Lord did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name and then I will declare to them I never knew you depart from me you workers of lawlessness.

Now the frightening thing about those words is that Jesus says that there will be many who speak like that many who claim allegiance to him but who in truth are strangers to him unknown to him whose lives are characterized by lawlessness rather than by glad and grateful obedience to his teaching.

It's possible to be a church member for many years and yet still to be a stranger to Jesus to be in hiding from him. Where are you?

There is no more important question. God asked it of Adam and he asks it of us. It's a question which forces us to assess where we're up to in our lives.

[21 : 51] Where are we in relation to God? If you're trying to run a business in a time of recession like today you will watch your assets and your liabilities very carefully won't you?

If you're wise you'll know exactly where you're up to financially week after week after week you'll watch your position like a hawk because you know that if you don't your business will go down. And yet many folks seem to be indifferent as to where they're up to in relation to God.

The devil persuaded Eve that something God had said was not really important when it was of the utmost importance. And the devil will try to persuade us that God's great question is not an important question.

But everything hangs on it. If we're in hiding we need to come out of hiding and find the joy and the forgiveness and the new life that Jesus alone can bring to us.

Where are you? There's only one response to the question and that is to step out of hiding to come to Christ and to come today. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together.

[23 : 14] Our dear God we thank you so much that you had mercy upon the human race and that even as you judged Adam because of his disobedience you began to provide for the Saviour who was to come who is indeed the Saviour of all who will repent and turn to him.

So we pray dear Father that you will have mercy on each one of us here today and that you will help us to listen to your word and to believe it.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Lovely to see you all. Friends, do come and join us again next week if you can. Thank you foruring us we shall want you to liveTo off semua Wel petrol does not meet the Warrenfficients to the us How any projects can manifest God cannot move you of any goodness for the Elizabeth