

1. Man in the dock: Where are you, and what have you done?

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- [0 : 00] to the passage that we read, Genesis chapter 3, at verse 8, page 3, I think, if you have one of our visitor's Bibles. Now, during my holiday, part of my holiday reading was an autobiography that I picked up just before I went away by Matthew Parris.
- He's a columnist who writes for the Times newspaper. He's a very interesting writer, I find, although of late I've noticed that he is becoming really very vehement in his anti-Christian views.
- Always has been, but there's been a particular vehemence of late. But all the same, I was interested to read his book, and it is indeed a very interesting book. If you read it, you'll know that in many ways it seems to be dominated by his own discussion of his own sexuality.
- He is homosexual. Perhaps that does indeed explain at least part of his very harsh views about the Church. But one thing that makes it a very interesting book is his insights, and there are many, into politics and politicians.
- You'll know that he was himself an MP, a Tory MP, for about seven years. And he's got an awful lot of interesting things to say about the background to much of the politics that we read about in our newspapers.
- [1 : 25] Many revealing things to say about many of the well-known figures in public life. And one reference that stuck in my mind was something that he wrote about his neighbouring MP in Derbyshire, Neil Hamilton.
- Now very infamous, of course, with his wife Christine, because of the so-called Cash for Questions affair back in 1999. There was a court case over that, as you know, even though it looks as though we're not going to have a court case over the Cash for Honours affair that we've just had this year.
- But reading Matthew Parris's comments there made me go back to another political autobiography, that of Martin Bell, the BBC reporter, who you remember took on Neil Hamilton and won his seat against him, standing as an independent MP.
- Now both of these books, incidentally, have a lot of very interesting things to say about the media and broadcasting and their influence in our country today. Both from an insider and an outsider perspective as broadcasters and as MPs.
- But, no, I'm not going to say anything more. That's for another time. That would be getting us off the track. But I recommend those books to you. But anyway, in Martin Bell's book, there's a section where he relates the story of that libel trial, where Neil Hamilton took Mohammed al-Fayed to court and sued him for libel.
- [2 : 50] Do you remember? It really was the libel trial of the decade. And, of course, Neil Hamilton lost spectacularly. It's no wonder that the trial made headlines when the two headline characters were such infamous ones.

But there were also two formidable barristers facing those men in the dock. And listen to what Martin Bell says. Both the barristers came to the fray with formidable reputations and the capacity to inflict grievous verbal harm.

George Carman QC, opening for Al-Fayed, described Hamilton as, quote, a greedy and unscrupulous politician who was on the make and on the take. Do you not think a man as greedy as Neil Hamilton is capable of lying again and again about whether he took cash for questions?

Desmond Brown QC, for Hamilton, called Al-Fayed, quote, a phony pharaoh, a man to whom lying has become a sickness and whose whole commercial life is founded on a lie.

Well, you remember the headlines, don't you? You remember how electric it was. And, of course, George Carman was, until his death in 2001, probably Britain's finest and certainly, I think, his best-known advocate.

[4 : 03] If you had to be in the dock in the court, you certainly did not want George Carman QC firing the questions at you. He successfully defended Jeremy Thorpe.

He won damages for Norman Tebbit and Elton John. Do you remember he won for Imran Khan when Ian Botham sued him? And, of course, it was George Carman, wasn't it, that finally did for poor Jonathan Aitken when the Guardian newspaper took him down.

One plaintiff in a case said, after being cross-examined by George Carman, whatever award is given for libel, being cross-examined by George Carman would make it not enough money.

And Martin Bell said this of Neil Hamilton's bruising in the dock. Of all Neil Hamilton's ordeals, which ranged over the years of his self-destruction from being censured by a commons committee to being lampooned on Have I Got News for New, his cross-examination by George Carman in court 13 was probably the hardest.

It was merciless. And, of course, in the end, as you know, poor Neil Hamilton lost spectacularly. He was ruined along with his battle-axe wife, as the tabloids love to call her.

[5 : 24] But, you know, reading that and recalling that made me think. In a secularized world that we live in today in the West, as far as God and as far as his word is concerned, I think most people tend to think of themselves a little bit like George Carman QC.

They are the brilliant, formidable advocates with all the evidence in their favor and all the killer arguments to floor an opponent. Whereas God, the God of the Bible certainly, is rather like Neil Hamilton.

He's standing rather forlornly in the dock. He's rather feeble. He's trying to defend the indefensible. And if there's no contest, the outcome is certain.

It's an absolute walkover. The Bible, the God of the Bible, is bankrupt. He's finished. He's ruined. He's totally discredited forever. That's what people think, isn't it?

Years ago, it was C.S. Lewis who coined a phrase for this whole attitude of secular man in the title of a book that he wrote called God in the Dock. Man is in charge.

[6 : 37] Man thinks he has all the answers. And therefore, it's man who fires all the questions and all the accusations at a helpless God. God who's defending himself feebly from all the wit and the wisdom of man.

Man is in charge. He has all the answers. And therefore, it's man who is on the bench. And God is in the dock. And I think we have to say, sadly, that many, even within the Christian church, and I dare to say many Christian preachers, have tended, rather, to collude with that idea, haven't we?

We'd rather be on the defensive. We think our arguments are a little bit feeble sometimes. We rather fear, don't we, the wit and the wisdom of man.

In fact, there's nothing new in this arrogant and presumptuous approach to the God of the Bible. Nothing new at all. If you read through the Gospels, you'll see that Jesus Christ found exactly the same.

There was a constant barrage of questioning and cross-examination and accusation to him, wasn't there? Especially from the religious lawyers, the so-called religious experts of the day. You know, the kind of people who come on to news night or their discussion programs and love to debunk everything, love to cast cynicism on everything that's orthodox.

[8 : 00] But was Jesus Christ cowed by that kind of thing? Not at all. When you read the Gospels, you see that Jesus was never, ever put on the back foot, was he?

It was quite the reverse. In fact, he always turned the tables on men and women. And he ended up putting the questions to them. He ended up putting them in the dock. Putting them in the place of cross-examination.

And Jesus faced them with God's questions. With God's accusations. With God's challenges to the human heart. And when he did, they didn't like it one bit, did they?

Matthew records for us in chapter 2, verse 46. No one was able to answer him a word. Nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

And so for the next few weeks, we're going to take our cue from Jesus. We're going to listen to some of the questions that God puts to us. We looked similarly at some of these things a couple of years ago on Wednesday lunchtimes.

[9 : 06] But we're going to see on Sunday mornings for the next little while that in fact we are in the dock. We're going to be where the Bible assumes men and women actually are.

And we're going to see what questions that God in the Bible might have for us to think about. However self-assured we might feel we are as 21st century Westerners. And we're going to see that the Bible is very, very full of just that kind of question.

We'll find that it's not us at all who are on the front foot. In fact, it's God. And we'll find that, never mind George Carman QC, the God of Scripture, friends, is a far more fearsome advocate to be worried about.

Well, our first question is right here at the beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 3 in the passage that we read. In fact, it's a question that comes right at the very beginning of human history but is repeated again and again right through human history and is still there today as God is speaking to people.

Right from the start and all through history and still today God has been asking men and women this question. Where are you? And what have you done?

[10 : 25] You've asked it to your children, haven't you, sometimes? When you've suspected something is askance. But God is asking it to every one of us, to every human being on earth.

Where are you? And what have you done? Now immediately, of course, you might think, well, that's wrong, surely. That's the opposite, isn't it? Of how our world thinks.

Our world, especially our post-modern Western world, our secular society, it thinks. It thinks that the question we are asking God, if there's any God at all, is where is God?

Isn't that right? Maybe that's your question today. Maybe you've just wandered in and you're wondering, where is this God? And why isn't he doing anything if he's there?

Why isn't he sorting out this world of mess, these wars, these famines, these floods, these global warming issues? God seems to be lost. God seems to be hidden or perhaps hiding himself.

[11 : 27] Or more like, I suppose, dead or at the very least, powerless. Where is God? It's what we think we're asking. If he does exist, then God must be to blame, mustn't he, for the state of our world.

Look at where religion gets you, for example. That's the kind of thing Matthew Parris is writing today, isn't it, in his columns in the Times? Like Bertrand Russell, who said, religion is a disease born of fear, a source of untold misery to the human race.

And especially today, it's fundamentalism that's on trial, isn't it? That's what causes suicide bombs, isn't it? So there you are. Any religion that gets too serious, well, it's going to lead to disaster, isn't it?

So come on, God, if you're there, show yourself. Come out into the open. Stand up for yourself. You've got a lot to answer for, God of the Bible. Well, you see, that's what we're saying, isn't it, in our secular world at large.

It's God in the dark as the feeble defendant, and it's us on the bench asking all the questions. We're in charge of the show. But wait a minute. Just for a second, listen to what the Bible says to that.

[12 : 42] And the Bible says, no, it's absolutely the other way around altogether. You see? It's right here in Genesis chapter 3. It's God who's asking the questions, isn't it?

Look at verse 9. It's the Lord God who's asking the questions. That's not just any old God. It's the unique and only God, the God who we've just read has made and created the whole world.

The God who's revealed himself as the Lord. The God with a name, the God of the Bible. The only God. And in verse 9, he says to man, where are you?

And where is proud humanity to be found? Verse 10. Verse 8, rather. Well, they're not standing tall, are they?

They're not confidently having the upper hand against God? No, they're skulking in the bushes, hiding from God. Look at verse 10. I heard the sound of you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked and I hid myself.

[13 : 47] We're feeling a bit exposed and awkward at the moment, they say to God. So we had to hide. We're not too keen on a face-to-face right at this moment, God. It's rather a pathetic picture, isn't it?

Self-assured humanity covering itself in its fig-leaf bikinis. At least they had the decency to cover themselves and hide in the bushes. There's a few folk I saw on holiday in bikinis who would have been much better hiding in the bushes.

But that's another matter altogether. But just look at verse 10. Isn't it a picture of humankind estranged from their Creator?

I hid myself, says man, from God. And that is where mankind is and that is where mankind has been right from that very first rebellion, hiding from God.

But God isn't finished, is he? He asks another question. Actually, he asks a few questions, but it's all summed up there in verse 13, isn't it? Do you see? What is this that you have done? What have you done?

[14 : 52] Well, the answer that the Bible gives to that question is as clear as it is terrible. You, humankind, says God, you have wrecked the universe. It's interesting, isn't it, in an age of climate change and global warming and all of that today, that perhaps we're just beginning to give some attention to that question, aren't we?

But it's here in Genesis 3. How have they done that? Well, look at verse 11. Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?

In other words, have you abandoned my rule and set yourselves up as autonomous rulers, pleasing yourselves in my world? The answer is yes.

That's exactly what humankind has done. Of course, they're very quick to deny responsibility. Neither the man or the woman will accept the blame. Verse 12, Adam says, it's not my fault.

It was the woman. Verse 13, the woman says, it wasn't my fault either. It was the serpent. That's just as people still say today, isn't it, in their rebellion against God.

[15 : 53] It's our upbringing, not my fault. I suppose Adam and Eve couldn't have said that really, could they? But they could have said what other people say, well, it's my genes. I made that way, God.

You made us this way. They deny responsibility. But that is what they have done. They have snatched from God the authority to decide for themselves good and evil.

That's what we've done, isn't it? We will have moral autonomy. We don't need to listen to God. We decide what's right and wrong. We say we have the right to decide.

It's me, it's my life, it's my body. I'll do what I want. Don't anyone tell me how to live my life or what's right or wrong. Not even you, God. And that's what human beings have said, isn't it?

Plain and obvious. But you see, what we're told here in Genesis 3 are the consequences of that. And that's what's so terrible, isn't it? It all began right here.

[16 : 55] Look at verse 16. A picture, isn't it, of erect relationships between men and women. Her desire will be for him, says God.

In other words, against him, as our footnote brings it up. That is, she will want to dominate and control her husband. Just as in Genesis 4, verse 7, sin's desire is to dominate and control Cain.

Same words. That's the seeds of male-female strife, isn't it? That's where the seeds of feminism comes from. But there's another side to it too, isn't it?

And he shall rule over you. That is, dominate you. That's the reality, isn't it, of male chauvinism, male abuse of women all the ages. Wrecked relationships between men and women.

That's the world as we know it, isn't it? Not harmony between the sexes, but battles between the sexes. Yes, there are different cultural aspects to it in different places, but that's universal.

[18 : 01] Wrecked relationships between men and women as a result of what we have done. That's not all. Look at verse 17. There's wrecked relationships, aren't there, between man and nature.

Cursed is the ground because of you. Yes, says God, there is still mercy and blessing. You shall still eat. You shan't die immediately. And there will be toil and work, says God.

There will be rewarding things in life through all of that. But there's also curse. It'll be toil and labor and strife all the days of our lives. Well, who can deny the reality of that?

Our work, our jobs, our careers. They're both of those things, aren't they? They're so often our fulfilling joy. And yet, at the same time, they're the bane of our lives. Isn't that right?

Both together. Wrecked relationships between man and our surroundings, our world. And look at verse 19. There's also wrecked relationship between mankind and his very being, our life itself.

[19 : 07] To dust you will return, says God. God. And it's true, isn't it? Life brings our greatest joys and gladnesses.

Think of the joy of the new life of a little baby. Think of the loves and the relationships of our lives. And yet, it ends always and inevitably, doesn't it, for all of us, in death.

Death is our greatest foe. Death is the great robber, the great thief that steals from us the most important and precious and dear things that any of us ever have, the loves of our lives. Then in the end, of course, our own life, ourself.

To dust you shall return. What have you done, says God? That's the question that God puts to us persistently through the Bible as he holds us in the dock of his perfect justice.

And when we look at ourselves, when we look at our world honestly, we have to admit that yes, we have destroyed relationships right across the universe. And it's all because, says God, the relentless advocate, it's all because you have rebelled against me, your maker and your Lord.

[20 : 22] You see, that, according to the Bible, that is the very essence of what sin is. Sin is not some peccadilloes, some skeletons in our closet. Of course not. It's a systematic destruction destruction of God's created order for all of life.

It's rebellion against his rule. And so, God's question to us forces us onto the back foot. Where are you? And what have you done?

And the real answer is, well, we're lost. And we're estranged. And we're afraid of God. And what we've done is we've wrecked the world and its relationships by our sinful rebellion, our selfishness.

But of course, our world can't accept that. No, no, no, says the wisdom of our world. Wise men and philosophers and scientists, well, we can explain the world. Look, we've sent men into space and we haven't found God.

Do you remember the ridiculous thing Yuri Gagarin said, the first astronaut, when he came back? I've been up into space and God isn't there. And, says the world, well, we've got clever mathematics and physics and astronomy and we've looked for the evidence of God but we can't find God.

[21 : 35] He's not there. We've got clever professors, haven't we, like Richard Dawkins declaring that God is just a delusion. There's no God. There's nothing. There's only DNA, says Professor Dawkins.

There's no design, no purpose, no evil and no good. Nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. DNA just is, he says. And we dance to its music.

We face a barrage, don't we, today, of aggressive secularism. And on the face of that, it's easy for some, in fact, it's probably easy for many within the professing church to lose faith in the Bible's diagnosis of the truth and of reality.

And so people try to accommodate, we try to make the Christian message, well, less, I suppose, offensive, more acceptable to a secular world. But, and listen carefully to this, this is important, this analysis at the beginning of the Bible is wrong, well, we'll have to rewrite, won't we, an awful lot of the rest of the Bible too.

Isn't that right? I mean, Jesus himself must have got terribly mixed up as well, mustn't he? You remember that story that Jesus told about the shepherd and the lost sheep?

[22 : 53] Well, that was obviously a mistake, wasn't it? Great mistake. It was Dick Lucas who first pointed that out to me. He says, well, we'll have to rewrite that story. It was all wrong. Jesus got mixed up.

Actually, it was a story about a shepherd and a hundred sheep. But what happened was the poor shepherd got lost. And so one day in the fold, the hundred sheep discussed amongst one another and said, bah, bah, well, what are we going to do?

Bah. And ninety-nine sheep said to one another, they said, well, look to the one sheep, you stay here and we'll all go out looking for the shepherd. And they said, well, that's a good idea and off they went. Bah.

And they went all around the desert and eventually they found the shepherd. The poor man was quite lost. Didn't know whether he was coming or going. But the sheep, well, they picked him up and carried him back to the fold and they said to the one, look, we find our lost shepherd.

They all had a big party together and ate lots of grass and had a wonderful time buying together. We found our shepherd who was lost. It'd have to be that way around, wouldn't it?

[23 : 52] If it's God that's lost and us who are searching. Poor Jesus, he was all wrong. He was all wrong, wasn't it, when he thought he'd come to seek and save the lost. No, it must have been poor Jesus who was lost.

He was the one who didn't know who he was or why he'd come. That's what some scholars want us to believe, isn't it? Poor Jesus was having an identity crisis. So we need to rewrite, well, lots of things.

John 14, verse 6, for example, it should say, not, I am the way, the truth, and the life, but Jesus said, who knows the way? Where's the truth? What's life all about? It would have to be that, wouldn't it?

He's lost until at last modern man with his clever science and scholarship can give him the answers. Fergal Keen with his BBC documentaries can tell Jesus, yes, we know who you are, not who you thought you were at all.

Ah, says Jesus, at last, modern man has come to help me find myself. Do you see? The whole Bible has to be turned back to front, doesn't it?

[24 : 58] Just preposterous. And yet, that's what we're left with doing. If the Bible's account of reality is all wrong, if it is God who's lost and hidden and helpless, of course it's not wrong.

This account we've read in Genesis just describes exactly the world as we know it. Describes exactly the way the world of human beings has always been right from the very beginning. Human beings hiding from the accusing presence of God.

Human beings lost and afraid and exposed and hiding. Pretending to themselves that they can protect themselves from God by a covering of fig leaves. As if that was possible.

It's interesting that Matthew Paris admits as much, really, in an article for the Times that he wrote in 1995. It's quoted in full in his book. He speaks about how he woke up one night and experienced how eerie and awesome it is to sit in the dark of night in total silence and be conscious of the noise of your own heartbeat and your breathing and your blood flow and the very complexity just of your own human body.

He says this, man is almost a miraculous combination of fragility with resilience. It doesn't bear thinking about. You better not look down if you want to keep on flying, B.B. King used to sing.

[26 : 23] It seems that human life is an impossibility sustained by inattention. We mustn't eavesdrop on these noises too often or for too long. In other words, he's saying we must hide constantly from the reality of the consequences behind fig leaves because the truth doesn't bear thinking about.

We must suppress it. We must keep this miraculous reality of what human life is suppressed in our minds otherwise it would all be too much. And that's just what people do, isn't it?

We hide behind fig leaves. Fig leaves of materialism, money to insulate us from reality, careers to absorb us and keep us from the deep thoughts, leisure to fill up our consciousness at other times, to keep haunting thoughts of God at bay so we don't look down and suddenly get fearful.

For some, it's fig leaves of mysticism, spirituality, looking for experiences, as if it was God who was hiding and us who was seeking him out for enlightenment.

But actually, of course, doing that, we're keeping out of our mind any reality of the God of the Bible, the awkward God, the holy God, the demanding God. We want to keep him right out of our minds by a fig leaf of searching for God somewhere else.

[27 : 47] Or there can be the fig leaf of moralism, can't there? Seeking the protection of a good life, being very upright and moral and proper and doing good as though to impress God. But actually, by doing that, we're just keeping the real challenge of God's awkward questions at bay, aren't we?

And thousands, thousands more different fig leaves. But all of them, in their way, seeking to hide us and insulate us from the truth, the truth about ourselves and the truth about God.

That's just what Romans chapter 1 talks about, isn't it? Very starkly. Paul's describing exactly the same thing. Just listen. for the wrath of God, he says, is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world and the things that have been made, so they're without excuse.

for although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened.

[29 : 06] Claiming to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

You see? Suppressing the truth, hiding from reality, behind fig leaves. It's so clear that the only way we can't see the truth about God is if we won't see the truth, if we hide ourselves.

And that's what Paul says leads to disturbed thinking, distorted thinking. People think they're wise, but actually they're fools. Like Bertrand Russell, brilliant mind, brilliant man in many ways, but his life was a disaster.

He wrecked his family, wrecked his marriage, all his followers were utterly disillusioned. Well, suppressing the truth, you see, leads to disturbed thinking and that's what leads to distorted affections, darkened hearts.

What Paul says leads to misuse of the body. Remember all the fuss a year or two ago when that film about Kinsey came out. Do you remember? The one who was the great authority on sexual behavior had such a huge influence in the 1960s, fettered as a great expert, and yet ultimately shown to be utterly perverse.

[30 : 21] A man who wanted to engage in gratuitous sex even with children, even with animals. Well, that's what Romans 1 is saying. It's all because human beings have exchanged the truth of God for a lie.

They've hidden themselves from the truth of the presence of God and his way for this world. What is God's judgment on that, says Paul, in verse 26 of Romans 1?

Well, astonishingly, God didn't have to do anything. He just gave them up to themselves. He's given us up to do what we wanted, given human beings to do exactly what they planned to do.

And that's what explains our world, isn't it? We say, where is God when you need him? But God says, where are you? The world's your responsibility, you wanted it. Where are you?

What have you done? God, who is lost or helpless or both, it's us. It's not us who can search and find God, it's him who must search and find and deal with us.

[31 : 29] He's the finder. God, who do you see, the message of the Bible is that God is still calling out that question. He hasn't left us utterly to ourselves.

If he had, we would have utterly destroyed this world long before now. But all through the Bible, he's calling men and women. It is, yes, a call of accusation.

What have you done? It does demand a heartfelt confession. It's what the Bible calls repentance. But at the same time, it's also a call of grace.

It's an offer of fellowship restored through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And that's what poses for us the real question, isn't it? If God is calling and questioning, are we listening?

Are we responding? Let me close by reading to you another version of that same call. It's the same call, same question, just in different words.

[32 : 31] This time, not from the beginning of the Bible, but from the very, very end of the Bible. It's the words of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to a living church. A church just like this with all sorts of different people, all different kinds of people listening.

It's the words that Jesus speaks to the church. in Laodicea, in Revelation chapter 3. For you say, he says, you say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

I cancel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments, so that you may clothe yourselves, and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my father on his throne. So he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

[33 : 51] Same question. God's still calling. Where are you? Are you listening? And if so, what's your answer going to be to him?

Well, maybe you'll think about that today and this week. Let's pray together. Gracious God, our Father, we thank you that your word speaks the truth about this world.

It tells us why things are as they are. It spares us none of the blushes or the shame. And yet we thank you also that you are a God who still calls out to us a question which is also an offer.

And that you come to us to seek us and to find us. To seek and to save that which is lost. And to bring us to the place of great and abundant joy.

Give us, we pray, ears to hear what your Spirit is saying to the churches today and every day. In the call of our Lord Jesus Christ. For we ask it in his name.

[35 : 04] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen.