

Twenty questions
Jesus asked
What is he asking you?

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Introduction

Sitting on the back row in the classroom, I was under the (mistaken) impression that the teacher wouldn't ask me any questions. Others in the class seemed only too eager to wave their hands in the air, straining to show their knowledge, but I was seldom confident that my answer would be correct.

Years later, as a member of the local Young Wives group, I ended up on the team for the annual quiz night, when we pitted our wits against half a dozen other local teams. A wretched question was put to me which has burnt itself into my memory: "'The Gunners' is the nickname for which football team?' My mind was a blank. Men in the audience, my husband included, were falling off their seats in disbelief that anyone could be so ignorant. Needless to say, the correct answer will lodge in my brain for ever. Arsenal... of course!

Today it seems that quiz shows on television and radio, quiz nights in schools and pubs, as well as a plethora of quiz books, have entered the universal bloodstream to become some of the most popular forms of entertainment. Whatever your age or intellect, there will be a quiz to suit you.

Yet how many of us, having just sat through a quiz programme, would be able to repeat all the correct answers? Most of us would need to hear the programme over and over again before all the information sank in.

So what is our perennial fascination with questions and answers? Does it spring from our earliest quest for information? All small children ask the questions 'Why? When? How? Where? What?' This shows a natural instinctive quest for information, but also a need for the security and comfort that answers can bring. Asking questions is part and parcel of growing up and learning to interact with our environment.

Unlike quiz questions, however, questions about life can rarely

be given immediate, concise answers. Often, one question only leads to another and then on to a whole spinning raft of questions that mangle our minds and fray our nerves. Yet it is only by confronting these daily questions that we make our decisions.

When we look at it in that light, it seems extraordinary that our approach to growing in faith is so passive. With busy lives, most people can spare only a fragment of their day to hear or read the Bible, and then it is but a snippet. The parables that Jesus told stand alongside the greatest stories ever told—we love them. The accounts of his miracles have triggered, for many, a longing for similar demonstrations of God’s power today, yet they still mystify us. Historians and authors offer books on the subject of Jesus’ life—endlessly fascinating to believers and non-believers—but what about the questions that Jesus asked?

In this book, you are invited to explore 20 of those questions. We will delve into the context in which Jesus asked the questions and consider why the people answered him as they did. Then we will take a new approach and try to engage with the questions as if Jesus was putting them directly to us, his present-day disciples. Suddenly, they are not 2000-year-old questions asked of people remote in time and place from us. The stories of those first disciples were written to encourage all who would be disciples in the future, of every age, in every century and continent. Now it is for us, in our time and situation, to work out where we stand in relationship to this same Jesus Christ.

It is not a case of having the ‘right’ answers. There are no instant, easy or trite replies to the Son of God. But my prayer for you is that you will be open to surprise and challenge as you take time to unravel your own personal answers.

Each chapter contains suggestions to help you wait upon God. In so doing, may you recognize afresh the reality of the living presence of Jesus; may he touch your heart and deepen your faith.

‘What do you want?’

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God!’ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked, ‘What do you want?’ They said, ‘Rabbi’ (which means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ ‘Come,’ he replied, ‘and you will see.’ So they went and saw where he was staying, and spent that day with him. It was about the tenth hour. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, was one of the two who heard what John had said and who had followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, ‘We have found the Messiah.’

JOHN 1:35–41

John the Baptist was the last in the Jewish tradition of ‘great prophets’. From Mark’s Gospel we know that his message of repentance and justice had made an astonishing impact on the people, for we read, ‘The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him’ (Mark 1:5). That’s quite a following. Also, Luke 1:36 gives us the intimate family detail that John the Baptist was a relative of Jesus.

Like all great religious teachers of his day, John had celebrity status and many disciples. His father, Zechariah, being a priest, it would have been natural for young John to grow up immersed in the holy scriptures. Zechariah himself had prophesied for his son, ‘And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him’ (Luke 1:76). The background is very important for us to remember as we

look at this significant moment recorded by the Gospel writer, the disciple John.

John the Baptist's ministry had reached its climax, the point when he acknowledged that his work was coming to an end. He told his disciples, '[Jesus] must become greater; I must become less' (John 3:30). This was the mark of a truly great man, and Jesus praised him, saying that none had been born greater than John (Matthew 11:11). In these brief verses at the start of John's Gospel, we picture that eccentric, wild-looking prophet staring down the road as his kinsman approaches—but instead of a family greeting, John announces to the two men beside him that Jesus is 'the Lamb of God'.

This strange phrase is rooted way back in Old Testament thought. Remember how the 'Passover lamb' (Exodus 12:21), a male without blemish (v. 5, NRSV), was used to spare God's people from the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn son. The emphasis on Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' was later taken up by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:7 and by Peter in his first letter (1:19). The phrase is also bound up with the idea of the scapegoat, the animal chased out into the desert bearing the people's sin (Leviticus 16:20–22). John and his disciples would have also known that the image of the lamb was to be found in Isaiah's song of the 'suffering servant' who was 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' (Isaiah 53:7).

Already we can begin to feel the force behind John the Baptist's words. He was stating, in terms understood far better by his hearers than by us today, that Jesus was God's chosen servant, God's anointed, the Messiah. If that wasn't earth-shattering enough, the inference behind his earlier statement that Jesus 'takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29) was mindblowing. Only God could take away sin!

No wonder the two disciples left their teacher and walked reverently after Jesus. Can you picture the scene? Two men, probably young, are walking a few yards behind the stranger when suddenly he turns round, looks straight at them and asks, 'What do you want?' Like people today who come unexpectedly face

to face with somebody famous, they just couldn't think what to say. Unnerved and embarrassed, they came out with a lame reply which had nothing to do with the real reason they wanted to be near Jesus.

We know that one of the men was Andrew. I wonder, who was the other disciple? Could it have been John, who wrote the Gospel? This may have been the first of several encounters with Jesus of Nazareth before John the Baptist was imprisoned and Jesus called them to be his own disciples (Mark 1:14–20).

What were they really wanting? Devout Jews had been longing for centuries for the coming of God's promised Messiah. For Andrew and the others, living under the Roman occupation was humiliating and soul-destroying. It was a political situation that injected a feverish intensity into their longing for both physical and spiritual renewal. Above all, they wanted a Redeemer, a Saviour who would turn all their longings for freedom, justice, forgiveness and peace into triumphant reality. But all they could mutter was, 'Where are you staying?'

What I love about this scene is the way Jesus responded. He invited the men to tag along, no strings attached. There was no condemnation for their halting answer, only a gentle invitation and the opportunity to listen and watch. Notice that verse 39 is quite specific: they only 'spent that day with him'. That taster session was the seed for all that was to follow. They spent a day with the man who would change their lives and the world for ever.

Imagine this same Jesus asking you, 'What do you want?'

Find a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Indulge yourself with a scented candle. Spend some minutes imagining yourself alongside the two disciples.

Jesus turns to look directly at you. You can see his face, hear his words... He is asking you... 'What do you want?' Allow his words to linger in your mind, to penetrate your heart. Take time to think, time to be honest.

What are your immediate needs? What are you looking for in life? Are you wanting things for those you love? What do *you* want?

If there are many thoughts buzzing in your mind, you might find it helpful to brainstorm a list of what you want—now, at this moment. Write things down in any order, just as they come; the list can always be rearranged later to reflect your priorities. Look at the list long and hard and gradually trace what it is that links all those ‘wants’ together.

Whatever is bothering you or whatever you are searching for, Jesus understands and is waiting for you to come to him. There may be ‘wants’ in your list that will not be granted or satisfied in this life but, whatever is uppermost in your heart, Jesus knows. Augustine is quoted as saying, ‘We could not have even begun to seek God unless he already had found us.’

Evidently, the ancient rabbis had a standard response to those who came to them with questions. They would say, ‘Come and see, and we will think about it together.’ What an encouraging reply!

I believe that, just like Andrew and his friend, we need to spend time with Jesus. Maybe there is someone in your life who has pointed you in the right direction, just as John the Baptist pointed his disciples to Jesus. We don’t have to be erudite and explain ourselves; we only need to pause, watch and listen.

James Montgomery (1771–1854), one of the vociferous opponents of slavery and the use of child chimney sweeps, has been called the greatest of English lay hymn writers. Here is a verse from one of over 400 hymns that he wrote.

*Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear,
The upward glancing of an eye
When none but God is near.*

It doesn’t matter if we are diffident, or even if there are times when we don’t actually know what we really want. What is important, vitally important if our faith is to strengthen and sustain us, is that we take a step in the right direction—closer to Jesus. The closer

we draw to Jesus, the deeper the impact that his teaching will have upon our hearts.

As the apostle James, thought to be Jesus' brother, was to write to the first Jewish Christians living through the dangers and difficulties of sporadic persecution, 'Come near to God and he will come near to you' (James 4:8).

As you open yourself in prayer to God, through Jesus Christ, the answers to your wants, your real wants, will take shape and by the guidance of the Holy Spirit your faith will deepen.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, I bring to you my deepest needs, even the things I cannot share with anyone else. I want to know you as my Saviour. Hold me in your love and surround me with your spirit of peace. Amen

‘Have you never read...?’

One Sabbath Jesus was going through the cornfields, and his disciples began to pick some ears of corn, rub them in their hands and eat the grain. Some of the Pharisees asked, ‘Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and taking the consecrated bread, he ate what is lawful only for the priests to eat. And he also gave some to his companions.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.’ On another Sabbath Jesus went into the synagogue and was teaching, and a man was there whose right hand was shrivelled. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched him closely to see if he would heal on the Sabbath... Then Jesus said to them, ‘I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?’

LUKE 6:1–7, 9

To spend time browsing in a bookshop is one of my particular pleasures, and should the bookshop have a ‘bargain shelf’, then I am doubly happy. Usually my purchases are modest and come under the headings of coastal walks, anything to do with China, or vegetarian cooking, but one day I was tempted by a hefty, vivid yellow hardback entitled *Everything You Need to Know in an Emergency*. Well, of course, my life would have been incomplete without this encyclopedia of advice brightening up my study! The book weighed a ton but promised to hold the answer to every cause of distress from burst waterpipe to heart attack. With that tome in my possession, all would be well.

When I came to move house some years later, I had to admit that I had never opened my encyclopedia. I felt a bit ashamed about this until it occurred to me that, in a true emergency, there is no time to go and read a book. Nor do we go about our lives in a state of high expectation and readiness for any and every eventuality. In emergencies we switch to automatic mode and, if possible, call for help. The bulky yellow book went to a charity shop.

My flippant attitude to my ultimately discarded book could not be further removed from the outlook of some of the Pharisees encountered by Jesus. Their whole life's work was about imposing ritual laws on every conceivable aspect of daily living. Their motivation could be construed as honourably devout or a way of distancing themselves and their culture from the despised Roman occupiers. At all costs they worked to retain Judaism's purity: they saw it as their duty to preserve their national identity because, for them, national and religious identity were the same.

No doubt the Pharisees prided themselves on representing a fundamental movement of renewal, as opposed to the Sadducees, who were content to compromise with Rome in order to secure their position and influence. We only have to look at the various political and religious groups today, with their factions and bickering, to be reminded that similar power struggles formed the backdrop to Jesus' ministry.

When we read the verses from Luke's Gospel at the beginning of this chapter, we should forget the vast hectares that modern agriculture calls 'fields'. Jesus and his disciples were wandering along the pathways beside strips of land (like those cultivated by villagers under our medieval feudal system), planted with corn. Obviously, they were not alone. Imagine Jesus, the twelve disciples, women and children, curious villagers, critical Pharisees—possibly as many as 30 or 40 people trekking from one Galilean village to another.

Technically, the disciples were not doing anything wrong by pulling off some corn and creating some makeshift muesli. They

could not be accused of stealing, as the Law of Moses said, 'If you enter your neighbour's cornfield, you may pick the ears with your hands, but you must not put a sickle to the standing corn' (Deuteronomy 23:25), but the Pharisees immediately jumped on the fact that the disciples were breaking the sabbath laws by 'working'. The Jewish legal tradition had built up an incredible 39 categories of activity forbidden on the sabbath, including 'reaping'. These traditions were creatively embellished so that any form of work became anathema on the sabbath, and, in the blinkered eyes of the Pharisees, healing was aligned with 'work'.

It is tempting to scoff at this religious absurdity, but obviously Mark, Matthew and Luke decided that it was necessary to record it as an expression of the different emphases in the teaching of Jesus and the Pharisees.

Jesus turned the criticism back on the Pharisees themselves. They were meticulous and learned men: they had read how their national icon, King David, some thousand years before, had eaten bread designated for priests alone. In the account (see 1 Samuel 21:1–6), David put the well-being of himself and his soldiers above strict manmade rules. His action did not become a habit; it was his response to an emergency. (Sadly, I'll never know whether advice for a similar emergency was given in my yellow book!) David needed food, which became available just at the right time. To him, it was yet another illustration of God's provision for his people.

It was bad enough for the Pharisees to be reminded of King David's actions, but Jesus went on to silence them with a sensational claim about himself: 'The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath' (Luke 6:5). Again, Mark, Matthew and Luke all record Jesus using the phrase 'Son of Man' about himself. The well-read Pharisees would have recognized it as a term used for Daniel, the great prophet of the exile. So Jesus left them in no doubt that his authority was beyond theirs. They could not control him and, by healing the man with the shrivelled hand, he exposed their self-righteous pride for the sham it had become. The Pharisees'

obsession with rules made them content to withhold, on the sabbath, food from the hungry and healing from the sick. By his actions, Jesus taught that God does not expect us to neglect our neighbours in pursuit of holiness. Rather, we honour and glorify God by ‘doing good’ (v. 9).

Although we may interpret his ministry as challenging the narrow-minded legalism rife among the religious leaders of his time, Jesus made sure his followers knew exactly where he stood: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them’ (Matthew 5:17). Jesus revealed a God of mercy and justice, whose love was inclusive and eternal, a God whom he called ‘Abba’, Father. To the eager crowds whose spiritual appetite had been whetted by the preaching of John the Baptist, this was true liberation theology.

Before we begin to feel complacent, perhaps we need to take a look at ourselves.

Many people are put off Christianity because they think it is a religion of rules: a catalogue of ‘Thou shalt nots’. Sadly, those who feel like this have not taken time to read the summary of the laws, the Ten Commandments, together with the teaching of Jesus, the fulfilment of God’s law. The Victorian clergyman and hymn writer Frederick William Faber (1814–63) wrote some piercing lines:

*But we make his love too narrow
By false limits of our own;
And we magnify his strictness
With a zeal he will not own.*

*If our love were but more simple
We should take him at his word;
And our lives would be illumined
By the presence of our Lord.*

The Pharisees made life so complicated. It was as if the more they tied themselves in knots of religious practice, the more those same

knots strangled their capacity for the values Jesus taught. Their hearts were not fertile ground for the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul listed as ‘love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control’ (Galatians 5:22–23). The listening crowds were witnessing an ever widening gap between Jesus and their religious leaders as Jesus gave the words of scripture fresh life and purpose. He taught that there is no room in God’s kingdom for spite and envy, criticism, rigid tunnel vision and cold self-righteousness. He brought them the healing joys of forgiveness, of sharing and mutual concern. If they could manage to live the way he taught, they would truly live as God intended humankind to live in the original paradise of Eden.

Let’s take this account of Jesus’ healing and teaching at the most basic level.

- Jesus is not only Lord of the sabbath but also Lord of our lives.
- Jesus shows us that there is no virtue in putting rules before human need.
- Jesus gave his disciples a proactive message—to do good.

The scenario is reminiscent of Moses’ words in Deuteronomy 30:19: ‘I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life.’ Jesus posed the choice between good and evil, to save life or to destroy it. In case you don’t have your Bible handy to check what reply the Pharisees gave, I can tell you that none is recorded!

As we look back over missed opportunities in our lives, the occasions when we have said and done things we never intended and bitterly regret, the times of doubt or downright disbelief, can we hear Jesus whispering to us, ‘Have you never read...’?

The Pharisees had plenty of head knowledge of God’s forgiveness and love but, because of their closed minds, they restricted God’s word for their own convenience. They chose to ignore any teaching that interfered with their routine.

Sometimes we too may fall into the temptation to pick and

choose the stories and parables we like while disregarding the challenging parts. Our minds and hearts can also remain closed, either by ignorance or by choice, leaving us with a sadly restricted and erroneous impression of our Saviour and his message.

A traditional story tells of a fly living in a world-famous art gallery. One day the fly alighted on a section of canvas that was dull to his eyes and rough to his tiny feet. The fly decided he didn't like this painting and he would never land on it again. If only he had seen the whole picture, though, he would have realized that it wasn't all dull and rough. He would have seen that he had made his judgment on the merest centimetre of paint brushed there by the great artist Van Gogh. The fly never saw the vibrant sunflowers.

As Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy, 'All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Timothy 3:16).

Prayer

Lord, guide me by your Holy Spirit so that I may see your purpose for me on the canvas of my life. Give me a desire to read more and more of your word as I seek to grow in your love and grace.