

Answering life's Big Questions

How to find answers to Big 21st Century Questions

Introduction

One of the titles given to Jesus was Rabbi, and Rabbis were, and are, famous for answering questions with questions. Often in Jesus day this lead to deep and meaningful theological conversations. When Jesus talked with Nicodemus, in John Ch 3 the conversation was moved forward by a series of questions from both men. The next chapter, records a conversation Jesus had with a woman. This conversation is peppered with questions

We all have questions. The aim of this study is to help you grapple with a few big 21st Century questions, which people grapple with today. People of faith, and people who are searching for faith. God is ready to give us the wisdom and insight needed to navigate the questions that seem too big for us. No answers to big questions are simple or simplistic, but together through this study we can begin to gather God's perspective on some of the big questions of our time.

Study 1

How do I find peace of mind today?

Introduction

Sometimes I sit just baffled why it is that nations at war just can't find a peaceful solution. When we sit as armchair generals, it all seems so clear to us. We just need to lock these leaders in a room and keep them there till they work out their differences. However before we become too critical of world leaders, it might be helpful to take an inward look and ask if we are taking steps of peace in our own life.

Wide view

1. If you have a relationship that is brewing into conflict and needs restoration, what are some of the things that get in the way of restoration and healing?

Biblical view

2 Consider the following passages and answer the question. How does the theme of peace weave its way through the life and teaching of Jesus?
Isa. Ch 9-6-7 Luke Ch 2 v 14 Matthew Ch 5 v 9 John 14 v 25-27 Acts Ch 10 v 34-36

3. If we are seeking to reflect the heart and will of God in the world, how will this impact the way we seek peace in the following areas

- a. Our personal relationships?
- B.our community?
- C our church?
- D.the world?

4. Jesus aim was to bring peace. Jesus spoke of an adversary who loves to bring war, conflict, tension, dissension and division. His strategy is to sow seeds of strife. Jesus described this adversary as a thief who comes to steal and destroy, the father of lies.

Looking around today what are some of the signs of this adversary at work in creating conflict, and dissension.

- a. in marriages?
- B.families?
- C.churches?
- D.communities and nations?

5. Jesus offered a solution for conflict. Read Matthew Ch 18 v 15 for his advice.

What are some of the consequences if we seek to ignore this directive from Jesus and choose to

- a. Push down our hurts and refuse to talk with the person?
- B. tell others about how we have been hurt by this person?
- C. come with an accusatory spirit?
- d. Be defensive and view everything as an attack?

6. What gets in the way of seeking reconciled relationships when someone has wronged us?

Practical view

7. The Apostle Paul wrote 'If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Romans 12 v 18' Most of us have been in a relationship where we have tried to seek peace but the other person refused. When this has happened what have you done to

- a. Seek inner peace about this conflict you have tried to resolve?
- B. in keeping the door open to this person so that they know you are ready to seek peace as soon as they are willing to take a step forward?

8. What is one specific place and practical way you could be a peacemaker right where you are?

Study 2

How can this planet survive?

Introduction

All things bright and beautiful is a song, which reminds us that God made the heavens and the earth. The theme of God creating and caring for his creation is a thread, which runs through the Bible. He has things to say about soil abuse [Leviticus 26 v 33-35] He has things to say about tree-abuse [Deuteronomy Ch 20 v 19] He has things to say about animal abuse [Proverbs 12 v10]

God is reminding us through the Bible that he has created everything, he owns it, and he is asking mankind to treat what he has given with respect, subdue creation, rule over it, work it, but protect it and don't abuse it, is God's call to mankind.

Wide view

1. what is one way you see our society abusing and hurting God's creation?
2. What is one way that you have not cared for creation, as you should have?

Biblical view

Read Genesis Ch 1 and Psalm 24 v 1-2

3. Just as a piece of art tells something about the artist, What do you learn about God by looking at creation?
4. How does God view his creation, and how should this impact how we see it?
5. How should this influence how we treat creation?
6. Genesis Ch 1 v 28 speaks about subduing and ruling over creation. Genesis Ch 2 v15 speaks about working and caring for creation. Some have taken the ideas of subduing and ruling the earth as licence to do whatever we want with creation. How does this errant interpretation cause problems
 - a. in how we treat the earth
 - b.in how some are viewed by those who have an increasing concern for the planet?
7. The Bible speaks about how God cares about all of his creation. What can we do to partner with him in taking care of creation?

8. Read Psalm 19 v 1-4. Tell about one place in creation that really speaks to you about the presence and power of God?

9. How does this speak to you when you meet with God in this place?

10. Reading the life story of Jesus, you will see that he spent a lot of his time around the Sea of Galilee, and finding quiet places to prayer. Why do you think Jesus spent so much of his discretionary time by the Sea of Galilee, and other places that brought him close to nature?

11. What can we learn from his example?

Practical view

12. When it comes to caring for creation, what is a good sign you have seen in

- a. Our society?
- b. the church?
- c. your own life?

13. What can we do to increase a positive concern for the creation?

14. Where do you believe Christians and the church need to take another step forward in caring for God's creation?

Study 3

How can I balance life's demands?

Introduction

It is often difficult and demanding to balance life's demands, it's not always the easiest thing to live with balance and health in a world that makes more growing demands upon us all the time. Today the crowdedness and hurriedness of life quite ironic when we have a lorry-load of time saving, life-simplifying devices available to us. The joke is that we all know people who stand by the microwave, and tell it to hurry up. It is a quite challenging today to reflect on how the pace of life is accelerating to the point where we are almost racing past the things, which matter most to us. We do need to ask what experiences of enduring value can occur at a very high rate of speed. I suggest not many. The truth is that the most treasured times with family; friends and God are done slowly. Intimacy can't be microwaved; quietness surrounds the things in life that really matter most.

Wide view

1. respond to the following
 - a. What one time saving device, didn't really save you any time?
 - b. do you find yourself more or less busy now then you were five years ago, and why?
 - c. what pace of life has created the most open space for rich relational connections and spiritual growth for you?

Biblical view

Read Ecclesiastes Ch 3 v 1-8 and Isaiah ch 30v 15-16

2. Ecclesiastes teaches that there is enough time for everything in life. What is one thing mentioned in this passage that you would like to make more time for, and how can you make space for it?
3. The Isaiah passage depicts a dramatic contrast between the pace of life God wants for his people and how fast we actually go. How do you see this contrast alive in your life today?

4. Today generally speaking there are 3 culprits which up the speedometer of our life. Increased opportunities, competitiveness, stimulation overload [hi-power hi tech input fills our life today]
a. how have you seen one of these factors impact the pace of your life?
b. how can you /we combat these things that are increasing our pace?

5. One single way to dial-back our pace of life is to say no. Tell of a time you set boundaries, what resulted from your decision to draw such a line and seek to live with balance?

6. In what areas of your life do you feel that you are close to overextending yourself?

7. There is nothing wrong with healthy competition but there are also times to dial back and not worry about ending upon top. There are times to look at others and say 'You win'. There are other times when it is not best to even enter into the competitive fray
How have you seen the increasing drive to compete and win impacted the lives of others in our culture?

8.a. In what areas of your life might competition and winning be important?
b. How might your life simplify and become more balanced if you were a little more content and less competitive in this area of your life?

Practical view

9. We all need times of both big sensory experience and times of silence and reflection. Use the scale below to indicate how to live your life

I tend towards Quiet times of reflection	I live with a healthy balance of sensory stimulation and Times of quiet	I naturally like high levels of sensory stimulation							
1.	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

10. What is one source of sensory input you could either turn off or down for the next month, and how might you invest this time in a specific relationship that needs to be strengthened and nurtured?

11. Three questions to ask yourself over the next few weeks
- a. Do I feel alive and buoyant in my inner person these days?
 - b. Is my soul more responsive to the activity of God throughout the day?
 - c. Is my soul more or less responsive to the souls of other people?

The Bible teaches that when our soul is well cared for, growing nurtured and cared for we feel fresh. We have a growing awareness of God's presence, we won't want to just talk on a superficial level with others, we feel alive.

The issue is always going to be is it speed, which is more important to soul or us.

The only person who can control the speed of your life is you.

Study 4. How do I know that God is real?

Introduction

Through our life we will have run into, and will run into folk who doubt the reality of the existence of God. Some of these will be people who will never give God a second thought, while others will be prepared to study, question and reflect on God's existence. We need to know how to help our friends who are like this. One good way is get them to reflect upon the intricacy of creation, this have the opportunity of a conversation about God materialising

Wide view

1. What is one place in creation where you consistently experience the beauty and the power of God?
2. Why do you feel this place connects you with God in such deep ways?

Biblical view

Read Psalm 19 v 1-6 Psalm 8 v1-9 Romans 1 v20 Genesis Ch 1 v 1-5

3. What do these passages teach us about the relationship of God to the heavens, earth, and all of creation?
4. What are some ways that God reveals himself to human beings through the staggering beauty and intricate design of creation?

Think about the intricacies of the human eye, and ask yourself the question. 'Is something so intricate, sophisticated and well co-ordinated more likely the result of an intelligent design or the consequence of an evolutionary development, or a cosmic accidental collision of gases billions of years ago?'

5. If you can tell about a time God clearly revealed himself to you as you experienced his presence and power unveiled in creation
6. Imagine you are talking to a friend who is seeking to discover if God is real or not. How might a conversation about the human eye, open the way for a spiritual conversation?

Think about the idea of as 'moral oughtness', which is the gut feeling that some things just ought not to happen. That some things are just well, wrong. And conversely some things are well, just right. Cultures around the world agree that kindness should trump violence that loyalty is better than betrayal that justice should win over injustice. How can this be, this sense of moral oughtness?

7. Name some things that virtually everyone in the world believes to be wrong?

8. Name some things that are commended and affirmed by people worldwide?

9. How does this sense of moral oughtness in the hearts and minds of human beings point to the existence of a God?

10. What would the world be like if we affirmed that human beings are simply evolved organisms with no need to follow moral codes or an inner sense of right and wrong?

Practical view

11. Some people see faith in God as being something that we DO. What do you think are some of the things we try to do to gain God's favour, and why do these actions fall short?

12. The Christian faith is based on what God has DONE for us. What are some of the things that God has done for you, and how could you tell others about his goodness in your life?

13. If we believe that Christianity is really about what we do, how might this impact the way we live our faith?

Study 5

How do I know God hears prayer?

Introduction.

Surveys continually show that while Britain's continues to become more secular, that a large percentage of people still admit to turning to prayer regularly. Often in a crisis, or a form of token prayer which if we don't pray then things might go wrong. Well some of the things, which pass for prayer, need to be evaluated and revised. Prayer is communication with God; it is the key, which turns the lock, which opens the door to nearness with God. It is often helpful to identify where our prayer life has become far less than when it could and might be.

Wide view

Sometimes we can see prayer as a token- something we just toss out because it is the right thing to do. Or prayer can be seen as purely formal- a watered down set of generic words that have to fit all faiths expressions, and offend no one. Or an impression prayer- when we use prayer to try to impress others, by the words we use.

1. How have you observed one of these types of prayer, and how do you think God feels when we pray this way?

2. What is one kind of pseudo -prayer that you can be tempted to fall into, and what might you do to avoid this temptation?

Biblical view

Read Luke Ch 18 v9-14

3. What do we learn about each man in this parable simply by watching them and listening to their prayer?

4. What contrasts do you see between how these two men viewed God?

5. How did each man's view of God impact the way he prayed?

6. What is one characteristic of God that helps shape the way you pray, and how does meditating on this attribute [quality] keep your prayers God centred and healthy?

7. What contrasts do you see between how these two men viewed themselves?

8. How did each man's view of himself impact the way he prayed?

9. In what ways can Christians today see themselves in the wrong light and end up praying like the Pharisee?

Practical view

10. Certainly there are times when we need to be prayerful of the needs of others. But there are also times when we need a one-to-one, heart-to-heart with God. Why is it important to regularly meet with God alone, 'forgetting the world'?

11. The Pharisee offered his prayer with one eye open, looking at the people around him. What are some of the dangers of comparing ourselves to others as we pray?

12. What is one way you pray that really connects you to God? How might others use this approach to prayer to broaden and deepen their communication with God?

Study 6, How come all religions aren't the same?

Introduction

There was a time when going to the shop to buy a tin of tuna was easy; there were only a couple of options. Today you can spend a long time trying to make a decision. Not only are there different brands, to choose from, there are also different options in how the tuna is packaged. Such is the dilemma of a world with a proliferation of options, and to be honest most of us like it that way. Often in the vast majority of situations our decision comes down to a personal preference. The Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi said. 'The souls of religion is one, but it is encased in a multitude of forms.' Was he right, or is there something more going on here?

Wide view

1. How have you seen the options of life increase over the past decade, and how has this impacted the way people tend to see the world?

2. Many people see the world's religions as basically saying the same thing. Choosing one is just a matter of personal preference. What do you think about this attitude?

Biblical view

Read Acts Ch 17 v 16-34 and John 14 v 1-7

3. If Jesus and Paul were sitting on a modern day panel that was discussing world religions, how do you think they would respond to the following
 - a. all the worlds' religions are really saying the same think
 - b. every religion is equally valid and true
 - c. the Bible never claims that Jesus or the Christian faith have a corner on the truth
 - d Jesus never claimed to be the exclusive way to heaven

On a simple basis there is a great deal of difference between world faiths. For example Christianity, Judaism and Islam believe in one God. These religions are monotheistic. Buddhism believes in many gods, it is polytheistic. Hinduism, in a sense does not believe in any god at all.

4. Just taking this simple example, why do you think people who are logical about all other areas of life are comfortable saying 'All religions are the same and equally true', when this is an illogical statement?

5. If you can respond to the following

a. claiming that all world religions are the same reveals significant ignorance about the world religions

b. claiming that all religions are basically the same would be insulting to any religious person who is devout and serious about their faith.

6. Jesus live in a pluralistic world, there was as much religious diversity then as there is now. Yet Jesus was still comfortable in speaking about himself as being the Messiah, the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, God in the flesh, and the only way to an eternal relationship with the Father. All bold claims.

a. If Jesus came to bring love and grace to the world, why would he make such claims that could divide people and draw distinctions between himself and the teachings of other religious leaders throughout history?

b. Can you think of things Jesus taught that drew a line and caused a division?

7. Through the Bible there is a thread, which lifts up the God of the Bible as the only true God. 1 Chronicles ch 16v 26 Exodus Ch 20 v 3-6, and culminates in the sayings of Jesus as him being the unique Son of Man John's gospel e.g. Ch 4 v 25-26, 6 v 35: 8 v 12: 8 v32-24:

a. why do you think God is so concerned that people do not embrace other world religious systems?

Practical view

Christianity stands out from other world religions simply because it maintains that the living God has come to share out human situation, took responsibility for human wickedness, and broke the last barrier death, on Easter day, with incalculable consequences for his followers and the whole world.

8. Therefore how is God's strong call to worship him, and him alone, a sign of his love for human beings?

9. What can you start to do to share the love and message of God with a person who is not yet a follower of Jesus Christ, which can point them towards Jesus, the Saviour?