

Questions you wanted to ask

Introduction

Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, there are some questions about God that are difficult to answer. For example:

'If there is a God, why is there so much suffering in the world?'

'How can God be so scary, yet loving?'

'How does the description of God in the Old Testament match with that in the New Testament?'

'How can Jesus be both man and God?'

When you hear these questions, maybe you think:

'Great! I've got a good answer to that!' or 'I really want to find out more about that question' or maybe you say 'I don't know... only God knows' or perhaps you just change the subject!

Whilst it's great that some people devote a lot of time to analysing these questions, there are also dangers of getting obsessed with them. We can get distracted from the task of loving God and loving others. However, it is worth all of us sometimes spending time exploring them so that we get to know God better and can become more confident in our faith. That said, it's important to remember that there are no easy answers and we will often grow in our understanding throughout our lives as we pray, read the Bible and live life with God. We can also learn a lot from one another's thoughts, stories and experiences – which is where Growth Groups come in.

Many of these questions arise from paradoxes – two true statements that seem to be in conflict with one another. For example, *'God is loving'* and *'God allows suffering'*.

This idea is explored more in Krish Kandiah's book, *'Paradoxology'*, which we've used as a starting point for this series. It's not necessary to read the book, but if you want to spend some time looking into the issues in a bit more depth then it would be a good place to start. For an easier read on some of the questions, you could try reading *'Searching Issues'* by Nicky Gumbel.

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Over the next few weeks, we will explore some of the questions and paradoxes. It won't be easy, but I hope that by helping one another with our journeys, we will all grow closer to God.

Toby

Questions you wanted to ask

1: Would God ask anyone to do that?

WELCOME

(please do this section this week even if you often don't)

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. Then try this...

Each share: Which questions about God do you find particularly difficult to answer? Why?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Sing a song together about God's goodness or faithfulness. You could use a CD & printed words or a YouTube video.

WORD

Here's the first tough passage to get your teeth into!

Read Genesis 21:1-7 and 22:1-18

Discuss your initial reactions to this passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below *(and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!)*

- What questions does this passage raise for you?
- If you heard the sermon on this passage, share anything that you particularly remember.

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- God condemns child sacrifice in the Bible – unlike other religions at that time. God also knew that he was going to save Isaac. How does this shape your view of God in the story?
- Abraham is confident that God will provide (v5: 'We will come back' v8: 'God himself will provide the lamb'). How does this shape your view of Abraham in the story?
- How do you think this episode affected Abraham and Isaac's relationships with God?
- God doesn't need anything from us – so why does he ask for things?

- Split into 2s or 3s. Give each group one of the following subjects:
 - * Family, Money, Time, Health, Safety
 - * For your subject, think of something big that God might ask someone to do today that meant giving up or risking that thing.
 - * Share your examples as a group
 - * Talk about why they would be hard & why God might ask someone to do them
 - * If God asked you to do them, what would you do?

- What areas of your life do you find it hardest to trust God with?

WHAT NEXT?

- Pray for all those starting a new phase in their life this September.
- Between you, try and name as many activities that we do as a church as possible. Pray short prayers for each one.
- Spend time on your own this week asking God which areas of your life he wants you to trust him more with – and how.

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2: How Can God be Scary & Loving?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Each share: Are there any Bible stories that you don't like? Why?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Go round the group. Go through the alphabet A to Z. For each letter, come up an attribute of God starting with that letter (be creative!). You could finish together with a prayer: 'Thank you God for who you are'

WORD

This week's big question is: How can God be scary and loving? Once again, there are no simple answers!

Read Joshua 6:1-5, 15-27

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use some of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- Each take a piece of paper.
 - * Draw a horizontal line. At one end write 'Fair'. At the other write 'Unfair'. Based on this story, mark a cross on the line where you think God is on the scale between fair & unfair.

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- * Do the same on a second line with 'Compassionate' and 'Harsh'.
- * Talk together what you've drawn and why

- For each of the following pieces of information, discuss: What difference does this make to your view of God in this story...?
 - * In Genesis 15:13-16 and elsewhere, we learn that the inhabitants of Canaan (the Amorites etc) had opposed God's ways for centuries – including sacrificing children to their gods (Deut 12:29-31).
 - * Years later, when Israel turned against God to other gods and engaged in their practices, God allowed the Babylonians and Assyrians to wipe out the Israelites.
 - * God tells the Israelites to spare Rahab and her family, even though she was a prostitute

- In this story, do you think that God should have been more just – by wiping out evil quicker... or more compassionate by allowing people to sin for longer?
 - * What about in the world today?
 - * What about in the lives of you, your friends and your community?

- Do you think war is ever justified – and if so, in what circumstances?

WHAT NEXT?

- Find out about an area of the world where there is war. You could read out a newspaper/internet article as a starting point. Light a candle and use short prayers to pray for the people in that place.
- Pray for the current Alpha Course – as people explore questions of life and faith together.

Questions you wanted to ask

3: Why did God let this happen?

In Jan 2014, we looked at this subject in more detail as part of a **series on Job**. Some of these notes are adapted from those.

The issue of suffering is huge & complex! It's also very important to a lot of people. Try to stay focussed on the topic, but give everyone a chance to share their thoughts & feelings – and **please be sensitive**.

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

When you see children suffering in Syria on the news, what feelings come to mind? Each share just a few words.

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Listen to the track 'Psalm 13 (How long O Lord)' by Brian Doerksen **or** read Psalm 13 slowly followed by a time of silence.

As you listen to the words and in the quiet, each think about a time in your life when some of these words seemed particularly relevant. In the quiet, talk to God about them. Finish by all reading verses 5-6 together.

WORD

Read Job 1:6-2:10 *You could read this by taking parts: Narrator, Job, Satan, God, Messengers (don't take personally which role you get!)*

Now write the following on separate pieces of paper: God, Devil, Us, Others. Also, add a few blank spares to add other words. Put them in the middle so everyone can see them as you talk together.

- Which of the following do you personally think are the main reasons for bad things happening to you? Why?
 - * Because of **God** – testing/teaching/punishing us

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- * Because of **the devil** – an attack
 - * Because of **us** – our sin or lack of faith
 - * Because of the actions of **others** – now or in the past
 - * Because of **something else** (add any other reasons people suggest to the pieces of paper in the middle)
- How many of these do you think were reasons for Job's suffering?
 - * Which ones weren't? Why?
 - * Do you think the causes of Job's suffering are typical or unusual?

Divide into 2s/3s/4s. Each group discuss one scenario from...

1: A child starving in the 3rd world; 2: Someone injured in a car crash;
3: A cancer patient; 4: A person whose child has died

- * Give all the possible reasons you can think of for the suffering.
- * What factors make it easier/harder to explain? Why?
- * What do you think God feels about these situations?

Now, share briefly what you talked about with the whole group.

- *In 2s/3s/4s:* If possible, share one or two personal examples of suffering and your response to them. *Please be sensitive to others.*
- *All together:* How would you answer someone who asked you: 'How can a loving God allow people to suffer?'
- The suffering of Jesus and others isn't ignored by the Bible or the Christian faith - it is a central part. How might this fact help in facing suffering yourself – or offering a Christian response to others?

WHAT NEXT?

- In 2s/3s/4s: Share anything you're struggling with personally at the moment. Pray for one another. THEN mention anyone else you know who's suffering/struggling & pray for them.
- One role of Growth Groups is to care for one another. How could you support one another better as a group?

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4: Does God choose some, not others?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Play a game which involves someone being chosen (eg wink murder)

Each share: When do you like/not like being chosen?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Sing a worship song together, even if you don't normally. Maybe one of you can play the tune on an instrument – however simply.

WORD

Read the whole of Jonah or this edited version...

Jonah 1:1-17; 2:10-3:5; 3:10-4:4 You could use parts: Narrator, God, Jonah, Sailor Captain, Another Sailor

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- On a scale of 0-10, how do you score the actions of the following characters and why? Jonah, The Sailors, The Ninevites
 - * What does this story show about God's attitudes towards different people – those who claim to follow him and those who don't?
 - * What does the story show about Jonah's understanding of God?



- * Describe situations today where our attitudes towards other groups of people are sometimes more like Jonah's than God's.
- If Jonah had not gone to Ninevah, what would the impact have been?
 - * Can you think of examples in the world today where people have not responded to God and this has had a big impact on others?
 - * Imagine and describe a situation where God might call you to do something which had a positive impact on others. What would be the consequences of not doing it?
 - * We often think of sin in terms of wrong things we do. How often do you think we disobey God by not doing things?
- In 4:1-2, Jonah gives his reasons to God for running away. He even quotes the Bible to God (from Psalm 145:8 & lots of other places). Are you convinced by Jonah's reasons? If not, what do you think his reasons were?
 - * How many different reasons can you think of that we give today for not doing what God wants? List as many as you can on some paper, then talk about which are the most common reasons
- What good news do you find in today's story? What challenges do you find?

WHAT NEXT?

- If you haven't done before, then choose one of the Far Out organisations that we support as a church (you can find them on our website). Pray for them now, but also work out how you could keep informed and pray for the work of that partner on a regular basis.
- Also, select a local organisation to pray for (if you haven't already)

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5: Can Jesus be both God and human?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Each bring/print/describe a picture that you like. Explain why you like it.

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Choose one of the authorised creeds on the CofE website at:

<https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/texts/newpatterns/contents/sectione.aspx> or find a copy of the Nicene Creed which we use regularly at the 9am service. In quiet, read through it and talk to God about it. You could then read it out together, but allow people to opt out if they're not comfortable.

WORD

WARNING! As usual, there are no simple answers – experts have wrestled with the issue for hundreds of years, so be patient with everyone.

Read John 1:1-5, 14; Luke 1:26-35

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

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- Being honest, do you normally think of Jesus as more God or more Human or neither? Do a show of hands for each answer in your group.
 - * Why do you think like this?
- The reading from John describes Jesus as 'The Word' who was God (v1) but also became human (v14).
 - * How do you feel about the idea of Jesus being both human and God?
 - * What do you think about the words that John uses?
- How does the virgin birth described in Luke make it easier or more difficult to understand Jesus as both God and human?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16 and Philippians 2:5-11

- In these passages, we are reminded that Jesus became human and we are encouraged to be like him.
 - * If Jesus hadn't become human, how might it change your understanding of God or your relationship with him?
 - * How do these passages encourage you in your faith?
- Because Jesus claimed to be God, CS Lewis said that we have to choose whether Jesus is mad (deluded), bad (a liar) or God (as he said he was). How helpful do you find this statement?

WHAT NEXT?

- Share any good news stories that have happened in your lives over the last fortnight. Thank God for them.
- Then each share one thing that you're worrying about. Pray briefly for one another, ensuring everyone is prayed for.
- Spend time praying for one another to become more confident in sharing your faith with others.

Questions you wanted to ask

6: Who's in control: God or us?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Talk about: In your life, do you like to be in control of things or would you prefer God was in control?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

All sit with your eyes closed and clench your fists. Imagine holding in your hands things that you are currently struggling with.

After a few moments, open your hands out upwards and imagine offering those things to God. Talk quietly to God about these things and imagine what he might be saying. He might or might not take them away from you, but ask for his help and guidance.

Finish by saying together Jesus' words to his Father before the cross: '*Father, if you are willing, take this cup (of suffering) from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.*' (Luke 22:42)

WORD

Read Matthew 26:14-16, 20-25, 47-50; 27:3-10

Discuss your initial reactions to the passages:

- Does anything in these passages jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

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- Who was responsible for Jesus's death? Come up with as many possible different answers as you can and explain why
 - * You could find a copy of Caravaggio's 'The taking of Christ' and find out about the characters in it
- To what extent do you think the following were responsible for Judas's actions?
 - * 1: Judas himself; 2: The chief priests; 3: God (as part of his plan); 4: The Devil (see Luke 22:3)
 - * Do you think Judas had free will or was he out of control of his actions?
- Jesus's death was predicted hundreds of years before in several places in the Old Testament (eg Psalm 22). Even the buying of the potter's field (27:9-10) was predicted in Zechariah 11:12-13.
 - * Do you think that God made the events in today's readings happen to match the prophecy **or** did he already know that they would happen and revealed them in advance to his prophets?
- Do you feel pre-destined or programmed (by God or 'genetics' or 'fate') to do the things you do **or** do you feel like you decide yourself?
- What light does this story shed on the mystery of how God uses people in his plans, but also gives them free will?
- How much do you think someone decides themselves to follow Jesus or are they only chosen by God?

WHAT NEXT?

- Share examples of when you've wished that God would intervene but he hasn't. Also share times when he has intervened.
- Pray for situations in the world where people are using their free will to cause harm to others (eg wars, climate change ec)
- Pray for the Christmas events coming up at church.

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7: How can the cross be a victory?

WELCOME

Spend time relaxing & sharing together. You could try this...

Share: Who have you known who has been particularly humble?

WORSHIP

Use music, silence, prayer, meditation, reflection, songs, hymns, etc. or be creative with drawing, writing, symbols, poetry etc to help people to draw near to God. You could try this...

Make a cross in the middle of the room creatively.

Read Matthew 27:45-56. Reflect on your emotions as you hear the story. Each share a word that comes to mind.

WORD

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Discuss your initial reactions to the passage:

- Does anything in the passage jump out at you? Why?
- Does anything connect with something you've been doing, reading or thinking about?
- Is there anything you haven't noticed before?

Now use **some** of the questions below (*and set a time limit to leave yourselves time to pray!*)

- What makes the crucifixion a unique event in history?
- Paul describes the message of the cross as 'powerful' (v18)
 - * What words would you use to describe the message of the cross?
 - * In what ways is the message of the cross powerful?
- What forms of power are there in the world today?

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- * In what ways does the message of the cross seem foolish or sensible measured by the 'wisdom of the world'? (v18-25)
- * How can the weakness of God be stronger than human strength (v25)?

- God chose the crucifixion to be the central point in human history.
 - * Do you feel it was necessary – could God have found a different (less messy) way to achieve his purposes?
 - * Why didn't he? Think of as many reasons as possible.
 - * If people today could choose or create an event to be the centre of human history, what would it be like?
 - * What does this show about God and the Christian faith?

- Some have argued that the cross shows God the Father as cruel by sending his son to the cross.
 - * How does Jesus' free-will and nature as both human and God (see previous weeks) help to challenge this point of view?

- How is the cross good news for you and others today?

WHAT NEXT?

- Review the Series. Discuss:
 - * What has been most or least helpful about this series?
 - * What has particularly challenged you?
 - * What are you personally going to do in response?
 - * It would also be great if you could feedback your thoughts to Toby to help shape future series
 - * If you want to look into these subjects more, then you might want to read one of the books mentioned in the Introduction.

- Pray for our local community this Christmas. Pray in particular for the Christmas events at Christ Church, Oakhanger and other local churches.