

Week One
Reading

DOES GOD CARE?



Dear God,

I don't typically send letters like this. It's not my style. I don't fill out feedback cards or stuff suggestion boxes. It's not that I don't have anything to say. I have much to say. I just don't typically take time to do it. For some reason, though, I'm compelled. I don't know how you'll respond. It's not like I expect to get a letter back. I do wonder, though, if you might really read this. If you do, I hope you'll find a way to respond, a way to speak. I really would like an answer, if there is one.

My question is simple.

Why this world?

I don't get it. Why did you create this world? It's not that I don't see some good in it. I do. There's much I love about this world. I love sunsets. I love oceans. I love thunderstorms. There's a whole lot that I love. I love my friends. This might sound selfish, but I love people who love me. That's just being honest. I want to love everyone, and maybe I'm growing in that, but the struggle only serves to reinforce my question. Why this world? Why a world where some people are so terribly hard to love?

Why create a world where there would be hardship, intense hardship? Why war? Why famine? Why pestilence and plagues? Why bankruptcy? Why create a world where infants die, or seemingly worse, where some live in intense pain and constant confusion? Why orphans? Why murderers, rapists, serial killers, and dictators? Why loneliness? Why relational conflict? Why imploding families? Why mothers who die when their children are still children? Why death at all? And not just why do all of these things happen, but why this world? Why create this world and not a different world, a world where none of these things happen?

Why not sunny days without sunburned backs? Why not picnics without mosquitoes? Why not the birth of families without the death of families? Why not the joy of friendships gained without the pain of friendships lost? Why not countries but no wars? Why not food but no famines? Why not business but no bankruptcies? Why not the good without the evil? Is this hardship truly needed? Did we have to have all that we have in this world? It sure seems like it could have been done differently?

Why this world? If you really did create it, why not create it differently?

I don't know that I want a philosophical answer. Maybe I do. More than that, I just want to know what it is you're up to. I don't expect a complete answer. I'd take strong indicators. I'd take knowing enough to know that this isn't some big mistake, some colossal failure. Is this really what you intended? It sure seems odd.

Sincerely,

Me

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IN THE BEGINNING

Consider Scripture's opening line.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

It doesn't take a cynic to wonder if God could have done a better job. That's not meant to sound harsh but honest. A quick glance at the news, and it's clear all is not well. There's a great deal of pain and suffering in this world. Why create this world? Why not create a better world? Why not create a world void of suffering but abounding with joy? Why must there be war in order to establish peace? Why must there be struggle on the outside and strife on the inside? Why the confusion, the hardship, the pain?

It's not hard to imagine a better world. Take the good of this world, boil away the bad, and this could be quite an experience. That's what's odd about it. The good in this world gives indication that good is possible, pleasure is possible, joy is possible. If these things are possible, why not *just* have these things and not have all the other? Why not tears of joy without tears of pain? Why not laughter without sorrow or friends without enemies?

Yes, theologians and philosophers have wrestled intensely with these questions. It's unlikely that we'll satisfy them here. With that said, consider a seemingly odd but somewhat intriguing possibility. There's something about it that gives cause for pause and makes us wonder if it could be so. Let's not embrace or reject this thought too quickly. Simply consider...

What if God agrees?

What if God looks at this world and the people of this world, and he sees potential for something better? What if he sees the joy and yearns for there to be no pain? What if God looks at suffering, grieves the suffering, and longs for a world where suffering does not happen? What if God sees the confusion of the orphan or the loneliness of the widow, and these sights inspire a vision for better days?

Does God agree? It's a fair question. A question that, if answered, no doubt raises other questions. If God does agree, for example, what is he doing about it? Does he have a plan to bring about restoration, healing, and justice? If so, why that plan? Why not another plan? Will the plan work? These are good questions—important questions. We'll address them, at least in part, in time. For now, let's keep it simple.

Let's position ourselves at an essential vantage point. It's not the vantage point from which we probe the more complicated questions. It is, though, the place from which we address the most important question—the question could be posed a lot of ways. Let's ask it bluntly:

Does God care?

Does God hear the cry of the hungry child? Does God see the injustice of the oppressive dictator? Does God notice the loneliness of the forgotten elder?

Abuse abounds. Hunger abounds. Hatred abounds.

Does God care?

What motivates God? What riles God? What drives God? Yes, we want to know his plan, but far more essential to his essence is the passion of his heart. We're troubled by hardship in the world. Is he? We're bothered by disintegrating families. Is he? Corrupt government and corporate greed frustrate us intensely. Does it bother God?

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Many see the abundance of life's hardships as evidence enough that God doesn't care. Such conclusions are understandable, especially when the hardship is personal. Why not shake an angry fist toward the heavens? Could he not have done something about this?

Yes, quite possibly, he could have intervened.

Despite that, consider the danger of assumptions.

What happens when we assume the worst in a relationship? What happens when a friend makes a comment, and we assume the worst? What happens when a colleague sends an e-mail, and we assume the worst? What happens when a spouse doesn't call back quickly, and we assume the worst? Far wiser is the person who restrains the rush to judgment and allows the friend or colleague or spouse to speak for him or herself. What does God say about life's hardships? What does God say about suffering? What does God say about corruption, injustice, and oppression? We can assume the presence of hardship communicates God's lack of care about such things, but as with people, assumptions are dangerous.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Rather than assume, let's observe. What does Scripture reveal about the heart of God?

A casual look at Scripture reveals God's work to assemble a people. From beginning to end, he's calling people to follow him. When leaders assemble a people, they commonly do so in hopes of transferring heart, values, and convictions that the leaders themselves carry. It's their hope that these people will live by different standards than the masses. They don't assemble a people so they'll simply be like everybody else. They assemble a people because they want them to be different.

With that in mind, consider carefully the calling God puts on his people. What does he want his people to be like? What does he want them to do? How does God want his people to differentiate themselves from the masses? When we consider the values and convictions God wishes to transfer, we gain a window into the heart and passion of God.

Numerous passages of Scripture could be considered. Consider, though, this exhortation from God to his people:

Learn to do right! (Isaiah 1:17)

This sounds reasonable. God, our creator, would want us to learn to do the right thing, the good thing, the noble thing. As leaders do, he's calling those who follow to differentiate themselves. But how? What is the right thing? How is this exhortation followed? Listen in full...

Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow. (Isaiah 1:17)

The right thing, the noble thing, the life to which God calls his people, is a life that seeks justice for the oppressed, defends the cause of the fatherless, and pleads the case of the widow. This very theme continues and is reinforced in the New Testament. Consider this summary description of how God wants his people to be characterized:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

When describing the devotion of God's people, a devotion God would consider pure and faultless, the description given by Scripture is that of a people characterized by looking after the world's most vulnerable people.

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In another place, we read:

Woe to those who make unjust laws, to those who issue oppressive decrees, to deprive the poor of their rights and withhold justice from the oppressed of my people, making widows their prey and robbing the fatherless. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when disaster comes from afar? To whom will you run for help? Where will you leave your riches? (Isaiah 10:1-3)

Not only does God call his people to look out for the most vulnerable of society, but he warns the oppressors. This is not a casual conviction carried by God. This is a conviction to which he intends to hold humanity accountable. God is not lightly disturbed by oppression and injustice. He's not mildly concerned about the world's most vulnerable people. God's passion is for the oppressed. He wants his people to be characterized by this passion, and he intends to bring justice to perpetrators of oppression.

So consider the obvious.

Would Scripture exhort love and kindness if the God of Scripture did not want love and kindness? Would Scripture command against theft, murder, and rape if the God of Scripture was content with theft, murder, and rape? If Scripture is in fact Scripture, it sure seems that God, too, wants a different experience.

Which brings us back to the question.

If God, too, wants a different world, why this world? Why create this world and not a different world?

Here again, let's be daring.

Let's consider a thought that may take some getting used to. It may take some getting used to because we tend to think that this experience is THE experience. We tend to think that this life is THE life, that if there is an afterlife it's exactly that, something that happens *after* life—a mere shadow of the *real* life we experience today. But what if this life isn't THE life? What if this experience isn't THE experience? What if this current experience is the shadow, and the life to come is the reality? What if in response to the question, "Why not create a different world?" God quietly whispered...

"That's exactly what I'm doing and have been doing all along. I'm creating something beautiful. I'm doing this, but it is not done; it is in process. Your current experience is part of the process, an important part; but yes, there is more, much more."

Hold that thought. We'll come back to it in a bit.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Let's go back to the beginning. Scripture paints a picture of a creation teeming with both purity and life. Adam (the Hebrew word for man) and Eve (a Hebrew word resembling life-giver) are placed in a garden. We're told that "God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Genesis 2:9). This was a place of both beauty and provision. There would be no want. Desire would be satisfied. We're told that this first couple lived in innocence: "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame" (Genesis 2:25). There is peace and contentment. There is intimacy without intimidation. There is joy but no pain.

Meditate on this world of Eden. It's a different world than we experience today. Yes, there are trees and fruit today, but provision for life comes with the poundings of life. Yes, there is relationship and intimacy today, but these relationships are colored by greed and lust. You don't feel greed and lust coming from the garden. You feel generosity. You feel contentment. You feel patience and peace. You don't feel fear. You don't feel worry. You don't sense there's any wonder where the next meal will

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come from or if one will cheat the other. Dark characteristics, so common to us today, are seemingly not present in the land of Eden. Yes, there are traces of the world we know today, but this garden is a very different place.

Those are the earliest pages of Scripture. Let's now do a comparison. Let's compare the beginning to the end. Let's turn to Scripture's final chapters.

THE NEW JERUSALEM

Scripture's final chapters display a vision for the future. There is "*a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away*" (Revelation 21:1). Much is said of this future existence. Whether the language is metaphorical or literal, we don't fully know; it's likely some of both. There is no question, though, that the vision is one of great beauty and peace. There is a city on this new earth. It is called the New Jerusalem. It is in this city that God's presence will no longer have any trace of distance, but "*he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God*" (Revelation 21:3). God will pour out his grace. "*He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain*" (Revelation 21:4).

And consider this line...

To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. (Revelation 21:6, TNIV)

So the thirsty will drink from the spring of the water of life. With that in mind, recall Christ's conversation with the woman at the well. Regarding the water, Christ said, "*Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (John 4:13-14, TNIV). How much of life's current hardship is driven by thirst? Not just a thirst for literal water—which is a very real problem in many parts of the world—but a thirst for satisfaction, a thirst for healing, a thirst to be whole. This "*water of life*," briefly described in this vision of the future, seems to describe depth of healing, depth of satisfaction—a quenching of the human thirst that drives so much of life's hardship.

It is through this vision in Revelation that God says...

"I am making everything new!" (Revelation 21:5)

Which says something to God's perspective. If God is "*making everything new*," he, too, is bothered by the world's current condition. If he were not bothered by the world's current condition, he'd not be making everything new. He'd be leaving it the way it is. But he isn't. He's taking bold action.

This points to a critical question.

What in the world is God up to? If he's bothered by the world's condition, why'd he let it get into this condition in the first place? What's he doing?

Let's ask the question from a different perspective. Let's take a step back and consider the two ends of Scripture.

THE GARDEN OF EDEN VS. THE NEW JERUSALEM

With the Garden of Eden at one end of Scripture and the New Jerusalem at the other, consider a critical question:

What's the difference?

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What's the difference between the Garden of Eden and the New Jerusalem? Is there a difference? Is one different from the other? In creating the New Jerusalem, is God simply re-creating the Garden of Eden? With God's story in hand, with one finger at Genesis 2 and another at Revelation 21, what's the difference between those two spots?

Many surface-level differences could be noted. One's described as a garden; the other's described as a city, for example. But consider a more qualitative difference.

Consider the difference from what's between them.

One has nothing before it.

The other is prefaced by world history.

To deny this difference is to deny the obvious. Eden knows nothing of life apart from God. The New Jerusalem will not only have God in a more manifest presence than is described at the Garden of Eden, but this new creation will abound with people who drink deeply from the presence of God because they know the thirst of being without him.

Might it be that the very world we long to experience, the very world we wonder why God did not create, is the very world God has been creating all along, and this world—the world we now experience—participates in the creative process?

To answer this question, travel back to the garden. What happened there? Genesis paints a picture of innocence, but this innocence is coupled with a naivety influential in humanity's fall. They'd been given one command. There was no command against murder because murder would not have crossed their minds. There was no command against rape because rape would not have crossed their minds. There was no command like any command we know today because they did not know evil. The only command they were given was to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The implication is clear. Before eating from this tree, they knew no evil.

But they ate. They rebelled. Humanity then knew rebellion against God.

World history has followed.

Citizens of the New Jerusalem will be different from inhabitants of the Garden of Eden. About this coming experience, Scripture can say with great confidence that no one "*who does what is shameful or deceitful*" (Revelation 21:27) will ever enter. The New Jerusalem will be populated by a people who know and love God. This will be a people who will neither run from God nor drift from God. They will love their God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength because they will know from experience the suffering that follows rebellion.

The Garden of Eden had no such people.

GOD'S PLAN

God has crafted and is executing a plan. It started in the Garden of Eden, and it culminates in the New Jerusalem. Today, at this very moment, we exist somewhere between the two. The garden is behind us and the New Jerusalem is before us. We now have a choice.

Consider a critical question:

Will I engage God's plan, or will I attempt to create a plan of my own?

Attempts at counter plans abound. We long for a better experience, an existence free from this world's hardships. Commonly, attempts are made to create that existence by insulating ourselves

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from common hardships. We will maximize pleasure and minimize pain by protecting ourselves through finances, fortune, or fame. Such attempts are understandable, but they are also boldly challenged by Christ.

What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? (Matthew 16:26)

Yes, we can insulate our lives from the hardships around us, but these efforts will ultimately disappoint. Why gain a life that is not THE life? Why engage a plan that is not THE plan? It is both dangerous and foolish to establish a microplan without considering the macroplan we cannot control. Far wiser is the life that aligns its microplan with the macroplan of God. To do so, takes intentionality.

We must not drift through life. We must gain depth of insight into God's plan. We must listen for this plan in Scripture, and we must open our eyes to the way this plan is being worked out in the world. To do so, we must pause and consider. How do we experience the world? What is happening around us? Each of us experiences the world in our own unique way. What do we discover when we open our eyes and increasingly view our experience of the world with increased understanding of God's plan?

The exercise that follows is designed to help us do this.

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