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TAKING QUESTIONS TO THE WORD

To understand the way God's Word was viewed during the time of Christ, it is necessary to go back 600 years to the Babylonian conquest and captivity. For centuries before that, God's prophets had warned His people that if they did not start taking Him and His law seriously, the consequences would be catastrophic. Though God has always had some people who trust and obey Him, in general the people refused and rebelled. They were taken captive by idolatrous nations time and again, and rescued time and again. The northern kingdom of Israel had finally "filled the cup of iniquity" and fallen to the Assyrians a hundred years earlier.

The culmination of all this was that Judah, the somewhat more faithful southern kingdom, was taken captive by Babylon, and this time God said, "Don't even ask. You're not going to be free for seventy years." Read or have read *Jeremiah 25:8-11*.

During this long captivity, people had time to think. Was it worth it to disobey God? When they were finally set free again, Ezra and Nehemiah led the charge to reinstate God's law and this time, to keep it faithfully. Read *Nehemiah 8:1-3*.

As a result, over the following centuries, Judah finally became, in part, the nation God had called them to be, known for their faithfulness to their great God. But only in part.

You see, the problem is, they now went too far in the other direction. They began to see the law itself, rather than the God who made it, as being holy and bringing salvation. If disobedience to the law had brought captivity, then they were going to keep that law in every tiny detail. In order to be absolutely certain not to break a commandment, they surrounded each one with more laws, like a hedge of protection. For example, if the Sabbath is important, then let's make up a whole bunch of tiny laws that dictate how

to keep it. They decided you couldn't carry any burden at all, not even your handkerchief. If you wanted a handkerchief on Sabbath, you had to pin it to your tunic within reach of your nose on Friday, but you couldn't carry it on Sabbath. You could write or erase two letters of the alphabet, but more than that was work. There were dozens more like this.

By Jesus' time, religious leaders known Pharisees and Sadducees, as well as scribes and lawyers (experts in the Old Testament law) were making life an intolerable burden for people, who rarely could read for themselves, and couldn't possibly keep all the laws laid on them. Read what Jesus had to say about this in *Matthew 23:1-4*.

For centuries, Abraham's descendants refused to obey God's law; now they were all about perfect obedience. The plain truth is, neither way followed the God of the law. God's whole focus from Genesis on has been on love. "I love you, I want to bless you, please love Me!" God pled throughout the Old Testament.

And they knew this. The greatest prayer in Israel from Moses to this day is called the Sh'ma, and is the text from *Deuteronomy 6:4-5*. (Read together.) The law of God is, was, and always will be all about love.

Compare *Acts 15:10-11* to see how the early church, knowing Jesus and knowing about love and grace, looked at the Old Testament law.

But what if you have questions? What if you don't understand all about God's law? Should we just accept blindly whatever we are taught? Should the Pharisees have simply jumped to Jesus' side without being clear in their own hearts and minds?

No. God gave us minds and wills and He wants us to use them, and to come and bring our questions to him. This week we will learn more about some people who had questions and doubts, and who did the very best thing a questioner can do—they brought them to Jesus.

DEVOTION

Those who fear questioning God or think it is wrong to do so have not read their Bibles very clearly. Abraham asked God questions, and even argued with Him. The prophets asked questions and had doubts. Some of David's psalms are about questions. Jesus' disciples constantly asked Him to explain this or that, or what something meant. And by the way, He never gave up on them, but just kept patiently answering and explaining. Even Judas, right up to the Last Supper or perhaps beyond that, could have repented and been restored.

Let's take a look at three stories of questioners, and the results of their questions.

Can a Pharisee be saved? Of course you know the answer is yes; anyone who will can be saved. But there is also another evidence for Pharisees in particular that you may not have thought of. Jesus spent a lot of time and energy on them! Why would He be constantly calling out to Pharisees, even the "woes" *in Matthew 23*, unless He saw hope for them?

1. One Pharisee in particular heard Jesus and his heart was stirred. Nicodemus, not wanting to let his interest in Jesus be known, came to visit Him at night when he would not be seen. We will examine their conversation in greater detail in the skit, but for now, read *John 3:1-3*. As you can see, Nicodemus might have wanted to ease into the conversation, but Jesus had no such hesitation. He went straight to the heart of the matter He knew was troubling Nicodemus. What do you think Nicodemus meant by "we know You have come from God as a teacher"? Did he believe at this point? In our skit we will see some of the later results of this conversation.
2. Now read *Luke 18:18-27*. Whom is this story about? What is his question? Have you ever had similar questions? What new questions are raised by Jesus' answer? In this case, sadly, there was no acceptance of Jesus, at least not at that time. We can hope

the rich young ruler eventually believed, but we won't know for sure until heaven.

3. For our third story, read *Luke 10:25-29*. Who is doing the questioning here? Is he honestly questioning Jesus, or does he have a hidden motive? See the clue in verse 25. Notice that Jesus quotes the great Jewish prayer, the Sh'ma. Every member of His audience would have known this prayer by heart. The lawyer no doubt recited it every day. Whether he lived by it is another matter. He tries to turn the question by asking who his neighbor is, although, as an expert in the law, he knows perfectly well that God says absolutely any stranger or alien in need is not only our neighbor but our brother or sister. In answer, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. Then, in verse 36, Jesus turns the tables. What question does He now ask the lawyer, and what does the lawyer answer? In this story, we are not told the ending. Does the lawyer listen and give his heart to Jesus? We will never know until we go to heaven.

In these three stories, we have seen three different attitudes. Some people come to God as earnest seekers but are shy about it. Some publicly come to God as earnest seekers, but hope to get easy answers. Some only ask their questions to demonstrate that they don't believe and try to make the gospel look silly. In every case, with what attitude does Jesus respond? Did He love all three of these questioners? How do you know?

Do you have questions? We can no longer go and see Jesus in person, much though we might wish to. How do you take your questions to God, and how do you find answers? What do you do when there are no easy answers? Do you trust anyway?

ACTIVITY SUGGESTION

1. Divide the group into pairs or small groups of no more than four. Make sure each group has a Bible, some slips of paper, and pens or pencils. If possible, have one or more concordances available to share. Some Bibles have simple ones in the back. If you have internet access, you can also look online.
2. Have each person write down a question he or she wishes to have answered. In the groups, use the Bible to try to find answers. These could be actual answers to the questions, or they could be encouraging passages that help us to trust God even when we can't know the answers.
3. If time, have the groups come back together and share some insights they gained from the search, even if they didn't find the specific answer they wanted.

SEVEN DAYS OF SOUL FOOD

SEVEN DAYS' WORTH OF DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind (Luke 10:27). To put it another way, body + heart + mind = one living soul.

We can't really divide ourselves into different sections, but it's useful to look at these different aspects of ourselves and be sure we have a well-balanced faith that uses all the avenues of a soul. Each of these starter kits will include a week's worth of food for your soul in each of these four methods of understanding and expression.

Write about each of the following in your prayer journal this week. Strive to use language of emotions, thought, physical health and strength, or spirit on the given days.

DAY ONE: During this week, you can take time to go more deeply into some of the questions you wish you could ask God. First of all, do ask Him! Don't just dig into the Bible to try to find answers without asking for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. If you don't have questions right now, you might want to look up deeper details about the things you do believe, so that you can explain them clearly to others. Write in your prayer journal, either about questions you have, or about ones you've had in the past and how or if they have been answered.

DAY TWO: *Heart:* Read Psalm 13. How do you think David's heart felt at the beginning? How do you think he felt by the end? What made the difference? Have you ever had these questions? Prayerfully connect with these emotional themes and consider how God wants to work in your heart this week.

DAY THREE: *Mind:* The apostle Paul was one of the most intellectual people in the Bible. He generally used logic to answer questions. For one example, read **1 Thessalonians. 4:13-18**. Paul wants us all to understand about resurrection. He gives more of his logic in **1 Corinthians 15**. You could read the whole chapter, but at least read the first 19 verses.

What logic does Paul use?

Does this help your mind to understand?

DAY FOUR: *Strength/body:* If there's one eternal human question, it might be why does God allow suffering?

Choose any story of one of the people Jesus healed, especially ones that had been sick or crippled for years.

What questions might they have had during those years?

Their feelings were immeasurably helped by being healed, but does that really answer the question? Why or why not?

What is your explanation of the problem of human suffering?

How could you share it?

DAY FIVE: *Soul/spirit:* As you prayerfully ponder the heart/mind/body insights God has given you so far this week, write about why you think passion for others reforms us and makes us more whole.

DAY SIX: Everyone—including your family, community, and church, struggles with questions. Are there ways you can share what you have learned?

DAY SEVEN: Use day 7 to create something beautiful that reflects what you have learned.

- Write a poem or song or story.
- Create a poster.
- Write a letter.
- Paint or draw a picture.
- Make a sign.
- Do some sidewalk chalk art or writings.
- Build something.
- Create a podcast or blog post or Twitter post(s).
- Make food and give it to someone in need.

Use whatever creativity God has given *you*. We all have something.

Share the love!

a short skit

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A SHORT SKIT

(ABOUT 10-15 MINUTES, could be longer depending on how deeply you go into Act 3)

An easy way to do this skit is simply to have the actors playing the parts of Jesus and Nicodemus with Bibles open to John 3 so that each person can read his part. This version is taken from The Message translation. If you have a Bible in your language with easy, everyday language, you can use that one. Or, of course, any version you like. The short second and third acts are a little more developed, from John 7:45-53 and 19:38-42.

CHARACTERS

1. Jesus
2. Nicodemus
3. Two or more temple police. They can share the speaking parts in Act 2.
4. Two or more Pharisees. Choose one to be the leader who speaks in Act 2.
5. Joseph of Arimathea
6. Pilate
7. Other disciples, including women. These are not speaking parts.

(continue on next page)

PROPS

1. Could have some kind of shawls for the Pharisees.
2. A long sheet or tablecloth as a burial cloth.
3. Herbs and spices can be imaginary.
4. If you put a row of chairs on one side and a long table on the other side, up front, you can use two of the chairs for the rooftop where Jesus and Nicodemus talk, then use the chairs for the Sanhedrin in Act 2, and use the long table for Jesus' body in Act 3.

Note concerning Act 3.

It is fine if you want to simply have Joseph and Nicodemus discussing their plans. But if the person who plays Jesus in Act 1 is willing, it can be a powerfully spiritual experience to have him pretend to be dead, and the others actually wrap up his body, trying to imagine the pain and sorrow of the real disciples as they buried their Master. If you choose to go this route, do take time to discuss the feelings it brings up, after the skit is over. Emphasize the pain and despair the disciples were feeling, as compared with the joy we have, knowing that Jesus is alive forever.

ACT 1

Scene: **Jesus** is sitting in a chair alone.

Nicodemus comes from one side, looking around as if he's nervous to be seen.

Jesus: Welcome, friend. How may I help you?

Nicodemus: (Nervously) I, uh...I need to talk with you. If that's all right...

Jesus: (Waves him to a seat) Of course. What do you need?

Nicodemus: (Sits down, hesitates, looking down at his lap; takes deep breath and looks at Jesus. He says his first line in a flattering way, as if he's trying to get Jesus to approve of him) Rabbi, we all know you're a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren't in on it.

Jesus: You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom.

Nicodemus: (Looking confused) How can anyone be born who has already been born and grown up? You can't re-enter your mother's womb and be born again. What are you saying with this 'born-from-above' talk?

Jesus: You're not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.

Nicodemus: (Leans forward) What do you mean by this? How does this happen? (Nicodemus shows his varied reactions as Jesus makes the following speech.)

Jesus: (Be sure to be expressive throughout, knowing how Jesus loves Nicodemus.) You're a respected teacher of Israel and you don't know these basics? Listen carefully. I'm speaking sober truth to you. I speak only of what I know by experience; I give witness only to what I have seen with my own eyes. There is nothing secondhand here, no hearsay. Yet instead of facing the evidence and accepting it, you procrastinate with questions. If I tell you things that are plain as the hand before your face and you don't believe me, what use is there in telling you of things you can't see, the things of God? No one has ever gone up into the presence of God except the One who came down from that Presence, the Son of Man.

Jesus:

In the same way that Moses lifted the serpent in the desert so people could have something to see and then believe, it is necessary for the Son of Man to be lifted up—and everyone who looks up to him, trusting and expectant, will gain a real life, eternal life. This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is.

(Nicodemus looks very thoughtful. They freeze in place for a minute, then leave to signify the end of the Act.)

Act 2

(Scene: The Pharisees, including Nicodemus and Joseph, are seated in the chairs. The Temple Police come in and bow.)

Temple We went and heard him, as you ordered,
Police: but...(hesitates)

Lead (Angrily) Well, where is he? Why didn't
Pharisee: you bring him with you?

Temple Have you heard the way he talks? We've
Police: never heard anyone speak like this man!

Pharisee: Are you carried away like the rest of the rabble? You don't see any of the leaders believing in him, do you? Or any from the Pharisees? It's only this crowd, ignorant of God's Law, that is taken in by him—and damned. [Note: this is the word used in the Bible. You can say "condemned" if you prefer.]

Nicodemus: Does our Law decide about a man's guilt without first listening to him and finding out what he is doing?

Pharisee: (Even more angrily) Are you also campaigning for the Galilean? Examine the evidence. See if any prophet ever comes from Galilee.

(Scene freezes for a moment, then they leave, signifying end of Act 2.)

Act 3

(Scene: Pilate is seated at one end of room. It can be in one of the same chairs, but as far as possible from the table.

At the other side of the room, **Jesus** is lying on the floor, with **Nicodemus** and the other disciples around Him, grieving. **Joseph of Arimathea** comes to **Pilate** and bows.)

Pilate: Well? What do you want?

Joseph: Please, my lord, I request permission to take possession of the body of Jesus of Nazareth.

Pilate: (Looks away, clearly disturbed, guilty, and upset) Okay, okay, I don't care. Take Him!

(Pilate leaves). Nicodemus and Joseph, with other help if necessary, lay out the cloth on the table and lift Jesus onto it.

They take the imaginary herbs and spices and sprinkle Jesus and wrap him up.

Try to really express what you would be feeling if you were there that terrible day.

End the skit by having everyone kneel on the floor around the table and cover their faces with their hands.

Allow the silence to stretch for a few moments.

Then have all the actors return to the group, and take some time to talk about feelings and reactions, not just to the last scene, but to the whole play.

How was Nicodemus' life changed? How is your life changed?