



## REWRITING THE QUESTIONS

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We are on our seventh and final week of looking at our New Day values. I hope it has been helpful and inspiring to revisit what we believe matters most. I have to say I always find it encouraging to go back and still be able to say, “Yeah – I still get fired up about these ideas.” I see them differently and learn more each time we go through them.

For one last hurrah, let’s look at the list again:

1. Worship is central.
2. Truth must be well told.
3. The church is a mission outpost.
4. Every Christian is a minister.
5. Authenticity rules the day.
6. The church must lead the way in love and reconciliation.

Today we’re looking at value #7 – **the Who question outranks the How question**. If you thought some of the other values sounded odd, this one may seem even more strange. But as with many of the others, this one isn’t something we made up – we just borrowed somebody else’s weirdness.

This one came from a summer class I took once. They had brought in a visiting professor named James Torrance. He was from Scotland. He had this thick brogue, and he would say words I’d never heard before, like foedus and perichoresis.

One day he made the passing comment that churches are normally preoccupied with how questions when they should be focused on the who question. What he meant was that we get sidetracked with the practical side of ministry and we forget about the person at the center.

Part of the reason that happens is because the “how” questions are so daunting and so pressing. How will we ever meet all these needs? How can we reach our community? How are we going to pay for this?

In contrast, the “who” question can feel silly. Who are we talking about? Who do we need? Well, God of course. We know that. So what more is there to ask? Talking about

a “who” question feels like it doesn’t accomplish anything for us, so we abandon it in favor of more practical ones.

Now of course we need to be able to ask “how” questions. Things need to get done and we have to figure out the way to do them. There’s nothing wrong with strategizing and planning. It’s more a matter of focus and which question outranks the other. And “how” questions have a way of dominating the conversation, which fundamentally warps what we’re about.

At this point some of you may be going, “You totally lost me. I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. Sounds like you’re splitting hairs. Does it really matter in the end?”

Let me give you an illustration of what I see as the end result of getting this one wrong. A couple weeks ago, I was watching Jimmy Kimmel’s show. I normally don’t stay up that late, but he was doing a special “Aloha to Lost” episode, and I was a big fan of Lost, so I wanted to hear what the actors would say about the way the series ended and what it all meant. If you’re unfamiliar with Lost, it was a show about these people trying to get off this mysterious desert island, and there were all these spiritual metaphors throughout the show that kept you wondering.

Jimmy Kimmel was trying to analyze the show, and he said, “I think the show was saying life is a test. You know in many religions, Christianity being one of them, life is a test. If you’re good you go to heaven and if you’re not you go to hell.” That was his understanding of Christianity. Here’s a presumably well-educated celebrity with a huge platform, and that was the description his millions of viewers heard. Christianity says life is a test and if you’re good you’ll go to heaven and if you’re bad you go to hell. I wanted to jump into the TV set and tell him that’s like the complete opposite of what it means. Christianity says nobody’s good enough – it’s only by God’s grace through Christ that we can have the hope of heaven.

I got to thinking, if that’s the message Jimmy Kimmel is hearing from Christians, if that’s the takeaway he thinks we believe, we’re obviously not being very clear in what we’re saying. Because his view represents what the average person on the street thinks. And this is what I believe is ultimately the danger of losing sight of the who question. Without Jesus at the center of all we’re talking about, Christianity deteriorates into just one more religion telling people how to live, how to try and be good enough to get to heaven. We lose the good news of the gospel itself when the how question takes over.

When I started seminary, I went in thinking it would give me more definitive answers on issues that were still fuzzy for me. Things like the end times, how to interpret some of the hard sayings of the Bible, and so on. When I came out the other side nine years later, though, I found it had been a completely different experience. In general I became less dogmatic, less cut and dry about many peripheral issues I had once felt strongly about. Fuzzy became fuzzier. But the core of my faith crystallized even more clearly for me, boiling it down to the main ingredient of Christ. I came out more convinced than ever of

the cruciality of the cross at the center. The verse that burned its way into my brain during that time was Paul's words to the Corinthians:

### **1 Corinthians 2:2**

*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

That became my mantra. I try to only preach one sermon. I will speak from different parts of the Bible, I will touch on different topics and cover different themes. But my goal is to center each message on Christ and his work on the cross. I don't mean just tack it on somewhere, but really wrestle with how every facet of life ties us back into the Who question.

I'm not saying I always do that or always do it well, but that's my commitment – that's my objective. When you hear me doing something else, call me out on it, because anything else quickly deteriorates into a series of how questions that muddies my thinking and my witness to other people.

It's one thing to see how this idea applies to preaching and something else to see how it makes any difference in the way we live life every day. I think it will help flesh out this value if we ground it in a story that really shows the difference between "how" and "who" questions and what happens when they get out of whack.

One story that comes to mind is from when the Israelites were on the edge of going into the Promised Land. Before they crossed into it, Moses decided to send some spies over to check things out and see what it was like. When they returned, things began to unravel.

### **Numbers 13:26-14:10**

*They came back to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran. There they reported to them and to the whole assembly and showed them the fruit of the land. They gave Moses this account: "We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw descendants of Anak there. The Amalekites live in the Negev; the Hittites, Jebusites and Amorites live in the hill country; and the Canaanites live near the sea and along the Jordan."*

*Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."*

*But the men who had gone up with him said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored. They said, "The land we explored devours those living in it. All the people we saw there are of great size. We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of*

*Anak come from the Nephilim). We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them."*

*That night all the people of the community raised their voices and wept aloud. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron, and the whole assembly said to them, "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

*Then Moses and Aaron fell facedown in front of the whole Israelite assembly gathered there. Joshua son of Nun and Caleb son of Jephunneh, who were among those who had explored the land, tore their clothes and said to the entire Israelite assembly, "The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good. If the LORD is pleased with us, he will lead us into that land, a land flowing with milk and honey, and will give it to us. Only do not rebel against the LORD. And do not be afraid of the people of the land, because we will swallow them up. Their protection is gone, but the LORD is with us. Do not be afraid of them."*

Since the time of Abraham, God had promised Israel this land. He miraculously rescued them out of Egypt and led them across the desert through all kinds of peril, and now he has brought them to a place where they can take possession of what he's given them. It's the goal they've been dreaming of forever. But now that they're here, they're not sure it's going to be possible. They're not even sure they want to do this anymore. Nobody is even thinking about how good the land is – all they can see are the freakishly big soldiers guarding it.

Here is a community faced with a huge HOW question. In fact, it's a giant question. How are they possibly going to enter this land and claim it when it is inhabited by people who are so physically intimidating? How are they going to take on an army twice their size? We don't know if they were literally a taller race of people or if they just seemed gigantic due to the fear they instilled in the spies. Anyway you interpret it, they posed a big problem.

So standing over here on one side you have the people of God, and over here you have the place where he is calling them, the land where he has promised to bless them abundantly. And in between the two is this obstacle that has become literally larger than life.

It's a case of a how question that's gone bad. It's taken over. From their situation, we can find four markers that can be red flags for us in our own lives as well. The first indicator when the how questions are too big is when **all I see is obstacle**.

There was no more Promised Land for the Israelites. They couldn't see it at all. All that good fruit they had brought back was not even on their minds anymore. The only thing

they could think about was how massive all the people were who lived there and how limited their own resources were for meeting such a threat.

Do you ever get so overwhelmed by a roadblock that you can't even think about where you were trying to go? If you've ever been in a true financial crisis, you know what I'm talking about. The bills are piling up, the income is shrinking and you have no idea how you will get out from under it. All you can think about is the impossibility of your situation. Pretty soon, the stress begins to show and you take it out on your family – the ones you love and are trying to provide for in the first place. The size of the crisis makes you lose sight of the goal.

The problem with only seeing the size of the obstacle is that it makes us focus on ourselves in comparison. We don't have enough money, we don't have enough ideas or time or energy to do what needs to be done. We take a mental inventory and because we don't have it within ourselves, it leads us to despair. And when we don't think there IS a way out, we begin to make irrational choices – trying to hide our dilemma, giving in to shame, becoming paralyzed or even self destructive.

The Israelites were definitely frozen. Their motivations had also changed. It's another sign that something is wrong, because when how questions take over, **fear drives my decisions.**

All along on their journey out of Egypt, the Israelites have been guided by the pillar of cloud during the day and the pillar of fire at night. They made their decisions about where to go based on where God's presence led them. Now there is a shift. God is still telling them where to go, but they aren't paying attention because they're listening instead to their fears. The men came straight out and said, "We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are." And the whole community started crying in their fear.

Think about your own strongest fears. Maybe it's related to failure. Maybe it's surrounding your kids. Maybe it's about rejection or loneliness. Maybe it's confrontation. Maybe it is the uncertainty of the future. I got together with a friend one time who was so wracked with fear that his wife would leave him that he could barely function. When we're basing our choices on fear, which isn't from God, we're no longer listening to his voice.

The more the Israelites gave in to their fears, the more their questions began to change. Instead of thinking about how they would defeat their enemies, this is what they started asking:

*Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword?*

Another good indicator that our how questions have taken over is when the **How has changed to Why.** Why God? Why would you do this to me?

The thing was, God HADN'T brought Israel out to the desert to let them fall by the sword, so to ask WHY he had done that was a nonsense question. But the problem in front of them seemed so insurmountable that the Israelites couldn't make it mesh with their image of a loving God.

This is not unique to them. We all tend to do that when we get fixated on how terrible our situation is. We see it as being more than we can handle and conclude that if God allowed something so bad to happen, he's either not good or not powerful. But our perspective gets so skewed when we're in the middle of a crisis that we can't possibly have clarity on God's motives. We're like the Israelites and start asking "Why would God do this to me?" When maybe he's not doing anything to us at all.

Once the Israelites started down that path, they begin dreaming of the good old days.

*"Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt."*

When they were in Egypt, they had been slaves. When they were in Egypt, Pharaoh had slaughtered all the boy babies. When they were in Egypt, they had been forced to work under inhuman conditions. This is what they want to go back to.

And it should be pointed out that absolutely NOTHING bad has happened to them yet in this crisis. They are anticipating a bloodbath, but as of this moment no one has been hurt. Yet they would rather go back to those appalling conditions in Egypt than chance what's ahead.

Here's one more indicator something's not right: **I'm going backwards.**

Sometimes the dread of the unknown can have us running for something familiar – even if what is familiar is harmful or uncomfortable to us. It's like all those feelings defenses Karin talked about last week – even when we know they're not helping, we revert back to them because we know how they work.

We often make those choices to go backwards even before anything bad has actually taken place. Mark Twain once said, "I've suffered a great many catastrophes in my life. Most of them never happened."

When I'm only able to see the problem, when I'm making choices based on fear, when I'm questioning God's power and goodness, when I see myself reverting or getting stuck in old ways – I can be fairly certain I'm letting the how questions run my life. And as you can see, they don't run it very well. It's not a productive, happy place to be.

Contrast that with the experience of Caleb and Joshua – the two spies who saw things differently. For them the glass was more than half full – it was overflowing. I just love the confidence in Caleb's words:

*Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, "We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it."*

Let's go for it! We can do it! What was it that enabled him to speak with such boldness? My contention is that it was because he was more focused on the Who question. And just like we saw with the how question, there are signs in this story of what a healthier perspective looks like.

To begin with, when I ask the Who question, **I focus on the place of promise.**

Caleb and Joshua saw the same armies as all the other spies. But that wasn't what held their attention. They were looking beyond them. They told the people,

*The land we passed through and explored is exceedingly good.*

It wasn't that they were ignoring the obstacles. They just were keeping the objective in view. The prize that was on the line was well worth it.

It's like Paul's attitude in the face of his own opposition.

## **2 Corinthians 4:16-18**

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

He could see a fantastic place of abundance that made his incredibly daunting challenges seem insignificant. And that is worth clinging to – the knowledge that what Christ has in store for us is so magnificent, so exceedingly good that it dwarfs the problems that look so big from this side.

**The central issue can't become how hard something will be to do but whether or not God is the one calling us to do it.** If he is in it, we can know that the end result will be exceedingly good.

Caleb and Joshua based their optimism on the fact that God loved Israel. They said, "If the Lord is pleased with us, if he loves us, here's what we can expect." Their assumption was that God was in fact pleased with them, because they were choosing to act like his people.

It's further evidence that when I'm keeping the Who question in mind, **I have confident hope.**

These two men are facing the exact same problems as the rest of Israel, but they are not in despair – they are filled with this positive outlook and rock solid conviction that everything will be okay.

Where does our confidence come from? How do we know if God is pleased with us? If you believe Jimmy Kimmel, you really don't know until life's over and you just have to cross your fingers and hope for the best.

But Scripture points us in a totally different direction. When Jesus was baptized, Matthew Mark and Luke all record these words from God:

**Mark 1:11**

*And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

God has already declared to the world that he is not just pleased – he is well pleased with Jesus. He is completely satisfied and happy with his performance, his being, his very self.

So when we are IN Christ, when we've put our faith in what he did and accepted him into our lives, his status of being pleasing to God transfers to us. We don't have to wonder what God thinks – he's already told us. As long as we're with Jesus, we can have total confidence. This is why we pray in Jesus' name – it's because of him that we are able to boldly come before God.

When we rely on how we're doing, we stay in a state of anxiety, wondering if we're good enough. Looking to Jesus changes everything.

We said before that the Israelites began to doubt the goodness and power of God – not because of anything he had done, but because they read motives into his actions that simply weren't there. Caleb and Joshua show me that when I am focused on the Who question, **I trust myself to God's character.**

Once they've established that God is pleased with his people, they then know how he will act. They're counting on him to lead his people. They're counting on him to bless his people and give them the land. They're counting on him to protect his people through their battles. And most of all, they're counting on him to be with them as they go. His very presence will be more than enough to handle what they encounter on the way. Knowing who this God is who walks with them is what empowers them.

God has a track record, and if there is one thing Scripture is clear on, it is that God is always faithful to his own character. That means we can count on the same things Joshua and Caleb were counting on. We can trust that he will keep leading us even when we don't know the way. We can trust that he has our good in mind. We can trust on his protection through whatever we face. And we can trust that he will never leave us.

God's personhood is completely trustworthy. That gives me so much freedom. When I know where he's calling me, I can know he'll get me there.

That's what enabled Caleb and Joshua to say, "We're not going back to Egypt. We're moving ahead. Let's go." A Who question attitude will show up in the fact that **I press forward**. The author of Hebrews said,

**Hebrews 10:39**

*But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.*

Keeping our eyes on Christ is what will free us from being stuck or forced back by difficulties in life.

If anyone should have gotten hung up on the how question, it was Jesus. How in the world could God become human? How in the world could victory come through a death? How in the world could he find a way to save us when we had turned our backs on him? Praise God he kept his eyes on his Father, choosing to see past the cross to the joy on the other side.

As we prepare to come to the Lord's Table and remember all he has done for us, I'm going to pass out some slips of paper.

I know that exercises like filling out slips of paper can feel contrived and silly. But sometimes our brains need a physical act that is outside our regular routine to help us break out of familiar patterns. Sometimes we need a tangible marker, and object to help us relate to an idea in a new way. So go with me on this one for a moment.

You'll find two questions on your slip of paper. The first is this: What is the land is God leading me to? What promise or calling or action is God holding out in front of me that I have been reluctant to pursue? It could be a better marriage. Maybe a kinder heart. Maybe it's a ministry or opportunity you've been contemplating, but feeling blocked about. Maybe it is a closer relationship with God himself. Maybe it's trust. Maybe it's as simple as praying with your family. Maybe it's an old wound God wants to heal up? What is the exceedingly good place you believe God has for you that you've been holding back from? Take a moment and write down.

Secondly, what is my giant? What "how" question has been making me reluctant to enter the land? How will I repair this relationship? How will I pay these bills? How will I ever be happy again? How will I move past my mistakes? How will I survive this crisis or forgive this hurt or get everything done or change the way I am? Write down your biggest question or questions on that bottom half of the paper.

When you have both of them in mind, take a moment to pray about them. Then what I would like you to do is rip the paper in half, symbolically removing the obstacle. When you come up to take communion, I want to encourage you to do something with that half of the paper. just leave that question at the foot of the cross, as if to say, "I can't handle this one anymore Jesus. I'm leaving it with you. I want to give you my how questions and keep my eyes on you."