

8

Questions God Can't Answer



JOHN BUSACRER



TO ELVIN MONROE "MONTY" SHOLUND

My dear mentor:

His penetrating questions ignited my faith.

His persistent encouragement instilled God's calling.

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A Word Before

THIS IS A BOOK OF QUESTIONS.

If you are looking for answers—put this book back!




I have a lot of questions, especially in these uncertain times. Where are we heading? How will this all turn out? Will we be OK? Have we hit bottom yet? What is the prudent course of action? Where is God in all of this?

Jesus had a lot of questions too. He was not just idly passing time or seeking to learn more about us with all of His inquiries. The God who cares about the location of every sparrow on the planet, and has the very hairs on our heads numbered, already knows all of our answers. There is nothing that stumps God. There is no additional knowledge that he must acquire. No hidden feeling that he must expose to himself. No wisdom that he must glean. He already knows everything about you and me.

So if God knows so much, why does he ask so many questions?


Jesus' principle teaching style was to ask questions—tough questions, personal questions, searching questions, transforming questions. He yearns to transform our faith—from feeble to fierce, from predictable to passionate.

By answering his questions for ourselves, we begin to discover the true object of our desire, the source of our fear, the uniqueness of our identity, the focus of our compassion, the real measure of our wealth, and the only lasting love of our life.




Are you willing to risk living in God's questions? The adventure will undoubtedly cause you to experience uncertainty and restlessness. But the result of leaning into Jesus' questions is the exhilaration of a faith that is untamed in its expression and unimaginable in its outcome. It is worth the wild ride!

Join me in exploring **8 Questions God Can't Answer** for us. The departure point for our journey together is the simple, yet deeply challenging question of our desire, "*What do you want?*" The destination is the pivotal question of our devotion, "*Do you truly love me?*" The path of our own faith pilgrimage is mapped out in these 8 questions.



Deepen your spiritual adventure by completing the Study Journal at the conclusion of each chapter. The Study Journal consists of three parts:



READ additional scripture to expand your understanding of each question.

REFLECT on questions to stimulate discovery and small group dialogue.

RESPOND to a challenge to boldly practice each of Jesus' questions.

So, if you are looking for questions-this is the book for you!

JB



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CHAPTER 1

What Do You Want?



DESIRE



The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God!” When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. Turning around, Jesus saw them following and asked,

“What do you want?”

John 1:35–38



What do you want?

ELIAS' CRITICAL QUESTION

I was immediately drawn to Elias. A short, powerfully built man with a radiant smile, Elias (Swahili for Elijah) had stopped counting his successful Kilimanjaro summit attempts when he had reached 200. At age 30, he already emanated the quiet wisdom of experience and the clear passion of calling that inspired confident followership. If I were going to attempt the summit of Kilimanjaro, I wanted Elias to be my guide.

My eleven fellow climbers and I gathered around in a tight circle as Elias kneeled over a dog-eared map of the mountain. He described the route through 5 eco-systems we would be taking in our ascent and descent of Kilimanjaro. We would begin in the Montane forest, camp the fourth evening in the Reusch crater bracketed by the 75-foot ice wall of the Fortwangler Glacier, summit early the next morning, then descend along the Mweka route. All told, the journey would take 6 days. Elias pointed out landmarks on the topographic map and described both the physical and emotional obstacles we would encounter during the climb. As he spoke, we were all feeling the giddy anticipation of success, the quiet fear of possible failure, and a chafing restlessness to begin—the powerful mixture that precedes most great adventures in life.

After less than 15 minutes, Elias ended his narrative, slowly turned to look each of us directly in our heart and asked, “What do you want?” Great question! What did we want? Elias used our answers to quickly build relationships from which he would encourage and challenge each of us in unique ways over the next





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6 days. His ability to effectively lead us was in direct proportion to the clarity of our own desires.

JESUS' FIRST QUESTION.

Jesus asked the same question early in His ministry. It is the first crucial question he used to ignite followership in 12 men who would change the world forever with the power of his teaching. It is the essence of how he engages us today to continue his world-changing work. He continues to ask, through both subtle stirrings and traumatic life events, “What do you want?” It is the first question he cannot answer for us. We must weigh in for ourselves.



The two men whom Jesus asked the original question were followers of John the Baptist. There was a wildness about John that attracted these men and many others to the wilderness. He stood as the thunder in the desert¹ sent by God to show everyone where to look and who to believe in.² He had the same clear passion of calling as Elias, igniting the energy of a whole generation of people weary of Roman oppression and a worn-out religion of rules. When Jesus showed up on the scene, John pointed him out for all of his followers to see. With just one word and two days' experience, these two disciples of John abruptly turned and began to run after Jesus. What a stunning change of allegiance.

There must have been something missing from the disciples' lives, some “Holy discontent” deep within their hearts, that they sensed only this carpenter from Nazareth could satisfy.

1 John 1:23 (MSG)

2 John 1:6 (MSG)

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Despite being avid followers of John, they dropped everything and turned on a dime to pursue a different leader. They were *seekers*, as Os Guinness describes, “looking for something. They were people to whom life, or a part of life, had suddenly become a point of wonder, a question, a problem, or a crisis. This happened so intensely that they were stirred to look for an answer beyond their present answers and to clarify their position in life.”³ Jesus’ very presence was posing a new question for which they had no answer. The followers of John became seekers of Jesus.

What about you? Are you a seeker also? Do you have a sense that something deep inside is missing? Has life become a point of wonder, a question, a problem or a crisis for you? Is there a restlessness that is unstilled by work, school, friendship, money, church or even family? Do you feel as if you are treading water, making no progress? If so, perhaps God is asking you the same question today—“What do you want?”—with the intent to engage you in a new world-changing work. What do you *really* want?

WAITING FOR DESIRE TO HAPPEN

We want to maintain at least the illusion that we are all buttoned down and in control of our life, work, relationships and religion—that we are always moving steadily forward. But then God poses a new question in our heart’s stirring, causing us to again become a seeker. We are awakened by a new question in our soul and consumed by finding a new answer.

Author Brennan Manning, who learned through the depths of alcoholism that control is an illusion, encourages us to pray, “I

³ Os Guinness, *The Call*, 4

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surrender my will and my life to you today, without reservation and with humble confidence for you are my loving Father. Set me free from self-consciousness, from anxiety about yesterday and tomorrow and from the tyranny of the approval and disapproval of others, that I may find joy and delight simply and solely in pleasing you. Let your plan for my life and the lives of all your children gracefully unfold one day at a time.”⁴

I regularly charge off after my own desires before checking in on God’s direction. It is said that human beings are the only creatures that speed up when lost. David sums up God’s perspective on speed in Psalm 130: “I pray to God—my life a prayer—and *wait* for what he’ll say and do.”⁵ Paradoxically, the initial path of seeking is to wait. David had discovered two critical truths about godly waiting. First, he is not shooting up a prayer at the last minute in hopes of getting some personal request granted. His *life* was a prayer. Much of the Psalms are David’s prayer journal with God. He was in constant, intimate, brutally honest conversation with the Almighty. Second, he was not waiting for God to catch up to his plan. We are never ahead of God. We need simply to look to where God is already active and join him there. An African expression for patience is “Waiting for time to happen.” We must wait for God’s desire to happen, in our heart.

What we are often searching for is the wisdom to discern God’s will at each critical transition in our lives. This wisdom does not typically flow into a noisy, crowded mind. It seeps into a heart quieted by prayer. God’s desire is a matter of the heart, not just the head. The word *desire* is most often coupled in the Bible with

⁴ Brennan Manning, *Ruthless Trust*, 132

⁵ Psalm 130:5 (MSG)

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heart or *heart's desire*. Erwin McManus writes, "What can settle your mind will not settle your soul. It will stir it up."⁶ The desire of the heart is a much more powerful tug than that of the head.

My friend John, a Carmelite Monk, whose life is devoted to discerning matters of the heart through constant prayer, sent me this thought several years ago: "The inner life of prayer can best flourish in an atmosphere of silence, free from agitation and noise. In silent prayer we come face-to-face with ourselves and learn to reconcile the contradictions of our lives; the fears, anxieties and frustrations that lead to discouragement and illness. Something more begins to happen, mysteriously, in moments of deep serenity; we discover at the root of our being, the presence of the One who created us and calls us in love, and we emerge from this experience transformed by the quiet joy and gentle peace which radiates from the inner recesses of the heart."

God approached Solomon centuries ago with the same question. "Ask for whatever you want me to give you."⁷ In other words, *what do you want*, Solomon?

There was no salary cap on these contract negotiations, no limitations on what Solomon could ask for or on what God could grant. Signing bonus? No problem. Guaranteed contract? Money? Fame? Power? Done. What Solomon asked for was simply wisdom, a discerning heart to govern God's people and to distinguish between right and wrong.⁸ God replied, "Since this is your *heart's* desire. . . wisdom and knowledge will be given you."⁹ I hesitate to think what I would ask for given the open

⁶ Erwin Raphael McManus: "Soul Cravings"; *Catalyst*, November 2006

⁷ 2 Chronicles 1:7

⁸ 1 Kings 3:9

⁹ 2 Chronicles 1:11,12

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checkbook of heaven! And yet God's hand is open to give us our heart's desire IF (and this is the critical IF) our heart's desire is God's desire. How do we know if they are one and the same? How do we discern if the longings of our heart are God-inspired?

BLINDED BY THE WHITE

Webster's New World Dictionary defines *orientation* as "The homing faculty of certain animals."¹⁰ We are all born with a spiritual homing faculty. Instinctively, we know if we are on or off course. St. Augustine wrote, "You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You." Restlessness is our God-given homing faculty. Try as we may with work, recreation, food, sex, family, money, religion or whatever else, we often feel lost—so disoriented that only God can find us.

The advertising industry in the U.S. spends billions of dollars annually trying to jam our homing devices. They bombard us through pop-ups, e-mails, TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards and phone calls with over 3,000 ads per day.

Through brilliantly crafted messages, their job is to create desire. If we look like _____, drive _____, smell like _____, wear _____, and so forth, we will be happy, successful, fulfilled. You fill in the blanks. In a word, their role is to disorient us. But to become disoriented is to risk becoming quickly lost.



I was climbing in late spring at Mt. Rainier National Park with our older son Brett. We had gotten off to a late start, but were still hoping to climb from the parking lot of Paradise (aptly

¹⁰ Webster's New World Dictionary, 1003



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named) to the ranger hut at Camp Muir, an ascent of about 5,000 feet. The weather was deteriorating with intermittent periods of sun, snow, clouds, rain and gusty winds. At about the halfway point, two climbers descending from the summit met us. They cautioned us that the conditions at Camp Muir were “downright nasty” and suggested we turn around soon. Heeding their advice, Brett and I decided to hike just a hundred feet farther, enjoy the view and begin our descent back to the car.



No sooner had we turned around, when we were suddenly enveloped by a complete whiteout, a dense cloud that swallowed us both up, immediately eliminating any sense of direction or depth perception. Our eyes filled with dancing white spots as our brains tried to register our distance to any discernable mountain feature. We were both disoriented almost instantly. I had a dull fear that, although we were off the glacier and in no danger of falling into a crevasse, we might still miss our destination and spend quite some time wandering in circles. Our saving grace that afternoon was a series of brightly colored wands planted every 10–20 yards in the snow by the U.S. Park Service, outlining the path to Paradise.

It is painfully easy to become quickly disoriented in our journey through life, caught up in the whiteout of our own desires and thus in danger of wandering in circles on the path to Paradise. One minute it seems that we are navigating in the clear sunshine of God’s calling and in the next we are lost in a deep cloud bank of our own causing. Our homing faculty tells us that we are off track, but we need wands to find our way out. Thankfully, God anticipated our tendency to become disoriented and planted wands to help us navigate our way home.

Paul cautioned the people of Rome to “not conform any longer to

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the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”¹¹

God's words are our wands. If we are going to be able to discern between good and bad desires, we need to regularly spend time in His book sharpening our mind. God's words are “living and active,”¹² or as Eugene Peterson describes in *The Message*, “His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey.”¹³ If we are to cut through the dense cloud bank of media noise in order to discern God's desire, we must follow the wands of His words. God's desires always line up with His words. He is perfectly consistent.

Listening to our heart and reading the Word can still lead us a long way off course. History is riddled with examples of ungodly acts that have been committed in the name of “God's will.” Scripture is the narrative of God's great love for us. Wisely used, it lovingly displays God's desires through our actions. It does not indiscriminately endorse our point of view or merely prove our position over others.

We must, therefore, triangulate our heart's desires and our own understanding with the wisdom of other Jesus-following friends. The Bible is full of encouragement to seek the counsel of others willing to love us and speak truth to action in our life and plans. “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.”¹⁴ “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers

11 Romans 12:2

12 Hebrews 4:12

13 Hebrews 4:12 (MSG)

14 Proverbs 12:15

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they succeed.”¹⁵ “Form your purpose by asking for counsel, then carry it out using all the help you can get.”¹⁶

Without the wisdom and encouragement of others, we are prone to pursue selfish desires, or perhaps worse yet, fun desires (even good desires) but not God’s desires. The enemy of great is what is merely good. There is nothing inherently wrong with good desires, except that they may keep us from pursuing God’s great desires.

In a stunning observation at the recent REVEAL conference at Willow Creek Church, Bill Hybels suggested that the largest gap in faith-practice exists not between seekers and believers, but between immature followers and Jesus-centered followers. The less mature believe that God is for their plans and agenda. Jesus followers have given up their lives and plans in complete surrender to him. It is no longer about them.

This is the great and deliberate contradiction in Jesus’ first question. Even though he asks what we want, he is not for *our* plans. He is for *His* plans, planted in our heart, supported by His Word and confirmed by other Jesus-followers. The essence of His question is not about *our* desire, it is about discovering *His* desire for us. In the end, what will truly quench our desires is a relentless pursuit of His desire. Nothing else will satisfy.

The insatiable outcomes of our own pursuits bear this out.

¹⁵ Proverbs 15:22

¹⁶ Proverbs 20:18 (MSG)

HOW'S THAT WORKING FOR YOU?

When our two sons were teenagers and we saw them charging down a path that we sensed would not have a positive outcome, we tried to sneak up on them with the powerful checking question, "How's that working for you?" This is a great question to assess the pursuit of our heartfelt desires as well. Our choices have consequences.

Imagine being a contestant on a game show where you must choose between what is behind either Door #1 or Door #2. Let me list the items behind both doors:

DOOR #1

- repetitive, loveless, cheap sex
- a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage
- frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness
- trinket gods
- magic-show religion
- paranoid loneliness
- cutthroat competition
- all-consuming yet never-satisfied wants
- a brutal temper
- impotence to love or be loved
- divided homes and divided lives
- small-minded and lopsided pursuits
- the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival
- uncontrolled and uncontrollable addiction
- ugly parodies of community

DOOR #2

- affection for others
- exuberance about life
- serenity
- willingness to stick with things
- sense of compassion in the heart
- conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people
- loyal commitments
- not needing to force our way in life
- able to marshal and direct our energies wisely¹⁷

Which door would *you* choose? The rewards behind Door #1 or Door #2 are ours to receive as we decide daily which desires to pursue. The first door is a path of our own selfish desires, the second a path of God-inspired desires. Door #1 lives are marked by the restlessness of disorientation, always wanting more or different, never having a sense of rest from striving or freedom from worry. Door #2 lives are marked by a deep joy and contentment because the desires pursued are in tune with God's heart.

As God regularly continues to ask us, "What do you want?" we must wait and listen to our heart, weigh our desires against God's words, seek wise counsel from faithful others, and then regularly check the outcomes of our pursuits.

¹⁷ Galatians 5:19–23 (MSG)

BUYING TIME

What do you want? This is God's crucial first question. We are not wired as human beings created in the image of God to merely replicate, but to learn and grow, to adventure and explore. Our desire defines our direction and ultimately our destination. What we pursue reflects who we are and determines what we will become.

It is like saying, "Show me who you hang with and I'll show you who you'll become." The followers of John wanted to hang with Jesus, and ultimately became like him.

John's two disciples' response to Jesus' question was a startled, "Where are you staying?" They were not sure how to respond to such a direct inquiry. Their initial safe answer was a benign question of their own. I suspect they were buying time. Why get to the heart of the matter if they could stick to the news, weather and sports? John's disciples sensed danger in Jesus' question.

I, too, feel unsettled when God plants longings in my heart. There is the intuitive sense that I must move from my comfort zone, and in that moment lurks the realization that another great adventure is about to begin. The feelings of giddy anticipation, quiet fear and chafing restlessness return.



In *Wild at Heart*, John Eldredge writes, "Most men think they are simply here on earth to kill time—and it's killing them. But the truth is precisely the opposite. The secret longing of your heart, whether it's to build a boat and sail it, to write a symphony and play it, to plant a field and care for it—those are the things you were made to do.



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But it's going to take risk, and danger, and there's the catch. *Are we willing to live with the level of risk God invites us to?* Something inside us hesitates.”¹⁸

This is why Jesus knew he had to ask us the next question to move us forward in our faith journey, a question to get at the core of our fear: “*Why are you so afraid?*”



¹⁸ John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart*, 49, italics added