

On A Mission - STUDY TWO**WHERE IS GOD?**

In this second study we continue to explore the Good News about Jesus Christ.

In the first study, “*Where Are We?*” we looked at the dark shadow that is cast over life. Life is difficult. But we are not always ready to acknowledge the shadow. Therapist, *Irving Yalom*, in a game called “Top Secret” asks people in his groups to write out the single thing about themselves they are least inclined to share and to return the paper unsigned. The most frequent top secret is the admission “I feel utterly worthless. No one would want me if they knew me.” The number two response is “I don’t love anyone the way I should”.¹ Presumably the people attending Irving Yalom’s sessions were in a bad space, but at one time or another we will all identify with their “top secrets”.

Henri Nouwen, in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, states: “Addiction” might be the best word to explain the lostness that so deeply permeates contemporary society. Our addictions make us cling to what the world proclaims as the keys to self-fulfillment: accumulation of wealth and power; attainment of status and admiration; lavish consumption of food and drink, and sexual gratification without distinguishing between lust and love. These addictions create expectations that cannot but fail our deepest needs.”²

If this sounds overly pessimistic, Jesus, as we saw in the first study, indicates the problem goes much deeper than addiction. He called the outwardly respectable people of his day “Whitewashed tombs³” (“You are not “dead wrong”, you’re just plain dead!”). Even the best of them⁴ needed to be “born again”! Doubtless those who took Jesus seriously began to suspect things were worse, much worse than they previously thought.

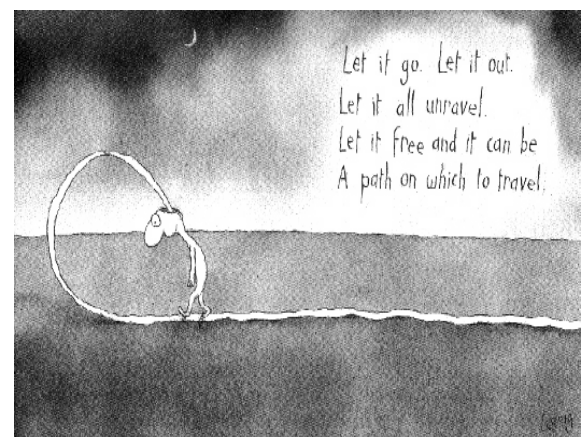
Our View of God

In this study we are asking the question “If we are in such a bad way, **where is God** in all this? Does God care? What is he doing?” These are crucial questions. A. W. Tozer said, “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the **most important** thing about us.”⁵ If we see God as either detached and unconcerned, or powerless and remote it will have a huge impact on how we approach life and relate to others. There will certainly be no passion to serve God unless we see him as he really is.

Exercise 1: Our Contemporaries

In the first study we looked at how our friends saw themselves. Now we explore what our friends think about God? How do they answer the question, “Where is God?” What are their answers to the big world-view questions: “Where have we come from?”, “Why are we here? Where are we headed?” Do they believe in a spiritual reality?

1. What are some of the underlying (and blatant!) media messages about spirituality and God (music, film, magazines, newspapers, books, etc).



¹ Lawrence Crabb, *The Safest Place on Earth*, p 63

² Henri Nouwen, *The Return Of The Prodigal* p42

³ Matthew 23:27

⁴ See John 3, Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus

⁵ A W Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, p1

2. Think about two or three people in your everyday life (maybe the same people you thought about in the first study).
 - What do you know about their view of God?
 - How do you think their view of God and spirituality is affecting the way they live?
 - What questions or difficulties do you think they might have with the idea of a personal, creator-God?

3. Ask God to give you more understanding of your friend's thoughts about God. What questions could you ask them? (Discuss this as a group)

“What we are witnessing in the New Age Movement is human desire being diverted to a use which is even more frightening than that harnessed and rationalized by political economists in the eighteenth century to turn the private vice of acquisitiveness into a public virtue. The New Age uses sciences such as pharmacology and neuro-techno-psychology to expand human consciousness-for the purposes of self-indulgence. The ambiguity of this trend is that the more that human potential is extended, the more room there is for self-centredness and sinfulness. It intensifies feelings of alienation instead of promoting human beings' relational needs. It expresses the boredom of an affluent society that cannot take suffering and poverty into account, so it is a movement with no concern for the underprivileged, for the Third World, or for the 'losers' within our own society.”
James Houston, *The Hungry Soul*, p115

Exercise 2: Jesus and the Bible

How does Jesus answer the question, “Where is God?” Jesus had a single-word description for the human condition that captures the gravity of our situation – **Lost!** In discussing our ‘lostness’ Jesus powerfully reveals where God is and what he is doing.

Luke 15 – Parables about Lostness.

Jesus framed his entire mission using this term - “the Son of Man came to find and restore the *lost*” (Luke 19:10). In using this term Jesus was pointing to familiar Old Testament prophecies that portrayed God’s angst over the state of the people of Israel, who were described as “lost sheep”.⁶ Jesus took the title, the “Good Shepherd”, and revealed that God’s concern extended way beyond Israel to the whole human race. What is particularly revealing is how he portrays God’s attitude to lost people. He reveals a dramatically different picture of God to the harsh judgmental image portrayed by the religious people of his day!



Rembrandt's “The Return of the Prodigal Son”

The Lost Son. Luke 15:11 - 31

Examine this parable in detail, focussing on the Father. What view of God is Jesus presenting here? (also read background on page 3)

⁶ “Lost Sheep” - see Ezekiel 34, Jeremiah 23, Isaiah 53

Background

Kenneth Bailey, in his penetrating explanation of Luke's story, shows that the son's manner of leaving is tantamount to wishing his father dead. Bailey writes: *"For over fifteen years I have been asking people of all walks of life from Morocco to India and from Turkey to the Sudan about the implications of a son's request for his inheritance while the father is still living. The answer has always been emphatically the same . . . the conversation runs as follows:*

Has anyone ever made such a request in your village? Never!

Could anyone ever make such a request? Impossible!

If anyone ever did, what would happen?

His father would beat him, of course!

Why?

The request means-he wants his father to die."

Bailey explains that the son asks not only for the division of the inheritance, but also for the right to dispose of his part. "After signing over his possessions to his son, the father still has the right to live off the proceeds . . . as long as he is alive. Here the younger son gets, and thus is assumed to have demanded, disposition to which, even more explicitly, he has no right until the death of his father. The implication of 'Father, I cannot wait for you to die' underlies both requests."¹

"The head of a family normally lived in the centre of the village, rather than on the edge. Therefore, such a father could have seen his son a long way off only if he was intentionally watching for the young man from the roof of his house or from the village gate. It was considered extremely undignified and humiliating for a man to run, especially to greet someone. A man signified his own importance by waiting or at most walking to receive someone."¹

OPTIONAL:

The Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. Luke 15:1 – 10

What do these parables reveal about the *heart* of God?

- How God *thinks* about us?
- How God *feels* about us?
- How God *acts* toward us?

Cross References

How involved is God with people? Acts 17:28; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-16; Isaiah 49:15, 16;

How deeply is he affected by us? Hosea 11:8; Matthew 23:37; Matthew 9:36; 11:28-30

What has he set in motion? What has he done for us? What are his plans for us? Gen 12:1-3; Isaiah 42:1-4; John 3:16, 10:11-16; Ephesians 1:9-10; Rev 5:9-10

In the light of your observations above, write a paragraph that captures the picture of God Jesus is painting here, especially indicating his attitude towards those who have become 'lost' to him. (Feel free to include insights from the optional section above)

Wrap Up

Return to your friends in Exercise 1, "Our Contemporaries". What particular things could you ask God to reveal about himself to each of them?

What could you do or say that may help fill in the gaps in their view of God?

It is easy to become blasé about the people around us. In the light of God's great heart of love, what can you pray for yourself

Charles Spurgeon was a passionate preacher in 19th Century London. He likened God's heart to a volcano constantly streaming with the burning lava of love and prayed - *"Oh that my heart could but get that stream poured into it, to set the whole of my nature on fire, to consume me in the flames and torrent of love"*