



Questioning Christianity explores the Christian story in an accessible way. No slogans. No politics. No simple solutions to complex problems. After years of exploring faith issues with skeptics, seekers, and new believers, Dan Paterson and Rian Roux can help you navigate what can often be a disorienting journey.

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ONE

The Garden: Created for Good

I would rather be what God chose to make me, than the most glorious creature that I could think of. For to have been thought about—born in God’s thoughts—and then made by God, is the dearest, grandest, most precious thing in all thinking.

GEORGE MACDONALD

DAVID ELGINBROD

*So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.*

GENESIS 1:27

One of the curious features of the Christian story is that we are not the main characters.

The Bible does not begin with an account of human origins, nor even that of our cosmos. In the first book of the Bible, the

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opening words of Genesis claim that, before anything else existed, our Creator simply *was*. God is the prime subject as the Author of all reality, and the Scriptures are your invitation to know Him.*

The Bible teaches in its first sentence what Greek philosophers would only centuries later surmise—that prior to the inception of our universe, before the creation of everything out of nothing, beyond our space-time continuum, there had to be a first cause or prime mover from whom everything else that now exists finds its source.†

There is a quantum leap, though, between this god of the philosophers and the God of the Bible. For beyond a cold, rational hypothesis, the Bible reveals God in warm and relational terms. From beginning to end, we learn that our Creator is not only personal, but communal.

God is *Trinitarian*.

Now if you have never heard that word before (or even if you have), and find this idea strange or confusing, you are in noble company. The brightest Christian minds throughout the ages have marveled at this mystery, and some have even compared our attempt to make sense of the Trinity to a two-dimensional square grappling with descriptions of a three-dimensional cube.² Because in two dimensions, we are used to one square being one thing and another square being another thing entirely, we struggle to accept that somehow, in a higher dimension, six squares can also make up one thing. In this analogy, we humans are relatively

* Since this raises big questions, see Part 3: “Why Isn’t God More Obvious?”

† Since this raises big questions, see Part 4: “Has Science Disproved God?”

The Garden: Created for Good

simple creatures, more like the square, whereas God is more like a cube: a complex unity of one *what* (God) and three *who*'s (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Before you throw down this book as too philosophical for your taste, the reason this matters so much to the storyline is, in a word, *love*. The idea that “God is love” is almost an axiom of modern spirituality, but God’s nature cannot be relational or loving at the core if for eternity past God was *alone*. Love requires a personal connection between a subject, a *lover*, and an object, the *beloved*. So the notion of God as a Trinity opens up the possibility for love to find its source in the very nature of our Creator, for love has been eternally flowing from and to all three members of the Trinity.

And so it came to be that God’s Trinitarian love sparked creation, in much the same way the loving union of a husband and wife tends to overflow into procreation. Beginning with the chaotic elements of creation, Genesis describes a process of developing order, where God brought about conditions conducive to life. A cosmically insignificant planet was granted incalculable dignity by becoming the epicenter of God’s purposes. So earth began to teem with all manner of living things, filling the waterways, skies, and landscapes.

Amid the wild beauty of this new world, God cultivated a high garden to house humanity. Eden was a special place where heaven and earth overlapped, God’s space and our space, where God’s presence was even said to roam the gardens. As the crescendo of His creation, God imbued humanity with His divine image. Elected from among the earthly creatures, we were chosen to be like God, reflecting our Creator to the whole of creation.

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This indelible imprint of God on each human soul is what gives everyone everywhere absolute status and worth, regardless of age, ability, gender, sexuality, race, religion, politics, or culture. Across history, this unique doctrine has served as an unassailable foundation for the universal dignity of all human beings, providing the soil out of which inalienable human rights can grow. And beyond what it has secured in horizontal or social terms, the vertical dimension of our special relationship to God speaks volumes into our earnest search for identity. For any journey to truly find ourselves must start by looking back to our origins.

One of life's inescapable questions is this: "*Who am I?*" From the first chapters of the Bible, from the opening scene of the Christian story, God's answer thunders back: we are God's earthly children, deeply loved, and masterfully created to be with and be like our heavenly Father.

When the reality of this identity dawns, it sheds light on all the meaningful things about who we are as human beings. Our hunger to love and be loved points back upstream to the headwaters of love itself, as we are made in the image of a relational God. Our consciousness and rationality are gifts of possessing a mind patterned after God's own mind, capable of unlocking the secrets God has woven into the universe. Our desires to create and contribute to culture are born out of our reflection of God's own creative drive and love of beauty. And our consciences are a window into the moral dimension of God's nature, serving as a compass to help us navigate right and wrong as the moral wisdom God has crafted into His creation.

So why did God create humans?

The Garden: Created for Good

Here the second of life's inescapable questions is raised: "*Why am I here?*"

Genesis teaches that God created humans for deep and meaningful relationships and for a role. Humans were *created for good*: to love God, love each other, and cultivate the planet. Desiring that we would partner with Him as earthly children to a heavenly Father, God appointed humanity to continue bringing order from chaos as we spread our human communities around the planet. Humans were given the mandate to be the gardeners and governors of God's good world, taming a wild world beyond the borders of Eden as we build cultures, frame beauty, and foster the fruitfulness of the earth.

The entire shape of this creation is said to have brought God delight.

God's presence and God's world brought delight to our human hearts.

Eden was the *good life* because we were there with God.

TWO

The Tower: Damaged by Evil

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.

ALEKSANDR SOLZHENITSYN
THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO

The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth.

GENESIS 6:5

The garden scene just described is a far cry from the world we now inhabit. Even though we still see glimpses of Eden in who we are and what we want, this light to which we cling is often eclipsed by a new shadow. Something sinister shrouds God's good world, and you can hear its echo in our collective protest whenever

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we stare evil and suffering in the face. This is not the way things should be. Something has gone wrong.

So what happened?

The second scene of the Christian story describes how although we were *created for good*, we have become *damaged by evil*. As moral creatures, designed for relationships and a role, humanity was faced with a choice, represented in Eden as a fruit tree. Either we could govern the world using God's wisdom, navigating life by trusting God's rule and definition of good and evil (a path God promises will lead to flourishing and freedom and life), or humans could redefine good and evil on their own terms, seizing power for themselves by eating the forbidden fruit (a path God warns will lead to a curse and captivity and death).

Why? Because any world of meaning is also a world of consequences. So to set the stage in this cosmic theater of meaning, God created a world where what we do greatly impacts us and our environment. Our choices matter. Cause and effect are built into the substructure of our universe. Not only does God govern matter and energy by upholding the regularity of what we call natural laws (a feature that enables us through science to harness nature for human enterprise), but God also wove a moral fabric into creation that governs the free actions of moral creatures (a feature that enables humans to live meaningful lives). Just like any attempt to break the laws of nature tends to end up with us being broken by them, God warned that to go against the moral grain of His design would always lead to suffering—only the symptoms of evil wouldn't stop with us. Since humans were appointed to be the gardeners and governors of God's world, if we were to walk

The Tower: Damaged by Evil

off the job to pursue our own path, God knew the entire system would break down.

At this juncture in the Christian story, we are introduced to a dark and mysterious rebel, who aptly takes the form of a snake in order to spread a deadly poison. Known by many names (the devil, Satan, the enemy, the father of lies), this malevolent and shadowy creature tempts humanity to pursue life on their own terms, seeking to enlist them in his rebellion by deceiving them into breaking faith with God. And even though we had no reason to doubt God's goodness or doubt that His wisdom would lead to our flourishing and freedom and life, the snake's lies suggested there was something we were missing out on by trusting and obeying God.

*What if God's moral design is more like a straitjacket than a path to freedom? What if God is holding us back from everything we could become? What if we can be happier as the authors of our own script?**

These temptations gave birth to the unthinkable: sin. A violation of our sacred purpose. Choosing to trust the snake, humanity exchanged the truth about God for a lie and traded the joy of eternal friendship with God for the thrill of a momentary and illicit pleasure.

The fallout from eating this forbidden fruit was catastrophic. Reaching for something more, we lost our true selves. While we were seeking to seize power, the power of evil seized us. What theologians describe as *the fall* is this space-time tragedy when human beings fell from their high calling as God's image-bearers

* Since this raises big questions, see Part 3: "What If The Snake Was Right?"

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and crashed into the moral fabric of God's universe, whereby we and our world became *damaged by evil*.

Everything we knew about the good life with God began to unravel as the effects of our evil spread like a cancer throughout creation. A new specter of shame hung over us, such that we no longer felt safe being fully known and so rushed to hide behind fig leaves and fern bushes. As this erosion of intimacy led to a fracturing of our relationships, a deep sense of alienation set in. Where once the river of our desires was aimed at the good and innocence washed over our conscience like a cold spring, now these headwaters were polluted. Selfishness dethroned love in the human heart, curving us in on ourselves until all our desires were bent out of shape.

So where was God in this calamitous picture?

Never being caught by surprise, God's first reaction as He came to the garden was not explosive anger. Rather knowing all that we had done, like a loving parent, God called us out of hiding. The very first question out of God's mouth in the Bible paints the picture of Him earnestly seeking us out for relationship: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9)

With a broken heart from our rejection of His fatherly rule, God unfolded the tragic consequences of our rebellion. We would have to leave Eden. Sin would lead us into exile from the freedom and flourishing and life of God's presence.

Yet even while pronouncing this sentence, God comforts us with a promise of hope. Where we had failed to resist selfish desire and chaos, giving in to the temptation of a darker power, one day a new human will stand where we have fallen. In a showdown with evil, this Savior would be mortally wounded, yet through this pain

The Tower: Damaged by Evil

would achieve a decisive victory and crush the snake's head.

Against the grim backdrop of the bad news of sin, this is the first glimpse of what Christians call the *gospel*, or the good news of the Christian story. Another closely follows. God substitutes our own attempts to cover up our shameful nakedness by clothing humanity in the skins of sacrificed animals. These twin prophetic acts, a promise and a provision, serve to foreshadow a coming hope. Someday, somewhere, somehow, God would send someone to save us from all we have done and become.

But that was still future. The hour had not yet come.

Even clothed in this hope, the exile from Eden was painful. The garden was where God had met with us personally. Eden was our taste of heaven on earth. But God's presence is dangerous for anyone *damaged by evil*. What theologians describe as God's holiness, the raw power of His unique presence, acts like a consuming fire. If you aren't made of the right stuff, then drawing near can be fatal. And so, because humanity were now corrupted by sin, for our own protection from His holy presence and to open the door for a plan of redemption, God sent us out into the wilderness beyond the borders of Eden. Only there, separated from God's life, we became vulnerable to sickness, suffering, and death. Where once in Eden the ground brought forth only good things, now in exile the fruitfulness of our work was frustrated, as the curse on creation brought forth thorns and thistles.

From here the scene grows dark. Sons and daughters were born in the wilderness, and the violence and injustice of a now-fallen humanity multiplied. With people redefining evil as good, everything sacred was trampled. Brother killed brother. Men enslaved

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women. Tools of war became a trade. The human heart hardened. As we pursued darker powers, trading God's benevolent rule for the tyrannical reign of diabolical gods and human dictators, our descent from Eden into evil accelerated.*

Eventually humanity unites under a murderous ruler to reach a second time for something more. Convinced that our earthly achievements could give us a sense of permanence and significance and satisfaction, humans constructed a corrupt civilization in Babel (Babylon). At the heart of this evil empire was a tower, a structure to help us reach back into the heavens—a misguided quest to remake Eden on our own terms.

It was an attempt to create the good life without God as King.

But Babylon always fails to deliver on its promises. Because we were made for God's presence, nothing and no one else can fill the void left by God's absence. All attempts to put something or someone in God's place only ends up disappointing us and hurting others. Since God knew that concentrating evil in a single empire would be disastrous for the human project and His plan of redemption, He intervened. Aware that words build worlds, God came down to confuse our tongues, such that the proliferation of new languages led to a scattering of tribes and an abandonment of Babylon.

At least for a time.

These first two scenes of the Christian story shed remarkable light on our human experience. That we were *created for good*

* Since this raises big questions, see Part 3: "How Could a Good God Allow Suffering?"

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explains everything deep and beautiful and rich about who we are and that we have become *damaged by evil* makes sense of the darkness, distance, and death we all experience and see within our own hearts. Something has gone wrong: evil. Only this dark power is not something outside of us we can simply push or wish away, for there exists within all of us a war between the divine and the diabolical.

We are now a mixture of Eden and evil.

We live in the shadow of exile.

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