



**We're constantly bombarded online, in schools, and sometimes even in our homes by attitudes and arguments aimed at deconstructing our faith. Anderson shows us, and the ones we love, how to grapple with questions redemptively—in a way that brings us closer and leaves us more secure in Jesus Christ.**

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# 1

## AN ANATOMY OF A QUESTIONING LIFE

*With what end in view do you again and again walk  
along difficult and laborious paths? —AUGUSTINE<sup>1</sup>*

**I HAVE NEVER REALLY DOUBTED** that God exists. Perhaps this is the wrong admission to make at the outset of a book on questioning, but it is true. I have considered the arguments on each side and have tried to do so honestly. But those inquiries were prompted by people around me—by friends and family who stood on the shores of unbelief wondering whether they should swim. I looked with them but was never seriously tempted. The universe seems too orderly, too rational to be here by accident.

I have doubted whether God is good, though, and especially whether He will be good *to me*. There have been moments where my uncertainty about God's kindness has almost crushed me. We think of doubt as an "intellectual" problem, but it can dramatically transform our entire posture toward the world. "I would have despaired," the psalmist writes, "unless I had believed that I would see the goodness of the LORD in the

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1. Augustine et al., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1909), 4.12.18.

land of the living.”<sup>2</sup> When we see God, will He smile at us? There is no neutrality, no cool detachment in the face of such a question. Nothing less than the universe depends on how we answer it—or, perhaps, how it is answered for us.

I am more skeptical these days of seeing *my own* goodness in the land of the living than I am of God’s. He has proved Himself in the death and resurrection of Jesus—and has been proved “o’er and o’er” through the many graces He has given since.<sup>3</sup> “The answer to the question ‘What is wrong?’” G. K. Chesterton wrote, “is, or should be, *I am wrong.*”<sup>4</sup> We are the ones in question, not God. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” the ruler asks Jesus.<sup>5</sup> His question signals interest, but also anxiety: he is responsible for his life, and no one can answer for it besides him. It is a dangerous thing to take such a question to God, though, for we might find that He returns the favor and puts His questions to us.

God calls us into the questioning life through questioning us; His questions liberate us to question Him. The psalmists knew the strange joy of laying bare our frustrations, sorrows, and anger before Him:

“Why do You stand far away, LORD? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?”<sup>6</sup>

“How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?”<sup>7</sup>

“Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?”<sup>8</sup>

These are questions that God has authorized us to ask, questions that our Lord Jesus would even have regularly had on His lips. Even so,

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2. Psalm 27:13 (NASB).

3. “Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him! How I’ve proved Him o’er and o’er. Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!

Oh, for grace to trust Him more!” So reads William Kirkpatrick’s hymn *’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus*.

4. Chesterton wrote this in a letter to the *Daily News* on August 16, 1905. It has sometimes been said that Chesterton responded to a request to explain what is wrong with the world with the very funny line, “Dear Sirs, I am.” He almost certainly did not, as this quote is the nearest we have to anything like that story. For the full letter and details, see <https://www.jordanmposs.com/blog/2019/2/27/whats-wrong-chesterton>.

5. Luke 18:18.

6. Psalm 10:1 (NASB).

7. Psalm 13:1.

8. Psalm 77:9.

hearing God's questions is the cost of our freedom to question God. The psalmists question *us*, not only God: "Oh LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?"<sup>9</sup> "Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?"<sup>10</sup> "Who considers the power of your anger, and your wrath according to the fear of you?"<sup>11</sup> "If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?"<sup>12</sup> The psalmists' approach to questioning embodies the Golden Rule: we should question God only as we would have Him question us.

And Jesus *does* put questions to us.<sup>13</sup> "What are you seeking?" Christ asks two disciples who had begun following Him at the outset of John's gospel.<sup>14</sup> They answer His question with one of their own: "Rabbi," they say, "where are you staying?" "Come and you will see," Jesus tells them, inviting them into the inner confines of His home. The disciples know they are not equals with Jesus: they begin following Him only after hearing John the Baptist announce, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" But Christ's first word to them is an invitation to say what they seek, to name the desires of their heart.

Many of Christ's questions in the Gospels are rhetorical; we find them opening His parables and embedded in His sermons. Sometimes Jesus uses questions to trap His foes, admonish His disciples, or vent His frustrations. Christ's questions draw people deeper into His own life by prompting them to make their thoughts and desires explicit.

"What do you want me to do for you?"<sup>15</sup>

"Do you believe that I am able to do this?"<sup>16</sup>

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9. Psalm 15:1.

10. Psalm 52:1.

11. Psalm 90:11.

12. Psalm 130:3.

13. Other books have counted Christ's questions and identified their various types. It is tempting to make much of the number of Christ's questions (307, by some counts) and how few "direct answers" He seems to give. I am wary of doing so, as how frequently a text mentions something is not always a good guide for its importance. If it were, the doctrine of the "image of God" would turn out to be extremely unimportant, seeing that Scripture mentions the phrase only a handful of times.

14. John 1:38. Note that Christ does not ask them their name . . . nor their favorite color. His methods are not the same as Tim, the enchanter who quizzes the knights in Monty Python's *Quest for the Holy Grail*.

15. Luke 18:41.

16. Matthew 9:28.

“Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?”<sup>17</sup>

“Who do you say that I am?”<sup>18</sup>

The questioning life is responsive and responsible to God. In questioning, we direct our attention outward, away from ourselves toward another who can give us an answer. We might put questions to our parents, to professors, or to proteins, like a chemistry teacher would.<sup>19</sup> In every case, questioning opens us to the world and puts us in a position where we can only receive what we are offered in response. Sometimes we find what we are looking for, and sometimes we do not. Questions invite the other person to speak—an invitation we should also be willing to receive. Jesus asks His disciples what they want, and they ask Him where He is staying. In His questions, Jesus invites us into a relationship of giving and taking, of mutuality and reciprocity. He does not merely question us; He questions *with* us, speaking and listening to us as His friends.

What does it mean to live a questioning life? What are we doing when we put our inquiries to the world? Where do questions come from? What does a question feel like, and how is it different than a statement or assertion? If we are going to learn to question well, we must first see what questioning is. While I hope to answer those questions over the course of this book, this chapter will sketch an anatomy of the questioning life. My “drawing” is more an outline than a full portrait. Questioning is a diverse practice, which can take many different forms and be done for many different reasons. But we can make a start toward understanding questioning by thinking about—questions.

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17. Matthew 20:22.

18. Matthew 16:15.

19. Proteins are the molecules that do much of the work in our body's cells. My sister-in-law was an analytic chemist who loved proteins so much she developed songs about them—a delight I found endearing, even while I did not share it.

## THE ANATOMY OF QUESTIONING

What happens when we ask a question? The practice is one of our most common ways of interacting with the world, yet its mechanics remain ambiguous.<sup>20</sup> We know what questioning is *not*, namely, making an assertion that is either true or false. We wake in the morning and declare, “What a beautiful morning!” when we see the sun shining through the open window on a spring day. We make assertions with less confidence as the world becomes more complicated. Still, the declarative sentence, the *indicative mood*, is how we describe the world as we know it.

A question does something different than declare what we know or think is true. It points us toward the unknown, directing our attention to something that is currently hidden from us. “Why is it raining?” the child asks his mother. The child knows *that* it is raining and knows *what* rain is, namely, drops of water falling from the sky. But is it raining because atmospheric pressure has dropped, allowing clouds to form so that water droplets become heavy enough to fall to the earth—or is it raining because God is crying, and crying because of something the child did (as comedian Jack Handy once quipped)?<sup>21</sup> There is a right and wrong answer to the question, but the child does not know it. So he interrogates his mother until he is satisfied or she is exhausted.

Questioning is a form of intellectual poverty, as it is an encounter with what we do *not* know. In questioning, we practice becoming “poor in spirit,” which Jesus commends as “blessed” in the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>22</sup> We ask because we do not have the answer already within ourselves. The question discloses our ignorance, our perplexity, our want or need for understanding. The paradox of the questioning life is that we must become so comfortable with our intellectual poverty

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20. See *The Philosophy of Curiosity* by Ilhan Inan for a good example of someone who gives explaining it a sporting try. Ilhan Inan, *The Philosophy of Curiosity* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

21. The line is one of Jack Handy’s “Deep Thoughts,” which were a series on *Saturday Night Live* in the ‘90s. The full quip should be read with all the seriousness of a bit of Instagram inspiration or wisdom: “If a kid asks where rain comes from, I think a cute thing to tell him is ‘God is crying.’ And if he asks why God is crying, another cute thing to tell him is ‘Probably because of something you did.’”

22. Matthew 5:3.

that we are not ashamed to ask for help and so eager to leave it that we persist in asking our questions. The only path to wisdom lies through the confusion and bafflement we feel when we come to the limits of our knowledge. “In order to arrive at what you do not know,” T. S. Eliot writes, “you must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.” It is a truth that is easy to write, but difficult to live out. Yet we can only learn when we are free to *not know*.<sup>23</sup>

Questioning directs our attention to what is hidden from us, to what we cannot see. Which is a little weird if we are being honest. How can we look at what is *not* there? Artists speak of “negative space,” which is a helpful concept for understanding how questions work. The negative space around a sculpture or an image is the area where something *is not*. Consider Michelangelo’s statue of David. His majestic right hand rests on his thigh, creating a space between his arm and torso—the space where his arm is not.<sup>24</sup>

Negative space is not *empty* space, but gains definition and shape from the objects that surround it. The more sharply defined an object is, the clearer the negative space will be. We could point to the middle of a room and announce that it is where a lion *is not*, but that would be unhelpful and uninteresting—as it is also where a zebra is not, or a tiger, or cheetah.<sup>25</sup> We can only see the space in Michelangelo’s sculpture because David has an arm and torso. Negative space is shaped by existing objects; it has form based on what is around it.

In questioning, we notice the negative spaces in our understanding—the parts of our mental picture that are *not* there—and try to fill them in. In learning, we piece together our facts, morals, and everything we know to tell a coherent story about the world. Along the way,

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23. T. S. Eliot, “East Coker,” in *Four Quartets*, 20. Eliot goes on: “In order to possess what you do not possess / You must go by the way of dispossession. / In order to arrive at what you are not/ You must go through the way in which you are not. / And what you do not know is the only thing you know / and what you own is what you do not own/ and where you are is where you are not.”

24. The FedEx logo is probably the most creative use of negative space in modern iconography. The space between the “E” and the “x” makes an arrow, to remind us that they are a shipping company. Once you notice the arrow, you cannot unsee it. So perhaps it *is* there, in a sense.

25. I hope this is true for you, anyway. If you have done this exercise and found such an animal in your living room, might I politely suggest putting the book down and getting help?



though, we are likely to encounter aspects or features of the world that do not make sense. We encounter an event or idea that does not fit our picture. Such moments bring us into contact with the edges of our understanding, the negative spaces of the unknown that surround us at every moment. Questions emerge when we come up against an unknown that we would like to explore and find out.

The unknowns we encounter have a shape, though: they are not “formless and void,” as the world was before God spoke in Genesis 1. As we see negative space only by discerning the outlines of an object, we see the unknown only by attentively considering what lies around it. The ignorance that motivates questions depends upon knowledge. The boy who asks his mother about rain must know enough about the world to know *what he does not know*. If he does not know that rain is water falling from the sky, then he cannot ask why it is raining. What he sees gives form to the negative spaces he asks about; what he knows gives shape to what he does not know.<sup>26</sup>

Questioning happens at the border between the known and unknown, between what we take to be true and what we do not understand. Consider one prominent response to Jesus’ ministry. After He heals a blind and mute man in Matthew 12, the gaping crowd asks, “Can this be the Son of David?”<sup>27</sup> The people know what it means to be the Son of David because they have read the Hebrew Bible. They have seen

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26. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was once mocked for explaining America’s intelligence failures in Iraq by appealing to the “unknown unknowns,” but the taxonomy he developed has a great deal of intuitive force—if you can sift through the complexities of it, at least. “As we know,” Rumsfeld said, “there are known knowns; there are things we know we know.” The little boy knows it is raining, and what rain is. “We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know.” He knows he is ignorant about why it is raining. “But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know.” Whether an unknown unknown is possible depends upon whose perspective we are considering them from. Snow might be an unknown unknown to the boy, as he might not know it exists—even while we do. My thanks to Sage Yassa for this point. You can see Rumsfeld’s comments at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=REWeBzGuzCc>.

27. Matthew 12:23.

Jesus and encountered His power. What they do not know is whether Jesus corresponds to their expectations for the Son of David. They are exploring the unknown, the negative space between their concept of the Messiah and the person of Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

Questioning does not only make us aware of our ignorance; it also deepens our understanding of what we know. Consider how we respond to losing our keys—a feeling I am too familiar with. We do not know exactly where to look to find them. If we did, they would not be lost. The impotence and ignorance that beset us in such moments can be infuriating.<sup>29</sup> So, what do we do? We retrace our steps. We eliminate possibilities. We look at the most plausible locations first until we eventually wonder whether they somehow ended up beneath the kitchen sink (nope). In that process, we give our house attention it rarely receives. We discover money beneath couch cushions and find photos hidden in desk drawers. Similarly, searching for an answer reveals depths to what we already know that we might never have encountered otherwise.

Knowledge makes the world mysterious and helps us investigate it better. In the case of the keys, the longer we search the more baffled we become by their location. We start our search by idly wondering where we left them. After an hour of hunting, though, we might begin to wonder whether we ever owned keys to begin with. We feel the mystery of their location most when we have exhausted our options for where they might be.

The questioning life thus has time for mystery—both at the beginning of our search and at its end, when we are “lost in wonder, love and praise” of God. It is appropriate to confess that our knowledge of God is limited. But the true mystery of God’s life only becomes manifest when we carefully investigate His revelation of Himself. Our knowledge of God’s mystery must be won, not used as a cheap way to escape thinking clearly about God. Those pursuing doctoral degrees sometimes

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28. In this instance, the Pharisees try to close that gap by answering the people’s question for them, but Jesus rejects their attempt and leaves it open.

29. This is a paradox first articulated by Plato in his *Meno*, though he did not use searching for keys as his example—because cars were not invented yet.

quip that they learned how much they do not know. (The wise ones actually believe it.) Socrates became the wisest man in Athens through questioning his teachers and discovering they claimed knowledge they did not have. Socrates was wise because he knew his ignorance, while others were ignorant but were not aware of it.<sup>30</sup> Yet Socrates learned his ignorance only through persistent and patient inquiry, which routinely demonstrates his considerable learning. Ignorance is not the enemy of knowledge, but its origin and companion. And our final inability to comprehend God's life is not really ignorance, anyway, but a studious wonder at a mystery we cannot finally unravel.

Understanding is cyclical and compounding: we question better as we learn more and we learn more as we question better. We associate questioning with youthfulness, for understandable reasons. Children are naturally inquisitive. They search and explore their surroundings with abandon. But if the young question most, the wise question best.<sup>31</sup> The art of questioning takes a lifetime to perfect, for the most interesting questions flow from a deep well of insights. The more we understand, the more aware we will be of the negative spaces around us. Those who have learned best and longest will explore forgotten nooks and corners that those of us starting out cannot begin to imagine. They will see questions that only well-trained eyes are strong enough to detect.

## THE BEGINNING OF OUR QUESTIONS

Where do questions come from? Or, more precisely, what moves someone to *ask* a question? Indifference toward our ignorance is always possible, as schoolteachers will attest. It is hard to instill a desire for learning where one does not already exist. If you have read this far, I suspect caring about the intellectual life is not your challenge. How does one begin, though, to live a questioning life?

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30. See Plato, *Apology* 221d-e.

31. This is why many wise people seem so "young at heart." Questioning makes the world feel new, which is partly why it is a youthful activity and so difficult to maintain as we grow old.

Questions arise out of love. We ask because we *want* to know, because we think that what we discover will be valuable, for us or others. Questioning is a form of searching—for understanding, for knowledge, for satisfaction, and ultimately for *the good*. The question inaugurates a quest, an exploration into the unknown. At the beginning of any journey lies some picture of the end that makes us want it. We search for goods we might find, not sorrows. If explorers anticipated only pain and misery, suffering and hardship, they would never leave home. People will subject themselves to all manner of difficulty, though, for the sake of knowledge, friendship, glory, or money.

Love precedes knowledge, but also cannot live without it. The good we seek through inquiry must be true or our love will wither and die. The good and the true go together. As Thomas Aquinas writes, “truth is something good, otherwise it would not be desirable; and good is something true, otherwise it would not be intelligible.”<sup>32</sup> While we can live in a fiction for a while, reality is undefeated; it will eventually overtake our lies, falsehoods, and mistakes. Exploring the unknown is not a game, and we are not role players in a fantasy. We explore the unknown because our love for the good impels us to, and because we are made to live in the truth.

Our questions both *reveal* and *deepen* our loves. I have an irrepressible inclination to ask people about their tattoos. People are often strangely open about the stories behind their ink, which allows me to learn about a person in a short amount of time. My interests are also academic, as tattoos are a fascinating proxy for how we think about our bodies. I have sometimes quipped that I know more about tattooing than any theologian alive.<sup>33</sup> My love for tattoos generates questions on appropriate occasions (and maybe an inappropriate occasion or two also!). As tattoos reveal something about their wearers, so questions reveal the loves of the person asking them.

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32. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q.79, a11.

33. I wrote a chapter on tattoos in *Earthen Vessels*. That book has since gone out of print, but my love of tattoos remains. No, I do not have one, I will not be getting one, and I will not answer whether I think they are right or wrong—the answers to the three most common questions I receive about them.

Sometimes, though, questions assault us from the outside rather than arise from our loves. In crises like the onset of cancer, the attacks of 9/11, or the COVID pandemic, our sense of stability is shaken and our security proves illusory. When what we thought we knew fails us, our only real option is to put new questions to the world. In the early days of the pandemic, many of us thought about supply chains and hygiene more than we ever had before. We became aware of how little we knew about the virus (before we promptly forgot our ignorance and acted as though we knew everything). In crises, questions *seize* our attention and will not let us go until we have resolution.

## WHAT QUESTIONS DO

What do questions do to us? How do they form us? While our questions signal our interest in the unknown, what about the questions that come to us? The questioning life is not a self-enclosed life, but involves an openness to being questioned by others. Think about Job, who after losing his family, work, and health puts his grievances to God: “Does it seem good to you to oppress, to despise the work of your hands and favor the designs of the wicked? Have you eyes of flesh? Do you see as man sees?”<sup>34</sup> God answers Job, if we can call it that, with a barrage of questions of His own: “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?”<sup>35</sup> G. K. Chesterton wrote of the conclusion to Job that the “riddles of God are more satisfying than the answers of man.”<sup>36</sup> But why?

Questions call us to reimagine the world. If someone gives an answer,

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34. Job 10:3–4.

35. Job 38:4–7.

36. G. K. Chesterton, *Introduction to the Book of Job*. Available at the American Chesterton Society ([www.chesterton.org](http://www.chesterton.org)).

we can either take it or leave it. A question asks something of the recipient, though: it invites a response, drawing them into a conversation. What would it mean for Job to have been there “when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” Understanding God’s question takes us beyond a naked confrontation with God’s assertion of His superiority into the act of seeking understanding. Job is invited to imagine a world that makes sense of the question and provides an answer, much like we do when trying to find our keys. God’s question opens a “negative space” before Job, which underscores Job’s limits as a creature. God might have told Job that he does not have God’s perspective on the world—which He did, in one sense. When God asks, “Have you entered into the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep?” there is no doubt about the answer. But by questioning Job, God allows him to explore the gap between them and to view creation as God does. God effectively tells Job, “Come and see.”

And Job *does* see. “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,” he says in his response, “but now my eye sees you.”<sup>37</sup> God’s questions make Job *feel* his limits as a creature and invite his response. It is one thing to know that no one can stand before God. It is another to have to answer “no one,” when God asks, “Who then is he who can stand before me?” God’s questions dignify Job. They might be rhetorical, but their audience is real and can really respond. God’s revelation of Himself does not annihilate Job but establishes and confirms him as a creature who can speak with God. God answers Job’s questions with questions of His own—questions that Job must answer, even if only with confession and praise.

Many of the questions Christ puts to us in the Gospels work in a similar fashion. When a question is posed in the middle of a sermon, it heightens the audience’s self-reflection by inviting them to answer silently. The Sermon on the Mount freely uses questions this way. “You are the salt of the earth,” Jesus tells His hearers, “but if salt has lost its

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37. Job 42:5.

taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?”<sup>38</sup> Jesus’ question simultaneously compels us to wonder whether we have lost our saltiness and confronts us with our inability to restore it. Similarly, Christ’s command to love our enemies comes with a battery of questions that underscores the commandment’s uniqueness and exposes our moral limits: “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”<sup>39</sup> His relentless questions in the Sermon heighten the drama of whether we will conform to His life. “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” “Which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone?” “Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?” Even rhetorical questions evoke a response from us—they raise the stakes and make us accountable to the speaker in a way that didactic claims do not.

Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon reconfigures our moral imaginations, bringing them in line with the disclosure of the kingdom of God—which can also mean replacing our questions with His. “Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” He asks us. We are not permitted to anxiously wonder where our bread will come from by frantically asking “‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” Instead, Christ’s questions reveal God’s providential care for humanity by inviting us to reflect on the birds of the air and lilies of the field: “Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing?” God does not prohibit us from asking questions so much as teach us better questions to ask. “If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?”<sup>40</sup>

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38. Matthew 5:13.

39. Matthew 5:46-47.

40. Matthew 6:25-30.

## THE SCANDAL OF QUESTIONING WELL

In a passage that has sometimes served as an anthem to Christians eager to enter into the questioning life, poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

You're so young, so far from any beginning; I should like to ask you, dear sir, as well as I can, to show patience towards everything in your heart that has not been resolved and to try to cherish *the questions themselves*, like sealed rooms and books written in a language that is very foreign. Do not hunt for the answers just now—they cannot be given to you because you cannot live them. What matters is that you live everything. And you must now *live* the questions. One day perhaps you will gradually and imperceptibly live your way into the answer.<sup>41</sup>

*Live the questions.* Enter into them, and allow them to enter into us. Become friends with our questions and learn to love them. Questioning is more than a practice: it is a form of life that encompasses and entangles our hearts, minds, and even our bodies. We can only question well when we believe there are answers—but we will only live our way into the answers if we orient our questions toward the good and the true as Jesus reveals them.

Questioning can be uncomfortable. “In much wisdom is much vexation,” the writer of Ecclesiastes states, “and he who increases knowledge increases sorrow.”<sup>42</sup> We do not always know where our questions will take us, which makes asking them risky. This is especially true as people age, which is why I think so few old men and women are still explorers. The twenty-year-old who questions might risk their relationship with family and friends—but the sixty-year-old who questions might jeopardize their life’s work. If they question too deeply, they might have to turn away from practices they have treasured from their youth. What could make such a risk worth taking, especially if our beliefs have served

41. Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, trans. Mark Harman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 45–46.

42. Ecclesiastes 1:18.



us well enough? It is safer to drown our questions in a flood of amusements and trivialities, to inoculate ourselves against the unknown. We are experts at avoiding the nagging disquiet of questions we cannot answer. It is better not to be disturbed.

We can only procrastinate against confronting the unknown for so long, though. Try as we might, none of us will escape the one great “negative space” at the end of our life, the line between when we *are* and when we *are not*. Death is the great unknown, the “undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveler returns,”<sup>43</sup> in Hamlet’s memorable description. Our intense curiosity to cross the barrier of death has long fueled the evils of necromancy; attempts to summon loved ones from the grave are as common today as they ever have been. What the dead are doing now is one of the great questions that haunts those who have watched loved ones depart for that country. For all our confidence in the resurrection of Jesus, for all our belief in the Christian doctrines of the afterlife, what happens at death remains a deep and irresolvable mystery. Death is not only the great question mark at the end of our lives, though; it puts a question mark *over* our lives, calling into question the meaning and value of everything we have been and done. There is no greater unknown, no more difficult question that we can face, than whether we are ready to die.

Questioning is preparation for death. By helping us become intimate with the little unknowns, questioning readies us for our final encounter with the great unknown. Our educational systems have increasingly turned away from helping students wrestle with the deepest questions of our existence as humans in favor of technically oriented preparation for the workforce. It is hard to resist the pull of professional training in an economy like ours. But students need contact with the fundamental questions of life: What is goodness? How can humans be free? What does it mean to be a person? Why is being preferable to nonexistence? Such questions are more than momentary excursions for college freshmen, which we forget when we get a job. Intimacy with the unknown

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43. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 1.

breathes life into everything we do. Those who *love* the unknown can be enthusiastic members of a team faced with solving a strategic problem or building a new product. But more importantly, they will be ready to die.

The questioning life might not be safe, but it is *good*. The only journeys that really matter are ones where the stakes are real. Some questions might require us to leave our father's religion and enter into a new way of life. We might find ourselves in need of repentance and forgiveness, as we come to terms with the fact that we were wrong and that the damage we inflicted was real. We can only learn this through discovering what is right, and growing in the joy that comes with living in the truth. Either we question ourselves or questions will thrust themselves upon us. Sometimes they will openly attack us—but more often, they will haunt us in the inarticulate regions of our hearts, creating a persistent discomfort with the way we live now until they are brought into the light.

And if we are also wrong about our new beliefs? Well, if we keep on exploring, we shall someday discover that as well. All who seek will find.

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