

Day One

Not so simple after all

Sam: Lyn, if there is a god, why doesn't he do something about human suffering?

Lyn: What are you suggesting, Sam? That whenever there's a problem, God should prevent it?

Sam: Of course not. I'm only talking about the serious ones.

Lyn: Define serious.

Sam: Well, Lyn, serious would be things like pandemics or loss of income...or poor health... or earthquakes or...

Lyn: What kind of poor health? Cancer? Heart disease?

Sam: Yes!

Lyn: What about headaches? Head colds?

Sam: No-no. More serious than that.

Lyn: Well, where do you draw the line, Sam? I mean, what's the difference between dropping a dinner plate and running a car into a tree? Or catching a cold and catching COVID-19? Essentially, they're all the same.

Sam: Well, yeah. But I wouldn't expect God to fix up every small problem that comes along.

Lyn: How do you know whether a problem is small? If you had a head cold, it could be a very serious problem if you were to visit an elderly person in hospital. Highly dangerous in fact.

Sam: Mmm, in that case, maybe.

Lyn: Or what if your cold was an excuse *not* to make the hospital visit? Or what if it enabled you to take a few days sick leave? What if you saw advantages in having the cold? What then?

Sam: Well... then I might not see it as a problem at all.

Lyn: And back to heart disease. What if you were poor and lonely and a heart attack would be a blessed relief? Better than suffering in isolation and cold and hunger?

Sam: Well, yeah, I suppose then...

Lyn: Can you see how difficult it is to resolve this issue, Sam? And what if you woke up one morning after a party feeling really sick because you had had too much to eat and drink the night before?

Sam: Well, that would be nothing to do with God. I wouldn't expect God to deal with that.

Lyn: But what if you ate something at the party that gave you food poisoning? Would you want God to heal you?

Sam: Sure.

Lyn: By stopping you going to the party?

Sam: Hang on, Lyn. That's not what I meant.

Lyn: But it would solve the problem, Sam. The issue is really not so simple, after all, is it? The thing is, if we acknowledge God's right to deal with things WE don't like, shouldn't we also acknowledge his right to deal with things HE doesn't like?

Read: Psalm 73:1-17; Habakkuk 1:1-4, 12-13; 2:1-4.

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? And why?

Day Two

The ultimate purpose

Lyn: Sam, it's easy to question God for not fixing something that we needed to be fixed. But what if solving one problem would create a worse one for someone else? For example, you may pray for a fine day for your golf or your family barbecue or even your church picnic, but farmers might be crying out for rain.

Sam: Well, I then guess it's goodbye to the barbie.

Lyn: So, Sam, you are now saying that it *is* all right for God to stop you enjoying yourself, if it's for someone else's good?

Sam: Yeah.

Lyn: Then what about our overall lifestyle? What if our prosperous lifestyle in this country means poverty in another? Should God intervene to make us share our wealth more than we do?

Sam: As long as it's not mine!

Lyn: Very funny. All I'm saying, Sam, is that if we expect God to intervene to prevent one person's suffering, shouldn't we also be willing for him to prevent another person's prosperity? We can't have it both ways.

Sam: Mm, I suppose you are right, Lyn.

Lyn: More than that. Sometimes suffering is necessary to produce success. Like dipping sheep in a foul-smelling pool to kill the bugs that otherwise might kill them.

Sam: Yeah, I get that. Like saying no to our kids because in the long run they'll be better off.

Lyn: Or being forced by a plague to find a cure that will save more people from perishing in a worse pestilence later on.

Sam: Mm, so sometimes we need to take a long-term approach.

Lyn: Yes, the question really is, 'What is God's overall or ultimate purpose?'. The Old Testament patriarch Joseph once said to his brothers, 'You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good'. To bring it down to a personal level, the Bible says, 'We know that in everything God is working for good with those who love him and are called according to his purpose.' When we know there is a higher purpose in what is happening, it is easier to understand why it is happening.

Read: Psalm 73:18-28; Romans 8:28-39.

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?

Day Three

Our heavenly hope

Sam: Lyn, this world is a seriously unjust place!

Lyn: Yes, it is.

Sam: Doesn't that worry you? Good people often suffer while the bad guys get away with it.

Lyn: Yes, that is often the case. But you haven't considered the whole story.

Sam: What do you mean?

Lyn: Well, if this life is all there is, you are right. The world *is* an unjust and unfair place. But this life is also only chapter one of a very long saga. There are more chapters yet to come in which everything will be put right and justice will be done.

Sam: What on earth are you talking about?

Lyn: Not earth--heaven.

Sam: Heaven! Pie in the sky when you die! Who believes in heaven these days? I don't. And I certainly don't believe in hell.

Lyn: So you really don't want justice to be done after all?

Sam: I didn't say that!

Lyn: Well, actually, you did. If you do believe in justice, this life cannot be all there is. There has to be something more, some further time and place where all wrongs are righted and all sorrows wiped away. Heaven gives us hope. There is no more sorrow there—no tears, no pain (Revelation 21:4).

Heavenly hope is not just *nice*—it is *necessary*.

Sam: That's an original idea, Lyn.

Lyn: Well, not really, Sam. It's been around for a while—like a few thousand years!

Sam: All right, all right. But it's original to me.

Lyn: Hm, I guess it would be to a lot of people... Sam, think about the terrible, horrific suffering many people endure. It's truly awful. I don't want to minimise or trivialise that one bit. But in a passage written in a time of vicious persecution, the Bible describes our present day suffering as 'light and momentary' in contrast to the incomparable glory and joy that God has in store for us. One day we will look back on even our worst troubles and it will be just like recalling a scratched knee from a fall when we were children. We howled then but it means nothing now.

Sam: All right. I get that. It's a pretty simple concept.

Lyn: Sam, it's both simple and profound. If God is real, heaven is real. But if heaven is not real, there is no hope. And no one can live without hope. As I said before, heaven is not just nice, it's necessary.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18; Revelation 21:1-27

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?

Day Four
Judgement Day

Sam: Lyn, I've been thinking. Have you been trying to tell me that everyone goes to heaven?

Lyn: I wish. The reality is that there also has to be a day of reckoning for the wicked. Do you really think that Joseph Stalin and a three-year old toddler should both finish up in the same place? That *would* be unfair. And unjust. The Psalmist Asaph discovered this. 'You have set them in slippery places,' he said to God about the wicked, 'and they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors' (Psalm 73:18, 19).

Sam: Mm, I've never thought of it like before.

Lyn: If you believe in justice, Sam, you have to see the big picture. In Western society today, we have this kind of saccharine belief that after death there is some nice place where everyone goes regardless.

Sam: Yes, I've seen that myself. Someone can be a drunk driver who has a serious accident at two o'clock in the morning, but at the funeral, he becomes a really good neighbour and a great family man. Someone else can be a rogue and a villain, but after they die, suddenly they become fine upstanding citizens.

Lyn: Well, that's putting it rather bluntly. But my point is that if there is no reckoning, then there is no justice, and that leaves us in a state of bleakness and despair. Because deep down we all know that there is a difference between good and bad, between wrong and right, and that it must be addressed. Our only hope is that there is a God who is both fair and just

Psalm 73:17-19, Habakkuk 2:6-20

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages?

Day Five

Then I understood

Lyn: At the end of the day, Sam, we don't have all the answers. Only God does. The secret things belong to him, the things that are revealed belong to us. That's what the Bible says (Deuteronomy 29:29). That's why we need to hear from him.

Sam: That's all very well. But how do you do that?

Lyn: Well, Asaph said it was when he went into God's sanctuary—in other words, when he prayed and listened to the Word of God—that he understood. When was the last time you seriously prayed? Not just to ask for something but actually to spend some time with God.

Sam: Mm, well, actually.... We did say grace at Christmas dinner last year.

Lyn: Wow! After that, you and God must be really good mates.

Sam: Okay, okay. Don't be sarcastic. So how do I do it? How do I pray? How do I hear God's voice? I'm really not much good at this sort of thing.

Lyn: Maybe you can take a tip from the prophet Habakkuk. He chose a place where he would not be interrupted and then set himself to see what God would say. And God answered him (Hab 2:1-4). And at the end of his little book, there he is singing a song of praise and thanksgiving to God—even though he still didn't have all the answers.

Maybe you should give it a shot. But God has a reputation for not being in a hurry and you may have to wait a while before you hear anything.

Perhaps you could begin by reading the Bible and then take it from there.

Sam: Fair enough, Lyn. But where do I start? It looks a pretty long book.

Lyn: Seeing we are talking about Habakkuk, why not start there? It's only three short chapters. Then maybe slip over to the gospel of Mark and hear from Jesus himself. Here, let me show you...

When we listen to God's Word, we understand God's will. Or to put it differently, if we want to know what God is doing, we need to listen to what he is saying.

Habbakuk 3:1-19; Philippians 4:6-7

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?

Day Six

The freedom of love

Lyn: Sam, there is another problem to be considered if God just chose to intervene in our affairs regardless. What happens to free will?

Sam: Hang on, Lyn, I wasn't meaning that God can just take over whenever he feels like it.

Lyn: Ok, I know. But even if he did so sometimes. Or even once, our freedom to choose would be diminished.

Sam: Yeah, I suppose so.

Lyn: Also, there would be no place for love. By definition, love involves the freedom to choose. If it doesn't, then it's not love.

Sam: That's true, Lyn. You can't be forced to love. It has to come from the heart.

Lyn: And the will. True love is primarily a decision. Furthermore, love demands someone to love. It's meaningless in isolation.

Sam: Well, yeah. That's pretty obvious.

Lyn: So if we are to keep on loving, we need to sustain our free will. And that means that God cannot just over-rule what we do, even if we sometimes complain that he doesn't.

Sam: (*puzzled, counting points on fingers*). Wait a minute, Lyn. Let me get hold of that. If we keep on loving we are sustained by... what was the next bit? Oh yeah, um, even if God complains... no, God doesn't complain, that's our job. Um, even when God breaks a rule... no, that's our job, too. Oh, what was it you said?

Lyn: You work it out, Sam. Or would you like God to just fix it for you?

Sam: But you just said—

Lyn: Just joking. Look, Jesus told us to love one another. Everyone needs to be loved. But it has to be without coercion. A world without freedom of choice would be a world without love. Love's power lies in our freedom to choose.

Deuteronomy 7:7-9; Romans 5:1-11

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?

Day Seven

Don't just sit there! Do something!

Sam: Hey, Lyn, sometimes, I still feel like asking God, 'Why don't you do something about all the suffering in the world?'

Lyn: Well, why don't you ask him?

Sam: I'm afraid he might ask ME the same question.

Lyn: Ha! Sounds like you're beginning to get the idea. It's easy to speak up and sound virtuous and righteous, but if we don't also do something about it, these are just empty words.

Sam: Well, I know a few people like that.

Lyn: I guess you do. There are plenty of them around.

Sam: I know one chap who is always sounding off about how we need to take more refugees into our country. But he doesn't even invite his friends inside his door for a cup of coffee. let alone welcome strangers to live in his house.

Lyn: Yes, actions do speak louder than words. This is why Jesus said that his followers should live in such a way that they bring honour to our heavenly Father and that people would know that we are his disciples because we love one another.

Sam: I just had a thought. Could it be that another reason God sometimes holds back from intervention is because he is expecting people who believe in him to act.

Lyn: Wow, Sam. I think you just hit it on the head. Somebody once said that we—Christians, that is—are the hands and feet of Jesus. It's up to us to do the work of God's Kingdom. And if we don't do it—

Sam: --nobody does.

Lyn: You got it! And if you think about it, over the years of history since the time of Jesus, most charitable work around the world was done by followers of Jesus. Hospitals, schools, hostels, feeding the poor, defending the weak and helpless. Although Governments and other religious groups have now taken over much of this, the foundations were Christian.

Sam: Lyn, you keep saying things that I know but have never really thought about before.

Lyn: Thanks, Sam. There is such a lot I don't know and so much that I doubt I will ever understand. But I think it is true to say that when God acts in this world it is usually through his people.

Sam: Yep, Lyn. This time you've nailed it.

Matthew 5:13-20, 38-48; John 13:34-35; 1 Peter 2:21.

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?

Day Eight

God has already demonstrated his love

Lyn: You remember the question we started with?

Sam: Sure do. Why doesn't God do something about the world's suffering?

Lyn: Well, actually, he already has.

Sam: What? How do you mean?

Lyn: Well, the Bible says that Jesus suffered for us and actually died for us. And that God chose to accept Christ's sacrifice on our behalf. So he understands what it is to suffer.

Sam: Really? I never thought of God suffering.

Lyn: Well, he did. And that is why he took human form—to share our pain. He understands what it is all about. And more than that, he dealt with the cause of our pain, which is selfishness and sin.

Sam: Yeah, that'd be right. If we were less self-centred the world would be a happier place.

Lyn: The good news is that Jesus carried in his own body all our sins and all our sorrows. He nullified them and destroyed their power.

Sam: So that's what it's all about!

Lyn: Not just the world's sins, Sam, but yours as well.

Sam: Mine?

Lyn: Yep, Yours.

Sam: Are you saying the world's troubles are all my fault?

Lyn: Of course not. But some of them are. Just as I had to do, you need to apologise to God, ask his forgiveness and gratefully accept Christ's sacrifice for you.

Sam: What, right now?

Lyn: Why not? Now's as good a time as any.

Sam: Well, I... I... I guess it is.

Lyn: Let's do it!

Sam: O-kay... So how do I go about it?

Lyn: You can start by just chatting with God. Simply tell him in your own words how you feel.

Sam: My own words? Don't I need a prayer book or something?

Lyn: No—not at all. Just be yourself.

Sam: God, you know we haven't had much to do with each other for a long time, but right now, I hope you are listening, because I just want to say that I've made a bit of a mess of things in my life and I need to sort it all out and put things right. If you can do that, I'm up for it. OK? If Jesus died and rose from the dead for me, I'm willing to give it a go and put my

faith in him. Well, that's about it for now. It's over to you, I guess. But I'm ready for it.

Lyn: And I'm sure God is ready for you, too, Sam.

John 3:16; Romans 5:1-11; Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9.

What next? Which verse or verses really stand out to you from these passages? Why?