

CHAPTER 1

The Big Why

The more I become an “adult,” the more I want to become a child again. I admire a child’s questioning nature. My brother-in-law Jamie asked a lot of questions as a child and so his parents placed him on a strict ten question per day limit. When a child first learns to ask the question *why*, it will take years for him to stop asking. “It is time to go to bed. *Why?* Because I said so. *Why?* Because I’m in charge. *Why?*”

Of course those are all small *why* questions. Eventually we get to *the big why*. Why are we here? Why did God create us? Why were we made? God wove *the big why* question into our DNA and eventually we all get around to asking it.

I will never forget the first hopeless answer I ever got to *the big why* question. I was in college. We were reading some philosopher that got rich and famous for *his* response to *the big why*. He basically said that the human race was the random result of atoms colliding. Why are we here? According to this particular philosopher, we are here because of a molecular accident. This is no doubt the most hopeless answer to *the big why* question I’ve ever heard.

It may surprise you to discover that most people throughout history have given an answer with a similar ring of hopelessness.

If you happened to grow up in the ancient Near East around 1200 BCE, just before the Book of Genesis was written, your world would have been incredibly dark and hopeless. Most people believed that many gods existed and that each god was at war with the others. As a kid you no doubt asked your parents why the gods created you in the first place. There isn't a kid in the world that doesn't get to *the big why* eventually. "We were created because the gods were bored." "We were created because the gods were lonely." "We were created because the gods were lazy and needed free labor." In other words, in the ancient Near East there was no *why*.

It was into this horribly dark and hopeless world that these words from Scripture were first recorded. "In the beginning . . . God created the heavens and the earth . . . And God saw that it was *good* . . . God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1:1, 25, 27).

We don't quite understand how radical and foreign these words would have sounded in their original context. We don't feel the scandal such a claim would have evoked from its first hearers. In 1200 BCE no one had ever conceived that the earth was good, that God was good, or that you and I were created in the image of *a* single God. This concept would have been as foreign to that world as the telephone.

What was and is so scandalous about the Biblical worldview is that we are not only made in God's image but that we were also created to bear God's *likeness* (Gen 1:26). Of course, this will make us wonder what exactly God *is like* in the first place, a question this book will answer in due time. However, our familiarity with sayings like "God is good" or "we are infinitely valuable" sometimes leads to overfamiliarity. And the moment *anything* becomes overfamiliar to us, it loses its transformative power. Such is why I want us to feel the controversy, scandal, and shock the Bible would have no doubt been to its first hearers. "You are made in the image of a good God. You

are infinitely precious and intended to bear the *likeness* of the goodness that only belongs to God.” These words were written to a hopeless world and nothing has ever been the same.

The Bible and “The Big Why”

I increasingly believe that the Bible’s answer to *the big why* has the power to transform our life. It says we were created to reveal, reflect, and *image* a very good God as we grow into God’s own *likeness*.

In contrast to a warring pantheon, the Bible reveals a supra-personal, loving God. The God of the Bible has three distinct personalities on the one hand, and yet is one. I am referring to the doctrine of the Trinity, which says that the God of the universe is a perfect community of love. The Bible contends that it was *this* Triune God, this Perfect Community, that created both our world and us. As Genesis 1:1 tells us, “God created,” which we attribute to the work of the Father. In Genesis 1:2 the *Spirit* of God hovers over the waters, which is the exact same language the gospels use to speak of the Holy Spirit hovering over the water at Jesus’ baptism. Finally, Genesis 1:3 tells us that God creates by speaking His *Word*. Creation is not something that God *thinks* into existence. Rather God *speaks*, and creation is called into existence. Christians believe that this “Word” is expressed fully in the person of Jesus Christ.

We all wrestle with *the big why*. We yearn to know what makes life meaningful, as well as what gives us value and significance. How we answer *the big why* often determines whether our life is a blessing or a nightmare.

This is why spiritual growth happens only as we acknowledge that we were not created because God is bored. We were not created because God is lazy. We are not a molecular accident or a cosmic goof. We exist because at the heart of all reality is a wonderful and dynamic Life Christians call the Trinity.

We exist because this God is generous and kind and good, and because God wanted to create us to be what Swiss theologian Karl Barth called “a parable of His own life.”¹

I fear too many of us have forgotten who we are, or like the pre-Genesis ancient Near Easterners were never told in the first place. Many people tend to oscillate between two extremes when it comes to our self-image. One view says we deserve a place equal to God. A few religions even teach that we are divine. On the opposite side of the pole we find the radically scientific and secular viewpoint where humans are a freakish cosmic accident—the random result of a random “bang.” Christians accept neither viewpoint. We believe that we are the pinnacles of God’s creative work, that we bear the image of the Triune God, and that we are created to share in God’s life as we grow into God’s likeness.

The Shape of God’s Image

Since we exist to be God’s image-bearers and to grow into God’s likeness, it would be good to put some flesh on what it actually means to live into this purpose. The foundation of growing into our God-given purpose is a clear understanding that we have a dignity and a worth that comes to us from God. “Worthiness” is foundational when we speak of our purpose to grow into God’s likeness so that we might “image” God in the world. A belief in our worthiness and goodness and preciousness, apart from what we do or don’t do, is central. Christians have a word for the unshakable worthiness we have before God irrespective of what we do or don’t do. We call it *grace*. Built on the grace-full foundation of our worthiness before God, the Bible suggests that we reflect God most clearly when we participate in an intimate, life-giving relationship with God and each other, and when we engage in creative, meaningful work.

¹ Karl Barth’s actual phrase is “parable of the existence of his Creator.” *Church Dogmatics III.2: The Doctrine of Creation* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 203.

Intimate Relationship

We are created to enjoy an intimate relationship with God and other people. Although we tend to speak of these as separate realities, in truth the two are deeply intertwined. We cannot have an intimate relationship with God and not draw closer to our brothers and sisters. Similarly, we cannot be courageously vulnerable and transparent with other people and not feel a divine tug to draw closer to God.

We were created to converse with God, to delight in God, and to trust in God. The early Church Fathers used the Greek word *parrhesia* to describe the intimacy Adam experienced with God in the Garden of Eden. *Parrhesia* implies a relationship characterized by freedom, boldness, and sincerity. *Parrhesia* is about showing God and others our “secret self.” The Book of Genesis infers that Adam and God took an intimate, nightly walk together in the cool of the day. Adam was naked, a symbol for being fully known and comfortable in the presence of God.

I can’t imagine that Adam was ashamed to walk naked with God. In fact we can only assume that God was naked as well. To be in the nude must have felt like the most natural thing in the world for Adam. Like an innocent child with the Father he admired so much, Adam walked nightly with his God, his friend, and his hero. Basking in the created world, Adam no doubt asked a million different *big why* questions as he continually explored the magnificence and wonder of life and of his place at the center of God’s “very good” created realm.

Adam was exactly what God created him to be. He was wholly whole and fully himself. Adam was a *priest*, for to live was to worship and to worship was to breathe. Life was a natural and glorious exercise in reflecting back to God all of the goodness and love that God so freely poured into him. The word *interpenetration* seems to me the best descriptor of the perfect relationship that God and Adam enjoyed. God lived inside of Adam and Adam lived inside of God.

Intimacy with Others

Human relationships seem much more in our reach of understanding. We intuit at a deep level that to live meaningful lives we must learn to love other people. Thomas Merton said it's impossible to become fully "us" until we learn to truly love another person.²

The Book of Genesis gives us a wonderful picture of Adam's life with God before "the fall." There is no sin, no disobedience, and nothing that damages Adam's relationship with God. Genesis also tells us that everything that God has created thus far is good. "God created the heavens and the earth, and God saw that it was *good*." The light was good, the ocean was good, and the plants were good. The "goodness" of God's created world is the constant refrain of Genesis in chapter one. It was all "good," that is until we get to Genesis 2:18.

For the first time God looks at the man and says, "not good!" Someone once told me God says "not good" because God likes women better. But I think the reason God says "not good" is because Adam is "alone." A better translation of the Hebrew Bible would be that Adam was "disconnected."

Like each and every one of us, God created Adam to connect with other people at a deep, meaningful level. God created Adam for authentic and transparent relationships. There is only one problem. There is no one for Adam to connect with!

The Genesis story then takes a dark and comedic twist. God becomes Adam's wingman. Adam is lonely and God decides to "set him up." God makes a bunch of animals and parades them in front of Adam so he can choose a partner to "connect" with from among them. Adam is all alone in Eden and God brings to him animal after animal—horse, buffalo, cat, lizard, rat, cheetah—and God essentially says, "Adam, these are *for you*."

² Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (Louisville, KY: Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust, 1988).

Take your pick!” But as the story goes, “for the man there was not found a helper as his partner” (Gen 2:20). Adam’s situation remains the same. Adam is still not connected with another person. “*Not good.*”

The Bible then introduces us to Eve. God sends Adam into a deep sleep and forms Eve from Adam’s rib. This act is meant to symbolize their deep interconnectedness as well as their common grounding in God, creation, and each other. Adam awakes and screams *at last!* “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gen 2:23). It is here, for the first time, that we are told that Eden was a nudist colony. “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen 2:25).

I like to imagine Adam’s walk with God after seeing Eve for the first time. Was it difficult for Adam to leave her? Did Adam *really* want to walk with God that night, or did he prefer to stay with Eve? I don’t really know. What I do know is that Adam felt so loved and so blessed by his God, his friend, and his hero. His God was always surprising him and blessing him with amazing new experiences and gifts.

I imagine Adam and God talked about how beautiful Eve was and about how much fun he was having getting to know her. When I began dating my wife Emily, I’m not sure I talked to God about anything else! It’s no coincidence that our first dance as a married couple was to Etta James’ *At Last!*³

As for Eve, she must have felt so safe, loved, and cherished. She didn’t feel used or taken for granted. She knew, in a way that no woman has ever known since, that she was appreciated and admired for who she was. Adam *knew* her because he *saw* her complete, naked, and secret self fully. Life in the nudist colony was good. Eve had a deep and intimate relationship with both Adam and God. That was, after all, why she existed in the first place.

³ Actually, Mack Gordon wrote *At Last* in 1941. Etta James renewed the song’s popularity when she released a version in 1960.

I worked as a hospital chaplain a couple years ago and I had the privilege of being at the bedside of many dying people. I clearly remember two types of people. I met plenty of people who had measured their success by what they achieved. They had accomplished great things but never really connected with God or even their own family. They had a stockpile of wealth and power and social status, but like Adam before he met Eve, they were disconnected. Each one died with bitter regrets, or with bitter complaints, depending on whether they blamed others or themselves for their “lot” in life.

I also remember a second group, which I will call “connectors.” These connectors measured their success by the relationships they formed and nurtured over the course of their lives. They were deeply committed to their family and friends. They had learned well the art of giving and receiving love. Their funerals, I was told, were standing room only. Not one of them regretted having lived their life for their God, their friends, their neighbors, their children, their family, or their church—not a single one.

I had a Bible study leader once that would always say we have a God-shaped hole in our heart that only God can fill. I think he was right. As St. Augustine once said, “our souls are restless until they rest in Thee, O Lord.”⁴ But a second and less obvious truth exists that we far too often ignore. We all have a human-shaped hole that God chooses not to fill.

I do not mean to suggest that we all need to get married or be romantically involved. However, Adam was with God before “the fall” and according to the Bible he was still disconnected. Adam had a human-shaped hole in his heart. No substitute, including God’s Self, could fill that hole.

No substitute can fill our need to connect deeply with other people either. Not money. Not busyness. Not business. Not

⁴ *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, written by Bishop Augustine of Hippo between CE 397 and CE 398.

casual sex. Not casual conversation. Not looks. Not books. Not brains. Not achievement. Not alcohol. Not even our daily private time with God. Adam was in a state of sinless perfection, and yet Genesis tells us that he was “disconnected.” According to God, that’s “not good.”

Creative Work

An intimate, life-giving relationship with God and other people is important but by itself relationship cannot answer *the big why*. Creative, meaningful work also lies at the heart of why we exist.

We hear something radical and shocking in Genesis 2:2: God “finished the work that he had done.” The idea that God works was perhaps more shockingly scandalous than the notion that God loves us, especially when we place the Bible alongside other creation accounts of the day. For example, in the “Enuma Elish” we find the Babylonian creation myth with its views on the dignity of human work.⁵ The Enuma Elish tells the story of a great battle between the gods. In the ancient Near East, the gods were always at war with one another. A tale is told of the bold and daring young Marduk who wins a great battle of the gods. Marduk celebrates by slashing open the belly of one of the defeated gods. As the story goes, out of that dead, defeated god’s belly came the world you and I inhabit.

Marduk is gracious. He invites the other gods to live on the earth and to enjoy its resources. But the gods soon discover that keeping up with the earth is a full-time job! The gods come up with a solution. They create humans to do the work they are too lazy to do.

The Babylonians had an incredibly low view of work. But so did the Greeks. Greek myth tells the story of Pandora’s

⁵ Many believe that the Enuma Elish was composed in the Bronze Age (roughly eighteenth to sixteenth centuries BCE). Some scholars favor an earlier date of 1100 BCE. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enuma_Elish.

Box. According to legend, Zeus gave a woman named Pandora a beautiful box and said, “Under no circumstances are you to open this!” Unable to curb her curiosity, Pandora did what any seven-year-old would do. She opened the box! And in that box Pandora discovered all the evils and sickness of the world—death, decay, disease, Brussels sprouts, and of course *work!* Like the Babylonians before them, the Greeks had an incredibly low view of human work.

One can begin to see how the Bible was and is so scandalous, unique, and different. The Bible says work has dignity because God works. “In the beginning” God plants a garden. Work is not beneath God. Creative, meaningful work is something that God delights in and created us to experience.

Many Greeks taught that if you *had to work*, the only noble profession was to become a philosopher. Philosophers, after all, don’t have to get their hands dirty. In light of all this, it is humbling to consider that Jesus spent thirty years of his life working as a blue-collar carpenter. Jesus had more in common with factory workers than he did with the tenured professor or the priest.

If nothing else, the Bible’s high view of work should make us reconsider our picture of “the good life.” Paradise is not an extended vacation or about acquiring enough money to relax, eat cake, and do nothing. Paradise is about beauty and friendship and God and *work*. Creative and meaningful work is at the heart of *the big why*. Not to get too far ahead of ourselves, but Christians call the meaningful work God has given us to do “mission.” But we will say more about this later.

Of course we need to distinguish between *creative* work and transactional work. Like God we exist to *create*. It is entirely true that the word *create* is only used with respect to God in the Bible. God alone creates *ex nihilo*—“out of nothing.” But the Bible does use words like “shape” and “form” to describe our work with God in creation, which is obviously different. God creates out of

nothing, whereas we form and shape the “stuff” that God creates *ex nihilo*. Like God we exist to bring order out of chaos.

The Bible portrays God’s Spirit hovering over “a formless void” and “the face of the deep” so that the Spirit might bring order out of the mess (Gen 1:2). God then begins to separate things. God separates light from darkness, night from day, and the sky from the ground. God’s “work” is to take that which is chaotic and without form so as to impose a new and wonderful design on it. This is what creative, meaningful work is all about—bringing order out of chaos.

There is a reason we love to make things “from scratch” and delight in making “something out of nothing.” We exist to bring order out of chaos like God. Whether we are a teacher bringing out the potential of our students, or a musician turning a jumbled set of lyrics and notes into a song, or a landscaper turning an overgrown yard into a garden, or an aspiring author taking his thoughts on Christianity and ordering them into a book, we all delight in a job well done. We love, as my prayer book says, tasks that demand our best efforts and accomplishments that satisfy and delight us.

Now at this point we need to up the ante a bit. It is not enough to say that we were created to work. Our vocation to create goes much deeper than this. We were created as vessels through which God could continue *God’s work*. God’s great desire is to rule in and through the humans God created. The Bible records God as saying, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion” (Gen 1:26). We are not only priests but also *kings* with a certain amount of “dominion” over God’s created world.

Of course we must understand our kingly vocation in light of *how God would rule* the natural world. I know this is hard in a world where the ice caps are melting and the ozone layer continues to thin. Dominion is *not* domination, and the Biblical concept of “dominion” can by no means justify humanity’s

abuse of the earth. We recall that the human is placed in the garden to “till” God’s created world (Gen 2:15). The Hebrew word translated “till” literally means *to serve*. God’s “dominion” is tied to service, not exploitation. God created us to serve the world as we take responsibility for engaging in meaningful and creative work.

We were created to *work* with God and for God as representatives on earth. There is a reason we all hunger to “do something that makes a difference.” Engaging in creative, difference-making work is also at the heart of Christianity’s answer to *the big why*.

Logos

We have not yet captured the fullness of the Bible’s answer to *the big why*. For a fuller answer we turn to the opening words from the Gospel According to John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. (Jn 1:1–3)

The opening words of this gospel are a clear echo of Genesis 1:1. In the beginning was the “logos,” a Greek term translated “Word.” When John wrote his account of Jesus’ life, the nature of the logos was at the heart of *the big why* debate going on at the time.

Our English word *logic* derives from the Greek word logos. The ancient debate at the time St. John’s gospel was penned centered on the logos, or the *logic behind our existence*. To discuss the nature of the logos *is* to ask *the big why*. What is the logic, or rationale, behind our existence? This was the question everyone was asking when St. John wrote his gospel.

The answers actually haven't changed much in two thousand years. One ancient group, the Epicureans, denied that any logos existed. Many of them suggested that we imbibe as much pleasure as possible before we die. This perspective is still very much alive in our world. One musician captures the Epicurean worldview well when he sings, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die."⁶ Another group, the Stoics, thought about the logos primarily in terms of their moral behavior and the attainment of virtue. They thought *the big why* was about reigning in their cravings and living a virtuous life.

Most accounts of the logos throughout history, and even today, fall into one of these two camps. There is either no meaning and we should all party, or else meaning is something *we attain* by following the Law and by being a really good person. We can run away from home and spend our money on our pleasures, or else we can stay home and follow every rule to the tee (see Lk 15:11–32). Such is the way of the Epicurean and Stoic, whether they are ancients or moderns.

The Christian way is much different. We believe that the logos, or the logic behind our existence, is a person to know, love, embrace, hug, eat with, and experience. We believe Jesus Christ is the Logic behind our lives. Only in Him can we find the intimacy and meaning we were created for. That is why Christianity isn't a philosophy or a set of principles, but a power. St. Paul calls it the "power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith" (Rom 1:16).

All religions answer *the big why* in one way or another. For Muslims it is the Koran. For Buddhists it is the eightfold path. For secular religion it is pleasure. For Christians it is Jesus.

I am not yet trying to persuade you that Jesus Christ is the logos, though I certainly believe that He is in fact the answer to *the big why*. I sincerely hope the pages that follow give a clear account for what rooting our lives in this truth looks like in

⁶ The Dave Matthews Band is the artist. "Tripping Billies" is the song from the album *Crash* (RCA Records, 1996). I believe he is alluding to 1 Corinthians 15:32.

practical terms. But I do wish to persuade you to take a hard look at your life and to consider what you think the logos of your life is.

I believe that it is impossible to live for nothing. I also believe that courage begins when we tell the truth about what we are living for. Have you pondered lately the logic behind *your* existence? Did you randomly happen or were you created? And if you were created, who or what were you created *for*?

These are not easy questions, but I believe they are important ones. Wrestling with *the big why* isn't easy. But it is ultimately far easier than not wrestling with *the question* of what makes life meaningful. I think back to that first group of people I visited in the final hours of their life. Not one of them wrestled with *the big why* and they all died with bitter regrets.

Wrestling with *the big why* takes courage. I define courage as a continual willingness to wrestle with the "logic" behind our existence coupled with an unswerving commitment to align our lives with that which we discover. If you saw someone using twenty-dollar bills as toilet paper, you would gasp. Money has a different logos than *that*. The same would hold true if you saw someone using a flat-screen TV for target practice. We know money's logos. We know a TV's logos. The real question is, *do we know our own?*

Identity

At the heart of *the big why* is the question of identity—*who am I?* I had a seminary professor who once said that the question of identity is the question of difference. Whatever we think gives our lives meaning matters greatly. How we finish the sentence "I am ____" sets the course of our life.

The book of Genesis defines our identity in a way that the rest of the Bible will echo, reiterate, and expand upon. We

are the beloved of God. Each person was created to be both God's priest and God's king. We are all endowed with worth and dignity because we have an unshakable *identity* as God's beloved children. Again, Christians call this *grace*. Our identity is unshakable precisely because it comes as a one-way gift. We may grow into the gift and build our life around the gift, *or not*. But grace is one-way love. We are a "somebody" simply because God has spoken our creation and salvation into existence. God creates it *ex nihilo*.

The implication here is that we are not what we do. We are not how we look. We are not our I.Q. We are not our net worth. We are not our mistakes. We are not our successes. We are people whom God created for a deep and intimate relationship with God's Self and each other. We are people who were created to engage in creative and meaningful work, i.e., people with a "mission" if you prefer such language. The Bible does not merely tell us *why* we are here. The Bible also tells us *who we are*. It speaks to us of a secure and firm and grace-full identity rooted in God.

We are the cherished beloved of God and the bearers of God's image. We are priests. We are kings. We are God's beloved.

The "Real World"

I suspect this chapter has made you present to some mixed feelings. After all, the wonderful, carefree nudist colony that Genesis describes is not the world we inhabit. Perhaps it described reality a long, long time ago in a garden far away. But the "real world" is much different.

Author Tom Wright says that we find ourselves haunted by echoes of a Voice that speaks to us about our purpose.⁷ I think

⁷ See Wright's *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). He speaks about this Voice in Part I, entitled "Echoes of a Voice."

Wright's right. We know in our bones that God created us to live in an intimate relationship with God and each other and to engage in creative, meaningful work. If the Bible doesn't convince us of this fact, our dreams probably will.

Yet, we cannot escape our experience of the "real world." We no longer live in a garden but in a war zone somewhere east of Eden. Ours is the world of death, conflict, pride, fear, and addiction. But none of this changes the truth that God created each person in God's own image and desires that we reflect God's likeness. God created each of us for intimate relationships and creative, meaningful work—a vocation that finds its deepest fulfillment in God's Son Jesus Christ.

Has God's image been blurred? Has our vocation been distorted? Do we live at the mercy of forces much stronger than us? Yes. *This too we know in our bones.* But no evil in the world will ever rob us of the great truth that we are all "very good."

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and saw that it was *good*. In the beginning was the Logic for Existence and the logos was with God and the logos was God. God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them."

Do you feel the controversy and the scandal—the power to heal and transform the human condition? These words were written to a hopeless world desperate to know *the big why* and nothing has ever been the same.

Discussion Questions

1. When do you first recall asking a “big” question about God or about the meaning of life? What was the question, who did you ask, and how satisfied were you with their answer?
2. Do you think there is a difference between being made in God’s “image” and growing into God’s “likeness”? If so, what do you imagine God is “like”?
3. If Adam and Eve’s nakedness is metaphorical language, what does “nakedness” as an ideal spiritual condition represent?
4. Do you believe that intimacy with God will always lead to greater intimacy with others, and vice versa?
5. Like God we were created for meaningful work that brings order out of chaos. Is meaningful work necessarily the same thing as “the job we get paid to do”? What are some examples of “meaningful work” that we don’t get paid to do?
6. I define the word *logos* as meaning the “logic for our existence.” What does it mean to say that Jesus is the *logos*?
7. There is a difference between the world we desperately want to live in and the one we currently inhabit. How do you reconcile that in your mind? What has gone wrong? How might the world be put right?