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THE QUESTIONS GOD ASKS,

CURIOUS

WE ASK, AND WE WISH

FAITH

SOMEONE WOULD ASK US

LORE FERGUSON WILBERT

FOREWORD BY SETH HAINES

A CURIOUS FAITH

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3

Who Told You That?

Genesis 3

Why are they sad
and glad and bad?
I do not know.
Go ask your dad.

—Dr. Seuss, *One Fish, Two Fish,
Red Fish, Blue Fish*

The next question God asks Adam and Eve *also* isn't "Who are you?" It is "Who told you that you were naked?" (Gen. 3:11). This seems like it's the sort of question most of us wouldn't need to be asked, but in a paradise like this one, the difference between simply *being* naked and *knowing* you are naked is notable.

I have struggled with anxiety for my entire life. When I was little, it was called *shy*, and when I grew up, it was called nicer words like *introversion* or *homebody*. But not until I was in my late twenties did anyone say, "Do you think you struggle with

anxiety?” They didn’t say, “Do you think you’re anxious?” or “Are you being anxious?” They asked, in so many words, might this persistent struggle I have also have a name, and could its name be *anxiety*?

It did and it was. And once I gave it a name, I was able to begin finding help for it.

Naming what we wrestle with or feel given over to can be one of the most difficult tasks of our lives. Sometimes it’s challenging because we really don’t know that there is a technical term for the problem. At other times, it’s challenging because we’re afraid of being labeled or put in a box or medicated or marginalized or disbelieved. We would rather the monster be invisible, behind a door or under our bed, nameless and formless, than give a name to the thing that threatens to eat us alive.

We think that by naming a thing we are giving it more power, but the truth is that by naming it, we become empowered. When we name the monster depression or anxiety, abuse or fear, sadness or grief, invisibility or anger, we begin to see the shape of the thing. We begin to see what feeds that particular monster and what starves it too.

Naming is power, but it can also lessen one’s power. Giving something a name means that we have compartmentalized it, given it boundaries, told the truth about who or what it is. I find it interesting that God doesn’t miss a beat over the fact that Adam and Eve have learned this new word *naked*. He is more interested in *who told them* they were naked, not because being naked is wrong but because it is important for them to know that a great enemy is afoot and that naming him will weaken him. Naming him will give shape to the monster in a way that had slipped past—or slithered past—Adam and Eve. They didn’t recognize the serpent as evil because they didn’t have a construct for evil. God is trying to show them that this shame they have over their nakedness has a source. He wants

them to see that *they* are not the source of that shame, and neither is he. The enemy is someone else.

Who told you that you were ugly?

Who told you that you were stupid?

Who told you that you were too much?

Who told you that you were too little?

Who told you that you didn't have what it takes?

Who told you that you did?

Who told you that people are scary?

Who told you that people are unimportant?

Who told you *which* people are unimportant?

Who told you that you were *more* important?

Who told you that you're a quitter?

Who told you that God doesn't like quitters?

Who told you that anxiety wants to eat you alive?

Who told you?

Who told you?

The voices we listen to in our lives form us in the same way that the place we come from and now inhabit forms us. And God cares about those voices, especially if they're saying something about us or him that isn't true or isn't important or isn't the most important. He cares about us naming things as they are, telling the truth about what they are. But he cares even more that we know the enemy is a liar and a thief and a killer, that he will be destroyed, and that death will be too.

Who told you all those things? The most important thing is not that you're naked and you know it now or you're anxious and you know it now or you're fearful and you know it now. The most important thing is that you know who the real enemy is (not you, not God, not the woman he gave—as Adam accused) and that you also know that nakedness or anxiety or fear or shyness or anger or insecurity isn't the real enemy here. These

may be true about us, but they are also what God wants to cover and heal and make whole. Before Adam and Eve left the garden, God covered their nakedness with the pelts of animals. He made a blood sacrifice to cover the effect of the enemy's sin on God's people. He did it again for all people, for all time, in the second Adam—Christ.

Your anger, my anxiety, your fear, my shyness, your lust, my grief, your pride, my shame—these effects of the enemy on all humans have all been named by God and covered by God. He's not ashamed to call us his own, laden as we are with these lived and difficult realities. Instead, he makes a cloak big enough for all humanity, the shadow of his wings, the arms of Christ spread wide on the cross. He names it for us and then covers it.

Who told you the gospel wasn't big enough to draw you in with your sin and suffering and brokenness and pain and fear? Who told you God's love for you wasn't enough?

4

What Have You Done?

Genesis 3

To be or not to be is not the question, the vital question is how to be and how not to be.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*

I've just arrived home from running an errand, and my errant pup, with a penchant for creamy yellow Irish butter, won't look me in the eye. Sure enough, a chair has been pulled out from the table and the butter bowl has an indent in the shape of one Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier's tongue. I don't know if it makes a hill of beans difference, but as soon as I pick up the butter bowl and look at her, she dips her head and lies down, penitent. Seeing her indiscretion, right there in my hands, is enough to warrant canine repentance.

I've always wondered why God asks Adam and Eve, "What have you done?" (Gen. 3:13, adapted) when, omniscience aside, it's clear exactly what they've done. It seems like a question intended to shame our first parents, similar to my intention

in holding that butter bowl up to my dog to shame her. I want her to see it and know it and never do it again. (Spoiler alert: she will.) But God is not a God of shame, so why the question?

Just as we need to give a name to our nakedness or to other struggles and realities we carry, we need to give a name to our sin.

I've been having conversations with a friend over sin. We have differences of opinion on a lot of things, and I've been trying to understand the root of these disagreements. Recently I came to this realization: our disagreements are rooted in sin.

To be clear, I don't mean one of us is in sin and the other is not. I mean that the way we *view* sin is at the root of our disagreement. She believes the most important posture toward sin is the naming of it and that all future action is predicated on having named it. And I believe the most important posture toward sin is that God wants to heal whatever it is in us that's causing us to sin in the first place. Neither of us denies sin, but we disagree on the ways brokenness in the world affects the choices we make regarding whom to vote for, where to go to church, how to practice our faith in the public square, what the nuclear family looks like. Our disagreements are based on this one difference of opinion.

Here's an example: someone really wants a particular job, and it has become an idol for him. My friend believes the idolatry is the main problem and that until he names that idolatry and submits to discipline for that idolatry, he'll be living in sin. I believe that unless we can set the job aside and get to the heart of this person's desires and their perspective on God and his goodness, the idolatry will just emerge in another place in another way. It will be like playing whack-a-mole with the particular strain of sin.

When God asks Adam and Eve, "What have you done?" I squirm a little bit because it seems like the aim of the question is to shame and not to heal. But my friend is right, we cannot repent for our sin unless we name it. We cannot repent for what we've done unless we know *what we've done*.

Much of Western Christianity is uncomfortable with this idea because we prefer to pretend we have it all together, and we tend to shame people who confess their sin implicitly with our actions, even if not explicitly with our words. We marginalize those in the throes of the mess of both sin and its consequences: divorcing spouses, angry fathers, single mothers, unmarried couples engaging in premarital sex, rebellious children, or even legalistic Christians with whom we disagree. We push them off to the side, shun them, unfollow them on social media, don't go to their weddings, stop supporting their businesses, don't want to keep company with them, and like to make it clear that *we* are not like *them*.

Naming our sin carries with it a risk that we will be treated as if we are unclean because that is often how we treat others who name their sin.

But the truth is that until we name it and receive the covering God supplies through the work of Jesus on the cross, *we are unclean*.

I used to go to a church that had a common saying, “The heart of the problem is a problem of the heart.” It reminded me that behavior modification—simply acting differently—wasn't the aim of our life in Christ. Christ has strong words for those he calls “whitewashed tombs” (Matt. 23:27), painted houses of death, because they were evidence of having the right presentation but the wrong motives. The heart of the problem for Adam and Eve, and for you and me, is that we are sinners in need of a Savior. And if the bad news is that we are all unclean, the good news is that there is one gospel to cleanse us from *all* unrighteousness. But before we can get to the heart of the problem, we have to name the problem of the heart.

The problem of the heart is not that Adam and Eve ate the fruit, or that you slept with your boyfriend, or you got drunk, or you yelled at your wife, or you disobeyed your mom, or you idolize children or marriage, or you snapped at your kids. The

problem of our hearts is a universal one: we have chosen something above God. Romans 1:25 says we worshiped the creation over the Creator. Our great and cosmic and inclusive sin is that we chose our own way over our Father's way.

“What have you done?”

That's what you've done.

That's what I've done.

That's what she and he and they and everyone has done.

We choose the wrong things. And we keep on choosing the wrong things. We are compulsive in our choosing of the wrong things. We choose to nitpick an argument instead of letting love cover a multitude of sins. We choose to ignore the suffering of others because of how it will inconvenience us. We choose to marginalize those who are different instead of drawing them close and trying to understand them. On and on it goes. Our love is not insufficient but rather disordered. It is not that we love too little but rather, as C. S. Lewis wrote, that we love the wrong things too much.¹

Saint Augustine wrote of a too-little love and how it shapes who or what we think a person is in his *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*: “For when we ask whether somebody is a good person, we are not asking what he believes or hopes for, but what he loves.”² God is less concerned with our goodness or badness (he knows exactly who and what we are more precisely than we ever will). God did not want Adam and Eve to merely acknowledge the fruit they ate or the specificity of their sin; he wanted them to acknowledge that they chose their own way over his way. They chose to obey their own impulses rather than to obey God. They chose to love the wrong things.

When God asks you the question “What have you done?” he is not asking for the specifics of your sin. He wants to know whether *you know* how deeply and widely your sin has separated you from him. It's not the end of the story. Far from it! It's the beginning of the story of being known by God and knowing him.