



# Encounters

## Week 1: the Questioner

If you could have dinner with any 3 people, dead or alive, who would they be and why?

During that dinner, if you could ask them 3 questions, what would they be?

What do you think is the purpose of life?

What do you think happens to us when we die?

❖ Questions are essential to life. All day we are asking questions, whether internally in our head or verbally to others. If we are honest, though, questions are often a scary part of our life. The reality of our questions reveals that we are in need. Questions show other people that we are missing something. We do not have knowledge or understanding in some way, and this can be a humbling reality depending on the question. But look again. Questions are telling us something else. Our questions (frequently) show who we really are, what we really think, and what's really going on underneath the surface of our day-to-day lives. Are you finding yourself asking questions about life? Is it okay to question life, existence, purpose, morality, and the rest of life's biggest questions? Absolutely! In fact, if you are not asking those questions, then you must ask yourself if you are really living. But are other people asking such questions? Definitely! You're not alone. Though everyone around you may seem like they have it all together, underneath their calm exterior is often a storm of questions. Dr. Keller, a New York City pastor, says this,

"All those young, ambitious, and brilliant people wanted to *look* like they didn't care too much about answering the foundational questions or that they had found them in whatever they were furiously pursuing. But underneath, they had the same need we all have, and that none of us can escape. They had to look for answers."

If you are going to be an individual who leads and has a positive influence on society, you must be asking questions. But is that enough? Is it enough to just be curious? No. You need to seek the true answers to the honest questions underneath the surface. Asking deep, honest questions is good. Seeking the answers to those questions is better.

But why? Does it even matter? Is it really worth it to get beneath the surface and seek answers to the bigger questions of life? Absolutely! How we answer life's biggest questions determines the course of our life. Where you live, what kind of family you have, what job you take, what major you choose, what you get involved in, what hobbies you take up, and how you spend your money, time, and resources are all determined by how you answer the questions life is laying before you. So where do we go for the answers? Is there anywhere we can look, anyone we can trust? And here we come to our first encounter.

Looking through the accounts of Jesus' life, it is apparent there was one thing he did not shy away from: questions. Jesus was a master at perceiving and answering questions. He was astonishingly insightful and reasonable. He could see behind and underneath the surface of questions to get right at the heart of the issue, which was often an issue of the heart. He constantly amazed, and often frustrated, people by the authority and clarity in his responses. His ability to handle questions drew many to come and inquire of him about life, while at the same time his perception could cut through the trick questions of the religious elite. So if there is anyone to bring our honest questions to and seek true answers, there is no one more qualified, inviting, and surprising than Jesus. He welcomed and satisfied the curiosity of the honest.

Now imagine for a brief moment you could sit down with this Jesus of Nazareth and ask Him your biggest questions about life. Do you think you would know what He would say? We all come into life's questions with presuppositions, biases, experiences, teachings, and opinions. We have all been greatly influenced by family, friends, institutions like school or church, culture, and all our day-to-day perceptions. If we are going to find the true answers to our honest questions, it will require us to take a step back, re-approach these sensitive areas of life, and run the risk of being surprised by what Jesus would say. You may just find Him to be more than you ever imagined.

## Snapshot of the Book of John

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." (John 1:43-51 ESV)

- What made Nathanael skeptical of Jesus? Why do you think that is?
- Why was Nathanael surprised that Jesus knew him? What does that reveal about what he believed about Jesus?
- What do you think changed Nathanael's perception of Jesus, and henceforth his relationship with Jesus?
- Who do you think Jesus is? Why?
- What are your biggest questions or skepticisms concerning faith and spirituality?

## Dr. Tim Keller's Commentary on the Passage Above

*When my wife, Kathy, and I moved to Manhattan more than twenty years ago, we wanted to start a new church. We were told that New York City was filled with the young, the ambitious, and the brilliant, and that if you started a church in Manhattan, nobody would come because they all think they know better. They look down on organized religion, we were told, and especially Christianity...They rolled their eyes at it. So nobody's going to come. But curiously that did not happen; today, Redeemer has more than five thousand people who regularly attend Sunday service. It's a thriving community.*

*The reason for all this is the same reason Nathanael changed. Underneath the loud, public assertions of skepticism there was a lot of covert spiritual searching going on. All those young, ambitious, and brilliant people wanted to look like they didn't care too much about answering the foundational questions or that they had found them in whatever they were furiously pursuing. But underneath, they had the same need we all have, and that none of us can escape. And many found them in Christianity.*

*In the same way, despite all his bluster, notice that Nathanael nonetheless went with Philip to meet Jesus. Why did he do it? Like many young Jews in his generation, Nathanael was struggling with the fact that the Jews were under the boot of Rome, and they had no idea what God was doing. They were having a collective racial identity crisis. Should they be looking for a messiah? What was their future? Were they still God's people or not? Had God rejected them? Evidently he wasn't satisfied with the answers to these questions he got from others. He must not have been very happy with his own understanding of things and, perhaps, with his own spiritual condition. So he thought, "Maybe I should look at Nazareth, as unbelievable as that sounds."*

*Students today wrestle with different forms of the big questions in life, but many of them are also unsatisfied with the answers they have gotten in the most respected schools and books and may, like Nathanael, quietly begin to investigate Jesus...*

*Did you notice the last thing Jesus says to Nathanael? He says, "You believe because of that? I tell you the truth, you shall see angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man." See, when you first come to Jesus you think, I'm probably not going to get answers to the big questions, but maybe he'll help me be a better person; maybe he'll deal with my loneliness or some other problem. You always come to Jesus hedging your bets, staying guarded as to whether you'll get your needs met.*

*But when you actually find him, he'll always be far more than you ever imagined him to be...*