

# A THANKSGIVING QUESTION WE NEED TO KNOW HOW TO ANSWER

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Let me ask you a Thanksgiving question: ***“In a world filled with evil, suffering, pain and death why should we be thankful to God?”*** If someone asked you that question, how would you respond as a Christian? Well, we’d typically start by explaining the ***Fall of Man*** where Adam and Eve chose to sin against God by disobeying Him. And because of their choice to rebel against God, evil entered into the world, and with it came suffering and death in the form of all kinds of diseases, natural disasters and man-made evils like wars, oppression and injustice. And that’s usually where many Christians would end their explanation. But, the inquisitive unbeliever might press you for more in the way of an answer—and rightly so. They might ask: ***“Yes, but why did God allow such a thing to happen?”*** And they may even follow up that question with a comment such as: ***“You claim that God knows all things. You say that God sees into the future and has foreknowledge of all things? If God could see all of this coming, then why did He make Adam and Eve as He did?”*** So here’s the point (invalid as it is) that they are trying to make: If God knew, as He surely did know, that Adam and Eve would disobey Him and, that as a consequence all this, evil and suffering would come into the world, why didn’t God do something about this? In other words, why didn’t God create things ***differently*** so that the inhabitants of the world wouldn’t have had to experience and suffer evil and suffering? Wouldn’t that have been the best thing to do? Wouldn’t that have been the ***best of all possible worlds?*** That, in a nutshell, is what an unbeliever would be trying to argue.

In other words, God could have ***programmed Adam and Eve to be obedient***. He could have made them a little more like ***loving and obedient robots***. So when Satan came slithering around in the form of that snake and tried to get them to eat of that forbidden fruit—Well, Adam and Eve, had they been wired a bit differently, could have automatically gone into a default mode of obedience. And without even thinking about it, they could have simply told Satan to take a hike. If God had just made them so they’d never have been able to make any bad choices, then they would have always made the ***right choices*** and always ***loved God***. Wouldn’t that have been a much better world—one in which no chance existed for Man to disobey God and let all the evil, suffering and death come rolling in? Wouldn’t that be a **LOVELY** world? . . . Actually no, it wouldn’t be.

Why? Because it would produce a world devoid of the most precious commodity, as scarce as it may be, that dares to exist in this evil world of sin. ***It would be a world in which love could not possibly***

**exist.** And I can assure you of this: A world without love is **not** the best of all possible worlds. Rather, it would be the **worst of all possible worlds**—far worse than the one in which we live today, despite all its evil and suffering. You see, it is a contradiction in terms to say that God could have created us to be **“loving and obedient robots.”** It is logically impossible to say that anyone could be programmed to make the right choices. Why?—because a robot, by definition, has no **free will and, thus, the making of “choices” would be an impossibility.** Whether they are good or bad choices, they require the exercise of **free will.** And a robot has no free will for the simple reason that it is not programmed to make **voluntary choices.** Take away free will, take away voluntary choices, and love cannot exist because love is the product of your personal voluntary decisions—the **choices** that you make. At its very core, love is dependent on the free will of the person empowered to make the choice to love. If love and devotion are to exist in any relationship, they must be **freely and voluntarily given** without any coercion or predetermined **“programming.”**

In fact, it could be argued that there would have been no reason for God to have created the world in the first place, **but for love.** You see, the Bible clearly tells us that **God is love.**<sup>1</sup> And, God created the world to share His love with men and women—the ultimate products of His Creation. He wants to share His love with humanity and then have the objects of His love return their love to Him—i.e., to have a loving relationship with Him. But, you can’t share love with a robot because a robot, having no free will, cannot choose to love you back. Now, that same questioning unbeliever might ask, **“So are you telling me that God took a risk and decided to create Man under the mere hope that when Satan came around Adam would make the right free will choice to love and obey God, and refuse to eat that apple?” “What a terrible risk that was!”** they might cry out. But if they happened to complain in that way, then they would only be revealing their misguided view of God’s love. You see when God decided to make this world and created Man, He really wasn’t taking any risk at all. To take a risk means that you don’t know the potential outcome with any certainty. But, when God created this world and gave humanity free will to exercise in deciding whether or not to love and obey Him, God wasn’t taking any risk at all. Now how can that be? Well, because He could foresee the outcome of Adam’s and Eve’s temptation in advance. He knew exactly how they would exercise their free will against His commands. And yet God decided to make men and women with the capacity to freely choose to follow Him or not. Now why would God do something like that? Well, God decided to create humans even though He knew they’d sin against Him for a very good reason. He did it in order to **give love a chance.** He did it so that you might have the opportunity to experience His amazing love.

Now that same unknowing-unbeliever peppering you with all those questions might once again cry out, ***“Are you kidding me? God did this—He gave Man free will—knowing all the time that evil, suffering, pain and death would come roaring into the world? What kind of loving God does that?”*** And the answer is clear—One that loves you so much that He would rather die than deny you the chance of having the most wonderful thing in this world—***a truly loving relationship with Him!*** Think about that. Do you know what that means? It means that God was fully aware, before deciding to even create Man with free will, that one day He would have to send His Son to die as a sacrifice for all our poor choices, all our ***free will*** sinful decisions made by you and me. Can you imagine that? God wants to have a loving relationship with you so much that He sent His Son to be born in an animal trough to a poor peasant girl, to grow up in a back-water town like Nazareth, to then leave home and walk hundreds of miles to tell an unloving world of His Father’s great love, and then to end that walk by going up a Hill called Calvary and die on a cross.

As we approach Thanksgiving, we need to be thankful for so many blessings from God, but we need to be especially thankful for God’s great love for us. It is a love so great that Jesus Christ came down from Heaven to a grimy and sinful world to die for humanity’s sin. And that’s the thing. We so often tend to look at this as ***“humanity’s sin”*** rather than admitting the fact that Jesus died for us on an ***individual basis***. We are all—each and every one of us—***personally*** responsible for His death on the Cross. And I suppose we psychologically suppress that reality to deflect any ***personal guilt*** for the crucifixion of God’s Son by thinking of Him dying for the masses of humanity instead of for you or me, on an individual basis.

But, our talkative questioner might not like me pointing blame in his or her direction. Our inquisitive friend might well ask that same question that many people might ask: ***“How can Jesus’ death be blamed on me when experts say that 108 billion people have lived and died since Man’s creation?<sup>2</sup> Everyone is a sinner so my personal sin is diluted by the ocean of sin in this world. My guilt is minimal at most, so don’t blame me!”*** Oh, but you are to blame—you are ***personally*** to blame. Jesus taught a twin set of parables that point to this. [In parable No. 1, Jesus said:] <sup>4</sup> ***“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it?<sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders<sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’<sup>7</sup> I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”<sup>8</sup>*** [Then moving on to parable No. 2, Jesus further explained:] ***“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does***

she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Luke 15:4-10 (NIV)

Two points come out of these parables. First, it doesn't matter how many saved people or unsaved people there are in the world, Jesus seeks out each one of us on a **person by person basis**. Why?—because each one of us are, or have been at one time or another, that **Lost Sheep** or **Lost Coin**. And so, these parables show us that Jesus came to save the world one person at a time—on an individual, personal basis because each one of us has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, Jesus was willing to die on the Cross for **you alone** due to one motivating factor. It was the same factor that motivated God to create the world in the first place. That motivating factor is **His unfathomable love**. It is a love far beyond our understanding. <sup>8</sup> “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. Isaiah 55:8 (NIV) His thoughts are so very different from our thoughts because God's thoughts emanate from the holiest of love. But, our thoughts are tainted by hate, anger, greed, worry, doubt—and a thousand other things that are so foreign to God's love. And so that causes the Psalmist to ask a good question: “What are human beings, that you think of them; mere mortals, that you care for them?” Psalm 8:4 (TEV) Again, the answer is **“love”—God's love**. What is the quality of this love? The answer is it's the greatest love of all. Jesus described this kind of love best when He said: <sup>13</sup> “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” [Then Jesus goes on to explain who His friends are—and He adds:] <sup>14</sup> “You are my friends if you do what I command.” John 15:13-14 (NIV) If we have God's love in our hearts, then we don't need to be programmed robots to obey God's commands. Rather, obedience becomes a by-product of our love for Him.

And yet, the ugly truth remains: Each one of us is **personally to blame** for Jesus' sacrificial death just as much as if we had spit upon Him as He carried the Cross—just as much as if we had cracked the whip that tore into His flesh—or if we were the one who raked that thorny crown across His brow, or nailed His limbs to the Cross, or thrust the spear into His side. . . Is this too much for us to bear if we look at it in those terms? Perhaps it is. And yet, while we need to understand our responsibility for His sacrifice, the Good News is that Jesus does not want for us to walk through life crushed by the weight of all that guilt. In His mercy and grace, Jesus wants to lift you up with the power of His love. Jesus says: <sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup> Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup> For my

yoke is easy and my burden is light.” Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV) Jesus died on the Cross to save us of our sins. And to accept that wonderful act of love on His part, we are called, not to continue hallowing in the muck of our past, but to step out of the darkness and into the wonderful light of His love. [For Jesus said:] “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” John 8:12 (KJV) No longer are we to suffer under the debt of our sin, because Jesus paid our debt on the Cross and made us debt-free.<sup>4</sup> Again, there is no greater love than that. How then, can we not help but to love Him in return?

So back to the question that we started with this morning: In a world of suffering and evil, why should we be thankful to God? Well, it shouldn’t surprise you—it all really comes down to love. The Apostle John puts it very well: <sup>9</sup> “God showed how much He loved us by sending His one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through Him.”<sup>10</sup> This is **real love**—not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins. 1 John 4:9-10 (NLT2) And when you accept Jesus Christ into your heart, you will be given, in the words of Paul, “a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.”<sup>5</sup>  
<sup>17</sup> Then Christ will make his home in your hearts as you trust in Him. Your roots will grow down into God’s love and keep you strong.<sup>18</sup> And may you have the power to understand, as all God’s people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep His love is.<sup>19</sup> May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.” Ephesians 3:17-19 (NLT2) And when you know God’s love fully like that, then all the evil and suffering in the world will never be able to suppress your cries of thanksgiving to Him. For it is into our world of evil and suffering that Jesus stepped for no other reason than to save you and me.

And the very best news of all is this: One day He is coming again. And this Old Creation with its pain and death will become a New Creation. And, <sup>3</sup> “God Himself will be with [us].”<sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things [will be] gone forever.<sup>5</sup> And the one sitting on the throne [Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, will say:] “Look, I am making everything new!” Revelation 21:3-5 (NLT2) There’s only one possible response to that, and it comes from the Psalmist who gladly proclaims: “Give thanks to the God of heaven. **His love endures forever.**” Psalm 136:26 (NIV)

Let us pray.

Forest Hill Baptist Church  
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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:8 (NLT2) But anyone who does not love does not know God, for ***GOD IS LOVE***.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Population Reference Bureau: “Modern” *Homo sapiens* (that is, people who were roughly like we are now) first walked the Earth about 50,000 years ago. Since then, more than 108 billion members of our species have ever been born . . . Given the current global population of about 7.5 billion (based on our most recent estimate as of mid-2017), that means those of us currently alive represent about 7 percent of the total number of humans who have ever lived.” “How Many People Have Ever Living on Earth,” <https://www.prb.org/>, (03-09-2018).

<sup>3</sup> Romans 3:23 (NIV) For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

<sup>4</sup> John 8:36 (NIV) So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

<sup>5</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:5 (NLT2) May the Lord lead your hearts into a full understanding and expression of the love of God and the patient endurance that comes from Christ.