

(5) ... by obeying God's laws

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[0:00] Great Bruce, thanks very much for your welcome and good afternoon everyone. It's great to be here with you as we think about this question, why are we here, what's life all about?

Now as you'll know, if you've been to a forum before, this afternoon is an opportunity to hear what the Bible has to say about this question and then have a chance to discuss the question on your tables.

Do make use of the handout, you shall have a handout looking like this on your tables. That outlines roughly where we're going and gives you some questions to get discussion going after each slot from me.

Now it's worth saying right up front that this is a question that matters for a number of reasons. It's not simply a question for the pub after one drink too many.

It's a question that takes us right to the heart of what it means to be human. And whether we realise it or not, it's a question that all of us have an answer to.

[1:01] Now that might be something of a surprise. You hear that and you might be thinking to yourself, I've not ever really thought about why we're here. That's far too abstract and philosophical.

I just get on with life. But actually, how we answer this question has implications in all sorts of ways. For example, how we treat other people.

How we respond to ethical questions. How we respond personally to the joys and trials that we will go through. At the most basic level, what we will expect life to be like day by day depends on what we think it means to be human.

Now before we get to the Bible's perspective, I want to outline in this first point two common views on this question about why we're here and what it means to be human. And there are two isms.

And they're on your handouts on the first page under point one. Humanism and naturalism.

Humanism. So the first ism that I want to draw your attention to is humanism.

[2:07] Which essentially has an inflated view of humanity. Seeing man as the measure of all things. Seeing humankind as improving.

And getting better in all sorts of ways year by year. So according to this view, according to humanism, history is the story of the ascent of man. And with each generation becoming more advanced technologically, socially, environmentally.

Humanism optimistically looks forward to finding solutions to all of the world's problems based on reason, experience and moral values founded on an optimistic view of human nature.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, humanism has tended to be very popular during times of peace and prosperity. When everything seems fine with the world.

However, the problem with this view essentially is our experience and the history of humanity. Which doesn't really suggest that things can only get better.

[3:16] For example, I'm sure you already know that the 20th century was the bloodiest on record in terms of war and conflict around the world.

And the start of the 21st century hasn't really been that different. But personally, if anything sums up the flaw with this view, it's the footage of the moon landing from the 1960s with Neil Armstrong walking on the moon.

I'm sure you've seen some of the grainy footage. Look it up on YouTube if you haven't. But it's an amazing picture. Here is humankind at its most advanced, if you like.

Literally walking on another planet. It's an astonishing historical achievement. And yet, as the astronauts phone home, the person that they speak to on the other end of the line is the American

president, Richard Nixon.

Nixon of the Watergate scandal. Nixon, one of the most corrupt presidents in all of history. It's a stunning picture of humanity, capable of conquering other worlds.

[4:26] And yet so deeply flawed that the same old problems are the same old problems. Well, humanism is the first common view, seeking to explain why we're here.

The second major view is naturalism. And this is the view that many of the current so-called new atheists would subscribe to. The view that nature and the natural world is all that there is.

So, in this view, humanity is nothing more than a collection of atoms. And there is nothing more to the universe than what we can see and observe.

All that there is, is what can be observed empirically under a microscope. And all that the universe consists of is matter, physical matter, and chance.

So, chance is the force that has arranged everything. You and I are here due to a random series of events involving atoms that has produced the world as we see it.

[5:29] But again, the problem with this view is that it falls down when compared to our day-to-day existence. Because it struggles to explain why non-physical things like morality, justice, and love are so significant.

So, if, for example, the naturalist is right, is there any reason why killing someone is any different to cutting a grapefruit in half and eating it for breakfast?

Atoms are just atoms. Whether human or grapefruit, it's all much the same. All we're doing is rearranging atoms in a particular order. Now, you might say that the murdered person's mother might be upset.

But again, what's upset? All that's happening is a chemical reaction taking place in the random collection of atoms that's called our brain.

Upset doesn't really mean anything. So, like humanism, this view of the world and humanity just simply doesn't make sense of our existence. It doesn't stack up with the way that we experience the world.

[6:47] So, what's it all about? Why are we here? Before we get on to the Bible's perspective, it's over to you to air your views around your tables. We've got ten minutes or so for discussion.

And then we'll crack on with the next point. So, over to you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Sounds like we're having some good discussions on tables. But we'll move on to our second point today, created for relationship.

Because the answer that the Bible gives as to why we're here and what life is all about is that we have been created by God for relationship with him and with each other.

But you'd be right in asking, what exactly does that mean? And maybe you've heard that sort of language before, created for relationship with God.

[7:50] And we have all sorts of relationships, don't we? Family relationships, romantic relationships, authority relationships with an employer or a teacher, business relationships, passing relationships with the person that we buy the newspaper from.

Is relationship with God? Is relationship with God like these sorts of things? What exactly does it mean? Well, the Bible describes this relationship for us in Genesis chapter 2.

Now, I'm not going to read the whole chapter now, but I have printed it out for you there on your tables. You've got hands-outs with Genesis chapter 2 on it. And there are just three things that I want to draw your attention to as we think about what does it mean that God has created us for relationship with him?

And the first thing that I want us to see is that this relationship is personal relationship. Have a look at verse 5.

It says, I just want us to notice that in this verse, God is described as the Lord God with the word Lord there in capital letters.

[9:04] Now, that might feel like a very small detail, but it's really significant. Because when you see God described like that, it means that

the personal name of God is being used.

Now, later on in the Old Testament, that name is revealed to Moses as Yahweh, but it simply means God's personal name. So right here, at the very start of the created order, the creator God who made the heavens and the earth is also personal, knowable.

A God that you can know personally, a God that you can relate to. And as the chapter progresses, we see God working this relationship with Adam out.

So God breathes the breath of life into Adam. And God gives Adam instructions in verses 16 and 17 about how their relationship is going to work out.

He sets out the terms of their relationship, if you will. Telling Adam to enjoy all that he's been given, but to not eat from one tree in the garden. The tree of knowledge of good and evil.

[10:16] So God relates to Adam. He's got a personal day-to-day relationship with him. He's not absent. He's not only a transcendent God. He's not just an impersonal force that you can't know.

He's personal and knowable. And the second thing to see about this relationship is that it's a generous relationship. God is no miser, nor has he created Adam simply as his slave.

When God creates Adam, he places him in Eden, in verse 8. A garden paradise that is full of delight and joy.

A place where Adam has all that he needs for food. A place that is pleasant on the eye and good to look at. Now some people take the view that when God created humans and put them into the world, he did it as some kind of test.

I.e. he was trying to sort of test humanity. Will they do good things in a bad world? But not a bit of it. Genesis 2 says that God puts Adam in paradise and says to him, verse 16, Go and enjoy it.

[11:33] Enjoy all of the good things that I've given to you. God is overflowing with generosity to Adam and Eve. And thirdly, do notice that this relationship is a countable relationship.

Now I guess that for most of us, when we picture paradise in our mind's eye, we sort of think of beaches, don't we?

And, you know, or mountain ranges or all sorts of amazing, wonderful things. The last thing that we think of is work. I mean, surely the office is just about as far from paradise as it's possible to be. Yet here in paradise, in Eden, Adam is given work to do. In verse 15, that's partly what he's in the garden for. He's here to keep it and work it.

Adam's given a unique role in all of creation as the one who is supposed to take care of what God has created. And that's authority, that dignity is underlined as he names the animals in verses 19 and 20.

[12:42] Genesis 2 is telling us that Adam's just given a unique position, a unique role in God's world. But he is under the authority of the creator and maker of the world.

Adam's not autonomous, he's not independent from God. But God holds him responsible for looking after the world. So Adam is accountable before God in a way that's different from the rest of the creation.

Now look, all I want us to notice at this stage is that Genesis 2 is teaching us about why humans are here, regardless of how you might want to read these verses in terms of whether they're history or not.

And what Genesis 2 wants us to see is that God has created humanity for relationship, for personal, generous, accountable relationship.

And can we see that this view of why we're here makes much more sense of our experience of the world than either humanism or naturalism?

[13:44] I mentioned earlier that both of those views fall down in part because they just don't fit with our experience of the world. But the Bible's view of why we're here fits exactly. So contrary to humanism, Genesis 2 tells us that we are not gods.

So sure, we have a unique role in the created order. And because of the way that God has made us, we're making advances in all sorts of ways. But we are accountable to him.

We're not independent of him. We're not free to decide our own destiny. And this view also explains why naturalism is wrong.

Of course justice and morality and love matter. Of course they do. They're not merely illusory. They're not merely... We're not just playing make-believe with these things. We're not simply a collection of atoms randomly assembled. We're relational beings designed to live in relationship with God, with one another. So how we treat each other really matters.

[14:56] Well, we're going to break again there. And have a chance to reflect around our tables for ten minutes or so. And then I'll call us back for our third point. So over to you. Well, let me cut into your conversations there.

Well, that may be all very well, you say. God created the world good. Created man to be in relationship with him. Created man to be in perfect relationship with man. But clearly, things aren't like this now, are they? You don't have to live in the world very long to know that the world isn't paradise. Relationship with God is fractured. Relationships individually and on a broader level are broken. Even our close relationships, family relationships, often feel less harmonious than we think they should. So how can the Bible go on about a perfect world and paradise and relationship with God? Is the Bible trying to pull the wool over our eyes?

[16:05] Or is it living in a world of make-believe? Why is our world so imperfect if the whole reason we are here is for perfect relationship?

Well, the answer to that question comes in the very next chapter of Genesis. Genesis chapter 3, which we're going to be looking at in much more depth next month at our next forum. So do come back for that. But just in brief, Genesis chapter 3 describes the fall of man. Genesis 3 describes Adam rejecting God and turning his back on the relationship that he was made for. So Adam and Eve make a break for independence, thinking that they don't need God and can rule his world without him. They think they can rule his world themselves. And the consequences of this rejection are horrific. So Adam and Eve's relationship is fractured. They're now at war in their marriage.

[17:12] They no longer live in harmony with each other or with the land. So they're thrown out of Eden. And the environment that they're in becomes hostile to them and work is difficult.

And the heart of these consequences is the relationship between God and man. It's no longer perfect relationship, as Genesis 2 talks about. But since Adam and Eve have rejected God, they are now under his curse, under his judgment. So Genesis 2 and 3 together give us a really realistic picture of what our world and humankind is like today.

So human beings were created good by God. We're created with authority and dignity. So are capable of wonderful achievements. Great art. Technological advance. Scientific inquiry. The ability, as it were, to rule the world. And yet, because Adam and in him all mankind rejected God, our relationship with him is shattered.

[18:20] And so our world is broken and messy. Full of division and conflict. And ultimately, our world is under God's judgment rather than his blessing.

And yet, at the end of Genesis 2, there is just a glimmer of hope that our relationship with God isn't necessarily lost forever and lost for good. And that clue comes right at the end of chapter 2, in verses 24 and 25. As God describes Adam and Eve's relationship in terms of a marriage. And the New Testament picks up on this very verse in Ephesians chapter 5. Let me read it to you. Don't understand the noun. But in Ephesians 5, verses 31 and 32, Paul says, Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. He's quoting Genesis chapter 2 directly. And then he goes on to say, This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

[19:35] In other words, Paul is saying that marriage, given as a wonderful gift from God to his people in Genesis 2, is also given as a picture of the relationship between Jesus Christ and his people, the church.

And so to keep using that picture, Jesus is the groom who loves his bride. And Paul can say that because of the cross.

Because Jesus loves his people and gave his life up for them. Taking the judgment and punishment that his people deserve, so that they might be brought back into relationship with God.

In other words, the picture we have is that human beings deserve God's judgment. In Adam, that's what we chose.

But in Jesus Christ, we can be restored to relationship with God again, even though we don't deserve it, even though we can't earn it, even though we didn't ask for it.

[20:41] Jesus' death has brought life for all those who trust him. And the wonderful good news is, one day, our Genesis 3 world will be turned into a place that is even richer and even more full of joy and delight than Genesis 2, than Eden ever was.

So Paul says that marriage is a picture of what is right at the heart of the universe. Relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

And it's only in the context of that relationship that our experience of the world makes sense. And we're able to satisfactorily answer the question, why are we here? What's life all about?

And why are we here? Well, the answer of the Bible is that we are here because God has created us for relationship with him. And through Jesus Christ, has made that relationship possible again for everyone who turns to him.

So the heart of the universe is a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.