

Living in the best Story A

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[0 : 00] that I don't believe in the God you don't believe in. That is to say, it's not the God of the Bible that people don't believe in.

When they say, I don't believe in God, they're not necessarily saying, I don't believe in the God that you read about in the Bible, but they are believing in a God who is of their own imagination, and it's altogether likely that you as a Christian don't really believe in that God either.

Okay? So that might be a helpful thing to say for you, if you come back to a non-Christian friend and they say, I don't believe in God. And you say, well, what's this God like that you don't believe in? I'll bet I don't believe in him either.

You see, it's no good trying to persuade someone about God or the existence of God if they are thinking of someone completely different to the real God when you mention his name.

So if they're thinking of a white-bearded old man, who kind of lives in the sky and doesn't have much to do with the world, then of course, it's good that they don't believe in him, because you don't believe in him either, do you?

[1 : 05] That's not what God is like. Or they're thinking of a God who is unfair and cruel and out to spoil your fun. That's what they're thinking of. Well, that's not the God you believe in, is it?

Or a God who hates gay people and women? Well, that's not the true God either. If people think that's what you're saying when we say God, then we need to go a few steps back, don't we, and get a level playing field about who we're actually talking about before we can talk about whether it's right to believe in him or not.

People are rejecting a caricature, a stereotype, something from their own imagination. They're not actually rejecting the God of the Bible. So don't be too afraid to say, well, let's just think about who the God of the Bible really is.

Have you heard about him? And then you can decide, if you like, I'll leave it to you to decide whether that God is there or not. But let's at least explore what you are thinking when we say that word God.

So, yeah, you can say, tell me, what is this God like that you don't believe in? I'll bet I don't believe in him either. Why? Because the God of the Bible is good.

[2 : 21] The God of the Bible is good. He is undeniably, continuously, jaw-droppingly good.

And I would say you could ask someone, do you not want a God like that? And they've got to be really sort of intellectually honest or really, you know, rigorously consistent to say, no, I could not live with a God like that.

You what? You couldn't live with a God who's awesomely, infinitely good in every element of his being. Wherever you go in God, he's good, good, good.

There's nothing wrong with him. No darkness at all. You don't want a God like that. Now you're being weird. This is a God who is full of love.

A God who is love. And that's what Genesis 1 is hinting at, at the very least, at the very least, throughout its words.

[3 : 34] But particularly in that first verse we read, in verse 26 of Genesis 1, hinting at the God who is love when it says, then God said, let us make mankind in our image.

So when it says, let us, you're probably aware that that's one being, talking in the plural, let us, and hinting at the fact that God is more than just this solitary, cold being.

God is an us. He always has been an us. He is an amazing gathering of unbreakable, self-giving lovers.

That God has always been plural. He has always been this God who rejoices in others and who is vibrant and alive and dynamic because of that.

A profound personality defined by perfect relationships. That's what this God, our God, the God of the Bible, your God is. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

[4 : 34] I'm not saying that a full doctrine of the Trinity is there in Genesis 1.26, but it's begun there and it's unfolded throughout the whole of the Bible and brought a beautiful expression in the mission, work, person of the Lord Jesus Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

So don't tell me, you can say, don't tell me that you know what love is without God. This is how we know what love is.

Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. That's what the Bible says. You only know what love is if you know God.

That's what the Bible says. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. God is good. And you see that then unfolded as you go through the first chapter of Genesis.

So he says, let us make mankind in our image. So God is good in his creativity. He is an awesome designer. He is intricate and yet all powerful in his designs and his creation.

[5 : 46] He makes us in his image. He makes, verse 28, he blesses those which he has made. He speaks to them.

He encourages them to be fruitful and to increase, to fill the earth, to rule over the fish and the birds and over every living creature. And then in verse 29, it says that he is a giver.

I give you every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth. Every tree that has fruit with seed in it. He is a God who gives. He loves to lavish his goodness upon other people.

It's not that he stays in heaven and says, well, I'll be good, but I'll let them over there just kind of work it out for themselves. No, he involves himself and gives what is good to those that he has made.

Even the creation which is not human, he is good towards. See in verse 30, to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures, things not made in his image, not made to be like him in the way that we are.

[6 : 46] But to them too he has given every green plant for food, we're told. And it was so. So this is a God who, you can't look at him and find anything, according to the Bible, wrong with him.

He's good in every way. He makes, he blesses, he gives. That's what the God of the Bible is like. So both you and any non-Christian friends of yours are living in a world run by that God.

And the Bible says very clearly that if there is something wrong with the world, and there is of course, if there is something wrong with you or me, it is not because God is bad at his job.

It is not because God is bad at loving us, or even just bad. He loves us. He loves his world.

It is us who are incredibly bad at loving him back. That is the root of the problem. That is why the world is as messed up as it is. That is your problem, it is my problem, and it is your friend's problem.

[7 : 58] But it is not to be laid at the root of God. It is not to be laid at his door. And maybe we could ask our friends if they have ever considered that. That is the first kind of building block.

It is a big thing. You might think it is a really obvious thing, but until we have got that laid down, God from the beginning, from before the beginning, and to all eternity, God is good. Don't be afraid of that.

Don't be in denial about that. God is wonderfully good. I know there is suffering in the world. I know there are problems. I know there is all these things, but the Bible says God is good, and it is that God you have got to have some dealings with if you are going to start rejecting him out of hand.

That God is good. God is good. That is the first thing. Here is the second thing. People matter. People matter.

That flows out of the fact that God is good. It flows out of what we have just seen from Genesis 1. And as I was saying earlier, it is a concept that has been taken on board by our secular society, that all people matter, that people have equal rights, that they deserve to be treated in a fair and respectful way.

[9 : 04] That's a good idea, because where does it come from? It comes from page one of the Christian book. A thing that a lot of people don't perhaps realize, certainly not acknowledge.

Verse 26 again. Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness. Something alluded to by James last night, but now we see again here, human beings are given incredible dignity by their creation in the image of God, made to be like God, made to represent God in the world to the rest of his creation.

Now, it is incredibly important, you see here then, that it's not that some people, according to the Bible, some people are special, like Christians are special, or believers in Jesus are special, and other people are not.

That is not the biblical view. It is mankind. Let us make mankind in our image, every single person, regardless of their race, regardless of their skin color, their nationality, their age, or their gender.

So verse 27 is very clear, that this creation of mankind in the image of God is equally granted to both men and women. Verse 27, so God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them.

[10 : 27] So there's this immediate, page one of the Bible, immediate respect for all people, and even after people sinned against God, as we go on to find in chapter 3 of Genesis, mankind as a whole, still matters to God, and still at the level of every single person, regardless of the things that have been brought in by the people, regardless of their physical ability, or disability, regardless of their mental state, regardless of their religion, be it false as false can be, regardless of the temptations that they, that you experience.

You matter to God, regardless of the distaste a person might feel for God's laws, regardless of the gender of the people that they're sexually attracted to.

All people, all people without distinction, made in the image of God, and matter to God. And we've got to get that really clear.

Even after the fall, even after our rebellion against God, that still holds true. So, a God who only cares for, for example, people who are heterosexual, or a God who only has time for people who feel completely at ease with their birth gender, a God who is like that, who only has time for those sorts of people, is not, not the God of the Bible.

And it gives me great pleasure to say that. And you should have confidence in saying that. And if you're here, and you feel, I am not, I am not sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex.

[12 : 17] I am sexually attracted to people of the same sex. You matter to God equally. equally. If you feel that you are, you struggle with your own gender, and you wonder, am I born in the right body?

You matter to God equally with the person next to you. With anyone else in the world. People matter. All people equal in God's sight, made in his image.

That is a huge building block. Again, to have down, have correct, have right, as we start to think about engaging with these things. And it's a wonderfully reassuring thing to say there.

That it is the Christian story of equality that from the first page of the Bible outdoes every man-made story trying to imitate it.

All the man-made stories about equality still cannot avoid creating limits about who is allowed into the story. You're equal as long as you agree with me.

[13 : 20] I don't know if you noticed, but in that article from Krista Aykroyd, the Yorkshire Post, she says, didn't she, in this story, she doesn't call it that, but it's her story she's telling, the world's story, in this story there are no outsiders.

Remember her saying that? No outsiders. But that is not true. She made it very clear that at the very least, Bible-believing Christians and conservative Muslims are not invited to the party.

But you know what? God's way is better than that. God's way is infinitely better than that. We have nothing to fear from that story.

Because God is love. He has no such limits. God invites to his party the sick and the lame and the weak and the Muslim and the Christian and the atheist and the lesbian and the abortionist and everyone else without exception.

even me, even you, he invites you. He invites every friend of yours and every person in the world. He cares about people who do not agree with him, who hate his laws.

[14 : 49] He invites them. He invited you when you hated him. People who reject his story and would kill him if they could, which we did. That is generosity.

that is courage. That is compassion. That is kindness to all. That is inclusivity.

God says that you do not need to love him in order for him to love you. and that is the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Contra the God that the world thinks we believe in, you certainly do not need to be white or male or straight or privileged to be a Christian.

and so we have nothing to fear from the secular storyteller saying we value diversity. The reality is that is from Genesis to Revelation to today, Christianity has been, is now and always will be the belief system of diversity.

[16 : 11] humanity. Jesus, when he came, God himself on earth, what did he do? He broke through every existing cultural and ethnic barrier of his day and he is still doing that today.

His followers, and the world needs to hear this and your friends need to realise this because most of them won't, the followers of Jesus today represent the most even racial, cultural and social spread of any belief system in the world by a country mile.

So if you're a Christian today you're as likely or more to be Chinese or Nigerian or Latino as you are to be white and western, far more likely to be of those other nationalities and ethnicities.

Just listen to Keith later today talking about Kenya, mission across the world, we need a global perspective. you're more likely to be female than male if you're a Christian today in the world.

It's not that Christianity is anti-women, if so why are there more women Christians than men globally speaking? Only just, but still, it's not as though every woman looks at Christianity in the world and goes, oh this is horrible, I'm running away from this.

[17 : 23] That's not what's happening. So don't believe it, it's a lie. You see, our little BBC bubble here is not the world, folks.

Our friends need to understand that globally speaking, it is atheism which is basically the domain of white western men and communist regimes.

That's what atheism is. You can say to you, are you happy to be part of that? Dominated by white western men and communist regimes. That's what atheism is across the world today.

Christianity is dominated by people of all ethnicities and races and both genders and everything else which the world says, this is diversity.

Christianity has that and atheism doesn't. from page one, the Bible has the better story. Your church perhaps is a living example of it.

[18 : 27] My church certainly is. We have 43 members and we have seven different nationalities. We have a whole group of people, it's probably quite likely, I mean not every church is going to be like that depending on where your church is, but most churches are going to have a whole mix of people, whether it's not ethnicities, it might be social differences or age or anything, but it's the only thing which draws all people together.

You could say come along to my church and see the kind of different people who are there. You don't get that with anything other than Christianity because it's the, the system of true diversity.

The story where people matter. This is great news. This is great news. God is good. People matter.

That's the Christian worldview. We're going to look at one more part of it now. We're at 25 plus 10 now. I wanted to talk about our bodies and how important they are and that's there in Genesis as well.

If you have your sheet still, just flip over. I'll give this one back to you, madam. Here's the second one which is a story about Oprah Winfrey who might just be the next president of the United States.

[19 : 43] Who knows? Or in future perhaps. I don't know. Or maybe not. If you don't know who she is, she's a talk show host, a massively popular and influential celebrity in the United States particularly and over here too.

She would say she's a Christian. I don't think that she is, but she would certainly say she is a Christian and has been a advocate for LGBT rights in the States and the world.

There was a significant watershed moment when she came out in support of Ellen, how do you pronounce her name? DeGeneres? Do you know who I'm talking about? You know who I'm talking about?

Ellen? Everyone just calls her Ellen anyway, the talk show host, when she came out as a lesbian in the late 90s. There's just a little article from Pink News, a gay website, that I want you to discuss and think about that in a similar way, just for five minutes and then I'll think about whether we can just sum up with the last little bit as well.

Does that make sense? Any questions? Get yourselves into little groups again.