

Jesus is the question

He might be the answer, too. But he doesn't offer much in the way of tweetable platitudes.

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [April 2023](#) issue



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I grew up in the era of evangelistic T-shirts. I was too shy to wear any myself, but I had friends who did. “WWJD?” “Cross-trained.” “Made to worship.” “Be still and know.”

One of the T-shirt slogans I saw often was “Jesus is the answer.” Kids would sport the slogan in bright, colorful letters, hoping to strike up conversation with peers who weren’t Christians. Their faith was earnest, and I respected it. But every time I read the words “Jesus is the answer,” I wanted to ask, “What’s the question?” What question is Jesus the answer *to*?

Being a little church nerd, I would head to my Bible to figure it out. I needed to find a one-liner that would make sense of the slogan. Something we might now post on Facebook—pithy and clickable.

I never found it. Not because I didn't look hard, but because the Jesus of the Gospels doesn't offer much in the way of tweetable platitudes. He seems far more interested in asking questions—hard questions. “Who do you say that I am?” “Why are you so afraid?” “Do you want to get well?” “You don't want to leave, too, do you?” “Do you love me?” Strange, for a man who's supposed to be the answer.

Lately I've been asking myself the questions Jesus asked and trying to dwell with them one at a time. Most recently, I've been sitting with the first question Jesus asks in John's Gospel. He's just been baptized and publicly identified as the Lamb of God by his cousin John. When two of John's own disciples decide to follow Jesus instead, Jesus turns, looks them in the eye, and asks a question that would have stopped me in my tracks: “What are you looking for?” (John 1:38).

So much for small talk; Jesus goes straight for the jugular. What longings keep you up at night? What hopes and hungers are you afraid to name, even to yourself? What fills you with joy? What breaks your heart? What are you looking for?

I wonder if the two who hear the question have any idea how to answer it. Maybe they don't. Maybe no one has ever asked them a question so inviting or vulnerable-making before. Maybe they've never considered the possibility that their own deep wants matter to God and profoundly affect their spiritual well-being and growth.

Maybe that's why Jesus asks. Because he knows that if they just take in the question, their lives will change. Their wanting will shape their finding. Their hungers will trigger transformation.

So, I turn the question on myself. What am I looking for? Do I know?

I live in a culture that tries so hard to answer the question for me. For as long as I can remember, I've been taught to want certain things fiercely. Success. Independence. Recognition. Security. So I've strived and strived, often feeling like a failure because I haven't attained all the things I'm supposed to want.

All the while, deep beneath the surface, Jesus' question burns hard and bright. What am I looking for? What is causing me to move so frantically through the world, one ambition piled on top of another, no achievement or accolade ever quite enough to calm my anxious heart? What am I looking for when I go to church on Sunday? When I pray? When I engage in ministry?

I know that my foundational calling is to look for God. To *want* God in my life—more than I want anything else. But I also know how easily habit, doubt, disappointment, weariness, or just plain boredom can dull my wanting. I know how fast I can step back and choose something smaller and safer. Close off my heart, stick a smile on my face, and go through the motions because I'm too depleted or jaded to yearn for more.

When Jesus asks his two would-be disciples what *they're* looking for, they dodge the question by answering with a question of their own: "Where are you staying?" As in what does your home look like? Where do you abide? Most importantly, perhaps, what shape will our lives take if we decide to hang out with you?

Jesus' response is both simple and profound: "Come and see" (John 1:39).

The only way to know where Jesus abides is to follow him all the way home. We can't know him in the abstract—he won't fit on a T-shirt. He's not the type who remains in stasis—he moves. That means we have to move too.

So he invites us to come and see, to walk the path for a while—as pilgrims, not tourists. If the path feels murky, it'll get clearer as we walk it. If we don't know what we're looking for, our patient sitting with the question will reveal what's hidden. Our wanting will shape our finding.

As I keep asking myself what I want, I realize that the asking itself is at the heart of discipleship. The point is not to rush headlong toward an answer but to undertake a journey in a spirit of holy curiosity and anticipation. To "come and see" over the full arc of my lifetime, cultivating a hunger for God that grows deeper over time.

It's a generous question, followed by an even more generous invitation. *What are you looking for? Come and see.* Come and discern what you desire most deeply. Come and cultivate that desire in the gracious company of a God who welcomes your questions, who holds your longings close, who promises to transform you into who you really are.

Maybe Jesus is the answer because Jesus is the question. He's the beginning and the end of what we're looking for, but it's okay with God if we can barely wrap our minds around that. We don't need to know at the outset. All we need to do is ask the question, to come and see.