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How does the gospel happen?

All of us on this earth find ourselves unavoidably faced with questions:

Who am I?
Am I a good person?
What will become of me?
Why *me*?
Why *not* me?
Why?

Human life is fragile, mortal, and vulnerable:

This burden has to do with the outrageous nature of happiness, the inescapability of guilt, the shocking manifestations of power, the suddenness of death, the pain of suffering, the unending duration of boredom, the demons of loneliness.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant emphasized above all our need for courage in facing such questions: “Be of good *courage* and use your mind.”

Beholding the world, approaching it with wonder, fear, hope, and questions:
THIS IS THE BURDEN THAT FACES US ALL.

There are **THREE STRATEGIES WE MIGHT TAKE IN FACING SUCH MATTERS:**

THE FIRST

possible reaction to the human predicament could be put this way:

“Don’t ask!”

Children learn, even before they start in school, which questions are permissible and which are “taboo”:

“Where was I before I was in Mommy’s tummy?” “Where is ‘Lucky Luke,’ my guinea pig, now?” “Grandpa, when are you going to die?” “When will we finally get there?” These are the questions that children around the world ask - regardless of whether they are religious or not.

Before their teachers utter a word, they have already come to know the unforgettable lesson of how we respond to them:

“It’s just that way.” “You should ask!” “Shut up!” “It’s nothing!” “Do you want to have an ice cream cone?” “Go out and play with your toys!”

Children sense in our tone of voice and the looks we give them our tactics of diversion and avoidance, which convey what they are not allowed to ask. They come to make this discovery with an often painful clarity.

In response to their alert and spontaneous questions, we immunize them with shame and embarrassment. They come to sense that “I’m not allowed to ask this.”

Later on, nothing is left for them other than a narrow obedience to science, superstition, or ignorance.

THE SECOND

possible reaction to these human questions is this:

“Practice trust and honesty!”

This seems plausible.

It is a moral strategy for living.

Following this tactic, one relies on good will, decency, and self-discipline.

One often finds elements of this approach among evangelical Christians and Roman Catholics. In Islam, such an approach finds expression in its purest form as “Sharia.”

In this case, morality serves as a virtue. The approach could be stated this way:

In order to control one’s life, one must learn the rules and observe them. Those who don’t know the rules lose the game.

“One must be noble, helpful and good, righteous, honest, blameless, irreproachable, dutiful, and so forth—and *this will assure you of success.*”

Here, one is confronted with an urgent, rigid, and perfectionist claim:

“You must change your life!”

Apply yourself! You have to work harder at it! Pull yourself together! Repent! Observe the commandments! Watch out! Keep your eyes open and watch out when you cross the street! Close your eyes when you find yourself tempted! Go to church! Pray dutifully! Wash your hands! Brush your teeth! Be a good, resolute, intentional person of faith! Love your neighbors! Support the needy! Recycle your garbage! Turn off the light when you leave the room! and so forth - *and all of this will assure you of success.*

“Think positively!” “Hey, man, you can do it!”

People deserve what they get if they’re not careful, don’t make proper plans, or fail to take appropriate and preventive steps. The only thing that matters is engaging the will. It all depends on our obligation to act.

Illness, unhappiness, or suffering – the important themes that make up the burden of our questioning – are understood in this posture as deserved penalties one has to pay – *and which one can pay!*

According to such an approach, the symbol of the cross represents a deal with God who is seen as an unimpeachable bookkeeper.

“Jesus died on the cross for you, so what are you going to do now for Him?”

He rules with justice.

What is involved in this case is the form of sacrifice, self-mortification, discipline and self-flagellation, all intended as a means of taking revenge according to the saying: “If the Almighty sacrifices Himself for us, it is only appropriate to pay Him back for this, right?”

Living according to a moral strategy depends on a certain “good intention function,” a kind of happy-ending-guarantee: In the event that one’s willpower is not sufficient to bring things to completion, one can ultimately turn things in a positive direction by claiming that one acted with a *pure intention*.

Here, the formula holds: Fulfilling the law (or, as a substitute, acting with a good will or intentions) = sense of fulfillment.

THE THIRD

and final possible response to the burden of such questions is this:

Let go. Let it be. Relax.

At first, this sounds ridiculous.

But it points to a *transmoral* perspective.

The Christian religion embodies this perspective under the rubric of “gospel.”

“Letting go”: does this mean that nothing finally matters? No, to the contrary: morality, values, and order are indispensable. But morality, in this case, is understood as a necessary evil. Law, order, and values are all necessary! Without justice and order, everything would fall asunder and go astray. But Christianity declares that order, finally, is not the key to a successful life. One recognizes this when one has tried to uphold order. Following the rules is important and good, but it will not bring us a sense of fulfillment in our lives.

We shouldn't kid ourselves:

We speak of obsessions and constraints. What is it that drives us?

We often act in ways that fly in the face of what we know.

We often behave in irrational ways.

We hear ourselves saying,

“I didn't want to do that!” “It wasn't me!”

“I can't help it!” “I couldn't have done any better!”

“Oops! I did it again!”

Shit happens.

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I have no idea what's happening to me.

God happens.

I can live into this change!

I put all my trust in knowing that God accepts who I am, as I am.

The cross symbolizes this:

The deepest depression, the most difficult agony, the most extreme experience of loneliness - none of these is “godless.” Even if we find ourselves in the worst possible situation, it is never too late.

The cross is and remains bloody. But it is the necessary prelude to Easter, and is not a kind of moral drama. Easter makes this clear: Jesus' death is the end of sacrifice in all its forms.

Whether as victim or perpetrator, I refuse to define myself any longer in terms of guilt and punishment.

And with this, we come to see a horizon beyond mere morality in our lives.

We celebrate Easter, knowing that no one is left behind, and that love lives on.

This is the reason why the biblical texts are replete with the usual suspects—the outsiders and outlaws, criminals, liars, those of little faith, the weak, the sick, those who are envious or hateful, traitors, prostitutes, blackmailers, and murderers: not in order to hunt them down in the wilderness, but rather to offer them hospitality and sit with them at table. -

Which approach do you identify with? Who do you want to be?

(Translation: Mark Burrows)