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Quest: God's Perspective

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We're journeying through a sermon series called Quest. Last week Jonathan talked about Soul Spa – taking time to imitate God in order to remind us that we aren't God. This week we're continuing the like God but not God theme, with what it means to look at things from God's perspective.

It should come as no surprise that God's perspective is different from ours. As a mere mortal, I am well aware that I am a flawed human being, so for God to be worth following, I need Him to be far bigger or superior to me, in which case His perspective on life, the universe and everything is also going to be somewhat different, not to mention superior, to mine!

The prophet Isaiah, writing as God's mouthpiece affirms this when he writes: *"For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts". (Isaiah 55:8 and 9)*

It's very hard for any of us to see the world from someone else's perspective. Although some people are more empathetically inclined, we all struggle with understanding other people's viewpoint to some degree. We all look at the world through the only set of eyes we have – our own. So if it's hard for us to see things from the perspective of another human being, how hard is it going to be to see things from the perspective of the Supreme Being – the creator of the universe?

Well, believe it or not, God wants us to understand His way of thinking. So in order to see things from His perspective, He gave us this amazing book, the Bible. But instead of making it in the form of some dry old text book or instruction manual, God presented His perspective in a whole lot of different forms: there's Law, poetry, prose, stories, biographies, history, letters,

even lists - in fact pretty well all forms of literature are covered in the Bible.

As one of my lecturers was fond of saying, the Bible isn't actually a book, it's a library.

Over the Christmas break, our family went to see the movie Avatar in 3D. It was amazing, and I found myself thinking that this was going to spoil me for normal 2D movies forever! The way 3D vision works, is that each eye sees the same object from a slightly different point of view, enabling us to see the true depth of the object or image.

In presenting His perspective, or way of thinking in so many different forms of literature, God has enabled us to not only discover Him in the form of literature that suits us best, but to also discover a far greater depth of understanding than if the Bible just said "this is how God sees things". God is intent on enabling us to understand as much as we possible can about Him – which is not everything there is, believe me – we can go on learning about God for the rest of our lives, and barely scratch the surface. But in some ways, the Bible shows us God in 3D, by showing His perspective from different angles.

So in effect, the Bible says "this is how God sees things, in other words, this is how He sees things, in other words, this is how He sees things".

At this point I'd like to suggest that of all the things the Bible is, something that the Bible is not is an instruction manual.

A common complaint I've heard from people over the years is that they've been reading the Bible, desperately seeking a solution for, or solace from whatever adversity they may be facing, but they can't find the answer.

When we have a problem in life we often go and "Look up" the solution to it. This mentality has been compounded by the internet. We are used to reading procedural manuals that give us step by step directions.

A while back I needed to change the rear gear cluster on my bicycle. I didn't know how to do it, so I went to Google, and found a video that explained what I needed to know. Very

simple. There are instruction books and websites for just about anything, and so we develop a practice or mentality that goes looking for specific answers.

When I 1st started work, one of the things I did was to fix TV power supplies, back in the days when we actually fixed broken TVs, instead of throwing them out. The way it was done was we had a test jig, and a book of instructions. We would hook up the power supply to the jig, and work through known faults outlined in the manual until we found one that solved the problem.

This process fixed 9 out of 10 faulty power supplies. If we got through the book without finding the fault, the final instruction was to call the supervisor.

I think there is a tendency today to not learn how something works. We just learn the bare minimum to make it work. It's like paint by numbers.

The Bible doesn't work like this. It doesn't give step by step instructions – at least not as a rule. For instance, you can't look up the procedure for dealing with marriage difficulties, diagnose the faulty component, whip it out with the soldering iron, pop in a replacement part, and get back to having a happy marriage.

True, there are times when we can find comfort in reading Scripture verses, but the Bible is so much more than that. The only time I read the instruction manual for my car is when I need to know something like what spark-plugs to buy. In fact like most blokes, my policy is "when all else fails, read the instructions".

But the Bible is so much more than the book where we look up answers to our problems, but never open up otherwise when things are going OK.

What's more, when someone is really struggling, the person that just gives them a few Bible verses and sends them away is not particularly helpful. If someone experiences bereavement, or a miscarriage, or a redundancy, to quote Romans 8:28 (*in all things God works for the good of those who love him, "who" have been called according to his purpose*) isn't particularly helpful! That doesn't mean what Romans 8:28 says it isn't true – it's a

profoundly important statement. But merely reciting it doesn't equate with applying it.

My wife Sue went as parent help on a school trip to Piha, where the kids were learning about surf beach safety. The kids all recited the rules in unison about swimming between the flags, staying close to the adults, and getting out of the water when the whistle blew. Then when they were let loose into the water, they all immediately violated the rules they had just chanted.

It's not enough to just know the truths of Scripture; it's not enough to see Scripture as a rule book. The truths of Scripture must be embedded deeply in our lives becoming part of the synergy of our being.

The Bible, and therefore God, is more interested in the big picture; in teaching us His ways to live, rather than just solving specific problems. And this is how the Bible, written thousands of years ago, remains relevant to today. The Bible is more interested in principles and values than it is in procedures and instructions.

I couldn't read in the Bible how to fix my bike, because obviously bikes hadn't been invented.

Likewise I can't find in the Bible much in the way of direct procedural instructions on how to conduct my marriage, raise my kids or manage my finances, because the culture, practices and norms are completely different between Biblical times and today. But what I can find in the Bible are the principles and values that are God's way of doing things; the values that are true to God's heart, which will enable me to make wise, God influenced decisions about the best way to conduct my relationships, and manage my life. And these values are timeless.

Some of you might be thinking about the instances where specific instructions are given, such as Paul's instructions to husbands and wives in Ephesians 5.

But these are fairly broad-brush instructions – they talk about love, respect, submission etc, but don't actually describe what this looks like. Paul doesn't define things like who takes the

rubbish out, who pays the bills, or who cleans the toilet. He doesn't specify details, he does specify principles.

What's more, often what we go looking for is a quick fix to our current situation, so we can solve the problem, and then get on with our lives. The problem with this is that quick fixes bypass the important life lessons that we learn from the problems that we face.

When I worked as a pastor, from time to time I had to deal with people who had been bereaved – had lost a loved one. Something that is very common at such a time, is that friends and family are reluctant to go and see someone who is grieving, because as they say: "I wouldn't know what to say to them". We all want to go and say the right words that'll take the pain away, and save them from their suffering, but we don't know what those words are.

The reason for this is that the words don't exist. No one knows what to say to relieve grief. And we don't do people any favours by trying to bypass grief. The grief process takes people through a series of stages in order for them to come out the other side as a whole, healthy person. We are far better off supporting and enabling healthy grief, so they can journey through the process.

So it is as we journey through the story that is life.

If you think about it, all stories have a crisis at their centre; whether it's Indiana Jones trying to capture the Ark of the Covenant and save the girl, Frodo Baggins trying to get to Mt Doom to stop evil lord Sauron from reigning over middle earth, or Miss Elizabeth Bennett trying to navigate through the tangled web of regency manners and protocol to find her way to Mr. Darcy's heart.

The crisis or the tension is not something that needs to be resolved so that we can get on with the story – rather the crisis is the story. In the same way our lives are stories.

I think many of us need to re-evaluate the way we look at problems. For many of the hardships we come up against, our attitude is how to fix it as fast as possible, so that we can get on

with life. On the contrary, many of the hardships we face are a part of getting on with life.

Rather than being hindrances to the journey, they are actually part of the journey. And to find easy, quick-fix solutions to them is to miss out on a significant part of life's journey of learning. Mike Riddell is a prolific author and former Baptist pastor, and he wrote "Perhaps an absence of suffering is an absence of God".

So if we read the Bible looking for quick-fix solutions, or procedural instructions, sorry, but we're going to be disappointed. Now I hope I haven't made too many people depressed that the Bible doesn't offer any solutions after all.

Nowhere does God promise us an easy life where we get to avoid the problems that life throws at us. Rather He promises to equip us so that we can make it through this life intact. And the Bible is the source of God's equipping wisdom in the form of principles and values.

There's a great line from the movie "The Matrix", when Neo, the hero is being trained by Morpheus for the mission he is to undertake within the Matrix. He asks "What are you trying to tell me, that I can dodge bullets?" to which Morpheus replies "No, I'm trying to tell you that when you're ready, you won't have to."

As followers of Jesus we may ask Him "What are you trying to tell me, that I can dodge life's difficulties?" to which Jesus replies "No, I'm trying to tell you that if you follow my Word, the Bible, you won't have to."

I'm always impacted by the difference in attitude between non-Christian funerals and the funerals of committed believers: On the one hand, a sense of hopelessness, finality and loss. On the other hand, a sense of sorrow for our loss, but joy for the deceased that they have been promoted to Glory!

We don't get to dodge the grave just because we're followers of Jesus. But because we're followers of Jesus, we don't have to. The grave has lost its power over us, because we have an eternal perspective.

As Paul writes to the Corinthians: *"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin,*

and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ". (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

In John 16:33 Jesus says to His disciples *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

I think Psalm 23 – which gets read regularly at funerals - is a great description of how God journeys with us through life, rather than around it.

^{PS 23:1} *The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.*

What stands out to me in this Psalm is that there is plenty of talk of guidance and provision - and I'm sure all of us are quite happy with this. No one's going to turn down God providing for them.

No one's going to turn down God's wisdom in the form of guidance, and of course the principles and values of Scripture are the foremost source of this.

But one thing our human nature would like the Psalmist to say is: "You protect me from hardship and difficulty so my life is easy and happy all the time" but that's not what he says. *"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me..."* The hardships are there, but we don't need to fear them because God is with us.

"your rod and your staff, they comfort me..." says something important: the Hebrew word that is translated Rod is shay'-bet – which literally means a branch, or a stick. That rod can be used for beating or it can be used for measuring. So the rod could denote God's standards, as in measure, it could denote God's

discipline of us, or it could denote God's protection – that with His rod He beats off attackers.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. There are plenty of people in this world whose worldview differs from ours as followers of Jesus. It would be nice to be able to lock ourselves away from such people, especially the antagonistic ones, and throughout history there have been plenty of people who have tried. They have elevated their personal holiness to the point where it is more important than being God's salt and light in the world.

But doing things God's way, seeing from God's perspective doesn't allow us to do this. The Psalmist doesn't talk of God allowing us to *avoid* difficult people, he talks about us sitting down to dinner with them! This is one area where the Hebrews of the Old Testament really got it wrong! If God's intention for them was that they form into a holy enclave, safe from the evil influences of the outside world, then He put them in the worst possible location!

The land of Israel is smack-bang in the middle of trade routes, on a land-bridge that joins two continents - Asia Minor and Africa! Israel was always having visitors passing through! The idea was that Israel would be as Isaiah puts it: *"...a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."* (Isa 49:6)

To put it into a NZ context, if you wanted to establish a commune isolated from the outside world where people could carefully guard their holiness, you'd set it up in the Ureweras, or on the West Coast of the South Island – you wouldn't do it in suburban Auckland! Yet that's where God has put us! He has prepared a table for us in the presence of those who don't see the world the way we do!

I think at this point I'd like to recognize the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. One theological viewpoint claims that since we now have the Bible to guide us, the gifts of the Spirit in the form of prophecy and word of knowledge are no longer needed. I don't agree with that one.

I believe that God is actively communicating with us via His Holy Spirit. But the enemy is also crowding the airwaves, and so too are our own fertile imaginations. I've known a number of occasions when people have made bold claims that God is speaking through them, but when their claim is put under the spotlight of Biblical values and principles, it doesn't stand up to the scrutiny.

You see, despite being a library more than a book, and despite having dozens of authors, the Bible has a remarkably consistent story to tell, and that consistency will continue into communiqués from God via the Holy Spirit. But in order to understand this consistent story, we need to stand back and see the big picture. This is what the theologians call the meta-narrative.

If we only look at small chunks of the Bible, we can end up getting a somewhat distorted picture, which is how many people see the Bible. American secretary of state Hilary Clinton recently described the earthquake in Haiti as "Biblical" in its scale of destruction. What does that mean?

Insurance companies refer to natural disasters as "acts of God". To see something like an earthquake as an act of God is to surely misunderstand the true nature of God.

I have a great appreciation for the cartoons of Gary Larson – here's one that gives us insight into how Gary Larson sees God: God is about to push a button that says "Smite" [God at His computer]

If we quote the Bible in small enough chunks, and far enough out of context, we can justify just about anything.

In 2 Corinthians 11 writing about his exploits as an Apostle, Paul states "once I was stoned". I've heard this used as justification for drug abuse. If we look at only some verses, and don't look at the big picture, we get a picture of God that is distorted.

There's a verse that Hilary Clinton, insurance companies and Gary Larson don't seem to have read: 1 John 4:8 "*Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love*".

When we stand back, and take a look at the big picture, the broad sweep, the meta-narrative of the Bible – the story it tells

from Genesis to Revelation, what we see is that God is relentlessly seeking to redeem humanity – to draw people back into relationship with Him, despite humanity's relentless forsaking of God.

God's love is consistent, undying, and completely unreasonable! Rich Mullins, one of my favourite songwriters wrote a song that talked of the "reckless raging fury that we call the Love of God".

So what are some of these principles? I think if you're going to build a doctrine, it's a bit dangerous to build it around one instance where something is mentioned in Scripture. The principles and values that are worth hanging on to are the ones that recur as a theme throughout the Bible.

For instance we've already talked about Ephesians 5 regarding marriage. Right from where Eve is introduced to Adam, the Bible has a theme that tells us that God places a high value on marriage. Sue and I have tried to the best of our ability to conduct our marriage on Biblical principles – mutual love and respect, not letting the sun go down on anger, staying exclusively faithful to each other - and you know what? I think that after 20 years of marriage, we can safely say that God's way actually works – we've formed a control group and done the research.

Another thematic thread that runs through Scripture is that of honouring parents: ^{EX 20:12} "*Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you*" And in the New Testament Colossians 3:20 says "*Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord*". And there are numerous other like-verses. What does it look like to honour your parents? It might mean different things to different people, in different ages.

I think there is a very good piece of Scripture that encapsulates what we've talked about this morning: The Old Testament prophet Micah wrote: "*He has showed you, O people, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*". (Micah 6:8)

To be consistent with the idea of looking for a theme to build our understanding on, in the New Testament, when telling off the Pharisees, Jesus said: “...*you have neglected the more important matters of the law--justice, mercy and faithfulness*”.

God has shown us how to live through the meta-narrative of Scripture. And justice, mercy and humility or faithfulness are values that are near to God's heart.

What does God want from us? How does He want us to conduct our lives? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with Him.

So that's God's way – Justice, mercy and humility. God's way is the best way to live - for own benefit as well as for His glory. When we live our lives according to God's principles, it's a win/win situation. It should come as no surprise that when I do things God's way, I can usually see why He says to do things that way. It doesn't mean life is all plain sailing – far from it. But it also doesn't mean that life is without fun and fulfilment – in fact, quite the opposite. When I wilfully go my own way, that's when things really turn to custard.

I think the last word should go to the Apostle Paul, as he wrote to the Colossians:

*“Let the word of Christ **dwell** in you **richly** as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God”.*

(Col 3:16)