

My Theological Junk Drawer

From misfit items to full storage bins

I have a junk drawer in the kitchen. This is the place where little things go that don't have a real home, or when I'm too lazy to put them where they actually belong. They are the small pieces of life that don't seem to fit anywhere. I have a few theological junk drawers as well. Everything that doesn't fit neatly in my worldview gets tossed in one of the junk drawers.

My entire life I've looked through only one lens - a Christian lens. I grew up going to church every Sunday. I went to Bible camp in the summer and youth group throughout my teen years. I even graduated from Bible College after high school. I've only listened to Christians explain how the world came into existence, why we have suffering, what happens to us when we die, what God is like, what man's primary purpose is, how we got here and where we are going. Creation, Fall and Redemption was the template to explain the deepest questions and yearnings of the human soul. The story goes like this:

God made the world perfect and everything he made was very good. Then man rebelled by disobeying God and the world was thrust into a state of wickedness, pain, suffering and disrepair. All humans were sentenced to Hell because not only did they all sin but their very nature was corrupt. Because our rebellion was against an infinite God, the punishment also needed to be infinite, hence, the sentence of eternal conscious torment. To remedy this, God sent his son to bear God's wrath on our behalf and redeem all who put their trust in Jesus. Everyone who believes in Jesus is promised eternal life. Built conveniently into my theology is a flashing yellow caution light for any teaching, philosophy or ideas that would contradict the claims of Christianity. Agnostics and atheists are of the devil, proud, hard-hearted, unenlightened, deceived, unregenerate fools who are most certainly headed for eternal damnation.

So why would I ever even consider listening to an unbeliever? They are the enemy of the faith. Besides being instructed to be very careful about whom I listen to and where I get my counsel, I was also reminded of what happens to everyone who doesn't put their trust in Christ. Eternal conscious torment awaits anyone who leaves the faith, or never accepts it in the first place. If I only listen to Christians defend the faith and validate its claims, if I'm only told that Christianity is true and all other religions are false, and I never listen to an outsider offer another explanation. It's no surprise that my only grid for explaining the deep mysteries of life is Christianity and the Bible.

Most of the tough questions could be answered through this Creation/Fall/Redemption motif and I believed it. Every word of it. Why is there suffering? Because of the Fall. We brought it on ourselves. Why doesn't God intervene? He does through redeeming all who trust in Jesus. In the afterlife everything will be made right.

Occasionally, though, some plaguing questions would surface that couldn't be explained away as convincingly as I would hope. They didn't quite fit in my neat Christian belief box, so I had to toss them in my junk drawers. These drawers were the catch all of every misfit idea, question, inquiry or paradox. These drawers were labeled in such a way that I could store this info away and still keep my existing views intact. One drawer was my "Miracle" drawer. Every supernatural claim or event could be explained by God's ability to override natural laws and perform miracles. So nothing is impossible with God. Claims made that couldn't possibly happen from a naturalistic explanation could be thrown in the miracle drawer. Another drawer was my "Mystery" drawer. Whatever can't be explained or justified from

a human perspective is relegated to the mystery drawer. God's ways are not our ways and so he can do whatever he pleases. It may look immoral to us, but we can't judge God's motives because he is different from us - a decent rationalization for the countless disturbing injustices recorded in scripture from genocide, rape, incest, deceit and murder by God's "chosen" tribe.

Through much reading and researching (and I mean much, much reading and researching), I've come to recognize this as cognitive dissonance - compartmentalizing my thinking in order to sustain my Christian view of the world.

So what if we got "God" wrong in the first place.

If there is no all-loving, all-powerful, all-knowing, invisible being, who is infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his attributes, I can accept the chaos, pain, suffering and injustices I see without having to continually exonerate God for not being present and involved. I realized that my junk drawers were getting full; they were starting to spill out. I began to wonder if "mystery" and "miracles" were really the best destinations for my growing questions. A junk drawer shouldn't be more full than, say the silverware drawer or the linen closet. Junk drawers are for small misfit items. They shouldn't encompass an entire storage unit. Perhaps if I had a bigger theology box that could contain my accumulated junk, I could emptying out these drawers. What if I could find explanations that didn't require magic or the mystery escape clause? It was time to dump everything out and see if they would fit within a different framework. So these last few years I've taken off my Christian glasses and have put on spectacles of a different prescription. Rather than trying to make the world, history, science, cosmology, and the universe fit within a Christian worldview, I'm throwing out the box and looking for better explanations.

I'm realizing that our universe makes so much more sense from an evolutionary/ naturalistic vantage point. If God is taken out of the equation, I don't have to try to reconcile a loving, all powerful, all knowing, deity with the unbearable suffering I see in the world. I don't have to wonder why God will let my friend's newborn die or why millions of children are starving. I don't have to speculate why God allows tsunamis and other natural disasters to kill hundreds of thousands of men, women and children without warning. Without God, I can relegate stories of talking animals and supernatural events to fantasy and myth rather than try and explain why or how God could do such things. Without God, I can accept evolution and the real facts about the universe, rather than try to squeeze the ice age, dinosaurs, splitting of the continents, etc. into a 6,000-year young earth creation theory. I don't have to wonder why Christians do bad things and atheists do good things. I don't have to read a dozen commentaries to explain why Jesus didn't come back within the lifetime of his followers as promised and why we should still trust him.

I don't have to try to reconcile the contradictions and errors in Scripture with the idea that the Bible is God-breathed and inerrant. I don't have to speculate about what we will do forever in Heaven or try and understand how we won't be able to sin there, and if that were true, why we didn't just go to heaven in the first place. I don't have to try to align the Genesis account of creation with scientific evidence or reconcile God's love with the doctrine of eternal conscious torment. I don't have to wonder how God could make belief the requirement of salvation without giving every single person (from every generation and geographic location, age, IQ, and culture) a chance to hear and respond. My junk drawers are filled with paradoxes. God is all-powerful but doesn't intervene. He is all knowing and yet created Lucifer. God loves all but only chooses to save some. We have free will but God elects people for salvation. God is perfect but makes imperfect beings. The universe is so complex; it must have had an intelligent designer. Yet, the designer doesn't have a designer.

I think there will always be a “mystery” junk drawer, because there is so much we will never understand. But the mystery is no longer about reconciling our reality with our perception of deity, but simply resting in the knowledge that we are fallible and incapable of unlocking every mystery in the universe. Little by little, though, we will learn more and more, through scientific discoveries and hard empirical evidence, making our junk drawers increasingly manageable.