

The Fire That Makes Us Gold
Conversations Beneath the Stars
The Questions Edition - Sixth Draft

The right answers are of little value if we're asking the wrong questions. We must learn to ask the right questions - not so we can borrow conclusions, but so we can discover and understand the answers ourselves.

Prologue - Two Chairs and a Fire

By the time the first stars appeared, we'd already stopped trying to fix the world.

There were two folding chairs, a small fire, and a kettle that had been taking longer than either of us thought reasonable.

"Do you think God had a plan for all this?" my friend asked.

"The kettle?"

"The universe."

"A little ambitious for a Sunday evening."

He held his hands toward the flame. "Everyone tells us why we need saving. I've heard that sermon. What I keep wondering is - saved for what?"

I didn't answer. There were answers I could repeat, certainly. I wondered whether any of them would answer what he meant.

A log shifted, and a small shower of sparks went up between us. He watched them fade.

"You're quiet," he said.

"I was going to ask whether God had a purpose," I said. "Now I wonder whether we are asking about the purpose or only about what went wrong."

"Isn't that what I just asked?"

"Not quite. If I take a broken clock to a craftsman, I can ask how he will repair it. But that still leaves another question. Why make a clock at all?"

"That is a different question."

"And maybe we shouldn't jump to the end of it."

The kettle finally began to hiss. He reached for it before I could.

"Good," he said. "We've got all night."

Chapter One - The Bridge

"Imagine a bridge," I said.

He sighed. "Does everything have to become a construction project with you?"

"Would you rather imagine an airplane?"

"Absolutely not. I've seen your drawings."

"Fine. A bridge. You have the blueprint. Every measurement is right, every material is specified. Can you drive over it?"

"Not unless I enjoy swimming."

"So the drawing isn't the bridge," I said.

"I know. But here is what bothers me. If the design is good, what exactly does the test add?"

"It might reveal whether the builder understood the design," I said. "Or whether the materials can carry what the drawing promised."

"You inspect it. Test the loads. Watch what happens when the weather changes."

"And if it holds?" I asked.

"Then you finally learn something about the bridge that you could not learn from paper alone."

"Why test it at all? Didn't you trust your calculations?"

"Calculations aren't the bridge."

"That was your point, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Part of it," I said. "You found the part I was about to skip."

"Then perhaps you could let me build the next analogy."

He studied me. The fire cracked, and a coal rolled to the edge of the ring.

"You're headed toward Genesis."

"I am. Genesis 1:26 says, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.' Romans 8:29 speaks about being conformed to the image of God's Son. What do you make of those together?"

"That humanity has something to become?"

"Maybe," I said. "And perhaps the image is a starting point and likeness is something we grow into."

"Hold on." He turned his cup slowly. "Genesis doesn't say those are two stages. Are you reading that into it because the bridge analogy sounds convincing?"

"I might be," I admitted. "Romans speaks of being conformed to Christ. That suggests growth, but it doesn't tell us exactly how to read the two words in Genesis."

He tossed a twig into the coals. "A child is fully human on the day of birth."

"But not fully grown."

"And talent?"

"Can be present without being exercised."

"Does unused talent exist?"

"That's a good argument for a longer evening. It's there as possibility. But nobody hears the music until someone learns to play."

"Does that make a life a building site?"

"Maybe that's too mechanical. A bridge doesn't disagree with the builder."

"A child does."

"Constantly."

He laughed. The kettle tipped slightly, and I reached for it before either of us lost our tea.

"You are asking whether refusal can be part of learning," I said. "I had only been thinking about the strength of the bridge."

"What if the ability to disagree matters?" he asked.

"Matters for what?" I asked. "If the builder wants obedience, disagreement is a defect. If the aim includes judgment, is it?"

He turned toward the sky. Above the treeline, the stars had thickened.

"That's what I'm trying to find out."

Chapter Two - One Tree

Something white moved over the tent, and we both looked up. For a second it seemed larger than it was - the firelight had made a ghost of it. Then it was gone, and we laughed at ourselves, and the owl did not come back.

"Eden is still strange to me," he said. "A garden, abundance, and one prohibition."

"Which part?"

"Why put the forbidden thing there?"

"I don't know," I said. "But the command does make a choice possible. Would a garden without any limit raise the same question about trust?"

"Maybe not. Yet if the point was trust, why promise knowledge as the reward for breaking it?"

"Would you suddenly need it?"

"I might start wanting it."

"Why?"

"Because someone else decided the limit."

He waited, as if I'd supplied the entire explanation. I hadn't.

"Or maybe we are both simplifying," I said. "The serpent offered something that sounded good. Is the boundary what drew them, or the possibility of becoming something they were not?"

"Why must we call wanting knowledge bad?" he asked. "Wouldn't you rather have someone curious than obedient without understanding?"

"I would. But is curiosity the same as insisting that every limit is mine to remove?"

He pointed at the kettle. "I told you not to touch it because it's hot. You can still touch it."

"Thanks for the generous freedom."

"Would you resent me for the warning?"

"No. I know what burns feel like."

He grew quiet. Something rustled in the dry leaves beyond the firelight, then stopped.

"What if you didn't?" he asked.

The fire shifted. A spark lifted, drifted a few inches, and died.

"Perhaps the warning would sound different," I said. "But we should be careful. We cannot read Adam and Eve's complete thoughts. We can ask what the situation reveals about our own."

"Want and need. Are those the same?"

"Certainly not. Yet don't we sometimes talk as if every denied wish is a stolen necessity?"

"And when someone limits what I can do, I may feel that they've taken something from me."

"Even before I've lost anything."

He looked into the dark beyond the fire.

"Do you think much of human conflict begins there?"

"Perhaps. But if we start calling every disagreement a fight for control, we'll explain everything and understand nothing."

"Then perhaps the better question is not whether people want control," he said. "It is what they fear losing when control slips away."

I moved my cup away from the coals. "That would make the same anger mean different things for different people."

"And when does an ordinary desire become something we believe we are owed?"

Chapter Three - What Did the Warning Mean?

"Do you think Eve knew what death meant?" he asked.

"She was warned."

"That isn't what I asked."

"Fair correction."

I held the cup close to the fire. "I can tell a child a hundred times that the iron is hot. Does knowing my words mean knowing a burn?"

"Not necessarily."

"Then consider this: what if Eve had already seen the consequences we read about later - her family divided, Abel dead, grief that couldn't be reversed?"

"That's a terrible thing to put before her."

"I'm not wishing it on her. I'm asking whether the serpent's promise would sound the same afterward."

He sat back. An owl called somewhere behind us, and he waited until it had finished.

"Perhaps she'd ask him what the promise would cost."

"Perhaps. Or maybe she would still be tempted. Humans do repeat mistakes they know are costly."

"Then experience isn't enough."

"What would be enough?" I asked. "A lesson can be remembered without being used."

"Perhaps the difference is not what you remember but what changes when you choose again," he said.

"You say that confidently," I said. "How would you tell the difference between a person who learned and a person who is merely afraid to try again?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Would the next choice tell us?"

"Hebrews 5:14 says mature people have their senses exercised by use to discern good and evil."

"Does it mean we should try every evil to understand it?"

"Surely not. You don't have to jump off a bridge to know gravity deserves respect."

He laughed. "Good. For a moment I thought our book was going to recommend terrible experiments."

"Some lessons come through observation, instruction, and trust," I said. "But how would we know whether we have learned one if it never affects a choice?"

"Memory," he said. Then he shook his head. "No. Memory alone would only preserve the warning."

"So what would preserve the judgment?"

"Or is the change in what we want the clearest evidence that we actually learned?" I asked.

He rubbed his hands together. "And if it changes judgment, does it also change what we want?"

I watched his face, curious where he would take that question. The fire had burned down to a steady orange, and the cold was beginning to press against my back.

"That's one I'd rather not answer too quickly," I said.

Chapter Four - The Fire and the Gold

The logs settled, and for a moment the fire shone brighter.

"Gold," he said.

"What about it?"

"It can be mixed with other materials. We heat and process it to separate what we want from what we don't."

"Careful. Gold doesn't learn anything in the furnace."

"No. But it emerges different."

"People aren't metal."

"Yet Scripture uses the comparison. Job speaks of coming forth as gold after being tried. First Peter speaks of faith tested like gold."

"Then surely everyone who suffers ought to come out better," I said. "If we follow that comparison all the way."

"That doesn't follow," he said. "I never said people were gold. Gold cannot refuse the furnace or learn from it."

"So what is the comparison good for?" I asked. "If it cannot explain the way people respond, maybe the fire is not the whole story."

"Then perhaps the question is not what the fire does to gold," he said. "It is what people do when the fire comes."

"And suffering?"

"Does suffering automatically refine someone?"

He stared into the flames before answering. "I've known suffering that made a person gentler. I've also seen suffering leave someone bitter."

"Then I shouldn't call every tragedy a refining fire," I said.

"Especially not to someone still inside it," he replied.

I nodded. "Joseph tells his brothers in Genesis 50:20 that they meant evil against him and God meant it for good. Does that mean the brothers' cruelty became good?"

"No."

"Does it prove every cruel act is a required step in God's plan?"

"I don't think so."

"But it leaves open the possibility that good can arise where someone intended evil."

He picked up a stick and traced a line through the ash.

"A bridge can be tested without anyone hating the bridge," he said. "Maybe we should stop confusing the load with the person who designed it."

"Or confusing what God can redeem with what God approves."

He looked pleased, then immediately suspicious.

"Are we doing it again?"

"Doing what?"

"Finding a neat answer and putting a ribbon around it."

I pushed the stick back into the fire. A small flame caught, then died.

"Then ask what the answer doesn't explain," I said. "I can think of at least one thing."

"Why doesn't every person emerge from hardship more faithful?" he asked.

"That was mine too," I said. "Maybe the question is harder than either of our analogies."

Neither of us touched that question for a while. The wind had shifted, and the smoke was coming toward us now. We moved our chairs without speaking.

Chapter Five - The Beautiful One

"There's another figure in this story," he said at last.

"Satan?"

"Or whoever stands behind the rebellion Scripture describes." He turned his cup slowly in his hands.

"Everyone seems certain they know his biography. Do we?"

"Not completely. Job describes an accuser. Revelation identifies the dragon with the devil and Satan. Jesus speaks of Satan's fall. But we aren't given a tidy chapter titled 'Where Satan Came From.'"

"And Ezekiel?"

"Chapter 28 speaks of a beautiful figure, described as perfect in his ways until iniquity was found. Its direct address is to the king of Tyre. Some Christians see a deeper reference to Satan. We should say when we're making that move."

An owl called from the ridge behind us. Neither of us spoke until it had finished.

"Let's not assume it, then," he said. "Just consider the question the imagery raises."

"Which is?" I asked. "And let us not turn a picture into a biography."

"How can something splendid fail?"

"Perhaps because splendid describes an ability, not its use," I said. "But that raises another question. How would anyone know the difference before the choice?"

"By watching the choice," he said. "Which is almost too late."

"Too late for whom?"

"Wait," he said. "You sound as if we have already decided Satan possessed every perfection and then lost it. Haven't we just agreed the text is less clear?"

"We have," I said. "Then let's ask what the imagery invites us to examine, not who we can prove it describes."

He leaned forward. "But there is a stranger contradiction. If a creature wanted God's position, what exactly would it be trying to possess?"

"Power? Rule? Worship?"

"And what if the thing that makes God God isn't reducible to power?"

"First John says God is love. Scripture speaks of His truthfulness and faithfulness."

"So could someone reject love and truth yet become what God is merely by seizing authority?"

"You're getting ahead of yourself," I said. "The passages don't give us a complete account of Satan wanting to occupy God's throne."

"I know," he said. "Can we still explore the contradiction as a possibility without declaring the biography settled?"

"We can," I said. "But hold the possibility loosely. A position and a nature aren't the same thing."

"Imagine a man stealing a judge's robe," he said. "Does the robe make him just?"

"No. It makes him a thief with better tailoring."

He laughed, then looked upward again. A meteor cut across the sky, and neither of us spoke until it was gone.

"Then why do people keep wanting the robe?"

"Maybe because a robe is easy to take," I said. "But becoming just takes something no one can steal."

"Or perhaps we keep mistaking being obeyed for being worthy of obedience," he said.

"That would explain more than a few things I have seen," I said. "But is it a fact about human nature or merely a temptation some of us share?"

We were getting close to making another grand theory. Neither said it aloud.

"What if the story of weakness and strength matters here?" he asked. "First Corinthians 1:27 says God chose weak things to shame the strong."

"Paul is speaking to a particular community about God's surprising choices. Can we apply that principle to all of creation?"

"Not as proof. But could it make us reconsider what we call greatness?"

The fire snapped loudly enough to interrupt us.

"Let's put it this way," I said. "What would count as evidence that someone is worthy of trust: the power they have, or what they choose to do with it?"

"I was going to say how someone uses power," he said. "But that does not settle who gets to judge the use."

"Nor whether a good choice once predicts the next one," I said.

He didn't answer. He didn't have to.

Chapter Six - The Quiet Addiction to Control

"Here's another problem," my friend said. "Why do people cling to grudges when the anger makes them miserable?"

"Maybe because the wrongdoing hasn't been acknowledged."

"Sometimes. But I've seen people replay an argument for years, long after the other person stopped thinking about it."

"Have you ever replayed one?"

"Only a few thousand times."

"What happens in the replay?"

"I finally say the perfect thing. The other fellow realizes I was right."

"And how does that imaginary victory feel?"

He laughed. "Better than the original argument."

"Then are you remembering what happened - or participating in what you wish had happened?"

The question hung between us. A branch cracked somewhere in the dark, and he glanced toward it before answering.

"Anticipation," he said. "The mind keeps returning to the imagined version because the imagined version is better."

"So every imaginary argument is a pleasant experience?" I asked. "Some leave me exhausted rather than satisfied."

"No. I didn't say every one. I'm asking why I sometimes return to the ones I hate remembering."

"That is harder to explain," I said. "I wonder whether the mind mistakes imagined victory for repaired dignity."

"But is dignity repaired if nobody else knows the argument happened?" he asked.

"That question bothers me more than the first one," I admitted.

"Maybe giving up the imaginary victory."

"Does forgiving mean pretending nothing happened?"

"No. And it shouldn't mean allowing abuse to continue."

"Or never seeking justice?"

"No."

"Then what are we surrendering?"

He watched the sparks drift upward. "Perhaps the idea that I must personally arrange how the story ends."

"And trust?" I asked. "If I stop directing the outcome, what replaces my sense of control?"

"Perhaps nothing has to replace it immediately," he said. "Maybe that is the hard part."

"Even when we don't like the uncertainty?"

"Especially then."

I thought of how often people use the word need when what they mean is want. I thought of how quickly disappointment becomes accusation. The fire had burned low, and the cold was beginning to reach my hands.

He noticed my silence.

"Does God want people who never get angry?" he asked.

"I don't know that Scripture asks us never to feel anger. It does ask what we do with it."

"I was about to answer that for you," I said. "Then I realized I would be doing exactly what we have been arguing about."

"And who gets to decide when justice is enough?"

"That may be the question the grudge keeps us from asking."

Chapter Seven - A Child Who Trusts

A cold gust lifted the smoke into our faces. We shifted our chairs.

"Do you think faith is believing something without evidence?" my friend asked.

"People use the word that way."

"Do you?"

"No. But I also wouldn't call every untested guess faith."

"Then what is it?"

"Let me try a different question. Can a child trust his father without knowing the father's next decision?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he knows his father."

"Does he know everything about him?"

"No."

"Does he need to?"

"Not if what he knows gives him reason to trust."

"Then knowing the father is doing quite a lot of work in your example," I said. "What if the child misunderstands him?"

"Then the child needs more than trust," he said. "He needs a way to learn whether the trust is well placed."

"Which sounds like examination," I said. "So perhaps faith and questions are not enemies after all."

"That's what I wonder. Daniel 3 describes three men who believed God could deliver them, but would not abandon Him even if He didn't. What were they trusting?"

"Not a guaranteed escape."

"Then what?"

He sat with that a long time. The fire had settled into a steady glow, and the stars above the treeline were sharp and cold.

"What happens when the father disappoints the child?" he finally asked.

"Then my analogy has a problem," I said. "Some fathers fail their children terribly. They have good reasons not to trust them."

"Don't throw it away yet," he said. "Is the point that every father is trustworthy, or that trust can grow from knowing a person rather than predicting every act?"

"The second," I said. "And now you have made my example harder, because we still have to ask how we come to know God's character."

"Maybe Scripture itself asks us to examine God's character rather than just collect promises."

"Yes, and I have another uncomfortable question," I said. "If I trust only while I get what I asked for, do I trust God or my expectations?"

"What about doubt?"

"Mark 9:24 gives us someone saying, 'I believe; help thou mine unbelief.' It doesn't sound like a person barred from God for asking."

My friend smiled. "Then questions aren't necessarily disloyal."

"Would trust that cannot tolerate a question be trust?"

He turned his empty cup upside down, and we both realized we'd forgotten the kettle.

Chapter Eight - The Memory of the Road

"Let me return to Eden," he said after we'd made more tea. "Imagine Eve had already known loss. Would the temptation have worked?"

"We imagined that earlier."

"But we didn't follow it far enough. Suppose a person has lived through the consequences, understood the choices, and learned to trust God's character. Then suppose that person reaches the future Revelation describes. What could rebellion promise?"

"Something the person thinks is better?"

"Better than what?"

"That's the challenge, isn't it?"

He smiled. "People resist giving up comfort even when the alternative might be better in the long run. What happens when they know from experience which road leads where?"

"Does knowing prevent every foolish choice?" I asked. "I have known better and still done worse."

"So have I," he said. "Then knowing must mean something more than possessing the facts."

"Perhaps it means the facts finally reach the part of us that chooses."

"And how would that happen?"

"Persistent memory?"

He laughed. "You make it sound like a computer."

"I've heard worse analogies."

"Imagine you could keep every lesson that mattered, not just as facts but as judgment you no longer had to relearn," I said.

"Then I have two questions," he replied. "Would you still be free? And would you still be able to learn something new?"

"I hope so. When I decline to put my hand into the fire, I have not lost freedom. But perhaps I have gained room to think about something besides the burn."

"But if nothing could persuade you otherwise, is it still a real choice?"

"Is maturity measured by how often we're willing to make the same mistake?"

"Maybe neither of those is quite right," I said. "Could a choice remain possible after its old attraction has disappeared?"

"And could love change what is attractive without taking the choice away?" he asked.

I had no quick reply. The fire had burned down to a bed of coals, and the cold was pressing in from all sides.

He continued. "First John 3:2 says we shall be like Him. Revelation imagines a dwelling of God with humanity where death and mourning have passed away. It doesn't explain every mechanism. But if such a life is possible, what kind of people could live it?"

"And how would they become those people?"

"And why would they want to leave?"

The stars looked sharper as the fire grew lower.

"Maybe we have been asking how God will prevent the next rebellion," I said, "when another question is whether mature love would want rebellion at all."

"You said something I had not noticed," he replied. "We keep imagining freedom and faithfulness as opposites. Do they have to be?"

He nodded slowly but didn't declare victory.

"Then what's the difference between freely choosing good and being unable to imagine anything else?"

We let the question remain. Somewhere in the dark, an animal moved through the brush, and neither of us bothered to guess what it was.

Chapter Nine - The Answers We Borrow

We had reached the hour when people begin mistaking tiredness for wisdom.

"Tell me," he said, "what have we established tonight?"

"Not very much with certainty."

"Then perhaps we wasted a perfectly good evening," he said. "Unless we found something worth questioning tomorrow."

"I found out where I was too certain," I said. "You found questions I would not have asked. Does that count?"

"Only if the bridge survives tomorrow," he said.

"Then tomorrow we should test the bridge again," I said. "But not mistake the drawing for the river."

"You mean we see a destination and have to work backward?"

"Yes. But then we need to walk forward again, to see whether the path really leads there."

"Like testing the bridge."

"Not again."

He grinned. The fire had burned down to almost nothing, and I could feel the cold on my face.

"What about First Thessalonians 5:21?" he asked.

"Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."

"In the other language Bible texts I remember is says: 'Test everything, cling to good.'"

"Test everything. Hold on to what is good."

"Is that telling us to experience every possible thing?"

"Of course not. Testing an idea isn't the same as living through its consequences."

"Then does questioning express a lack of faith?"

"Not necessarily. It might be one way of taking belief seriously."

"And when an answer comes from somebody we trust?"

"Do we borrow the answer," I asked, "or do we learn enough about it to know what it answers?"

"Could borrowed answers be a starting point instead of a failure?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "But where does borrowing stop and understanding begin?"

He stared at the orange edge of a log. "Maybe we should have begun with a better question."

"Which one?"

"Instead of asking whether we can explain everything about God, what if we ask what kind of people our understanding is making us?"

"I nearly gave you a conclusion," I said. "But your question makes my earlier answers feel unfinished."

I almost answered. It would have been a tidy line, the kind that closes a chapter and asks nothing of the reader.

Instead, I asked, "How would we tell?"

Epilogue - The Last Question

The fire was nearly out. Somewhere past the trees, an animal moved through the brush. We couldn't see it, and neither of us bothered to guess what it was.

My friend folded his chair.

"There's still something I don't understand."

"Only something?"

He laughed. "You keep doing that."

"You keep giving me opportunities."

He looked up at the stars, then toward the little circle of light we'd made on the ground.

"We've talked about what God might be developing in humans. What about all the people who never have a conversation like this? Who never get time to sit by a fire and puzzle over Scripture?"

"Maybe they ask the questions in different ways."

"Or maybe they never find words for them."

"Does that mean the questions aren't part of their lives?"

He paused. The last of the coals was fading, and the cold was beginning to settle in earnest.

"Do you think a person needs to know the purpose of a life in order to live toward it?"

I reached for the bucket of water.

"That's a better question than the one we started with."

"Do you have an answer?"

I poured water onto the final coals. They hissed, and the small orange glow vanished.

"Not one I'm ready to hand you."

He stood beside me, watching the smoke disappear into the dark.

"Next Sunday?"

"If you bring the firewood."

"And if I bring another question?"

I picked up my chair.

"What makes you think we'll have finished with this one?"