

Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. YouTube. Pinterest. Wikipedia. Snapchat. Together, you might say, they are weapons — *weapons of mass distraction*.

You know how it works. You are cooking something on the stove when you hear a ping from your smartphone. You say, “Okay, while that’s cooking, I’ll go see what that notification is about. Oh no, he’s totally wrong! I have to reply to this post ... Ha, that cat picture is silly ... What a cool video! And that other video in the thumbnail looks interesting, too ... That friend from high school he’s totally wrong again! ... This Wikipedia article has a lot of cool information.” Meanwhile, in the kitchen: there is a five-alarm fire happening.

Journalist Shankar Vedantam knows that most of us react to the beeps and buzzes of our phones with great urgency, like parents responding to a baby’s cry. Although we know that it isn’t healthy or sane to do so, we still do it. But now, research is showing that we really should make an effort to avoid distractions. When we become lost in social media or email, we lose our ability to focus.

In his *Hidden Brain* podcast, Vedantam profiles Cal Newport, a computer scientist at Georgetown University and author of a book called *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. Newport believes that we should minimize the problems created by constant interruptions, and he insists that “it’s more urgent than people realize.”

Here’s the problem: When we let emails or Facebook messages guide our workday, we’re weakening our ability to do the most challenging kind of work — what Newport calls “deep work.” This is the work that requires sustained attention, such as writing a report, solving an engineering problem, or doing significant research.

The solution to distractions, according to Newport, is to do what we can to set aside long portions of our day to focus on deeper thinking. This means no social media, limited email, and strict limits on appointments. The result is a life

that is richer and more human than a life of robotically responding to emails and clicking on websites, which is what many of us practically end up doing all day.

In many churches, an announcement is often given before worship reminding people to silence their smartphones. Sometimes, this announcement is made by the pastor or worship leader. Which can lead us to stop and considered how difficult it is for the people who attend worship on Sunday to go through an hour without checking messages. This practice can lead us to stop and think about who we are, when we aren't tied up in technology or our electronic devices.

In today's Old Testament reading, God challenges a righteous man named Job to do the "*deep work*" of answering the question of who he is in relation to God. It is not a question that can be answered by a quick Google search, because it involves deep thinking about what it means to be a human created by God. And the challenge that God gives Job is also a challenge to us — one that pushes us to unplug ourselves long enough to ask and answer some deep questions.

For starters, "Who is God?" That's a big one, and if we search the internet, we find that God is holy, love, Father, Jesus, Spirit, God is almighty, omnipotent, merciful and more. None of these answers is wrong, but such answers can be distracting, providing us with too much information.

In the book of Job, God keeps things much simpler when speaking to Job out of a whirlwind. God asks, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" In other words, "Where were *you* — Job — when *I* — God — laid the foundation of the earth?" Both the "you" and the "I" are important.

In his book *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Protestant reformer John Calvin unveils one of the guiding principles of his theology on the twofold knowledge of God. Calvin argues that our knowledge of God consists of two parts: knowing God as Creator and knowing God as Redeemer. Anchored to this is our knowledge of ourselves. And this Knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves

are connected and interrelated, according to Calvin, and we cannot have one without the other. Calvin begins by saying that “without knowledge of self, there is no knowledge of God.”

That’s why God asks Job from the whirlwind, “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding” Knowledge of self and knowledge of God are both important. “Who determined its measurements?” God asks. “Surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together, and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy?”

Writing in his commentary on this text, pastor Tom Are points out that “the voice in the whirlwind asks a series of questions that Job cannot answer.” Job does not know the answers because he is finite. Only the infinite God knows. “This is perhaps the first word from the whirlwind: Job is creature, not creator.”

Perhaps this is something we need to hear and understand as well, because our high-tech world regards some people as godlike. Peter Thiel, one of Silicon Valley’s high-tech gurus, recently said that “Humans are distinguished from other species by our ability to work miracles. We call these miracles technology.” But hold on — technology may be helpful, but it is not miraculous. Instead, it can involve factories that pollute, narrow corporate interests, and the marketing of personal information in a way that can hurt us as well as help us.

Only God is the Creator. Humans can be creative and develop marvelous technology, but we cannot work miracles. We were not present when God laid the foundation of the earth, so we cannot do God’s miraculous work. God is the Creator of all that is, including us.

So, the deep question “Who is God?” can be answered with the word “Creator.” But how about the question, “Who are *we*?” What does it mean for us to be human creatures that our part of His creation?

God answers this, in part, as the one “who has put wisdom in the inward parts” and “given understanding to the mind.” As creatures who are made in the image of God, we are people who have been given wisdom and understanding by our Creator. And when we do deep work, we realize that we do not have all the answers. Only God does.

But we can have wisdom, understanding, and the ability to search for answers as we live in relationship with God and with one another. “The world is complex and painful,” writes Pastor Tom. “But the [God] who laid the foundations of the world did so in order that there might be a world, and so that we might be in it.” Our Creator wants us to live in a relationship with the Divine, and to share the wisdom, understanding and love of the Divine.

The brilliant theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking, as you may remember died in March of 2018 at the age of 76. He spent his career exploring the universe. He inspired many people with his intelligence, humor, and insights into the Big Bang, which many people believe happened when God “laid the foundation of the earth” Hawking knew how to focus, and was a man who was always looking for wisdom and understanding.

He also had a crippling disease. At age 21, Hawking was diagnosed with ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. After a throat operation in the mid-1980s, he designed an electronic voice system which eventually allowed him to enjoy sophisticated computerized communication.

Although Hawking relied on a wheelchair and a voice system, he was always connected to others. “He was like all of us,” says science professor Hélène Mialet in *The Atlantic*, “all too human, and always dependent on others, whether humans or machines.” The life of Stephen Hawking reminds us that none of us acts alone. In fact, our being and acting require a network of complex support.

The question “Who are we?” can be answered in part with the word “social.” We are social animals, created by God to be in relationship with God and with each other. None of us can survive for very long by ourselves, but we need the support and accountability of a community.

Fortunately, God has created a world in which we are wonderfully interconnected, a world in which God provides for all creatures, from people to lions to ravens. The apostle Paul built on this understanding when he said that the church was a body, and that we, “who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.” All of this comes from God, who “has put wisdom in the inward parts” and “given understanding to the mind.”

When we go deep for answers, we discover that our Creator is the source of all wisdom and understanding. Calvin knew this, saying that “the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.”

Knowledge of God as Creator. Knowledge of ourselves as social beings, connected to God and each other. When we put the two together, we are doing the deep work that God wants us to do. And Thanks be to God for that! Amen.