

50  
HARD  
QUESTIONS  
OF  
CHRISTIANITY

THINGS

I'VE BEEN

ASKED

NICK HAWKES



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Nick Hawkes is a theologian, writer and communicator. He has been a guest lecturer at a number of theological colleges and has written and recorded over 800 ‘thoughts for the day’ for Christian radio – both in Australia and the United Kingdom.

Nick has two degrees in science and three more in theology. He is an apologist who writes about the rational credibility of Christianity. He not only does this through apologetic works, but also through his novels (the ‘Stone Collection’, see [author-nick.com](http://author-nick.com)).





# PART 1:

IS CHRISTIANITY RATIONAL?



# 1. WHAT EVIDENCE IS THERE FOR GOD?

The leading atheistic philosopher in the early 20th century, Bertrand Russell, was once asked what he would say to God by way of explanation when asked why he didn't believe in him. His reply was 'Not enough evidence; not enough evidence'.<sup>1</sup> This raises the really good question: What would enough evidence look like?

What if God answered this question by creating a universe of unimaginable wonder – a universe constructed according to the rules of very advanced mathematics? Would that cause our atheists to accept the probable existence of God? And what if the universe had many factors finely tuned to a degree of many, many trillionths of exactitude to allow life to develop on at least one planet? Could atheists reasonably dismiss that as coincidental? How many trillionths would an atheist need before they reviewed their position?

In Bertrand Russell's case, he simply refused to look at the evidence. During a 1948 debate, Jesuit philosopher Father Frederick Copleston said, 'I do think the notion of the world having an explanation is a mistake. I don't see why one would expect it to have.'<sup>2</sup> This comment from a leading academic is an extraordinary one. Russell's answer to the existence of mind-boggling complexity, codes and 'coincidences' of the universe was simply not to ask any questions about it. This, I submit, can in no way be construed as intellectual honesty.

Let's muse for a moment: What if Bertrand Russell was persuaded that God existed? He might still claim that it was impossible to actually *know* that God.

But what if God came to Earth 2,000 years ago to show us what God was like – and to die to pay the price for our sins which would otherwise disbar us from him? What if God did that? Would that be enough to persuade Bertrand to accept God's love and lordship?

Quite honestly, it is difficult to know what else God could have done to invite an atheist to respond to his love with their own. What else could God have done that would also preserve the need for faith to be freely chosen rather than forced? God knew full well that a forced relationship is not an authentic one.

Is that what Bertrand Russell wants – a totally unambiguous revelation of God's identity and glory; a self-revelation even clearer than that revealed by the universe and clearer than that revealed by Jesus? Does Bertrand want God to force himself on humanity? Because if so, it is not going to happen. God won't force anything. He invites faith with a language that is only heard by the humble – in the language of the cosmos and through the person of Jesus.

Not everyone, however, is interested in looking for truth. Have you noticed that? I once heard someone say, 'If life has no purpose, why work it out?' It seems to be a sentiment that reflects the philosophy of many in society, which is odd, because it is an illogical argument. If you don't at least try and work out what the meaning of life is, you will, rather unsurprisingly, conclude that life has no purpose. This doesn't bother many people, for it results in a highly

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Salmon's 'Religion and Science', p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Reported in Kainz, *The Existence of God and the Faith-instinct*, p. 21.

desirable outcome – the freedom to do what they like. Unfortunately, it also carries with it an attendant outcome that is highly toxic to human wellbeing: they consign themselves to meaninglessness.

History has shown that being able to ‘do what you like’ and having ‘no meaning’ is a dreadful cocktail of convictions that, when combined, have resulted in the worst human abuses seen in history. It is also a mournful expression of hopelessness that can find little expression outside of suicide. I would want to spare you that, so please don’t stick your head in the sand and surround yourself with ignorance when it comes to God.

So, what evidence is there that suggests that the Christian God exists? What makes Christianity reasonable?

It is reasonable because

- it is scientifically rational – the universe is riddled with codes, mathematical order and forces that are balanced to a trillionth of degree so as to allow life
- it is morally unsurpassable when ‘authentic’ – that is, when it is based on the teaching and lifestyle of Christ
- it is grounded in historical fact – Jesus came in history, and his existence is verified by non-Christian historians who wrote about him at the time
- it has a reputation, like no other religion or philosophy, of being able to transform individuals, families, cities and nations for their good.

Frankly, it is not difficult to see rational or moral flaws in other religions. But you don’t see either in the authentic Christianity of Jesus Christ.

The many religions that exist represent humankind’s sincere attempt to reach God. Christianity, however, is unique in that it is the story of God reaching out to us. He came to us as Jesus to pay the price for our sins that would otherwise disbar us from sharing eternity with him.

So, don’t miss out on it!

## 2. WHAT DO SCIENTISTS SAY ABOUT GOD?

If you Google ‘Einstein and Christianity’ you will discover an unseemly squabble between Christians wanting to claim Einstein was a Christian and atheists who want to insist he was an atheist. Each wants Einstein, and his brilliance, to be on their side to lend them credibility. The truth concerning Einstein is actually much more interesting – and, I submit, significant.

Einstein was a brilliant scientist. He was not, however, a brilliant theologian ... and it is perhaps unfair for people to expect him to be one. Theology was not his area of study. What is significant is that science took Einstein as far as it could towards God. Einstein’s scientific study convinced him of God’s existence. It gave him good reasons to believe in a higher being. However, although he was firmly convinced of the historical reality of Jesus Christ, Einstein sometimes described himself as an agnostic (someone who isn’t sure about God’s existence).<sup>3</sup> However, he made it quite clear that he was not, and never had been, an atheist (someone who is convinced that there is no God).<sup>4</sup> Here are some of his quotes:

I’m not an atheist, and I don’t think I can call myself a pantheist. We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child knows someone must have written those books. It does not know how. It does not understand the languages in which they are written. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the books but doesn’t know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God.<sup>5</sup>

In view of such harmony in the cosmos, which I, with my limited human mind, am able to recognize, there are yet people who say there is no God. But what really makes me angry is that they quote me for the support of such views.<sup>6</sup>

I want to know how God created this world ... I want to know His thoughts. The rest are details.<sup>7</sup>

Let’s turn now to some quotes by other distinguished scientists.

Charles Darwin (1809–1882), an English naturalist who gave scientific evidence for biological evolution:

I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God.<sup>8</sup>

Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful

<sup>3</sup> Calaprice, *The Ultimate Quotable Einstein*, p. 340. Einstein said this in a letter to M. Berkowitz, 25 October 1950.

<sup>4</sup> Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe*, p. 390.

<sup>5</sup> Einstein, ‘Notes for an Autobiography’, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Calaprice, *The Expanded Quotable Einstein*, p. 214.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Einstein, quoted in Ferris, *Coming of Age in the Milky Way*, p. 177.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Darwin in a letter first published in 1887 by his son Francis Darwin (Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, p. 304).

universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backward and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.<sup>9</sup>

The legendary French biochemist Louis Pasteur (1822–1882):

Posterity will one day laugh at the foolishness of modern materialistic philosophers. The more I study nature, the more I stand amazed at the work of the Creator. I pray while I am engaged at my work in the laboratory.<sup>10</sup>

The Scottish scientist James Clerk Maxwell (1831–1879), who was responsible for formulating the classical electromagnetic theory:

Science is incompetent to reason upon the creation of matter itself out of nothing. We have reached the utmost limit of our thinking faculties when we have admitted that because matter cannot be eternal and self-existent, it must have been created.<sup>11</sup>

Arno Penzias, who, along with his colleague Robert Wilson, discovered the cosmic microwave background radiation left over from the 'Big Bang':

If there are a bunch of fruit trees, one can say that whoever created these fruit trees wanted some apples. In other words, by looking at the order in the world, we can infer purpose and from purpose we begin to get some knowledge of the Creator, the Planner of all this. This is, then, how I look at God. I look at God through the works of God's hands and from those works imply intentions. From these intentions, I receive an impression of the Almighty.<sup>12</sup>

Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976), an eminent German quantum physicist:

In the course of my life I have repeatedly been compelled to ponder on the relationship of these two regions of thought (science and religion), for I have never been able to doubt the reality of that to which they point.<sup>13</sup>

Freeman Dyson (1923–2020), theoretical physicist and mathematician:

The more I examine the universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense knew we were coming.<sup>14</sup>

I hope you enjoyed reading the wisdom of some of the finest minds in history – and have allowed it to point you to God.

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<sup>9</sup> Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 443.

<sup>10</sup> Louis Pasteur, quoted in 'Is Darwinism on Its Death-bed?', p. 490.

<sup>11</sup> Maxwell, 'The Theory of Molecules', p. 289.

<sup>12</sup> Arno Penzias, quoted in Haberman, *The God I Believe In*, p. 184. Penzias and Wilson were awarded a Nobel Prize for this discovery in 1978.

<sup>13</sup> Heisenberg, *Across the Frontiers*, p. 213.

<sup>14</sup> Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, p. 250.

### 3. WON'T GOD SPOIL MY DAY, AS SOME PHILOSOPHERS CLAIM?

There is a wonderful security in being who you were meant to be. It is emancipating to let the God who made you lead you into the purposes he designed for you. Yes, God has given us boundaries that he asks us not to cross, but they are there to protect us, not to spoil our day. The ancient psalmist writes, 'The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places' (Ps 16:6). This reminds us that God is *for* us, not against us. God's intent is that we live life in all its fullness (John 10:10).

In medieval times, men who were not in service to an overlord – and the structures and securities the overlord imposed – were called 'lawless men'. They became bandits because of their lack of order, morals and boundaries. The apostle John uses a related term, 'lawlessness', when describing those who choose to flout God's moral laws (see 1 John 3:4).

I beg you not to be lawless and anti-God in this way. It will lead to hurt and dysfunction ... and the eternal prospects are not good. God has given us a beautiful life-giving pattern, which we depart from at our peril. Nothing I see in the life of lawless hedonists persuades me otherwise. God's ways work best.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre trashed the idea of conventional truth and morality, scorning it as bourgeois. His thinking helped give momentum to Marxism's deconstruction of Western civilisation (and Christianity in particular) in the mid-20th century, so that it could impose its dehumanising totalitarianism. However, in the latter part of his life, Sartre became conflicted and disillusioned. A month before his death, he wrote these words in his journal:

with this wretched gathering which our planet now is, despair returns to tempt me. The idea that there is no purpose, only petty personal ends for which we fight! We make little revolutions, but there is no goal for mankind. One cannot think of such things. They tempt you incessantly; especially if you are old ... the world seems ugly, bad and without hope. There, that's the cry of despair of an old man who will die in despair. But that's exactly what I resist. I know I shall die in hope. But that hope needs a foundation.<sup>15</sup>

The French 20th-century philosopher Paul-Michel Foucault has been lionised in many of our universities' philosophy departments. Foucault's philosophy formed the basis for postmodernism and its trashing of all forms of truth. It brought him no joy, however. Foucault's mental landscape was characterised by the macabre, sadomasochism and, rather distressingly, paedophilia. He often contemplated suicide. Tragically, he died of AIDS in 1984 at the age of 57. Foucault was a lost soul who didn't thrive outside the safety barriers that Christianity provided.

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Stephen Travis, *I Believe in the Second Coming*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1982, p. 227.

I have to wonder if Foucault really does represent the ‘gold standard’ for civilised philosophical discourse worthy of our next generation of societal opinion leaders. His answers to philosophy’s greatest questions of meaning, morality and destiny offer very little that is good, just or true.

Bertrand Russell was arguably the leading academic atheist in the early 20th century. He wrote a book called *Why I am Not a Christian*. Sadly, Russell fell into the trap (later developed into a fine art by Richard Dawkins) of building grotesque caricatures of Christianity that he found easy to destroy. His daughter Katherine (who became a Christian) wrote about this habit of his, saying, ‘When [father] wanted to attack religion, he sought out its most egregious errors and held them up to ridicule, while avoiding serious discussion of the basic message.’<sup>16</sup>

Russell was determined to hold on to his atheism in defiance of his strict Protestant grandmother who brought him up in his late childhood. His passion for atheism was probably instilled by his parents before they died. In later years, this passion was further fuelled by his sexual appetite, for he found the moral boundaries of Christianity inconvenient to his quest for sexual happiness. However, his atheism came at some cost to his peace of mind. At the end of his life, he wrote a poem to his fourth wife Edith, the first stanza of which said:

Through the long years  
I have sought peace,  
I found ecstasy,  
I found anguish,  
I found madness,  
I found loneliness.  
I found the solitary pain  
that gnaws the heart,  
But peace I did not find.<sup>17</sup>

This is such a terribly sad epitaph.

Please don’t let it be your epitaph. Fulfil your purpose in the loving designs of God.

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<sup>16</sup> Tait, *My Father Bertrand Russell*, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell, in Monk, *Bertrand Russell*, p. xix. Russell wrote this in the preface of his *Autobiography*.



## 4. HAS SCIENCE MADE GOD OBSOLETE?

The idea of God creating everything took a bit of battering in 1953 when Harold Urey and Stanley Miller, researchers at the University of Chicago, introduced some electrical sparks to a mixture of gasses and water that simulated the Earth's early atmosphere. After a few days, the water discoloured with a mixture of a few simple amino acids. As amino acids are the building blocks of proteins (the basis of all life), some people claimed that the idea of God was redundant. Brute circumstances can fluke amino acids into existence. The mystery of how proteins and life came about was solved.

Alas, this is not so. Leaving aside the rather obvious point that God began with nothing – no laboratory, no flasks, no chemicals, no physical laws – the fact is, while making amino acids is relatively easy, making proteins capable of sustaining life is mind-bogglingly difficult.

To build a protein, you must arrange amino acids in precisely the right sequence. As a typical protein consists of 200 amino acids, the likelihood of making one protein by chance would be equivalent to spinning a slot machine with 200 wheels, each with 20 symbols (to represent 20 of the most common amino acids), and then getting the winning combination.

You don't reckon that's a big deal? Let me explain. It would require you to spin the wheels more times than there are atoms in the universe.<sup>18</sup> And if that is not enough, there needs to be a sophisticated structure that will protect the acidic DNA from its surrounding alkaline environment. (A living cell is lot more than a blob of soup!)

So, it would appear that God is not redundant after all.

Notwithstanding his atheistic convictions, the English physicist and astronomer Fred Hoyle wrote that the likelihood of chance alone being responsible for making even the simplest of living cells was about the same as that of a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and assembling a Boeing 747 jet aircraft.<sup>19</sup>

The British philosopher Anthony Flew says that we need to ask 'How can a universe of mindless matter produce beings with intrinsic ends, self-replication capabilities, and "coded chemistry?"'<sup>20</sup> He goes on to wonder why living matter has 'an inherent goal, or end-centred organisation, that is nowhere present in the matter that preceded it.'<sup>21</sup>

It's a good question, but we need to be careful. When talking about living matter having 'intrinsic ends' and 'an inherent goal', we are not talking about evolution. Evolution is blind. It doesn't try to get anywhere. It just selects mutations that help an organism adapt to a particular ecological niche. Flew is talking about something deeper than evolution. He is talking about why life developed in the first place – and did so in a universe where time is linear.

The British cosmologist Paul Davies makes the point that life is more than complex chemical reactions. The living cell operates according to coded information. As such, the

<sup>18</sup> Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, p. 254.

<sup>19</sup> Fred Hoyle, 'Hoyle on Evolution', p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> Flew & Varghese, *There Is a God*, p. 124.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

cell is 'an information storing, processing and replicating system.' He goes on to say, 'The problem of how meaningful or semantic information can emerge spontaneously from a collection of mindless molecules subject to blind and purposeless forces presents a deep conceptual challenge.'<sup>22</sup>

Flew reminds us that there is 'no law of nature that instructs matter to produce end-directed, self-replicating entities.'<sup>23</sup> The fact that it does so is therefore a mystery. He goes on to quote the Nobel Prize-winning physiologist George Wald, who said, 'We choose to believe the impossible: that life arose spontaneously by chance.'<sup>24</sup>

Flew concludes that 'the only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such "end-directed, self-replicating" life as we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind.'<sup>25</sup>

And that's not a bad conclusion from a man who used to be atheism's leading philosopher in the second half of the 20th century.

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<sup>22</sup> Davies, 'The Origin of Life II', p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Flew & Varghese, *There Is a God*, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 132.

## 5. HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT IS ACTUALLY TRUE?

The reason people don't accept God's love and lordship are many and varied. It's worth exploring some of them to see if they have credibility.

The real issue concerning Christianity is this: Is it true? Nothing else really matters. If God really has revealed himself through Jesus Christ, then God is worthy of our full commitment. If God has not, then Christianity is not worthy of anything. So, let me say again, the real issue is: Is it true?

If people are so wedded to their need to live autonomously from God that they refuse to investigate whether Jesus is true, then there is little anyone can do. That is simply willful atheism, and it is not rational. But for those who dare to seek, their quest is to find an answer to the question: Is it true? From this, it follows that discarding Christianity because of abuses committed by the church in history, is irrelevant to the question. Discarding Christianity because the church once treated you poorly is similarly irrelevant to the central question. Meeting religious people whom you judge to be hypocritical is also irrelevant. A desire to fit in with society's atheistic opinion leaders, who tell you that God is not 'on trend', is similarly avoiding the more pertinent question: Is it true? Whether or not you believe you can live a moral life without being a Christian is also irrelevant to the question.

To be perfectly honest, I am not greatly interested in whether or not you say 'Being a Christian is boring and inconvenient to my lifestyle'. The issue remains: Is it true? If the love story of the Christian gospel is historically and rationally true, then it is worthy of your full commitment. But if you wilfully choose to hide from the truth in a cave of ignorance, justifying your position with lazily held clichés, then that, I submit, is culpable behaviour.

### **Is it all about my happiness?**

It's fair to say that the concept of truth has taken a bit of a battering in recent decades. Evidently, people are now less inclined to seek it, preferring instead to pursue those things that make them 'happy'. Happiness is now the measure of what is good.

This sort of thinking is similar to the Epicurean philosophy that existed 2300 years ago. And now here it is again, bobbing up in history. Epicurus lived in the 3rd century BC. He was a rationalist who advocated prudence and aimed at the ideal of developing happy, egalitarian communities, without any thought of God. Death was simply the dissolving of a bag of atoms. Sadly, it didn't take long for his thinking to degenerate into a philosophy of self-focused happiness. *My* happiness became the ultimate good. *My* happiness became the goal. The ultimate significance was therefore *self*. And dare I say it, the ultimate god I serve became *self*.

I once listened to the Australian politician Kevin Andrews talk about his book on marriage. It was called, rather sadly, *Maybe I Do*. When introducing his book to us, he said that a few decades ago, marriage was considered a morally good thing to do, and it was morally good to do all you could to make your marriage last. However, in recent years, this has been overtaken

by a new morality. Now the focus is not on doing the right moral thing in marriage. Now the measure of all things is 'Does it make me happy?' Something is only morally good if it makes me happy.

It is little wonder that narcissism has become one of the diagnostic features of our age. The term 'narcissism' comes from the Greek myth of Narcissus, a young man who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water. It is important to note that narcissism is different from self-esteem. Narcissism is having an inflated and untrue image of self. Self-esteem is having a true image of yourself and knowing your worth.

People with self-esteem value personal achievement and personal relationships. This contrasts with narcissists, who lack empathy and have poor relationship skills. So, here's a hint: don't marry one.

Professor Jean Twenge and Keith Campbell have been investigating whether people born in recent generations are more narcissistic than previous generations. It turns out that they are, and these findings have been documented in the book *The Narcissism Epidemic: Living in the Age of Entitlement*.<sup>26</sup> For example, plastic surgery rates have increased, and there is a greater drive to be 'unique', to stand out rather than fit in. This is even evident in the names people are choosing for their children. Crucially, the findings show that relationships are not as stable as they once were. More children are being born to unmarried couples, and people don't stay married for as long.

Into the midst of this self-worship and self-obsession comes Jesus. He comes as a servant to wash the feet of his disciples and die on a cross for us to pay the price for our sins. The difference between his attitude and that of the world today is monumental.

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<sup>26</sup> Twenge and Campbell, *The Narcissism Epidemic*.

## 6. IS CHRISTIANITY NON-RATIONAL?

Science is rational and Christianity is not – such is the claim of many strident atheists. Many go further and say Christianity is actively at war with science, suppressing its truth. In reality, this claim is but one of the myths some people wrap around themselves in order to hide from truth and stay huddled within the rhetoric of their own kind. The truth is far more complex.

It may surprise you, but it is not just Christians who display faith; scientists need it too. They need to have faith that the universe is put together in a way that is ordered, consistent and open to rational enquiry. If they didn't have faith in these realities, they couldn't do science. This has led to some of the world's top scientists saying that belief in God is scientifically reasonable. Paul Davies, a mathematical physicist and cosmologist, says:

I belong to the group of scientists who do not subscribe to a conventional religion but nevertheless deny that the universe is a purposeless accident. Through my scientific work I have come to believe more and more strongly that the universe is put together with an ingenuity so astonishing that I cannot accept it merely as a brute fact.<sup>27</sup>

Here's another interesting fact. Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon were English clerics in the 13th century that were responsible for revolutionising how science was done. Until they turned up in history, science was largely restricted to passive observation. However, when Grosseteste and Bacon arrived, they introduced the notion of experimentation. It can therefore be said that experimental science (at least in the West) was born in the Christian church.

In fact, it is very hard to imagine how science could have flourished in the West without Christianity. This was because science was often seen as a spiritual discipline. Why? Because it helped reveal the creative hand of God. Many of the world's top scientists say the same thing today. In the words of Francis Collins (director of the Human Genome Project):

I have found there is a wonderful harmony in the complementary truths of science and faith. The God of the Bible is also the God of the genome. God can be found in the cathedral or in the laboratory. By investigating God's majestic and awesome creation, science can actually be a means of worship.<sup>28</sup>

### Galileo

One of the key events in history that has been used by atheists to ridicule Christianity and support their claim that Christianity is inherently anti-science is the story of the Roman Catholic Church putting Galileo on trial for heresy. The church did so because Galileo taught that the earth was not the centre of the universe but a heavenly body that circled the sun – an idea first put forward a century earlier by Copernicus.

The real story is, again, more complex, and it's a ripping yarn, so it's worth telling.

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<sup>27</sup> Davies, *The Mind of God*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> Collins, 'Collins: Why This Scientist Believes In God'.

Galileo lived at a time when the Roman Catholic Church was desperately trying to regain control after the Reformation, when groups of Protestants were spinning off in a thousand different theological directions. In response to the situation, the Catholic Church called the Council of Trent (1545–1563) at which they decided that only ‘Doctors of the Church’ were allowed to give definitive interpretations of Scripture.

Galileo, however, disregarded this ruling and gave interpretations of Scripture in the light of his scientific findings. He taught his heliocentric model of the universe as fact, despite the Catholic Church only permitting him to teach it as a hypothesis. (This is worth noting, for it shows that the church was not trying to suppress his scientific enquiry.) The Catholic authorities instructed Galileo to get scientific proof for this theory and then let the church’s Doctors of divinity interpret the significance of his findings.

The problem was, Galileo didn’t actually have the knockout proof for his heliocentric theory of the earth circling the sun. Proof could only come from measuring the parallax of a distant star (measuring its angle from the Earth at different seasons of the year). Unfortunately, the instrument required to measure parallax to the required level of accuracy simply didn’t exist. It wasn’t until 1832 that the German scientist Friedrich Bessel built one capable of doing so.

Galileo could actually be obstinate and even wrong when it came to science. For instance, he ascribed the movement of the ocean’s tides to the heliocentric motion of the earth, even though Kepler had shown that tides were linked to the phases of the moon.

In reality, Galileo’s fight was not so much with the Catholic Church as with the Aristotelian philosophers, whose understanding of the universe was particularly challenged by Galileo’s hypothesis. It was the Aristotelians who refused to look through Galileo’s new invention (the telescope) at Jupiter’s moons to see evidence of his theory for themselves. And it was the Aristotelians who set about engineering Galileo’s downfall.

Galileo assisted their efforts by putting the theological objections of Pope Urban VIII (who was once kindly disposed towards Galileo) into the mouth of the fool Simplicius, in a satirical book he wrote. So, it was probably not surprising that Galileo was brought to trial in 1633!

So, now you know the story.

## 7. ISN'T CHRISTIANITY BASED ON FEAR AND GUILT?

I once had the intriguing experience of visiting some of the cathedrals of England with my children. While they were too young to fully appreciate the history and imagery carved into the stone, they could 'feel' a cathedral's atmosphere. My daughter particularly spoke of spooky cathedrals and nice ones. The spooky ones often featured pictures or carvings of souls being damned and falling into the pit of hell. Fear and judgement were the central motifs.

It was sometimes difficult for me, a theologian, to make much of a connection with what the children were seeing and the Christian gospel.

So, with this in mind, may I make an apology to all of you who have been put off Christianity because you have experienced a culture of fear and judgementalism in the church. Fear and judgementalism are not the central tenets of Christianity. The word 'gospel' literally means 'good news', and it is this that is (or should be) the central theme of the church.

When Jesus came to earth to pay the price for our sins that would otherwise keep us from God, it was a peerless act of love. The gospel is a rescue story, and it is very good news. Furthermore, it's worth noting that *the* subject Jesus preached about more than anything else was 'the kingdom of God' and the fact that its eternal benefits were now available to everyone – if they chose to accept it.

Jesus was not shy of speaking about the reality of God's judgement and of our ability to disqualify ourselves from God's intended destiny for us. However, the whole tenor of his teaching was the 'good news' of God seeking to restore a broken relationship with us and his creation, and therefore giving us a future. As such, this is the theme that should characterise the culture of the church.

It is worth pondering a moment how the medieval horrors depicted in some cathedrals came to infiltrate the church and persist, even today.

The 5th-century theologian St Augustine is partly to blame. He wrote some profound truths, but he also had a well-developed loathing of his own sinful state – and this came out in his theology. Augustine promoted the idea that everyone was born sinful, and that some people had been predestined for judgement and hell. Only a minority had been chosen for salvation.

His ideas were taken up by the institutional church, not least because it bolstered the level of control the church had over society. As a result, fear came to be graphically portrayed in many of England and Europe's cathedrals.

The 16th-century Reformation resulted in the Protestant church splitting away from the Roman Catholic Church. You might think this would have resulted in a softening of the 'fear' aspect of the church's culture. Alas, this was not so. The teaching of the reformer John Calvin (particularly as it became hardened by his disciples) enshrined the idea that God had predestined some people to hell. As such, both the Catholic and the Protestant branches of the church have been guilty of an overemphasis on fear.

Some of that fear and judgementalism may have trickled down to you and put you off Christianity. If so, I am deeply sorry. What you should have encountered was 'good news' and hope. The central reality of Christianity is God and his love for you. God was prepared to sacrifice himself to win you back to himself.

That is the gospel story ... and that is the message I want to leave with you.

All of the above does not mean that God does not judge. He does, and we should be profoundly grateful that he does. It would be terrible if there were no justice at the end of time. And it would be bewildering if there was no moral standard that guaranteed what 'good' is. The yardstick, by which God measures what is good and what is just, is himself. Anything that falls short of his standards has to be judged by God and killed off, for it stands against all that he is. God will not allow cruelty, selfishness and evil to remain unchallenged in his kingdom.

The great news, of course, is that Christians are those who have allowed Jesus to pay the price for their sins, which would otherwise disbar them from God's presence.

And that's good news.



## 8. DIDN'T THE UNIVERSE ALWAYS EXIST?

Can everything come from nothing?

Rather a lot rides on the answer.

The strident American atheist and physicist Lawrence Krauss thinks it can. He wrote a philosophically muddled book called *A Universe from Nothing*, in which he speculates that it is possible for a universe to come from nothing, provided some parameters (such as quantum fields and the physical laws that govern them) are already in existence to allow it. He wants to call the empty space of the cosmos 'nothing', while also insisting that this 'nothing' is actually a cauldron of virtual particles that can pop into physical existence when interacting with powerful fields.

Krauss' great mistake, of course, is to fail to understand what 'nothing' really means.

In all human scientific endeavours, scientists have never exhausted the beautiful mathematical order that has underpinned their discoveries. This is even true for the non-intuitive world of quantum physics, and this, I submit, is hugely significant. The esteemed English astronomer and mathematical physicist James Jeans (1877–1946) said in his book *The Mysterious Universe*, 'The universe appears to have been designed by a pure mathematician.'<sup>29</sup>

But does God actually exist?

Whether or not he does depends on which sequence of events is true concerning the building of the universe.

Did matter give rise to information (as atheists believe) or did information give rise to matter (as theists believe)?

What do I mean by this?

Atheists believe that somehow, as the result of nothing (or because the universe has always existed without reason), a universe existed. In other words, 'matter' came to exist. Then, over time, various evolutionary processes took place resulting in this matter generating sophisticated information that allowed life to develop.

Lawrence Krauss is one who believes that matter gave rise to information. He does so by championing the idea that there are an infinite number of universes, each with a different set of physical laws. And because there are an infinite number of universes, we should not be surprised that one universe eventually stumbled on a set of physical laws that allowed life to develop. The significance of our ordered universe can therefore be dissolved in a sea of infinity.

However, if one universe is hard to explain, it is even harder to explain the existence of an infinite number of them. As such, the multiverse hypothesis does not explain anything. It merely lifts the conundrum up to the next level.

Another principle atheists appeal to in order to explain the existence of our universe is to say that a fundamental physical principle – a 'theory of everything' – exists that makes

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<sup>29</sup> Jeans, *The Mysterious Universe*, p. 134.

the development of a life-friendly universe inevitable. (It seems to me that they have simply crossed out God and replaced him with a 'theory of everything' – which doesn't appear to be much of a step forward!)

The other trouble with this thinking is that there is no hard evidence of a theory of everything existing.

A third option available to atheists is to believe that our universe has always existed – and has done so without reason or purpose. This, of course, is simply a faith statement. It also suffers from the fact that there is no precedent for anything existing without a cause. In fact, the very idea shatters the law of 'cause and effect' that underpins all of science.

Let's now explore the idea that information gave rise to matter.

By suggesting that information gave rise to matter, I am suggesting that creation was an intelligent act. The mathematics we see in the cosmos and the codes contained within living cells have their genesis in a mind – the mind of God. As such, the information in God's mind resulted in matter (in the form of the cosmos) existing.

What's the evidence?

Nothing in the long history of human experience has ever caused complex ordered information to exist other than rational thought. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that rational thought has given rise to a rational universe.

So, what can we say in conclusion?

All science relies on ultimate rationality existing. Christians call this ultimate rationality 'God'. And while it is important to understand that God is *more* than cosmic rationality, it is nonetheless a very good place to start!

## 9. WAS CHARLES DARWIN ANTI-CHRISTIAN?

If ever there was a person who epitomised the banishing of God from scientific thought, it would be Charles Darwin (1809–1882). He developed the theory of evolution, an idea first mooted by his famous atheist grandfather, Erasmus Darwin.

I have to confess, I like Charlie. He was a man who retained a childlike wonder at the grandeur of creation – such as he experienced when he stood in a Brazilian rainforest. He was a keen observer who asked intelligent questions, but he was also thoughtful enough to care about the distress his theory of evolution might cause others.

Just to remind you: Darwin was an English naturalist. He travelled the world in a ship called *The Beagle*, collecting and recording information on wildlife and fossils. From what he observed, he concluded that some individuals of a species were able to adapt slightly in a way that made them better able to thrive in a particular environmental niche. Because they were able to thrive, the characteristics that gave them an advantage over other individuals of the same species were passed on to more offspring, causing their numbers to increase and resulting in the ‘survival of the fittest’. Nature’s continual selection of what worked best ensured that all living species were able to continually evolve so that they became ever more specialised at thriving in a particular ecological niche. This meant that nature did the selection and drove organisms to become more specialised. God was no longer necessary. As Charles anticipated, this rocked the faith of many people – a fact that caused him to be reticent in publishing his findings.

Charles did not grow up with a Christian heritage. He studied theology at Cambridge, largely at the insistence of his father after Charles had failed as a medical student. He had initially studied medicine at Edinburgh. However, the fact that he couldn’t stand the sight of blood, and that he spent too much time collecting beetles and barnacles, meant that he flunked his course. His father, a doctor, reasoned that if Charles became a Church of England cleric, he would have all the time he needed to indulge his naturalist pursuits. Certainly, British clerics were at the forefront of biological research at the time.

Despite his parents coming from a largely Unitarian background, Charles made a sincere attempt to embrace Christianity when he was in Cambridge. But later in life, he lost his Christian convictions, and he did so for three reasons.

The first was because his research indicated that God did not necessarily intend the existence of specific life forms, as Christianity appeared to suggest. The second reason was the death of his daughter Annie, his second child, who died from scarlet fever at the age of 11. This, along with the suffering he saw in nature, caused him to doubt that God was loving and all-powerful.<sup>30</sup> He saw how a cat played with a mouse, and how an ichneumon wasp injected its eggs into a caterpillar – eggs which hatched into maggots that ate their way through the

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<sup>30</sup> Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 2, p. 105.

living caterpillar. It is fair to say that Darwin never developed a good Christian theological understanding of the vexing subject of suffering.

The third reason Darwin struggled with Christianity was because it seemed to suggest that God would eternally condemn good people to hell because they weren't Christians.<sup>31</sup> It would seem that Darwin had not developed much depth to his Christian theology.

Darwin's convictions about evolution caused a good deal of consternation in the church, but not universally so. The novelist and cleric Charles Kingsley wrote that he found it 'just as noble a conception of Deity to believe that he created primal forms capable of self-development.'<sup>32</sup> Frederick Temple, the future Archbishop of Canterbury, also preached that 'the finger of God could be seen at work in the laws of nature' and that there was 'no need to oppose the extension of natural law into new territory.'<sup>33</sup> In fact, Darwin valued his friendship with a number of Christian colleagues, including his mentor, the eminent botanist and mineralogist Revd Professor J.S. Henslow.<sup>34</sup>

However, despite walking away from Christianity, Darwin retained his belief in God. He said, 'I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God.'<sup>35</sup> Darwin also wrote, 'I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and [as such] I deserve to be called a Theist.'<sup>36</sup>

So, if Darwin saw evidence of God in nature and the cosmos, I invite you to see it too.

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<sup>31</sup> Barlow, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, p. 87.

<sup>32</sup> Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 2, p. 82.

<sup>33</sup> Temple, 'The Present Relations of Science to Religion', p. 36.

<sup>34</sup> Desmond & Moore, *Darwin*, pp. 80–82, 89–90.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Darwin, in a letter first published in 1887 by his son Francis Darwin (Darwin, *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, p. 304).

<sup>36</sup> Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 443.

## 10. AREN'T CHRISTIANS JUST FRIGHTENED OF DEATH?

It's a little odd, isn't it, when you listen to someone who has the temerity to tell you the reasons you believe what you do. I mean ... how would they know? They are not you. So let me confess that I find it a little galling when exponents of atheism try and tell me the reason I am a Christian – and then portray that reason as something pathetic and rationally vacuous.

Bertrand Russell, arguably the leading exponent of atheism in the early 20th century, played this game. In his lecture 'Why I am not a Christian', given to the National Secular Society in 1927, Russell said that people believe in God fundamentally because of their fear of death. This is a familiar stick Christians are beaten with, and it is, of course, a fallacy – a fiction designed to make atheists feel both superior and comfortable in their narrative.

How on earth would Russell and other atheists know why Christians believe what they do? It is as cheeky as inviting a baker's apprentice to give an opinion on nuclear physics. The reality is: an atheist is experientially ignorant of the transforming reality of God in a person's life. Almost always, they are also crassly ignorant concerning the historical evidence for Jesus Christ and what Christian theology has to say about the big issues of life, such as suffering.

So, just in case there are a few 'Bertrand Russells' reading this, may I share the reasons why I am a Christian?

First, it is not primarily because of fear. It is because I encountered the love story of a God who pursues me with relentless grace. It is the story of a God who died on a cross to pay the price for all the dumb things I've done that would disqualify me from his presence.

Second, I was prompted to look at the possibility of God because our universe exists with a level of 'fine-tuning' (to a degree of many, many trillionths) that has allowed intelligent life to develop. To not ponder the possibility of God is to believe that everything came from nothing, as a result of nothing – which, I submit, is irrational.

There is an ache in the human soul that is divinely given. This ache is not fear. It is the discomfort that comes from feeling you don't yet fit where you were meant to fit. It is an ache for meaning, morality and hope that is as restless as a compass needle until it finds true north.

I pray that you find that 'north'.

Finally, let me admit to being guilty of one aspect of fear – the type of fear often referred to in the Bible. It is a fear that more accurately can be defined as reverence, respect and awe. Personally, I think such reverence is entirely appropriate when faced with the reality of a holy God who dreamed you into being ... and who invites you to be part of his eternal adventure.



## **PART 2:**

IS THE BIBLE HISTORICALLY CREDIBLE?





# 11. HAVE PEOPLE CHANGED THE BIBLE?

The most useful ancient text of the Old Testament used to be the Masoretic text. This text was written by the Masoretic Jews between the 6th and 10th centuries AD. That's a long time after the original texts were written. As such, people wondered if this text was the same as the text Jesus would have read a thousand years earlier.

The answer to this question came in 1947, when a young Bedouin shepherd boy discovered some pottery jars in a limestone cave while he was looking for a lost goat. (The cave was about two kilometres from the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea in Palestine.) Inside the jars were leather parchment scrolls wrapped in linen. These became known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Eventually, scrolls were found in 11 caves situated around the ancient ruins of the Qumran community. This community was a splinter group of pious, nationalistic Jews who chose to live an isolated monastic existence. They were particularly active between 130 BC and AD 68, which means they were active at the time of Jesus.

The community was eventually wiped out in AD 68 by the Roman army bent on stamping out Jewish rebellion. Before they were killed, however, the community managed to hide their library in the surrounding caves.

About 500 documents, some just fragments, were found. Roughly 100 of these were texts from the Old Testament. In fact, portions of every book in the Old Testament were found, except the book of Esther. The remarkable thing was that when these texts were compared with the Masoretic text, they were nearly identical. This was despite them being up to a thousand years older! This gives us confidence that the Old Testament has not been changed in any significant way. What we read now in the Old Testament are the same Scriptures Jesus read.

## **The passion of the early disciples to write accurate historical accounts**

John, the disciple who was closest to Jesus begins his epistles with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life. The life appeared, we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 John 1:1–3).

John is making it quite clear that he is writing from his first-hand experiences of Jesus. He is not at all interested in promoting myths that might have developed about him at a later stage.

The apostle Paul was equally passionate about accurately transmitting Jesus' words and actions (2 Tim 2:2, 15). Paul understood that the revelation he had of Jesus, and the truths handed to him by the apostles, were a sacred entrustment that he needed to pass on faithfully in an untainted way. He wrote:

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me' (1 Cor 11:23–24).

Historical accuracy has always mattered. The apostle Luke took pains to research all that happened in the life of Jesus using the first-hand accounts of the apostles (Luke 1:1–4).

### **The Scriptures came into existence really quickly**

One of the extraordinary features of the New Testament is how soon the Scriptures were written after Jesus' death. Paul wrote his letters just 15 years after Jesus' ascension. It is thought that his letter to the Galatians was one of his earliest. His letters contain a fully developed understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection, and a full appreciation of the significance of these events (1 Cor 15:1–8). What is more, Paul knew that what he said could either be endorsed or rebutted by those still alive who remembered Jesus.

Scholars have more fragments and copies of early New Testament manuscripts than any other historical document. Because so many early copies of the New Testament text have been found, the different texts can be crosschecked for accuracy. Remarkably, the texts have been found to retain an accuracy of over 99%. In archaeological terms, this level of accuracy has no parallel.

### **The Holy Spirit has brooded over the development of the New Testament**

It seems as if the Holy Spirit of God has brooded over both the content and development of the New Testament accounts of Jesus. This should not surprise us. If you look at the Gospel accounts of Jesus and the start of the book of Acts, you can't help but be impressed at the priority Jesus placed on teaching his disciples the full truth and significance of his ministry, and how he completed the prophecies written about him in the Old Testament (Luke 24:25–27, 44–48).

And now this teaching has reached you.

## 12. HOW WERE THE BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHOSEN?

Some who scorn Christianity have made the claim that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life lack credibility. One of these was the 18th-century literary wit of the Enlightenment, Voltaire. Despite claiming to be a rationalist with at least a passing respect for truth, he invented and promoted the myth that the early Christian church had 50 different Gospels of Jesus' life before they settled on just four that matched the narrative the church wanted to teach.

In recent years, the Oxford biologist and militant atheist Richard Dawkins has continued the theme. In his book *The God Delusion*, he wrote, 'The four gospels that made it into the official canon were chosen, more or less arbitrarily, out of a larger sample of at least a dozen including the Gospels of Thomas, Peter, Nicodemus, Philip, Bartholomew, and Mary Magdalen.'<sup>1</sup>

Dawkins' ignorance and deceit is breathtaking, but behind his anti-Christian attack lies a good question, and it is this: How were the books now included in the New Testament chosen?

The writings collected in the New Testament were written 20 to 80 years after Jesus died. In historical terms, this is very soon after the event. (The first reference to Buddha was made by Ashoka, 269–232 BC, over 200 years after Buddha died!) But the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life were not the first books of the New Testament written. The first were the earliest letters of the apostle Paul. His letters were copied and circulated among the early church, and they were very quickly held in high esteem. The apostle Peter even referred to them as 'Scripture' in his second epistle (2 Pet 3:16).

Paul's letters display a deep understanding of the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. At one point, he quotes what most theologians recognise as an early creedal statement that summarises Jesus' ministry (1 Cor 15:1–8). Paul makes the claim that he 'received' his revelation directly from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11–12). This may have been by direct revelation, but it may also mean that he received the words of Jesus from Jesus' disciples. He speaks of 'receiving' this truth and passing it on (1 Cor 11:23). Paul was at pains to point out that his teaching did not differ from that of the apostles (Gal 2:6). He even travelled to Jerusalem twice and stayed with some of the apostles to make sure of it (Gal 1:18; 2:14).

In the early decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, the story of Jesus was told by word of mouth, notably by Jesus' apostles and Paul. However, as time went on, the apostles knew that their witness to Jesus would end when they died. It therefore became important to write down an orderly account of Jesus' life.

The Gospel of Mark was the first to be written (c. AD 60), followed by Matthew and Luke (c. AD 80), both of whom borrowed some of their material from Mark. John's Gospel was probably written about 90–100 AD. Because each of the Gospels told the story of Jesus to a different audience, they slightly differ in their emphasis and perspective. (Incidentally, it is these very differences that lend authenticity. Fictitious accounts would not have them.)

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<sup>1</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 121.

Inevitably, the early church began to be plagued by groups of heretics who wanted to use Jesus to promote their own spurious ideas. One of the earliest of these groups was the Gnostics. They believed that God was totally distant from us and that you could only get closer to God through being taught secret knowledge (in Greek, *gnosis*, from which they got their name). They thought God was far too holy to come to Earth and die on a cross. Their philosophy echoed some of Plato's ideas of the physical world being totally corrupt and different from the spiritual world. The physical world should therefore be viewed with disdain.

Some of this emphasis on *gnosis* can be seen in the Gospel of Thomas, which was part of the Nag Hammadi collection of largely Gnostic works discovered in Egypt in 1945. This fictitious Gospel was written about 100 years after the New Testament Gospels. The other spurious Gospels mentioned by Dawkins were written even later.

It is significant that the early church had no difficulty in spotting these frauds. The early church academic Origen of Alexandria (c. 184–c. 253) listed the 'Gospel according to Thomas' as being among the heterodox (heretical) Gospels known to him. Similarly, Philip of Side (380–431) wrote that the early church leaders absolutely rejected the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas, which they considered to be the work of heretics.

It is significant that Origen's list of books he believed to be Scripture included all the books in the current New Testament except for James, 2 Peter, and 2 and 3 John. He also included Shepherd of Hermas, which was later rejected by the wider church.<sup>2</sup>

In his Easter letter of 367 AD, Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria listed all 27 books we now have in the New Testament. However, it was not until the Council of Carthage in 397 AD that the New Testament canon (the official list of authoritative Scripture) was closed – that is, could not be added to. (The Greek word 'canon' literally means 'measuring reed' – i.e. a stick that measures the worth of something.)

The early church decided on which books would comprise the New Testament canon on the basis of two things:

- how closely they were associated with Jesus' apostles (the first eyewitnesses to Jesus)
- how revered a piece of writing was by the early church because of the integrity, usefulness and power of its content – for example, the book of Hebrews.

As such, we can have confidence in the integrity of the New Testament.

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<sup>2</sup> Irenaeus also considered this a canonical work.

## 13. DID JESUS' RESURRECTION REALLY HAPPEN?

Is the resurrection of Jesus a reality we can hope in or is it just a myth – something that has meaning only because we give it meaning? Is talk of resurrection just a projection of our need to feel that we have meaning after death?

What do you think?

It's worth giving the subject some serious thought. The American Episcopalian minister John E. Large wrote, 'The entire character of a [person's] whole life depends on whether he [or she] answers "Yes" or "No" to the historic fact of the Resurrection.'<sup>3</sup> That's a bold statement. Whether or not you believe Revd Large, it highlights the fact that how you respond to the resurrection is a key life decision.

There is little doubt that the subject of the resurrection has been central and definitive of Christianity from its very first days (Acts 4:33; 13:30–33). All but the smallest New Testament writings testify to it. The apostle Paul spoke of it as being of 'first importance' (1 Cor 15:3), and it was the subject central to his preaching. The apostle Luke reports that when Paul was in Athens, he 'was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection' (Acts 17:18).

The Anglican theologian Michael Green says 'The Resurrection is therefore no tailpiece to Christian doctrine. It is the centrepiece.'<sup>4</sup> But can you believe it?

There can only be a few alternative explanations for Jesus' resurrection:

1. *The swoon theory.* This suggests that Jesus didn't die but was in a coma from which he recovered. This claim is fanciful. Jesus was flogged savagely, crucified, speared in the side, wrapped from head to toe in embalming bandages and left in a tomb for two days. It can't seriously be said that Jesus was fit enough to unwrap himself, pull back the heavy stone over the tomb entrance, dodge the soldiers who were on guard and then persuade the disciples that he had risen from the dead! If he had swooned on the cross, he would have suffocated and suffered irreparable brain damage within nine minutes. We can therefore conclude that the resurrection was not the survival of death but the overcoming of death.
2. *The disciples all had hallucinations or visions of Jesus.* The fact that over 500 people in different places had simultaneous hallucinations or visions makes this highly unlikely (1 Cor 15:6).
3. *The disciples stole the body.* This is not credible. The disciples were as surprised about Jesus' resurrection as anyone. Another key reason why this claim is not credible is that following the resurrection, Jesus' disciples exploded onto the world stage with missionary zeal. All of them had to overcome enormous odds, and all but one of them was martyred. No-one can seriously believe that the disciples would have been prepared to suffer martyrdom if they knew their message was based on a lie.

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<sup>3</sup> This is a quote I used in a very early sermon of mine. Unfortunately, I cannot now find the source of this quote.

<sup>4</sup> Green, 'Why the Resurrection Matters', p. 29.

4. *Jesus' resurrection was just a myth that developed in the first few years after Jesus' death.* C.S. Lewis doesn't think it was. He was one of the world's leading experts on myth literature, and he said that the New Testament records don't read like a myth. Rather, they read like eyewitness accounts. In fact, he says that they are one of the earliest existing eyewitness accounts in literature. He wrote, 'I have been reading poems, romances, vision-literature, legends and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know that not one of them is like this.'<sup>5</sup>

It is chronological arrogance to suggest that the disciples were a primitive people unable to tell the difference between myth and reality. The Apostle Peter said, 'we did not follow cleverly devised stories when we told you about the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in power, but we were eye-witnesses of his majesty' (2 Pet 1:16). Peter makes the point that Jesus was seen by 'witnesses whom God had already chosen – by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead' (Acts 10:41). John (another of Jesus' disciples) writes similarly: 'That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim ...' (1 John 1:1).

### **Paul's teaching on the resurrection**

The apostle Paul was not one of Jesus' original disciples, but he was highly significant in the early history of the church. He was responsible for planting Christian churches among non-Jews living in modern-day Turkey, Greece and Italy. He made it clear that his teaching on the resurrection was not something he had worked out independently. It was something that he had 'received' within just a few years of Jesus' death and now 'passed on' to others (1 Cor 15:3–5).

The resurrection of Jesus was the central theme of Paul's preaching, and Paul always insisted that it be correctly understood. The young church in the Greek city of Corinth contained some people who doubted the resurrection, so Paul wrote to them to assure them of its reality (1 Cor 15:12–19) ...

... a reality which I pray gives you great hope.

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *Fern-seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, p. 109.

## 14. ARE THE OLD TESTAMENT STORIES, SUCH AS THE CREATION ACCOUNTS, TRUE?

Non-Christians sometimes point to the miraculous stories in the Old Testament and ask how any sensible person can believe them.

It is fair to say that Christians hold a diversity of views about some stories in the Old Testament as to whether they are strict history or stories designed to teach a theological truth. What is not in dispute is that the Bible contains many styles of writing. It contains poetry (e.g. Psalms), prayers, stories designed to teach ‘who’ and ‘why’ rather than ‘how’ and ‘when’ (e.g. Genesis 1–3), a love song (Song of Solomon), wisdom to live by (Proverbs) and prophecies about the future (e.g. Revelation). Theological integrity requires us to treat each piece of writing in the way the original author intended and understand it in its context.

As such, we would do well to note what one of the great fathers of the Christian church, St Augustine (354–430 AD), wrote concerning the creation accounts in Genesis. He was critical of those who turned to the Scriptures for answers to cosmological questions the writers of the Bible never intended to teach.<sup>6</sup> John Calvin (1509–1564), one of the leaders of the Reformation, expressed a similar conviction. He said bluntly, ‘He who would learn astronomy and other recondite arts, let him go elsewhere.’<sup>7</sup>

But we need to be careful not to dismiss the creation accounts at the start of the Bible as fanciful rubbish. The Oxford mathematician and theologian John Lennox is one who takes seriously the chronological sequence of the creation events in Genesis 1–2, but he notes that the word ‘day’ can have a number of definitions.<sup>8</sup> A day of creation can simply be a period of creative activity. Lennox believes that the initial act of creation (Gen 1:1–2) is separated from the six days of creation that followed. The reason he gives for this view is that the repeated phrases ‘And God said’ and ‘there was evening and there was morning’ only begin in Genesis 1:3. By separating ‘the beginning’ from the creative events of day 1, the universe is free to have an indeterminate age.<sup>9</sup>

Lennox also explains the creation of the sun and moon after the days of creation (in Gen 1:16) by adopting the idea that the Hebrew word for ‘create’ used in this verse (*asah*) can also mean ‘to appoint’ or ‘to work in’ something that is already there.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, II.9, 1.21, in McMullin, ‘How Should Cosmology Relate to Theology?’, p. 19. Origen of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea similarly advocated an allegorical understanding of Genesis 1 (see Rasmussen, *Genesis and Cosmos*).

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Commentaries: Genesis*, vol. I, p. 79.

<sup>8</sup> Lennox, *Seven Days That Divide the World*, pp. 48–51.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

In truth, there is no other literature quite like the first three chapters of the Bible. The creation accounts have elements of poetry (repeated phrases) and numerology (repeated numbers and patterns). It is a carefully crafted piece of literature that teaches, with peerless prose, that

- there is only one God
- all that exists is created by God
- God thinks his creation is 'good'
- God seeks to have a loving relationship with us
- evil is rebellion against God, and God has a zero tolerance for it
- suffering is the result of humankind going down a path God never intended
- God has not given up on us – he is rescuing his people, and his creation, back to himself.

These are truths that *all* Christians can unite on with joy.

What about Jonah and the whale? Surely that's a fishy tale. Christians are divided over whether this is a story designed to teach a truth or a historical account. Let me say at the outset that with God, anything is possible, and so it may well be history. Certainly, the story is placed in a historical context.

Let's turn our attention to Moses parting the Red Sea. The translation of 'Red Sea' is uncertain and could equally mean 'sea of reeds', which is suggestive of marshlands. A string of shallow lakes, some of which periodically dry out, exist along the exodus route, and the sea crossing could have occurred at one of them. The exodus account specifically mentions that a strong east wind held back the waters (Exod 14:21). This meteorological phenomenon has been recorded. But mentioning these natural phenomena is not to deny God's supernatural hand in rescuing his people. The exodus was a defining event for both Jews and Christians. As such, it is highly likely that God had a hand in it.

God saving people in the midst of water is a recurrent theme in the Old Testament (Isa 43:2; 1 Pet 3:20). This is why the apostle Paul links the Red Sea event to baptism (1 Cor 10:2).

You may remember that the Hebrew people also crossed the Jordan on dry land at a time when it was in flood in order to enter the Promised Land (Josh 3). Geologists have identified a site 32 kilometres upstream where earthquakes and land slippages periodically block the Jordan. Maybe God whistled up this natural event.

God is able to do as much or as little as he likes through natural phenomena. What is not in dispute is the fact that God has caused us to have the Bible, a collection of books that have stood as a guardian of faith for centuries. Despite the Bible being written over a 1,500-year period, its various parts fit together to build a consistent picture of God's plan to restore humankind, and all of creation, to himself. Every significant principle taught in the New Testament is prefigured in the Old Testament in some way.

It is a remarkable story, and God is inviting you to make it yours.



## 15. DID NAZARETH ACTUALLY EXIST?

In 2008 the Atheist Press of America put out a book, *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus*, written by amateur archaeologist René Salm.

If René had taken a little more care, he might have discovered that the modern-day town of Nazareth was, in all probability, a satellite hamlet of the main town of Nazareth that existed in Jesus' time. This main town (now known as *Tel Yafia*) would have been 2.4 kilometres southwest of the hamlet of Nazareth where Mary lived. According to the amateur archaeologist Trevor Harris, her hamlet was probably one of five contained within the town's borders.<sup>11</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Joseph had his workshop in the main town of Nazareth. Why? Because that's where the population centre was. The city would also have been the place where the synagogue existed, later made famous by Jesus when he went there and read from the book of Isaiah at the start of his ministry (Luke 4:14–21). The little hamlet of Nazareth (where modern Nazareth now stands) was too small to have a synagogue, as archaeology has confirmed.

The town of Nazareth (and its satellite hamlets) was situated about halfway between the Sea of Galilee and the Mediterranean in the northern province of Galilee – an area noted for its good agriculture and its rebellions. The town had a pleasant climate, as it was located in the hills 390 metres above sea level.

It's worth dwelling, for a moment, on how the town of Nazareth (a town not mentioned in the Old Testament) came to exist, and how Joseph, a native of Bethlehem 160 kilometres to the south, came to be living there. History gives us some intriguing clues.

For much of the period between the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Seleucid Empire occupied Galilee and Judea. The Seleucids imposed Greek culture on the region. However, the Jewish Maccabean revolution (167–160 BC) freed the Jews from the Seleucids and allowed Jewish colonists to move north into Galilee. Some of these colonists developed a city that they named 'Nazareth' in celebration of their Davidic ancestry. The Hebrew word *nazara* means 'of Davidic ancestry'. The root of the word *nazara* literally means 'branch'. This was because King David was the 'branch' (i.e. descendant of) his father Jesse (1 Sam 16:1–13). In other words, *nazara* signalled that the town was a Davidic town and therefore thoroughly Jewish. Joseph, a native of Bethlehem (David's city), would have been at home in Nazareth as he was a descendant of King David.

It is likely that the distinctive Jewish culture of Nazareth city was stamped out in AD 68, when Vespasian's Roman army invaded the region. The city was then Romanised and existed through the centuries until it was obliterated by the Muslim invasion.

No serious scholar doubts the existence of Nazareth. The town is mentioned repeatedly in all four Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. The early church fathers Justin Martyr

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<sup>11</sup> Harris, *Proving Biblical Nazareth*.

(100–165 AD) and Origen (185–254 AD) spoke of Nazareth, and both would have had contact with the *Desposyni* (people of the blood line of Jesus).

Conclusive proof of Nazareth's existence comes from a fragment of a stone tablet found by archaeologists in 1962 at an ancient synagogue in Caesarea Maritima. (The Department of Archaeology of Hebrew University, Jerusalem, conducted this research with the assistance of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.) On the fragment was a list of places where priests were sent to perform their duties, and the list includes Nazareth. The inscription reads, 'The eighteenth priestly course, Hapizzatez, [at] Nazareth' (line 18). We therefore know that the city of Nazareth existed and that it was big enough to warrant the services of priests who were rostered on to minister there.

Can I just pause here and vent a little exasperation? Do atheists seriously think that those writing the biographies of Jesus would have invented a mythical town such as Atlantis, and written about it to people who had, or could have had access to, those with a living memory of Jesus, and expect it to go unchallenged?

Seriously?!

## 16. DID THE EXODUS REALLY HAPPEN?

The celebrity atheist, Richard Dawkins, could be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that the events of the exodus are myth, if he took into account the conclusions of many Egyptologists such as the Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein and the American archaeologist Neil Asher Silberman.<sup>12</sup> Finkelstein and Silberman co-wrote a book entitled *The Bible Unearthed*, in which they claim that the evidence showing that the exodus did not happen at the time and in the manner described in the Bible is ‘irrefutable’.<sup>13</sup> Some claim that people of Israel didn’t even exist at that time.

However, Professor James Hoffmeier, an American Old Testament scholar and Egyptologist, disagrees.<sup>14</sup> He makes the following points.

### **The first reference to Israel**

Hoffmeier argues that a people group called ‘Israel’ did exist at that time in history. He makes reference to the existence of an engraved stone pillar (a ‘stele’), on which Ramesses II (Ramesses the Great) boasted of his conquest of the surrounding nations, including Israel. This stone is called the Merneptah Stele. It was discovered in 1896 by Flinders Petrie and is now located in the Cairo Museum.

### **Is there evidence of Semites living in Egypt?**

There were three periods when Egypt was powerful. These have been called the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms. Between these periods, Egypt was weak and unable to police its borders. This allowed the Semitic group, the Hyksos, to live in the Nile delta.

It’s worth noting that the Bible has something to say about the date of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. It mentions that the exodus occurred 480 years prior to the laying of the foundations of Solomon’s temple in 966 BC (1 Kgs 6:1). If the dating of the laying of the foundation is correct, it would suggest that the pharaoh at the time of the exodus lived just before Amenhotep II, a pharaoh who lived well before Ramesses.

### **‘Children of the Nursery’ and the story of Joseph**

The pharaohs used to take captive foreign princes who were still children and train them up to serve Egypt’s purposes. A boy trained in this way was called ‘A Child of the Nursery’, and it was considered a great honour. The training of Moses by the royal family is entirely consistent with this practice.

It is also significant that in 1980, the limestone tomb of Aper-El was discovered in Saqqara, the necropolis of Memphis. Aper-El (El meaning ‘God’) was a Semitic man who became the prime minister (vizier) of Amenophis III in the 14th century BC.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Dawkins Foundation, ‘No Exodus – No Judeo-Christian Faiths?’.

<sup>13</sup> Finkelstein & Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> James Hoffmeier, interviewed by Dickson, ‘The Exodus’.

### **Is the exodus story a fiction?**

Is the exodus story a fiction written to help the Jews navigate their return from captivity at the time of the Persian Empire?

Possibly not, because some of the names mentioned in the Exodus story – for example, Miriam and Hur (which literally means ‘of Horus’, the Egyptian god) – are Egyptian names. It is unlikely that a writer writing a fictional account in the Persian period would have given Egyptian names to his characters.

### **Enslavement**

There can be little doubt that Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt. An Egyptian list of domestic slaves (probably written in the 17th century BC) contains not only Semitic names, but several specifically Hebrew names. This document is known as Papyrus Brooklyn 35.1446.

There is also a wall painting of Nubian and Semites (distinguished by their scruffy beards) working as slaves under the goading of Egyptian overlords.

### **Plagues**

Plagues of the type mentioned in Exodus chapters 7–11 happened from time to time in Egyptian history. Plague pits of hastily buried bodies have been found.

### **The parting of the sea**

The identity of the Red Sea (or the Sea of Reeds) is uncertain. It could easily be a series of three large lakes that flooded in the rainy season to become one lake. For some periods of the year, it was possible to navigate your way round the three large lakes – if you knew the path.

### **Why is there no record of a mass exodus of Jews from Egypt?**

Papyrus records don't survive. The oldest extant papyri come from Roman times. As such, there is 2,000 years of silence regarding old Egyptian written records. The number of Jews recorded leaving Egypt was 600,000 men, according to Exodus 12:37. However, in Hebrew, the number is written with three words: six (*shishshah*), hundred (*meyah*), thousand (*eleph*). The tricky thing is *eleph* not only means ‘a thousand’, but also a clan or family unit (literally, ‘people yoked together’). If this is so, then the number of people involved in the exodus could be as few as 3,500 men – or 10,000 people overall.

### **The city of Ramesses**

Ramesses' father began to build the city, but then Ramesses II developed it into one of the biggest cities in the world. The city flourished between 1275–1130 BC. Unfortunately, the tributary of the Nile that fed the city and facilitated transport silted up, so the city was abandoned, dismantled and moved to Tanis. This is why Ramesses is referred to as Tanis (biblical Zoan) in Psalm 78:12, 43. It would be unlikely to have this detail if the exodus story was fictional.

So, what do you think?

# 17. DOES MODERN HISTORY FULFIL OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY?

There is something very special about the continued existence of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel. If you look at the last 3,000 years of human history, the fact that the Jewish people still exist is nothing short of a miracle. So if you are looking for a modern-day miracle that points to the veracity of Old Testament prophecies concerning God's people, you can't go past this one. All the nations in the Levant region that were contemporaries of the Jews no longer exist. The Hittites, Amorites, Amalekites, Philistines, Edomites, Jebusites and a host of other nations have disappeared from history. Only the Jews have remained, and they have remained despite being deported and scattered across the world where they have had to endure horrendous pogroms and the Nazi Holocaust. They have returned to Palestine and survived despite the recent wars waged against them that had the declared aim of exterminating them.

This alone should give you a shiver down your spine. It indicates that something special is happening. It would seem that God's hand remains upon his people. Let me hasten to say, this doesn't mean that the Jewish people are particularly godly. They haven't been, and they are certainly not perfect today. God has needed to chastise his people continually throughout history for their immoral and unfaithful behaviour. But it makes you think, doesn't it?

It is significant that Jesus insisted that not even the tiniest detail of any scriptural prophecy would fail to be fulfilled (Matt 5:17–19). The poignancy of this statement comes from the fact that some of these prophecies, particularly relating to Jesus' second coming, seem to be only recently fulfilled.

One of these prophecies concerns the return of the Jews from around the world (Isa 11:10–12, 15–16; 43:5–7; 60:8–9). Listen to the words of the Old Testament prophet, Amos: “I will plant Israel in their own land, never again to be uprooted from the land I have given them,” says the LORD your God” (Amos 9:15).

The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, says::

Who are these that fly along like clouds,  
like doves to their nests?  
Surely the islands look to me;  
in the lead are the ships of Tarshish,  
bringing your children from afar,  
with their silver and gold,  
to the honour of the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel,  
for he has endowed you with splendour.

Foreigners will rebuild your walls,  
and their kings will serve you.

Though in anger I struck you,  
in favour I will show you compassion. (Isa 60:8–10)

Is it being too fanciful to believe that the allusion to those who ‘fly along like clouds’ could be a reference to aeroplanes bringing Jews back to their homeland? (See also the reference to God carrying his people on ‘eagles’ wings’ in Exod 19:4.) Similarly, could the ‘ships of Tarshish’ refer to the ships bringing Jewish immigrants home in the 20th century? (Note: the exact location of Tarshish is not known. Its name has been linked to Carthage, Spain and Britain.)

Intriguingly, Isaiah speaks of the country of the Jews coming into being in one day.

Who has ever heard of such things?  
Who has ever seen things like this?  
Can a country be born in a day  
or a nation be brought forth in a moment?  
Yet no sooner is Zion in labour  
than she gives birth to her children. (Isa 66:8)

This must have seemed a highly unlikely prophecy, and yet modern-day Israel *was* born in a day. The mandate for British rule of Palestine ended at midnight on 14 May 1948. Next day, Israel gained its independence.

Almost immediately, Operation Magic Carpet was put in place. This was the nickname given for Operation On Wings of Eagles, a program designed to bring 49,000 Yemenite Jews to the new state of Israel between June 1949 and September 1950. British and American planes airlifted them. This initiative kick started the return of Jews to Israel from all over the world. The desire to someday return to Jerusalem had been kept alive for centuries – exemplified by the phrase ‘Next year, in Jerusalem’, which was said by all Jews at the end of the annual Passover meal.

If you visit the city of Jerusalem, you will see the eastern gate (the ‘Golden Gate’) has been sealed up by stonework. Intriguingly, the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel prophesied this gate would be sealed and not opened until the Messiah (Jesus) returns. This is what he said:

Then the man brought me back to the outer gate of the sanctuary, the one facing east, and it was shut. The LORD said to me, ‘This gate is to remain shut. It must not be opened; no one may enter through it. It is to remain shut because the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered through it. The prince himself is the only one who may sit inside the gateway to eat in the presence of the LORD. He is to enter by way of the portico of the gateway and go out the same way.’ (Ezek 44:1–3)

Ezekiel’s prophecy about the eastern gate being sealed was given around 575 BC. He could not have guessed at that time what a history that gate would have. The Byzantine emperor Justinian I built the present gate around 520 AD. It was closed by the Muslims in 810, reopened in 1102 by the Crusaders, and walled up again by the Muslim leader Saladin after he recaptured Jerusalem in 1187. The Ottoman sultan Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilt the gate and city walls in 1541 – but he also sealed up the gate.

It has remained sealed until today.

It is always difficult to say how literally you should take Old Testament prophecy, or to claim with certainty what they refer to. However, we have the privilege of knowing enough for us to be hugely respectful of biblical prophecy and acknowledge its relevance for us today.

## PART 3

WHAT IS THE TRUTH ABOUT JESUS?





## 18. WHAT IS THE STORY OF JESUS?

Over the centuries in which the Old Testament was written, God's prophets foretold the coming of God to earth as the 'Messiah' (Hebrew) or 'Christ' (Greek), both titles meaning 'the anointed one'. People had to contain their sense of anticipation and wait a long time before these prophecies were fulfilled. In fact, there was a 400-year wait between the last of these prophecies and the coming of Jesus.

Then, finally, something happened. The Holy Spirit of God caused a virgin by the name of Mary to become pregnant with a baby boy. At the time, Mary was engaged to Joseph, a carpenter from Nazareth in the northern region of Galilee.

Joseph had to journey south to the town of his ancestors, Bethlehem, in order to be registered in a census that was being undertaken by the Roman Empire for tax purposes. While he and Mary were there, she gave birth to the Messiah. She gave birth in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn.

An angel instructed Mary and Joseph to call the child Jesus, which literally means 'God saves'. God had come to earth as a vulnerable baby – a human being – to save us from our sins and rescue us back to himself.

Two groups of people were led by God to visit Jesus after his birth. The first was a band of lowly Palestinian shepherds. This was a clear indication that Jesus had come for ordinary people. The second was a group of learned Zoroastrian mystics (magi), who journeyed all the way from Persia. Their invitation to witness Jesus' arrival showed that Jesus had come for all people who earnestly seek God – regardless of their religious tradition.

Joseph, Mary and Jesus then spent two years in Egypt as refugees, hiding from the Jewish king, Herod, who was trying to kill Jesus. An ancient prophecy about a king being born in Bethlehem had caused Herod to feel that his kingdom was under threat. He therefore murdered all the baby boys born in Bethlehem.

After Herod died, Joseph, Mary and Jesus returned to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

Sometime during the next 30 years, Joseph died, leaving Mary alone with her adult son Jesus and Jesus' younger brothers and sisters who had been born naturally from the union of Joseph and Mary.

When Jesus was 30 years old, he began his ministry as an itinerant preacher. He invited 12 men (most of whom were from the local region of Galilee) to be his disciples. Jesus travelled with them from town to town, telling people that the kingdom of God was now available to everyone who repented. Jesus showed that the kingdom of God had come by healing people and driving out evil spirits from those who were possessed. He also modelled to his disciples a radical new intimacy with God, whom he called 'Father'.

From time to time, Jesus travelled south to the capital city of Jerusalem to teach at the temple there. He often used to stay with friends in the village of Bethany, a kilometre or two east of the city.

For most of his ministry, Jesus tried to keep his identity a secret to avoid causing a riot or being mobbed. Only in the last few days of his ministry, when he entered Jerusalem for the last time, did he acknowledge his identity publicly.

The authority of Jesus' teaching and the miracles he performed soon caused the Jewish religious leaders to feel threatened, so they plotted to kill him. After three years of ministry, one of the disciples, Judas, betrayed Jesus into the hands of the authorities. Jesus was arrested, tried in a Jewish court and then taken to the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The Jewish leaders did this because they knew that only the Romans could order a person to be executed.

Jesus was paraded through the city to the place of execution outside the city walls. There, he was impaled on a wooden cross and left to die. Two rebels were crucified, one on either side of him. At the precise moment when Jesus died, the curtain that separated people from the presence of God in the temple was ripped from top to bottom. This was how God signified that the way was now open for people to come to him. By dying a cross, Jesus had paid the price for everyone's sins.

Two influential men from the Jewish council then wrapped Jesus' body in strips of cloth and laid him in a freshly cut tomb. When they had finished, they rolled a heavy stone over the entrance. This occurred on a Friday evening.

Nothing happened during the next day, as the religious feast of Passover was being celebrated. But on Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene (a follower of Jesus) and some other women went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body more thoroughly in preparation for his permanent burial. When they arrived, however, they found that the stone covering the tomb had been rolled away. An angel of God told Mary that Jesus had been raised from death! She was amazed and ran back to tell the disciples. Very reasonably, they didn't believe her, but two of them (Peter and John) ran to the tomb and saw that it was empty – except for the folded grave clothes.

The disciples could hardly believe that Jesus was alive, and most of them returned north to Galilee with Peter to resume their profession as fishermen. But one morning, the resurrected Jesus met them on the shore of the lake. Needless to say, the disciples were overjoyed.

Over the next 40 days, Jesus appeared to his followers a number of times – on one occasion to over 500 of them! As he met with the disciples, he commissioned them to go into the world and tell people about Jesus, so that everyone could put their faith in him and be saved. Before the disciples went on mission, however, Jesus asked them to remain in Jerusalem until they had been empowered by God's Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would remind them of everything Jesus had taught them and give them the spiritual gifts (abilities) they needed to be effective missionaries.

Finally, the time came for Jesus to leave his disciples so that they could get on with their ministry. Jesus met with them just east of Jerusalem, not far from the village of Bethany where he used to stay with his friends. After reminding them of their mandate to be his missionaries, he was taken up from the earth before their very eyes – up into the sky until a cloud obscured him from their sight. The disciples didn't know what to make of this until two angels spoke to them. The angels assured them that Jesus would come back in a similar fashion at the end of time to inaugurate God's eternal kingdom..

## 19. WHAT HISTORICAL EVIDENCE IS THERE FOR JESUS?

Christianity is not a culturally derived religious philosophy that gradually evolved over the years. It is based on the historical reality of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. This claim is hugely significant, for if it can be shown that the New Testament accounts of Jesus are nothing but myths and exaggerations formed incrementally over the years by overzealous adherents, Christianity disappears in a puff of smoke leaving nothing behind but moralism.

So, let's take a look at the historical evidence of Jesus.

John, the disciple who was closest to Jesus begins his epistles with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim concerning the Word of Life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 John 1:1–3).

John is making it quite clear that he is writing from his first-hand experience of being with Jesus. He is not at all interested in promoting myths that developed about him years later. Peter and the other apostles said similar things. Luke records Peter saying in Acts: 'We are witnesses of these things' (Acts 5:32).

Christopher Hitchens, who, when he was alive, was one of the most vociferous 'New Atheists', made the claim that there is 'no firm evidence whatever that Jesus was a "character in history"'.<sup>1</sup> In order for the New Atheists to say such things, they need to ignore scholarly research and embrace selective rhetoric, then pass it off as informed comment. Hitchens' claim is shocking in its untruth. His comments are driven by his atheistic agenda, not by academic research.

George Eldon Ladd, a professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, says this: 'Unlike other world religions, modern man has the means of actually verifying Christianity's truth by historical evidence.'<sup>2</sup> Some of this evidence comes from a chap called Josephus.

Josephus was born around 37 AD, just seven years after Jesus' death. He was a Jewish military leader who sought to defend Galilee from the invading Romans in 67 AD. General Vespasian (who later became emperor) captured him, and Josephus abruptly changed his allegiance and agreed to become an interpreter and adviser to the Romans. The Romans gave him a villa in Rome and supported him while he wrote a history of the Jewish people called *Jewish Antiquities* in 90 AD. In this work, Josephus writes (and I'm careful here to exclude any controversial sections that some historians think were added later):

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<sup>1</sup> Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 115.

<sup>2</sup> Ladd, 'The Knowledge of God', pp.7–13.

About this time there lived Jesus, a wise man ... for he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people who accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks ... When Pilate, upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us had condemned him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up their affection for him.<sup>3</sup>

Another person who wrote about Jesus was Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56–120 AD). Tacitus was proconsul of Roman Asia. He wrote the *Annals of Imperial Rome*, a history of the emperors Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius and Nero. Only some parts of the *Annals* have survived. One section of the surviving literature gives an account of the great fire of Rome that raged for six days, destroying 14 of the 18 city districts. Tacitus mentions that Nero tried to deflect the blame for the fire from himself to Christians. He wrote:

Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of man, loathed for their vices, who the crowd called Christians.

Christ, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilate.<sup>4</sup>

Yet another near contemporary of Jesus was Pliny the Younger (c. 61–112 AD). He was sent by Trajan to sort out the disorganised province of Bithynia, south of the Black Sea. Pliny wrote about the rapid spread of Christianity and the fact that he had interrogated some captured Christians to find out about their faith. The letter he wrote to give an account of this is significant because it takes the existence of Jesus Christ for granted.<sup>5</sup>

And there are other early witnesses to the historical Jesus, such as the Stoic philosopher Mara bar Serapion (born 50 AD) and Lucian of Samosata (115–200 AD).

The historical evidence of Jesus' existence is overwhelming – particularly when you add the significant details recorded in the Gospels. We need to remember that these Gospel accounts of Jesus' life were written at a time when those who were eyewitnesses to Jesus' life could have challenged the truth of their contents.

There is no record of any challenge ever occurring.

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<sup>3</sup> *Jewish Antiquities*, 18, pp. 63–64.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, 15.44.

<sup>5</sup> Pliny, *The Letters of the Younger Pliny*, Letter 96.

## 20. IS THERE ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE FOR GOSPELS OF JESUS CHRIST?

When atheist Christopher Hitchens was alive, he made the audacious claim that the authenticity of the Gospels has been shown to be ‘in tatters for some time, and the rents and tears only become more obvious with better research.’<sup>6</sup> In reality, this comment is so manifestly outrageous as to beggar belief. Here’s why.

### **Galilean synagogues**

For many years, contemporary scholars were troubled by a lack of synagogues. Prior to 2008, no archaeological evidence for any synagogue existing in Jesus’ time could be found in the region of Galilee. As the Gospels mention that ‘Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues’ (Matt 4:23), this was a bit of an embarrassment.

Some scholars concluded that the claim that Jesus preached in the synagogues of Galilee was an invention of the Gospel writers. But then, in 2009, archaeologists discovered the remains of a pre-70 AD synagogue in the Galilean town of Magdala (the town where Mary Magdalene came from). Later that year, they found another at Khirbet Wadi Hamam ... and in 2016, yet another at Tel Rekish, near Mount Tabor.

These archaeological findings suggest that the Gospel writers knew a great deal more than our modern scholars!

### **Jehohanan**

Some historians have attacked the biblical account of Jesus being buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, arguing that no person defiled by crucifixion would have been put into a family tomb.

However, in 1968, building contractors working in northeast Jerusalem uncovered a family grave. It contained an ossuary box (a stone box containing the bones of someone who had died) with a Hebrew inscription on it saying that the bones were those of Jehohanan, the son of Hagkol. Jehohanan had been crucified sometime in the first century, and his lower leg was fractured just like the legs of the two rebels who were crucified either side of Jesus. The end of the nail that had pierced one of Jehohanan’s heels was bent, making it extremely difficult to withdraw, so it had remained imbedded in the bone.

So it seems that a crucified person could be buried in a family grave after all.

### **Pontius Pilate**

The Gospels record Pontius Pilate as being the military leader who ordered the death of Jesus. However, references to Pilate in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus suggest that

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<sup>6</sup> Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 122.

Pilate was a civil leader. Who was right? Did the apparent mistake suggest that the Gospel writings were later, unreliable works?

In 1961, an inscribed stone tablet was found in Cesarea Maritima. The stone appeared to come from a building built by Pilate to honour Tiberius Caesar. The inscription read (in part) 'Pontius Pilatus, prefect of Judaea'. The office of prefect was a military one, making it clear that the Gospel accounts of Pilate's military authority were correct.

### **The pool of Bethesda**

In the past, liberal theologians (who cast doubt on a lot of biblical historicity) have claimed that the Gospel of John contains fictitious accounts written to embellish the Jesus story. They cited the account of Jesus healing the lame man at the pool of Bethesda as an example (John 5:1–9), as there was no archaeological evidence of such a pool existing.

And then ... yes, you've guessed it ... in 1964, archaeologists working in the grounds of St Anne's church, just north of Temple Mount, confirmed the existence of an extensive pool complex that matched the biblical description of the pool of Bethesda. John's Gospel describes the pool complex in some detail, including the existence of five covered colonnades. These have all been found. One of the reasons it took archaeologists so long to discover the pool was that many buildings had been built on top of the complex over time, including a pagan temple and a Byzantine church.

### **Alexander, son of Simon**

I've reserved the next archaeological find for last, as I find it particularly exciting. In 1941, the Hebrew University professor Eleazer Sukenick and his assistant Nahman Avigad were excavating the tombs of the Kidron Valley, which runs along the eastern edge of Temple Mount. They discovered a tomb that had been closed off by a large stone. When they entered the tomb, they found 11 ossuary boxes containing bones. The professor documented his findings, and the artefacts were stored away.

For some reason, the findings of the professor were not made public until 1962. When they were, it caused a sensation. On the side of one ossuary box facing the wall was inscribed 'Alexander, (son) of Simon', and below it, in smaller letters, 'Alexander QRNYT'. The most probable meaning of QRNYT is that it is a misspelling of *qrnyh* – Hebrew for 'Cyrenian'.

Archaeologists conclude that it is highly probable that these bones were those of the son of the man forced to carry the crossbeam of Jesus' cross. The Gospel of Mark tells the story. It says, 'A certain man from Cyrene, Simon, the father of Alexander and Rufus, was passing by on his way in from the country, and they forced him to carry the cross' (Mark 15:21).

The fact that Mark gives details of both sons suggests that their names were relevant to his readers. In other words, his readers would probably know of them because both men had become Christians. (It is possible that Alexander's brother Rufus is the same Rufus mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:13.)

Let me say: these are outstanding archaeological findings. And the consistent feature of these discoveries is that they back up the Gospel accounts of Jesus.

Hooray!

## 21. WHAT ARE THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES OF JESUS?

It is significant that Jesus expects us to see him in the prophecies of the Old Testament. He once said to some religious leaders, ‘You study the Scriptures diligently to learn about eternal life [but these] are the Scriptures that testify about me’ (John 5:39). And when meeting two of his disheartened disciples on the road to Emmaus, Jesus said to them,

‘How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25–27).

It is spine-tingling to read the numerous prophecies about Jesus that were written several hundred years before he was born. These include

- his birth in Bethlehem (prophesied in Mic 5:2; fulfilled in Matt 2:1) to a virgin (prophesied in Isa 7:14; fulfilled in Matt 1:18)
- his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (prophesied in Zech 9:9; fulfilled in John 12:12–15)
- his betrayal for 30 pieces of silver (prophesied in Zech 11:12; fulfilled in Matt 26:14–16)
- his hands and feet being pierced (prophesied in Ps 22:16; fulfilled in John 19:33–34)
- his legs not being broken during his crucifixion, unlike those who were crucified with him (prophesied in Ps 34:20; fulfilled in John 19:31–33)
- people gambling for his clothing (prophesied in Ps 22:18; fulfilled in John 19:23–24)
- his resurrection (prophesied in Ps 16:10; fulfilled in Acts 3:15).

In Genesis, chapter 49, we read of Jacob, one of the great biblical patriarchs, who was old and dying. His last act was to bless his sons and let them know that he was fully aware of their character. He had 12 sons, the descendants of whom would become the 12 tribes of the Jews. One of his sons was Judah.

Up until that moment, Judah had not played a starring role. He wasn’t the oldest son or the most favoured son. And yet, old man Jacob says to him, ‘The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his’ (Gen 49:10). This makes it plain that the eternal ruler (the Messiah) will come from the tribe of Judah, the tribe from which King David also came. Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah sometimes refer to the Messiah as being a ‘branch’ of King David (Jer 23:5; 33:15) or Jesse (who was David’s father; see Isa 11:1). It will be of no surprise therefore to learn that Jesus was technically a descendant of King David (Luke 1:26–27, 32).

Arguably the most spine-tinglingly accurate prophecy of Jesus’ ministry is that written by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah began his ministry in 740 BC, and his prophecy occurs in Isaiah 53.

Verse 1 begins by saying ‘Who has believed our message?’ This is a salutary reminder that many will choose not to believe the Christian message, no matter how it is communicated.

Verse 2 goes on to describe God’s suffering servant, the Messiah. ‘He grew up ... like a tender shoot ... He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.’ The chosen servant of God had nothing outwardly going for him at all. The Jews were looking for a glorious king who would be a religious and political saviour. They did not expect him to be a person who was born in a place where animals feed.

Verse 3 continues: ‘He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain ... he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.’ Jesus began his life as a political refugee – fleeing from the murderous intent of King Herod. And at the end of his ministry, he was mocked and flogged (John 19:1–3).

Isaiah continues in verse 5: ‘He was pierced for our transgressions’. This turned out to be the case. Jesus was nailed to a cross and speared in the side. He endured this to pay the price for our sins that would otherwise disbar us from God’s presence (1 John 4:10).

In verse 7, Isaiah says that God’s suffering servant was oppressed, but ‘did not open his mouth’. The Gospels record that Jesus did not open his mouth to defend himself during his trial (Mark 15:3–5).

Still later, in verses 8–9, we learn that the suffering servant is killed and ‘assigned a grave with the wicked’. Jesus was crucified between two robbers (Mark 15:27). Furthermore, ‘He was assigned a grave ... with the rich in his death’. Hundreds of years later, Matthew records how Jesus’ body was placed in the grave of a rich man from Arimathea (Matt 27:57–59).

And finally, Isaiah says in verse 11, ‘After he has suffered, he will see the light of life’. This alludes, of course, to Jesus’ resurrection.

Wow!

Isaiah’s prophecy is remarkable. Only the willfully perverse could claim that its accuracy concerning Jesus was coincidental or insignificant. But those with a humble heart towards God will hear God whispering to them about Jesus. And I hope he is whispering to you.



## 22. WHAT ARE THE CHRISTMAS PROPHECIES OF JESUS?

Why did God send his son to be born in an obscure rural village in a country that was overrun by an occupying enemy force? What made God involve a peasant girl and a carpenter? What prompted the Son of God to be born in a place where animals feed?

The truth is: God had laid the plans for this event long ago. The Old Testament prophets had foretold it. The prophet Micah had spoken about a mother who was to give birth to a prince of ancient lineage, who would shepherd his people and be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2–5).

God even worked through the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, prompting him to have a census. This event required Mary and Joseph to return to Bethlehem in time for Mary to give birth to Jesus, so fulfilling the ancient prophecy of Micah. This census was carried out typically every 14 years for the purposes of assessing who could be called up for military duty and establishing what taxes should be levied on each region. Let me read to you a similar decree that historians unearthed written by the Roman governor of Egypt:

Gaius Vibius Maximus, Prefect of Egypt orders: ‘Seeing that the time has come for the house to house census, it is necessary to compel all those, who for any cause whatsoever are residing outside their districts to return to their own homes, that they may both carry out the regular order of the census, and may also diligently attend to the cultivation of their allotments.’<sup>7</sup>

Another prophecy foretelling the birth of Jesus occurs in Numbers 24:17: ‘A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel.’ This speaks of a royal ruler who will come from the Jewish people. It echoes a prophecy given in Genesis: ‘The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his’ (Gen 49:10). This prophecy teaches us that the eternal ruler will come from the tribe of Judah, the tribe from whom King David also came – which proved to be the case (see Luke 1:32).

The prophecy in Numbers 24:17 was written about 1,400 BC and the one in Micah 5:2 about 700 BC. This means that there was a lot of waiting before the event prophesied came to pass! It is a powerful reminder that God has ultimate control of history.

Here’s another remarkable prophecy. As Daniel was praying for his people, the angel Gabriel visited him and told him that the time between the issuing of the Persian decree to rebuild Jerusalem and the coming of the Messiah would be 483 years. ‘Know and understand this: from the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven “sevens”, and sixty-two “sevens”’ (Dan 9:25). It is most probable that the decree Daniel referred to was that of Artaxerxes in 445 BC (Neh 2:1–6), as that’s the one that specifically speaks of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. If the edict to rebuild Jerusalem was that of Artaxerxes, this predicts that the Messiah (the ‘anointed one’) will come

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<sup>7</sup> Recorded in Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, p. 15.

as 'ruler' in AD 38. If this is so, then this is a pretty accurate prophecy about Jesus. Note: Jesus was hailed as 'ruler' on his entry to Jerusalem (Luke 19:37–38).

Note also that Jesus was crucified – that is, 'cut off' (as prophesied in Dan 9:26) – from the land of the living a week later, quite possibly in AD 38 or thereabouts.

Here's another intriguing prophecy concerning the birth of the Messiah. It is found in Isaiah 7:14: 'the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.' Immanuel literally means 'God with us'. This prophecy occurs in the middle of an account of Isaiah reprimanding Ahaz, the king of Judah, for not accepting God's offer to give him a sign that he would be victorious over the armies of Aram and Ephraim (who were invading from the north). In effect, Isaiah says 'If you won't ask for a sign, God will give you a sign ...' and then follows this prophecy, which is obviously a lot more to do with the future coming of a Messiah than defeating invading armies from the north.

A few chapters later, another prophesy about the coming of the Messiah follows: 'For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isa 9:6).

These Old Testament prophecies about Jesus' first coming 2000 years ago are extraordinary. God has written his name large upon the canvas of history because he's got something big in mind. God's plan is to come to us and draw us back to himself. He has come to seek us – as a lover seeks his bride.

## **PART 4**

IS GOD GOOD?



## 23. HOW CAN A LOVING GOD ALLOW SUFFERING?

It is perfectly understandable for someone experiencing great suffering to ask: Why did God allow it?

Let me begin by saying that God loves you and cares for you more deeply than you will ever know. Therefore, what happens to you matters to God. Jesus wept when he saw the grief of his friends Mary and Martha over the death of their brother Lazarus. The love of God means that he shares our pain.

There are no easy answers to the vexing question of suffering. There are some things we can't fully explain. However, the Bible does give enough information for us not to be completely bewildered.

Care needs to be taken, however, when using verses from the Bible to teach about suffering. Giving simplistic answers by quoting just one or two verses of Scripture will not be helpful in most cases. If, for example, you quote James 1:2–4 and tell a mother of a dying child that God allows suffering in order to bring about a greater good, you will justifiably earn her scorn. An examination of Scripture shows us that there are many aspects to suffering that need to be appreciated and held in balance if we are to know all the truth that can be known. Like a diamond with many facets, we need to understand each facet if we are to appreciate the whole diamond.

What, then, does the Bible teach about suffering?

Suffering is one of the sad features of a world that is 'off the rails' – that is, corrupted by our sin (Gen 3:1–19; Gal 6:7–8), our bad choices (Prov 10:14; 22:3) and Satan (Luke 13:16). Fundamentally, suffering is caused by humankind's rejection of God – as the story of Adam and Eve demonstrates.

While suffering does not come from God, he does allow it (Job 1:8–22, 2:1–7). Why?

The cost of God giving humankind freewill to accept or reject a loving relationship with him was the risk that we would choose to reject God and bring on ourselves the consequences of sin, which is suffering.

The imperfections of a suffering creation are seen in two ways. First, it is seen in the suffering that is caused by moral evil. God has given us free will to accept or reject his lordship. But this freedom comes with risks. God risks that we might make bad choices – and suffer the consequences. Hitler made bad moral choices and caused horrendous suffering.

Secondly, suffering is caused by physical evil (natural catastrophes) – for example, cancer and tsunamis. It seems as if the sinfulness of humankind has not only corrupted us, but nature itself. This truth is taught in the Adam and Eve story in Genesis 3. We need to remember that just as the salvation of Jesus – whom the apostle Paul calls the 'last Adam' (1 Cor 15:45–49) – reaches both back and forwards in history, so too can the sins of the first Adam (i.e. us) have consequences that flow back and forwards in history, corrupting creation.

A key assurance the Bible gives us is that God understands our suffering. He has shared it as Jesus (Isa 53:3–5; Heb 2:18; 4:15). But here's a question: Is God just a compassionate spectator?

No! God works actively against suffering, evil and oppression through his church. Christianity does not simply give a facile response to the problem of suffering based only on a future hope. On the contrary, God's Holy Spirit directs believers to work at overcoming suffering and injustice wherever they see it.

The other thing to remember is that although we may not be saved from hardships, we never need to face them alone. The promise is that God will never forsake us, and if invited, he will walk with us through life and lend us his strength (Matt 28:19–20; Heb 13:5).

Some people are tempted to believe that bad things happen to bad people and are therefore confused when something bad happens to a good person. Jesus corrects this thinking in Luke 13:1–5, where he makes it plain that those who suffer are not necessarily more evil than anyone else. He teaches that their suffering is one of the sad consequences of the rejection of God by people of all nations, leading them to go down a path God never intended. As such, suffering points to the need for all of us to repent. As C.S. Lewis said, 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience but shouts in our pains. Pain is God's megaphone to arouse a deaf world.'<sup>1</sup>

It must also be said that a life without pain is neither possible nor desirable. Some pain is necessary, as it is the way our body tells us it is damaged. We also need the risks of life to help us mature.

So, what are the different facets of suffering taught by the Bible? In essence, they are these:

1. God is loving, and he is the perfect definition of love.
2. Times of crisis are times of opportunity, when we can show God's love, generosity and self-sacrifice (2 Cor 1:4).
3. God has the right to bring judgement on us in this life as a consequence of us choosing evil. He has warned us of this reality. But God's judgement is always aimed at bringing about our repentance so that new beginnings and blessings can follow.
4. God is just, and he is the perfect definition of justice.
5. We all live in a broken and fallen world, and we all share in its dangers.
6. God sometimes uses a situation of sickness to show his glory by bringing healing (John 9:2–3).
7. Times of difficulty can help us grow in godly character (Jas 1:2–4).
8. This life is not all there is. Christians can view it from the perspective of eternity. God and his goodness will ultimately triumph. Evil will be judged and killed off (Rom 8:35; Rev 21:1–4).

... which is a wonderful place to end.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 58.

## 24. HAS GOD PREDESTINED PEOPLE TO HELL?

Many of the writings of the apostle Paul in the New Testament suggest that God has already chosen those who will be saved and live eternally with him in his kingdom (Rom 8:29–33; 9:18; 16:13; Eph 1:4–6; Col 3:12; 1 Thess 1:4; 2 Thess 2:13). This, in theological language, is called ‘divine election’.

This leads to the unsettling thought that God has chosen those who will go to hell – and that he decided this before the world was made. Such an idea, of course, presents huge ethical difficulties – because it’s not fair on those who were not chosen. It also conflicts with Bible verses that speak of God’s desire for everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:3–4; 2 Pet 3:9).

The idea that God has made us like a mechanical clock, predestined to move its cogs and tick its way remorselessly along, presents a logical problem, for it would mean that our relationship with God is not real. We are simply ‘pre-programmed’ to love and become Christians. Therefore, the whole notion of Jesus and Paul admonishing us to love, be faithful and choose holiness becomes meaningless.

The reality is that both Jesus and Paul emphasised the importance of choice (Mark 16:16; John 10:9; Acts 2:21; Rom 1:16).

Paul had an incredibly strong understanding of the high calling of being a disciple of Christ. The privilege of being ‘in Christ’, and therefore being ‘saved’, coloured all his theology. Paul never taught that anyone was excluded from God’s kingdom, except through sin. His whole missionary focus was to preach to those who might reasonably have thought they were excluded from God, and *include* them. The urgency he felt about this is well displayed in his letter to the church in Rome.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? (Rom 10:14–15)

The theory that God predestines some people for hell was popularised by the Swiss reformer John Calvin. Calvin revised his teaching (his *Institutes*) several times and never claimed they were the last word. As such, we should be careful to take our final authority from the Bible, not Calvin. To be fair to Calvin, his understanding of predestination was driven by a pastor’s heart. He wanted people to know that they were never left unseen by God, in the hands of fate and chance. God has a plan. And to this, we can all say ‘Amen!’

The fact is, God’s will for humanity is not realised until God and the people he created each become the object of the other’s love. For this to happen, both must be able to freely choose to love each other – for unless they do, no authentic relationship will occur. It is important to remember, however, that while God and humanity are the two agents participating in a freely chosen, loving relationship, only God supplies the means for this to happen. He has done this, of course, through the cross of Christ.

So, how do we make sense of the Bible verses that speak of predestination?

The issue can be resolved when we remember that God stands outside of time. This means that the past, present and future are equally known to him. The consequence of this is that God already knows who will, by faith and of their own free will, become his people.

It is important to remember that God has not made people for hell and damnation. God did not intend anyone to go to hell (1 Thess 5:9). It was to save us from hell that Jesus came. Hell was designed primarily for the devil and his evil spirits (Matt 25:41). Sadly, however, the Bible teaches that hell is a state of being that many people choose. After all, God will respect anyone's decision not to have anything to do with him. Jesus put it well when he said 'many are invited, but few are chosen' (Matt 22:14).

An image that has helped some understand the issue of predestination is this. Picture yourself walking towards the gate of God's kingdom. As you approach this gate, you see written above it 'Enter all who choose to.' You decide to enter the gate, but on looking back, you see written above it, but on the inside, 'You have not chosen me, I have chosen you.'

Do choose well.



## 25. DID GOD CAUSE PEOPLE, LIKE PHARAOH, TO SIN?

Some verses in the Old Testament speak of God hardening the hearts of people – like Pharaoh in the exodus story – so that they did the wrong thing ... and thereby earned God's judgement (Exod 7:3; 10:1; Josh 11:19–20; Rom 9:18; Heb 4:5–7). This raises an interesting question. Surely it is unfair of God to judge anyone for a condition that God himself has forced on them?

Much of the confusion will be resolved if the golden rule of biblical interpretation is applied, which is this: you must allow all of Scripture to determine the meaning of any one verse. With this in mind, let's define the facts we can be certain of. Here, then, are eight truths that provide the boundaries. This means that the answer to our question has to be contained somewhere within the parameters defined by these truths.

1. God is the final definition of both love and justice, and whatever he does, he cannot violate his fundamental character.
2. God will never violate our free will. He always invites us to freely choose our behaviour (Josh 24:14–15; Deut 30:15–20).
3. God's attitude towards us is overwhelmingly one of love (John 3:16).
4. In that God allowed someone's heart to be hardened, it can be said he caused it. But it is still the individual's choice (1 Sam 6:6; John 12:40). The root of the Hebrew word 'to harden' literally means 'to strengthen'. God hardens a person's heart by strengthening the resolve they have already formed in their own heart (Ps 81:11–12; Rom 1:21–32). Scripture says six times that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, but it says on seven occasions that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.
5. We are the ones who are instructed not to harden our hearts (Zech 7:12; Heb 3:7–9). Hardness of heart, unsurprisingly, results in a person remaining ignorant of God's truth (Eph 4:18).
6. In the past, God allowed some behaviour (such as divorce) as a concession to the hardness of our hearts. But these behaviours were never God's perfect will. That's why Jesus (who is the final revelation of God's truth) updated these 'concessional' actions when he came to us 2,000 years ago (Matt 5:38–42; 19:8).
7. God is sovereign, and he can do whatever he likes to draw out sin so it can be dealt with (Gen 15:16; Rom 9:18). However, while this is true, God has bound himself to always act within his character, a character epitomised by love and justice.
8. God wants everyone to be saved and join him in his eternal kingdom (1 Tim 2:3–4; 2 Pet 3:9). He will therefore not disqualify anyone unjustly. God has done everything possible to win us back to himself – even sacrificing his Son to pay the price for those things that would otherwise disqualify us from his presence.

God hardened Pharaoh's heart, and by doing so, God drew into the open the full amount of evil that was already in Pharaoh's heart so that it could be judged and dealt with. In other words, Pharaoh had already hardened his own heart.

Let's not do the same.

## 26. WHY DID GOD ASK ABRAHAM TO SACRIFICE HIS SON ISAAC?

From the very start of the Bible in Genesis, God introduces us to ‘patterns’ which then occur throughout the Bible. One of these patterns is the concept of a sheep being sacrificed to pay the price for sins. This theme is repeated throughout the Bible. For example, God provided a sheep (specifically, a ram) for Abraham to sacrifice at Mount Moriah, instead of sacrificing his son Isaac (Gen 22). This introduced the theme of God being the one who would ultimately provide a lamb for sacrifice – as we shall see.

God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah to test Abraham’s faith. Of course, God had no intention that the act be carried out, and he dramatically reversed the narrative by saying that he would provide what was to be sacrificed – a sheep. This prefigured God providing us with Jesus (the lamb of God), who would be sacrificed to take away our sin. It is worth noting that Scripture records that Abraham never lost his conviction about the goodness of God, even when instructed to sacrifice his son. He reasoned that God would, and could, resurrect Isaac back to life (Heb 11:17–19).

The next reference to Mount Moriah occurs in the story of King David, when he offered a sacrifice to God at Araunah’s threshing floor (1 Chr 21:18–22:1). The peak on which Araunah’s threshing floor was located was none other than the place David intended to build God’s temple (1 Chr 22:1). Many sheep would later be sacrificed at that temple.

In the event, it was David’s son Solomon who built the temple there.

Then Solomon began to build the temple of the LORD in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David. It was on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite, the place provided by David (2 Chr 3:1).

The theme of a sheep being sacrificed to atone for sin continues with the story of the first Passover. On this occasion, blood from a lamb was sprinkled on the doorways of the Jewish huts to signify that they did not have to suffer the judgement of God. The judgement ‘passed over’ them.

Reference to a lamb dying to pay for the sins of the people continued with the Jewish practice of sacrificing a lamb each morning and evening in the temple. And as you’ve no doubt remembered, the temple was built on Mount Moriah! This should make your spine tingle!

Pre-eminently, of course, all of this was pointing towards Jesus, who came to us as the ‘Lamb of God’. In all four Gospel accounts of Jesus’ life, it is recorded that John the Baptist points to Jesus and says ‘Look, the Lamb of God’ (John 1:29). By saying this, John was prophesying that Jesus would die on a cross as a sacrifice to pay the price for the things we have done that would otherwise disqualify us from God’s presence.

A lamb is also spoken of in the final book of the Bible, Revelation. Revelation 14:1 speaks of a ‘Lamb’ who looked as if it had been slain (Rev 5:6) standing on Mt Zion. Later on, it speaks of the wedding of the Lamb (Jesus) to the church (Rev 19:6–9).

It can readily be seen that God ordering Abraham to sacrifice Isaac is part of a much bigger narrative that lays bare the saving grace of God.

## 27. WHY DID GOD ORDER THE DESTRUCTION OF THE AMALEKITES?

How do we make sense of God's instruction for the Jews to totally destroy the Amalekites (in 1 Sam 15:1–3)? It is the sort of action we don't associate with a loving God.

The Old Testament reveals that the thing that God particularly hated was the sacrifice of children to a false God. He considered it the worst defilement of truth. As such, God never failed to visit a consequence on any nation doing such a thing – even when it was his own people, the Jews.

Child sacrifice was practised by the Amalekites. The Amalekites were descended from Amalek, the grandson of Esau – a man who broke his covenant with God by spurning his birthright. The murderous Haman (who tried to exterminate all Jews – see Esther 3) was an Amalekite. He is described as 'the Agagite' – that is, he was descended from the Amalekite kings (see King Agag in 1 Sam 15:7–8). The Amalekites consistently sought the annihilation of the Jews (Exod 17:8–14; Num 14:41–45; Judg 3:12–14; Judg 6:3, 33–35). It was their implacable stance against the Jews coupled with their practice of sacrificing children to false gods (Deut 12:31) that resulted in God condemning them to total annihilation (1 Sam 15:1–3).

What, then, can we say in response to our bewilderment about God calling for the annihilation of the Amalekites? Let's establish the boundaries within which the truth about this situation will be found:

1. God is the final definition of love.
2. God is the final definition of what is just.
3. God is holy. He has a zero tolerance for evil. God will kill it off. The sobering reality is that there is a sense in which we all deserve death.
4. The Bible records that other nations living in the land had done 'detestable things' when worshipping their false gods (Deut 20:16–18). This particularly included sacrificing children (2 Chr 28:3).
5. Jews had the option to offer peace rather than annihilation to a people group if they were not a threat to the Jews and were willing to serve them (Deut 20:10–11).
6. Jesus is the perfect picture of God. He completes and perfects our understanding of God and is therefore the true and authoritative representation of God's character.
7. This present life is not all there is. Nor is it of central importance when viewed from the perspective of God's eternal kingdom. No 'good' person (of any race or nationality) will fail to receive their reward in eternity (Matt 2:31–46; Mark 9:41).

It must never be forgotten that God's overarching emotional response towards all people is one of love. To remind you of this, here are some beautiful verses from the Old Testament that speak of God's love:

LORD, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth – you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way (2 Chr 6:14).

I have loved you with an everlasting love;  
I have drawn you with loving kindness (Jer 31:3).

Therefore I [God] am now going to allure her;  
I will lead her into the wilderness  
and speak tenderly to her (Hos 2:14).

How can I give you up, Ephraim?  
How can I hand you over, Israel?  
How can I treat you like Admah?  
How can I make you like Zeboyim?  
My heart is changed within me;  
all my compassion is aroused (Hos 11:8).

## **PART 5**

WHAT DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE?



## 28. DO CHRISTIANS WORSHIP A THREE-HEADED GOD?

In his book *The God Delusion*, atheist Richard Dawkins trashes the idea of the Trinity. His main beef with it is that he doesn't understand it. He evidently wants to design a god that will fit into his intellect. Sadly, it hasn't occurred to him that if a god were so small as to fit into his intellect, then it would be no god at all. By definition, God has to be more than our intellect can conceive, if he is to more than our intellect has conceived.

The Bible insists that there is only one true God (Deut 6:4). However, this one God lives in community within himself of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The church sought to describe this mystery by using the term 'the Trinity of God'. (The Carthaginian church father Tertullian was the first to use this term in 210 AD.)

The Christian church came to understand that each member of the Trinity mutually indwells the others – without losing their distinctive identity. One of the things this means is that because each member of the Trinity perfectly represents the others, *all* of the Trinity suffered on the cross.

There are hints of the truth of the threefold nature of God even in the Old Testament:

- 'Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image"' (Genesis 1:26).
- 'And the LORD God said, "The man has now become like one of us"' (Genesis 3:22).
- 'I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"' (Isaiah 6:8).<sup>1</sup>

It is also worth noting that one of the Old Testament words for God, *Elohim*, is a plural word.

God's existence as Father, Son and Holy Spirit became explicit in the New Testament. The identity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is described clearly in the passage that speaks of Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:1–13). Jesus also taught about the threefold nature of God when he was telling his disciples about his provision for them of the Holy Spirit. He said, 'And I [Jesus] will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth' (John 14:16–17).

The apostle Peter similarly spoke of the threefold nature of God. He spoke of God's elect, 'who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood' (1 Peter 1:2–3).

Each member of the Trinity has always existed as individual persons – within the community of the one God. There is no hint in these verses of God changing his 'mode of being' depending on the job in hand.

The idea of the Trinity may be non-intuitive, but there is a significant theological reason why 'the Trinity' makes sense. The Bible says that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). But no-one can love, or be loving, unless there is another object or person to love. God therefore needs to live

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<sup>1</sup> Underlining added.

in community within himself if he is to be loving. The doctrine of the Trinity (or the existence of at least two persons) is therefore a logical necessity.

The Trinity of God certainly helps us understand the fullness of God. When it comes to our salvation, it has been said that the Father ordained it, the Son obtained it and the Spirit applies it.

It also helps us understand the vexing issue of suffering. When we cried out to God in our suffering, and despaired of there ever being a final solution, God introduced himself to us as the Father – the one who will have the last word and has set a time when this present age will be replaced by a new order uncorrupted by sin and suffering.

When we cried out that God did not understand how it felt to be the victim of suffering, God introduced himself to us as the Son – the one who has experienced the agonies of life and therefore understands.

And when we cried out against God because, although he understood our suffering, we were helpless to address it, God introduced himself to us as the Holy Spirit – the empowering presence of God. The Holy Spirit is the one who compels us to address suffering practically, wherever it is found.

So what can we say to conclude? Perhaps this: if your mind cannot conceive of God in three persons, I am delighted. You are well on the way to learning humility and allowing mystery ... and discovering a bit more of the bigness of God.



## 29. HOW WILL THE UNIVERSE END?

The apostle Paul makes a bold claim. He says that the marvels of the cosmos and the ordered reality of life on Earth were designed to encourage us to reach out to God. He said that God created this order so that people ‘would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us’ (Acts 17:27).

So ... I invite you to reach out. I do so because all the evidence suggests that there will be an ending. You will physically end. And interestingly, so will our solar system. Scientists tell us that our sun will die in 4.5 billion years’ time. If you manage to escape to another solar system, you are not out of the woods, because the universe itself is due to die and fade away in what is known as ‘heat death’.

The British astrophysicist and theologian David Wilkinson writes about how non-Christian scientists are feeling about a world without hope. In his book *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, he says, ‘This end of Universe in the heat death of futility raises a great deal of pessimism within the scientific community.’<sup>2</sup> Certainly, the 20th-century atheistic philosopher Bertrand Russell didn’t express much hope:

The world which science presents for our belief is even more purposeless, and more void of meaning ... all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction ... and the whole temple of man’s achievements must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins.<sup>3</sup>

The British cosmologist Paul Davies echoes this sentiment, commenting that an ‘almost empty universe growing steadily more cold and dark for all eternity is profoundly depressing.’<sup>4</sup>

The huge question each of us needs to answer is: Why does anything exist, if it’s all just going to end? What on earth are we here for?

The Bible makes it clear that this is a question God expects us to ask. The apostle Paul says that it is reasonable for people to look at creation, ponder its meaning and let it introduce them to the possibility of God (Rom 1:19–20).

Science has uncovered the fact that time is linear. It has a beginning and an end. This fact forces us to face the reality of both our beginning (why we exist) and our ending (have we lived the purpose for which we were created?). The option of lazily shrugging our shoulders and saying that everything is meaningless is not a stance that has rational credence. There is simply too much order in the cosmos – with many of its forces tuned to the level of trillionths of a degree to allow life – to believe that everything is meaningless. It is hard to believe that everything came from nothing, as a result of nothing, via a mechanism that has never been discovered and for which there is no precedent – and which fractures the law of ‘cause and

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<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson, *Christian Eschatology and the Physical Universe*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Russell, ‘The Free Man’s Worship’, pp. 415–424. Title of essay changed after 1910 to ‘A Free Man’s Worship’.

<sup>4</sup> Davies, ‘Eternity: Who Needs it?’, p. 48.

effect' that underpins all of science. To believe that is, I suspect, simply the willful hubris of people not liking the idea of letting God be the leader of their lives.

Unless your world view has something sensible to say about your origins, purpose and ending, then I respectfully suggest you have some honest thinking to do. Rather sadly, modern philosophy may not prove much help. This is because modern philosophers have generally adopted atheism as their foundational core belief. As a result, they are unable to offer humanity any foundation on which to build an understanding of its identity, meaning, truth or hope. They can only offer silence when it comes to the big questions of life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has resulted in philosophy's relevance fading in the West.

Constrained by its atheistic prison, modern philosophy has done just two things. First, it has stopped asking questions about the big issues of identity, meaning and values, and it has concentrated on bickering about the rules of logical thought. In other words, today's philosophers have turned philosophy into a sterile academic mind game. And who cares about that! Second, because modern philosophy has concluded that life is meaningless and there is no such thing as truth, nothing is inherently good or sacred. This, of course, gives modern philosophers the mandate to 'do their own thing'. If you read modern philosophers such as Nietzsche, Sartre and Foucault, it is difficult to escape the conviction that they designed their philosophy to cater for their sexual addictions.

In the early 20th century, a reformed alcoholic, Arthur Stace, wrote the word 'Eternity' over half a million times on Sydney footpaths. That one word embodied more useful philosophy than that given by most modern philosophers. And the big question is: Are you ready for it?

## 30. WILL ONLY CHRISTIANS GET TO HEAVEN?

The Christian gospel states that people are not made acceptable to God by their moral leadership, wisdom or piety. None of these things will earn you the right to God's acceptance. The Bible says that the wisdom of the world is foolishness when compared to God's standards (1 Cor 3:19). Similarly, our piety can never be enough to earn us a ticket into God's kingdom. These sorts of things simply amount to us trying to make God 'controllable' and accessible by our own efforts.

In the end, we must come to God on God's terms, not our own. While some faiths believe that God requires moral, wise or pious acts to reach him, Christianity does not. It declares that it would be cruel and deceptive to require the standards of morality and piety necessary to reach God, because they are impossible to attain. Humanity is therefore in a dreadful dilemma. We can never reach God by our own efforts.

In the end, only God could solve the dilemma. What we could not do, God did. God came to us in person to rescue us. He suffered judgement in our place for our sins that would otherwise disqualify us from his presence. God died on a cross for us. It now only remains for us to put out faith in Jesus, asking him to forgive our sins and be the leader of our lives.

But this raises the question: How can Christians respect other 'good' religions without abandoning the need for Christ to die for our sins so we could be with God?

There are three possible answers.

The first is 'pluralism'. Pluralists believe that all good and sincerely held religions get you to God. This, of course, raises the question: Who is it that decides if a religion is good or not? In reality, pluralism reduces Christianity to moralism. It removes everything that is diagnostic about Christianity – for example, Christ's saving action on the cross and his resurrection. This 'cut down' pluralist god lacks identity and hides behind the mask of a thousand different religions.

Many who embrace pluralism do so because it helps them pursue an overarching ideology such as eco-justice, feminism or social justice. In other words, people try to recruit God, or domesticate him, to serve their ideological cause. Rather obviously, such a god is no god at all.

The second position is 'exclusivism'. This is the belief that only right-believing Christians can be saved. As such, those who have not heard and responded to the Christian gospel cannot be with God in his kingdom.

This belief is very harsh and contradicts God's express will that everyone should be saved (1 Thess 5:9; 2 Pet 3:9). It also seems to contradict what the Bible consistently says about God – that he is the perfect definition of love and justice (1 Jn 4:7–10; Psalm 89:14).

The third option is 'inclusivism', but with a twist. Inclusivists believe that Jesus is unique and essential, but that God is also revealing himself through other religious traditions as well.

This position seems reasonable but it is dangerous, for it seems to suggest that Jesus' death and resurrection may not be of crucial importance. However, the inclusivist position

can be tweaked to make it acceptable. 'Modified inclusivism' can allow that there is some undeniable truth and beauty in other religions. However, these truths do not add anything new to the essentials of salvation spoken of in the Bible. It is not that people can be saved *through* other religions, so much as they, by God's grace, may have access to Christ's saving action *from* their own sincerely held faith position. The German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner calls these people 'anonymous Christians'.

So, what can we say in conclusion?

The Bible makes it clear that God is fair – in his dealings with us, he takes into account what we know (Luke 12:47–48; 1 Tim 1:13). It also teaches that God will judge us according to how we have responded to Jesus (John 3:36; Heb 10:29) and the ethical laws we instinctively know to be right (Rom 2:14–16; Rev 20:12).

The great advantage of becoming a Christian now is that you can be certain of your future with God, and you can begin a loving relationship with God right now ...

... which is what I invite you to do.

## 31. DO MIRACLES EXIST?

The universe is a miracle. Either it came from nothing as a result of nothing, or God made it. The only other alternative is that, against all scientific precedent, it has always existed and will continue to exist without reason. Whatever way you look at it, it's a miracle – one that even atheists have to face.

If God exists (as the extraordinary order in the cosmos suggests), then logically, God must be capable of more than building a universe that operates according to the physical laws he has put in place. God must be able, at any time, to superimpose a new order over the natural order he has instituted and do a miracle whenever he feels like it.

But while God *can* do a miracle, *would* God do a miracle?

Some believe he wouldn't. They don't believe God would poke a divine finger in the ordered processes he has set up and perform a miracle, for to do so would upset the order of things. In believing this, they seem to suggest that performing a miracle would present a problem that God can't overcome. I have to say, to believe such a thing is demeaning. Who dares put these constraints on God's actions? Has God told them he would never do a miracle, or is this belief just a human concoction? Have people been so besotted with the order of normal physical laws that they have been blind to the wider reality that is responsible for it?

The order we see in the universe (fine-tuned to the degree of many trillionths so as to allow life) suggests there is a mind behind the universe ... and that this 'mind' has a plan. And if God has a plan, it is likely that he is active in history. He is not an absentee landlord. As such, it is entirely to be expected that God would occasionally superimpose a new order over the natural order he has instituted and perform a miracle to bring to pass the things he wants.

The testimony of human history indicates that God performs a miracle in response to the prayers of his people or whenever he wants to get our attention. However, by definition, miracles are rare. Why? Because God will never force our faith by overwhelming displays of the miraculous. This means that no miracle will ever be so compelling as to negate the need for faith (Luke 10:13; John 12:37).

Sadly, there have been exaggerated claims of miracles in some churches. Some Christian 'crusades' promising miracles, wonders and healings do not bear close scrutiny. TV evangelists have done showy crusades that have allegedly shown people being healed. However, when those claiming they have been healed are followed up next day, those healings could not be substantiated.

At best, this is 'evangelastics'. (Evangelastics is when people stretch the truth for the sake of the gospel.) At worst, it is deceit. Either way, it's wrong.

But let me say clearly, the 'real deal' also exists ... and this real deal occurs in churches today – even in the West.

It is perhaps worth asking why miracles seem to occur more frequently in the two-thirds world where poverty is most prevalent. The uncharitable might suggest that miracles are not

more prevalent; they are simply reported by people who are less educated and more gullible. They believe things to be miracles when in actual fact they are not.

While this scenario might sometimes occur, it is not generally true. Those in the two-thirds world know full well that dead people stay dead, people with terminal illness die and blind people stay blind. To suggest otherwise is simply elitist arrogance. One has only to read of the ministry of people such as Heidi and Rolland Baker in Mozambique to know that the incidence of miracles has very much more to do with faith and being totally reliant on God. It seems that God's eyes are particularly directed towards the poor ... and that God loves a childlike faith. Note that I have said 'childlike faith' not 'childish faith'. There is an important difference between the two.

It would seem that the 'faith' of a person seeking healing was an important factor in many of the miraculous healings that Jesus did (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 10:46–52; Luke 7:36–38; 44–50; 17:11–19). However, it was not always required. Jesus sometimes healed people who showed no faith at all or had a misplaced faith (John 5:1–9). So, while faith is *usually* important (as it aligns us with God's nature and purposes), we are not healed because of our faith. We are healed because of God's faithfulness.

While miracles occur, Christians are not guaranteed a life free of suffering. Perfection this side of heaven is not possible, and all of us have to share in the pain of life. So while Christians pray for a miracle, they also know that they are called to stay faithful in the midst of their suffering (Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 4:12–14).

## 32. DOES GOD HEAL TODAY?

The Old Testament prophesy about Jesus in Isaiah 53:1–5 makes it plain that Jesus died to pay the price for both our sin and our sickness. As such, it is reasonable to conclude that healing is high on God's agenda. Certainly, healing was an integral part of Jesus' ministry. He didn't so much heal people to prove he was God, but rather he healed people because he was God.

It is worth pausing at this point to ask the question: Where does sickness come from if it doesn't have its origin in God?

The Bible teaches that the world is not as God would want it to be because of sin, sin which the devil encouraged us into. As such, the devil is the origin of sickness and disease (Job 2:7; Luke 13:11,16). This idea may seem quaint to modern ears, but it is no less real. Jesus saw sickness as an enemy to be confronted. He made it clear that he had come to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). All four biographies of Jesus' life (the Gospels) tell us that it was Jesus' natural predisposition to heal people wherever possible (Mark 1:40–42).

It is important to remember that the Jesus who healed then is the same Jesus who is alive today – that is, who is living and active through God's Spirit in the lives of his followers now. It is significant that Jesus not only healed people, but he told his disciples to do the same (Luke 9:1–2). He promised that when his disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit, they would be able to do all that Jesus had done in his ministry, and more (John 14:12). And this proved to be the case. The Bible records that the disciples continued to heal people after Jesus' death (Acts 3:1–8).

It was the normal expectation of the apostle Paul that the preaching of the gospel be accompanied by a demonstration of God's power (1 Cor 4:19–20). Divine healing was one of the factors that convinced people that the Christian gospel was true. It certainly helped the church grow (Acts 8:4–8). Nothing has changed since then. As such, we are neither being presumptuous, fanatical or ignorant when we pray for people to be healed.

But that doesn't mean we don't have questions. Why didn't Jesus heal every single sick person he saw in Palestine? Similarly, if Jesus' salvation is complete and the devil's power has been broken, why isn't everyone who is prayed for today healed? Miracles of healing, by definition, are still rare.

While not everyone is healed following prayer, prayers for healing should still be a feature of the church's ministry. We, as Christians, are called to prefigure the 'kingdom of God', but we can't expect a perfect track record in our prayers for healing, as the full expression of God's kingdom won't be realised until Jesus comes again.

Do we still need doctors? Yes, of course we do. At no point did Jesus suggest that doctors were not necessary. He even talked about them in his teaching (Mark 2:17).

It's worth remembering that God has built into our bodies a healing mechanism. Doctors can't operate without relying on the body being able to repair itself. Much of what doctors do is to encourage the body's God-given healing mechanism to work. When praying for healing,

we are appealing to the same source – God. So, medicine and prayers of faith are not so different. Both can work together. As the British Anglican cleric David Watson said, ‘We need prayer, pills and pillows.’

Do you need great faith to be healed?

Not always, but it can certainly make the difference – as it did in Jesus’ time (Matt 9:20–22; Mark 10:46–52; 7:36–38; 44–50; 17:11–19). Faith is often important. And this makes sense. Lack of faith does not honour God or show that you trust him (Jas 1:6–8). However, faith should not be regarded as a button we can push to manipulate God. Rather, it is an indication of trust – and God loves that. That’s why faith is so powerful (Mark 9:21–23). But we can’t be legalistic about it, as faith is not always required – as was the case even in Jesus’ time (John 5:1–9).

So, be willing and available to pray for people to be healed. Make a start. You will never pray for anyone to be healed if you wait until you know enough, have enough faith or have enough courage. Remember: your faith is not in your faith, but in your God.

Do, however, ask God for discernment before you pray, and actively listen for God’s promptings. Sometimes sickness can come about because of some underlying cause that first needs to be dealt with.

If you feel right about praying for someone to be healed, make sure that person gives you permission. This is essential if you want to pray out loud or lay a hand gently on the person seeking prayer (as Jesus sometimes did). You may even dab a bit of oil on the sick or disabled person’s forehead, as instructed in James 5:14–15. (Olive oil or similar, is fine.)

No special words are needed. Simply ask Jesus what you want, and declare that you are praying with his permission and dare to do so because you have been given his holiness. In other words, you are seeking to pray according to Jesus’ name (John 14:13).

Go, and do valiantly.



## 33. DOES MEANING EXIST?

Recent scientific research into black holes suggests that there is a reality beyond ‘space–time’ in which space, matter and time do not exist.<sup>5</sup> If that wasn’t weird enough, research into quantum physics suggests that consciousness has a part to play in calling physical existence into being. Here’s the thing: both of these findings are supportive of the idea that God exists.

It is significant that a lot of convictions from top scientists are now coming together to form a picture that theologians have long recognised and which causes them to smile. Scientists have been amazed at the level of ‘fine-tuning’ of the forces of nature (to a level of multi-trillionths) that has allowed life to develop in the universe. They have also wondered why our minds have been ‘tuned’ to a degree that gives us the ability to unlock the secrets of the universe.

So let me take you on a whistlestop tour of some scientific and philosophic thinking that will lead us to some exciting conclusions about God.

Kurt Gödel (1906–1978), a logician, mathematician and philosopher, said that science is not exact. It speaks in analogies. Maths is simply a language. Therefore, you can’t define things exactly with maths. Maths can’t prove anything in a closed system.

But before you surrender to the postmodern despair of there being no truth to believe in, let me hasten to say that maths is still pretty useful, and it does shine a light on some truth. Let me refer you to the distinguished physicist Paul Dirac, who said: ‘God is a mathematician of a very high order, and he used very advanced mathematics in constructing the universe.’<sup>6</sup> The theoretical physicist Eugene Wigner expressed a similar thought. He spoke about the ‘unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics in the natural sciences.’<sup>7</sup>

Some scientists (both Christian and non-Christian) are ‘critical realists’. Critical realists don’t believe we ever see the ‘real’ world; rather, we only see approximations and models of the real thing that have been filtered and fermented by our fallible human perceptions. Of course, there has to be a lot of truth in this. Science is forever marching onwards, giving us new insights. But again, you wouldn’t want to push this too far. Many basic scientific truths have remained ‘true’ for a very long time. While some truths have had to be revised, other truths have provided a sure foundation for new truths to stand on.

The English particle physicist and theologian John Polkinghorne was fond of saying ‘epistemology models ontology’.<sup>8</sup> In other words, how we know things to be true (epistemology) gives a fair approximation of the essential nature of what actually exists (ontology). If this is so, then his conviction very much supports the idea that God wants us to know a bit about him through his creation (Rom 1:20). Reality is therefore not a complete illusion.

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<sup>5</sup> Cox, ‘Heart of Darkness: Black Holes’, 41–50-minute mark.

<sup>6</sup> Dirac, ‘The Evolution of the Physicist’s Picture of Nature’.

<sup>7</sup> Wigner, ‘The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences’.

<sup>8</sup> Polkinghorne, *Quarks, Chaos and Christianity*, pp. 67–68.

This brings us to Ludwig Wittgenstein. He was a philosopher who worked primarily in logic and mathematics. Wittgenstein is considered to be one of the greatest philosophers of the modern era. The trouble is, people can't actually agree on what it was that he said – particularly in the latter half of his career. From what I understand, his central conviction was that philosophical speculation was a complete waste of time! Now, that's a conviction that would put a lot of university philosophy departments out of business, but is he right?

Again, if we believe that God wants his creation to point to him and give us an idea about meaning, morality and destiny, we can't say that philosophy (that takes seriously the idea of *telos* – i.e. ultimate goal) is a waste of time. So, sorry Ludwig.

Finally, let's look into the fertile mind of the theoretical physicist John Archibald Wheeler (1911–2008). He was the chap who popularised the term 'black hole'. He also coined the term 'participatory anthropic principle'. Now, before your brain has conniptions, let me explain. The 'strong anthropic principle' is the conviction that the universe has been designed to allow intelligent life to develop. (As I said earlier, the apparent 'fine-tuning' of the universe that has allowed us to exist has convinced many scientists that this is the case.) The wrinkle that Wheeler has added is this: because a divine 'mind' wanted humankind to develop, we have become 'participants' in the overall plan. This, of course, fits beautifully into Christian thinking.

So, what can we say to wrap up?

Gödel says that maths can't prove anything in a closed system. Wittgenstein said that philosophic talk is meaningless. What both men are touching on is the fact that a created being (us) cannot fathom the ultimate reality of the system it exists within, because they are smaller than it. To comprehend the system (the universe/s and life), we would need to be bigger than the system (in the same way a tapeworm in the gut of a pilot flying a jet fighter cannot comprehend what the pilot is up to).

Wittgenstein and Gödel's suggestion that we can't know ultimate things would be totally convincing, if it were not for one thing. What if God wanted humankind to understand some profound things about the universe (Ps 19:1–4)? If this were so, then it would make philosophy and mathematics valid enterprises – if conducted with at least a nod towards *telos* (ultimate goal) – that is, God. In other words, philosophy without God is pointless – which probably explains the desperate sense of meaninglessness, lostness and senselessness felt by many modern atheistic philosophers.

Science is giving us good reasons to believe that meaning exists. And that's good news.

## 34. DOES THE DEVIL EXIST?

Some Christians don't believe Satan is real. They believe Satan is a cultural idea that came from a time when people were less rationally informed. They see references to Satan simply as analogies to the evil that is inherent in the human race.

What do you think?

It is significant that Jesus presumed the existence of Satan in his teaching (Luke 10:18). He dealt with Satan as a real person (Luke 4:1–13) and waged war against him as a distinct personality (1 John 3:8).

But here's the question: If God made everything, did God make Satan? Even more disturbingly: If God is the origin of all things, is God the origin of evil?

Two things can be said. The first is that God's character should never be in doubt. God is the final definition of love and justice. God is truly good, because he chooses to be good – irreversibly so. The second thing is this: just as cold is the absence of heat, so evil is the absence of God. Evil is therefore not caused by the presence of God, but by the absence of God.

The origin of the devil is explained in Ezekiel's prophecy against the king of Tyre. Most theologians believe this prophecy against the king of Tyre to be a prophecy against Satan (Ezek 28:11–17). From this passage, we learn that Satan was originally the model of perfection, 'a guardian cherub', who was close to God's throne – until pride drove him to seek equality with God. God's response was to throw Satan out of heaven onto earth to be 'made a spectacle of'.

In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, Satan's expulsion from heaven is described in terms of a prophecy against Babylon (Isa 14:12–16). Babylon is often used as an analogy of Satan in Scripture (Rev 18:2–5). Satan's expulsion from heaven to earth is also recorded in Revelation (Rev 12:7–9). The story is therefore a consistent one. At one point, Jesus himself made reference to Satan's downfall (Luke 10:18).

Satan's fallen angels are evil spirits. Some see Revelation 12:4 as indicating that one-third of the angels sided with Satan.

Satan knows that time is short before God deals with him completely. He is therefore raging about on earth attacking God's kingdom while he can (Rev 12:12). The Bible records him as being a deceiver (2 Cor 11:13–15), liar (John 8:44), murderer (John 8:44), tempter (Gen 3:13; Matt 4:3–10), accuser (Rev 12:10), an origin of sickness (Luke 13:11,16) and a destroyer (1 Pet 5:8–9).

We have no authority over the devil at all. However, Jesus Christ does. This means that we only have authority over Satan when we are 'in Christ' – that is, when we are a Christian (Col 2:6–7). Acts 19:13–16 tells a story of the seven sons of Sceva who tried to drive out evil spirits without being 'in Christ'. They came badly unstuck (Acts 19:13–16). From this incident

we can draw the conclusion that our safety comes from being in Christ. Our authority over Satan is grounded on Christ's authority and holiness, not our own.

Paul warns us against letting the devil get a foothold in our lives (Eph 4:26–27). There are a number of ways the devil can do this. The first is by direct invitation – for example, through ouija boards, séances or witchcraft. These activities can be seen as harmless fun. Sometimes people engage in these things because they are looking for personal empowerment (white magic) or a desire to be at one with 'mother earth'. These activities can, however, progress to something very ugly. Satan's one aim is to destroy, so be careful. Satan is not called the 'master of lies' for nothing.

Second, the devil can exploit weaknesses in our character and background. If there is anything he can use as a tool to get at you, exploit you and make you ineffective as a Christian, he will. Some of the tools he can use are our bad habits, pride, anger and fear. The trick is not to provide him with the tools. Instead, the Bible tells us submit to God and resist the devil (Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8–9). How are we to do this?

The apostle Paul gives us a great answer in Ephesians 6:10–18. He tells us to put on the 'full armour of God' so that we can stand firm. He lists these as

- the 'belt of truth' – that is, know what is true
- the 'breastplate of righteousness' – be righteous in your living
- the 'shoes of readiness' – be ready to share the gospel with others
- the 'shield of faith' – grow your faith through prayer and acts of faith
- the 'helmet of salvation' – know that Jesus has forgiven your sins and is now the leader of your life
- the 'sword of the Spirit' – know God's principles and truth in Scripture, which you can use to change a situation.

Christians are not to be preoccupied or paranoid about Satan. Our attention should be on Jesus, not on fear of Satan. Nor should we doubt Satan's final destruction (Rev 20:7–10; Matt 25:41). God has already written it into history.

And that's very good news!

## 35. HOW CAN I BE SURE I'M A CHRISTIAN?

It can all be a bit much to take in, can't it? The promise, the good news, is so incredibly ... 'good'. But can you believe it? After all, you know yourself to be very imperfect and unworthy of God. Yet the Bible assures you that if you have asked Jesus to forgive your sins and have made him the leader of your life, you have an eternal destiny with God in his coming kingdom.

So, the big question is: Can you believe it? Do you qualify?

The answer, rather extraordinarily, is 'yes' – and it is 'yes' solely because of the unmerited love of God. God alone, in his grace, has made it possible. His love for you is a safe love; it does not vary because of your behaviour.

Now we have that truth locked in place, let's explore what assurance the Bible can give us concerning our salvation. Here it is in bullet points:

- Jesus *has* paid the price for our sins (Isa 53:6; 1 John 4:9–10).
- If you accept Jesus, you *will* be saved (Rom 10:9, 13).
- Jesus came to save sinners (Matt 9:9–13; Rom 5:8; 1 Tim 1:15).
- God doesn't want anyone to be lost (Matt 18:14; 2 Pet 3:9).
- God can change you and make you into a 'new creation' (2 Cor 5:17).

The Bible assures us that those who believe have eternal life (John 5:24; 1 John 5:11–12). Your sins are forgiven (Ps 103:12; Rom 8:1). Therefore, all those who have said 'yes' to Jesus have the right to be called 'children of God' (John 1:12).

This is the truth that God wants us to hold on to by faith. Note that we don't hold on to it by feelings. Feelings can vary, depending on our mood and circumstances.

The forgiveness of God is beautiful, but here's the thing: there is a sense that forgiveness can't achieve its goal unless we choose to receive it. Only when we do so, is God's act of forgiveness fully realised. So, please receive it.

Forgiveness is a wonderful mechanism that allows us to let go of the bad things done in the past so that they don't continually have a claim on us. It is very freeing. So, it is good to come to God for forgiveness often (1 John 1:9). However, this doesn't mean that we should do it every moment of the day – to do so would suggest that we are living in a state of perpetual fear. Christians who place their hope in Christ's saving power are in a continual state of being forgiven.

The beautiful truth is this: God has committed himself to us everlastingly through the eternal covenant (agreement) made with us through Jesus. God's commitment to forgive us and accept us therefore never ends.

But here's a troubling thought: Does God have a perfect plan for me, which I have forfeited because of my sin? Am I on God's umpteenth emergency backup plan?

A more accurate way of thinking about God's intended pathway for us in life is this: God has an intended goal for us. That goal is for us be part of his eternal kingdom. His intention is for us to journey towards that goal in a straight path.

So, we begin life's journey and head towards that goal. But then we might make a wrong turn and rebel against God. We journey away from God's goal until we come to a place of repentance. At this point, we turn towards God's goal again, but our direction to it will now be different. Why? Because we are starting from a different place as a result of our previous life's history. And so the process continues, as we ricochet our way towards God's intended goal.

Some, sadly, choose to miss it altogether. Please don't be one of them.

Remember: God loves you and will never stop wooing you so that you will respond to his love with your own. He will never be surprised by what you do and give up on you in disgust. God stands outside of time and therefore already knows the paths you will take through life – and yet he is still pursuing you with his love.

## 36. WHAT MAKES EFFECTIVE PRAYER?

God is relational. He wants to enjoy our love and do things with us (Gen 1:26). This means that we have the privilege of being able to share with God what's going on in our hearts. And the way we do that is through prayer. Prayer is simply talking with God, either silently or out loud.

No relationship will develop unless there is communication. Throughout the Old Testament, God's complaint about his people was that they did not seek him (Isa 9:13; 31:1). So, let's make sure we do.

One of the most radical things that Jesus modelled was his intimacy with God. He demonstrated this in his prayers when he called God 'Abba', an intimate Hebrew word for 'Father' (Mark 14:36). The Bible records Jesus getting up early to pray and choosing to do so in places where he wouldn't be disturbed (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16).

Prayer invites you into God's agenda, and it involves God in your agenda. This doesn't necessarily mean that every prayer is answered as you would like. As the American pastor Robert Schuller said:

If the request isn't right, His answer is 'No'.  
If the timing isn't right, His answer is 'Slow'.  
If you aren't yet ready, His answer is 'Grow'.  
And when everything's right, His answer is 'Go'.<sup>9</sup>

It's worth pausing at this point to ask what it is that makes some prayers effective and others not?

We get a big clue from Jesus, who taught us how to pray. He gave us a model that has a fabulous balance of praise, confession and petition (Matt 6:9–13). Each section of the Lord's Prayer gives us successive subjects about which to pray.

- *Our father.* (Ponder your relationship with God.)
- *Hallowed be your name.* (Spend time picturing God's holiness – and worship him.)
- *Your kingdom come.* (Make yourself open to doing all you can to faithfully represent the things of God's kingdom.)
- *Your will be done.* (Mould your will to fit God's will.)
- *Give us this day.* (Ask God for what you need to achieve your purposes.)
- *Forgive us ... as we forgive.* (Examine yourself before God. Confess and forgive. Unless you forgive, you cannot receive God's forgiveness.)
- *Lead us not into temptation.* (Ask God to guide you into the right decisions and away from overpowering temptations.)
- *Deliver us from evil.* (Pray for protection against Satan.)

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Schuller, reported in *Every Day with Jesus*, Crusade for World Revival, 7 October 2011.

Please note that the start of the Lord's Prayer is very significant. It teaches us not to rush into God's presence with a shopping list of requests. Rather, it invites us to begin our time of prayer by focusing on the character and holiness of God ... and then consciously aligning ourselves with his 'kingdom' agenda. If we do this, we will be well placed to pray according to God's will (1 John 5:14).

Here's a summary of those factors that make for effective prayer – as taught in Scripture:

1. Be confident that prayer changes things (Jas 4:2; 5:14–16).
2. Seek God's agenda (Matt 6:10).
3. Fix issues that arise through being careless of God and others – for example, disobeying God (Zech 7:13), not being honest to God about your sins (Ps 66:18; Jas 5:16), not forgiving others (Mark 11:25), having divided or selfish motives (Jas 4:2–3), being inconsiderate to your spouse (1 Pet 3:7) or not caring about those who need help (Prov 21:13).
4. Pray as often as you can (1 Thess 5:15).
5. Be bold and wholehearted in prayer (Luke 11:5–8; Deut 4:29; Jer 29:13; Heb 11:6).
6. Persist in prayer. Don't give up (Luke 18:1–8). Believe that God will answer (Mark 11:24).
7. Have faith, even if that faith is as small as a mustard seed (Matt 17:20–21). Don't doubt (Jas 1:5–8).
8. Follow the pattern taught by Jesus regarding prayer (Matt 6:5–15).

This is not a list of factors that are impossible to fulfil. God is not a cranky old man who needs to be coerced. God is *for* you. These things are simply indicators that you come to God with a humble heart and a degree of integrity ... and that your prayer is real.

When you pray, allow silence and listen for insights the Holy Spirit will give you. Give yourself time to hear from God and enjoy his company (Ps 46:10). Francis Collins, the distinguished scientist who led the international team that mapped the human genome, says:

Prayer for me is not a way to manipulate God into doing what we want Him to do. Prayer for me is much more a sense of trying to get into fellowship with God. I'm trying to figure out what I should be doing rather than telling Almighty God what He should be doing.<sup>10</sup>

He makes a lot of sense.

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<sup>10</sup> Collins, 'One of the World's Most Powerful Scientists Believes in Miracles'.



## 37. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU DIE?

What happens when you die?

What a great question, and let's be honest: not one of us will escape its relevance!

Pastors hear a lot of strange things at funerals, where claims are made about where the recently deceased loved one is. 'My darling is now an angel, or rainbow, or a star.' I've learned that funerals are times when sentimentality can masquerade as spirituality, and people don't know what to believe.

The early Christians, in contrast, did know what to believe. They were a people of hope. The hope that they had enabled them to face incredible hardship and unspeakable persecution. The question is, of course: Do you know this hope? What do you think happens when you die? Are you immediately resurrected to be with Jesus?

The Bible makes it clear that the resurrection won't happen until Jesus returns (John 5:28–29; Acts 10:42). Jesus, incidentally, was the first one resurrected. He is called, rather delightfully, the 'firstfruits' (1 Cor 15:20). In this sense, Jesus is the pathfinder, the one who shows that resurrection life is possible.

Here's another question: When Jesus turned to the penitent rebel being crucified next to him, assuring him with the words, 'today you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43), where is paradise? It can't be God's eternal kingdom that will be created when God combines a renewed earth and heaven together (Matt 19:28; Rev 21:1–3). The Bible makes it clear that this new kingdom won't be inaugurated until after Jesus returns, and God's final judgement has been pronounced (Rev 20:12–13).

So let's talk about what happens to those who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. When they die, God anticipates their final judgement by taking them to heaven (or paradise). This is a glorious place where they wait for Jesus to come again to judge the living and the dead (Heb 9:27). In other words, it is the 'waiting room' for God's new kingdom. Hints of this waiting period are given in Revelation 6:9–11, where the faithful (who had been martyred) ask how long they will need to wait until God brings his final judgement on evil.

When the godly are finally judged, God will reward his people according to the good things they have done on earth (Matt 5:11–12; 6:19–20; 16:27, Mark 9:41, 1 Cor 3:11–15). This judgement is not to determine who is saved, as godly people are already saved and have been made fit for God's kingdom. The judgement of Christians is to determine 'special' rewards. Then, after judgement, the adventures of a resurrected life in God's kingdom begin.

Note that when the word 'heaven' is used in the New Testament in reference to the afterlife, it is not necessarily referring specifically to God's kingdom or paradise. It could refer to either. Heaven often meant 'up there with God' – in a general sense.

Now let's look at what will happen to the ungodly. It will be of no surprise that their pathway is a mirror image of that experienced by the godly – one that has a very different outcome. When an ungodly person dies, their final judgement is anticipated and they are sent

to wait in Hades (hell). This is a place of punishment and regret (Luke 16:19–24), where they wait for Jesus' second coming and God's final judgement (John 5:28–29). When this happens, they will be judged and confirmed to be ineligible for eternal life in God's kingdom. For them, only eternal death awaits (Matt 10:28; 2 Pet 3:7). This is referred to as the 'second death' in Revelation (Rev 20:6).

The big question (about which theologians are divided) is: What happens to the ungodly eternally? Are they annihilated as if they never existed, or are they punished eternally as Matthew 25:46, Revelation 14:12 and 20:10–15 suggest? What do you think? There is a sense, of course, that not living with the love, adventure and creativity of God in eternity is an eternal punishment.

Whatever is understood, two things must be remembered. The first is that God is perfectly loving and just. We, whom God created, are not going to have a better idea of justice and love than the God who created us. The second is that gratuitous evil should receive no mercy from any God who is good.

We also need to remember that God's agenda is that we are saved, not sent to hell. God did not intend anyone to go to hell (1 Thess 5:9). It was to save us from hell that Jesus came. Hell was designed primarily for the devil and his evil spirits (Matt 25:41). For a person to go to hell, they will need to reject God's purpose for their lives (2 Pet 3:9). Sadly, this is something many people choose (Matt 7:13–14). We need to understand that God will respect anyone's decision to have nothing to do with him, both now and eternally.

But in the meantime ... all those who rejoice in God's love and lordship have hope.

## 38. DO ANGELS EXIST?

Angels ... admit it ... you've been intrigued as to whether or not they exist, haven't you? So, what does the Bible teach?

Let me say straight away that the study of angels is not of central importance in Scripture, and it is important that we don't develop an overblown interest in them in a quest to be super-spiritual or engage in unhelpful speculation.

We should certainly avoid any idea that angels should be worshipped (Col 2:18–19). People can sometimes be tempted to do this if they haven't developed a personal relationship with God. As a result, they look for 'intermediaries' to worship. Please don't do this. It is God the Father and Christ Jesus whom we worship. Whenever people in the Bible attempted to worship an angel, the angel always stopped them (Rev 19:10; 22:8–9).

But do angels really exist?

There are too many biblical references to angels for us to dismiss them. Normally, of course, angels are not seen. Sometimes, however, they are (Luke 1:11–12). At other times, people's eyes need to be opened so that they can see with their spiritual eyes (2 Kgs 6:15–17).

What are angels?

The word 'angel' comes from the Greek word *angelos* meaning 'messenger' (Matt 1:20; Luke 2:9–14). In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for messenger, *malakh*, is used (Gen 32:3; Isa 42:19; Mal 2:7). This indicates that one of their prime functions is to act as God's messengers. They have no authority of their own; rather, they are carriers of God's authority (Jude 9).

Angels are spiritual beings who have been created by God, and like God, they are moral beings. They have a concept of right and wrong. Fallen angels are evil spirits (Jude 6).

There is evidence of a hierarchy among angels. Michael is described as a prince and an archangel with special authority (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1; Rev 12:7). The Bible speaks of Gabriel being an archangel (Luke 1:19). So, there is good evidence that some angels are more powerful than others (Rev 10:1).

In accordance with their function as messengers, angels are sometimes seen as winged, but not always. Gabriel is described coming 'in swift flight', implying the possibility of wings (Dan 9:21).

Seraphim are winged angels (Isa 6:2), and this term may be interchangeable with cherubim. Cherubim, however, are not the chubby Reubenesque baby angels that cause people to fall in love. At one point, the Bible refers to cherubim as being armed guardian angels (Gen 3:24).

It's also worth noting that statues of two winged cherubim were placed on top of the Ark of the Covenant (Exod 25:17–21). They indicated the presence and authority of God – and have done so consistently throughout history (Isa 6:1–8; Ezek 10:1–17).

Angels also worship (Rev 5:11–12). In other words, they acknowledge the truth of God's glory and authority.

Angels, as we have said, are heavenly (spiritual) beings created by God before time began. However, they remain eternal for only as long as God determines, as 'fallen angels' will be destroyed (Rev 12:9).

The status of angels is similar to royal servants in God's court. So, when God the Son came to earth as a human being, his status became less than that of angels. However, when he returned to his Heavenly Father, everything was again put under his authority (Heb 2:7–9). Similarly, when God's people finally inherit his new kingdom, we will share with God some authority over his servants, the angels (1 Cor 6:3).

But what about 'fallen angels'?

Satan was originally the model of perfection, a guardian angel, who stood close to God's throne until he became wicked. Satan's problem was pride, which made him seek equality with God. The Bible records God throwing Satan out of heaven onto earth to be 'made a spectacle of' (Ezek 28:11–17). His expulsion from heaven to earth is also recorded in Revelation (Rev 12:7–9).

Satan's fallen angels are evil spirits. Satan knows that time is short before God deals with him completely. He therefore rages about on earth, attacking God's kingdom while he can (Rev 12:12).

What do angels do?

Here's a brief list:

- They are heavenly messengers. When angels are on the scene, they introduce divine authority into a situation (Luke 1:11–22, 26; Acts 12:6–14).
- They have responsibility over individuals, such as children (Matthew 18:10).  
Certainly, there was a belief among some of Jesus' disciples that Christians have an angel assigned to them (Acts 12:14–15).
- Angels can also preside over the interests of particular nations (Dan 10:13; 10:21; 11:1). The archangel Michael may have special responsibility as the guardian angel of Israel (Dan 12:1).
- They can carry out God's judgements (2 Sam 24:16; Acts 12:23; Rev 15–16) and execute God's will (Ps 103:20).
- Angels watch over the interests of the churches (1 Tim 5:21; Rev 2:1).
- Angels help believers (Heb 1:14; Ps 91:11).

Angels – it's nice to know they are on your side.

## 39. DOES GOD GUIDE US TODAY?

Divine guidance is not about learning which buttons to press in order to get God to tell you what you want to know, or discovering how to manipulate God. It has more to do with establishing a relationship with God.

God has given us free choice to accept or reject a loving relationship with him. If we choose to have a relationship with God, it will necessarily be one that we can't appreciate or understand fully in this life. That's why faith is required when we enter a relationship with him. Yet any relationship requires communication if it is to exist, and part of communication is 'guidance'.

### God guides

God loves us and wants the best for us. Listen to the beautiful words he speaks to his people in the Old Testament book of Jeremiah: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). And here's another of God's promises in the Psalms: 'I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you' (Ps 32:8).

### But do we want to be guided?

God may long to share our love, but do we really want to be loved and guided by God? Rather obviously, if we want guidance, we must first decide what objective in life we want to ultimately pursue. Let me illustrate with a quote:

'Cheshire Puss,' she began, rather timidly ... 'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?'

'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the cat.

'I don't much care where,' said Alice.

'Then it doesn't matter which way you walk,' said the cat.<sup>11</sup>

I invite you to be wise and seek the guidance of God. The apostle Paul says bluntly, 'Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is' (Eph 5:17).

### How does God guide us?

Occasionally, God gives supernatural guidance – for example, in Acts 8:26; 10:1–23 and 16:6–10. Usually, however, we are guided by wise judgements that we make when we

- put God first (Prov 3:5–6)
- allow God to renew us (Rom 12:2)
- are obedient to God (Ps 66:18; Isa 58:6–11)
- are humble (Ps 25:9)
- fear (in the sense of respect) God (Ps 25:12,14) and worship him (Acts 13:2–3).

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<sup>11</sup> Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, ch. VI: 'Pig and Pepper'.

Please don't consider these things as an impossible list of conditions. Rather, they indicate that the nearer you are to God, the clearer you will hear his voice. If you are already living a godly lifestyle, you are well placed to hear God's guidance. In many respects, it shows that you are already living under God's guidance (Ps 16:7).

You can check the five key aspects of guidance on the fingers of one hand:

- Does your intended action match consistent biblical principles? The Bible provides a solid basis for guidance (Ps 119:105; 2 Tim 3:15–17). If our guidance does not agree with clear biblical principles, it will not be correct.
- Is your intended action encouraged by wise and spiritually mature people? The Bible tells us to seek advice from those who are wise and mature (Prov 12:15). It is important, however, that wisdom be God centred, as the wisdom of God is not the same as the wisdom of a godless world (1 Cor 1:20–30; Jas 3:17).
- Does the Holy Spirit give you an inner peace about a course of action? Learn to recognise and be sensitive to the inspiration and insights that the Holy Spirit gives you. Remember to check out these insights first before you accept them as God's word to you, as you can sometimes muddle up your own ideas and ambitions with God's.
- Do circumstances suggest it is a wise course of action? Make the most of the opportunities God presents you with, as the apostle Paul did (2 Cor 2:12). However, don't avoid the responsibility for making your own decisions by seeking to interpret signs that tell you what to do. God answered Gideon's request for a sign as a concession to his lack of understanding and inability to discern God's will (Judg 6:36–40; Isa 7:10–13; Luke 4:12). Remember, too, that signs may help or be deceptive (Matt 24:24). On their own, they are not enough to base a decision on.
- Are you happy to take responsibility for your own decision? It is important that your decision be your own and not someone else's (1 Kgs 13:15–22). If you feel you lack wisdom, the Bible invites you to ask God for it (Jas 1:5–6).

So, seek it out (Prov 2:1–6; 4:5–9).

And finally remember: 'The LORD confides in those who fear him' (Ps 25:14) – so confide in him.

## 40. DOES GOD HAVE A ROLE FOR ME IN OLD AGE?

Our society is obsessed by youth. In fact, ours is the first generation in human history that values youth over maturity. A huge industry now exists that is designed to hold back the symptoms of ageing. This can make it difficult for the elderly to feel they are valued in a culture that measures people's worth by their economic output and external appearances.

In a world of increasing pace and change, the elderly can also feel vulnerable. The Psalmist felt this and prayed to God, 'Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone' (Ps 71:9). God's assurance is seen in Isaiah: 'Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you' (Isa 46:4).

Old age is seen as a blessing in the Bible – expressed well in this beautiful promise from Zechariah:

This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each of them with cane in hand because of their age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there' (Zech 8:4–5).

Grey hair can indicate that you have had the wisdom to help you to live to old age (Prov 16:31). However, age doesn't guarantee wisdom. People can elect to be unteachable any time from adolescence onwards. Age simply gives more opportunity for people to reflect on experience and learn the wisdom it teaches (Job 12:12).

Unfortunately, not everyone finishes life well. Solomon allowed himself to lose his faith (1 Kgs 11:4), and Eli the priest failed to discipline his wayward sons (1 Sam 2:22–33, 3:11–13). There is no greater sadness than seeing folly in old age.

The Bible links respect for the elderly to reverence for God (Lev 19:32). As such, the elderly should take pride in the symptoms of age (Prov 20:29). Now there's a radical thought!

No Christian ever retires from ministry or from being members of God's church. We are never too old to worship God (Heb 11:21). The Psalmist speaks of the righteous 'bearing fruit' in old age (see Ps 92:12–15).

The Bible urges us to finish well. The apostle Paul speaks of doing all he can to 'finish the race' (Acts 20:24; 1 Cor 9:24–27; 2 Tim 4:6–8). As the French writer Jules Renard (1864–1910) is reputed to have said, 'It is not how old you are, but how you are old.'

There are a number of farewell speeches by great old leaders in the Bible that illustrate lives of faithfulness, honesty and prayer right to the very end (Josh 23:1–6; 1 Sam 12:1–4, 19–24). Enjoy reading them.

My experience of working in a nursing home taught me that the world of the aged progressively contracts as mobility and independence decreases. What is left, however, is an abiding appreciation of relationships. Certainly, old age wonderfully concentrates priorities. As such, the voice and perspective of the aged is a useful balance in a world addicted to adrenaline and self-interest (Ps 37:25).

Wisdom in old age is a precious thing. The failure of a young king to listen to the advice of his elders led to the splitting of the Jewish kingdom (1 Kgs 12:13–19). We should never be too old to be teachable (Eccl 4:13).

God's Spirit can enable the elderly to dream of what might be – that is, to look to the future (Joel 2:28). However, while we must allow the past to inform the future, it is unhelpful to simply hark back to the 'good old days' (Eccl 7:10).

The older generation have the vital role of passing on the faith to the younger generation (Ps 71:18). The writer of Proverbs speaks of parents imparting wisdom to their adult children, which will train them in the ways of godliness (Prov 1:8–9; 2:1–6).

The role of grandparents is important in our society. They can love their grandchildren in a way that accepts them as they are, without the parent's habit of continually trying to improve them. Above all, grandparents have time for children and can be a great influence. It is significant that the apostle Paul was able to point to the influence and faith of a grandmother on Timothy's life (2 Tim 1:3–5).

Paul has bit to say to those of us who are old. He encourages old men to be temperate, self-controlled and sound in faith. He also asks them to love (Titus 2:2). Similarly, Paul asks older women not to slander people with gossip or let themselves be controlled by bad habits. He says they are to teach what is good. In particular, they are to teach the younger women to love their husbands and children (Titus 2:3–5).

Never doubt that God has role for each of us, regardless of age.



## PART 6

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?



## 4]. IS CHRISTIANITY ANTI-SEX?

Many young adults find the church's teaching on sexuality negative, judgemental or irrelevant. I'm sorry about that. Let's see if we can say something more useful.

The sex drive is God's gift to us, and it is a beautiful one. It's worth beginning our study with this fact, as you can get the impression that sex was invented by the rock industry. As sex was God's idea, it would be very wise to discover how he intended it to be used. I say this because the gift of sex is the hardest gift you will ever be given to control.

As I look round the university scene, I see a lot of people who are conflicted because they feel let down by the realities of the 'hook-up' culture. The fun, fun, fun-loving thing hasn't delivered. Woman particularly can end up with a loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depression and sometimes post-traumatic stress if they have been victimised. They can feel that something of their essence has been violated or trivialised – but they may not always be able to put this into words.

God has a great plan for sex, and he should know, because he invented it. 'Tonight we will fake love'<sup>1</sup> is a paltry, pathetic shadow of a beautiful reality that God wants to reserve for you. The excuse 'everybody's doing it' didn't work out so well for lemmings – so take the hint. Your self-esteem is never going to be improved by someone who just wants to use you for sex. So, embody Jesus' way of living – in particular, the way he was so comfortable living within his own skin.

Whatever you do, don't compartmentalise! In other words, don't have your Christian life in one pigeonhole and your sex life in another. You'll end up being schizophrenic. The reality is, you can't serve two masters. (Jesus said this when he talked about being careful not to love money more than God – see Matt 6:24.)

### **Your body**

Your body is good, so don't be ashamed of it (Gen 1:27, 31). Note that modesty should not be confused with shame. Think of your body as a temple in which God lives by his Spirit (1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16; Eph 2:22). The Bible encourages us to give our body as a living sacrifice to God (Rom 12:1–2). Immodesty has been touted as sexual freedom, but it has actually encouraged sexual objectification – as our execrable TV reality shows amply demonstrate.

### **Be wise**

The Bible says that we are to 'flee' from the idea of immorality. In other words, don't put yourself in situations where there is great pressure to sin (1 Cor 6:18). Be wise (Prov 2:12–18). Like a quarrel, once you start, it is difficult to stop (Prov 17:14; 26:11; 27:12). This prompts the question: What level of petting do you think is appropriate before marriage? It's not an

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase was popularised by the British poet Steve Turner and was the title of one of his books, *Tonight We Will Fake Love Poems, 1969–1973* (Razor Books, n.p., 1978).

easy question. Whatever else: avoid being a sucker for seduction (2 Pet 2:18–19; Jas 1:14–15). Be careful. The hormonal make-up of men means that certain stimuli will invariably produce sexual arousal. Some researchers also claim that the hormone-amended brain of males makes them less inclined to monogamy than females. This does not excuse bad male sexual behaviour, but it does suggest that men have to be particularly careful.

Finally, be stable. Know who you are, and understand your sacredness to God. It is often the unstable who are most easily seduced (2 Pet 2:14).

### **Is the Christian ideal of 'celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage' just a Western, cultural imposition?**

Some may be tempted to suggest that celibacy in singleness and faithfulness in marriage does not reflect biblical truth but is merely a product of outdated Western culture. They point to the different sexual ethics of some biblical leaders in the Old Testament, such as King David and King Solomon, who amassed a considerable number of wives between them (2 Sam 5:13; 1 Kgs 11:1–3).

David and Solomon certainly did have many wives. What is equally true is that this led to strife rather than blessing. Polygamy caused Solomon to lose his faith (1 Kgs 11:3). David's adultery with Bathsheba resulted in death and murder (2 Sam 11:1–12:19), and Abraham's sexual liaison with Sarah's maid caused jealousy and strife (Gen 16:1–5). It has to be said that sex outside the model God set for humankind has never worked well.

### **Thinking it**

The development of sexual feelings in young people is quite natural, and it is part of growing up into an adult. Rejoice in it and don't feel guilty about it. We also have to face reality. The sex drive can be powerful, and it is not easy these days to keep sex for marriage – particularly as people are becoming sexually mature earlier but are marrying later. This means that you will need to manage your sexuality – that is, adhere to boundaries that will keep you from doing things that will hurt yourself or others. But for this is to happen, you will need to identify the principles you want to live by.

### **Some questions for honest reflection**

Here are some questions for you to reflect on when the time is right. I ask them only because they may help you navigate the way to the future you want.

1. Does your significance come from the number and status of your sexual partners, or could your significance come from something more profound – that is, being loved by God?
2. Could you live as God wants you to, intentionally cultivating godly relationships in defiance of your sexual desires? (Note that I'm not talking about 'suppression', I'm talking about 'choice'.)

Sex can demean or ennoble. I'm cheering you on as you seek to get it right.

## 42. IS CHRISTIANITY BAD FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

The Canadian environmental activist David Suzuki has suggested that the teachings of the Old Testament encourage us to have a low view of creation, allowing us to exploit it thoughtlessly for our own gain. It has also been suggested that by destroying animism (the worship of created things in nature such as trees and rivers), Christianity made it possible for Christians to exploit nature without scruple.

Despite the teaching of great Christian saints like Francis of Assisi (who called all created things his ‘brother’), Christianity has been seen by some as not being very ‘green’. We need to take these criticisms seriously and learn what the Bible really says to help us discover our responsibility for the environment. Our task is nothing less than that described in the title of one of Tony Campolo’s books, *How To Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature*.<sup>2</sup>

The Old Testament is a story of how people’s understanding of God developed. The finer details of their understanding were continually revised in the light of new experiences. Much of their understanding about the land reflected a time when good productivity (and military victory) was seen to be God’s reward for faithfulness, while desolation and defeat were the result of unfaithfulness.

The national identity of the Jews was defined by their relationship with the land – a land they understood God had given them. This conviction played out in a number of ways in their military campaigns. On one occasion, God instructed the Jews to engage in an act of environmental vandalism in support of a military objective. They were told to despoil the lands of the rebelling Moabites (2 Kgs 3:18–19, 24–25). God also instructed them to undertake acts of environmental conservation in support of a military objective. They were not to cut down the fruit trees outside the cities they besieged (Deut 20:19).

The Old Testament teaches that there was one factor that determined the wellbeing of the lands belonging to God’s people, and that was faithfulness to God. Right in the beginning, the Genesis story taught that sin against God resulted in the land being cursed (Gen 3:17–19). This set a consistent pattern in Old Testament Jewish history. Rebellion against God resulted in good land becoming wasteland (Ps 107:33–34; Jer 9:12–13; Hos 4:1–3). In a very real sense, sin defiled the land (Isa 24:4–6; Jer 2:7). Not caring for God and not caring for the land went hand in hand (Jer 12:10–13).

The Old Testament does allude to environmental conservation, but it does so in the context of the laws surrounding the worship of Yahweh. For example, God did not want his people to work the land on the Sabbath (Friday night to Saturday night) as it was to be a day of rest and worship. Similarly, God commanded his people to ‘rest’ the land every seventh year (Lev 25:2–4) – allowing the land to catch up on the Sabbath rests it never had (Lev 26:33–35). God even threatened to drive the people off the land by an invading force if they failed to

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Campolo, *How To Rescue the Earth Without Worshipping Nature*, Thomas Nelson, Nashville TN, 1992.

obey this law. Again, the prosperity of the land was linked with faithfulness. Conversely, repentance and forgiveness never failed to result in the restoration of the land (2 Chr 7:13–14; Ezek 36:33–36).

The apostle Paul understood that the ecology of the earth was cursed because of the sin of humankind (Gen 3:17–19). That is why he taught that all of creation is waiting to be rescued from its blighted existence (Rom 8:22). Christians are waiting for God to combine a renewed earth and a new heaven into his eternal kingdom (Rev 21:1–4). However, while we wait for this, we are not to abdicate our responsibility for the present. We are to honour God's creation and care for it. This means that Christians must be the first to reduce, recycle and re-use.

The book of Genesis teaches us that God is responsible for creating our environment and that he considers every aspect of his creation (before it was spoiled by our disobedience) to be 'good'. The Hebrew word for 'good' is *towb*, which means 'good/pleasant/precious' (Gen 1:12–25). As such, we are not free to vandalise God's creation. We, as God's stewards, have been given God's authority to rule and bring into subjection a creation that has gone partly awry due to sin. We are to do this much as a gardener would make an unruly garden fruitful (Gen 1:27–28). The Hebrew word *kabash*, meaning 'subdue', that is used in Genesis 1:28 can mean 'violate', but that is not the meaning here. God's command to Adam and Eve was for them to work the land and take care of it (Gen 2:15). That's why industrious work on the land is extolled in the Old Testament (Prov 28:19; Lev 19:23–25).

Despoiling the land for greed is therefore a sin. We are to honour God by honouring his creation. We are to care for the land as God's tenants. So please do so.

## 43. WHAT IS THE UNFORGIVEABLE SIN?

What is the unforgiveable sin mentioned in the Bible?

The short answer is: If you are worried you might dishonour God and commit the unforgiveable sin, you won't.

Before we explore this issue, let's first lean into a truth that we can be very sure of. It is this: God is the final definition of justice and love. God's love means that he is for us, not against us. The Bible makes it quite clear that it is God's will that we be saved, not condemned (1 Tim 2:4).

Let's now look at the passage that refers to the 'unforgiveable sin':

And so I tell you, every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt 12:31–32)<sup>3</sup>

In this passage, Jesus draws a distinction between blaspheming the Holy Spirit (unforgiveable) and blaspheming the Son of Man – that is, Jesus (forgivable). But how can this be so when one member of the Trinity perfectly represents the other? In other words, if you denigrate Jesus, surely you must be denigrating the Holy Spirit. On one occasion, the Holy Spirit is even referred to as 'the Spirit of Jesus' (Phil 1:19; see also 2 Cor 3:17).

The answer to this conundrum is found in Jesus' use of the phrase 'the Son of Man' (with the definite article 'the'). This was a term Jesus used to refer to himself. The phrase occurs over 80 times in the Gospels and also in Acts and Revelation. This prompts the question: Why didn't Jesus use the unambiguous term 'Son of God' instead? After all, that's who he was.

The phrase 'the Son of Man' was not so much a title Jesus gave himself, but a humble (almost understatement) of who he was. The phrase could equate to 'son of Adam', 'human being' or even 'mortal man'. By using the term 'the Son of Man', Jesus was highlighting his humanity rather than his divinity (Phil 2:6–8). (Remember Jesus was 100% God and 100% human). Jesus referring to his humanity in this way was in keeping with his wish to keep his full identity secret from most people during his ministry.

But with Jesus, there was often a subtlety and significance to him using a phrase that ran deeper. It is possible that Jesus was also making a connection between himself and the 'son of man' mentioned in Daniel 7:13–14 (which is a fairly unambiguous reference to the Messiah).

If we bring this understanding back to the passage in which Jesus talks about the unforgiveable sin, we can say this: Jesus is saying, in effect, 'If you denigrate me, whom you perceive to be a mere man, that's within your right. But if you denigrate the Holy Spirit, you are not denigrating a man, but God – and the consequences of that are dire.'

This warning follows Jesus healing a demon-possessed man. Quite obviously, this was a triumph of God over evil. It would take perversity to believe otherwise. But the religious

<sup>3</sup> Also reported in Mark 3:28–29 and Luke 12:10.

Pharisees chose to be perverse and said that Jesus' authority to drive out demons came from Satan. Their comments prompted Jesus to issue this warning: don't call an act of God an act of Satan.

Let's continue to explore whether you can 'shipwreck' your faith, as the apostle Paul suggests in 1 Timothy 1:19.

You can. While Jesus will never let you go (John 10:28), you can let go of Jesus. If you have allowed Jesus to rescue you from eternal death and then willfully choose to reject him, you are in great danger. That very probably is the 'sin that leads to death' that the apostle John refers to in John 5:16.

Further insight into the 'sin that leads to death' can be obtained from Hebrews 6:4–6.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Note what is being said here. If a person has been enlightened as to the truth about Jesus, experienced his gift of salvation, known the indwelling power of God's Spirit and tasted the truth and goodness of God's word – and then willfully rejected God ... God will honour their wish to have nothing to do with him – eternally.

But what does this mean for you? All of us do and think things that are not godly from time to time. Are we doomed?

No. Even the apostle Paul wrestled with disobedience (Rom 7:15–24). Faithful Christians are in a process of *continually* being transformed into Christ's likeness (2 Cor 3:18), but they know that perfection won't occur until they are in God's kingdom. In the meantime, they treasure the promise that God will never turn his back on anyone's authentic repentance (1 John 1:9) ... and that is a beautiful truth we can all hang on to.



## 44. IS CHRISTIANITY HOMOPHOBIC?

Is Christianity homophobic?

No, it is not. The English theologian Rebecca McLaughlin is same-sex attracted but happily married to a man – by choice. She understands that homosexual sex is not acceptable to God, but she makes the point that the Bible encourages healthy loving relationships between people of our own sex and the opposite sex. Sadly, because society has become so sexualised, it has complicated the issue hugely, for it is assumed that almost any friendship has to be defined by sex.<sup>4</sup>

Every single one of us is a sexual being, and the Bible makes this one thing clear: all of us (regardless of sexual orientation) express our sexuality imperfectly. We are both totally broken and (wonderfully) totally redeemed. So, whether homosexual or heterosexual, we all need to come to God in repentance when we fall short of God's standards.

### What does the Bible say?

There are nine biblical passages that mention homosexuality. All speak of it in a negative light. However, those wanting the church to teach that homosexuality is okay for some people have an argument for most of them, so these verses don't settle the issue.

However, it has to be said that the biblical writers do not define what forms of homosexual acts are wrong and which are right. They do not suggest that it is just homosexual acts associated with temple prostitution that are wrong, or that it is just heterosexuals engaging in homosexual acts who are wrong. Long-term, fulfilling, homosexual relationships are not excused any more than long-term, fulfilling, adulterous relationships. The biblical writers' condemnation of homosexual acts is non-specific. The Bible is consistently negative about homosexuality in way it never is about women in leadership. While the Bible has liberating texts for women, there are none for those engaging in homosexual acts.

Nor can the biblical prohibition on homosexual acts be rejected as outmoded in the same way as slavery. The apostle Paul was actually quite radical in his views about slaves for his time. He makes it clear that slaves were to be respected as Christian brothers and sisters, and he taught that they were equal to their masters in God's eyes (Eph 6:9). He calls slave traders 'ungodly' and encourages slaves to gain their freedom if they can (1 Cor 7:21–23; 1 Tim 1:9–10).

It's worth remembering that it was God's deliberate intention to create male and female. In the first chapter of the Bible, we read 'God created ... male and female' (Gen 1:27). Having two sexes was therefore bound up in the very purposes of God.

Here's a great question: If gays and lesbians did not choose their condition, how can they be expected to repent of it? Archbishop, Keith Rayner, gives a good answer: 'Insofar as that orientation is not a matter of choice, no question of sin is involved and there need be no sense

<sup>4</sup> McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity*, pp. 153–174.

of guilt. Sin lies not in our sexual orientation but in the use we make of it.<sup>5</sup>

In our imperfect sinful state, none of us attain God's standards in any area of life, including the sexual area. However, this is no reason to disregard God's biblical principles. God gives these principles for our good. We should be glad that they are there. And we should be equally glad that when we fail in any area, God invites us to repent and enjoy his forgiveness.

So, what does Christianity say to the homosexual? It says this:

- You are loved and cherished by God.
- You should be loved and welcomed by faithful Christians.
- It is no sin to have a homosexual orientation. It would be unusual if you were responsible for your sexual orientation. All of us in society must share the responsibility for that.
- Everyone is imperfect in some way, and we all fall short of God's best will for us. We will continue to be imperfect until God makes 'all things new' (Rev 21:1–3). If you are broken in one area, others are broken in another.
- You may have had no choice in your sexual orientation, but you can choose how to express it.

My gay and lesbian friends have open access to my church, home and fridge. I love and respect them as fellow imperfect human beings. Many are superbly gifted, and they bless me, hugely.

Finally, if you are contemplating engaging in a homosexual relationship, here are some questions for you to consider:

1. Who are you? Is the essential 'you' simply the sum of your desires, or is there something deeper that defines you?
2. Does your freedom come from being controlled by your desires – and is that really freedom?
3. Does your significance come from the number and status of your sexual partners, or could your significance come from something more profound – that is, being loved by God?
4. Could you live as God wants you to, intentionally fostering godly relationships in defiance of your sexual desires? (Note that I'm not talking about suppression, I'm talking about choice.)

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<sup>5</sup> Keith Rayner, *Archbishop's Report to the Diocese*, Anglican Diocese of Adelaide, September 1985, pp. 29–30.

## 45. IS ABORTION OKAY?

Mothers in pre-Christian Rome would put their unwanted babies on the roadside either to die or be picked up by a stranger to be raised as a slave.<sup>6</sup> Most of these mothers can't be blamed. Rape and abuse of women was rife. The careless attitude of some men today is also a reality, and this has relevance to the abortion debate. I have a great deal of sympathy with the conviction that any man who shuns responsibility for the wellbeing of his child forfeits the right to give his opinion on abortion.

And yet, the abortion debate must necessarily involve both men and women. While it is a deeply personal issue for women, it is also an issue that touches wider society because it touches on parameters set by our legal and medical institutions.

The issue also touches on me as a scientist. While early term abortions are medically (although not necessarily psychologically) benign, late-term abortions are not. Having once been a research biologist, it is difficult to keep quiet about the fact that a human baby feels pain after 20 weeks' gestation. I therefore shudder at what normally happens to a late-term baby being aborted. I can only pray that it is given pain relief.

There were 310 late-term abortions in the state of Victoria in 2016. Ten per cent of the babies were born alive because of unsuccessful abortions. Unbelievably, politicians in that state have refused to mandate giving care to a child that survives an abortion. Please note that it can no longer be said that the baby must be allowed to die to ensure the safety of the mother. She has already given birth. Also, the argument 'It's my body, I can do what I like' no longer applies, for another tiny body is now lying in a room where it has been taken.

I suspect a key reason for this unconscionable action is that society has allowed its Christian heritage to slip through its fingers. History has shown that non-Christian worldviews are generally dangerous to unborn and newly born children.

The abortion debate is really a debate about meaning. It requires us to face up to the question of why we exist and whether our existence has significance. Put simply, a person's position on abortion will depend on whether they hold to one of two positions:

1. God does not exist. Therefore, life has no meaning or value other than that we choose to put on it. This means there is no real obstacle to getting rid of an unwanted fetus/baby before, or even after, birth.
2. God does exist, and although the world is spoiled by sin and suffering, he considers each person to be sacred and purposed, whether or not they were intended by their parents. This means we are not free to kill unborn babies indiscriminately (Deut 5:17).

The church, from its inception, has disapproved of abortion and the killing of newborn children. Here are three quotes that are typical:

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<sup>6</sup> Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*.

You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill one who has been born. (*The Didache [The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles]*, c. AD 80–140, 1.377.)

Although keeping parrots and curlews, the [pagans] do not adopt the orphan child. Rather, they expose (abandon) children who are born at home. Yet, they take up the young of birds. So they prefer irrational creatures to rational ones! (Clement of Alexandria, c. AD 195, 2.368.)

Are you to dissolve the conception by aid of drugs? I believe it is no more lawful to hurt a child in process of birth, than to hurt one who is already born. (Tertullian, c. AD 212, 4.57.)

Billy Graham disapproved of abortion except in the case of medical necessity or rape. I have a lot of sympathy with his position.

There is a brutal reality to abortion that no amount of sloganeering can erase. The mantra of the pro-abortion lobby, 'My body; my choice', manifestly fails to acknowledge that the unborn baby is given no choice at all. The law, as it currently stands, is similarly inconsistent. If an abuser causes an unborn child to die, it is called murder. If a prospective mother causes an unborn baby to die, it is called abortion. So, it all seems to depend on where you choose to invest your emotions – and emotions, of course, can change.

Mercifully for us all, in the midst of all our failings and follies, God's love and forgiveness reaches out to us. And the Christian church, made up of fallible people, must demonstrate that same grace. So, no matter what, let's ensure we love and support those who have had to face the question of abortion – regardless of their decision.

What is not in dispute is that God loves his people, and the fact that every person is made in God's image means that we should treat babies in the womb, and their mothers, with the highest respect.

## 46. IS EUTHANASIA OKAY?

The word ‘euthanasia’ comes from the Greek *eu*, meaning ‘good’, and *thanatos*, meaning ‘death’. It literally means ‘good death’. Sometimes this is referred to as ‘mercy killing’. Euthanasia is a hot topic at the moment, so what should Christians think about it?

My father was nearly dead, dying horribly of cancer. The worst ravages of suffering were held at bay by morphine. His doctor looked me straight in the eye three days before his death and said: ‘Know that I will sign the death certificate whatever happens. Don’t hold back in giving him morphine if there is need. It will probably result in your father dying of dehydration or respiratory depression.’ In other words, he was giving me permission to kill my father. Here’s the question: What would you have done in my shoes?

There are two types of euthanasia: passive and active. Passive euthanasia is allowing a patient to die by withholding medication or emergency resuscitation – in other words, it is letting nature take its course. Active euthanasia is the administration of something lethal.

The Bible is silent on the matter of euthanasia. We therefore need to be careful to extract principles from it that are valid. For example, the God-given command ‘do not kill’ (Exod 20:13) should not lazily be applied to someone who chooses to leave instructions that they be allowed to die if they get into a permanent vegetative state. This is because the biblical prohibition on killing is in the context of malice – that is, of murdering someone. God’s command not to kill is a prohibition on:

- exerting ultimate authority over someone else’s life that you have no right to exert
- making a judgement about someone else’s life that is not yours to make
- demeaning the value of someone else, which is contrary to the value God places on them.

The Anglican theologian John Stott identified three issues surrounding the euthanasia debate.<sup>7</sup>

- **Value.** What value does a human life have? Are we just meaningless organisms that have made it to the top of the food chain, or have we been intended and loved by God?
- **Fear.** What level of fear exists that we might suffer unbearable pain, indignity or become a burden to others? This is particularly pertinent given that the quality of palliative care cannot be guaranteed universally.
- **Autonomy.** What right does an individual have over his or her own life? Do the sensibilities of family, friends and medical staff count for nothing? This last factor is tricky, as patients can, in a worst-case scenario, be made to feel as if they are a burden to relatives who want to be free of their responsibilities and enriched by inheritance money.

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<sup>7</sup> Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, ch. 14.

Atheism has cast a dark shadow over the euthanasia debate. The Australian philosopher Peter Singer believes that a human life is no more special than that of an amoeba, but his atheistic thinking did not stop him caring for his mother in a nursing home! It seemed that his head and heart were conflicted.

Atheist Richard Dawkins once said that we should have no compunction about killing babies with severe disabilities such as Down's Syndrome.<sup>8</sup> The American bioethicist Joseph Fletcher shares this view. He pioneered the concept of 'situational ethics'.<sup>9</sup>

This prompts the question: Does disallowing euthanasia (in the case of mental handicap or gross physical handicap) enfeeble humanity and place an unnecessary burden on people? This sort of thinking calls to mind the atheistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, who claimed that Christianity made humanity feeble. It is sobering to remember that the Nazis borrowed Nietzsche's philosophy to justify their implementation of eugenics. Eugenics is the practice of improving the genetic quality of a human population by euthanising those who are not physically perfect.

It can readily be seen that without God, people have no inherent value.

Nancy Crick, great-grandmother of six, grandmother of four and mother of two sons, was a heavy smoker who had become convinced that she had cancer. After she had killed herself, it was found she had not had cancer, but simply had a twisted bowel. The Right to Die lobby tried to justify Nancy's euthanasia by saying that a person is 'terminally ill' if they feel they have suffered enough. They said the issue is whether a person is 'hopelessly ill' not 'terminally ill.'

At the time, the columnist Miranda Divine made the point that such an understanding could logically result in people deciding to kill themselves because they were lonely, too fat or depressed. She said, 'Once you allow the state to end a life according to its quality, the potential is endless.'<sup>10</sup>

I think she's right.

So, what can we say in conclusion? Perhaps this:

- We exist because of God's initiative. Therefore, all life should be respected.
- Suffering gives us a chance to exercise the compassion of God.
- Those who love will not want any person to suffer continually when nothing can be gained by it.
- Any decision to end a life not only impacts on an individual, but on families, the medical profession and society itself. No-one is an island.

Respecting God and respecting others are the principles that should guide all things.

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Richard Dawkins Apologises for Causing Storm with Down's Syndrome Tweet', *The Guardian*, 22 August 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2014/aug/21/richard-dawkins-apologises-downs-syndrome-tweet>

<sup>9</sup> Bard & Fletcher, 'The Right to Die', pp. 59–64.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda Divine, 'The Death Knell for Euthanasia', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 May 2004.

## 47. WHY GO TO CHURCH?

You've probably heard people say 'You don't have to go to church to be a Christian.' The statement is, of course, partly true. The act of going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you a car. But behind this statement is a question about obligation. *Should* those claiming to be Christians go to church?

There are good churches that are faithful to the consistent principles of Scripture, and there are bad churches that aren't. Please go to a good one. Go to one that will teach truth and encourage you to do things as part of a team that you can't do on your own. Go to a church in which you can use your gifts to do the things that Jesus is calling you to do.

The question 'Should I go to church?' is fundamentally a theologically flawed one. The church is not a building or a place. The church is people ... people who seek to make Jesus the leader of their life. Church is who you are when you are part of Jesus' community. The American-Canadian theologian Gordon Fee writes, 'God is not just saving individuals and preparing them for heaven; rather, he is creating a people among whom he can live and who in their life together will reproduce God's life and character.'<sup>11</sup>

If you are a Christian, your priority is no longer yourself; it is Jesus and his agenda. So, if you think you are a Christian because you believe in God and have good morals ... you will, of course, feel perfectly free to play golf on Sundays instead of going to church. The problem with this approach is that 'belief' and 'morality' are not what makes a Christian – although, of course, it is part of the deal. Being a Christian is about putting your faith in Jesus' death on your behalf and making him the leader of your life.

So, the right question is: Does Jesus want you to be in community with other Christians, to meet with them regularly to be encouraged and to encourage others, to use your abilities in ministry and to do things together that you couldn't do on your own?

And the answer is yes.

You may feel you can worship God better on a nature walk than at a church service. But that is not church. That is worship ... and it's different. Doing church is doing community. Doing church means embracing the oddness and idiosyncrasies of each other. Being church challenges our predisposition to deify ourselves, our opinions and our preferences. It's about 'otherness'. As church, we acknowledge God, worship God, submit to God and minister to his glory – together.

And we had better get used to 'community', because the whole reason God created the universe was so that he could expand the orbit of his love to include as many people as possible. God's future kingdom will be his community – and we, the church, get to prefigure it.

It follows that, rightly speaking, there is no such thing as a Catholic church, an Anglican church or a Methodist church. There is only one church, and that is Christ's church

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<sup>11</sup> Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, p. 66.

(Eph 4:15–16). For there to be divisions in the Christian church, at some point people will need to have strayed from Jesus, for unity is only found ‘in’ Christ (John 15:5–8). Church denominations are institutional responses to theological preferences. They are symptomatic of a lack of faithfulness and unity of people at some point in history ... and that is very sad. So don’t get too hung up about denominations. Find a vibrant church that is faithful to the consistent principles of God – as recorded in the Bible. All else is simply human accretions – clutter from history that can sometimes help and sometimes hinder.

The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us not to neglect meeting together, but instead to encourage one another (Heb 10:25). That’s pretty straight talking. It is also good advice. Just as a burning coal will lose its heat when removed from the fire, we need to be put back in the fire regularly with other pieces of coal so that we can share our heat and help each other to burn brightly.

The reality is: without you being in community with other Christians, the church is incomplete (1 Cor 12:12–27).



## 48. WHAT DOES HEALTHY GRIEF LOOK LIKE?

Grief is how we cope with loss, and it is my hope that I can help you through it.

First, let me say this: it's okay to grieve. Our body can handle grief if it is allowed to do so. One of the ways we handle grief is to cry. Because tears have wonderful healing power, crying should not be discouraged.

Our bodies also cope with the initial stages of grief by producing a number of narcotic-like chemicals similar to heroin – powerful pain-killing drugs that help create a numbing experience in the beginning. As the weeks roll by (typically 4–6 weeks), the production of these chemicals decreases and reality sets in. So, be ready for it.

Christians are no less likely to feel grief than anyone else. We are not expressing a lack of faith in the Christian hope when we grieve, so don't feel guilty. Hidden guilt is destructive, but grief is okay.

It's also okay to feel relief. Relief typically comes from three things. First, it comes from the fact that someone's suffering has finally come to an end. Second, you can feel relief that a long anxious wait is over. And third, there can be relief that your life can return to some sort of normality. You are not expressing a lack of love or being unfaithful when experiencing this relief. It is simply common sense ... and you are being honest.

You may also be experiencing a sense of guilt that you could have done things better. This feeling is either untrue and you are being too hard on yourself; or it is true. It is sometimes both. If it is untrue, do an honest review of the situation and tell the feeling of guilt to 'get lost'. Note that you will have to do this repeatedly until you have retrained your brain to think differently. That can take several months.

If there are good reasons for your guilt, come quietly to God and share it (confess it) to him in prayer. He loves you and promises to forgive you (see 1 John 1:9). God wants to embrace you, not condemn you. He is a God of new beginnings.

Let me return to the subject of grief and describe the sequence of what typically happens, so that you will be forewarned.

1. Initially you might not be able to take it in. There will be *numbness* (good old brain opiates in action).
2. Then there is protest, confusion and *anger*. In this anger, you might reasonably expect to blame God, others and yourself.
3. Feelings of hopelessness typically follow, including deep *despair*, anguish and depression.
4. *Apathy*, detachment, indifference and fatigue often come next.
5. *Bursts of energy* follow as you begin to reorganise your life.
6. Finally, you are grateful for the past ... but you are now ready to *embrace the future*.

Often you will experience a mixture of stages in the same day. It is also quite usual to go back and repeat a few steps. You are not going mad. It is normal.

You will be surprised how long the grief process is. Again, let me assure you, you are not going mad. It takes a long time – many months (typically 18 months, although nothing is ever ‘typical’). Grief only really gets going at the time the brain opiates go, which, perversely, is the time some people start expecting you to ‘pull yourself together’, so don’t listen to them.

Instead, allow yourself to experience grief and the other emotions that accompany it. I would, however, offer the following advice:

1. Your grief should not be too destructive. If you have to throw plates at the wall, get old ones and do it outside.
2. Don’t sink so far inside yourself that others can’t reach you to love you. There will, however, be plenty of times when you will only want your own company, and that’s okay.
3. Don’t hide guilt inside you. Let it out. Share it. Talk it out with wise and trusted friends.
4. Don’t hide from memories and objects that remind you of the past. Healthy grief will eventually mean, however, that you don’t make a ‘shrine’ of anything and are free to get on with life.
5. Don’t make too many big ‘life’ decisions until the dust has settled – that is, it’s probably not a good idea to decide to move to America in the next year or so!

Be aware that your body might do odd things. You may not eat very much. This is normal. However, don’t let it get too bad. You need to ensure that you drink enough to be hydrated and eat enough to have the energy to function.

Finally, many of your family and friends may not know how best to help you in your grief. They too will be in grief ... and will be grieving for you. They will say the wrong thing sometimes. Forgive them and understand.

One of the best things you can do is to tell stories, both funny and sad, of what you once did together. Tell them to your family and tell them to your friends.

Good grief is both healing and possible.

## 49. IS DEPRESSION THE EIGHTH DEADLY SIN?

You are a Christian; you know your identity, destiny and sacredness ... yet you are suffering depression. Does this make you a terrible sinner who has thrown the victory of Jesus, the hope of God's kingdom and the joy of being cherished ... back into the face of God?

Let's explore the question, but first – a reality check.

Life is a wounding business. This can be particularly so for Christians. They will grieve at the suffering and injustice of this life (which they see in stark contrast to the kingdom of God that is to come), and they may also be targeted by persecution. Christians know themselves to be aliens in a foreign land, a people who don't belong in this world (1 Pet 2:11).

What then, can we say?

Throwing 'proof texts' from the Bible at a depressed Christian may simply add to the sense of depression. This is not to say that scriptural truths are not useful. They are. It is just that the gold they contain needs to be given at the right time and framed in the right manner if they are to be truly appreciated. This is the truth that is taught by Proverbs 25:11: 'A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver' (NRSV).

There are different types of depression and not all depression is bad. In fact, we were designed to live with depression – the depression brought on by grief, disappointment and unrequited hope (Prov 13:12). This normal sort of depression is called 'exogenous depression'. It is the depression that can come as a reaction to the adverse things that happen in life, such as losing a loved one, losing a limb or losing a job.

What is not normal is 'endogenous depression' (or clinical depression). This is when the brain hardwires itself to be permanently depressed, usually as the result of sustained stress. High-achieving leaders can be prone to this. They can live life in the fast lane for so long that they get addicted to adrenaline. The trouble is, they burn out their adrenaline receptors so they have to do increasingly risky things – even acting immorally or out of character – to feel any sense that they are alive.

Depression can express itself as an inability to see joy or be motivated by anything. It can be a hell of blackness and despair where no hope reaches you. Food loses its flavour, humour is irritating, you can't sleep and you are unable to feel the love of those closest to you. You break out in anxiety at the thought of putting out the rubbish bin, and you can sometimes feel as if you are having a heart attack. If this is the case, get help fast. If you don't take a few weeks off when the symptoms are mild, you will end up having to take months off. And if you don't take months off when the symptoms are severe, you may end up taking years off ... if you return to work at all.

Do godly people suffer depression? You bet! Some of Christianity's greatest theological luminaries suffered from depression – for example, Martin Luther, Søren Kierkegaard and Charles Spurgeon. Even Elijah, the great Old Testament prophet, suffered from it. Despite witnessing God providing an impossibly endless supply of oil to a widow, being used by God

to raise a child from the dead, and miraculously defeating the priests of Baal on Mt Carmel ... he ran away to the desert and asked God to take his life (1 Kgs 19:4). His depression made him irrational, and it led to his conviction that he was the only godly person left in the land.

It is interesting to note how God responded to Elijah's depression. God fed him, rested him and brought in an apprentice who would eventually replace him.

Is depression a deadly sin? No. Nothing is ever so broken that it can't be managed or mended in God's economy. Many, like the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, have offered their suffering to God as a sacrifice and have honoured him by remaining faithful despite their depression. However, please do all you can to be free of it – that is, by employing prayer, pills and pillows. Make sure the burden you carry is no heavier than it needs to be.

Finally, here are some verses to sooth the soul:

Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you (1 Pet 5:7).

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phil 4:6).

## 50. HOW CAN I OVERCOME TEMPTATION?

Let's face it, everyone battles with temptation ... and it is a continuous battle. The human landscape is littered with the wreckage of what was once integrity, humility and truth. I do hope some of that wreckage is not yours. Not for nothing did God say to Cain, 'sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it' (Gen 4:7).

It is somewhat mollifying to know that Jesus understands the pressures of temptation (Heb 2:18). He was tempted himself (Luke 4:1–13), and because he understands, he can help us when we are tempted (Heb 4:15–16). This leads to an important truth: it is not a sin to be tempted. It is what we do with temptation that matters. As the English 19th-century literary critic Churton Collins wrote:

We are no more responsible for the evil thoughts that pass through our minds than a scarecrow for the birds which fly over the seed-plot he has to guard. The sole responsibility in each case is to prevent them from settling.<sup>12</sup>

Temptation on its own is harmless – it is just an invitation. It must be allowed to mix with our own evil desires before any sin is committed (Jas 1:14–15). Therefore, Satan can't make us sin by tempting us. Satan needs our 'yes' first.

But here's the conundrum: the Bible teaches that Christians no longer *have* to do what their old nature wants them to do. We are told that the old nature can be 'crucified' when we make Christ the leader of our lives (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 2:20). And yet, no Christian has ever managed to be entirely good. Even the apostle Paul battled with temptation (Rom 7:18–19). The apostle Peter was right when he said there is a war going on between our old nature and the Spirit of God (1 Pet 2:11).

What I'm saying next is pretty obvious, but I'll say it anyway because it's important: God does not want to spoil our fun. God is not against us for our sin; he is for us against our sin. As Benjamin Franklin said, 'Sin is not hurtful because it is forbidden; sin is forbidden because it is hurtful.'<sup>13</sup> Jesus tells us that Christians are meant to 'have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). And the apostle Paul reminds us, 'God ... richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment' (1 Tim 6:17).

Because God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us, he doesn't want us to dampen his Holy Spirit's presence within us by continuing to sin. God calls us to be free of sin, rather than be enslaved by sin (John 8:34; 2 Pet 2:18–19).

Remember: Satan loves to kill, steal and destroy, which is why he's made sin so addictive. The trick is to put an end to temptation early, before it takes hold. Once we let ourselves savour the idea, willful sin follows (Jas 1:14–15). So, don't savour it. Distract yourself. Fill your mind with something else that is positive (Phil 4:8)

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<sup>12</sup> Manser, *The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations*, p. 334.

<sup>13</sup> Franklin, *The Way to Wealth and Poor Richard's Almanac*, p. 35.

Here are some more tips from the Bible:

- Hate the thought of being 'controlled' by bad habits (1 Cor 6:12).
- Don't do or think things that are unhelpful (1 Cor 10:23). It's worth pondering what films, books, social settings and situations are unhelpful, so you can avoid them.
- Avoid immature, self-indulgent excesses and aim at righteousness (2 Tim 2:22).
- Bring your thinking under God's control (2 Cor 10:5; Col 3:1–3).
- Train your body – that is, your habits (1 Cor 9:24–27).
- Train your thinking – that is, renew your mind (Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 10:5; Eph 4:22–24). The Apostle Paul reminds us that we can retrain our minds by choosing to think about things that are true and good (Phil 4:8).

It can be disheartening looking at list like this, can't it? Sometimes it is not very helpful to be told to be strong and try harder. Are we condemned to rely only on our own resources, or can God really give us tangible help? What more can we say?

Overcoming temptation is not just drawing away from something; it is drawing near to someone. Overcoming temptation is not just having the willpower to stop doing something, but being motivated by God's love to draw closer to him. The promise is that if we live as friends of God, our old nature will be transformed (2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 1:3–4). God has also promised that we will never be tempted beyond that which we can endure. He will always give us the ability to overcome temptation – if we want it (1 Cor 10:13).

Your other great resource is the Bible. Jesus quoted Scripture to counter temptation (Luke 4:1–12). Scripture teaches us what is right and wrong (Ps 119:9–11,105; Prov 6:23–24), and it will teach you the promises of God (2 Pet 1:3–4). It will train you and build you up (2 Tim 3:15–17).

So, read it every day.

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