

The Most Important Decision of Your Life

Probe's founder, Jimmy Williams, shares how to know God and go to heaven when you die.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

I have come to share a message that changed my life. I was not a bad boy—but not a good boy either. I went to church with my parents and was baptized when I was 12.

If you had asked me if I were a Christian, I would have said yes. But for twenty-one years God was just a formal idea to me rather than a personal friend. I professed Christianity, but I lived my life as a practical atheist.

At the University, I studied music. I loved to sing, especially the tenor arias from the great operas. As I neared my final year, I was having success with my career goals, but my heart was empty. I felt that something was missing from my life. I did not know at the time that, as the empty stomach calls for food, I was suffering from spiritual hunger.

Pascal, the great French physicist eloquently expressed this hunger when he said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of each man which cannot be satisfied by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus Christ.”

Augustine, the great theologian and bishop speaks of the same hunger: “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

I thought I had many unsolvable problems then, but I soon discovered that solving my spiritual hunger helped many of my other problems to vanish.

I met a fellow student, an athlete, who had the radiance of a Christian on his face. A simple conversation with him changed the entire direction of my life that day in September, 1959.

He told me that just as there are physical laws in the universe, so are there spiritual laws which govern our relationship with God. They are called “laws” because they are universally true. For example, we do not break the law of gravity. . . it breaks us. Jump off a high building and we discover the truth about the law of gravity.

So what are these spiritual laws? I will share with you the four my friend related to me that day. And like the law of gravity, they are true, whether we believe them or not.

I. God loves us and has a purpose for our lives.

Jesus tells us in John 10:10, “I have come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.” That is one of the reasons He came to make our lives rich and full of purpose.

Everything in this room has a purpose—the microphone, the piano, the stage, the chairs, the sound system, the lectern. What is man’s purpose? What is your purpose? This is an important question.

Why is it that most people are not experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised? The second law tells us:

II. Man is sinful and separated from God; thus, he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.

The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” God has given us standards to live by in such things as the Ten Commandments. And James

tells us that “if a man keeps the whole law (the Ten Commandments) but offends in **one** place, he is guilty of all.”

I am not saying that every person is as bad as he/she could be; I am saying that every person has fallen short of the mark, has failed to meet what God has required. And what God requires of us in our personal standard of behavior and righteousness is as unattainable as throwing a rock and trying to hit the North Pole.

Humans have tried to address this problem of personal, moral failure in various ways. Some, in the face of some 4000 years of documented history which records horrific, bloody, and unending incidents of man’s inhumanity to man, some have actually persisted in the belief that man is basically **good**.

Others, more realistic and honest about man’s tendency toward selfishness and evil, have attempted to explain the reason man displays such destructive behavior. Here are three explanations widely held across the world:

(1) Some suggest that man’s moral failure is **biological**; that it is simply the vestigial remains of aggression from our primitive, animal, evolutionary past.

(2) Others argue that man’s moral flaw is basically **sociological**, that man lacks the proper environment necessary for upright behavior.

(3) Still others insist that the human problem is essentially **intellectual**, and if people knew more, they would understand what was right, and they would do it. Curiously, in the United States, over 35,000 laws and statutes exist simply to try and enforce the Ten Commandments! We *do* know what is right, but we choose often not to do it!

These three theories have one thing in common: each one approaches the human moral condition from the standpoint of what man lacks.

The **biologist** tells us that more time is needed for man to work out and eliminate the remnants of his primitive aggression. Tennyson optimistically hopes for this in his poem, *In Memoriam*: "Moving ever upward, outward, let the ape and tiger die."

The **sociologist** tells us that what humans basically need is a proper or better environment, and if they had it, human behavior would improve. Modern America is a vivid and tragic example that abundance will not make people good.

Others suggest that man's lack is **information**, and therefore education is the answer. We lack sufficient time; we lack a proper environment; we lack the necessary information.

But our real dilemma is not what is *lacking*, but what is *present*! And every academic discipline has to allow for and explain what it is:

Biology calls it primitive instinct;
Philosophy calls it irrational thinking;
Psychology calls it emotional weakness;
Sociology calls it cultural lag;
History calls it class struggle;
Humanities calls it the human flaw, or *hubris*;
The Bible calls it sin.

Jesus speaks of this presence in Mark 7:15-23 as something which comes from within man, something which issues forth from his inner life:

*"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. . . .Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? . . .That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from **within**, out of the*

heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

Albert Einstein echoes this when he said, "It is not the explosive power of the atom which I fear: but rather the explosive power for evil in the heart of man which I greatly fear."

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."
(Romans 3:23).

And if this sinful condition were not bad enough, we learn from the Bible that there are consequences for our sin: "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

What is the meaning of death? Death always means separation. *Physical death* is a separation of the soul/spirit from the body. People who are present when someone dies can actually observe the moment when this takes place.

Spiritual death is also a separation, from God Himself. Man's sin keeps him separated from the one he seeks to know. Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu teacher, speaks of this separation when he says in his autobiography, "O wretched man that I am! It is a constant source of torture to me that I am separated from the One I know to be my very life and being, and I know it is my sin that hides Him from me!"

T.S. Eliot expresses this same despair when he says:

"We are the hollow men,
We are the stuffed men,
Head piece filled with straw.
No head—No heart.

Life does not end with a bang,
But with a whimper."

Feelings of this separation, this alienation, have prompted men through the ages to try and find a way to bridge this gap, this estrangement, from God. And historically, all of these attempts originate with man, and reflect his own efforts to reach God by trying to be good, trying to keep the Ten Commandments or the Golden Rule, or by observing some religious practice.

The problem with these approaches is that one never knows when he or she has been good enough or done enough! Karl Marx said that "Religion is the opiate of the people," meaning that it appeared to be something necessary and helpful for humans, whether true or not. And many people console themselves by attending church, trying to be basically good and decent, and drugging themselves into believing God will accept them for making such efforts. Marx believed these naïve human inclinations should be eliminated.

Actually, the teachings of Jesus agree with Marx on this point. Jesus taught that religion is the enemy of Christianity, because religion represents man's best attempts to reach up and find God. And it is interesting to note that in Jesus' day He was most critical of the self-righteous, religious people He encountered: the "good" ones.

He said, "Those who are well do not need a physician." (Matthew 9:12) When does someone go to the doctor? When well, or sick? What Jesus was implying is that the notion that one's good deeds or relatively good life were already sufficient to bridge the gap between himself and his God, then what Christ came to accomplish through His sacrificial death on the cross is totally negated and unnecessary. In other words, He was saying, If you have drugged yourself into believing that your own good works have secured your salvation, then He, the Great Physician, can do nothing for you.

This is what Paul was getting at in Ephesians 2, 8-9 when he said: "For by grace have you been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast."

The Ten Commandments were never given by God with the expectation that man would keep them flawlessly. They were given as a guide, a teaching tool. Or, in medical terminology, the commandments parallel the purpose of an X-ray machine, which can only *reveal* the condition of the broken bone within a human body. It identifies the problem but can provide no solution for knitting the bone back together.

This is what Jesus was trying to say to the Pharisees, to recognize the true spiritual condition of their lives, in that as good and righteous as they tried to be, they were still hopelessly short of the mark which God required. A gospel preacher once pointed out that it was not difficult to get people saved, but it was extremely difficult to get them *lost*! We must first honestly face our true spiritual condition.

Once we have come to grips with this fact of our own personal sin and failure before God and accept it as true of ourselves, we are ready to consider the third spiritual law:

III. Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin; through Him we can know and experience God's love and purpose for our lives.

The second spiritual law reveals to us the bad news about man's condition. This third law now gives us the *euaggelion*, the gospel, the good news from God:

"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." (Romans 5:8)

We have established that "religion" is defined as man's best

efforts to reach up and find God. Christianity is unique and exactly the opposite and is defined as God's only effort to reach down and find man. Religion is spelled "**Do.**" Christianity is spelled "**Done!**"

Jesus stated the purpose of His divine mission in John 6:38-40:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. . . And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. . . For this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life: and I myself will raise him up on the last day."

John the disciple, an eyewitness, recounts to us the last words Christ uttered on the cross: "When Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, 'It is finished!' And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (9:30). "Mission accomplished!" "Done!"

It is for this reason that Jesus had told his disciples, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father except by me." (John 14:6) He claimed to be the One who, by His Incarnation and death, had come from heaven to build a bridge made of Himself, which could alone completely span the spiritual chasm between sinful human beings and a holy God.

The exclusiveness of this statement by Christ offends many. It is too narrow, they say. But honestly, some things in life *are* narrow. I have always appreciated a narrow-minded pilot, for example, who insists in landing his plane on the runway!

One of most beautiful cities in America is San Francisco, California. You may know that at the opening into the vast San Francisco Bay there stands a gigantic, rust-red suspension bridge called the Golden Gate Bridge. It allows people and cars to get back and forth from the city on the South to the

picturesque little seaside village, Sausalito, and the Napa Valley on the North. People have a choice if they want to get to Sausalito: they can take the bridge, or they can swim in the cold Pacific with its treacherous currents flowing in and out of the Bay. Everyone decides to trust the Bridge.

This bridge is also narrow. And since it was built in the 1930s, no one has ever petitioned the city of San Francisco to put up another bridge alongside the Golden Gate so people can get to Sausalito. It is not necessary, not needed. Now the real question is whether Jesus' claim to be the bridge, the only bridge, which gives access to God, is true.

There is a story recounted about a certain man who operated a drawbridge over a large river which he raised and lowered, allowing the boats to pass through. One day he brought his small son with him to the drawbridge. Late in the morning a large boat approached filled with people. As he was raising the drawbridge to let the big ship pass, his little son fell directly on to the great gear wheel. Horror-stricken, the man was faced with the decision of imperiling the many lives of those on the swift, oncoming craft, or saving his son. Moments later, the crushing of the little son's body in the machinery was accompanied by the tears and the crushed heart of a father who sacrificed his beloved child for the lives of the strangers on the boat.

That is the significance of the Cross. Jesus' life for ours. He is our substitute, our bridge, and access to God. He died so we might live. He was separated from God the Father ("My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?") so we might not have to be. . . for an eternity.

"All we like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on
Him.
He was oppressed and He was afflicted,

Yet He did not open his mouth.
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. . . .
He was cut off out of the land of the living,
For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was
due. . .
Although He had done no violence
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
But it pleased the Lord
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If His soul would render Himself as a guilt offering. . .
By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.”
—Isaiah 53

What this means to you and to me is that if we were the only two people who ever lived on planet earth, Christ would still have come and do what He did just for the two of us. That is how much He loves us. He had you and me specifically in mind as He carried that cross up the *Via Dolorosa* on that day in Jerusalem two thousand years ago. And on that Cross He took your place and mine and bore our Hell so that we might have the chance at Heaven.

Now it is most important to make something crystal clear. I want to pose a question. If the above things are really true, how many people did Jesus die for? We find the answer in John 3:16: “God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

We learn from this that Christ died for the world. His death is sufficient for every human being who ever lived on the planet.

But we must ask a second question: Does that fact that Christ

died for *all* mean that everyone is a Christian? Obviously not. His death is *sufficient* for everyone, but it is only *efficient* for certain ones. Which ones? The fourth and final spiritual law tells us:

IV. We must personally receive Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior into our lives in order to become a Christian.

John 1:12 and 13 tell us that “As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe on His name. . . who were born not of blood (through inheritance), nor of the will of the flesh (human will power), nor of the will of man (priestly pronouncement), but of God (the new birth).”

The Bible speaks of receiving Christ as similar to receiving a gift. We have seen this mentioned in Romans 6:23 and Ephesians 2:8,9 above. This “gift” concept marks out an approach to God that is diametrically opposed to any and all religious systems based on human effort we have already discussed.

The “spirit” of gift-giving is one of **grace**. How does one accept a gift? The appropriate response is “Thank you.” If you were to try to give money in exchange for a gift given you, the other person would be highly insulted and offended. The graciousness of the gift-giver would be spoiled by such a response. Grace is God’s unmerited, undeserved favor.

We cannot earn this gift.

We do not deserve this gift.

We can only say “Thank you.”

What God has so graciously provided for our salvation is so unlike the way humans think about such things, that no human would ever have thought up such a solution to the fallen,

human condition.

And so we humans have a choice with respect to our personal salvation. We can continue our own religious efforts with the uncertain hope of being acceptable to God when we die, or we can accept the free gift of God, His Son's death on our behalf. And when you come to think about it, if God intended for man to achieve his own salvation through self-effort, then He made a terrible mistake: He let His own Son die on the Cross, which was evidently (along this line of reasoning) not really necessary! Salvation through self-effort negates the very significance of the Cross and Christ's death on our behalf.

Now how do we receive this gift? We do it by exercising faith through the exercise of our will. It is a personal faith decision one makes on the basis of the facts stated above.

The experience goes by many names: conversion, being saved, being born again. Let's look at Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in John chapter three. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, the group Jesus was so often critical of because of their self-righteousness. But Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus and comes to see Him. He says, "Rabbi, we know that you have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these miracles that you do unless God is with Him." Jesus said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus took Him literally: "How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born, can He?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of . . . the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Here Jesus contrasts physical birth with spiritual birth. Physical birth is an event. It happens at a moment in time

and, we each celebrate the occasion once a year on our birthdays. Likewise, spiritual birth is an event, one that can occur at any time and any place when a person understands what Christ did and reaches out to personally receive the Gift He offers: "But as many as received Him, to those He gave the authority to become the children of God, to those who believe *on* His name (John 1:12)." Observe the verbs in this verse. It is our part to believe that what Christ did for us is true, then to receive Him into our lives as our Savior, and become a child of God. This is done by an exercise of our will, which actively decides to abandon all self effort to reach and attain a righteousness acceptable to God, but rather to reach out to Him in faith and receive the Gift which He offers us. And notices the verse states that we are to believe *ON*, not *IN*. Believing in something does not necessarily call for trust. Believing on something does. This is the true nature of faith. To "believe *on*" means to "*count on*."

The story is told of a great trapeze artist at the circus. Up on the high wire, he would ride back and forth across on a bicycle with a long pole. Then he would do it again with his attendant sitting on his shoulders. After that He asked the audience if they believed he could carry one of them across. The entire audience loudly exclaimed they believed he could. He looked at a particular man on the front row and asked if he believed, and he said "yes." Then the trapeze artist said, "Climb up the ladder, get on my shoulders, and Ill take you across." If the man responds and *entrusts himself* to the man on the bicycle, he is demonstrating the equivalent of the biblical faith called for by one who desires to become a Christian and to be born into the family of God.

It is important to understand the nature of faith in our lives. Faith is something that we employ all the time. Faith that a chair will hold us up; faith the on-coming driver will stay in his lane; faith the plane will land safely. Everyone has faith—atheist, agnostic, Christian. The real issue is not

having faith, in large or small quantities, but rather to have a *worthy object* for our faith. If you walked out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a little faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a lot of faith in an inch of ice? Faith is important, but the *object* of our faith is all-important.

To believe on Christ is to trust Him and Him alone to make us presentable and acceptable to God. We decide that He is the most reliable object of our faith and we are saying that when we stand before God, we are not trusting in our own merits to attain eternal life, but rather in the merits of our Substitute, the spotless Lamb of God who stands there with us, our Savior and our Redeemer.

Revelation 3:20 gives us a picture of how this spiritual birth occurs: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine (fellowship) with him, and he with Me."

Picture Jesus standing at the door of your life, your will, seeking entrance. He is a gentleman. He will never force His way into our lives. But we learn here that if we open the door of our life to Him and receive Him as our Savior, He will respond.

If I were to come to your home and knock on the door, you would have essentially three responses: (1) you could tell me to go away, (2) you could ignore me and play like you were not at home, (3) or you could invite me in.

The same is true of Jesus. He waits to be invited. He treats each person with integrity and will not come where He is not invited or wanted. It is our choice. But if we *do* open the door (that's our part), He *will* come in (that's His part). And Jesus doesn't lie. If we open, He will come.

We do this through prayer. The specific words we use are not important, but rather the attitude of the heart. Here is a short prayer which contains the major elements of receiving

Christ:

"Lord Jesus, I reach out to you at this time in my life to claim the gift you have offered me. I confess I have sinned and fallen short of what you require of me. I thank you for dying on the Cross for my sins, and I thank you for your forgiveness. I open the door of my heart and life and invite you to come into me, and make me the kind of person you want me to be. I trust you now as my personal Savior and from this day forward I *trust in you alone* to make me presentable and acceptable before God when I must give account of myself and my life. Thank you for coming into my life, and I know you are there now, because you promised that if I opened the door, you would come in. Amen."

If you prayed this prayer right now, and it expressed the desire of your heart, then where is Christ? He is now inside you. Before, He was on the outside looking in. Now, He is on the inside looking out. The word "Christian" means "Christ *in* one." That is why the body is called the temple of God. A temple is a place where God dwells.

How do you know he is there? We are back to the question of faith. Above, we spoke of exercising faith and trust that Christ's death on the Cross for us is true and that we are called upon to respond by believing *on* it. To answer this question, we must exercise faith again.

Let's say I came to your home and knocked. You opened the door, invited me in, and we went into the living room and sat down to chat. And let's say after a time, you got up, went to the door, opened it and said to me, "Come on in, Jim!" You did this several times, while I remained on the sofa in the living room! This would not only be silly; it would be clear evidence that you did not *really* believe I was already in your home!

So it is with Christ. Faith is when you stop saying "please" to God and you start saying "thank you." Unless you trust in

faith that, regardless of how you *feel*, Christ was true to His Word and actually entered when you invited Him, you can never get on with your new life in Christ, because you keep “going to the door” in uncertainty, not truly believing He did what He said He would do. And so once you have invited Him into your life, *believe that He is there*, and begin to trust that by saying, “Lord, thank you for coming into my life and making me a child of God and a member of your family.”

Perhaps this train illustration will help to understand the difference between fact, faith, and feeling. The *engine* of the train represents the facts . . .the truths about Christ’s death and its implications to us. The *coal car* represents faith. . .the energy needed to make these facts a reality to us. The *caboose* represents our feelings . . .which may vary every day and every moment depending on our circumstances, emotions, and state of mind.

The train will run with or without the caboose, and one would never think of trying to pull a train with the caboose! So it is with our life in Christ. This decision we have made concerning our salvation has nothing to do with how we *feel* at any particular time.

If someone were to ask me if I were married, I wouldn’t respond by saying, “Well, I feel married today,” or “I’m working at being married,” or “I think I’m married,” or “I hope I am.” And yet these are the very kinds of statements we often hear when we ask someone if they are Christians. In fact, these responses are a strong indication that the person does not really understand what Christ did for them, and He is probably still “standing outside” knocking at their door. This may be the case for many just simply because they lack the proper information and no one has ever clearly explained how they can become Christians.

Let’s ask another question: Is it presumptuous to assume that when I die I will go to heaven?

“And the witness is that that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know (not “hope”) that you have (present tense; not “will have”) eternal life.” (I John 5:11-13).

What we learn here is that a Christian receives eternal life not at death, but at the Second Birth. To receive Christ and “have the Son” is also to have eternal life as a **present possession**. No Christ, no eternal life. Possess Christ and also possess eternal life. We can see why this would be so. At our physical birth, our parents gave us the only kind of life they possessed—human life. When we place our faith in Christ and are born spiritually into the family of God, He gives us the only kind of life *He* possesses—eternal life.

That is why the apostle Paul could say with confidence, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). And that is why Jesus could say to the believing thief on the cross, “Truly I say to you, *today* you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

As a non-Christian, it always made me angry if someone said with confidence, that they knew they would go to heaven when they died. That is because I had assumed that what they implied is that they had done enough “good things” already to merit heaven. But that wasn’t their reasoning at all. They were simply giving testimony to the fact that they had received the gift of eternal life promised them when they recognized the futility of their own religious efforts and turned to Christ and received Him into their lives as the Bible instructed them to do.

To not have this certainty in the Christian life is to live out one’s days motivated by fear. God does not intend this for His children, and plainly states it over and over again, that

our lives are to be lived out with a motivation of love and gratitude for what God has done for us. We want to live for Christ. Our good works become, not a means of gaining our salvation, but the results of having been forgiven and a desire to please our Heavenly Father out of grateful hearts which have received mercy.

Where does one go and what does one do after he/she is born again?

Newborn babies need a lot of care. Birth is followed by a process of growth and development and time. When this natural development in a little baby fails to proceed as intended, we consider it sad, a tragedy. In the spiritual realm, the new birth goes through a similar process. New Christians need a proper environment so they can begin to grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith. Here are several suggestions to speed your growth along:

- **Begin to read the Bible.** Jesus said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). Jesus is saying here that if we want to obtain a word from God, we must go where He has revealed Himself. He has done so in the Scriptures, not Shakespeare or the morning paper. Peter says, "Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, so that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

The Bible is a big book. In fact it's 66 books! Many people get bogged down by starting in Genesis. They quickly get bogged down in the "begats" and abandon Bible reading in despair. What kind of nourishment do little babies begin with? Milk. Then pabulum. Then baby food. Then finally meat.

Start with the Gospel of John. It is the baby food section. Get a Bible that you feel free to mark up so you can underline things which are meaningful to you. Read the Bible like you eat fish. When you come upon a bone, something indigestible,

don't choke on it. If you don't understand it, say "Father, I don't understand this, but I trust that as I grow, I will come to understand it. It's probably meat I can't digest yet." Mark Twain observed, "It's not the things about the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the things about the Bible that I *do* understand that bother me." There is plenty that we do understand even as young Christians to feed our souls. It is through the Bible that you let God talk to you.

- **Make prayer a habit.** This is how we talk to God. Prayer can happen at any time and any place, not just on Sunday. It can be long or short, eloquent or plain, important or trivial, and with or without "thee" and "thou." It can be done with eyes open or shut, standing, kneeling, or lying down. It is talking to a Person, your Heavenly Father. He promises never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore is accessible to you 24 hours a day everyday. Prayer can involve:

- (1) *confession of sin*, as it occurs, with assurance that "If we confess (agree with God concerning) our sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

- (2) *praise and thanksgiving*,

- (3) *intercession* (asking for others), and

- (4) *petitions* of any kind which may burden one's heart. Paul says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God, and the peace of God which passes all understanding shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6,7).

- **Fellowship with other Christians.** Seek out the encouragement that comes from being and sharing with other Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another." A hot coal removed from the fire and placed apart from the others quickly dies out, but left in proximity

to other coals it burns brighter and longer. Christianity was never intended to be a solo affair. It is best served by a community of believers who mutually strengthen, support and challenge one another to “run a good race” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

- **Baptism.** Our Lord left us only two ordinances to faithfully observe: baptism and communion. Therefore, in obedience to the Lord’s command, every new believer should soon arrange to express his/her faith commitment to Christ—in His death, burial, and resurrection—by a personal, visual rite of public baptism. (“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” [Matthew 28:19].)

- **Share Christ with others.** Jesus told the first disciples, “Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men” (Mark 1:17). If you know of a good bargain somewhere, you tend to want to tell your friends. One sign of being a Christian, is that you have a strong desire that others might know what you have discovered yourself. . .that God loves them and wants them to know Him. But notice this is a *process*. No one is a “natural” born fisherman. It takes time and skill to catch fish. Learning how to share effectively with others is a learned experience as well. Study the life of our Lord and see how He dealt with people. Read the book of Acts and observe how Paul and others were effective in helping others clarified their own spiritual experience and joined the family of God.

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The Great Light

“A myriad of men are born; they labor and struggle and sweat for bread; they squabble and scold and fight; they scramble

for mean little advantages over each other. Age creeps upon them and infirmities follow; shame and humiliation bring down their pride and vanities.

“Those they love are taken from them, and the job of life is turned to aching grief. The burden of pain, care, misery, grows heavier year by year. At length ambition is dead; longing for relief is in its place.

“It comes at last . . . the only unpoisoned gift earth has for them . . . and they vanish from a world where they were of no consequence, where they achieved nothing, where they were a mistake and a failure and a foolishness; where they left no sign that they had ever existed—a world that will lament them a day and forget them forever.”

Mark Twain, who penned these words in his autobiography, reveals a pessimistic heart about the value and meaning of human life. For Twain, people do not live; they merely exist. And to no good purpose. Life is drudgery, and increasingly so, as the years fly past.

But two thousand years ago a bright star arose over tiny Bethlehem to protest such a despairing view of life. As it sparkled in the desert night, some took notice, pondering its significance. By following it to an obscure manger, they found their own. They drew near to warm themselves at the radiant glory which enveloped the little newborn on the straw. This **Great Light** had come at last to dispel the darkness and meaninglessness of human life.

The special glow experienced at Christmas Season transcends all gift giving and family festivity. It is something more, a cosmic celebration which unites us in spirit and praise with that first tiny band of worshippers who discovered on that ancient night that people have significance *only* if God gives it to them. The presence of the Christ Child is the tangible evidence—for them and for us—that God has actually **done so!**

The “unreachable” God has reached us.

The shimmering, Bethlehem Star over that ancient stable dramatizes God’s act of penetrating the darkness of human existence. “He loved the world. . . . He gave his Son.” And if human life is without significance and value, as Mark Twain suggests, God would hardly have bothered. But He did. He “bothered” to the point of total identification with humanity as a real flesh and blood man.

The heart of the Christmas message is one of affirming human worth and the exquisite price God paid to prove it—the death of His dear Son. Every day, every Sunday, every Christmas, with bread and cup, millions of believers . . . remember and remember. “Lament them a day and forget them forever?” Impossible! His life and death give meaning to our own. We remember . . . and rejoice . . . and our lives are filled with meaning as we continue to warm ourselves at the hearth of His cheerful and abiding presence.

God bless you as we celebrate His birth this year!

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The First Christmas Wreath

A sure sign of the approaching Christmas Season is the appearance of brightly colored wreaths which adorn the front doors of countless dwellings around the world. These gaily decorated reminders get us ready to commemorate again the wondrous birth of Christ our Savior.

Christmas is a time of warmth and celebration. A blazing

fireplace, the smell of pine, a brightly lit tree with gifts spilling out in every direction, the sense of families drawing closer, shining smiles of eager youngsters—these and a myriad of other personal touches and traditions make this a most special time of the year.

But ironically, this joyous season becomes also a time of stress and dread for many. Stress and dread caused by endless traffic and irritating crowds, financial tensions, anxiety in the choice and cost of gifts for others, fractured families who shuttle children back and forth and spend more time awkwardly carving up a schedule than they do the turkey, Roloids and ruined toys, traffic deaths and body counts, loneliness, alienation, depression, and fatigue.

Such is the bitter/sweet nature of Christmas. And yet these very feelings of lostness and despair are what Christmas is really all about. Because its celebration flows out of divine consolation. Little Immanuel has come to identify Himself with a fallen humanity. To share our pain and give us hope.

He was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. . . . As a teenager He experienced the death of Joseph, His human father. As eldest son He knew backbreaking labor and the weight of the responsibility to provide for His household. His ministry and mission were misunderstood by His loved ones. He faced the humiliating accusation of illegitimacy all of His life. And accepted His betrayal by a friend. He patiently bore the hostility and the taunts of His enemies, and also the injustice of being wrongly accused. He humbly submitted to arrest, torture, and the cruelest of deaths. He died of a broken heart.

“Sure He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” says the Prophet Isaiah. “We do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weakness, but one who has been tested in all ways as we are,” notes the writer of the book of Hebrews. He understands. He lived as we live. He died and rose again

that we might *really* live. Christmas, then, is a celebration of life for God's people, a time of triumphant rejoicing and praise. We can wholeheartedly do so because *our Savior has come*. His suffering has brought freedom and hope to us all.

Why can we celebrate each year with the Christmas wreath? Because He *wore* the **first one—a crown of thorns**.

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Jonah in the Whale – An Actual Event Pointed to by Jesus Christ

Probe founder Jimmy Williams considers the question: was Jonah a real man experiencing real events or is it an allegorical story? Upon examining Jesus' use of the book, the testimony of first century commentators, and the characteristics of modern day whales and fish, he concludes that Jonah is a record of actual events.

The book of Jonah—is it history, allegory, or romance? Was he really swallowed by a great fish as Scripture records? Or was he even a real person? Did he really go to Nineveh and preach so effectively that an entire city repented and escaped divine judgment? These are important questions that not only involve the integrity of Scripture, but that of our Lord Jesus Christ, who referred to Jonah as a real person.

Like the Sadducees of Jesus' day who rejected all things "miraculous" (Remember their question posed to Jesus about the woman who married seven brothers one after the other and their

concern about whose wife she would be in the resurrection in Luke 20:33?), modern scholars have had a field day with this book. Here is an example:

The Book of Jonah is unlike any of the other prophetic books in that it is not primarily a record of the utterances of the prophet. Rather it is a short story, clearly fictional. The hallmarks of fiction rest in its anachronisms and its elements of fantasy. . . . Since the book is fiction, it would be best to consider the “great fish” an element of fantasy, a mythological monster, and let it go at that. . . . Popularly, Jonah’s fish is considered to have been a whale. . . . If it was a whale that swallowed Jonah, then we are left with the fact that the only type of whale with a throat large enough to swallow a man is the sperm whale. . . . Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean and, in the course of nature, it is completely unlikely that a man should be swallowed by one there, or still further, survive three days and nights of incarceration. . . . All difficulties disappear, however, if it is remembered that the Book of Jonah is a fantasy.{1}

Always keep in mind that a large proportion of all modern criticism of the Bible comes from one philosophical presupposition: **miracles do not occur**. Locked into this naturalistic view of reality, it is not surprising that skeptical theologians encounter difficulties throughout the Bible. Given their premise, every miracle in Scripture must be explained away by either tacit rejection, in in the previous quotation, or by giving the “miracle” some feasible, naturalistic explanation. Their attempts to accomplish this throughout the Bible are often so ludicrous, varied, and contradictory, that we turn with relief back to the Bible, preferring the miraculous to the ridiculous!

This always reminds me of the illustration Dr. Norman Geisler alludes to in his many debates: A man visited a psychiatrist

to share a problem which greatly concerned him.

"Doctor, I have a terrible problem."

"Please tell me about it," said the doctor.

"Well, I believe that I am dead."

"Hmmm, that is a heavy concern. May I ask you a question?"

"Of course," replied the man.

"Do you believe that dead men bleed?"

"Of course not. That's preposterous," said the patient.

The psychiatrist reached over and picked up a long hat pin, took the man's hand, and pricked his finger with it. As the blood began to flow, the man stared at his finger and exclaimed, "Well, what do you know! Dead men bleed after all!"

The real question is not, "Are miracles possible?" but rather, **"Does God Exist?"**

The Bible declares that "With God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Those who prefer this presupposition (and there is good reason to prefer it) acknowledge that God has, and can activate, for His Sovereign purposes, the prerogative to intervene, to override the natural laws of the universe created by His Hand.

Historical Considerations

Jonah 1:1 declares, "The word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai."

Is there any other biblical evidence that Jonah was a real person? Yes. In 2 Kings 14:25 we read, "He (king Jeroboam II of Israel) restored the coast of Israel from the entering of Hamath unto the sea of the plain, according to the word of the Lord God of Israel, which he spake by the hand of His servant Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet which was by (from) Gath-hepher."

Here we discover that Jonah gave a prophetic word concerning this king, Jeroboam, the greatest and longest-reigning monarch

of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. Substantial archeological data has been recovered concerning Jeroboam (II) from the city of Samaria (the royal Capital of the Northern Kingdom) and Megiddo, including a jasper seal by Schumacher and inscribed, "Shema, servant of Jeroboam." {2}

The reference in 2 Kings also informs us as to the time Jonah lived and ministered. It is thought by some that Jonah may have been numbered among the "schools of the prophets" and was a contemporary of Elisha the Prophet (eighth century B.C.)

With respect to the narrative itself, there is no indication within it, nor among any of the early Judaic traditions that would suggest that it is not historical. Interestingly enough, during the third century B.C., the time which most modern critics assert the book of Jonah was composed, we discover one of the fourteen books of the Apocrypha, the Book of Tobit, makes mention of Jonah. The Apocryphal books are those included in the Catholic Bible but not in the Protestant Bible. They were early considered "suspect" for one reason or another and were not regarded by the Jews as canonical. However, they do have historical and literary merit for biblical studies. Tobit, addressing death-bed comments to his son, Tobias, says: "Go into Media, my child; for I surely believe all the things which **Jonah the prophet spake of Nineveh**, that it shall be overthrown." {3}

Two Jewish writers of the first century A.D., Philo, the philosopher, and Josephus, the historian, also consider Jonah to be an historical book. And one of the most prominent biblical scenes found in the Catacombs of Rome is of Jonah and his Fish . . . no doubt for the hope of resurrection symbolized by the book, and confirmed by Christ.

Jesus

In Matthew 12:39-40 Jesus says, "An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign; and there shall no sign be

given to it but the sign of the prophet Jonas; for as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whales's belly, so shall the son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

Here Jesus refers to Jonah and his experience as historical. Critics have offered the explanation, based on their "no miracles" presupposition, that Jesus (actually aware that it was really a myth) merely *accommodated* Himself to the naïve perspective of His first century, unsophisticated hearers, as someone might refer to King Lear or Don Quixote.

But this is not the *only* mention of Jonah by our Lord. He goes on to say in Matthew 12 about Nineveh: "The men of Nineveh shall stand up with *this* generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because *they* repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (v. 41).

Here Jesus is comparing and linking the real people listening to His words ("this generation") with the generation of Jonah's day and foresees the Day when both groups will be evaluated and *judged* on the basis of how they responded to the divine light given them in their day! The *context* does not allow an inference that one generation is parabolic and the other historical. It does not allow for the "accommodation" theory of the modern critics. With these words in Matthew 12, Christ clearly confirms the historicity of the book of Jonah.

Whale or Fish?

The Bible doesn't say that Jonah was swallowed by a whale. Only the King James Version of 1611 does that. Jonah 1:17 says "God prepared a great fish (*dag gadol*)," not a great whale. And the Matthew passage (12:40) in Greek refers to the animal as a "sea monster" (*ketos*), not a whale. It may or may not have been a whale. Let's explore the possibilities, beginning with the question of "*Could* it happen?" Are there marine creatures capable of swallowing a human being?

Whales

There are two basic types of whales if differentiated by their mouth and throat structures: *baleen*, and *non-baleen* (toothed whales).

Baleen whales are by far the most numerous species in the oceans and include the Blue, Gray, Humpback, and Right (Bowhead). All of these whales are distinguished by the presence of a baleen “curtain” or “strainer” in their mouths. They have a very small throat (like a funnel) and feed by straining krill, plankton, and small crustaceans as they swim through the water with their mouths open. It would be impossible for any of these whales to swallow a human, so they can be ruled out.

The “toothed” whales can be given some consideration. These include the dolphin, porpoise, Beluga, Narwhal, Orca (Killer whale), none of which is large enough to swallow a whole human being, and the Sperm whale, which definitely *is*.

The Sperm whale is the largest of the toothed whales, adult males measuring over sixty feet in length (walk into your garage and multiply the length by four!). They are most prominent in the Pacific Ocean, but not unknown in the Atlantic and a favorite of Norwegian whalers. This whale’s diet consists of giant squid, large sea-bottom and mid-water sharks, skates, and fishes.{4}

The Sperm whale has a *huge* capacity in its gullet to store food. In his book, *Sixty-three Years of Engineering*, Sir Francis Fox tells of a manager of a whaling station who indicates that the whale can “swallow lumps of food eight feet in diameter, and that in one of these whales they actually found ‘the skeleton of a shark sixteen feet in length.’”{5}

In the *Daily Mail* of December 14th, 1928, Mr. G. H. Henn, a resident of Birmingham, England recounted the following story:

My own experience . . . about twenty-five years ago, when the carcass of a whale was displayed for a week on vacant land in Navigation Street, outside New Street station . . . I was one of twelve men, who went into its mouth, passed through its throat, and moved about in what was equivalent to a fair-sized room. It's throat was large enough to serve as a door. Obviously it would be quite easy for a whale of this kind to swallow a man."{6}

This could only have been a sperm whale. On the coast of England, Mr. Frank Bullen in his book, *The Cruise of the Cachalot* (another name for the Sperm whale), notes that the *sperm whale always ejects the contents of its stomach when dying*. He himself witnessed such an incident and described the huge masses of regurgitated contents, estimating their size as about "eight feet by six feet into six feet, the total equal to the bodies of six stout men compressed into one!"{7}

It is argued that Sperm whales are not found in the Mediterranean. But who is to say that was the case 2800 years ago? There are a lot of marine creatures not found today due to the intense, world-wide fishing pressure of the past 300 years. If a Sperm whale beached itself on the west coast of England in this century, who's to say a Sperm whale might not have found its way into the Mediterranean? We know all whales migrate toward warm water to bear their young. One would also suspect that if a Sperm whale did find itself east of Gibraltar, it probably would not fare well in the shallower depths and could well be very hungry! [One story has circulated for years about the whale ship *Star of the East*, which lost a sailor named James Bartley. The story is that he was swallowed by a large sperm whale, and found alive inside the whale's stomach when it was killed and brought aboard. Mr. Bartley was found unconscious and with his skin bleached by the whale's gastric acid, but alive nonetheless. We have just discovered that this is, regrettably, an urban legend, and therefore cannot be used to support our argument. Here is a

link to the debunking of this urban legend:
<http://www.ship-of-fools.com/Myths/04Myth.html>]

Other Prospects

Baxter also notes a more recent incident:

We have come across the following news-item in the Madras (India) *Mail* of November 28th, 1946:

Bombay, November 26. – A twelve-foot tiger shark, weighing 700 lbs., was dragged ashore last evening at the Sasson Docks. When the shark was cut open a skeleton and a man's clothes were found. It is thought that the victim may have been one of those lost at sea during the recent cyclone. The shark was caught by fishermen thirty miles from Bombay.

The Tiger is a medium-size shark. The Great White is much larger, over thirty feet in length and weighing four tons. This shark has attacked swimmers all along the Atlantic seaboard on both sides of the ocean.

Which bring us to another important point: It is possible that Jonah actually *did* die. There are several indications in chapter 2 (vs. 2, 5, 6). There are also several miracles recorded in this book: God preparing the great fish, the hearts of the people of Nineveh, the gourd plant, the east wind. If Jonah did die in chapter 2, another miracle involving his resuscitation after the watery sojourn would not be anymore difficult for God to perform than the other miracles in the book. God chides Abraham when he doubts a child could come forth from the deadness of Sarah's womb and says, "Is anything too difficult for the Lord?" (Gen. 18:14). In Genesis or Jonah the answer is the same: "No."

If Jonah actually did die, this simply records one more person among the several in Scripture who were resuscitated for God's intended purpose, and it makes Jonah a still more remarkable

type of Christ and His resurrection . . . which is without a doubt the *main* reason this little book is included in the Sacred Canon!

The main *personal* application of the Book of Jonah is simply this: **Before God can *use* the prophet, He must first *break* the prophet!**

“And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm strengthen, and establish you. . . . Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time.” (1 Pet. 5:10, 6).

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Education: The Three-Legged Stool

In the late 80's when the Communist walls were coming down in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, columnist Jack Anderson commented: “I don't mean to minimize the Soviet danger, but while spending trillions of dollars on the military, we've completely neglected our economic defenses, while the Japanese have been assaulting our economic citadel . . . Japan is a nation of engineers and producers. We're a nation of lawyers and consumers. Japan sacrifices today for tomorrow. And we sacrifice tomorrow for today.”

After the Revolutions, the possibility of armed aggression (time will tell) upon the U. S. seems at present even more remote than Anderson noted. But the second part of his comment focuses upon the present concerns of the Clinton

Administration and others with respect to America's flagging educational endeavors. That is, we are told we must upgrade learning at all levels so we might again compete economically with Japan and the European Community and reclaim our "rightful" place as "Number 1" in the world.

Competition is a healthy thing to a point. But I submit that whatever Herculean measures undertaken by educational agencies might actually produce the mathematicians, engineers, and scientists needed to bring us back up to global "par," we would still be woefully short of proper educational goals for the nation. The educational crisis of the 90's has shown to be a supreme failure, as it is driven mostly by economic concerns, ignoring Jesus' reminder that man simply cannot live by bread alone. We must therefore insist that the educational establishment do something beyond cranking out human "hardware"—graduates who perform acceptably in the market place in the production of competitive goods and services, but have chests with no hearts.

It is one thing to teach young Americans how to make a living; it is quite another to teach them how to live. This is the "software" part of the educational process. The tension between intellectual and moral development in educating the young is as old as civilization. Aristotle spoke keenly to this point in the fourth century B.C. when he said,

"Intellectual virtue is for the most part produced and increased by instruction, and therefore requires experience and time; whereas moral or ethical virtue is the product of habit The virtues we acquire by first having practiced them, just as we do the arts. It is therefore not of small moment whether we are trained from childhood in one set of habits, or another; on the contrary it is of very great, or rather of supreme, importance."

The real question educationists must answer was posed by Jack

Fraenkel: "It appears important to consider, therefore, whether we want values to develop in students accidentally or whether we intend to deliberately influence their value development in directions we consider desirable." It goes without saying that the "values clarification" approach of today never intends to accomplish the latter, and there is no guarantee that even the former is being achieved among today's young!

Our Founding Fathers faced clearly the necessity of providing an educational experience that encompassed both the cognitive and moral spheres. As early as 1787, Congress passed the Northwest Ordinance, setting aside land for educational purposes with these words: "Religion, morality, and knowledge being essential to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

This three-legged stool upon which children could learn and a vibrant, strong society could be built encompassed the inter-relatedness and necessary cooperation of the church, the home, and the school. Sadly, today the "stool" is largely missing a couple of legs. And the third (public education) has assigned to itself (with our increasing encouragement) the task of providing all three! This is neither possible, nor is it desirable. By its very nature, pluralistic public education dictates a methodological approach that of necessity dilutes religious and moral teaching to abstract speculation with no direction or call for personal commitment to a point of view. Rather, the goal is simply that everyone should *have* a point of view! The paralysis of this approach with respect to religion and moral values spills over to the knowledge "leg" as well. Deprived of metaphysical and moral certitude, information proliferates and expands like so much pizza dough; it is swung wildly around classrooms, but it won't stick to anything!

No wonder learning is such a chore, such uninteresting,

laborious work for our sons and daughters. Bombarded with information, many youngsters face life on “perpetual overload,” stunted and numbed in the process because they lack the intellectual, skeletal framework upon which they can separate and arrange the truly important from the trivial.

We who have children must increasingly look to ourselves to remedy this situation. And we are in good company. Most of the best education throughout history has not occurred in public educational arenas. It has emerged from the hearts of caring parents who refuse to sacrifice their children upon the altars of popular educational notions and experiments. Dr. Ronald Nash’s penetrating analysis of this struggle in *The Closing of the American Heart* charts a path that you and I can follow in identifying the real roots of the American educational crisis and what to do about it.

“And these words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. . . . And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. And shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”
Deuteronomy 6:6-9

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From Fig Leaves to Fur Coats

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys don’t!” is one of the greatest conceptual heresies today. Probably most of us at one time or another have undergone the ordeal of

having a Sunday school teacher point a bony finger at us and carp away at our inappropriate conduct, warning us of the ultimate outcome of such behavior.

This Santa Claus mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice,” to “find out who’s naughty or nice.” The conclusion we are supposed to reach is that our good deeds and our bad deeds are being placed on the divine scales and will be weighed at the time of our physical death to see if we go “up” or “down.” This suggested approach to God is diametrically opposed to that which Jesus affirmed as the right approach.

The most righteous men of Jesus’ day were the Pharisees. In order to be a Pharisee, you had to be “Mr. Clean.” The Pharisees knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day, and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and exposed their spiritual bankruptcy to the thronging crowds with such statements as, “Except your righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter the Kingdom of God”(Matthew 5:20).

“The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment: “You mean the Pharisees aren’t righteous enough to make it? If they can’t make it, who can?”

What a moment in history! A radical young man dares to suggest that the most righteous and moral men of the ancient Jewish community are not righteous enough to make themselves presentable before God. In fact, Jesus said they were hypocrites! He informed them they were wrong to claim they were righteous enough to assume that all was well between them and their Maker. When you are well, you don’t need a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick.

Jesus was pressing the Pharisees to be honest with themselves

when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:13).

A Mildewed Fig

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! Most of us don't know what sin really is, nor do we understand what a sinner is. A sinner is one who has violated the law of God.

Many assert that they try to live by the Ten Commandments, or by some other rule of life. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers that we have violated these standards at some point. These codes of behavior are to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the condition of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only *reveal* to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us of sin.

The Pharisee looked at the Law and then at his life and said, "I'm well." Jesus desired them to come up with exactly the opposite conclusion. A person must know he needs help before he will seek it. Everyone has this sin disease. Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in humans. There is a great deal of good. The point is merely that this relative human goodness is unacceptable to God.

In Russia they print and circulate rubles, and with those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill and buy things in the shops. But if you took those rubles across the Atlantic Ocean and brought them to America, they would be worthless currency.

Debased Coinage

So it is with our characters, our lives. . . all that we have outside of Christ. A person may be a millionaire in character,

and that might buy him a high position in this world, but when he crosses the great divide between this life and the next, his character is a debased coinage, and God in His Holiness cannot accept it at all.

It is important than individual comprehends the fact that there are *two* kinds of righteousness. There is a righteousness of men, and a righteousness of God. The apostle Paul, who was a Pharisee, finally recognized these two distinct types of righteousness when he said that the desire of his life was to “be found in Him, not having my *own* righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9).

He saw clearly the predicament of his Jewish brethren when he wrote with a broken heart to the Romans, “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for god, but not according to knowledge. For being ignorant of *God’s* righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (Romans 10:1-4).

Failing “Home Economics 101”

In the Old Testament account of Adam and Eve, there is a vivid imagery of these two kinds of righteousness. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they hid in the bushes in shame. They took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to clothe themselves with some kind of garment or covering. God came walking in the cool of the garden, desiring His regular fellowship with them, but Adam was in the bushes with Eve. . .flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the flimsy, pathetic clusters of fig leaves which had been hastily sewn together by the guilty couple, and in short, thoroughly censored their effort.

The account goes on to say that God took animals and made garments from their skins for Adam and Eve. While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very beginning that man, in his own efforts, does not have the ability to make himself presentable before God.

It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver... trying to clothe himself ... but the silkworm's activity spins him a shroud."

So it is with man. Philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, or any other system which seeks to gain the approval of God is the "fig leaf" approach. This was the error of those fellow Israelites for whom Paul grieved, those who were trying to establish their own righteousness, without recognizing that another kind of righteousness was available them by faith: ". . .and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, lest any man should boast"(Ephesians 2:8,9). "Works" righteousness is what religion is all about. Works righteousness is spelled "**DO!**" "Faith" righteousness is what Christianity is all about. Faith righteousness is spelled "**DONE!**" Jesus cried triumphantly from the cross, "It is finished!" The work which the Father had given Him to do was completed at the cross. A bridge, a way of access—by His sacrificial death—had been constructed between God and man, and it was now open for business.

That is why the cross is so important to each individual. If one can find God through his own efforts and good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake at Calvary. He allowed His Son to die a substitutionary death for the world that was not truly needed. The choices of approaching God are then left to each person. One can accept the death of Christ on his behalf, or he must pay with his own death. How presumptuous for anyone to think himself qualified to provide salvation for himself when the standard each must meet is God's perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that no one can reach it. The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one

mile deep. The world's record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 Olympics, is 29' 4 ".

Yet the chances of a man jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than the chance of a man establishing fellowship with God through his own efforts.

A "God-Original"

What God has to offer is *free*. It is a gift which is not deserved by any man, nor could any man ever *repay* what the gift is worth. Man has been dealt with in grace and love. The only thing that man is asked to do is acknowledge that he has broken the laws of God, to acknowledge that God made things right through His son at the cross, and accept His forgiveness.

He is requested to lay aside his own fig-leaf garment and to be clothed with a "God-original" garment made possible by the slaying of the Lamb. God wants to clothe every person with the righteousness of *Christ*.

This is what Jesus was referring to in a parable concerning a wedding feast which a king was having for his son: "So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad*: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, Friend, how come you are here not having a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the King to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!'" (Matthew 22:1-13).

In a society where the hue and cry is "take it off³take it all off," it is ironic that God is saying the very same thing. He does not want us to cover ourselves—to hide what we really are. He wants us to acknowledge what we are and accept with a

thankful heart what He has provided in Christ.

As a gracious Host, He stands there holding the most costly garment in the universe—the righteousness of Jesus Christ—and He eagerly desires to wrap *you* up in it, safe and warm and happy and secure:

“I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation. He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels” (Isaiah 61:10)

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“Isn’t the Old Testament Just a Rip-Off of Older Tales From Other Cultures?”

Dear Mr. Williams,

I’m curious on your thoughts toward the common charge that the Old Testament did nothing more than rip off older tales from other cultures. Have you read the *Genesis of Justice*? I’m very curious on your thoughts, Sir. . .

Thank you for your recent e-mail. Let me try to give you a little background on this question and then offer an explanation.

It is true that there are some documents relating to events

recorded in Genesis which **predate** the projected time of the writing of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), commonly known among the Jews as the ***Torah***.

By way of background, first of all, we must acknowledge that the Hebrew Old Testament is an ancient Semitic book and bore a close relationship to the environment out of which it came. The setting for the first eleven chapters of Genesis, which record the primeval history of mankind, is laid in "the cradle of civilization," the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley (part of the Fertile Crescent). Archaeologists and Anthropologists all agree that here we find the first and earliest major civilization.

The controversy surrounding the question you have asked came about with (1) the discovery and decipherment of the Babylonian- Assyrian cuneiform script in 1835, and (2) the subsequent excavations at Nineveh (the ancient capital) between 1848 and 1876, which yielded various clay tablets which made up the Library of Ashurbanipal (668-626 B.C.) Among them were seven tablets of the great Creation Epic known as "*Enuma Elish*," or "When Above." Although these tablets date to the 7th century B.C., they were composed much earlier in the days of Hammurabi (1728-1676 B.C.). Also found at the same site was "*The Epic of Gilgamesh*" which incorporates an account of the Flood. There are other resemblances to Genesis 1-11 as well, but these are the two main ones. And there is no question that these documents came **before** the writing of the Semitic Pentateuch. There is also no question that there is a relationship between these two traditions, but there are both *similarities* and stark *differences*.

In the **creation story** they are similar in that both accounts (1) know a time when the earth was "waste and void", (2) have a similar *order of events* in creation, and (3) show a predilection for the number seven.

They are very *different*, however, in that one account is (1)

intensely *polytheistic*, the other strictly *monotheistic*; (2) and one account confounds *spirit* and *matter*, while the other carefully *distinguishes* between these two concepts. Merrill Unger says,

As a result of this salient difference in the basic concept of deity, the religious ideas of the two accounts are completely divergent. The Babylonian story is on a low mythological plane with a sordid conception of deity. . . .The great gods themselves plot and fight against one another.

Genesis, in striking contrast, is lofty and sublime. The one God, supreme and omnipotent, is in superb control of all the creatures and elements of the universe. . . . the crude polytheism of the Babylonian creation stories mars the record with successive generations of deities of both sexes. . . .(producing) a confusing and contradictory plurality of creators. (Archaeology and the Old Testament, pp.32-33).

I have just been reading Augustine's *City of God*. The first half of the book (about 300 pages) addresses this same difference: the many Graeco-Roman gods, and the One True God:

We, however, seek for a mind which, trusting to true religion, does not adore the world as its god, but for the sake of God praises the world as a work of God, and purified from mundane defilements, comes pure to God Himself Who founded the world. . . . But if any one insists that he worships the one true God—that is, the Creator of every soul and of every body—with stupid and monstrous idols, with human victims, with putting a wreath on the male organ, with wages of unchastity, with the cutting of limbs, with emasculation, with the consecration of the effeminate, with impure and obscene plays, such a one does not sin because he worships One Who ought not to be worshipped, but because he worships Him Who ought to be worshipped in a way in which He ought not to be worshipped. (VII., Chapters 26 & 27)

Augustine goes on to say that there was ONE nation—among all of the other nations—which gave testimony of this God through unique religious thought and practice: the *Hebrews*. (VII., Chapter 32). This is truly remarkable, historically, and I believe is a strong argument in support of Genesis over the Sumerian/Assyrian/Babylonian tradition. I will give another reason shortly, but let me turn to the Flood Stories.

Like the Creation Accounts, the Biblical and Babylonian *Flood Accounts* contain similarities and differences. Both accounts:

- Hold that the deluge was divinely planned;
- Agree that the impending catastrophe was divinely revealed to the hero;
- Connect the reason for the deluge with the corruption of the human race;
- Say that the hero was divinely instructed to build a huge boat to preserve life;
- Tell of the deliverance of the hero and his family;
- Acknowledge the physical causes of the flood
- Mention the duration of the flood;
- Include similar, striking details,
- Describe acts of worship after deliverance and the bestowing of special blessings.

The contrasts, or differences, include: A radical contrast (1) in their *theological* conceptions (Genesis attributes the Flood to an infinitely holy, wise and all-powerful God, while the Babylonian describes a multitude of disagreement—quarreling, self-accusing deities, who crouch in fear “like dogs”); (2) in their *moral* conceptions (Genesis presents the Flood as a divine, moral judgment, while the Babylonian account portrays mixed standards of conduct on the part of the deities, a hazy view of sin, and the result of the caprice of the gods; (3) and in their *philosophical* conceptions (one of speculation confusing spirit and matter, finite and infinite, and ignorance of the first principles of causation. The Genesis account has no such ambiguity).

Now what can we make of all this? First, it is extremely unlikely that the Babylonians borrowed from the Genesis account. The relative dating of historical events will not allow it. And so we must concede that the Hebrews (Moses) were aware of these events and **may** have incorporated them into the Genesis account, either through direct knowledge of the Babylonian literature, or through oral transmission. Which leads us to a third alternative, namely, **that both the Biblical and Babylonian accounts go back to a common source of fact, originating from actual, historical occurrences!**

If the Genesis account is recording actual, historical events, then we should find some evidence of that across the world. Do we? Yes. Cosmologies from primitive and distant parts of the globe (Micronesians, Eskimos, New World Indians, Scythians, Celts, Australian Aborigines) contain stories about Creation and the Deluge. There are some 150 flood accounts across the world recording many of the things mentioned above (notwithstanding that the accounts become more inaccurate the farther away they are geographically from the Fertile Crescent).

The Babylonian accounts may antedate the writing of Genesis, but there appears to have been a strong, world-wide oral tradition concerning these events which preceded even their accounts created at the time of Hammurabi early in the Second Millenium B.C.

We also must focus on the entire question of inspiration of the Biblical documents. There is no question that these final, written records which now make up our Old and New Testaments were revealed, recorded (written down), and preserved by a Divine Hand. In answering the above question, we must come back to either deny or affirm that God, in His own time, and in His own way, made Himself and His redemptive plan known to us (Hebrews 1:1). The purpose of both testaments was to demonstrate His holiness and justice, as well as His love and grace, and how He brought about Reconciliation for those of us

who believe and accept His provision by faith.

The startling thing to me is the absolute **uniqueness** of the Judeo-Christian God in comparison with all of the bizarre alternatives we still find throughout all the world and throughout all of history. That uniqueness helps me to make my decision to trust the Genesis account rather than some other:

What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things; and He made from one every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should see God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and have our being. . . (Acts 17:24-28).

Hope this helps answer your question.

Jimmy Williams

Founder, Probe Ministries

Thank you, Sir. Well written. I really appreciate the response. I've read about the Flood stories that are prevalent throughout history which seems really interesting (obviously something happened). But how do we know there wasn't simply a great flood and these stories were made by common folk (or even the leaders of the time) and written down as their own interpretation? Curious, _____.

Glad you received the information. With respect to your question in this e-mail, I think the main issue is the

widespread, global awareness of this event. Obviously the “tale was told” from generation to generation. The fact that it is present and widely-distributed among the folklore of so many cultures in describing their “distant past would argue for a real, historical basis. Sometimes this was handed down through oral tradition, and sometimes written. The fact that certain “particulars” vary in the accounts would indicate **some** interpretive innovations (this is to be expected) as the story moved on, but there is a basic “core” that seems to be consistently preserved, though some details are altered, or embellished.

There is no doubt that, sometime in the remote past, there was a gigantic flood. Theologians still argue as to whether it was global or local. What we **do** know, however, is that a very high percentage (I’m guessing at least 80%) of the earth’s crust is *sedimentary* rock; that is, rock that was formed by the pressure and weight of *water*.

Warm Regards,

Jimmy

“I Find the Argument for a Wednesday Crucifixion Most Compelling”

I receive the Probe-Alert and read an interesting response to another email: [“If Jesus Was Crucified on Friday, How Was He Dead for Three Nights?”](#) I use a Dake’s Bible and although I try to keep an open mind when studying his (Finis Dake) interpretations, I thought his explanation of the Wednesday

crucifixion was quite compelling. Dake refers to many verses in support of his interpretation. I will endeavor to include as many of the pertinent ones (admittedly my opinion) as possible. If you have access to a Dake's Bible, the references are included beside each verse.

Matt. 27:63 – "...after three days I will rise again."

This shows how the Jews understood the three days and three nights of Matt. 12:40

Lev. 23:7

This verse refers to the special Sabbath two days before the weekly Sabbath.

Mat. 12:40 "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly, so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."

John 19:31 "...for that Sabbath day was an high day."

This is another reference to the special Sabbath.

Luke 9:22

Although this verse merely says that He will be raised on the third day, Dake gives another perspective on the three full days and three full nights interpretation:

- When days and nights are both mentioned, then it cannot be parts of three days, but full days and nights (Ester 4:16 with 5:1; 1 Sam. 30:12 with 13; Jonah 1:17 with Mat. 12:40). See also Rev. 11:9-11.
- The Jews understood Christ to mean "after three days" or three full days and three full nights (Matt. 27:63), hence the soldiers had orders to guard the tomb at least that long.
- It was the custom to mourn for the dead three full days and nights, called "days of weeping," which were followed by four "days of lamentation," thus making seven days (Gen. 27:41;

50:10; 1 Sam. 31:13; Job 2:13). According to rabbinical notion the spirit wandered about the sepulchre for three days hoping to re-enter the body, but when corruption set in the spirit left. This was believed to be on the fourth day when the loud lamentations began. Hence, on the fourth day Lazarus was supposed to stink (John 11:39).

- Herodotus testifies that embalmment did not take place until after three days when the spirit was supposed to be gone (Herod. ii. 86-89). This is why the women were taking sweet spices to anoint Jesus (Mk. 16:1; Lk. 24:1)

- The Jews did not accept evidence as to the identification of a dead body after three days, for corruption took place quickly in the East. Hence, this period of three full days and three full nights was wanted by God, so as to preclude all doubt that death had actually taken place, and shut out all suggestion that Christ might have been in a trance. Jews would legally have to conclude His death, should He remain dead the full three days and three nights.

Thank you for your e-mail.

As you may know there is some controversy/discussion about Passover meal and whether it was celebrated Wednesday night, or Thursday night, and some evidence which argues for both days.

I am inclined to agree with the full three days, and the Wednesday night theory.

I appreciate your sending this information (some of which I already have) and your nice summary.

If you go with Thursday, you just have to accept the fact that the Lord was in the tomb some PORTION of three days (Friday, Saturday, and Sunday).

As far as theology and/or interpretation is concerned, either (in my judgment) is acceptable since the rudimentary facts of the death, burial, and resurrection are not affected.

Warm Regards,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

“Did Stalin Have a Deathbed Conversion? What About Trotsky?”

I am trying to check the validity of the following material. I came across one of your articles on the Web and thought you may be able to comment. I am not expecting you to research this, but just if you happen to know would you mind responding? It would be a help.

Question 1. The statement “Religion is a crutch for the weak. . .” and various variants of it I had heard attributed to Joseph Stalin. Do you know if this is correct. Or was it Marx? I know Marx penned the famous “Religion is the opiate of the masses,” but who is generally attributed as the author of the first quote. Possibly it was just a common atheist saying and thus picked up by most of the communists.

Question 2. I recall hearing it said that Stalin close to his death had said, “I cannot escape the overwhelming feeling that I am about to be cast into an ocean of the blood of the lives I have destroyed,” or words to this effect. Do you know whether this is correctly attributed to Stalin, or was it

another?

Question 3. I also recall reading somewhere that one of the old communists (again I thought it was Stalin) was the son of a Jewish father who upon moving to a new city changed to attending the Lutheran church, telling his son it was better for business. This contributed to the son rejecting God and adopting a strongly atheistic world view.

I am afraid I can't help you from my memory on these quotes. On #1, I know that Stalin attended an Orthodox Christian School for ten years. He was kicked out of seminary for his radical Marxist views. I checked the *Oxford Book of Quotations*, but found nothing there. I have heard the quote about religion being a "crutch" mentioned many times, but I have never related this to Stalin.

On Questions #2 let me offer the following: I am not inclined to think Stalin made this statement of regret. I found these words about Stalin's deathbed scene, as described by his daughter, Svetlana, in Allen Bullock's *Hitler and Stalin*. She says:

"The death agony was terrible. God grants an easy death only to the just. He literally choked to death as we watched. At what seemed like the very last moment he suddenly opened his eyes and cast a glance over everyone in the room. It was a terrible glance, insane or perhaps angry and full of fear of death. . . Then something incomprehensible and terrible happened that to this day I can't forget. . . He suddenly lifted his left hand as though he were pointing to something up above and bring down a curse on us all. The gesture was incomprehensible and full of menace. . . The next moment, after a final effort, the spirit wrenched itself free of the flesh."

Bullock immediately adds,

“Like Hitler, Stalin preserved his image of himself intact to the end, without retraction or regret. Both men died defying their enemies.” (pg. 968).

With regard to #3, my first guess would be Trotsky. He was the son of a Russian Jew who settled in Ukraine, and there Trotsky was educated (Odessa on the Black Sea). His real name was Lev Bronstein. He took the name “Trotsky” at a time when he needed a forged passport to continue his underground activities undetected. I would start looking at his life first.

Hope this helps.

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries

“What Is the ‘Sin Unto Death’?” [Jimmy Williams]

I have always been puzzled with 1 John 5:16-17 and the meaning of the “sin unto death.” Can you explain exactly what John is referring to?

16 If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it.

17 All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death.

I would really appreciate any help you can give me on this.

Thank you for your e-mail and your concerns about “the sin unto death” mentioned in 1 John 5:16-17.

Let me see if I can give you an acceptable answer to your question. In doing so, we will first have to explore a number of factors which come from the Bible. Let me begin with a passage from Hebrews 12:

“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord. . . Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . “All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet. . .” (Heb. 12:5-13).

Whether we are reading the Old Testament or the New, we find that God is at work to create a family for His own pleasure, a company of sons and daughters who will commune with and look to Him for love, provision, guidance, and consolation. In the Gospel of John, chapters 1 and 3 make it clear that when we place our faith in Jesus Christ to be our Savior Who, through His death, can make us presentable to God, we join the family of God through a new spiritual birth and thus embark upon our personal Christian pilgrimage which ends on the day we die.

As newborns in this family, we are admonished by the Word to “Grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18), and “as newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may *grow* in respect to salvation” (1 Pet. 2:2).

All children, physical and spiritual, undergo a process of development which involves time. The theological term for this

process is “sanctification,” which means the **Christian life**. Along the way, as we saw above in the Hebrews passage, we observe that God, like any good father, disciplines us appropriately when necessary. The goal is *training*, not *punishment*. This training process may occur through circumstances we encounter, and which God allows, or it can come through knowledge of the Bible:

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16,17).

We have a vivid example of this process in the Apostle Paul’s life. He describes it this way:

“And because of the surpassing abundance of (my) revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself... Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness’” (2 Cor. 12:7-9).

We don’t have a clear picture what this “thorn” was. Most believe it was a physical ailment. There is some indication that it may have been an eye problem. But the point I make here is that God may allow all kinds of circumstances into our life which are designed for training purposes. This process is *the normal Christian Life*.

Another good example comes from 1 Corinthians 11:21-31. Paul writes this epistle to address several problems and/or abuses occurring among the church members there. One abuse was that when the believers came together to take communion, some of the members showed up to enjoy the food and some came *drunk*! Paul rebukes them saying, “Therefore when you meet together,

it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry, and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you. . . For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep."

This passage makes it clear to us that there are consequences to our disobedience. Some of these Corinthian believers evidently are disciplined by God through both illness and even death ("some of you sleep"). That is *not* to say that all illness and death are divine judgments, but some *are*.

In this particular instance, some of the disobedient Corinthians experienced the "sin unto death." (That is, some of them died).

With this background, we come to the heart of your question. The "sin unto death" is found throughout the Bible and seems to be connected to new eras of biblical history.

Here are some examples where people experienced death through disobedience:

- *Giving of the Law, Mount Sinai: Golden Calf (Exodus 32)*
- *Institution of Levitical Priesthood: "Strange Fire" (Leviticus 10)*
- *Conquest of the Land: Achan (Joshua 7)*
- *Beginning of the Church: Ananias & Sapphira (Acts 5)*
(See also Samson and Saul—God was longsuffering with both)

Speaking of the incident in Leviticus 10 where Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, offered "strange fire" which

“consumed them, and they died before the Lord” (Lev. 10:2), Rev. Ray Stedman of Palo Alto Bible Church says:

This was a sin of presumption, not a sin of ignorance. They knew better and what incense they were supposed to burn. . . they had been told emphatically that God would be offended if they offered incense other than that which he had prescribed. Second, it was a sin dealt with severely because it distorted God’s revelation of Himself. All of these sacrifices and rituals were intended for us to learn what kind of God He is. Third, God used it to set an example. God is here teaching a lesson-to show how important it was for the priests at the beginning of their priesthood to follow explicitly what God commanded. And it only happened once. Similarly, though the sin of Ananias and Sapphira (deception, hypocrisy) was common among Christians of the early church and common ever since, God never visited death like that again. It is a manifestation of God’s love and concern. At the outset, He is wanting to stop this kind of thing from happening again, and He is giving fair warning of the eventual consequences to anyone presumptuous enough to sin deliberately in this way.” That is the way we human beings work. Unless an issue is vividly, dramatically, openly, symbolically made clear to us, we’ll go right on and do the wrong thing. So God is stopping that, arresting it with his judgment at this point. But he really wants us to learn to refrain for the sake of his glory, not out of fear for our lives. *(Cf. elaborate instructions on incense, Exodus 30:34-38, particularly v. 38).*

Sin Unto Death (1 John 5)

Now let’s look at the passage you have questioned. The first thing to note is the *context*. This major topic from 5:13-18 is prayer. We are given in verses 13-15 that God hears and responds to our prayers. The key word is “*anything*.” Then John remembers there **is** an exception: praying for a disobedient,

sinning brother or sister in Christ. What to do? How do we pray for that one? Here is the sequence we must keep in mind for such a one as we pray.

First of all, the Apostle John tells us that there is a sin **not** leading to death (physical). In verse 16, he tells us that it is possible for Christians to fall into this sin not leading to death. [See also 1 John 2:1,2—the ideal is to “sin not.” But if anyone sins (*and we will*), we have an Advocate, a defense attorney.]

When Christians observe disobedience in brothers and sisters, they *are* to pray for him/her (16b); as a result of these prayers, God may choose to preserve, prolong, extend the person’s physical life (not eternal life, since that life is determined by one’s personal faith decision).

This intercession is effective only in the case of sin **not** leading to death (16c): that is, the person has not reached the end limits of God’s patience and grace (His “last straw”). See also v. 17 where John says, “All unrighteousness is sin, but there is a sin which is not unto (physical) death.”

Secondly, there **is** a sin which results in physical death—the sin unto death (v. 16d): This is the death of a believer characterized by persistent, willful sinning in which “the flesh is destroyed [physical death—1 Cor. 5:1-5] so that the *spirit* might be saved.”

John tells us that this is a sin **not** to be prayed for, because God’s immutable law concerning this final, “last straw” disobedience is involved and will be unaltered by intercessory prayer (16e), and frankly, we do not know another’s heart condition before the Lord. We are not encouraged to speculate about the cause of any believer’s untimely death. In our prayer life, we can continue to intercede for a wayward brother or sister, but we are not to draw any conclusions about what may, should, or has happened in regard to a

believer's death.

Thirdly, when some Christian we know dies, we might be inclined to ask the question of ourselves, "Was this the sin unto death or not?" John is telling us in this passage not to speculate, because we just don't know.

All through this Epistle (1 John) the Apostle has been addressing sin in the life of the believer—yours and every Christian you know. It is fitting that John portrays the remedy of *habitual* sin on the part of a believer in the context of the new birth. The "black and white" contrast all through 1 John concludes with the same idea, and one that is also expressed in the book of James:

"Even so, faith, if it has no works is dead, being by itself. But someone may say, 'You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' . . . Are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead." (James 2:17,18, 20, 26)

The New Testament clearly teaches that "Faith alone saves (Ephesians 2:8,9; Titus 3:5), but saving faith is never alone."

This leads us to a practical application in observing/evaluating another believer's life and imperfections. This verse comes to mind: "The Spirit Himself bears witness with *our* spirit that we are the children of God" (Romans 8:16). What we learn from this verse is that we can know about *ourselves*, (i.e. that we have the Spirit, that we are born again), but ultimately we cannot know about *another*. In other words, I can know about *me*, but I can't know about *you*. You can know about *you*, but you can't know about *me*.

Practically speaking then, we should accept every person's

testimony who claims to be a Christian. Actual Christian behavior is on a spectrum which John describes by saying, "all sin [big and little] is unrighteousness." Only God can rightly see the totality of a believer's obedience and disobedience over a lifetime, and rightly judge it. As a loving Father, He may bring discipline to get us "back on track." 1 John 1 and 2 speak to the way this may be accomplished—God's grace through the Blood of Christ providing daily cleansing through confession/acknowledgement (1 John 1:9) and thus, further potential opportunity to serve.

Since we cannot see the heart of another, we can only inspect the "fruit" (or lack thereof) we see in a life. The farther a believer appears to wander away from God, the more "bad fruit" we observe, and the more we wonder about the truthfulness of that believer's profession of faith. We cannot help being tempted to ask the question: "Is this person *really* a Christian?" We are to go no farther in our evaluation or conclusion; rather, we should *continue our intercession* for him or her.

*John 21: 20-22: "And looking around, Peter saw the disciple whom Jesus loved (John the Apostle) following them. . .and therefore seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? **You** follow me!" (Old Aramaic Expression: "Stick to your knitting!" <smile>).*

I hope this answers your question, _____.

Sincerely in Christ,

Jimmy Williams, Founder
Probe Ministries