“Your Perception of Hinduism is Inaccurate”

Rick Rood’s learned and well organized article on Hinduism is an excellent attempt at giving an idea of the basic features of the religion to non-Hindus.

I am a nominal Hindu with a great deal of Christian influence. I find a few inaccuracies when he talks of the religion under, “A Christian Response”. I appreciate that Hinduism is too vast a religion to be grasped accurately in all its aspects by any one man. However the perception that the Hindus’ concept of God’s grace could be a Christian influence and related comments are inaccurate. Most of the rituals, Pujas that the Hindus perform are to seek God’s grace and deliverance, apart from asking for material favors! Further the concept of performing “Prayaschitta” or atonement for your wrong-doing and asking for forgiveness is very much a part of Hinduism that came from ancient times. Of course, there is also the concept of the one who is wronged giving a “shaapa” (curse) to the wrong doer.

While there are a lot of differences between the two religions, the final destination individually and as a society appears to be the same.

And, by the way the Christians can relax. Though Hinduism is gaining popularity in the West there is no provision in Hinduis to “convert” non-Hindus! The Indian Christians are considered part of the Hindu culture and you find many Hindus like myself believing in Christ, though not in the same manner as the practicing Christians.

Thank you very much for your message regarding the article on Hinduism, and for taking the time to read the article. It is certainly not an exhaustive description of the Hindu religion

and its comparison to the Christian faith. But I tried to give a brief summary.

I noted your comments with regard to the contrasts between Christianity and Hinduism mentioned in the article. I thought I would just briefly respond to your comment on “grace,” and also on “forgiveness.”

I appreciate what you said about Hindus seeking grace through religious activities. By this I take it that you mean that Hindus believe that they can obtain the help of a deity in relieving themselves of negative karma and moving toward enlightenment. I suppose that this kind of divine help or assistance could be described as “grace” in a certain broad sense (though I think you will see some important distinctions below). I appreciate also your comment about a Hindu worshiper asking for forgiveness (which I would take to be a remission of bad karma).

I wonder if you could help me, however, in understanding the way in which you are using the word “grace.” As I understand the Hindu religion, spiritual progress always requires the effort or striving of the worshiper, whether it is through action or ritual, knowledge or meditation, or devotion to a deity. In the Christian faith, spiritual discipline and works of love and service are also very important. But these spiritual activities are never considered the means of one’s attaining salvation. They really are the fruit or result of attaining salvation. Actually, this salvation is not attained, but obtained as a gift through faith in Jesus. I’m sure you are familiar with the statement in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul, “For by grace you are saved, through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as the result of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). This statement puts grace and works in totally different categories. In fact, it states that salvation is a gift, not to be achieved, but to be received through faith in Jesus. I’m interested to know if you perceive the same contrast between

the Hindu way of striving (working) to make spiritual progress toward enlightenment, and the Christian way of receiving the free gift of salvation through faith in Christ. One of the most beloved statements of Jesus that highlights this contrast is as follows: “Come unto me all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)!

The reason that this free gift of salvation is tied to faith in Christ comes into clearer focus when we consider the second issue you noted in your message . . . the issue of forgiveness. In the Christian faith, when God forgives someone their sins, it means that He freely releases the person from the judgment and penalty that his sins have brought against him. This judgment or penalty for sin is defined in the Bible as “death.” “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). The death referred to here is not merely physical death, but spiritual death which is eternal separation from God: “Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (Issiah 59:2). This judgment on sin is necessary, because the Bible says that God is a “holy” God: “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil, you cannot tolerate wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13). Furthermore, the Bible says that it is impossible for us to be released from God’s judgment on sin by working our way out of it, or striving to overcome it: “No one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (Romans 3:20).

How, then, does Jesus come into play here? By giving his life as a sacrifice for sin, taking on himself the judgment we deserve and paying the penalty that we owe to God: “For even the Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (payment) for many” (Mark 10:45). This is why God is free to offer his forgiving grace to anyone who acknowledges his sin and need for forgiveness, and receives this gift by trusting in Jesus and what he has done for us: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans

6:23). The “eternal life” referred to here includes God’s forgiving grace, but also so much more . . . a life in fellowship with God both now and forever. But apart from what Jesus has done for us, this “eternal life” could never be made available to us.

By the way, here is one additional contrast worth noting between Hinduism and Christianity. As I understand the Hindu religion, the goal of spiritual progress is ultimate union with God, a melting of all distinctions between self and ultimate reality. The essence of salvation or eternal life in the Christian scriptures is not union with ultimate reality, but communion with God . . . person to Person!

Thank you, _____, for taking time to interact with me on some very important issues. I commend you for taking seriously the spiritual journey we all are on in life. May I also commend to you a word from your own M. K. Gandhi: “I shall say to the Hindus that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teachings of Jesus.”

Respectfully,

Rick Rood

Grief and Grace

Former Probe staffer Rick Rood, a hospital chaplain who understands the pain of losing his beloved wife, addresses loss, grieving and God’s grace.

Over the past eight years that I’ve had the privilege of serving in the hospitals, I’ve had the occasion and privilege of interacting with thousands of grieving people, and to become more than casually acquainted with the many aspects of

the “grieving process.” In seeking to become better able to comfort those who are grieving, I’ve read many books and attended numerous seminars. But I’ve observed that while it’s one thing to learn about the grieving process, it’s quite another to experience it. Australian pastor Donald Howard wrote in the preface to his short book entitled *Christians Grieve Too* that though he was prepared for the death of his wife from cancer at the age of forty-six, he was “ill-prepared for grief.”

Part of me didn’t want to write this short essay. I’ve gotten in the habit of writing about some of the painful things in life the past year or so (though from the perspective of faith). And I wanted to write something happy, or even humorous. But I guess it’s one of the occupational hazards of a hospital chaplain that you are constantly confronted with the realities of life that most of us would rather forget about (until it’s no longer possible). This past year, I didn’t have to go to the hospital to be confronted with this kind of reality. So, please bear with me as I “reflect” one last time.

One of the things I’ve noticed about grieving people is that though all people do grieve their losses, everyone grieves differently. There must be a host of factors influencing how people grieve: the kind of relationship they had with the loved one, and its depth, the degree of dependence of one on the other (either the dependence of the survivor on the deceased, or vice versa), the presence of ambivalence in the relationship (the presence of anger as well as love), the degree of guilt (whether real or imagined) experienced by the survivor, the kind of loss (sudden, traumatic, preventable, etc.), the person’s temperament and personality, gender, ethnicity, family background, past losses and accumulated grief, one’s world view and spirituality. Wow. That’s just the short list! Knowing just this much has kept me from comparing how one person grieves from another, and from making judgments

about things I know little or nothing about.

There are many excellent books and resources available on grief and loss these days, quite a number from a Christian perspective. But few of them take into consideration in much detail what the scriptures tell us about grief, except for some passing references. My work and my own personal experience have prompted me to pay more attention to this topic in my Bible reading than I normally would. And especially this past year I have tried to listen more closely to what the Lord says to us about it through his Word. Some of what I've found so far has surprised me. All of it has encouraged me.

Grief and Loss

This first section will of necessity be a bit more somber. But it is a necessary prelude to what will follow! The first and most obvious thing one notices in reading the scriptures is that death follows sin, like winter follows fall. God had warned that Adam's sin would result in death (Genesis 2:17). And it did. The solemn refrain "and he died" appears eight times in the list of Adam's descendants given in Genesis 5. Death is indeed the "wages of sin" (Romans 6:23a). Death is not (as we are sometimes told) "a natural thing" or "just a part of life." Death was not part of the created order when God pronounced it "very good" (Genesis 1:31). It is an aberration, an alien invader into God's natural order. Isaiah describes death as a "covering which is over all peoples," and a "veil which is stretched over all nations" (Isaiah 25:7). It is the great equalizer.

The second most obvious thing one notices is that God promises that death will one day be destroyed. The day is coming when "He will swallow up death for all time" (Isaiah 25:8), when the sentence of death will be "abolished" (1 Corinthians 15:26), and it will "no longer be" (Revelation 21:4). For all who are in Christ, this is our great hope!

The third thing that becomes apparent as one reads the scriptures is that while the sentence on death awaits its fulfillment, sorrow and grief follow death and loss as naturally as spring follows winter. If death were just a natural thing, it would be unnatural to grieve the resulting loss. But since death and loss are not natural, grief and sorrow *are*. They are the expression of pain resulting from the severing of relational bonds that were originally designed by God to be permanent. But because of sin and death, they no longer are. And it hurts.

It's interesting that the first person described in the Bible as grieving is God! Scripture tell us that because of the evil and wickedness of man. God was "grieved in His heart" (Genesis 6:6). We don't understand everything about the emotional life of God. It is certainly not exactly like our own. But since we are created in his image, we should not be surprised to learn that our emotions are in some sense a reflection of his own. One of the most remarkable statements of scripture in this regard appears in Isaiah 63:9, "In all their affliction, he was afflicted." Edward J. Young, in his commentary on Isaiah (vol 3, p. 481) says, "God feels the sufferings of his people as his own sufferings." In fact, every member of the Godhead is described in scripture as experiencing grief. Not only God the Father, as in these passages, but also God the Son. In reflecting on his rejection by the nation's leaders in Jerusalem, it is said that He "wept over it" (Luke 19:41). At the tomb of his friend Lazarus He "was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled," and indeed that he "wept" (John 11:33, 35). In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus is described as pouring out His heart to God the Father "with loud crying and tears" (Hebrews 5:7). The Holy Spirit is described as experiencing grief as well. Compare Isaiah 63:10 and Ephesians 4:30, where we are warned against "grieving the Holy Spirit" by our sins. The psalmist says that God "remembers" our tears (Psalm 56:8). And it is even implied that He is in some sense moved by them (Isaiah 38:5, "I have heard your prayers, I have seen your

tears”).

The fact that God experiences grief should not be seen as contradicting his sovereign control over all things. For it is clear that there are many things within God’s sovereign purpose that are nonetheless grievous to Him. In fact, there are many things within God’s purpose that are the cause of His anger and judgment.

If God, then, experiences grief, it should not surprise us to find many scriptures which describe God’s people as experiencing grief as well. Abraham is said to have “mourned and wept” over the death of his wife Sarah (Genesis 23:2). So Joseph at the death of his father Jacob (Genesis 50:1). The nation Israel at the death of Moses (Deuteronomy 34:8). Indeed, there is an entire book devoted to expressing the “Lamentations” of the nation Israel over the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. True, God’s people were admonished not to mourn in the same way that the surrounding pagan nations did at the death of their own. Though we do not understand today the meaning of these practices, the Jews were forbidden to “cut themselves” or “shave their head” for the sake of the dead, as their pagan neighbors did (Leviticus 19:28; Deuteronomy 14:1). Nonetheless, there were traditional mourning practices among the Jews that were viewed as entirely appropriate (e.g., the covering of the head in 2 Sam 15:30, the baring of the feet in Isaiah 20:2, and the covering of the lip in Leviticus 13:45 and Micah 3:7.) The fact that Ezekiel was forbidden these outward expressions of mourning at the death of his wife (Ezekiel 24:16-17) as a sign to the nation concerning their impending judgment (v. 24), indicates that such restraint was not considered normal.

In the New Testament we find similar expressions of grief on the part of God’s people. We’ve already noticed our Lord’s own grief. Indeed he was called “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3, cf. v. l0a). A curious description, if indeed Jesus rarely wept. One aspect of our growth in

likeness to Christ is that we should be growing more transparent about our emotions, and more empathetic with those of others. We should also note the description of the "devout men" who when they buried the martyred Stephen "made loud lamentation over him" (Acts 8:2). A most interesting reference appears in Paul's letter to the Philippians (a letter devoted to promoting the joy of the Lord), where he states that should his friend Epaphroditus have died as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow" (2:27). Just as in the Old Testament, so in the New, God's people have reason not to "grieve as those who have no hope" (I Thessalonians 4:13). But there is nothing in the New Testament which suggests that God's people nonetheless do not or should not grieve the temporary loss of relationship with those they love. Theologian J. I. Packer has stated: "Grief is the human system reacting to the pain of loss, and as such it is an inescapable reaction" (*A Grief Sanctified*, p. 12).

Of particular interest to me is the fact that the removal of grief and sorrow from human experience is tied very closely in scripture with the ultimate removal of death and loss. Compare the following statements from both Old and New Testaments. "He will swallow up *death* for all time, and the Lord God will wipe *tears* away from all faces" (Isaiah 25:8). "And He will wipe away every *tear* from their eyes; and there will no longer be any *death*" (Revelation 21:4). Though I believe (as we shall shortly see) there is substantial healing available from the Lord in our grieving now, its effects will not be entirely and completely relieved until the old order of life is fully replaced by the new.

With this context in mind, before moving on to a consideration of God's comforting grace, there is an intriguing passage in the Old Testament that we ought not overlook. It's found in the sometimes enigmatic book of Ecclesiastes: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living take it

to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, *for when a face is sad a heart may be happy*. The mind of the wise is in the house of mourning, while the mind of fools is in the house of pleasure" (7:2-4 NASB). As with many of Solomon's sayings in this book, the italicized phrase is not easily understood. But the RSV rendering seems to capture its meaning well when it says, "By sadness of countenance the heart is made glad." Or as the NKJV puts it, "For by a sad countenance the heart is made better." What the writer appears to be saying is that genuine "recovery" from grief comes not by denying it or repressing it, but by giving appropriate expression to it. This is obviously something that the Old Testament saints understood, and practiced. And so may we. Someone well may ask how sorrow and grief can be consistent with the joy of the Lord. But it is interesting that St. Paul saw no contradiction in describing himself on one occasion as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Corinthians 6:l0a). The former is the result of experiencing painful loss; the latter the result of contemplating the implications of the providence of God—simultaneously.

Few people have experienced losses greater than those that befell Job. Perhaps his initial response to news of the death of his children provides something of a paradigm for us. "Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped" (Job 1:20). Grieving, but worshiping. Grieving profoundly. Worshiping humbly.

Comfort and Grace

In God's economy, if grief follows loss, then comfort follows grief. And this is exactly what we find in many passages of scripture. Among the things for which the Lord is said to have anointed his Messiah is "To comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah. 61:2b). Among those upon whom Jesus pronounced God's blessing are those who mourn, "for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). A fact sometimes overlooked is that it is only those who

mourn, who acknowledge their grief, who place themselves in a position of being comforted by the Lord. God's comforting grace is the answer to our grieving heart.

One of the most endearing descriptions of the Lord in scripture is found in 2 Corinthians 1:3, "The Father of mercies and God of all comfort." He is merciful and compassionate in nature. And He is the source of all genuine comfort and encouragement. The word used here for "comfort" is related to the word used to denote the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter" … one called alongside to encourage and help (John 14:16,26). He is "the divine fount of all consolation to His people—the 'all' both excluding any other source of comfort and also emphasizing the complete adequacy of that comfort for every circumstance that may arise" (P. E. Hughes, *II Corinthians*, p. 13). The following verse states that God "comforts us in all our affliction" (v. 4a). "The present tense of the verb shows that this God of ours comforts us constantly and unfailingly, not spasmodically and intermittently; and he does so in all our affliction, not just in certain kinds of affliction" (Hughes, p. 12). Furthermore, God comforts us "so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God" (v. 4b). "Nor is the comfort received from God intended to terminate in the recipient: it has a further purpose, namely, to fit the Christian for the God-like ministry of comforting and encouraging others, whatever the affliction they may be suffering" (Hughes, p. 12). What a rich description of the comforting grace of God! From Him. To us. Through us.

But *how* does God's comfort come to us? One means through which God's comfort comes to us has been alluded to already. And that is that God identifies with us in our grief. We have noted above some of the passages that state this very fact. He "sympathizes with our weakness" (Heb. 4:15). "For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust" (Psalm

103:14).

But beyond this, God has provided his word with a view to providing comfort in time of sorrow. “This is my *comfort* in my affliction, that your word has revived me” (Psalm 119:50). “My soul weeps because of grief; *strengthen* me according to your word” (Psalm 119:28). God’s words seem to find their way into our heart particularly when they are set to music: “Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Psalm 119:54). I have found great comfort in the music of praise and worship to the Lord. St. Paul says that “through perseverance and the *encouragement* of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). And concerning his teaching on our coming reunion with the Lord and with our departed loved ones, St. Paul says, “Therefore *comfort* one another with these words.” It is in part through letting the word of God “richly dwell within” us (Colossians 3:16) that we can gain access to God’s comforting grace. I have found it true in my own experience that the Word of God has been a river of grace to my heart.

We are comforted also by simply experiencing the loving acts of God in our life. “O may your lovingkindness comfort me, according to your word to your servant (Psalm 119:76).” It is for the direct experience of the faithful love of God that the psalmist is praying here. And I believe God does comfort and encourage us by leaving his “fingerprints” on our lives in many ways during our days of grieving. He lets us know through his providential acts that we are not alone. That He is with us. That He loves us. That He has a purpose for us still (cf. Genesis 50:24).

As indicated in the passage examined above (2 Corinthians 1), much of God’s comfort comes to us through his people. Later in this very letter, Paul tells us that he was comforted by God’s sending his friend Titus. “But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus” (2 Corinthians 7:6). When God provided Rebekah as a bride for Isaac, it is said that he “was comforted after his mother’s death” (Genesis

24:67). When Paul was imprisoned in Rome, he wrote that he was "refreshed" by his friend Onesiphorus who searched for him and found him (2 Timothy 1:16-17). It is often overlooked that much of God's grace comes to us, not only directly from His Spirit or through His word, but through His people. Peter tells us that it is as we steward the gifts God has given us in serving one another that we administer "the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). The Old Testament people of God seemed to put this understanding into practice in a very practical way. It was apparently their custom to surround their grieving neighbors with love and support by providing meals for them. The "bread of mourning" and "cup of consolation" were biblical terms meant to be taken in a very literal way (cf. Deuteronomy 26:14; Jeremiah 16:7; Hosea 9:4).

In what ways can God's people administer God's comforting grace? Certainly through following Jesus' example to "weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15b; contra Proverbs 25:20). By learning to be comfortable and patient with those who are actively grieving their losses. By learning to be "quick to hear, slow to speak" (James l:19b). By being a "ready listener." I've personally found that those who have simply "listened to my story" have greatly comforted me. I once heard a pastor speak of this effect as "healing through the laying on of ears." What a great phrase! When Job's friends first came "to sympathize with him and comfort him" (2:11b), it is said that "they sat down on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights with no one speaking a word to him, for they saw that his pain was very great" (2:13). (Oh that they would have remained in silent mode!) Later, Job made this telling statement: "For the despairing man there should be kindness from his friend; so that he does not forsake the fear of the Almighty" (6:14). The thought is that lack of kindness can serve only to push people further from God when they are despairing. I've talked with many people in the hospital through the years who have distanced themselves from various churches. When I've inquired about what occasioned their

departure, too often I have been told that it was during a time of bereavement. You can fill in the rest of the story. One way I've learned that we "speak the truth in love" is by being sensitive to the recipient's present ability to receive it and absorb it. ("I have many more things to say to you, *but you cannot bear them now*", John 16:12.)

Closing Thoughts

A rather obscure passage that has served to guide me in all of this is found in 1 Samuel 30:1-6.

> "Then it happened when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, that the Amalekites had made a raid on the Negev and on Ziklag, and had overthrown Ziklag and burned it with fire; and they took captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great, without killing anyone, and carried them off and went their way. When David and his men came to the city, behold, it was burned with fire, and their wives and their sons and their daughters had been taken captive. Then David and the people who were with *him lifted their voices and wept until there was no strength in them to weep*. Now David's two wives had been taken captive, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail the widow of Nabal the Carmelite. Moreover David was greatly distressed because the people spoke of stoning him, for all the people were embittered, each one because of his sons and his daughters. *But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.*"

What a great passage for summing up our thoughts in this article. We see first the experience of sudden loss. Then the expression of understandable sorrow and grief. They wept 'til there was no more strength in them to weep. But then, as he was able, *David strengthened himself in the Lord.*

It's that last phrase that I want to emphasize in closing. And there are two thoughts that emerge from it. First, the strength to move through our grief comes from the Lord. We go

astray when we seek to find comfort for our grief apart from Him. I've seen many in the hospitals who have fallen into addictions or into unhealthy relationships due to their attempts to find comfort apart from the Lord. We've seen already some of the ways in which the Lord comforts and strengthens us in our grief, so that we can move on with our life and fulfill God's remaining purposes for us.

But second, as David did, we ourselves must take responsibility for obtaining God's comfort and strength. David *strengthened himself in the Lord his God*. Gaining God's comfort involves our active participation in the process. And if the people around us seem not to be helping us in this direction, then we must ask God to lead us to those who will. And seek them out. Not everyone is so equipped. A dear friend who had previously lost his wife told me, a good while before I lost Polly, "Rick, your recovery will be your responsibility."

The rate of recovery is unique for every person. But there is at least one passage in scripture which speaks of those who seemed to be stuck in their grief, "refusing to be comforted" (Jeremiah 31:15; cf. 2 Chronicles 15:7), in need of "restraining their eyes from tears" (Jeremiah 31:16), and of remembering that "there is a hope for (their) future" (Jeremiah 31:17). We do this as we utilize the means of grace which God provides, placing our faith in Him one day at a time, in pursuit of his purpose for the remainder of our days. Part of that purpose may be (probably will be) serving others who are still on the path of grief.

> *Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand* (Isaiah 41:10).

Suggested reading:

Howard, Donald. *Christians Grieve Too*. The Banner of Truth Trust.

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. Bantam Books.

Mitsch, Raymond R. and Lynn Brookside. *Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love*. Vine Books.

Packer, J. I. *A Grief Sanctified*. Vine Books.

Scazzero, Peter. *The Emotionally Healthy Church*. Zondervan.

Wright, H. Norman. *Helping Those Who Hurt*. Bethany House.

Wright, H. Norman. *Recovering from the Losses of Life*. Revell.

Wright, H. Norman. *Will My Life Ever Be the Same? Finding God's Strength to Hope Again*. Harvest House.

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Reflections of a Caregiver

Former Probe staff member Rick Rood lovingly cared for his wife Polly through their twenty-year battle with the degenerative ravages of Huntington's Disease. He wrote this intensely personal and insightful essay a couple of months after Polly's death in the fall of 2003. We gratefully provide his reflections on that journey.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

During these first few months of adjusting to being alone

without my dear wife Polly, I've had occasion to reflect quite a bit not only on our nearly 32 years of marriage, but particularly on these past twenty years of walking with her through her journey with Huntington's Disease (HD). And particularly how they impacted me personally. I admit that this is going to be a very personal essay. And parts of it may be tedious at best. But I feel that at the end of this twenty year journey, this is an appropriate time for me to share some of my thoughts, and to fill in some of the gaps in Polly's story. My purpose is not only to share some of my heart, but also to provide a glimpse at some of the ways in which the Lord was at work through this experience, at least to my perception.

Polly and I met during our college years at Seattle Pacific University, and got to know each other well during the year that we both served in student government. I remember to this day being "captured" by Polly's disarming warmth and cheerfulness, as well as by her servant heart. Polly used to spend her summers working at Christian camps. And the summer before we served in student government together, she served as a summer missionary among the Indians of British Columbia. Polly was an elementary education major, and also was a very good pianist. When she was younger she had also been a cheerleader, and was a member of her school's swim team.

When we married on Sept. 11, 1971, we had no idea that thirteen years later, almost to the day, our lives would be impacted in the way they were when she was diagnosed with HD. There was no clinical test for HD back then. No way to know that you carried this illness, until the symptoms began to reveal themselves. But over the course of a year, and two visits to the University of Texas Health Science Center in Dallas, Polly's doctor concluded that he was "99% certain" that she had this illness. From that moment on, no aspect of our life would be untouched by this reality—physical, emotional, relational, social, vocational, and spiritual. We

also knew that her health would gradually decline over the course of the next fifteen years or so, and that only a very small percentage of HD patients survive more than twenty years after onset.

I could detail every step of Polly's journey with HD (and later also with cancer), and fill several pages. But that's not my purpose in this essay. I will only say that her limitations affected every aspect of her person, and that they proceeded slowly and gradually over the course of the next nineteen years, until she was taken home to heaven on August 6 of this year. There were, however, certain "milestones" along the way which I will share with you. The most notable of these was when it became obvious to us that it was time for her to take up residence in a nursing home in August of 1992. Polly never held back from the challenges she was confronted with by this illness. She continued to do all she possibly could. But she gradually had to give up one activity after another: driving, cooking, dressing and feeding herself, etc., etc.

The year prior to her entering the nursing home, I was able to work almost entirely at home for the ministry I served with at the time (International Students). It was unsafe to leave Polly alone, since she easily lost her balance. And she needed someone to feed her at mealtimes, and help her with the other aspects of her life. We had discussed nursing home residency in the past, though it was not something either of us was entirely comfortable with. But I well remember the day when she sat in our living room and said to me, "Rick, I think it's time for me to move to a nursing home." I think we both knew it was time. Polly needed someone with her at all hours of the day and night. Yet we also had two children to continue raising (Jeff and Jill were 12 and 15 at the time), and a full-time ministry to pursue.

The day I helped Polly move into her room at the nursing home, I stayed with her over the lunch hour. I had never spent much time in nursing homes before. And looking around the room, I

realized that we were entering a very different world. Most of the people in this nursing home were quite disabled. It was a culture shock! But with my nightly visits, and development of relationships with the staff and the other residents, Polly's nursing home soon became my home as well. Her world became my world. The highlight of my day for the next eleven years was to drive to her nursing home to be with her in the evening, and when I could to go at lunchtime to feed her her meal! At first, Polly used a walker, and we would walk down to the dining room to sit alone at a table, and talk about our day. She always wanted me to get a Dr Pepper or iced tea, and lift it to her mouth so she could drink it by straw. She loved for me to read to her from various books, and especially from the Bible. I think we read through most of the Bible together—some books several times. She loved Genesis, Isaiah, the Psalms, and the Gospels. Soon Polly was in a wheelchair, and I used to wheel her outside to a bench that was shaded by trees. We would sit and watch the birds, and pray together.

A statement Polly made to me a few days after she entered the nursing home reveals something of what kind of person Polly was. She said to me, "Rick, do you think I should start witnessing to the people here?" I've encountered people through the years whose zeal for witnessing probably had the opposite effect they desired. But Polly was not one of them. Just her quiet perseverance and cheerful manner spoke volumes to me, as I believe it did to many others around her. The social worker at the nursing home where she spent her first four years made these comments about her: "Polly was a very cheerful person. Whenever you would see her she had a smile on her face that could cheer up the world. She was always complimenting others for things they do. She loved a challenge. She played a major part on our balloon volleyball team. Although her health condition limited her in doing some things by herself, she did as much as she could by herself, trying so hard to be independent as much as she could. I remember her face when she used to tell me that she was going

out on pass to go to a ballgame, she was so excited. Polly was a very kind and sweet individual who loved her family and she will be missed."

Many fun activities were provided by the nursing home staff, including "balloon volleyball" (which Polly seemed to enjoy a lot), special holiday dinners (she would dress up in her finest dress, and accompany me down the hall to the dining room), outings to various events in the city (e.g. to concerts, the state fair). Actually, Polly's move to the nursing home enhanced our life in many ways. For the year prior to her taking up residence, almost all our time was devoted to "keeping our head above water" (which we didn't always manage to do). We were beginning to sink under the load of all the activities necessary just to maintain our life. But with all the assistance of the nursing home staff to cover many of these things, the time we spent together could now be devoted to other things that added to Polly's quality of life.

For several years I always brought Polly home on the weekends, and always scheduled a special outing or two—to a ballgame, a concert, a movie, a drive to a lake, etc., etc. I found that the anticipation of these events brought an element of hope and joy to Polly during the long weeks at the nursing home. We all need hope—the little hopes of a change of pace each weekend. I well remember one day probably 8 or 9 years ago now when Polly looked at me and said in her then slurred speech, "Rick, you help make my life worthwhile." My reporting that to you sounds self-serving, and maybe it is. But I will tell you that that one statement stayed in my heart for many years! On another occasion I recall asking Polly how she kept going in spite of the at times overwhelming difficulties. She simply said to me, "I have the Lord. And I have my family."

About six years ago it became very difficult for Polly to continue eating, and she decided to permit her physician to insert a feeding tube in her stomach. For a while I continued bringing Polly home on the weekends. But with the tube

feedings every four hours, neither of us got much sleep, and by Sunday night we were both exhausted. But even after we discontinued her coming home for these extended stays, we still went out Friday evenings (mostly to high school ballgames) and Saturday afternoons, and even to church Sunday mornings (where we sat at the back of the sanctuary). These outings brought me great joy. And it was so satisfying to see Polly smiling, even though she could barely speak anymore.

Polly's physical condition was declining pretty rapidly now. And it was getting much more difficult to transport her places. I well remember one day I think nearly four years ago, when I realized that this particular Saturday was the last time I would likely ever by able to take her out. It was. From that day on, Polly rarely was removed from her bed, except when we transported her to the shower room. Henceforth, it became a matter no longer of bringing Polly to places she could enjoy, but of bringing joy to Polly in her room. While we continued many of our daily routines, it seemed to me that worship became more and more our most meaningful activity. Polly couldn't speak at all anymore, and I am not much of a musician. But I could tell that the worship music that we frequently listened to brought a great deal of comfort to her . . . and to me too. In fact, the past few years it was worship that brought most comfort and joy to my own heart as Polly's caregiver and husband . . . to the very last day of her life. Just before she left us, I was preparing to play some music. We never got to it. But I'm convinced that she was welcomed into heaven by far more beautiful music and meaningful worship than anything I could provide for her!

As I have reflected more and more on these past twenty years, I've asked many questions. It was only natural, especially at first, to ask "Why?" But we knew that we live in a fallen world, and none of us can claim immunity from life's struggles and even tragedies. It never really entered my mind to ask "What?" That is, "What shall I do as Polly's husband?" I knew

that I was with her for the “long haul.” No matter what. But I did at times ask “How?” “How are we going to do this?” How am I going to care for her, raise our two children, continue in full-time ministry, and for a few years during this journey also help care for my mother with Alzheimer’s, and my dad when he was so seriously ill as a result of working so hard at caring for her. It didn’t take me long to realize that apart from the Lord there was no way to do this. It was an impossible task. But I also knew that we weren’t “apart from the Lord.” He had shown himself faithful to us in so many ways through the years. He couldn’t stop now.

Shortly after Polly was diagnosed with HD in 1984, I was reading through the Psalms, and I came to this statement: “Cast your burden upon the Lord and he will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken (literally “totter”)” (Psalm 55:22). In the margin I read that the word “burden” could be rendered “what He has given you.” At that moment, the Lord impressed on me that the burden we had been handed was also in some mysterious way I could not yet understand, a “gift” from the Lord. Not something He had caused. But something that He could touch and transform. It would be many years before I would even begin to see how this could possibly by true. As I progressed through my reading of the Psalms, I also came to this statement: “Blessed be the Lord, who *daily* bears our burden” (Ps. 68:19). I knew that if we were going to finish this race, it would be by doing what these two verses urged us to do . . . and to do it one day at a time. I had for some time kept a journal in which I recorded evidences of God’s hand on our life. And over the next twenty years I returned to this discipline many times. Today, this journal is one of my most precious possessions, because it is full of the record of God’s faithfulness to us, even though at times my own personal faith was very much of the “mustard seed” variety, if even that! I was also very aware that we needed the prayer support of many other people. And I cannot tell you the encouragement it was for both of us to hear from

so many friends across the country that they were praying for us even daily. When I encounter people in the hospital who are under a burden too heavy for them to bear, I always encourage them to enlist the daily prayer support of as many friends as possible. And to ask them to keep praying until they go to heaven!

As I read through this journal, I find evidence of the Lord's activity in our lives in two primary ways. First, in the many things that He did ***for*** us. I'm sure that there were innumerable ways in which He was working in our behalf, of which we were totally unaware. But I will mention a few of the ways of which I *was* aware. For one, it became evident to me as the years went by that God had been *preparing* us for this long chapter of our lives—primarily by providing models for us. I think for instance of my own paternal grandparents. Among my earliest memories in life are those of watching my grandmother care for my grandfather during the years following his major stroke, in the early 1950s. Then there was the model He provided for us of Bill and Dorothea Hart, who were members of our church in the Seattle area in the late 1970s. Bill suffered from Parkinson's for many years. And he and his dear, caring wife were regular attendees at the church I pastored for five years. What a sterling example they were to us. There was the model of Polly's mother Elsie, who tirelessly cared for Polly's brother Chris for so many years. There was my own father who was so dedicated in caring for my mom during all her years with Alzheimer's. There was the couple we met in Hayward, CA in 1987, Sherwood and Harvette Peters. Harvette had M.S., and relied on Sherwood's loving care for many years before her homegoing. There were our neighbors, Al and Jeane Olson, who lived directly across the street from us. (Little did we know what a blessing they would be to us when we bought our home, not even knowing they lived there!) Al suffered from a neurological disorder for many years, and his wife Jeane provided such a wonderful model by patiently caring for him. I could mention others, such as Greg and Lisa Hatteberg at

Dallas Seminary, who are still contending with Lisa's M.S. And so many others whom God brought across our path to serve as models and examples, particularly for me.

In addition to preparing us, it was also evident that the Lord was *guiding* us and *providing* for us. God's guidance and provision was evident first of all in his enabling me to remain in full-time ministry through these past twenty years, but in ways that allowed me the flexibility to provide the increasing level of care that Polly needed. I frankly did not know how this could be. But how grateful I am for the years I was allowed to serve at Dallas Seminary, International Students, Probe Ministries, and since 1996 in hospital chaplaincy. And for the many, many faithful friends who have supported us in these efforts!

I think of the special families who lived near us, and who helped us shepherd our dear children during the years they were growing up, and we were being stretched beyond our capacities.

The Lord's guidance and provision was also evident at points along the way when we had to make important decisions. I think for instance of when it came time for Polly to enter the nursing home. It was our neighbor Melanie Miller, a nurse, who informed us of Brentwood Place—the one facility in Dallas County that had a preponderance of younger residents (Polly was only 41); and then four years later when Polly's needs were increasing, she informed us of the opening of a new nursing home on the shores of Lake Ray Hubbard (Sr. Care) where Polly resided for over seven years. I remember also when Polly and I were discussing this decision, being captivated by a story on the evening news that very week about a couple's going through the process of making the same decision we were.

When she first entered the nursing home, we had to jump through a number of legal and financial hoops, including applying for Medicaid assistance for Polly. This was the only

way we could afford this level of care. Only those whose total assets fall under a certain limit are able to qualify for this assistance, which ours did at that time. We later learned, however, that if we had waited one more month to apply, we would have been disqualified, and Polly would not have been able to enter the home for perhaps two more years. This was the Lord's doing, and his timing for her.

At other times of decision it seemed that God brought people across our path who had just the insight or encouragement we needed at that particular time. When Polly had to make a decision about a feeding tube for example (which really is a huge decision), the very day that we were contemplating it I entered a room at the hospital where I serve as chaplain, only to find a HD patient and her husband. She had made the same decision Polly was contemplating. I only encounter HD patients in the hospital about once a year! But I encountered her on the very day I needed some encouragement with regard to Polly's decision.

One of our most constant companions these past twenty years was the temptation to discouragement. I'm convinced that there is a spiritual battle that surrounds issues such as these in our lives. There is an enemy who wants to defeat and destroy us. And I found that one of the ways that the Lord encouraged us (I'm speaking for myself here), was through the many small evidences of his presence in our lives. If you were to read several pages of my journal, you would conclude that I had recorded a number of interesting "coincidences" in our life. But when you string together so many events like these over the course of not only years but decades, it becomes not "coincidence" but "providence."

For example, I remember a day in the early 90s when a package containing a book came to my desk at Probe Ministries, where I was serving as Director of Publications. Accompanying this package was a letter from the authors of the book. They were asking if we would consider marketing and distributing this

book. This was the only request like this that I remember receiving during the years I worked there. I noticed from the cover that the book was a biography or story. How they happened to send this book to us at Probe (an academic/educational ministry), I still do not know. The authors had no way of knowing me, or anything about our life. But what surprised me when I opened the book was that it was the life story of a couple, the husband being affected by HD! Polly's illness. What are the odds? We eventually met the sweet surviving wife of this man about whom the book was written!

I remember another time not long after Polly entered the nursing home that I brought her one evening to a concert at a large church in Dallas. About 4,000 were in attendance. We were a few minutes later than planned, and the lights were already dimmed. It was packed. But there was one seat at the end of one pew on the ground floor, where Polly could sit next to me in her wheelchair. We took our place. I turned to my right, and found that the person right next to me was the director of nursing from her nursing home! I didn't even know she was a believer, or that she would be there that night. What are the odds? There was also the time when I had just finished reading a portion of a book to Polly at the nursing home, then left to attend a service at a nearby church. The pastor's message was on exactly what I had just read to Polly. What are the odds?

Given any one of these instances, I would not think a great deal about it. But these kinds of events formed a pattern over the course of many years to the very last day of Polly's life! I recounted in my memorial letter about Polly some of the evidences of God's fingerprints on our life during her final weeks and days. But for those who have not read that account, I repeat some of it here. The morning before Polly entered the hospital for the last time, I was preparing for my day and listening to a Christian radio station in the background. As

is my custom, before leaving my room I walked over to my bed to sit down and read the day's selection from the devotional "Daily Bread." As I sat down, I reached over to turn off the radio. But before I did, the last words uttered by the spokesperson on the radio caught my attention. He said, "If you knew that today would be your loved one's last day, what would you say to them?" An interesting thought. Then I opened my devotional, and the reading for the day was entitled "Say It Now!" These words appeared in the article: "Recalling the good qualities of deceased friends or relatives at their funeral is appropriate, but how much better to give sincere praise to them while they are still living. It may be the encouragement they desperately need . . . . Don't put it off. Say it today. Tomorrow may be too late!"

That night when I went to see Polly, I made a special point to be alone with her and to tell her how much I loved her and thanked God for her, and to thank her for all she had done for us as a family through the years. Polly had been unable to speak at all the past few years. But the look in her sweet brown eyes spoke more than words could tell. Little did I know that this indeed would be her last full day in the nursing home. The next night I would be sitting with her in the emergency room as she entered the hospital for the last time. Two weeks later I was up early on the morning of August 6, preparing my breakfast before returning to the hospital. The same radio station was playing in the background as two weeks before. This time a commentator came on the air and said, "You know, when it comes time to die, the relationships that will support us during our time of need, are the ones we have cultivated and nurtured all our life. We die the way we lived." Less than two hours later I was standing at Polly's bed as she left this world for heaven.

I share these events with you to simply illustrate how over time I learned to take them as reminders, or "markers" along the way, of God's presence and shepherding care over our life.

Even in our most difficult hours. One of the many things that the Lord did for us during Polly's long illness.

But just as important as what the Lord was doing *for* us, if not more so, was what I eventually saw as his work ***in*** us. At least I knew He was seeking to do this in me. Shortly after Polly died, our daughter Jill said to me (and I quickly corrected her), "Dad, I think the reason God put you with Mom was because He knew you had the qualities that would be needed to care for her." I know my heart better than she does, and I said, "Jill, I think one reason the Lord put us together was because He knew I needed to *acquire* the qualities needed to care for Mom." And it's true. I well remember a day (a moment, really), probably five years after Polly was diagnosed, that it dawned on me what God was doing in my life in this regard. And how much growing I needed to do. I can only speak for myself, but I know that when Polly became ill, God enlisted me in a life shaping process. Part of this process involved his gently and patiently chipping away at qualities that He knew needed to diminish in my life. The other part was gradually instilling in my heart the qualities He wanted me to acquire. And I saw primarily three.

The first of these was a sounder *faith* in the Lord. Not that there wasn't faith in our hearts before. But this assignment required faith at a different level than I know I personally had. I'm not necessarily speaking of faith in God's healing power (though I know it's real). Candidly, there were occasions over the years when well-meaning individuals urged us to have faith that God would heal Polly miraculously. One fellow once told me that if we had real faith we would discontinue all of Polly's medications. I don't need to tell you that I didn't think about this suggestion very long. The kind of faith I sensed God was aiming at growing in us was a trust in His goodness, and the goodness of His purposes, even when it was unknown to us what they really were. Even though life was getting harder every year. This kind of faith comes

only from God.

Over the years the Lord used such things as the reading of scripture, times of prayer, the prayers of others, and the recording of instances like those mentioned above, to nourish our faith in Him. Not that we didn't experience times of doubt or discouragement. We did. One thing I did learn, however, was that the experience of pain and sorrow is not inconsistent with faith in the Lord. Paul's letter to the Philippians is full of exhortations to joy and peace, and contains a wonderful affirmation of our hope that to be with Christ is "better by far." But in the middle of this letter Paul makes the honest confession that if his friend Epaphroditus were to die as a result of his recent illness, he would have experienced "sorrow upon sorrow" (2:27). God's word is so realistic and balanced. That fact helped me endure the stormier seasons (as it does now).

The second quality I sensed God working on, and this is really an outgrowth of the first, was *hope*. I am not by nature a very hopeful person. But I learned to grow in this area. I see hope as simply "faith oriented to the future." (I read this somewhere.) An expectation not just of "good times to come," but that as God's goodness has been revealed in the past, so it will be unveiled in the future—even if it comes through encounter with illness and pain. That what the enemy may intend for evil (and which is evil), God can and ultimately will use for good. Even in the face of death (that alien invader into God's created order), there is the wonderful hope of eternal life in heaven, and the resurrection to come!

The third quality God was working on is the most important. That was *love*. I say "most important" because the New Testament tells us that if faith doesn't produce love, we are "nothing" (1 Corinthians 13:2). It is useless and dead. I loved Polly before. But this illness tested our love, and took aim at it. Speaking for myself, God used this illness to transform my love for Polly. I learned just how much I needed

to grow in genuine self-giving and self-sacrificing love. Not that I didn't need to take time to care for myself. It is possible to neglect your own legitimate needs as a caregiver. And I see some caregivers in the hospital who do this. I remembered that even the "Good Samaritan" delegated some of his caregiving to others so that he could tend to his other obligations (Luke 10:35). But there is a difference between taking care of our needs, and catering only to our own desires. And this is what the Lord was showing to me.

He was showing me just how many ways there are to spell "love." Dressing, bathing, feeding, carrying, smiling, laughing, crying, reading, singing, just sitting quietly . . . . I learned that in a society that places its highest premium on appearance and ability, it is very easy for people whose illness robs them of these very things to feel not only diminished, but also *devalued*. At times the words and actions of others can reinforce this false belief. I learned that the most significant gift I could give to Polly was to communicate to her by my own words and by my actions that she was the most valuable human being in my life. And she was.

I must not fail to mention at this point that not only did I sense the Lord transforming my love for Polly, but also deepening my love for Him. There were times when I felt confused and upset about what the Lord was allowing to happen in our life. I still feel the pain of some of these memories. But as the years went by, and we experienced more and more of God's shepherding care over our lives (even during the very trying times), my love for Him and sense of indebtedness to Him grew and grew. As a result, I sensed a growing passion in my heart to simply worship Him. Both private and corporate worship became the focus and highlight of my week. I remember reading as a young boy the verse that says, "We love (Him) because He first loved us" (1 John 4:19). It's true. The love I feel for Him and the worship I find flowing from my heart, is simply the natural response to His great love, expressed to

us in so many ways. When my heart grows cold, and at times it does, one of the things I've learned to do is to bring to mind the many ways in which God has so graciously loved us these past twenty years. "Faith, hope and love; these three remain. But the *greatest of these is love*" (1 Corinthians 13:13).

I will tell you honestly that the greatest blessing of my life was caring for Polly. I miss it deeply. And though I would never want her to go through again what she did these twenty years, . . . if she had to, I would be first in line to go through it with her again.

Several years ago, I was reading through the Gospel of John. When I reached the end of the book my attention was drawn to a statement Jesus made to Peter in which he signified to him "by what kind of death he would *glorify God*" (21:19). I had always thought about "*living* to the glory of God." But I had never thought about our "dying to the glory of God." I knew at that point that Polly's remaining years were likely few. And I began praying almost daily that whenever it came time for her to leave us, that her departure would bring glory to Him in some way. That was a hard prayer for me to offer. And I don't feel like I was ready for it to be answered until her very last hospital stay. But now that that day has come and gone, I believe God has answered that prayer. In my mind, He has answered it in part by magnifying through Polly all that He has done ***for*** us, and all He's doing ***in*** us. And will continue to do until we see Him in glory. *Soli Deo Gloria*.

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“Why Do You Lie About Islam?”

Why do you say lies about Islam? You have to be fair when descriping other religions to Christians otherwise you are a liar.

You said that in Islam no one can make relation with God and that’s not true. Everyone can make relation with God, moreover the topheads of islamic organizations can’t claim they are better than common people cuz it’s a pure heart issue in the first place.

You said in Islam God is unknown and that’s tricky cuz for sure we know him but we didn’t see him,so we know him morally not physically.

You said the prize is after death, and that’s the greatest lie, cuz the rule that every Muslim know is, bad relationship with Allah(God)=discomfort in life, good relationship=comfort, contentment, and help of Allah. You said that everyone need forgiveness even Mohammed and that’s not true, the truth is that we all need surplus from Allah cuz our good work can’t reward blessing of Allah in life let aside the paradise.

You claim that Allah in Islam doesn’t love anybody, however he loves the devouts. Is that enough, or you want me to say more?

If you are innocent and said that by mistake then correct it and contact me, if you want to misguide your people, it’s up to you and Allah will judge you.

Thank you very much for taking time to read the article on Islam, and especially for writing to us. We appreciate you. And we do honor your request that we be fair in what we say about religions beside Christianity. If there are errors in what we have said, we are certainly open to correction.

As I read your message, I noted the following objections to

the article on Islam:

1. That there is no true relationship with God in Islam.
2. That God is unknown in Islam.
3. That salvation consists in the blessings that come after death, rather than during this life.
4. That everyone is in need of forgiveness, even Muhammed.
5. That God is not described as a loving God in the Koran.

I can understand why some of these statements would be offensive to you. Let me do my best in trying to respond to each of them.

First, that there is no true relationship with God in Islam. In reading over the article, I couldn't find this precise statement. But I did find the statement at the end of the article that "the New Testament . . . reveals the only source of acceptance before God in His love and grace, expressed through the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ . . . ." This is the clear testimony of the New Testament, and of Jesus Christ himself, and of his apostles. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father (God) but by me" (Gospel of John 14:6). The apostle Peter said, "Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The name he referred to is Jesus Christ. This is a difficult statement to accept, I know. But it is the clear teaching of the New Testament, which also tells us that God is "the rewarder of those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). In other words, if we earnestly seek the truth of God, He will reveal it to us. And we believe that truth includes the teaching of Jesus Christ concerning his being the way to a relationship with God.

Second, that God is unknown in Islam. I did find the statement in the article that in the Koran, God is ultimately unknowable. I can understand your reaction to this statement. But it was intended to reflect the orthodox Muslim doctrine of

mukhalafa (difference) and tanzih (removal or making transcendent), which implies that God's essence is not really knowable to us . . . that the attributes or characteristics ascribed to God in the Koran are descriptions of his actions or deeds, but not of his nature or essence. This may not be widely comprehended by Muslim people, but it is a reflection of Islamic teaching. You can consult for reference the book entitled *The Call of the Minaret* by Kenneth Cragg (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 42-43.

Third, that the "prize" is after death, and not in this life. I couldn't really find a statement like this in the article. Actually, the New Testament teaches that there are many blessings that flow from our relationship with God through Jesus—both in this life and in the next. But obviously, knowing God does not shield us from ever experiencing pain and sorrow during this life. But it does assure us of the comforting grace and mercy of God, both now and after we die.

Fourth, that everyone needs forgiveness, even Muhammed. I know that among some Muslims, Muhammed is viewed as a nearly perfect man. And he obviously was a very great man. But the Koran itself testifies to his imperfection, and his need to ask forgiveness from God. See the following Koranic texts: 40.55; 41.19; 48.2. According to the the New Testament, all of us stand in need of God's forgiving grace. At one point it says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), and at another, "For the wages (penalty) of sin is death (eternal separation from God)" (Romans 6:23). This last text goes on to say, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." In other words, eternal life (which includes forgiveness of our sin, as well as fellowship with God) comes to us as a free gift. At another place the New Testament says, "For by grace are you saved, through faith; and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8-9). As it says in the Gospel of John, "Yet to all who received him (Jesus Christ), to those who believed in

his name, he (God) gave the right to become children of God" (Gospel of John 1:12).

Fifth, that the Koran does not speak of God as a God of love or as a Father to his people. I know that one of the names of God in the Koran is "Al Wadud" (the Loving, Compassionate one). I believe it is used of God only twice in the Koran (11.90 and 85.14). Yet I think it is clear that this title falls short of the Bible's description in I John 4:8 that "God is love," as well as the many examples of God actually extending his love to sinners. For example, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10). Actually, the great Islamic theologian al-Ghazzali taught that this title for God refers only to his objective acts of kindness or expressions of approval. In his work Al-Maqsad Al-Asna he says, "He (God) remains above the feeling of love" (p. 91) and "Love and mercy are desired in respect of their objects only for the sake of their fruit and benefit and not because of empathy or feeling" (p. 91). In light of this, I would have to stand by the statement in the article that in the Koran God is not spoken of as a God of love or as a Father to his people (a title never attributed to God in the Koran), as He is in the Bible.

Mr. _____, I do appreciate very much your writing to us. My purpose is not at all to offend you personally, but to encourage you to evaluate the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament, and to compare them to the teachings of Muhammed in the Koran. My wish and prayer is for God's blessing and grace on your life.

Sincerely,

Richard Rood

Do All Roads Lead to God? The Christian Attitude Toward Non-Christian Religions

Rick Rood discusses the fact of religious pluralism in our age, the origin of non-Christian religions, and the Christian's attitude toward other religions.

Few facts have become more evident in our lifetime than the fact that we live in a pluralistic world and society. With the rapid increase in the transmission of information and the ability to travel on a worldwide scale has also come an increasing awareness that both our world and society contain a multitude of diverse and conflicting viewpoints on many different issues.

No where is this pluralism more evident than in the realm of religion. More than ever before, we are conscious of the existence of the world's many religions-not only the major religions of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but also a host of smaller yet enduring religious movements.

According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, there are approximately 1 billion Muslims, over 650 million Hindus, over 300 million Buddhists, over 200 million followers of Chinese folk religion, in addition to the world's 1.6 billion nominal Christians. What is important for us to understand is that these figures are more than statistics in a book or almanac. They represent real people; people who are born, live, and die every day.

What brings this reality home even more, however, is the fact that an increasing number of followers of non-Christian

religions are living in our cities, in our communities, and in our neighborhoods. Islamic mosques and Buddhist and Hindu worship centers can be found in every metropolitan area of the United States.

As followers of Jesus Christ, what should our attitude be toward non-Christian religions and toward those who embrace them? Among those who are seeking to respond to this question, three distinct answers can be heard today. Some are saying that we must acknowledge that all religions are equally (or nearly equally) valid as ways to approach God. Though there may be superficial differences among the world's religions, at heart they are fundamentally the same. Often the analogy is used of people taking different paths up the same mountain, but all arriving at the same summit. This is the viewpoint known as religious pluralism.

Others, more anxious to preserve some sense of uniqueness for the Christian faith, yet equally desirous of projecting an attitude of tolerance and acceptance, are committed to the viewpoint known as Christian inclusivism. In their opinion, though people of another religious conviction may be ignorant of Christ—or possibly even have rejected Him—yet because of their positive response to what they know about God, or even due to their efforts to follow the dictates of their conscience, they are unknowingly included in the number of those who are recipients of Christ's salvation. The analogy is sometimes used of a person who receives a gift, but is unaware of who the ultimate giver of the gift may be.

A third viewpoint is known as Christian exclusivism. This is the viewpoint traditionally held by the majority of those who accept the Bible as their authority in spiritual matters. It is the view that though there are indeed truths and values in many other religions, there is only one saving truth, namely the gospel of Jesus Christ. This view is most naturally deduced from Jesus' well known statement: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me"

(John 14:6).

What should the Christian's attitude be toward non-Christian religions and their followers? This is a question becoming more difficult to ignore. To answer this question accurately and fairly we must look into the way non-Christian religions began.

The Origin of Non-Christian Religions

There are, of course, what we might call "naturalistic" explanations of the origin of all religions. Those committed to a naturalistic worldview that denies the existence of God or of a supernatural realm see all religions as the product of man's imagination in some way. They might say that religion is the expression of man's fear of the overwhelming forces of nature, or of his desire to overcome death. While such naturalistic factors may indeed play a role in the development of some religious sentiments, they are hardly sufficient to account for the origin of all religious belief.

From the perspective of one committed to a supernaturalistic worldview, and particularly from the Christian viewpoint, there are several elements that may have contributed to the origin of non-Christian religion. First, where we find truth in non-Christian religion, we must attribute this to God. He is the source of all truth. We know that, in the beginning, the truth about God was universally known. And it is possible that remnants of this "original revelation" have survived in the memory of peoples around the world. It is also possible that some elements of truth were implanted in some cultures by ancient contact with God's people, Israel, with early Christians, or with portions of the Scriptures. We know, for example, that Islam owes a great deal to the influence of both Judaism and Christianity due to Mohammed's early contact with representatives of both religions.

Second, we must recognize that where there is falsehood or

even a twisted perspective on the truth, this is the result of man's sinful nature in repressing the truth about God. Romans 1 states that man's nature is to suppress the truth about God that is evident to him, and to substitute for it what Paul calls "futile speculations" (Rom. 1:21).

Third, we cannot deny the influence of Satan and his demons in inspiring "counterfeit" religious expressions and experiences. For example, Psalm 106:36-37 states that those who serve idols offer sacrifices to demons. The apostle Paul says the same thing in 1 Corinthians 10:20. And in his first letter to Timothy he attributed false religious teachings to "deceitful spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1). In his second letter to the Corinthians, he stated that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14) and that he disguises many of his agents as "servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:15). Satan often promotes what is evil. But he can just as easily promote a high level of morality or religion so long as it discourages people from recognizing their need for the unmerited grace of God, expressed through the death of Jesus Christ.

In summary, non-Christian religions can (1) represent man's response to the truth about God that he knows. It can also (2) represent man's attempt to suppress the truth and substitute his own speculations. Finally, it can (3) represent the deception of Satan, who replaces the truth with a lie.

Are There Many Ways to God?

Now we must turn our attention to a related issue concerning non-Christian religions, the idea or attitude called religious pluralism. Religious pluralism suggests that there are only superficial differences among the religions and that these differences are greatly overshadowed by their similarities. Thus, to this school of thought all religions share a fundamental unity that renders them equally valid as approaches to God.

Of course, the most immediate difficulty posed by religious pluralism for the Christian is that it compels him to deny any claims to the uniqueness of Christ or of Christianity.

The claims of the New Testament that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and Savior of the world must be recast as mere exaggerations of the early Christians. It is impossible to embrace religious pluralism and hold to the authority of the New Testament when it speaks of the uniqueness of Christ and of the salvation He has provided.

Beyond this, however, religious pluralism significantly underestimates the differences between the teachings of the various religions. This can be seen, for example, in the differences between Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, with regard to their teaching concerning salvation. In classical Buddhism, the problem facing humanity is the suffering caused by desire. Since whatever man desires is impermanent, and ultimately leads to frustration and sorrow, the way to peace of mind and ultimate "salvation" is through the elimination of all desire-even the desire to live! In classical Hinduism, the problem facing humanity is our being trapped in this illusory, material world over the course of many lifetimes primarily due to our ignorance of our true identity as fundamentally divine beings! The solution to our dilemma is our recognition of our true divine nature. In Islam, man's problem is his failure to live by the law of God which has been revealed through His prophets. The solution is to commit ourselves to obeying God's laws, in hope that our good deeds will outweigh the bad. In Christianity, the problem is similar—our rebellion against the will of God. But the solution is much different. It is through faith in the sacrifice of Jesus for our sins, provided by God's unmerited grace. From these examples alone, it is evident that though there may be superficial similarities among the world's religions the differences are fundamental in nature!

Not surprisingly, most pluralists are unfazed by these

differences in belief. They emphasize that in spite of these differences, if the various religions foster a common "religious experience" or result in the moral and ethical improvement of man, this is enough to show that they are valid ways to God. The problem is that with regard to "religious experience." Even here there are significant differences. And with regard to the moral and ethical effect of the various religions, this is something impossible for us to measure. For, as Jesus so strongly emphasized, morality is as much a matter of the heart as it is of action. And this is something only God can know!

We must conclude, then, that due to its denial of the uniqueness of Christ, and to its failure to take seriously the vast differences among the world's religions, religious pluralism does not represent a valid point of view for the Christian.

Are the Followers of Other Religions Recipients of Christ's Salvation?

A more subtle and attractive theory of reaching out to non-Christians is the concept called Christian inclusivism. Inclusivists hold that, though Christ is the unique Savior, nonetheless there are many people included in His salvation who are ignorant of this fact—even followers of other religions.

Inclusivists generally hold that Christ's salvation is available to those who positively respond to the truth they have—whether it be through creation, conscience, another religion, or some other means. Such individuals are sometimes termed anonymous Christians.

There is no question that this is a very attractive approach to the problem of world religions. Inclusivism seeks to widen the extent of God's grace while still preserving a commitment to the uniqueness of Christ. It must be acknowledged also,

that God could have arranged things in this way if He had so chosen. The question is not, however, whether inclusivism is an attractive position, or a logically possible one, but whether the evidence is convincing that it is true. And for the Christian, this means the evidence of Scripture.

Inclusivists generally recognize this and seek to find support for their view in Scripture. We will briefly look at one biblical example that is often used to support the idea of inclusivism—the case of Cornelius the centurion recorded in Acts 10.

In this chapter Cornelius is referred to as "a devout man, . . . who feared God," even before he heard the gospel. This is often pointed to as evidence that he was an anonymous Christian before believing in Christ. It must be remembered, however, that in the next chapter (specifically in Acts 11:14), it is clearly stated that though Cornelius was favorably disposed to God he did not receive salvation until he heard and believed in the gospel.

Other examples could be discussed. But in each case we would see that a good deal must be read into (or out of) the text to arrive at the conclusion that salvation can come to those who do not know Christ.

Furthermore, there are clear statements that it is necessary to hear and believe in the gospel to receive salvation. Perhaps the clearest is Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of (or about) Christ." Hebrews 9:27 also strongly suggests that this faith in Christ must be expressed before we die: "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

What then of people, like Cornelius, who do respond to the truth they know about God, but do not yet know of Christ? Is there no hope for them? Actually, the case of Cornelius provides a good illustration of what seems to be the biblical

solution to this problem. Because he had responded to what he knew about God, God saw that he eventually received the gospel—in his case through Peter. But it was only then that he experienced Christ's salvation and the forgiveness of sins. This principle was also well summarized in Jesus' statement: "To him who has, shall more be given" (Mark 4:25).

Based on our confidence in the faithfulness of God, we can be assured that the gospel will come to all those whom God knows would be prepared, like Cornelius, to receive it. And He has commissioned us to carry the message to them!

What Should Our Attitude Be Toward Other Religions?

In the course of this short discussion we have examined the attitude of religious pluralism, as well as that of Christian inclusivism. The former holds that all religions are equally valid. The latter holds that Christ is the unique savior, but that His salvation can extend to followers of other religions. In both cases, we concluded that the evidence in support of these views is inadequate.

The only remaining option is the attitude of Christian exclusivism—the view that biblical Christianity is true, and that other religious systems are false. This is more than implied in numerous biblical statements, such as in Acts 4:12: "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved."

This is not to say, however, that there are no truths at all in non-Christian religions. There are certainly moral and ethical truths, for instance, in Buddhism. In Buddha's Eightfold Path, he appealed to his followers to pursue honesty, charity, and service, and to abstain from murder and lust. We should certainly affirm these ethical truths.

Likewise, there are theological truths in other religions—truths about God that we could equally affirm. These may be more scarce in religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. But Orthodox Judaism and Islam certainly share our belief in a personal Creator—God, though Christianity is unique in the monotheistic tradition with regard to the doctrine of the Trinity. There are even truths about Jesus that we share in common with Muslims—that He was a prophet of God, and the Messiah, and that He worked many miracles, though they deny that He was the Son of God, or that He died for the sins of the world.

We can, and should affirm these moral and theological truths that we share in common with followers of other religions. We must acknowledge, however, that in no other religion is any saving truth to be found. And as mentioned earlier, there is no other religion that presents the human dilemma, or solution to that dilemma, in quite the same way as does the Christian faith. In Christianity, the problem is not ignorance of our divine nature—as in Hinduism—nor simply our desire—as in Buddhism. The problem is our alienation from God and His blessing due to our failure to live according to His will—what the Bible calls sin. And the solution is neither in self-discipline, nor in revised thinking, nor even in moral effort. The solution lies in the grace of God, expressed in His provision of His Son, Jesus Christ, as a sacrifice for our sin. Salvation is not something we achieve; it is something we receive.

It is clear, then, that though there are superficial similarities among the world's religions, there are fundamental differences. And the most important difference is the person and work of Christ.

What should our attitude be toward followers of other religions? It is important for us to distinguish our attitude toward non-Christian religions from our attitude toward followers of those religions. Though we are to reject the

religion, we are not to reject them by mistakenly perceiving them to be “the enemy.” The biblical injunction is to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves no matter what their religion. Rather than viewing them as “the enemy,” we should see them as “the victims” of the enemy who are in need of the same grace that has freed us from spiritual slavery—in need of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

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Reaching The World That Has Come to Us

World Missions in Perspective

What images or conceptions enter your mind when you hear the phrase *world missions*? Do you think of khaki clad missionaries fighting their way through impenetrable forests? Do you think of sparsely attended meetings featuring pictures of a world totally unrelated to your day-to-day life? Or does the phrase *world missions* evoke a sense of excitement and opportunity?

Though the phrase *world missions* never appears in Scripture, the concept of penetrating every culture in the world with the message of God’s gracious provision through Christ, captures one of the most important themes of the Bible! From Genesis to Revelation, world missions is at the heart of God’s purpose on earth.

Immediately following the record of God’s judgment at Babel, which resulted in the division of the human race into diverse nations and cultures, we read of God’s selection of Abram and

his descendants as His special people. God promised to make of Abram's seed "a great nation" and to "make great their name" (Gen. 12:1-2). But He made it clear that beyond His intention to bless the children of Abram, God had a multicultural purpose in view: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was God's design that through Israel He might reach a world that had spurned His love.

One of the most familiar passages of Scripture is found at the end of Matthew's Gospel; we call it the Great Commission. Among the final words of Jesus were his instructions to "make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:18-20). And for the past two thousand years the church has been on a mission to penetrate every culture with the message of God's grace. In this way we've filled the role of Abram's seed in bringing God's blessing to "all the families of the earth" by going into all the world with the gospel.

But what of the two millennia that have transpired between God's declaration to Abram of His multicultural purpose, and Jesus' pronouncement of the Great Commission? How did God fulfill His purpose to bless all nations before the church existed? He did it through His people, Israel. A hint is given, I believe, in a divine statement recorded by the prophet Ezekiel: "This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her" (Ezek. 5:5). A glance at a world map will reveal that God placed Israel at the crossroads of three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe. He could not have chosen a more strategic location through which to influence the entire world! As diplomats, merchants, and armies traversed the world, they inevitably passed through that tiny strip of land which God had deeded to Abram's seed!

When King Solomon offered his prayer of dedication for the temple in Jerusalem, he included these words: "Also concerning the foreigner who is not of Thy people Israel, when he comes from a far country for Thy name's sake (for they will hear of Thy great name and Thy mighty hand, and of Thine outstretched

arm); when he comes and prays toward this house, hear Thou in heaven…, and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to Thee, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know Thy name, to fear Thee…" (1 Kings 8:41-43).

For two thousand years at least, God's method for fulfilling His multicultural purpose, rather than sending His people to the nations of the world, was to bring the world to His people. The Great Commission, issued after two thousand years, reflected an adjustment in God's method. But as we shall see, it did not mark an end to His practice of bringing the world to His people, wherever they might be.

World Missions In Reverse

In the fifth chapter of Revelation we read of the vision of the throne of God granted to the apostle John, and of the heavenly worship of Christ. In the course of the vision, the apostle hears sung these words: "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev. 5:9). This heavenly anthem makes note of the fulfillment of a purpose which God declared nearly four thousand years ago, to extend his grace to every nation on earth.

This purpose has been fulfilled during the past two thousand years primarily through the response of faithful Christians to Jesus' Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But as we discussed above, the Great Commission, rather than signaling the beginning of the fulfillment of God's multicultural purpose, simply reflected an adjustment in God's method of carrying it out. For centuries, God had been reaching out to a spiritually needy world not primarily by sending His people to the world, but by bringing the world to His people. He did it by placing His people Israel at the crossroads of three continents, with the intent of using their influence to draw the nations of the

world to Himself.

To prepare them for this special assignment, God gave His people Israel some very specific instructions with regard to how they should conduct themselves toward these “alien visitors.” First, He said, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself” (Lev. 19 33-34a). International visitors were to receive a warm and loving welcome in Israel. This alone would make Israel unique among the nations of the world!

But second, they were to give the alien an opportunity to know God, through exposure to the Scriptures. In giving instructions concerning the reading of Scripture at the Feast of Tabernacles, the Lord said, “Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, in order that they may hear and learn and fear the Lord your God” (Deut. 31:11-12).

What is of interest to us, however, is that even with the giving of the Great Commission to go into all the world with the gospel, God continued to bring the world to his people, wherever they might be.

This was evident, for instance, even on the day of Pentecost itself. As the Holy Spirit was giving birth to the church, it’s recorded in the book of Acts that “there were Jews living in Jerusalem…from every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5). At the church’s inception, God had brought the world to His people.

A while later we read that a man had come to Jerusalem to worship, who “was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure” (Acts 8:27). As he was returning to Ethiopia, he was intercepted by Philip, whom God had directed across his path.

As the church was growing, God continued to bring the world to His people.

A bit later we read of “a certain man at Caesarea named Cornelius, a centurion of what was called the Italian cohort” (Acts 10:1). Through a series of extraordinary circumstances, God led Peter to Cornelius’ house to explain to him the gospel through which he came to know Christ.

Throughout the church’s history, God has continued to fulfill His purpose to extend His grace to every nation, not only by sending His people to the world, but also by bringing the world to His people. And the instructions He gave to Israel concerning their treatment of the international visitor are as valid for us today in our own situation as they were for them so many centuries ago!

The World at Our Doorstep

Most Christians have a sincere desire to be involved in the work of world missions, and faithfully pray for and contribute to those missions that God has laid on their hearts. Yet few of us realize that it’s possible to be involved in the world’s most exciting enterprise in an even more direct way, by befriending and ministering to the world of international students whom God has brought to us!

Every year approximately half a million students from virtually every nation on earth are enrolled in the colleges and universities of the U.S., more than in any other country! And I agree with Rev. Billy Graham when he said that the presence of these future world leaders constitutes one of the most strategic missions opportunities for the church today. Consider for a moment just a few facts about this group of international students.

First, more than half of these students generally come from countries that restrict or prohibit traditional Christian

ministry within their borders. It's difficult to carry on the work of Christian ministry in countries like China, Malaysia, or Nepal. Yet each of these countries sends many students to the U.S. every year. In fact, approximately sixty percent of the international students in the U.S. come from what is known as the "10/40 Window." This is the group of countries located in the area between the 10th and 40th degree northern parallels, in which 90 percent of the world's "unreached peoples" reside! As one person has put it, "The door into these countries may be closed or barely open, but the door out is wide open!"

The second fact about these international students is that they compose the pool from which many of the world's future leaders will emerge. Mark Hanna, in a talk delivered at Park Street Church in Boston in 1975, said that one-third to one-half of the world's top positions in politics, business, education and the military would be filled in the following twenty-five years by foreign students then attending colleges and universities in the United States.{1} How much more could this be true today! Consider this list of just a few of the scores of international leaders who received their college education in the U.S.: Jose Napoleon Duarte of El Salvador studied at Notre Dame; Corazon Aquino studied at the College of Mount St. Vincent in New York; Ingvar Carlsson of Sweden studied at Northwestern; Andreas Papandreou of Greece studied at Harvard, as did King Birendra Bir Bikram Shad Dev of Nepal. As recently as 1987, some forty heads of state were educated in America.

Not only do many international students originate from countries that restrict Christian ministry, and not only are many of them destined to fill positions of leadership in their home countries, but while they are here they're generally more receptive to considering new ideas than they would be at home. And not only this, but these students are invariably in need of genuine friendship during their stay in the U.S.

Some time ago a study was done to determine the factors which contributed to the adjustment of international students to their stay in America. It was found that those who were best adjusted to their sojourn in the U.S. had two things in common. First, they had a close friend from their home country. And second, they had forged a close friendship with an American. Yet it was also found that no more than twenty percent of international students have such a friendship with an American, and fewer still have ever stepped foot inside an American home!

Students Among Us

In the 1950s a young man from Ethiopia came for military training to Aberdeen, Maryland. During the course of his stay, as the result of unfortunate experiences, he became embittered against America, and against the Christian faith. After his training here he returned to Ethiopia, and in 1974 participated as a key figure in the military coup which resulted in the establishment of a Marxist regime. Among his actions as head of state over the new government, were the launching of a campaign to root out “alien” religion in Ethiopia. In a speech to the nation, he named missionaries as the number one source of “imperialist infiltration” in Ethiopia. Many missionaries were expelled, and many national Christians were imprisoned. Churches were closed, and the formerly Christian radio station was converted into a voice for Marxist propaganda. The student’s name was Mengistu Mariam.

About the time Mengistu was returning to Ethiopia, another student by the name of Tuisem Shishak arrived in Chicago from India, and later completed his Ph.D. in education at the State University of New York-Buffalo. While he was here Christian friends encouraged Tuisem in his faith, and encouraged him in his vision to return to India to establish a Christian college. In 1974 he did exactly that, founding Patkai

Christian College, the first Christian liberal arts college in India. Since then, hundreds of graduates have entered India's society to fill positions of leadership in business, government, agriculture, the arts, and Christian ministry.

About the time Tuisem Shishak was returning to India, a Muslim student from Afghanistan arrived to study at an east coast university. In 1980 he received his Ph.D. in education. While he was here, as the result of being befriended by a Christian family, he came to faith in Christ. This student went on to translate Christian educational materials into his native tongue of Dari, and to record gospel broadcasts transmitted into Afghanistan, Pakistan, and southern Russia.

A number of years ago, Hal Guffey (former president of International Students, Inc.) was speaking to a group of Christians about the opportunity to befriend international students. At the end of his talk a young lady from another country approached him. She told him that though her father had not become a Christian as a result of his student days in the U.S., nonetheless he had returned home with a favorable impression of Christians. Many years later he found himself in a position to decide whether Christian missionaries should be allowed to remain in his country. He decided they should be allowed to stay.

These are just a few of the thousands of similar stories that could be told about students who have come to America, and have returned to make a contribution in their home countries. While they were here, their attitudes toward the U.S. and toward American Christianity were indelibly shaped by their personal experiences. Some of them returned with an attitude that could be characterized as less than friendly. Others have returned with at least a positive impression of America and American Christians. And not a few have taken with them a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, as a result of their encounter with Christian friends.

Reaching Out

We've noted that at least half of these students come from countries that restrict or prohibit Christian ministry. We've also noted that at least 80 percent of these international students eventually return home, many of them to fill positions of leadership in their home countries—whether in business, education, government, or some other field. Some believe that as many as half of the world's future leaders are studying at American universities today.

We also recounted some of the stories of international students who have studied among us, and who returned home with attitudes that determined their future actions toward the work of Christ. Some returned to do much harm. Others returned, not only as faithful disciples of the Lord Jesus, but as effective leaders in Christian ministry in their own country.

In the case of the latter, God invariably used an American Christian who was willing to invest a little of his time in befriending and encouraging an international student in his pursuit of a relationship with God. In surveying international students who have come to know Christ during their stay in the U.S., two elements were voiced over and over again. The first was that they had enjoyed more than a merely surface relationship with a Christian friend. Someone had taken the initiative to express real love and concern to them, and had demonstrated a life of Christian integrity. Not that they had attempted to project an image of perfection or an impeccable spiritual life. But in some way a life of genuine love and faith had made an impact they could not forget. Several years ago, in the wake of the bloody incident at Tiananmen Square in Beijing, American Christians acted to assist students from China in the U.S. who had extraordinary needs. I remember one student who said in my presence, "You Christians really care about us, don't you." Another student who was from India stated publicly that though he had not yet become a Christian,

nonetheless Christians had expressed the most genuine concern to him and he counted them as his closest friends. He has since come to faith in Christ.

The other element God used in drawing these students to Himself was a careful exposure to the Scriptures. In many cases, we may be surprised to learn that our international friend has never even opened a Bible before we invite him or her to study it with us. I recall one Chinese student who stated to me at the outset of a personal study, “This is my first exposure to the Bible.” Another student agreed to meet over lunch once a week to study the Scriptures. He told me as we began our series of studies, “I’m open to God.” Several months later, after completing an overview of the life of Christ, I asked him who he believed Jesus Christ to be. He said to me, “Jesus is the Son of God. And He is my Savior.”

A number of years ago, a Muslim student from Jordan was studying at a major university in southern California. He was befriended by a Christian worker on his campus, who shared with him the message of the gospel. At first, this student said he was not interested. But over time, and as a result of this Christian’s consistent love toward this student, he came to know Jesus Christ in a personal way. Later, this student decided to attend an evangelical seminary here in the U.S., and eventually returned to found the first evangelical seminary in Jordan. What made the difference in this student’s life, and in the future of the church in Jordan? The faithful love and witness of one Christian in southern California.

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Notes

1. Lawson Lau, *The World at Your Doorstep* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 13.

Resources

Andrews, Dick and Stacey Bieler. *China at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987.

Lau, Lawson. *The World at Your Doorstep*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984.

To learn more about ministry to international students, we highly recommend that you write to International Students, Inc., requesting information on how to launch such a ministry in your home church (or just on a personal basis), and for a list of their published materials. You can contact them at:

International Students, Inc.
P.O. Box C
Colorado Springs, CO 80901
Phone: (719) 576-2700
http://www.isionline.org

The Problem of Evil

Rick Rood helps us understand the challenging question of evil and why it is allowed to remain in this world. Speaking from a Christian worldview perspective, he gives us a thorough understanding of how Christians should consider and deal with

evil in this world. The Bible does not shirk from addressing the nature and existence of evil AND our responsibility to stand against it.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

The Problem of Evil – Introduction

John Stott has said that "the fact of suffering undoubtedly constitutes the single greatest challenge to the Christian faith." It is unquestionably true that there is no greater obstacle to faith than that of the reality of evil and suffering in the world. Indeed, even for the believing Christian, there is no greater test of faith than this—that the God who loves him permits him to suffer, at times in excruciating ways. And the disillusionment is intensified in our day when unrealistic expectations of health and prosperity are fed by the teachings of a multitude of Christian teachers. Why does a good God allow his creatures, and even his children to suffer?

First, it's important to distinguish between two kinds of evil: moral evil and natural evil. Moral evil results from the actions of free creatures. Murder, rape and theft are examples. Natural evil results from natural processes such as earthquakes and floods. Of course, sometimes the two are intermingled, such as when flooding results in loss of human life due to poor planning or shoddy construction of buildings.

It's also important to identify two aspects of the problem of evil and suffering. First, there is the philosophical or apologetic aspect. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the skeptic who challenges the possibility or probability that a God exists who would allow such suffering. In meeting this apologetic challenge we must utilize the tools of reason and evidence in "giving a reason for the hope within us." (I Pet. 3:15)

Second is the religious or emotional aspect of the problem of evil. This is the problem of evil approached from the standpoint of the believer whose faith in God is severely tested by trial. How can we love and worship God when He allows us to suffer in these ways? In meeting the religious/emotional challenge we must appeal to the truth revealed by God in Scripture. We will address both aspects of the problem of evil in this essay.

It's also helpful to distinguish between two types of the philosophical or apologetic aspect of the problem of evil. The first is the logical challenge to belief in God. This challenge says it is irrational and hence impossible to believe in the existence of a good and powerful God on the basis of the existence of evil in the world. The logical challenge is usually posed in the form of a statement such as this:

1. A good God would destroy evil.
2. An all powerful God could destroy evil.
3. Evil is not destroyed.
4. Therefore, there cannot possibly be such a good and powerful God.

It is logically impossible to believe that both evil, and a good and powerful God exist in the same reality, for such a God certainly could and would destroy evil.

On the other hand, the evidential challenge contends that while it may be rationally possible to believe such a God exists, it is highly improbable or unlikely that He does. We have evidence of so much evil that is seemingly pointless and of such horrendous intensity. For what valid reason would a good and powerful God allow the amount and kinds of evil which we see around us?

These issues are of an extremely important nature—not only as we seek to defend our belief in God, but also as we live out

our Christian lives.{1}

The Logical Problem of Evil

We have noted that there are two aspects of the problem of evil: the philosophical or apologetic, and the religious or emotional aspect. We also noted that within the philosophical aspect there are two types of challenges to faith in God: the logical and the evidential.

David Hume, the eighteenth century philosopher, stated the logical problem of evil when he inquired about God, "Is He willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then He is impotent. Is He able, but not willing? Then He is malevolent. Is He both able and willing? Whence then is evil?" (Craig, 80). When the skeptic challenges belief in God on the basis of the logical problem of evil, he is suggesting that it is irrational or logically impossible to believe in the existence of both a good and all powerful God and in the reality of evil and suffering. Such a God would not possibly allow evil to exist.

The key to the resolution of this apparent conflict is to recognize that when we say God is all powerful, we do not imply that He is capable of doing anything imaginable. True, Scripture states that "with God all things are possible" (Mt. 19:26). But Scripture also states that there are some things God cannot do. For instance, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). Neither can He be tempted to sin, nor can He tempt others to sin (James 1:13). In other words, He cannot do anything that is "out of character" for a righteous God. Neither can He do anything that is out of character for a rational being in a rational world. Certainly even God cannot "undo the past," or create a square triangle, or make what is false true. He cannot do what is irrational or absurd.

And it is on this basis that we conclude that God could not eliminate evil without at the same time rendering it impossible to accomplish other goals which are important to

Him. Certainly, for God to create beings in his own image, who are capable of sustaining a personal relationship with Him, they must be beings who are capable of freely loving Him and following his will without coercion. Love or obedience on any other basis would not be love or obedience at all, but mere compliance. But creatures who are free to love God must also be free to hate or ignore Him. Creatures who are free to follow His will must also be free to reject it. And when people act in ways outside the will of God, great evil and suffering is the ultimate result. This line of thinking is known as the "free will defense" concerning the problem of evil.

But what about natural evil—evil resulting from natural processes such as earthquakes, floods and diseases? Here it is important first to recognize that we live in a fallen world, and that we are subject to natural disasters that would not have occurred had man not chosen to rebel against God. Even so, it is difficult to imagine how we could function as free creatures in a world much different than our own—a world in which consistent natural processes allow us to predict with some certainty the consequences of our choices and actions. Take the law of gravity, for instance. This is a natural process without which we could not possibly function as human beings, yet under some circumstances it is also capable of resulting in great harm.

Certainly, God is capable of destroying evil—but not without destroying human freedom, or a world in which free creatures can function. And most agree that this line of reasoning does successfully respond to the challenge of the logical problem of evil.

The Evidential Problem of Evil

While most agree that belief in a good and powerful God is rationally possible, nonetheless many contend that the existence of such a God is improbable due to the nature of the

evil which we see in the world about us. They conclude that if such a God existed it is highly unlikely that He would allow the amount and intensity of evil which we see in our world. Evil which frequently seems to be of such a purposeless nature.

This charge is not to be taken lightly, for evidence abounds in our world of evil of such a horrendous nature that it is difficult at times to fathom what possible purpose it could serve. However, difficult as this aspect of the problem of evil is, careful thinking will show that there are reasonable responses to this challenge.

Surely it is difficult for us to understand why God would allow some things to happen. But simply because we find it difficult to imagine what reasons God could have for permitting them, does not mean that no such reasons exist. It is entirely possible that such reasons are not only beyond our present knowledge, but also beyond our present ability to understand. A child does not always understand the reasons that lie behind all that his father allows or does not allow him to do. It would be unrealistic for us to expect to understand all of God's reasons for allowing all that He does. We do not fully understand many things about the world we live in—what lies behind the force of gravity for instance, or the exact function of subatomic particles. Yet we believe in these physical realities.

Beyond this, however, we can suggest possible reasons for God allowing some of the horrendous evils which do exist in our world. Perhaps there are people who would never sense their utter dependence on God apart from experiencing the intense pain that they do in life (Ps. 119:71). Perhaps there are purposes that God intends to accomplish among his angelic or demonic creatures which require his human creatures to experience some of the things that we do (Job 1-2). It may be that the suffering we experience in this life is somehow preparatory to our existence in the life to come (2 Cor.

4:16-18). Even apart from the revelation of Scripture, these are all possible reasons behind God's permission of evil. And at any rate, most people agree that there is much more good in the world than evil—at least enough good to make life well worth the living.

In responding to the challenge to belief in God based on the intensity and seeming purposelessness of much evil in the world, we must also take into account all of the positive evidence that points to his existence: the evidence of design in nature, the historical evidence for the reliability of Scripture and of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In light of the totality of the evidence, it certainly cannot be proven that there are no sufficient reasons for God's allowing the amount of evil that we see in the world…or even that it is improbable that such reasons exist.

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part I

But the existence of evil and suffering in our world poses more than a merely philosophical or apologetic problem. It also poses a very personal religious and emotional problem for the person who is enduring great trial. Although our painful experience may not challenge our belief that God exists, what may be at risk is our confidence in a God we can freely worship and love, and in whose love we can feel secure. Much harm can be done when we attempt to aid a suffering brother or sister by merely dealing with the intellectual aspects of this problem, or when we seek to find solace for ourselves in this way. Far more important than answers about the nature of God, is a revelation of the love of God—even in the midst of trial. And as God's children, it is not nearly as important what we say about God as what we do to manifest his love.

First, it is evident from Scripture that when we suffer it is not unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor is it unspiritual to express it. It is noteworthy for instance that there are nearly as many psalms of lament as there are psalms

of praise and thanksgiving, and these two sentiments are mingled together in many places (cf. Pss. 13, 88). Indeed, the psalmist encourages us to “pour out our hearts to God” (Ps. 62:8). And when we do, we can be assured that God understands our pain. Jesus Himself keenly felt the painful side of life. When John the Baptist was beheaded it is recorded that “He withdrew to a lonely place” obviously to mourn his loss (Mt. 14:13). And when his friend Lazarus died, it is recorded that Jesus openly wept at his tomb (Jn. 11:35). Even though He was committed to following the Father’s will to the cross, He confessed to being filled with anguish of soul in contemplating it (Mt. 26:38). It is not without reason that Jesus was called “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa. 53:3); and we follow in his steps when we truthfully acknowledge our own pain.

We cross the line, however, from sorrow to sin when we allow our grief to quench our faith in God, or follow the counsel that Job was offered by his wife when she told him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9b).

Secondly, when we suffer we should draw comfort from reflecting on Scriptures which assure us that God knows and cares about our situation, and promises to be with us to comfort and uphold us. The psalmist tells us that “the Lord is near to the brokenhearted” (Ps. 34:18), and that when we go through the “valley of the shadow of death” it is then that his presence is particularly promised to us (Ps. 23:4). Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, “Can a woman forget her nursing child, and have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Isa. 49:15). He is more mindful of us than is a nursing mother toward her child! It is of the One whom we know as the “God of all comfort and Father of mercies” that Peter speaks when He bids us to cast our anxieties on Him, “for He cares for us” (1 Pet. 5:7). Our cares are his personal concern!

The Religious Problem of Evil – Part II

We noted that when suffering strikes it is neither unnatural to experience emotional pain, nor unspiritual to express it. But we also noted that when suffering strikes, we must be quick to reflect on the character of God and on the promises He gives to those who are enduring great trial. Now we want to focus on one of the great truths of God's Word—that even in severe trial God is working all things together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). This is not at all to imply that evil is somehow good. But it does mean that we are to recognize that even in what is evil God is at work to bring about his good purposes in our lives.

Joseph gave evidence of having learned this truth when after years of unexplained suffering due to the betrayal of his brothers, he was able to say to them, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). Though God did not cause his brothers to betray him, nonetheless He was able to use it in furthering his good intentions.

This is the great hope we have in the midst of suffering, that in a way beyond our comprehension, God is able to turn evil against itself. And it is because of this truth that we can find joy even in the midst of sorrow and pain. The apostle Paul described himself as "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). And we are counseled to rejoice in trial, not because the affliction itself is a cause for joy (it is not), but because in it God can find an occasion for producing what is good.

What are some of those good purposes suffering promotes? For one, suffering can provide an opportunity for God to display his glory—to make evident his mercy, faithfulness, power and love in the midst of painful circumstances (Jn. 9:1-3). Suffering can also allow us to give proof of the genuineness of our faith, and even serve to purify our faith (1 Pet. 1:7). As in the case of Job, our faithfulness in trial shows that we

serve Him not merely for the benefits He offers, but for the love of God Himself (Job 1:9-11). Severe trial also provides an opportunity for believers to demonstrate their love for one another as members of the body of Christ who "bear one another's burdens" (1 Cor 12:26; Gal. 6:2). Indeed, as D.A. Carson has said, "experiences of suffering… engender compassion and empathy…, and make us better able to help others" (Carson, 122). As we are comforted by God in affliction, so we are better able to comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4). Suffering also plays a key role in developing godly virtues, and in deterring us from sin. Paul recognized that his "thorn in the flesh" served to keep him from boasting, and promoted true humility and dependence on God (2 Cor. 12:7). The psalmist recognized that his affliction had increased his determination to follow God's will (Ps. 119:71). Even Jesus "learned obedience from the things He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). As a man He learned by experience the value of submitting to the will of God, even when it was the most difficult thing in the world to do.

Finally, evil and suffering can awaken in us a greater hunger for heaven, and for that time when God's purposes for these experiences will have been finally fulfilled, when pain and sorrow shall be no more (Rev. 21:4).

Note

1. The line of reasoning in the first three sections of this article can be found in many sources on the problem of evil. Chapters 3 and 4 of William Lane Craig's book cited in the resources below has served as a general guide for my comments here.

Resources for Further Study:

• Blocker, Henri. *Evil and the Cross*. Tr. by David G. Preston. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
• Briggs, Lauren. *What You Can Say…When You Don't Know What to*

Say: Reaching Out to Those Who Hurt. Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1985.
• Carson, D.A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990.
• Craig, William Lane. *No Easy Answers: Finding Hope in Doubt, Failure, and Unanswered Prayer*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1990.
• Dobson, James. *When God Doesn't Make Sense*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1993.
• Dunn, Ronald. *When Heaven is Silent: Live by Faith, Not by Sight*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1994.
• Feinberg, John S. *The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.
• Ferguson, Sinclair B. *Deserted by God?* Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993.
• Geisler, Norman L. *The Roots of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978.
• Kreeft, Peter. *Making Sense Out of Suffering*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986.
• Lockyer, Herbert. *Dark Threads the Weaver Needs*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1979.
• McGrath, Alister E. *Suffering & God*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995.
• Plantinga, Alvin C. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974.

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Is There Really a Hell?

Rick Rood discusses the biblical teaching on hell, as well as the practical effects of this belief for Christians.

This article is also available in Spanish. 

The story has been told of C. S. Lewis listening to a young preacher's sermon on the subject of God's judgment on sin. At the end of his message, the young man said: "If you do not receive Christ as Savior, you will suffer grave eschatalogical ramifications!" After the service, Lewis asked him the question, "Do you mean that a person who doesn't believe in Christ will go to hell?" "Precisely," was his response. "Then say so," Lewis replied. (1)

This story illustrates something that most Christians know, but few articulate: that of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the one we feel most uncomfortable discussing is the doctrine of eternal punishment or hell. And it is not difficult to understand why this is so. The doctrine of hell is offensive to unbelievers, and contradicts the emphasis on tolerance and on human potential that dominates our times. Who of us enjoys alienating our friends by speaking of eternal judgment for sin? For many of us, the doctrine of hell is also difficult to reconcile with the the love and grace of God. Furthermore, we are well aware of Christians who have misused the doctrine of hell by using it to manipulate and control other people. In seeking to distance ourselves from the abuse of this doctrine, and to avoid appearing intolerant and uncaring, many of us have eliminated the word "hell" entirely from our vocabulary (making our belief an entirely personal matter).

Recent surveys have revealed some very interesting facts about current attitudes toward hell. A survey conducted by George Gallup in 1990 revealed that just under 60% of Americans believe there is a hell (down over 10% from 1978), though only 4% believe that hell was their own personal destination. A survey in the mid-1980s of American evangelical college and seminary students revealed that only one in ten believed that the first step in influencing unbelievers for Christ should be

to warn about hell. 46% of seminary students believed that to emphasize to non-believers that eternal judgment would be a consequence of rejecting Christ was "in poor taste." A survey conducted in 1981 revealed that 50% of theology faculty believe in the existence of hell (61% of Roman Catholics, and 34% of Protestants)! (2)

In spite of the prevailing current attitudes toward hell revealed by these surveys, however, it is still apparent to most Christians that the doctrine of hell is firmly grounded in the teaching of Scripture. All but one of the letters of the Apostle Paul mention the wrath or judgment of God on sin. And of the twelve uses of the word *gehenna* (the strongest word for hell) in the New Testament, eleven come from the lips of Jesus himself! In fact, the Savior taught more about hell than He did about heaven! Of the more than 1850 verses recording the words of Christ, 13% pertain to the topics of judgment and hell. Of the 40 or so parables uttered by Jesus, more than half relate to God's eternal judgment on sin. Surprisingly, the much beloved "Sermon on the Mount" contains some of Jesus' most straightforward words about hell!

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

In his book simply titled "Inferno," Dante Alighieri describes in great detail his imaginary tour through nine levels of hell. Dante's book makes for fascinating reading. But to learn what hell is really like, we must turn to another source: the Bible.

As we begin reading through the Old Testament, we find frequent references to "sheol" (the world of departed spirits) as the abode of all the dead (cf. Deut. 32:22). As we continue reading, we find also that a day will come when the bodies of all who are in sheol will be resurrected: some to "everlasting life" but others to "everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2).

The common belief of godly rabbis during the intertestamental

era that sheol was divided into two sections is reflected in the New Testament, which refers to the abode of the righteous as “Paradise” (Lk. 23:43) or “Abraham’s bosom” (Lk. 16:22), and the abode of the unrighteous as “Hades” (Lk. 16:23). After Christ’s resurrection, it appears that those who resided in Paradise were ushered into the presence of God in heaven where they await the future resurrection of their bodies. But those who are in Hades await a resurrection to a different destination– hell.

The word that is used most frequently in the New Testament for hell is *Gehenna*. Gehenna is a reference to the Valley of Hinnom located on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the city’s “garbage dump” during Jesus’ time. The fires that burned here never went out.

As did his contemporaries, Jesus referred to Gehenna as the place where “the fire is not quenched” and where “their worm does not die” (Mk. 9:48). Whether He implied a literal flame and a literal worm is not of great importance. Jesus also described hell as a place of “outer darkness” (Mt. 22:13). But it is clear that He meant us to understand that hell is a place of continual deterioration and suffering for those who inhabit it! Jesus also referred to those who were cast into hell as being “cast outside” (Mt. 8:12), or as Paul simply puts it “away from the presence of the Lord” (II Thess. 1:9). Hell is a place of exclusion and loss of every blessing that comes from God. Hell is described as a place of “contempt” by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 12:2)—where every person is despised by every other inhabitant. As one writer has put it: “Sinners in hell will have company but no sympathy” (3)

Jesus said hell will be a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:42). The weeping no doubt speaks of terrible remorse and grief. But the gnashing of teeth speaks of intense anger—anger at oneself, anger at Satan, anger at God. Paul speaks of hell’s inhabitants as experiencing “wrath and anger … trouble and distress” (Rom. 2:8-9).

The Bible also tells us that in hell not all will be judged alike. Jesus made it clear that there will be degrees of judgment in hell. He said that the one "who knew his master's will and did not … act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few" (Lk. 12:47-48). But though not all will be judged equally, all will be judged with certainty. Exodus 34:7 tells us that though the Lord is "compassionate and gracious, … yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished."

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Does the Bible teach that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for sin? One alternative proposal is that for many (if not all) a second opportunity will be given after death to respond to the grace of God. Appeal is usually made to the statement in Peter's first letter that "the gospel … has been preached even to those who are dead" (4:6). William Barclay states that in this passage we find a "glimpse of nothing less than the gospel of a second chance" (Commentary on the Epistles of Peter). Yet, the context makes clear that he is speaking of those to whom the gospel was preached during their lifetime, but who now were deceased! There is no indication at all that a "post-mortem" opportunity to repent exists.

In John 8, Jesus says that for those who "die in their sins" there is no possibility of joining Him in heaven (vv. 21,24). In contrasting the expectation of the believer of being reunited with loved ones in heaven, he says that unbelievers "have no (such) hope" (I Thess. 4:13). These statements are difficult to reconcile with the belief that the deceased are offered a second opportunity after death. Hebrews 9:27 says that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

Another proposal, that is gaining a wider acceptance today, is that unbelievers will simply be snuffed out of existence or "annihilated." Support for this belief is often sought in statements throughout Scripture that describe sinners as "perishing" or being "destroyed." The psalmist says, "May the wicked perish before God" (68:2). The same word, however, is used in Isaiah 57:1 to refer to the righteous: "The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart." It is clear that in the latter case, the word implies "severe suffering." It could not possibly mean that the righteous are "extinguished." There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the opposite is the case when the word is used to describe the fate of sinners. To "perish" or be "destroyed" means to "suffer ruin," not to be "annihilated."

That the Bible teaches eternal conscious punishment for sin in hell, is the only deduction that can be reached from the fact that the most emphatic words available to the biblical writers were consistently used to describe hell's endless duration, as well as to describe the duration of heaven, and even the eternal existence of God! Just as Jesus described the destiny of the righteous as "eternal life," so He described the destiny of the unrighteous as "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:46). Just as John described God as the one who "lives forever and ever" (Rev. 15:7), so He described the fire of hell as lasting "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11).

Sometimes it is said that the Greek word for eternal (*aionios*) really means "age lasting," implying that at the end of a series of ages God will empty hell of all its inhabitants. Those who hold this interpretation, however, fail to recall that while this present age is finite in duration, it was the common understanding among Jesus' listeners that the "age to come" was eternal!

In reference to the fate of Judas, Jesus said: "It would have been better for him if he had never been born" (Mt. 26:24). If indeed it is as terrible a fate as these words suggest, and if

it is eternal in duration, why would a loving God send people to hell? If God is a God of love, why would He consign anyone to an eternity as terrible as the Bible describes the fate of those whose destiny is hell?

Perhaps the biblical doctrine of hell can begin to make more sense to us when we reexamine our understanding of two other teachings of Scripture: the nature of God, and the nature of man and of sin.

One of the wonderful revelations of Scripture is that God is a God of infinite love and grace. Who of us is not refreshed when we read the words of the psalmist: “But Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth” (86:15)? Yet it is the same God who is also described as the One who “will by no means leave the guilty unpunished” (Ex. 34:7)! The God who loves the sinner is also the God whose “eyes are too pure to approve evil” and who cannot “look on wickedness with favor” (Hab. 1:13). The psalmist quotes God at one point as saying, “You thought that I was just like you” (50:21). But we are in need of the realization that just as God’s love is far beyond our own, so the purity of his holiness exceeds all our conceptions! When Isaiah was granted a vision of the Lord on his throne, he was shaken by his impression of his holiness (Isa. 6:3)! For sure, God is a God of indescribable love, but He is just as much a God of absolute holiness and righteousness! When we gain a vision of the holiness of God as it is portrayed in the Bible, we begin to understand the reasonableness of the doctrine of hell.

We are also helped when we allow Scripture to more fully inform us in our comprehension of the nature of man and of sin. The emphasis in our generation on the value and dignity of the human person has been a welcome corrective to a past overemphasis on the depravity of man. Yet it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that though we are indeed created in the image of God and of very special value in His eyes,

nonetheless we are also deeply and indelibly stained by sin in every area of our being. The God who knows every thought and motive of every human heart, said that it “is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). Jesus himself said that “from within, out of the heart of men, proceed (all manner of evil)” by which we are defiled (Mk. 7:21-23)!

When Ezra learned of the disobedience of the people of Israel in marrying unbelievers, he said, “I tore my garment and my robe, … and sat down appalled” (Ezra 9:3). When the Apostle Paul saw the city of Athens filled with idols, “his spirit was … provoked within him” (Acts 17:16)! Is it possible that we have lost something of the sense of the seriousness of sin that seemed to grip the heart of these two men?

Some have objected that while sin is certainly worthy of punishment, a “finite” sin is hardly worthy of the “infinite” punishment of hell. But that our rebellion against God should be considered “finite” in nature is not entirely clear.

When we consider that the One against whom we have rebelled is the One who gave us life, who is the source of every good thing that we know in life, and who has extended his love by giving his own Son as payment for our sin, how can we possibly measure the gravity of our sin or the punishment it deserves? When we consider too that there is no indication that those in hell will ever experience a “change of heart” in attitude toward God, perhaps we can see that God’s judgment is entirely just.

The Doctrine of Hell: What Difference Does It Make?

We want to focus on three areas of life that should be impacted by our understanding of the biblical doctrine of hell.

The first is our attitude toward sin … particularly our own. A number of years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* In it he challenged the popular notion that all of our thoughts and actions can be accounted for by factors beyond our own personal control, that we are rarely responsible for our own conduct. For sure, there are "mitigating" factors in most of our lives that influence our character and conduct to greater or lesser degree. And God is not unaware of these things. "He knows our frame, that we are but dust" (Ps. 103:14). He knows as well that we are born with a sinful nature that is beyond the power of human will to overcome (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). But He also knows that the choice is our own as to whether we approve and condone the fruit of our sinful nature, or whether we turn to Him for grace to hold in check our sinful impulses and to learn to follow his will. In his book *The Screwtape Letters,* C.S. Lewis said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done." The choice is ours as to which kind of person we will become.

When we realize that we are responsible for what we choose to do about our sin, and that it is more than merely an act that may result in unpleasant consequences for ourselves, but that it is also a disposition of rebellion against God, that requires his holy judgment, we cannot help but become more sensitive to its presence in our lives!

The second result of a biblical understanding of hell is a much greater appreciation for the grace and salvation we have received from God! Our appreciation for the immense value of this gift is greatly enhanced when we fully comprehend the nature of that from which we have been delivered. Our perception of the awesomeness of salvation is determined in large measure by our perception of the awfulness of hell!

Finally, a biblical understanding of hell should move us to include in our proclamation of the gospel a clear warning

about the consequence of failing to respond. We need to be more forthright than the preacher whom Charles Spurgeon reported as saying, “If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be sent to the place which it is not polite to mention.” (4) C.S. Lewis once said: “If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference.” (5) If there really is a hell, then Christianity is far more than one more bit of good advice!

In his book *Our Guilty Silence*, John Stott recounts how the seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries to China, not wanting to offend the sensitivities of the Chinese, excluded the cross of Christ and other details from their message. Quoting Hugh Trevor- Roper, Stott says, “We do not learn that they made many lasting converts by the unobjectionable residue of the story.” (6)

There is little question that the doctrine of hell has at times been abused. But as one writer has well put it: “May its misuse not result in its disuse” in our efforts to lead people to Christ.

Notes

1. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992. p. 13

2. Dixon, pp. 10-13; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp.2-3.

3. John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992, p. 146.

4. Quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991, p. 171.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960, p. 133)

6. John Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd, p. 45.

Recommended Resources on the Subject of Hell:

Blanchard, John. *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992.

Dixon, Larry. *The Other Side of the Good News*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992.

Fernando, Ajith. *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.

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The Truth About Heaven

Rick Rood analyzes the teaching of the Bible about heaven, as well as the practical effects of the Christian belief in heaven.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What images come to mind when you think of Heaven? Do you think of a mode of life that is exciting and fulfilling? Or do the words of the epitaph of one dear soul come nearer to hitting the mark?

> *Weep not for me, friend, tho' death do us sever, I am going to do nothing forever and ever.{1}*

Does Heaven awaken for you a sense of anticipation, or does it evoke visions of monotonous and boring inactivity?

What is Heaven really like? Is Heaven even something we should spend much time thinking about? Or should we relegate thoughts of Heaven to the dusty corners of our mind, lest we render ourselves of little earthly good?

In this essay we want to focus on what the Bible teaches about Heaven, and how these teachings should impact the way we live. We will note some of the foundational truths about Heaven revealed in Scripture.

We know first of all that Heaven is the spiritual realm in which the glory of God's presence is manifest, and in which dwell the angels of God, and all believers who have departed this world (Heb. 12:22-24). The few glimpses of Heaven given in Scripture reveal a pervading sense of the holiness of God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4-5), which had an alarming and overwhelming impact on those who were granted such visions (Isa. 6; Dan. 7:9-28). Isaiah, when he saw the Lord sitting on His throne,

said, “Woe is me . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.”

We are also informed that it is a place which human words are inadequate to fully describe. Ezekiel could only describe what the glory of Heaven was “like” or “resembles” (Ezek. 1). In reporting on his apparent visit to heaven, the apostle Paul said that he “heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (2 Cor. 12:4). What he saw was not only impermissible but impossible to describe in human terms! Heaven is certainly among those things he described elsewhere as “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9)! No wonder Paul says in another place that we shall be “astonished” when we see the Lord at His coming in glory (2 Thess. 1:10)!

Third, we know that for those who belong to Christ, Heaven is their immediate destination after death. To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul said that “to be absent from the body (is to be) at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), and that should he depart this world, he would “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But there is really no reason to believe we will not be. To be infinite in relation to time is an attribute only God can possess. We know that Scripture speaks of “months” in Heaven (Rev. 22:2) and even “ages” to come (Eph. 2:7). Certainly also, the music which will be sung in Heaven requires a temporal mode of existence. It seems apparent also that in Heaven we will be cognizant, to some degree, of what is transpiring on earth. When Moses and Elijah met the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, it’s recorded that they discussed Jesus’ coming return to glory (Luke 9:30-31). And during the coming tribulation period we are told that the saints in Heaven will be anxiously awaiting the completion of God’s purposes on earth (Rev. 6:10-11). Until His kingdom

comes, even in Heaven the question will be asked, “How long, O Lord?” (as these saints are recorded as imploring).

Oswald Sanders said: “God has not told us all we’d like to know, but He has told us all we need to know” about Heaven {2}. So, let’s look closer now at more of what the Bible does tell us about existence in heaven.

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Spiritual Changes!

Mark Twain once sarcastically asserted that in Heaven, for twelve hours every day we will all sing one hymn over and over again.{3} Hardly an inviting thought! The Bible, however, paints a much different picture of what life in Heaven will be like. Consider just a few of Heaven’s most significant characteristics.

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of “the hope of righteousness” for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body (Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, “we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold “the glory of the Lord” we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him “just as He is.” And when we do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are

cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

Second, in Heaven our comprehension of the nature of God will be greatly expanded. The apostle Paul says that “though now we see through a glass darkly,” then we shall “see face to face” and “shall know fully, as we are known” (1 Cor. 13:12). It is this knowledge I am convinced that will move us to spontaneously join the heavenly chorus in singing hymns of praise to Almighty God. From the few glimpses of heavenly worship we are granted in Scripture, we learn that our praise of God will focus both on who He is—the eternal, holy, almighty God (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8)—and on what He has done (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14). If our worship of God is muted now, it is at least partially because we do not yet fully comprehend the greatness of His glory and the awesomeness of His creative and redemptive work. But in Heaven we will gain much clearer insight into the wisdom of God displayed in the intricacies of His creation, and of His marvelous purposes manifest in His redeeming work. Some have wondered how we could be happy in heaven knowing that some of God’s creatures are enduring His eternal judgment. It seems apparent, however, that in Heaven we will gain a much clearer perspective on the justice of God (cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1-4). Perhaps the most perfect happiness of Heaven is impossible apart from some element of sorrow over the eternal loss of those who have rejected God’s grace. No doubt, however, many of the mysteries of life and of God’s ways in our individual lives will be more clearly understood, prompting us to join in His praise.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that there will be opportunity for growth in Heaven . . . not growth toward perfection, but growth in perfection. As a man, Jesus was indeed perfect. Yet Scripture tells us that He “grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man.” Scripture also tells us that one of the three virtues that will abide

forever is hope (1 Cor. 13:13). And what is hope but the expectation of better and better things yet to come . . . the prospect of all for whom Heaven is our eternal home!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

George Bernard Shaw one said, "Heaven, as conventionally conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore" {4}. The interesting thing about Shaw's statement is that he was right . . . at least when it comes to Heaven as it is "conventionally conceived!"{5} But the Bible informs us that the life that awaits us is not only "better" than anything we could ever dream of here, or even "much better," but according to the apostle Paul, "very much better" (Phil. 1:23)! Now we want to continue our consideration of some of these "very much better" things that await us in Heaven.

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and "dies" (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is "spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!"

The second “very much better” thing that will await us is the creation of a new heaven and earth in which we shall live with Christ forever. Jesus referred to this transformation of the creation as “the regeneration” (Matt. 19:28) the same term used to describe the new birth of a believer. Paul described it as the time when it will be “set free from its slavery to corruption” (Rom. 8:21). In the Revelation we are told that in the new creation there will be “no more sorrow, pain or death” (Rev. 21:4). And in Isaiah’s prophecy we read that the glories of the new creation will be so marvelous that “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17)! Not only will the sufferings of this present life fade in comparison to the glory of this new world order (Rom. 8:18), but even the most wonderful of life’s experiences will be so overshadowed by our new life that they will barely survive in our memory! When the apostle John was given a vision of life in the new creation, he was so overwhelmed that he had to be reminded to record what he was witnessing (Rev. 21:5), and to be assured twice that what he was beholding would really come to pass (Rev. 21:5; 22:6)!

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united worship of God, we will serve (Rev. 22:3) and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). The domain over which we will reign will no doubt encompass all of creation, for we’re told that for Christ “all things have been created” (Col. 1:16), and that with Him we will inherit “all these things” (Rev. 21:7)! Though in many respects there will be a certain continuity between our present and future life, many tasks and occupations of the present order will no longer be needed. The enterprises in which we will engage will be totally creative and productive far more fulfilling and exciting than anything we know on earth today!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? The Prospect of Heavenly Reward

So far in our discussion on Heaven we have noted aspects of our heavenly experience that will be true for all of us who will ultimately make it our home.

We want to focus now on the fact that there are some things about Heaven that will not be equally enjoyed by all.

Jesus on more than one occasion stated that not all who enter Heaven will enjoy its blessings to the same degree. Not that there will be any judgment or punishment for those who are heavenbound. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). But Jesus did say that in His kingdom “many who are first shall be last, and the last first” (cf. Matt. 19:30).

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ’s presence “with confidence,” or “to shrink away from Him in shame” (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a “stumbling” fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be “rewarded,” or “suffer loss”; that it is possible to be “saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the “fire” referred to here is a reference to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as “a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for “bad” in this case refers not merely to what is “evil” but to what from God’s perspective is “worthless.” Not only will our “works” be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

What is the nature of the reward that may be won or lost? Many passages speak of our heavenly reward in terms of the responsibility with which we will be entrusted by God when we reign with Christ in the new heaven and new earth. In Jesus' parable of the talents, He spoke of rewarding those who had been faithful by putting them "in charge of many things" in His kingdom (Matt. 25:21 23). In another place He spoke of putting some of us in places of authority over cities in His kingdom (Luke 19:17,19). To those who had stood by Him in His earthly trials, Jesus promised to place them "on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" in His future kingdom, as well as to seat them at His side at His table (Luke 22:28-30)! Not only would they be worthy of being entrusted with greater responsibility, but also capable of enjoying the closest fellowship with Christ!

In many passages heavenly rewards are likened to the "crowns" worn by victors in athletic contests. Whether literal or metaphorical, these crowns represent different aspects of our heavenly reward. The "crown of life" is promised to those who persevere under trial (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), the "crown of righteousness" to those who long for Christ's return (2 Tim. 4:8), an "incorruptible crown" to those who exercise self control (1 Cor. 9:25), the "crown of rejoicing" to those who lead others to Christ (1 Thess. 2:19), and the "crown of glory" to those who serve unselfishly as spiritual leaders (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

The most important fact about our heavenly rewards is that they are based not on our position or ability, but on our faithfulness. Time and again Jesus told His followers that "he who is faithful in a little thing, will be faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10; 19:17).

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

Before we conclude, we want to think about just a few of the ways in which our life on earth should be impacted by what we

believe about Heaven.

First, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the disappointments and sufferings of this life. D. A. Carson was right when he wrote: “There is nothing in Scripture to encourage us to think we should always be free from the vicissitudes that plague a dying world” {6}. But one thing the hope of Heaven can do is help us to put the “dark side” of life in perspective. Paul wrote: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). The glory to come will be immeasurably greater than the depth of any sorrow we may know today!

But Scripture also tells us that our present sufferings actually play a role in preparing us for that glory to come! As the apostle put it: “For momentary, light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). The very qualities and virtues that will fit us for Heaven are today being woven into our soul through the many afflictions of our present life . . . freeing us from the bonds of self-indulgence, creating in us a heart of compassion for others, and prodding us to draw ever closer to the One whose presence we shall enjoy for eternity to come.

Second, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the true nature of success. On every side we hear the message that the “good life” consists in the accumulation of material possessions, the acquisition of power, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Scripture does encourage us to enjoy the many good things of life with which we may be blessed (1 Tim. 6:17); but the hope of Heaven should remind us that this world and all that is in it is passing away, that its glory is for only a season (1 John 2:15 17), that we truly are “strangers and aliens” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

That’s why it exhorts us to set our minds and hearts on Heaven and to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3). God is

urging us to turn aside from what in His eyes are “trivial pursuits” that end only in emptiness, and to devote ourselves to those ambitions that will yield fruit that will accompany us into the next world. When Jesus said to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,” He was encouraging us to make these things our highest priority in life.

Finally, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on death. The Scriptures nowhere teach that as believers we are immune from or should deny the reality of the sorrow that death can bring. But in Christ, we share in His victory over death! We grieve, but we grieve not as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), rather as those who are certain of our reunion with loved ones who have gone before, of receiving a glorious body that will never weaken or decay, of entering a wonderful new life beyond our fondest dreams, and of forever being with the Lord!

At the end of his beloved “Narnia Tales” C. S. Lewis describes the events that transpire as the characters in his story enter Heaven: “(T)he things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”{7}

Notes

1. Gilmore, John. *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 175.

2. Sanders, J. Oswald. *Heaven Better By Far*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, p. 10.

3. Sanders, p. 19.

4. Stedman, Ray C. *God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1991, p. 334.

5. Stedman, 334.

6. Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 250.

7. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 183-184.

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When Your Teen Rejects Your Values – A Christian Response

Rick Rood looks a typical teenage rebellion and offers a plan based on a biblical worldview and Christian values to help lead them through rebellion to a strong Christian walk. By reacting from a truly Christian perspective and following a biblical plan of action, our chances of successfully making it through to adulthood and greatly increased.

The Fact of Teenage Rebellion

Mark Twain once advised parents that when their child turns 13 they should put them in a barrel, close the lid, and feed them through a hole in the side. When they turn 16, Twain suggested parents close the hole! Twain was a humorist, and we laugh about his counsel. But beneath the laughter is the recognition that the teenage years are seldom easy…for the teen or their parents! And it's particularly challenging when we find that our teen is rejecting our values.

Admittedly, in tackling this issue we are taking on a real lion! If there is anything more humbling than being the parent of a rebelling teenager, it's attempting to pass on advice to others who are struggling with this same situation. But our prayer is that this pamphlet will offer some help and encouragement to parents of a challenging teen.

“Adolescence” is the label we attach to the time of life from the onset of puberty to maturity. It denotes the stage of life during which a young person moves from childhood to adulthood, from dependence upon parents to independence. It’s a time of great change not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, spiritually and socially. It’s a time when teens are asking questions like “Who am I?,” “What do I believe?,” “How do I fit into life in this world?”…when they’re searching for their identity as individuals.

Adolescence is also a time when some degree of strain develops between teens and their parents. No longer do parents appear to be infallible and beyond contradiction. Our flaws are much more visible…and probably exaggerated by our teen. It’s a time when the values of their peers generally appear much more attractive than their parents’, and when acceptance by their friends will likely become much more important than that of their parents.

It is not uncommon in their quest for identity and independence for teens to reject some of the values of their parents, their church, and society. And to a degree this is not unhealthy. Young people need to develop their own convictions about life. And part of the process may involve challenging the values and convictions they have been taught. Some may challenge them more overtly, and others more covertly. Some may challenge them in relatively minor areas such as dress, appearance, music, or they way they keep their room. Others may show total disregard for the moral and spiritual values of their family, their church, and even society. Parents who allow for no individuality in some of the more “minor” areas (such as dress and appearance), may be challenging their teen to test them in the areas that are of much greater consequence.

Several years back, a group that included Dr. James Dobson conducted a survey of some 35,000 parents. The survey concluded that while 25% of teens are of “average”

temperament, 40% were considered to be more on the “compliant” side, and 35% on the “strong-willed” side. (More boys than girls fell in this latter category.) Among the strong-willed teens, 74% were found to be in some degree of rebellion during their teenage years, 26% of them to a severe degree. Furthermore, it was surprisingly found that the strong-willed were most susceptible to the influence of their peers! It was no surprise to find that 72% of parents of strong- willed teens characterized their relationship as “difficult” or “very stressful”! (*Parenting Isn’t for Cowards*, by Dr. James Dobson, chaps. 3 & 4).

If you identify with this group of parents, you are definitely not alone! And perhaps this realization is an important first step in responding to a teen who rejects our values!

The Sources of Teenage Rebellion

Many a parent has wondered if the teen living in their home is really the same child that they played with and enjoyed just a few years before! And it is only natural for them to ask “Why?” “Why is this happening? And why is this happening to us?” Most parents are probably also asking themselves, “Where did we go wrong? What could we have done to prevent this from happening?” These questions are not only painful to ask, but are equally difficult to answer. And it’s important not to jump to simplistic conclusions in trying to do so.

It is very likely that there is more than one reason why our teen is rejecting our values. And there really are many possible reasons. One that we noted yesterday is that it is simply the nature of adolescents to search for their own identity and independence. We also noted the role that innate temperament plays in teenage rebellion. A survey conducted by a group including Dr. James Dobson concluded that nearly 3/4 of children born with a strong-willed temperament exhibited some degree of rebellion during their teen years. There are, however, a number of other possible reasons why our teen is

rejecting our values. It’s important to look beyond their behavior to the reasons behind it.

First, it’s possible that there are physiological factors involved. Young people who have learning disabilities, or attention deficit/hyperactive disorder are going to be much more inclined to rebel, in part over the frustration they are experiencing in meeting the expectations of their parents, teachers and other authority figures. Any physical illness, or even imbalanced or insufficient diet can affect a teen’s emotional and behavioral pattern. Even apart from such irregularities, the changes that are taking place in an adolescent’s hormonal system are apt to result in more volatile emotions.

Second, it is possible that there are difficulties of a psychological nature, or even disorders of a more serious nature involved. In this latter category would fall young people who are manic-depressive or schizophrenic. It is important to realize that many of these disorders have genetic and biological sources, requiring the attention of a medical professional. It is more likely, however, that a teen may be struggling with low self-esteem or depression…and may be engaging in conduct that is aimed at obtaining the acceptance of his peers, or at gaining the attention of his parents or other authority figures (even if it’s negative in nature!).

Third, it is not uncommon for a young person to express his anger (and even guilt) over the tensions that may exist within the family at large or between his parents by acting in a rebellious fashion.

Traumatic experiences such as a death in the family, prolonged illness, or serious financial problems can be a source of rebellion. They may even result in a teen’s questioning the existence or the goodness of God, and in rejecting of God’s moral principles.

We must not fail to mention the negative influence of peers, and of the values portrayed and endorsed in today's movies, television, and by the lyrics of much of the music that young people listen to. All of these media are communicating a message that more often than not challenges the right of anyone (including parents) to limit their freedom or stifle their individuality.

Finally, it is not impossible that our own example as parents, or our parenting style has contributed to their rebellion to a greater or lesser degree. We will return to this issue later in the week, and tomorrow we will begin to look at the question of whether parents are always at fault when their teens reject their values.

A Parent's Reaction to His Teen's Rebellion

In the previous two programs we have briefly examined some basic facts about the nature of teenage rebellion and some of its possible sources. We noted that there are many possible reasons why a teen might choose to reject his parents' values. It is not uncommon, however, for those of us who are Christian parents to feel that we bear the greater (if not exclusive) share of responsibility. After all, have we not been taught that if we train our children "in the way they should go, when they are old they will not depart from it"? (Prov. 22:6). If they do depart from the way they should go, certainly it is our fault for not training them properly!

At the outset, we must affirm that parents are responsible before God to provide the training and instruction that will guide them in His way (Eph. 6:4b). The scriptures also warn us that it is possible for us to "provoke our children to anger" (Eph. 6:4a) and to "exasperate them so that they become discouraged" (Col. 3:21). When our teen is rebelling, it's appropriate for us to evaluate the impact that our own

parenting style has had in our child's life.

We must just as emphatically, however, reject the notion that teenage rebellion is invariably the consequence of parental mismanagement. To believe that it is, is to accept the premise that all human behavior is caused by external influences. Behavior may be influenced (even very strongly) by genetic and environmental factors, but to say that there is no such thing as human will and choice is to deny a fundamental element of biblical teaching. In the final analysis, a young person's rejection of godly values is a personal choice.

Many Christians, however, find themselves adopting an essentially behavioristic and deterministic philosophy in their acceptance of a common interpretation of the verse we alluded to a few moments ago, Proverbs 22:6, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." Many a parent has concluded from this proverb that if his teen does "depart from the way he should go," it is because he has failed to provide the training he needed. But that this proverb (as many proverbs) should be taken as general observation about life, rather than as an absolute divine promise, can be deduced from two facts. First, if we do take this proverb as an absolute promise, then other proverbs in the book must be also. Yet there are a number of proverbs for which exceptions can be found on a regular basis. For example, Proverbs 10:27 says that "The fear of the Lord prolongs life, but the years of the wicked will be shortened." This is a general truth. But there are innumerable examples of the wicked who have lived long on the earth, and of the godly whose lives have been cut short. A second reason is that to take it as an absolute promise would contradict the teaching of many other proverbs that it is possible for a young person to reject the training his parents provide. Proverbs 15:5 says, "A fool rejects his father's discipline." The writer of Proverbs also appeals to sons to "receive" and "be attentive" to their parents' instruction (2:1-2), and warns against

“neglecting” and “abandoning” their teaching (4:1-2). (Cf. also Deut. 21:18-21)

We must conclude, then, that when our teen rejects our values, we must prayerfully discern to what degree both we and they are responsible for what is happening, as well as what other influences are at work. In some cases, the parents may bear a great deal of responsibility; in others they may bear very little. The important thing, however, is not so much “who is to blame,” but what ought we to do from this point on in our relationship with our teen.

A Plan for Parents

We have looked at the nature of teenage rebellion. We’ve also addressed the question of whether it is always the parents’ fault when their teen rejects their values. But today, we want to focus on how we should respond as parents of a challenging teen.

Our first response must be to look beyond the rebellious behavior to the sources that lie behind it. If we suspect there are factors of a physiological nature, we must not neglect to enlist the help of a qualified physician. Nor should we reject the aid of a godly counselor in addressing issues of depression or self image that may lie hidden in our teen’s heart. But neither should we neglect to look to the Scriptures as our ultimate source of wisdom.

As we do, it will be tempting to look initially for ways in which we can promote change in our teenager’s behavior. But the one factor in our child’s life over which we have the most influence is our own character and approach to parenting. And this is where we must begin—by reflecting on the model which God himself provides in his character and in his relationship with us as his children. In God as our Father we find that perfect balance of judgment and grace, of discipline and love, compassion and firmness. This is a standard from which all of

us fall short, the one to which we will never fully attain in this life; but the one by which we must measure our lives, and toward which we must continually strive! Larry Crabb has said, "The key to becoming a more effective parent is to become an increasingly godly person." (*Parenting Adolescents* by Kevin Huggins, p. 258) Wise is the parent who makes this his primary goal!

Wise too is the parent who resists the impulse to project a perfect image to his teen, but who echoes the prayer of David: "Search me, O God, and know my heart…see if there be any hurtful way in me; and guide me in the everlasting way" (Ps. 139:23-24). Wise is the parent who is willing to offer a sincere apology to his child, and to seek forgiveness for ways he has genuinely fallen short as a parent. But wise also is the parent who refuses to brood over past failures, but who having learned from his mistakes sets out in a new direction! (Phil. 3:13-14). And wise is the parent, as well, who guards against trying to "atone" for past mistakes by becoming overly kind or permissive.

As we seek to allow God to shape our lives after his own model as the divine parent, we will do well to keep two primary qualities in view. The first is an unconditional love for our child. This is the kind of love God manifests toward us. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in that while we were yet sinners (while we were his enemies!), Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). This is the kind of love He seeks to instill in us for our teenager, regardless of how much anger or contempt he or she has shown toward us—a love that asks not how they can meet our needs, but how God can use us to minister to their genuine needs.

But the second quality is an uncompromising commitment to help our teenager grow toward responsible maturity. "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines;…but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness" (Heb. 12:6,10). As God guides us in the path of righteousness, and establishes clear

expectations for our lives, so must we for our teen. As God disciplines for rebellion through appropriate consequences, so also must we.

Above, we proposed that there are two primary qualities God seeks to instill in those of us who are parents of a teen who is rejecting our values: an unconditional love and an uncompromising commitment to guide them toward responsible maturity. But how do these qualities take shape in our day to day lives?

How do we show this kind of love toward our teenager? First, we love them when we praise and reward them for the good that we do see in their lives, as God does with us. We love them when we show respect for their feelings and opinions, though not always agreeing with them. We love them when we show interest in and participate with them in activities that are meaningful to them, and refrain from squeezing them into a mold for they were not designed. We love them when we restrain our anger from erupting in violent acts and hurtful words, when we relate as a "fellow struggler," when we don't try to be better than they are at everything, when we handle our own sin in the same way we expect them to, when we listen to their explanations before disciplining them, when we keep alive a sense of hope and excitement about discovering God's purpose for their life!

But the love toward which we strive is also one that guides and disciplines (Prov.13:24). states that "he who loves (his son) disciplines him diligently." Researchers have found that teens are less likely to rebel who grow up in homes that are neither too permissive nor overly authoritarian, where parents gradually allow them more participation in decisions and relinquish more responsibility, while maintaining final authority (*Teen Shaping*, by Len Kageler, chaps. 3 & 12).

What are a few marks of a parent who has this kind of commitment? First, he provides instruction in the ways of the

Lord. One teenager who refused to accompany his family to church, was willing to read a chapter of scripture with his father several times a week. By his senior year, they had read through the entire New Testament together! Second, he communicates clear expectations regarding personal conduct (even if parents of his child's friends do not): expectations concerning the use of language in the home, honesty about whereabouts and activities, household chores, attendance at school, curfew, use of the car, payment for gas, insurance and traffic tickets, drinking, and sexual conduct. Finally, such a parent will enforce meaningful consequences for wilful rebellion. There are some things we are obliged to provide for our child no matter what: a place to live (though it need not be our own home in all situations), food, clothing, and personal respect. But many things that young people take for granted today are privileges that can and must be suspended as a result of irresponsible behavior: use of the phone or TV, tuition for school, use of our car, or even a driver's license. Teenagers who engage in activities that are not only irresponsible but illegal, should have every expectation that their parents will notify the authorities. We do our children no favor when we shield them from the painful consequences of foolish choices. Some teens will become skilled at manipulating their parents through guilt or intimidation. But we must resolve to render such tactics ineffective by refusing to let them work.

God does not hold us responsible for all of our teenager's actions. But He does hold us accountable for the way in which we relate to them as parents—with unconditional love, but uncompromising commitment to responsible maturity.

Yet, even when we do, God provides no guarantee that they will always (or even ever) respond positively. But He does ask that we persist in doing what is right . . . praying for them, gradually relinquishing them to Him who knows them far better than we . . . remembering his exhortation that we "not lose

heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary" (Gal. 6:9).

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Addendum from the author, after his teenagers finished growing up:

It was over twelve years ago that I wrote the article you have just read. Since then, I've had a lot of time to reflect on the matter of parenting. If there is one thing I would add to the article, it is the statement in Psalm 127:1, "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it."

I'm more convinced than ever that though I believe God's word does give us guidance concerning what we as parents should and should not do in relating to our children, being a parent is much more than simply "doing all the right things." It is at root a matter of trusting God to work in our children's lives in his own way and time . . . to accomplish in their lives what only He can. And of course, to trust that He will do the same in our own hearts and lives as well. Sometimes His ways are far beyond our understanding. I have met some who came from very difficult homes, who nonetheless have turned out to be wonderful people. On the other hand, I have met others who grew up in wonderful families, who nonetheless have chosen to walk a very painful path in life. All of this should cause us to make prayer our first priority as parents. There is no greater responsibility or privilege we have as parents than to pray for the children the Lord has entrusted to us. May we never cease to do so.

Resources on Parenting Teenagers

Emotionally Healthy Teenagers, by Jay Kesler (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998)

Bound by Honor, by Gary and Greg Smalley (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1998)

Parenting Today's Adolescent, by Dennis and Barbara Rainey (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998)

How to Really Love Your Teenager, by Ross Campbell (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983)

Parenting Adolescents, by Kevin Huggins (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1992)

Teen-Shaping: Solving the Discipline Dilemma—What Works, What Doesn't, by Len Kageler (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1990)

Parents & Teenagers, ed. by Jay Kesler (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984)

Parents in Pain, by John White (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1979)

Parenting Isn't for Cowards, by Dr. James Dobson (Waco: Word Books, 1987)

The Wounded Parent, by Guy Greenfield (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991)