Overcoming Anxiety: Finding Real Peace When Life Seems Crazy

What makes you feel anxious? Being late or unprepared for work or appointments? Maybe unresolved interpersonal conflict. Airline travel? Public speaking? Fears of losing love? Serious illness or a friend's death?

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What makes you feel anxious? Being late or unprepared for work or appointments? Maybe unresolved interpersonal conflict. Airline travel? Public speaking? Fears of losing love? Serious illness or a friend's death?

Pressures from the trivial to the traumatic can prompt feelings of fearfulness or apprehension.

Once at a booksellers convention my wife and I spent an exhausting day on our feet promoting a new book. Late that night, after a reception crowd had thinned down to mostly authors and our publisher, we stood in a circle engaged in conversation. I had to leave her side momentarily to attend to a matter.

Upon returning to the circle, I walked up behind my wife and began gently to massage her shoulders. She seemed to enjoy this, so I started to put my arms around her waist to give her a little hug. Just then, I looked up at the opposite side of the circle and saw … my wife.

I had my hands on the wrong woman!

In that instant, I knew the true meaning of fear. Fear of circumstances. Even fear of death! Confusion clouded my mind.

Heat enveloped my back, shoulders, neck and head. My face reddened; my stomach knotted.

You've probably had embarrassing moments that generate anxiety. What about more serious causes?

Your Greatest Fear?

Fear of death is perhaps humans' greatest fear. In college, the student living next door to me was struck and killed instantly by lightening on a golf course one springtime afternoon. Shock gripped our fraternity house. "What does it mean if life can be snuffed out in an instant?" my friends asked. "Is there a life after death and, if so, how can we experience it?" Confusion and anxiety reigned.

If you can't answer the question "What will happen when you die?" you may become anxious.

How can you find real peace in a chaotic world? Consider a possible solution. It involves the spiritual realm.

As a university student, I wrote a paper for an abnormal psychology class investigating a biblical therapy for anxiety. I had come to faith as a freshman and found it brought me peace of mind. Complex psychological disorders often stem from more basic problems like anxiety, problems for which faith offers practical solutions.

I sent a copy of my paper to the author of our textbook, a prominent UCLA psychologist. A month later, he replied that he liked the paper and asked permission to quote from it in his revised textbook.

Somewhat amazed, I readily agreed. I also sent a copy of his letter to my parents in Miami, who were beginning to wonder about their son's campus spiritual involvement.

This professor felt that the principles in the paper—which

certainly were not original with me—had both academic and personal relevance. Several months later, we met at his lovely home in Malibu overlooking the Pacific Ocean. As we sat in his back yard, this professor told me he lacked personal peace and wanted to know God personally. I showed him a simple four-point outline based on one of Jesus' statements: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."{1}

We discussed God's unconditional love for us, our dilemma of being unplugged from Him and the flaws (selfishness and "sins") that result. I noted that Jesus, through His death in our place and return to life, came to plug us back into God by paying the penalty we owed for our sins.

Finding Real Peace

This professor decided to place his faith in God and asked Jesus to forgive him and enter his life. We kept in touch. Later, over the phone, he told me that as he looked out over the ocean and saw the setting sun, "I really believe I'm a part of all this. Before I didn't, but now I do." He was seeing how he fit into God's universe. An internationally acclaimed scholar linked up with, if you will, the greatest Psychologist.

One of Jesus' earlier followers wrote to some friends about a divine aid for anxiety: "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus."{2}

Faith in God does not make life perfect and is no automatic solution to anxiety. Illness, chemical imbalance, emotional wounds and more can hamper coping. But a good starting place is to become linked with the One who loves us and knows best

what makes us fulfilled.

Might it be time for you to consider Him?

Notes

1. John 3:16 *NLT* (*New Living Translation*).
2. Philippians 4:6-7 (*NLT*).

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9/11 and You

My sister had a 9:00 a.m. appointment at the World Trade Center.

On September 12.

Since September 11, 2001, I've often wondered what might have happened had her appointment been a day earlier or the terrorist attacks a day later. I could have been walking the streets of New York City with her picture.

What were your feelings that tragic day? Shock? Fear? Anger? Confusion? Sadness? How do you process those feelings now, as reminders of the attacks come in anniversary commemorations and media coverage? Nearly two-thirds of American Red Cross 9/11 adult counselees still grieve, according to a study of those directly affected by the attacks{1}.

"I Hate You!"

In the immediate aftermath, my feelings of sadness blended with intense hostility. Once when Osama Bin Laden's face

appeared on television, I spontaneously shouted, “I hate you!”

I was and am a follower of Jesus. He taught his followers to “love your enemies.”{2} Why was I yelling “I hate you!” to a picture on a TV screen?

I wondered why this guy hated my sister. If Deborah Wright had been among the victims, her death would have been included among those he applauded. If I had been a victim, he would have applauded mine. I wrote a radio series on “Why Radical Muslims Hate You” to discover historical, socio-cultural, political, religious, and psychological roots of such anger. It helped me to connect with Muslims who shared similar concerns but disavowed the radical methods.

Dust of Death

Deborah’s experience as a corporate chaplain took her back to New York to help WTC-based companies and their employees who suffered loss on 9/11 cope with the emotional and spiritual whirlwinds their worlds had become. Many suffered from survivor guilt. Failure to process grief could lead to serious consequences. Some firemen, for instance, were assigned to look after widows of fallen comrades. “There can be enormous intimacy and bonding in shared grief,” Deborah notes. “Some of the firemen and widows ended up in bed together.”

Some competitive, driven businesspersons re-examined their rat race—making big bucks and accumulating the most toys—and asked, “Is that all there is?”. Long looks at corporate culture prompted many to consider spiritual realities.

Part of helping survivors process their experiences involved taking them to Ground Zero. Deborah comments, “As I stood at Ground Zero and picked up the dust, I could not help but think that we were standing in a giant crematorium. The ground seemed hallowed to me.”

Personal Lessons from 9/11

What personal 9/11 lessons persist? Perhaps you can relate to these that seem poignant to me:

We live in a contingent universe. Human decisions and actions have consequences, often for good or evil.

Life is temporary. One early spiritual leader wrote of our lives' fleeting nature, "You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away."{3}

Link with the eternal. Jesus of Nazareth, whom people of diverse spiritual persuasions respect as a great teacher, told a friend grieving her brother's death, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish."{4}

Cherish your friends. In the aftermath of 9/11, many friendships were deepened as people linked with each other for encouragement, solace and support.

Understand and love your enemies and intellectual adversaries. Support national defense, but learning about state enemies can help communication with moderates who share some of their convictions. Getting to know neighbors or associates with whom you differ politically, philosophically or spiritually can help build bridges that foster civility in public discourse.

Notes

1. Amy Westfeldt, "Study: Sept. 11 Survivors Still Grieving," Associated Press, May 26, 2006, on AOL News. Also see full Red Cross report, http://www.redcross.org/images/pdfs/SRPClientSurvey.pdf, p. v.

2. Matthew 5:44 NASB.

3. James 4:14 NASB.

4. John 11:25 NLT.

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Leftist Jewish Journalist Survives Evangelical Beat

Quiz: What do you get when you take one leftist Jewish journalist, assign him to the evangelical Christian beat for major newspapers on both US coasts, sprinkle in some fiery sermons and politically conservative speeches, mix thoroughly, and bake with the heat of fiercely contested national elections?

Note: This is not a joke.

Sound like a recipe for nitroglycerin shortcake? Maybe you'd expect mutual animosity: "Those wacko God-squaders are at it again, imposing their beliefs and politics on the rest of us sane people." "He's just another example of the biased secular humanist liberal media that's ruining America."

Yet this cake hides no explosives. The leftist Jewish journalist made a significant discovery on the road to meeting deadlines, one he feels can instruct his colleagues and us all.

He says to effectively cover the strange tribe to which he was assigned, it helps to know its members as neighbors and friends. His lesson has affected his writing in ways that have conservative evangelicals commending him for fairness and that provide useful illustrations for managing today's turbulent culture wars.

A Jew Among the Evangelicals

Mark Pinsky's new book, *A Jew Among the Evangelicals: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Westminster John Knox), tells how this "nice Jewish boy from Jersey" ended up attending church "more often than many Christians" and sometimes more often than he attends his own synagogue. During his ten years covering religion for the *Los Angeles Times*, he focused on leaders of major evangelical ministries and had little connection with local grassroots evangelicals.

When he moved to Florida in 1995 to write for the *Orlando Sentinel*, they were everywhere: In the neighborhood, at kids sporting events, birthday parties, PTA meetings, Scouts, "I encountered evangelicals simply as people, rather than as subjects or sources of quotes for my stories."

Still a committed Jew, Pinsky found they were neither monolithic nor, as *The Washington Post* once claimed, ""poor, uneducated and easy to command." They displayed surprising diversity on a range of issues including the Iraq war, environmentalism, tax policy, women in leadership, and immigration.

The Readable Radical

Disclaimer: Pinsky, whom I've known since our university days, is a personal friend, so I'm biased. But I've also observed a curious development here that merits wider consideration. His *Duke Chronicle* column was entitled "The Readable Radical" and he was at the vanguard of late-1960s campus leftist causes. I didn't always agree with his politics, but I admired his concerns about justice, hypocrisy and the disenfranchised.

He still votes with the Democratic left, but he also understands the Christian subculture he covers better than many of its members. Mutual respect characterizes his relations with its leaders.

Pinsky is not without good natured humor as he highlights evangelical quirks. Example: the Orlando golf club that hyped its Easter sunrise service and "Easter Egg Scramble" golf tournament. And, perhaps-not-so-tongue-in-cheek, he admits he especially likes about evangelical Christians that "if you are sorry, they have to forgive you." He knows their boss said, "When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against{1}.

Lessons for Life in the Larger World

His book draws lessons from his peculiar and unlikely journey for life in the larger world. His stories of "how people just like you wrestle with feelings, values, and beliefs that touch the core of their beings" provide "a glimpse of someone learning to understand and get along with folks whose convictions differ from his own."

Get to know your intellectual and philosophical adversaries, he recommends. Take them to lunch. Ratchet down the rhetoric. Maybe connection can produce understanding and civility can grow into bridgebuilding.

Not bad advice in a world too-often filled with brickbats and name calling.

Note

1. Mark 11:25 *New Living Translation*.

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Animal House Considers God

How would you like this introduction for your speaking engagement?

The terrazzo floor is glazed with stale, dry beer from the weekend's wild party. As students stream into the dining room, it is obvious no self-respecting cockroach would have wanted to live in the adjoining kitchen. A few composite portraits of members hang – somewhat askew – on the paneled walls. The room buzzes as the 60 men swap stories and engage in friendly banter. Then their leader gavels them to order. Welcome to the fraternity chapter meeting.

First up is a profanity-laced tirade by the president condemning two rival University of Miami fraternities and a UM campus administrator. Next, an officer blasts some members for lagging participation. A sharp crack of the gavel awakens a sleeping brother, who responds with an obscene gesture. The president declares he is stressed out and cannot wait to get away for spring break so he can get drunk and sleep with some chicks he does not know. A few minutes later he announces a speaker who has come to talk about brotherhood.

As you step up to speak, you might think, ***So, I break my back raising support to get to do this?***

Some friends, Christian campus workers at the University of Miami, lined me up to speak at this fraternity. Ken and Robert were eager to reach the campus Greek community. Of course, fraternity and sorority members have no special standing in God's eyes. But Greeks are leaders on many campuses, with significant potential influence for Christ. They often live together which helps facilitate small groups and discipleship. Ken was a member of this fraternity on another campus, as was I, and his relationships in the Miami chapter opened doors. We prayed that God would work through this meeting.

My opening joke bombed. My stories and illustrations about communication skills, conflict resolution, and brotherly love seemed to connect; they laughed and appeared more relaxed. The chapter advisor had told me that internal feuds were affecting his men. As I spoke, I was convinced the Holy Spirit had arranged this presentation on this topic for this audience at this moment. To catch a glimpse of what went on that evening, here is a bit of what the men heard.

Backfired Road Trip And Brotherly Love Quotient

I related this incident: During my freshman year in college, two other pledges and I took my fraternity big brother (an older student mentor) on a road trip. We borrowed his car (he was generous), took him to dinner, and then drove to a remote location with plans to strand him there. All went according to plan until we arrived at the remote location. Somehow, he overpowered us, grabbed the keys, and drove off, leaving **us** to find our way home. Of course, we were red-faced. Eventually, his forgiveness soothed our embarrassment.

In the same way, these men to whom I spoke could forgive when wronged, but care enough to confront when appropriate. Balancing truth and grace can be challenging.

Some questions helped them analyze their attitudes and brotherly love quotient:

1. *How often do I use biting sarcasm?*
2. *How do I act toward members whose participation lags?*
3. *Do I participate in chapter activities as I should? How is my attitude?*
4. *How do I feel about the brother who casts a vote against my favorite rushee (prospective member)?*

5. How do I relate to rushees to whom we did not extend bids to join the fraternity? Later, when I see them on campus, do I give a friendly smile and greeting? Or was all that just for rush?

*6. I am madly in love with the beautiful blond in Chemistry 101. So is another member of my chapter … and **they** are going out tonight. How do I feel toward that brother?*

Number six may be the ultimate test of brotherly love.

How does one get the internal power to love and accept others unconditionally? I related to these men that as I struggled with this question some friends suggested I consider the spiritual dimension. I learned in coming to faith as a freshman that God can provide inner power to enhance life and relationships.

The men seemed fairly attentive and were gracious in their applause. Had the Holy Spirit penetrated hearts? The men's written comments gave some clues:

- *"On target."*
- *"Very good but a bit idealistic to me."*
- *"If I did not know any better, I would have thought that you had lived here for months. You clearly know the ins and outs of fraternity life, and you hit the nail right on the head. I especially like what you said about the situation where two brothers like the same girl [sic]; it happens more than we would like to admit. Thank you."*
- *"Boring."*
- *"Very sincere. I am not the most spiritual person. But you made sense."*
- *"You read my mind."*

- *“I would be interested in receiving your articles and more about brotherhood.”*

Arrogance, wrath, and lasciviousness sometime mask empty hurting hearts.

Ken continued his ministry in that house. Two years later, the chapter gathered at 11 p.m. to hear a Christian perspective on sex. When my host and I departed after midnight, several men followed us out the door with heartfelt questions. Animal house was not a church sanctuary, but God was at work.

Lessons For Communicating In Secular Universities

Consider some lessons from this story that relate to one-on-one, small-group, and public speaking situations.

Pray

Ken, Robert, other friends, and I prayed before the outreach. The warm response was God’s answer. Wisdom and skill help, but ultimately it is God who works in hearts.

Meet on their turf

To present Christ to hardened nonbelievers in their own home might seem scary, but they feel much more comfortable there among their friends than they would in a church or a neutral campus location. Use various outreach venues as appropriate, but also go where people are. Jesus and Paul went to homes, the marketplace, synagogues, and schools.

Transcend differences

In a Greek house or dormitory, you may encounter uncomfortable scenarios: pinups, porn, drunkenness, and foul language. At a campus-wide outreach meeting in my fraternity house, one member welcomed guests while tied to a cross. Other members

heckled the speaker. The speaker responded with poise, engaging them in friendly dialogue about Jesus. We are seeking to rescue lost people who do not always feel lost. Pick your battles and learn to overlook the natural flaws of natural people so you can relate spiritual truth.

Establish personal relationships

Ken's friendships with fraternity leaders helped open doors for our meeting and for continued ministry there. That we were both members of their fraternity did not hurt. Use the opportunities you are given; but warm, personal relationships can open many doors for the gospel.

Use humor and stories

Those men could relate to the story about my backfired road trip, laughing with – and at – me. Humor can involve risk. I have studied, written about, taught, and used humor often. I also have had hilarious stories fall flat. Learn from these situations, develop recovery techniques, but realize that circumstances and specific audiences may generate different reactions. Do not be discouraged when your best zingers or illustrations bomb. Ask others to critique your presentation, but keep telling stories to connect with today's campus culture.

Connect with their situation

Learn your listeners' intellectual and emotional languages. This applies to any people group you seek to reach, whether they reside in remote forested jungles or nearby academic ones. In this case, stories about fraternity life and recognizable social situations – using terms familiar to them – helped gain and hold attention.

Connect their interests with spiritual matters

The brotherly love quotient questions helped listeners consider their need for inner strength to love

unconditionally. From that point, discussing spiritual matters, God's inner power, and my own journey to faith followed naturally. Do not simply tack the gospel onto your secular material. Show a clear connection.

Trust the Holy Spirit for long-term fruit and open doors

After Paul presented Christ to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, "some laughed, but others said, 'We want to hear more about this later.' … Some joined him and became believers" (Acts 17:32,34, NLT).{1} Similarly, in our attempts to reach secular students and professors, some will scorn, some will want to know more, and some will believe. As we are faithful to trust the Holy Spirit to open hearts and doors of opportunity, God will work. "The king's heart is likechannels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes" (Proverbs 21:1, NASB).{2}

Notes

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Duke Lacrosse: Ethical Reflections

Written by Rusty Wright

The Duke lacrosse story has multiple ingredients for explosive media coverage: sex, race, politics, criminal charges, sports, class, a prestigious institution the list goes on.

Like many Duke alumni, I have personal convictions about the scandal. My Duke experience was and remains positive. So I'm biased. But I'm also realistic. Houston, we have a problem.

As much of the civilized world knows, a hired African-American stripper alleged some white players raped her at a lacrosse party. The accuser attended nearby North Carolina Central University. The accused maintain their innocence. The lacrosse coach resigned. Duke cancelled the season.

During basketball season, it was often "All Duke, all the time" on America's sports pages. Through much of the Spring, it became "All Duke, all the time" on the front pages.

Nowadays at Duke, quips one professor, historical calendars are not reckoned "BC" and "AD" but "BLC" and "ALC." "Before the Lacrosse Crisis" and "After the Lacrosse Crisis."

I'm glad Duke President Richard Broadhead emphasizes the presumption of innocence in criminal law. Travels in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have exposed me to chilling stories about presuming guilt.

At an April reunion, I found the campus buzzing with controversy. Some students conveyed deep personal pain about race and gender issues. At their national tournament in May, Duke women lacrosse players wore wristbands and headbands supporting the men's team.

Broadhead commissioned an ongoing Campus Culture Initiative emphasizing responsibility and respect. In my view, he's handled a difficult situation with exceptional grace, dignity, and transparency.

What ethical lessons might come from this episode? Of course, if rape occurred, punishment should ensue.

But setting aside the rape allegations, what about the ethics of hiring a stripper? What principles should determine how we act in life?

When I was an undergraduate, a friend from the fraternity next door excitedly told me the dean had just given his fraternity permission to host a topless dancer at their Saturday night party in university housing.

Fast forward to 2006. On one television program, a woman argued that her own stripping had paid her college bills, and besides, it allowed her to exercise power over men.

Suppose you were a Duke student. Should you host or attend such a party? Hiring a stripper broke no laws. Both the players and the young woman could claim benefit. What's the harm?

A pragmatist might maintain, "In retrospect, it was more trouble than it was worth." A libertarian might assert, "Stripping's OK, if no one gets hurt." Some absolutists might say, "No. Never." Feminists could argue either side. Stripping exploits women as sex objects, a negative cultural influence. Yet a woman needs to earn a living.

Duke ethicist Elizabeth Kiss, soon to become Agnes Scott College president, recommends a starting point for answering the classic question, "How should I act?" She notes that the "Golden Rule" appears in various forms in different faith traditions.

Good point. Jesus said, “In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you.”

The Jewish Talmud says, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.”

Muhammad said, “Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself.”

On Duke’s main quadrangle sits a plaque containing the first article of the university’s bylaws. The statement promotes truth, scholarship, freedom, tolerance, and service. It begins as follows:

“The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the Son of God….”

Hmmm. An ethical guideline worth considering?

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The Da Vinci Code: Who is

Jesus, Really?

The Da Vinci Code, the blockbuster novel that's now a major motion picture, makes some controversial claims: Jesus of Nazareth, a mere mortal, married Mary Magdalene and fathered her child. Their descendants live today.

Dan Brown's novel is an entertaining, artfully designed thriller filled with mystery, intrigue, and suspense. The film generally follows the novel's storyline. Reviews have been mixed. I enjoyed the film and feel that moviegoers are in for an adventure if they can follow the action and detail.

The novel raises healthy questions about Christian faith. The story's fictitious British scholar, Sir Leigh Teabing, says, "…almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is *false*."{1}

Teabing says that the Roman emperor Constantine had history rewritten to cast Jesus as divine rather than mortal and convened the famous Council of Nicaea to debate Jesus divinity. He says the council upgraded Jesus to divine by a close vote.

The Greatest Story Ever *Sold?*

Teabing suggests that the greatest story ever told is, in fact, the greatest story ever *sold,*{2} a monumental cover-up. Was Jesus' divinity a clever fabrication?

University of North Carolina religion chair Bart Ehrman, not a theological conservative, found troubling Brown's assertion that "All descriptions of…documents…in this novel are accurate."{3}

Ehrman says, "Most of the descriptions of ancient documents, in fact, are not factual—they're part of his fiction. But people reading the book aren't equipped to separate the fact

from the fiction."{4}

Ehrman notes that Constantine called the Council of Nicaea (325 C.E.) not to debate whether Jesus was divine but rather what precisely that meant: Had he always existed as divine, or was he created as divine?{5} The council overwhelmingly affirmed the former.

Dan Brown gets an A-/B+ for dramatic writing but a C-/D for historical accuracy. Still, what do we really know about Jesus?

Tacitus, a Roman historian writing around 115-117 C.E., refers to Jesus' execution under Pontius Pilate.{6} The Talmud, a collection of Jewish laws and commentary, mentioned in the late first or second century a tradition that Jesus was hanged on Passover Eve.{7}

Jesus' contemporary biographers indicated that he claimed deity. For instance, one records a trial at which religious leaders asked, "Are You the Son of God, then?" Jesus' response: "Yes, I am."{8} Accusing him of blasphemy, leaders said he deserved to die.{9}

The Alternatives

What are the alternatives? If his claim was true, he would be the Lord. If it was false and he knew it, he was lying. If he didn't know it was false, he had serious delusions, perhaps paranoid schizophrenia or paranoia proper.

Jesus claim to deity sets him apart from great moral teachers. Either he was a liar, or a lunatic, or the Lord.

Was he a liar? If so, he died for that lie. Few, if any, would willingly die for something they knew was a hoax. Would you? Both believers and skeptics have considered Jesus a paragon of virtue.

Was Jesus a lunatic? His teachings about love, forgiveness, respect, and interpersonal relationships are often used as a basis for mental health today. He had a genuine concern for others, a cool response under pressure, and a great love for his enemies as he said from the cross, Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.{10} If Jesus was insane, what must we be?

If he was not a liar and not a lunatic, were left with the alternative that he was the Lord, as he claimed. Evidence for his resurrection supports this claim.{11}

The Da Vinci Code touches many emotional chords. Clergy sex scandals have engendered mistrust. People like conspiracy theories. Feminist themes resonate with many. Deep hunger for spiritual experience is prevalent.

Who is Jesus, really? Why not examine the evidence and decide for yourself?

Notes

1. Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), p. 235; emphasis Brown's.
2. Ibid., p. 267; emphasis Brown's.
3. Ibid., p. 1.
4. Deborah Caldwell (interviewer), "Unpacking 'The Code': What's true in Dan Brown's *'Da Vinci Code'* and what's pure historical fiction?", p. 1, Beliefnet.com, http://www.beliefnet.com/story/167/story_16783_1.html.
5. Ibid., p. 2.
6. Tacitus, *Annals*, xv. 44.
7. Sanhedrin (43a); in F.F. Bruce, *Jesus & Christian Origins Outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), pp. 55-56.
8. Luke 22:70 NASB.
9. Matthew 26:65-66.
10. Luke 23:34 NASB.

11. www.WhoIsJesus-really.com.

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The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

Christmas often means time with family, hectic shopping, parties, cards and gifts. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all? The answer may surprise you.

What does Christmas mean to you? Times with family and friends? Perhaps carols, cards, television specials. Maybe hectic shopping, parties, and eating too much.

All these and more are part of North American Christmas. But what about the first Christmas? Why is the original story—the baby in a manger, shepherds, wise men, angels—important, if at all?

May I invite you to consider eight reasons why the original Christmas story matters, even to you? You may not agree with all of them, but perhaps they will stimulate your thinking and maybe even kindle some feelings that resonate with that famous story.

First, the Christmas story is important because it is. . .

A Story that Has *Endured*

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to

shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.{1}

That a story persists for many years does not prove its truthfulness. Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny and the tooth fairy survive in the popular imagination. But a twenty-century tenure at least merits our consideration. What deep human longings does the Christmas story portray? Why has it connected so profoundly with millions of people? Is the story factual? Curiosity prompts further investigation.

Second, the Christmas story is also . . .

A Story of *Hope* and *Survival*

Jesus' society knew great pain and oppression. Rome ruled. Corrupt tax collectors burdened the people. Some religious leaders even sanctioned physical beating of Jewish citizens participating in compulsory religious duties.{2}

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary traveled a long distance to Bethlehem to register for a census but could not obtain proper lodging. Mary bore her baby and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. Eventually, King Herod sought to kill the baby. Warned of impending risk, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt, then returned home after Herod's death.

Imagine how Mary felt. Traveling while pregnant would be challenging. Fleeing to another nation lest some king slay your son would not be pleasant. Yet she, Joseph, and Jesus survived the ordeal.

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival, hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name . . . [would] be the hope of all the world."{3}

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured

and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Peace* and *Goodwill*

Christmas carolers sing of “peace on earth.” Greeting cards extol peace, families desire it, and the news reminds us of its fleeting nature.

I encountered ten-year-old Matt from Nebraska in a southern California restaurant men’s room one afternoon. Alone and forlorn looking, he stood outside the lone stall.

“Could I ask a favor?” inquired the sandy haired youth. “The door to this stall has no lock. Would you watch and be sure that no one comes in on me?” “Sure,” I replied, happy to guard his privacy. Matt noted, “In a lot of nice restaurants the stall doors don’t have locks.” “I know,” I agreed. “You’d think they would.”

After a pause, his high-pitched voice said, “You know what I wish? I wish there could be peace in all the earth and no more arguments or fighting so no one would have to die except by heart attacks.” “That would be great,” I agreed. “How do you think that could happen?” Matt didn’t know.

“It seems that the Prince of Peace could help,” I suggested. “Do you know who that is?” He didn’t. “Well, at Christmas, we talk a lot about Jesus as the Prince of Peace,” I explained.

“Oh, I see,” conceded Matt. “I don’t know about those things because I don’t go to church. Do you know what it’s like to be the only boy in your town who doesn’t go to church? I do.”

“Well, I’m a church member,” I replied, “but really the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ as your personal friend. When I was eighteen, some friends explained to me that He died and rose again for me and that I could begin a

relationship with Him. It made a big difference and gave me a real peace inside. He can also bring peace between people."

By now, Matt was out washing his hands as his father stuck his head in the door to hurry him along. I gave him a small booklet that explained more. "Thanks," smiled Matt as he walked out to join his family for lunch.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman in his bestselling book *Emotional Intelligence* tells of boarding a New York City bus to find a driver whose friendly greeting and positive disposition spread contagious warmth among the initially cold and indifferent passengers. Goleman envisioned a "virus of good feeling" spreading through the city from this "urban peacemaker" whose good will had softened hearts.{4}

The Christmas angel announced to some shepherds, "'Don't be afraid! . . . I bring you good news of great joy for everyone! The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born tonight in Bethlehem, the city of David!"{5} A crowd of angels then appeared praising God and proclaiming peace among people of good will.{6}

The Christmas story brings a message of peace that can soothe anxious hearts and calm interpersonal strife.

Reason number four: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Family*

Christmas is a time for family gatherings. This interaction can bring great joy or great stress. Estrangement or ill will from past conflicts can explode.

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph's fiancée became pregnant though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how

would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

Joseph, described as "a just man, decided to break the engagement quietly, so as not to disgrace . . . [Mary] publicly."{7} But an angel appeared to him in a dream, explaining that the child was conceived in her by God, and told him to "name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."{8} Joseph followed instructions and cared for his family. His continuing commitment to Mary and Jesus played a significant part in the boy's birth and early childhood. With God's help, the family overcame major obstacles. And so can your family.

Fifth, the story is Christmas is also . . .

A story of *Humility*

When kings, presidents, and other rulers appear in public, great pomp often ensues. From a biblical perspective, God came first not as a ruling king but as a servant, a baby born in humble circumstances. His becoming human helps humans identify with Him.

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus

displayed by becoming human:

> *Though he was God, he did not demand and cling to his rights as God. He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal's death on a cross. Because of this, God raised him up to the heights of heaven.{9}*

The Christmas story speaks of family and humility. But is it true?{10}

Reason number six why the Christmas story matters: it is . . .

A Story that Was *Foretold*

Jesus' followers noted numerous clues to his identity, prophecies written many years before His birth.{11}

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 BC of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One" from Bethlehem.{12} We know that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ."{13}

Isaiah, writing around 700 BC, foretold that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel."{14} The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." Biblical accounts claim Jesus' mother was a virgin when she bore Him.{15}

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and

conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17}, the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus.{16}

In a similar vein, consider reason number seven why the original Christmas story matters. It is . . .

A Story that Has *Substantial Support*

Can we trust the biblical accounts of the Christmas story? Three important points:

• *Eyewitness Testimony*. The Gospels—presentations of Jesus' life—claim to be, or bear evidence of containing, eyewitness accounts. In a courtroom, eyewitness testimony is among the most reliable evidence.

• *Early Date*. Dr. William F. Albright, one of the world's leading archaeologists, dated every book of the New Testament (NT) before about AD 80.{17} There is no known record of NT factual authenticity ever being successfully challenged by a contemporary.

• *Manuscript Evidence*. Over 24,000 early manuscript copies of portions of the NT exist today. Concerning manuscript attestation, Sir Frederic Kenyon, director and principle librarian of the British Museum, concluded, "Both the authenticity and the general integrity of the books of the New Testament may be regarded as finally established."{18}

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family and humility. It was foretold by

prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Love*

Jesus' followers taught that His conception and birth were part of a divine plan to bring us genuine peace, inner freedom, and self-respect. They believed the biblical God wants us to enjoy friendship with Him, and meaning and purpose. Alas, our own self-centeredness separates us from Him. Left to our own, we would spend both time and eternity in this spiritually unplugged state.

Jesus came to help plug us into God. Mary's baby was born to die, paying the penalty for our self-centeredness, which the biblical documents call "sin." If I had a traffic fine I could not pay, you could offer to pay it for me. When the adult Jesus died on the cross, He carried the penalty due all our sins then rose from the dead to give new life.

Jesus explained, "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."{19} God can become your friend if you believe in Him, that is, if you trust Him to forgive you. He will never let you down.

Perhaps you are becoming aware of the importance of the Christmas story in your own life. Might you like to receive Jesus' free gift of forgiveness and place your faith in Him? You can celebrate this Christmas knowing that you are a member of His family. Perhaps you'd like to talk to Him right now. You might want to tell Him something like this:

> *Jesus Christ, thanks for loving me, for dying for my sins and rising again. Please apply your death as the means of my*

forgiveness. I accept your pardon. Come and live in me and help me to become your close friend.

If you made that decision to place your trust in Jesus, He has entered your life, forgiven you and given you eternal life. I encourage you to tell another of His followers about your decision and ask them to help you grow in faith. Call this radio station or visit the Web site probe.org to learn more. Read the Bible to discover more about God. Begin with the Gospel of John, the fourth book in the New Testament, which is one of the easier ones to understand. Tell God what is on your heart, and tell others about the discovery you've made so they can know Him too.

Christmas is meant to celebrate peace and joy. Amidst the busyness of shopping, parties, presents, and fun, remember that the Prince of Peace came to spread peace and joy to all who believe in Him.

Notes

1. Details of the Christmas story are in Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1:18-2:23.
2. Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973 printing of the 1883 original), i:372.
3. Matthew 12:21 NLT.
4. Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), ix-x.
5. Luke 2:10-11 NLT.
6. Luke 2:13-14 NASB.
7. Matthew 1:19 NLT.
8. Matthew 1:21 NLT.
9. Philippians 2:6-9 NLT.
10. For more on evidence for Jesus, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com and www.probe.org.
11. For a summary of prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see Josh

McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-177.
12. Micah 5:2.
13. Matthew 2:1 NASB.
14. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
15. Matthew 1:18, 22-25; Luke 1:27, 34.
16. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 99-112.
17. McDowell, op. cit., 62-63.
18. Frederic G. Kenyon, *The Bible and Archaeology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1940), 288; in McDowell, op. cit., 41. McDowell develops these points in pp. 39-41 ff.
19. John 3:16 NLT.

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7 Questions Skeptics Ask – Radio Transcript

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend has questions:

> *How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?*

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."{1} This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: How can you believe the Bible? Why do Christians say there is only one way to God? How does one become a Christian?

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want

answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands? His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.{5}

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, "I don't have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?"

I don't have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I'll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and

human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.{6} This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection{7} I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD.{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. Gods perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they wont need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical

behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a

psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.{16} Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."{17} That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him? To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.*
- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one*

way? He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans "by grace…through faith… not…works"{18} was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.

• Was Jesus' plan true? Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy{19} and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament{20} convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, "Why would God allow this to happen?" I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven't acted like Jesus. Maybe they're angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one's death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become

seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.

2. John 1:14.

3. John 1:45-47.

4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.

5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.

7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/ ; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.

13. Matthew 28:1-8.

14. Luke 1:26-2:40.

15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.

16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.

18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

19. A summary of some of the prophesies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

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Grappling with Guilt

What Makes You Feel Guilty?

What makes you feel guilty?

Has a relationship gone sour and you find yourself agonizing about what might have been if you'd acted or spoken

differently? Maybe your slave-driver boss hassles you for being behind. Are your kids wondering why they ended up with you as a parent?

These days, food guilt is common. With super-slim models gracing supermarket tabloids and magazine covers (admit it, now; you've peeked), even a fit, petite-sized former cheerleader can get depressed standing in the checkout line. "No-Guilt Nachos," offers a *Ladies' Home Journal* recipe.

America Online has a special guilt section dealing with "Relationship Guilt," "Parental Guilt," "Food Guilt," "Workforce Guilt," "Pricey Guilt," "I'm-a-Rotten-Person Guilt," "Stay-in-Touch Guilt," and "Trying-to-Please-Everyone Guilt." Whew!

Ever been late paying a family bill due to negligence or overspending? Been unfaithful to your spouse? Lied to the IRS or a friend? Been angry without reason?

When we fall short of our own – or others' – standards, guilt feelings can result. Unresolved guilt can bring anxiety, depression, ulcers, low self-esteem and more.

I am a recovering perfectionist. As a teenager, I could be pretty hard on myself. I once fouled out of a high school basketball game in the final seconds with our team ahead. The opposing player made his free throws, putting his team ahead. I felt bleak. Our team's desperation inbounds pass went to midcourt, where a teammate caught the ball and threw up a prayer. The ball swished through the net as time expired. We had won. I was the second happiest player there. I probably would have excoriated myself had he missed.

A single man I know became involved with another man's wife. Her rocky marriage had sent her lonely heart wandering and his youthful enthusiasm and libido met many of her wants. They dreamed, schemed, sneaked, and rendezvoused. When discovered, he lied and sought to perpetuate the affair. Eventually,

friends convinced him to break things off. He felt guilty for having the fling, guilty for lying about it, and guilty for dumping her.

Feeling guilty can cripple you emotionally. Serious ethical or moral lapses can bring blame and shame. A seemingly minor flaw can sometimes bug the daylights out of you. This article looks at healthy, biblical ways to deal with guilt, and how to know that you are really forgiven.

Some Causes of Guilt Feelings

Why does guilt affect us so, and how can we alleviate it? Some psychologists emphasize that problems in our past can plague us in the present. Inability to reconcile or move past unhealthy relationships with parents, siblings, teachers or classmates may color our emotions. Other authorities feel that people may be following overly rigid standards.

Suggested solutions have included discovering and resolving past hang-ups, relaxing moral codes or easing personal expectations. Certainly many people still suffer from past problems or set unrealistic standards. Forty-eight hours of tasks won't fit into one day, so don't necessarily castigate yourself when only half your ambitious to-do list gets accomplished. If you find yourself sneaking a diet-busting snack, maybe rewarding yourself occasionally is better than whipping yourself. But it seems wise to also consider that, at least in some instances, we may feel guilty because we are guilty.

If this is true, then therapy for a guilty person could begin with getting them to admit their shortcoming. That's not always easy.

Admitting you're wrong can be hard. Perhaps you've heard of the writer who asked his domineering editor if he'd ever been wrong. "Yes," replied the editor. "I was wrong once. It was

when I thought I was wrong but I wasn't."

University of Illinois psychologist O. H. Mowrer pointed out a common dilemma in trying to face your own shortcomings:

> *Here, too, we encounter difficulty, because human beings do not change radically until first they acknowledge their sins, but it is hard for one to make such an acknowledgement unless he has "already changed." In other words, the full realization of deep worthlessness is a severe ego "insult," and one must have a new source of strength to endure it.*[{1}]

I understand this inner weakness problem. As a teenager, I found success through athletics, academics, and student government. I was attending one of my nation's leading secondary schools. President John F. Kennedy and actor Michael Douglas were alumni. But my achievements didn't bring the personal satisfaction I wanted. Guilt, anxiety, and a poor self-image often plagued me on the inside.

My first year in university, I met some students who said that the spiritual side of life offered a solution to the guilt problem. A relationship with God, they said, could give me the "new source of strength" necessary to face my own flaws and seek help. Because of them, I discovered practical reasons why faith could help me overcome my guilt.

A Solution to Guilt

The hit movie *Bruce Almighty* depicts God's attempts to contact the main character (played by Jim Carrey) by leaving a number on his pager. Turns out the phone number is valid in many area codes. After the film's release, people and businesses began getting calls from folks asking for God.

A Florida woman threatened to sue the film studio after twenty calls per hour clogged her cell phone. A Denver radio station built a contest around the fluke. Some callers to the station

seemed to think they'd really discovered a direct line to God. One even left a message confessing her adultery.{2}

Owning up to guilt can help clear your conscience.

Those college students I mentioned earlier had a joy and enthusiasm that attracted me. They claimed to have a personal relationship with Jesus of Nazareth. I couldn't believe it all. I kept returning to their meetings because I was curious and because it was a good place to get a date. Especially because it was a good place to get a date!

They explained that God loved me, but that my own self-centeredness or sin had separated me from Him. They said His Son, Jesus, died to pay the penalty for my sins, and rose from the dead so I could receive forgiveness as a free gift. Eventually, it made sense.{3} Through a simple heart attitude, I invited Jesus to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. There was no thunder and lightning, no angels appeared, and I did not become perfect overnight. But I found a new inner peace, freedom from guilt, assurance that I would be with God forever, and the best friend I could ever have.

Of course, my experience is not unique. Harvard psychologist William James, in his classic book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* cites Henry Alline who placed his faith in Christ: "the burden of guilt and condemnation was gone . . . my whole soul, that was a few minutes ago groaning under mountains of death . . . was now filled with immortal love . . . freed from the chains of death and darkness…."{4}

One early believer wrote: "God made you alive with Christ. He forgave all our sins. He canceled the record that contained the charges against us. He took it and destroyed it by nailing it to Christ's cross."{5} I found that my own guilt was gone, but I also had to draw on His power daily.

A friend of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to him, he [God] is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us

from every wrong."{6} Some call this statement the believer's "bar of soap." We confess, being honest with God. He forgives and cleanses us.

But what if you don't feel forgiven? Is there such a thing as false guilt?

True or False?

A reader who signed his e-mail "Guilt plagued" told me of his struggles:

> *A few years ago, out of desperation, I made a series of terrible mistakes. I am committed to the Lord and confessed my sins. I'm terribly ashamed and embarrassed about what I have done, and I feel ten times worse because I can't make restitution. . . . I'm having a difficult time processing the idea that He has forgiven me. . . . Please help me . . . what should I do? The guilt is eating me alive.*

Sometimes we feel guilty because we are guilty. Other times we feel guilty without cause. Is your guilt true or false, and what can you do about the feelings?{7}

When my wife, Meg, was in graduate school at Stanford, she regularly parked on the street near her campus office. One afternoon she discovered a parking ticket on her windshield. During that day – while she was parked there – campus management had painted the curb red, signifying "No Parking." (The curb had never had paint during her tenure.) Was she guilty?

Her dilemma was both laughable and burdensome. Meg would have to either pay a fine or go to court. She appeared in court and told the judge what had happened. He dropped the charges. (I should *hope* he would!)

The law and the judge's application of it determined guilt or

innocence. Similarly, if we violate God's proscriptions, we stand guilty. If we do not violate biblical principles, then we may or may not be guilty.

If you know your guilt is real, your solution begins with placing your trust in Christ to forgive you. Once you have, and you become aware of sins in your daily life, simply admit them to God.

Keep short accounts with God. As the proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em." Feelings may lag behind, but if you've admitted your sin to God, He has forgiven you.

What if you're unsure if your guilt is true or false, or if you confess your sins but still don't feel forgiven?

Consider *the Holy Spirit's guidance.* Jesus sent His Holy Spirit to guide us into truth,{8} especially concerning sin.{9} If the Bible doesn't prohibit certain behaviors, you – if you're a follower of Jesus – can ask the Holy Spirit for wisdom about them. Jesus' brother James wrote, "If you need wisdom—if you want to know what God wants you to do—ask him, and he will gladly tell you."{10} Discerning God's guidance is not a perfect science, but His inner conviction can help you sort things out.

Making Things Right

What do you do if you're not sure if your guilt feelings are legitimate, or if you don't feel forgiven?

Realize that *God's promises trump your own self-criticism.* Members of God's family can trust His opinion even when they don't feel like it's true. We can "set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."{11} Does your heart condemn you unjustly? You can say, "Listen, heart. I'm a child of God. I've confessed my sin and He says I'm

forgiven. I refuse to believe your condemnation."

I recommend that you converse with yourself in private rather than in public! For a variety of psychological and spiritual reasons, your guilt feelings may not disappear immediately. Changing established emotional patterns can take time. Choosing to believe God is good starting point.

Realize also that *God's promises trump the real enemy.* This may be hard to swallow, but it's important. Jesus taught the existence of "Satan," a "liar and the father of lies,"{12} the "accuser" of believers.{13}

I once considered myself too intellectual to believe in Satan. Our university mascot was the "Blue Devil." To me, the devil was some guy in a blue costume with a pitchfork who ran around at basketball games. Then I heard that Satan the deceiver has some people so deceived that they don't believe he exists. Jesus' life and teachings eventually convinced me that Satan was real. If you experience false guilt feelings, realize that they may have a lower source. You needn't deny the feelings, but you can deny false guilt based on Jesus' friendship with you.{14}

You may need to *make restitution.* My second year in college, I swiped a plastic bucket from behind the lectern in the psychology lecture hall. It had been there every day during the semester. "No one wants it," I convinced myself. "It deserves to be taken." I used it to wash my car.

Two years later, I read a booklet about God's forgiveness. That bucket kept coming to mind. I not only needed to admit my theft to God. I needed to make restitution.

My booty long since lost, I purchased a new bucket and carried it sheepishly across campus one afternoon. Finding no one in the psychology building to confess to, I left the bucket in a broom closet with a note of explanation. Maybe a janitor read it. My conscience was clear.

After hearing of this stolen bucket episode in a lecture, one friend wrote his former employer to confess all the items he had stolen and to offer restitution. “We all probably have some plastic buckets in our lives,” observed another associate.

Feeling guilty? You may just need to relax unrealistic standards in a stress-filled world. But you also may need to face genuine personal shortcomings. If you do, you can know that the complete forgiveness that Jesus offers is free and that His truth trumps all challengers.

This article is adapted with permission from Rusty Wright, “Grappling with Guilt,” *In Touch*, February 2005, pp. 18-20; Copyright © Rusty Wright 2005.

Notes

1. O. H. Mowrer, “Sin, the Lesser of Two Evils,” quoted in Henry R. Brandt, *The Struggle for Peace* (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, 1965).
2. Mitch Stacy, “‘Bruce Almighty’ Phone Number Annoys Many,” *Associated Press/AOL News*, May 28, 2003.
3. For detailed information on Jesus and evidence to support His claims, see www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
4. *The Life and Journal of the Rev. Mr. Henry Alline* (Boston, 1806), 31-40; selection abridged in Henry James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The Modern Library/Random House, 1936 [original copyright 1902]), 214-215.
5. Colossians 2:13-14 NLT.
6. 1 John 1:9 NLT.
7. For more on false guilt, see, Kerby Anderson, “False Guilt,” www.probe.org/false-guilt/and Sue Bohlin, “It’s Not Your Fault!” www.probe.org/its-not-your-fault/.
8. John 16:13.
9. John 16:8.
10. James 1:5 NLT.
11. 1 John 3:18-20 NIV.

12. John 8:44 NASB.
13. Revelation 12:9-10 NASB.
14. 1 John 4:4 NLT.

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Divorce and You

How can you cope with divorce if it comes your way? How can you help a friend who is going through it? What about divorce and the ministry? Practical—and personal—thoughts on this important issue.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

It's Over

Divorce. What thoughts and feelings does that word kindle in you?

Are you happily married and feel that divorce is not an option? Maybe the concept scares you. The fear of loss seems overwhelming.

Are you in a struggling marriage and the end is near? Perhaps you are confused, angry, depressed, or grieving. Or maybe you are happy and envision this as the necessary end of an unpleasant relationship.

Perhaps your parents are divorced. Maybe you recall their angry disputes during your childhood, fear over your family's future, anguish over deciding with whom you would live.

Got any friends whose marriage is on the rocks? You might care for both of them, but how should you relate to them now? Take sides? Remain neutral? Intervene? Keep out of it?

In 1975 I married a wonderful woman. She was kind, sensitive, beautiful, loving, intelligent, fun, talented . . . my best friend. We traveled the globe together speaking in universities, on television and radio, writing books and articles about love, sex and marriage. She taught me much about love, kindness, sensitivity, communication. Much of the modest success I've seen in speaking and writing I owe in part to her excellent coaching.

Twenty years later, in 1995, she told me she wanted out. I felt devastated. The love of my life didn't love me any more. The pain of rejection ran deep. I had not committed adultery or desertion. I felt helpless. Legally, I was helpless. California's "no-fault" divorce laws mean that in our state it takes two to get married but only one to get divorced. One partner can simply claim "irreconcilable differences" – no proof is needed – and a judge will dissolve the union after a six-month waiting period. The unwilling partner is legally powerless to stop it.

Imagine the worst spat you've ever had with your spouse, partner, or friend. Multiply the pain of that by a jillion and you have a glimpse of the hurt. It felt as if I were being reamed out by an emotional Roto Rooter. I cried buckets. It was really, really awful. Are you getting the idea that I did not like this experience?

What does the Bible say about divorce? How can you cope with divorce if it comes your way? How can you help a friend who is going through it? And what about divorce in the ministry? This article offers you some practical thoughts on this controversial topic.

Biblical Issues

Is divorce a solution or a cop-out?

I appreciate it when speakers or writers make clear their way of looking at the world. My worldview is a biblical one. You may agree or disagree, and I certainly respect that, but may I encourage you to consider what the biblical documents say on this issue?

Moses, the famous Jewish liberator, explained that God made the first man and woman for a close bond. “For this reason,” Moses wrote, “a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.”{1}

Hundreds of years later, some religious leaders asked Jesus of Nazareth about divorce. He quoted Moses’ statement, then added, “Since they are no longer two but one, let no one separate them, for God has joined them together.”{2} Jesus held marriage in high esteem: “God has joined them together,” He declared, “. . . let no one separate them.”

But if divorce is wrong, these male religious leaders responded, why did Moses discuss how to handle certain complicated divorce situations? Jesus explained: “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you,” Jesus continued, “that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery.”{3}

Strong words. What do they mean? Even dedicated followers of God differ about whether He allows divorce and under what circumstances. A thorough study exceeds the scope of this short series. I recommend Jay Adams’ book, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible*,{4} for more detail.

Years before my own marriage began to crumble, I carefully studied a biblical perspective on divorce and remarriage. Here

is what made the most sense to me. Partners should enter marriage for life, "until death do us part." If splits arise, reconciliation should always be the first aim. If reconciliation fails, I see two biblical bases for divorce and remarriage: adultery of one spouse{5}, and desertion{6}. Adultery or desertion do not mandate divorce, but they make it allowable.

As difficult as this subject may seem, remember that God loves you and wants the very best for you.{7} If you are hurting right now, He understands. He wants to wrap His arms around you, be your friend, and help you handle your deepest disappointment.

Coping With Divorce

What are some ways to cope with a shipwrecked marriage?

Divorce can teach you a lot. I'm a sinful person who made plenty of mistakes in marriage. I could have been more thoughtful, sensitive, and kind. Though I tried hard to be a good husband, I realized I could not be responsible for another's decision.

About a year after the divorce, at some friends' encouragement, I began to speak publicly about what I had learned. I was determined not to speak ill of my ex wife, but I wanted to encourage others. My story got several reactions, which I began reflecting to audiences to help them process it. Maybe you can relate.

"Some of you feel uncomfortable with this topic," I would tell listeners. "You wish I would change the subject. I've felt that way. Others of you think, I wish the person I love would be as open with his heart as you're being.' Some of you are skeptical," I'd continue. "You'd like to hear *her* side of the story! I can appreciate that. Maybe you're angry. Perhaps I remind you of your ex-spouse. You think, He talks so sweet.

But I bet he's a tyrant in private!' I realized that I cannot assume responsibility for all the people who have hurt you. But I can offer hope. Maybe people will reason, He's hurt; I've hurt. He says Jesus helped him with his hurt. Maybe Jesus can help me with my hurt.'"

Jesus can help you with your hurt. He said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls."{8}

Often divorcees experience the classic stages of loss: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.{9} You may not believe you're experiencing this. You may be mad at your mate or God. You may promise God you'll follow Him if He restores your marriage. You may become depressed when the end seems certain. Eventually you may accept reality.

What helped my journey through grief? I had to believe that God really did cause "all things to work together for good to those who love" Him.{10} I sought to walk closely with Him. I asked forgiveness of my ex-wife for my many shortcomings. I forgave her and forgave myself.

I saw a skilled counselor. A wonderful divorce recovery group helped me understand what I was experiencing and feeling. I did not date for about two years after the divorce was final, to allow time to sort things out. And some fine friends helped me to land on my feet.

Responding to a Friend's Divorce

How might you be a friend to someone in the midst of divorce?

The couple next door is splitting up. One partner is bailing on the marriage. You and your family have known them for years. You've babysat each other's kids, carpooled to work, vacationed together, laughed and cried together. You are

members of the same church.

How should you relate to them now? Take sides? Remain neutral? Intervene? Keep out of it?

If you are a follower of Jesus, you likely will want to seek divine wisdom. Every situation is different, and marital strife can be explosive. Jesus' mother Mary once had some wise advice that relates well to these situations. She said, "Whatever He [Jesus] says to you, do it."{11}

I was quite fortunate to have a circle of good friends who reached out in loving care. Perhaps their examples can give you some ideas of what you might do.

My friends did not abandon me in my darkest hour. They stuck with me, let me know that they cared, asked how they could help, arranged opportunities for us to spend time together. One couple had me over to dinner every Friday night during the fall. Then we would watch their son play high school football. It helped take my mind off of my problems, relax, and enjoy being around other people.

Some recommended books,{12} met me for lunch, and invited me to a concert. One couple listened as I poured my heart out and helped me plan my future. Some organized a prayer meeting among close friends, helped me move, sat with me in court. They would call to ask how I was doing, especially when I felt particularly lonely or burdened.

Two friends tried to contact my estranged wife to encourage her to drop the divorce action.

After the divorce, many gracious folks welcomed me into their circles and encouraged me to serve others. Some pastors and theologians who knew me well told me they thought it was appropriate biblically for me to remarry. I was reluctant. I wondered if I could ever open my heart to another woman.

Then, at a conference, I met Meg Korpi, a beautiful, sensitive, kind, wise, caring, brilliant, fun woman. She was as dedicated to God as she was wise and gorgeous. (I get points for saying all this in writing, you understand!) I knew what I liked and I liked what I saw! We began to date almost three years after the divorce ended and were married about a year-and-a-half later. We are very happy together. We thank God often.

Divorcees and the Ministry

What about divorce and the ministry? If a ministry leader divorces, should he or she remain in ministry?

If a leader initiates an unbiblical divorce – or commits adultery or otherwise acts inappropriately – one should confront him or her as described in Matthew 18. In my view (not all will agree), with a change of mind and heart – and after appropriate time – it may be possible to restore a fallen leader to effective service. Paul wrote, "If someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."{13}

What about the victim of an unbiblical divorce? There are both wise and unwise ways to deal with such tragedies. Ministry boards and executives should take special care to act biblically. They may be tempted to value public image and donations above biblical principles.

Perhaps my case will be instructive. My first wife and I were international speakers with a prominent evangelical movement with thousands of wonderful staff. We traveled the world together, wrote books, appeared on television. In my twenty-fifth year with this organization, my wife filed for divorce without – in my opinion – biblical grounds. This caused quite a stir.

Though initially expressing concern and care, corporate

leaders claimed they had a policy requiring me to leave if my spouse divorced me. I was told I was a PR risk and would need to go. At one point they wanted me to agree never to speak or write about marriage, divorce, or remarriage (mine in particular or these themes in general). Things got "curiouser and curiouser."

Again, this movement has done much good around the globe. It helped me come to faith when I was a student. Please understand that I am seeking here the proper blend of grace and truth, not an easy task in these matters.

My employer owned a seminary, a separate corporation that had no automatic divorce restriction. The seminary president hired me. He took some heat for acting biblically, but those like him who refused to convict me of a sin – divorce – that I did not commit were God's instruments of grace in my life. After a time of healing, I returned to the lecture circuit. Today, I am privileged to enjoy an even larger global influence via speaking and writing.

Divorce does not have to end ministry. Has any sin been dealt with in a biblical fashion? If so, then the divorced servant of Christ can, with God's direction and power – and with appropriate accountability – continue to touch lives for Him. Jesus welcomed the denying Peter into fellowship and service.

The wounded servant may become even more effective, able to connect with people on a deep level and to point them to the One who can heal their broken hearts.

Notes

1. Genesis 2:24 NASB.
2. Matthew 19:6 NLT.
3. Matthew 19:8-9 NIV.
4. Jay E. Adams, *Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980).
5. Matthew 19:9.

6. 1 Corinthians 7:12-15, taken with Matthew 18:15-17. An outline of this argument regarding desertion is as follows: 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 can be understood to mean that when a spouse who does not believe in Christ deserts a spouse who does have faith in Christ, the deserted believer is not bound from remarriage. Regarding a marriage between two believers, a deserted spouse should first seek reconciliation. If the deserter will not reconcile, the deserted spouse should follow the biblical "progressive correction" prescription in Matthew 18:15-17. That is, s/he should confront the deserter with his/her sin individually, then (if the deserter continues to resist) with one or two others, then involving the church. If the deserting spouse still resists, then the Lord's admonition to the church (which includes the deserted spouse) is "let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." In other words, relate to that person just as you would to someone outside the church, as to an unbeliever. How does the church relate to unbelievers? One of the many biblical teachings regarding relationships between believers and unbelievers is that an unbelieving spouse who deserts a
believer does not bind that believer from remarriage (1 Corinthians 7:12-15). See Adams, op. cit., for a more complete discussion of desertion as allowable grounds for remarriage.
7. Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 23.
8. Matthew 11:28-29 NLT.
9. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, M.D., *On Death and Dying,* reprint edition (New York: Simon and Schuster, reprint, 1997).
10. Romans 8:28, NASB.
11. John 2:5 NASB.
12. Especially helpful are Joseph Warren Kniskern, *When the Vow*
Breaks (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993); and many of the Fresh Start resources
at www.freshstartseminars.org.
13. Galatians 6:1 NIV.

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