Secularization and the Church in Europe

Rick Wade

Christian beliefs and church attendance are playing a much smaller role in Europeans’ lives in general than in the past. Rick Wade gives a snapshot of the place and nature of Christianity in Europe.

At the end of a talk about the state of the evangelical mind in America, the subject turned to Europe, and a man said with great confidence, “The churches in Europe are all empty!” I’ve heard that said before. It makes for a good missions sermon; however, it doesn’t quite do justice to the situation. Not all the churches in Europe are empty! The situation isn’t like in Dallas, Texas, where churches dot the landscape, but there are thriving churches across the continent.

That said, however, there is more than just a grain of truth in the claim. Church attendance in Europe is down. Traditional Christian beliefs are less widely held.

It’s important to know what the situation is in Europe for a few reasons.

First, we have a tendency to write Europe off in a way we don’t other parts of the world. The church is struggling there, but it isn’t a lost cause by any means! Maybe we can even learn from the thinking and life’s experience of believers across the Atlantic.

Second, learning about the church around the world is good because it broadens
our understanding of the interaction of Christianity and society. This should be of interest to us here in America.

Let’s look at a few numbers in the area of church attendance. To provide a contrast with the situation today, the best estimate for church attendance in Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was between forty and sixty percent of the adult population.\footnote{1} By contrast, in 2007, ten percent attended church at least weekly. About a quarter of those (about two million people) self-identify as evangelicals.\footnote{2} Although there has been large growth in so-called “new churches,” that growth hasn’t offset the loss across other denominations, especially the Church of England.

What about some other countries? In 2004, Gallup reported that “weekly attendance at religious services is below 10% in France and Germany, while in Belgium, the Netherlands, [and] Luxembourg . . . between 10% and 15% of citizens are regular churchgoers. . . . Only in Roman Catholic Ireland do a majority of residents (54%) still go to church weekly.”\footnote{3}

As we’ll see later, reduced numbers in church doesn’t mean all religious belief—even Christian—is lost.

**The Golden Age of Faith**

There is a story of the prominence and demise of religion in Europe that has become standard fare for understanding the history of Christianity in the modern world. The story goes that Europe was once a Christian civilization; that everyone was a Christian, and that the state churches ensured that society as a whole was Christian. This was the so-called “golden age of faith.” With the shift in thinking in the Enlightenment which put man at the center of knowledge, and which saw the rise of science, it became clear to some that religion was really just a form of superstition that gave pre-modern people an explanation of the world in which they lived and gave them hope.\footnote{4}

This story has come under a lot of fire in recent decades.\footnote{5} Although the
churches had political and social power, there was no uniform religious belief across Europe. In fact, it’s been shown that there was a significant amount of paganism and folk magic mixed in with Christian beliefs. Many priests had the barest notions of Christian theology; a lot of them couldn’t even read. Sociologist Philip Gorski says that it’s more accurate to call it an Age of Magic or an Age of Ritual than an Age of Belief.

On the other side of this debate are scholars such as Steve Bruce who say that, no matter the content or nature of religious belief in the Middle Ages, people were still religious even if not uniformly Christian; they believed in the supernatural and their religious beliefs colored their entire lives. “The English peasants may have often disappointed the guardians of Christian orthodoxy,” Bruce writes, “but they were indubitably religious.”

So what changed? Was there a loss of Christianity or a loss of religion in general, or just some kind of shift? Historian Timothy Larson believes that what has been lost is Christendom. The term Christendom is typically used to refer to the West when it was dominated by Christianity. The change wasn’t really from religion to irreligion but from the dominance of Christianity to its demise as a dominant force.

Religion has come back with significant force in recent decades even in such deeply secular countries as France, primarily because of the influx of Muslims. Although the state Christian churches are faltering, some founded by immigrants are doing well, such as those founded by Afro-Caribbean immigrants in England. It seems that critics sounded the death knell on religion too soon.

**European Distinctives**

Although Christian belief is on the demise in general in Europe, the institutional church—the state church specifically—still has a valuable place in society.

In Europe’s past, the church was a major part of people’s lives. Everyone was
baptized, married, and buried in the church. That tradition is still such a part of the social psyche that people fully expect that the church will be there for them even if they don’t attend. Sociologist Grace Davie describes the church in this respect as a *public utility*. “A public utility,” she writes, “is available to the population as a whole at the point of need and is funded through the tax system.”  

Fewer people are being married in churches now, and far fewer are being baptized. However, there’s still a sense of need for the church at the time of death along with the expectation that it will be there for them.

Another term that characterizes religion in Europe is *vicarious religion*. Vicarious religion is “religion performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who . . . understand [and] approve of what the minority is doing.” Church leaders are expected to believe certain things, perform religious rituals, and embody a high moral code. “English bishops,” Davie writes, “are rebuked . . . if they doubt in public; it is, after all, their ‘job’ to believe.” She reports an incident where a bishop was thought to have spoken derogatorily about the resurrection of Jesus. He was “widely pilloried” for that, she writes. Soon after his consecration as bishop, his church was struck by lightning. That was seen by some as a rebuke by God!

Another indicator of the importance of the church in European life is the fact that, in some countries, people still pay church tax, even countries that are very secular. Germany is one example. People can opt out, but a surprisingly high number don’t, including some who are not religiously affiliated. Reasons include the possibility of needing the church sometime later in life, having a place to provide moral guidance for children, and the church’s role in positively influencing the moral fabric of society in general.

**From Doctrine to Spirituality**

I described above two concepts that characterize religious life in parts of Europe: *public utility* and *vicarious religion*. There’s a third phrase sociologists use which points to the shift in emphasis from what one gets through the institutional church to personal spiritual experience. The phrase is “believing without
belonging.”

Sociologist Peter Berger believes that, as America is less religious than it seems, Europe is less secular than it seems. “A lot goes on under the radar,” he writes.\footnote{15}

A phrase often heard \textit{there} is heard more and more frequently in the States: “I’m not religious, but I’m spiritual.” This could mean the person is into New Age thinking, or is interested in more conventional religion but doesn’t feel at home in a church or in organized religion, or just prefers to choose what to believe him- or herself. A term some use to characterize this way of thinking is “patchwork religion.”

One frequently finds a greater acceptance of religion in Europe when religion in general is the subject and not particular, creedal religions. Davie notes that “[generally speaking] if you ask European populations . . . do you believe in God, and you’re not terribly specific about the God in question, you’ll get about 70 percent saying yes, depending where you are. If you say, do you believe that Jesus Christ is the son of God, you’ll get a much lower number. In other words, if you turn your question into a creedal statement, the percentages go down.” A “cerebral” kind of belief doesn’t hold much appeal to the young. The essence of religious experience isn’t so much what you learn as it is simply taking part. “It’s the fact that you’re lifted out of yourself that counts.”\footnote{16}

The loss of authority in the state church hasn’t resulted in the triumph of secular rationalism among young people, which is rather surprising. They experiment with religious beliefs. “The rise occurred right across Europe,” Davie notes, “but is most marked in those parts of Europe where the institutional churches are at their weakest.” This isn’t seen, however, “where the church is still strong and seen as a disciplinary force and is therefore rejected by young people.”\footnote{17}

\textbf{Some Closing Thoughts}

Allow me to make some observations about the subject of secularization and the
church in Europe.

Here are a few things to keep in mind as we face a Western culture that is increasingly hostile to the Gospel. First, we routinely hear the charge from people that religious people are living in the past, that they need to catch up to modern times. Such people simply assume as obviously true the long-held theory that secularization necessarily follows from modernization. This theory is sharply disputed today. Europe’s history isn’t the history of the rest of the world. Modernization appears in different forms around the world, including some that have room for religious belief and practice. America is a prime example. It isn’t the backward exception to the rule, as haughty critics would have us believe. Some say it’s Europe that is the exception with its strong secularity. In fact, I think a case can be made that the modern propensity to separate our spiritual side from our material one is artificial; it violates our nature. But that’s a subject for another time. What we can be sure of is that the condescending attitude of people who want Christians to catch up to modern times is without basis. There is no necessary connection between modernity and secularity.

A second thing to keep in mind is that the church doesn’t require a Christian society around it in order to grow. Christianity didn’t have its beginnings in a Christian society, but it grew nonetheless. The wide-spread social acceptance of Christian beliefs and morality is not the power of God unto salvation. It is the word of the cross.

Third, religion per se will not disappear because we are made in God’s image and He has put eternity in our hearts (Eccl. 3:11). Christianity in particular will not die either, for the One who rose from the dead said even the gates of hell won’t prevail against it (a much more serious adversary than the new atheists!).

What should we do? The same things Christian have always been called to do: continue in sound, biblical teaching, and learn and practice consistent Christian living. It is the way we live that, for many people, makes our beliefs plausible in the first place. And proclaim the gospel. Despite any constraints society may put on us, the Word of God is not bound.
Notes

1. Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2002), 63-64.
5. Sociologist Rodney Stark is one of the most prominent doubters of secularization theory. See his “Secularization, R.I.P. – rest in peace,” *Sociology of Religion*, Fall, 1999, available online at findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0SOR/is_3_60/ai_57533381/.
7. Stark, “Secularization, R.I.P.”


17. Ibid.


19. Sociologist Christian Smith edited a volume titled *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life* (UC Press, 2003) in which the case was argued that secularization became so powerful here because of a concerted effort by people who wanted it, not because of some natural, teleological progression.

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**Influential Intellectuals**

Kerby Anderson

*Kerby Anderson examines four famous intellectuals—Rousseau, Marx, Russell and Sartre, looking for reasons they are worth following and not finding much.*
Over the last two centuries, a few intellectuals have had a profound impact on Western Culture. British historian Paul Johnson writes about many of these influential intellectuals in his book, *Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky*. In this article, we will look at four of the better-known intellectuals whose influence continues to this day.

Paul Johnson reminds us that over the past two centuries, the influence of these secular intellectuals has grown steadily. He believes it is the key factor in shaping the modern world. In fact, this is really a new phenomenon. It was only the decline of clerical power in the eighteenth century that allowed these men to have a more significant influence in society.

Each secular intellectual “brought to this self-appointed task a far more radical approach than his clerical predecessors. He felt himself bound by no corpus of revealed religion.”[1] For the first time, these intellectuals felt they alone could diagnose the ills of society and cure them without a need to refer to religion or past tradition.

One important characteristic of these new secular intellectuals was their desire to subject “religion and its protagonists to critical scrutiny.” And they pronounced harsh verdicts on priests and pastors about whether they could live up to their precepts.

After two centuries in which the influence of religion has declined and secular institutions have had a greater influence, Paul Johnson believes it is time to examine the record and influence of these secular intellectuals. In particular, he focuses on their moral and judgmental credentials. Do they have the right to tell the rest of us how to run our lives? How moral and just were they in their financial dealings and their sexual relationships? And how have their proposed systems stood up to the test of time?

I will give you a preview. These secular intellectuals lived decadent lives and mistreated so many people in their lives. Their proposed systems of politics, economics, and culture have been a failure and devastated
millions of lives.

What a contrast to the Christian message. Jesus lived a sinless life (1 John 3:5) even though He was tempted as we are (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus called on His disciples to follow Him (Matthew 4:19). Even the Apostle Paul encouraged Christians to follow his example as he followed the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).

Paul Johnson concludes his book with a number of examples of how some of these secular intellectuals addressed current political and social issues. He also points out that these intellectuals saw no incongruity in moving from their own discipline (where they are masters) to public affairs (where they have no expertise). In the end, we discover that they “are no wiser as mentors, or worthier as exemplars, than the witch doctors or priests of old.” {2}

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Jean-Jacques Rousseau is a very influential intellectual. Many of our modern ideas of education were influenced to some degree by his treatise Émile. And even to this day many indirectly refer to some of his ideas found in the Social Contract that encapsulated his political philosophy.

Rousseau rejected the biblical narrative and instead believed that society was the reason we humans are defective. He argued, “When society evolves from its primitive state of nature to urban sophistication, man is corrupted.”{3}

Rousseau believed that you could improve human behavior (and even completely transform it) by changing the culture and the forces that produced it. In essence, he believed you can change human beings through social engineering.

He was, no doubt, a difficult person to be around and very egotistical. Paul Johnson explains that “part of Rousseau’s vanity was that he believed himself incapable of base emotions.”{4} He also had a great deal of self-pity for his circumstances and had “a feeling that he was quite unlike other men, both in his
sufferings and his qualities.” {5}

Paul Johnson also reminds us that Rousseau “quarreled, ferociously and usually permanently, with virtually everyone with whom he had close dealings, and especially those who befriended him; and it is impossible to study the painful and repetitive tale of these rows without reaching the conclusion that he was a mentally sick man.” {6}

Apparently, he cared little for those around him. For example, his foster-mother rescued him from destitution at least four times. But later when he did much better financially, and she became indigent, he did little for her. {7} His five children born to his mistress were abandoned to the orphanage hospital. He did not even know the dates of their births and took no interest in them.

Rousseau even acknowledged “that brooding on his conduct towards his children led him eventually to formulate theory of education he put forward in Émile. It also clearly helped to shape his Social Contract, published the same year.” {8}

The only woman who ever loved Rousseau summed him up this way: “He was a pathetic figure, and I treated him with gentleness and kindness. He was an interesting madman.” {9}

In this article we are studying some of these secular intellectuals because they have had such a profound impact on our world even today. But as we can already see from the life of Rousseau and will see from some of the other men we will discuss below, they lived decadent lives. They really had no business telling the rest of us how to live our lives.

**Karl Marx**

Paul Johnson concludes that Marx “has had more impact on actual events, as well as on the minds of men and women, than any other intellectual in modern times.” {10}
Marx claimed that his philosophy was scientific. Paul Johnson disagrees and says it was not scientific. “He felt he had found a scientific explanation of human behavior in history akin to Darwin’s theology of evolution.” [11] Although Marx obtained a doctorate in philosophy he really wasn’t a scholar, at least in the traditional sense. He actually spent more time organizing the Communist League and collecting material.

Paul Johnson says there were three strands in Marx: the poet, the journalist, and the moralist. He used poetic imagery which actually became part of his political vision. He was also a journalist and fairly good one at that. He also made use of aphorisms. Many of the most famous were borrowed from others. Two of the best known are: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains,” and “Religion in the opium of the people.”

The moral impulse of Marx began with “his hatred of usury and moneylenders.” [12] He believed that Jews had corrupted Christianity. His solution, therefore, was to abolish the Jewish attitude toward money. Ultimately, the Jews and the corrupted version of Christianity would disappear. Later Marx broadened his critique to blame the bourgeois class as a whole.

How did Marx treat others? “Marx quarreled with everyone with whom he associated” unless “he succeeded in dominating them completely.” [13] He also collected elaborate dossiers about his political rivals and enemies.” [14] Also, Marx “did not reject violence or even terrorism when it suited his tactics.” [15] Later Lenin, Stalin, and Mao would practice such violence on an enormous scale.

Central to his hatred of capitalism was probably his incompetence in handling money. He never seriously attempted to get and hold down a job. Instead, Engels became the primary source of income for Marx and his family. In fact, Engels nearly ended the relationship when he once received a letter from Marx that virtually ignored the death of a woman Engels loved and focused the rest of the letter asking for money.

Life for his wife Jenny and their children was a nightmare. In time her jewelry ended up at the pawnshop. “Their beds were sold to pay the butcher, milkman,
chemist and baker." [16] He even denied his daughters a satisfactory education. After his wife’s death, the family nursery-maid became his mistress and conceived a child whom Marx would never acknowledge. Once again, we see the decadent lives of these secular intellectuals.

**Bertrand Russell**

Paul Johnson says that “No intellectual in history offered advice to humanity over so long a period as Bertrand Russell." [17] His first book was published when Queen Victoria was still alive, and his last book came out the year Richard Nixon resigned because of Watergate. He also wrote countless newspaper and magazine articles. He wrote so much because he found writing to be so easy, and he was well paid for it.

Russell was an orphan, but his parents (who were atheists) left instructions for him to be brought up on the teaching of John Stuart Mill. His grandmother, however, would have none of it and raised him in an atmosphere of Bibles and Blue Books, taught by governesses and tutors. Nevertheless, he rejected religion as a teenager and remained an unbeliever the rest of his life.

“No man ever had a stronger confidence in the power of intellect, though he tended to see it almost as an abstract, disembodied force.” [18] For much “of his life he spent in telling the public what they ought to think and do, and this intellectual evangelism completely dominated the second half of his long life.” [19] On a number of occasions, he found himself in trouble with the law, being sued and fined for articles he wrote.

Paul Johnson remarked that “No one was more detached from physical reality than Russell. He could not work the simplest mechanical device or perform any of the routine tasks which even the most pampered man does without thinking.” [20]

He said that the First World War caused him to revise the views he held about human behavior, in part because he could not understand how people’s emotions
function in wartime. Reading him produced “a sense of wonder in the normal reader that so clever a man could be so blind to human nature.” {21}

Bertrand Russell believed “that the ills of the world could be largely solved by logic, reason, and moderation.” But here was his inconsistency. “When preaching his humanist idealism, Russell set truth above any other consideration. But in a corner, he was liable—indeed likely—to try to lie his way out of it.” {22}

As we have documented with other secular intellectuals, Russell also exploited women (especially his wives) as well as others who worked with him. This does seem to be a pattern. When students are required to read the works of many these men, they are never told about their lives. Although we are supposed to respect their intellect, once we study their lives we find that there was very little to respect.

**Jean-Paul Sartre**

Paul Johnson concludes that “no philosopher this century has had so direct an impact on the minds and attitudes of so many human beings, especially young people, all over the world.”{23} Existentialism was a popular philosophy for decades. His plays were hits. His books sold in the millions.

He grew up as a spoiled child (his father dying when he was fifteen months), with his grandfather giving him the run of his library and his mother providing for him a childhood “paradise.” He enjoyed one of the best educations and had a habit of reading three hundred books a year.

In some ways, World War II made Sartre, though the people around him found little use for him. He “was notorious for never taking a bath and being disgustingly dirty. What he did was write.”{24} He didn’t do anything to save the Jews. Instead, he “concentrated relentlessly on promoting his own career. He wrote furiously, plays, philosophy and novels, mainly in cafés.”{25}

Sartre is known for the philosophy of existentialism, though the word was not his. The press invented it, and he came to embrace it. He proposed his philosophy of
human freedom at a time when people were hungry for it. But he also meant that
the existentialist individual must live without excuses. That is the why he wrote
that “Man is condemned to be free.”

Sartre’s companion through life was Simone de Beauvoir, who was a brilliant
writer and philosopher. But he treated her “as a mistress, surrogate wife, cook
and manager, female bodyguard, and nurse.”{26} He was “the archetype of what
in the 1960s became known as a male chauvinist.”{27} He had numerous sexual
liaisons that came and went with some regularity.

Paul Johnson concludes that “Sartre, like Russell, failed to achieve any kind of
coherence and consistency in his views on public policy. No body of doctrine
survived him.”{28} Apparently he stood for very little other than to be linked to
the liberal Left.

In this article we have taken a brief look at the lives of some of the secular
intellectuals who have had an influence in the world. They still have some
influence, and so it is worth asking if we should accept their prescriptions.

These men all lived decadent lives. Most of them mistreated people in their lives.
But even more disturbing is the fact that they proposed systems of politics,
economics, and culture that have been a failure and devastated millions of lives.
They do not deserve the prominence they are often given in our universities
today. We are expected to revere them, but there is little in their lives to respect.

Notes

1. Paul Johnson, Intellectuals: From Marx and Tolstoy to Sartre and Chomsky
2. Ibid., 34.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Ibid., 10.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 14.
7. Ibid., 19.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid., 27.
10. Ibid., 52.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 57.
13. Ibid., 70.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 77.
17. Ibid., 197.
18. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 203.
23. Ibid., 225.
24. Ibid., 229.
25. Ibid., 230.
26. Ibid., 235.
27. Ibid., 236.
28. Ibid., 253.

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Probe Survey 2020 Report 6: Nothing in Particulars and Biblical
We want to examine the Unaffiliated and particularly those who selected Nothing in Particular (NIP) as their religious preference. As noted in the first article of this series, some researchers earlier in this century posited that many of the Nothing in Particulars were actually part of the Christian majority in America and would return to the fold as they aged. However, as shown in that article, this idea has not materialized as the young adults aged. Rather, the percentage of NIPs in each age group has grown as the age group has aged.

In this report, we will see how very different the beliefs of the NIPs are from those taught in the New Testament. We will look at this in three separate areas:

1. Salvation through Christ Alone.
2. A Biblical Worldview
3. Attitudes Concerning Sexual Issues

In these three areas, we will discover that most NIPs disagree with biblical teaching on these topics.

**Reasons for Not Believing in Salvation Through Christ Alone**

One question asked was “What keeps you from believing that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ alone?” Particularly for the Unaffiliated, we want to know whether
it is a lack of knowledge or some other reason. When asked this question, the respondents could select from the following answers:

1. Never gave the question any thought.
2. Don’t believe that God would take upon Himself the penalty for my sin.
3. Salvation is not a gift, it must be earned.
4. I am clearly as good as Christians I know so I should be accepted by God if they are.
5. There is no personal, creator God.
6. Another answer not listed here.
7. Not applicable, I do believe.

First let’s consider how the various religious groups answered this question as shown in Figure 1. This data has already been discussed in Report #4. But in the current discussion, we want to focus on Other Religion and Unaffiliated.

Respondents from Other Religions were most likely to select either “salvation must be earned” or “another answer not listed.” A smaller percentage, just over 10%, selected “I am clearly as good as Christians I know. That answer appeared to be irrelevant to them.

On the other hand, the two largest segments selected by the Unaffiliated were “no personal, creator God” and “another answer not listed.” Both groups had about 15% of their number select “Not applicable, I do believe.”
To get a better understanding of what drives these results, we dove further into the makeup of each of these two groups. The results are shown in Figure 2. We divided Other Religions into the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) and all other non-Christian religions. We divided the Unaffiliated into Atheist, Agnostic and Nothing in Particular. As shown, the LDS respondents are much more likely than other religions to select “salvation must be earned,” “I do believe,” and “God would not pay the price.” Almost one quarter of the LDS selected “I do believe” which explains how the Other Religion category showed about 15% with that answer. So we see that a strong majority of LDS people believe that they must do something more than believing in Christ to achieve salvation. At the same time, a significant minority believe in salvation through faith in Christ alone.

The Atheist subgroup follows our expectations. A majority (> 55%) don’t believe in Jesus as savior because they do not believe in any God at all. When we add in “another answer not given,” about three quarters of the Atheists are covered.

Moving to Agnostics, we see that a strong majority selected either “no God” or “another answer not given.” Adding in “I never gave it any thought,” we cover about three quarters of the Agnostics.

The Nothing in Particular group (NIPs) has a significantly different range of answers. About one in five say they do believe in salvation through faith in Christ. This number is significantly higher than Atheist and Agnostics, but it still leaves
four out of five who say they do not believe. Almost one half of them selected “another answer not given” or “I never gave it any thought.”

So, there are about one fifth of the NIPs who might have a somewhat Christian view of salvation. However, less than 3% of this group claim to be born-again. And of course, four fifths of this group say they do not believe in salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. So, an overwhelming majority of the NIPs clearly are not born-again or evangelical Christians.

**NIPS and a Subset of a Biblical Worldview**

How do those who claim their religion is “Nothing in particular” stand in accepting a subset of the Basic Biblical Worldview discussed in earlier articles? The subset consists of the following three questions:

1. Which of the following descriptions comes closest to what you personally believe to be true about God: **God is the all-powerful, all knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.**
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all its teachings: **Strongly Agree**
3. If a person is generally good enough or does enough good things for others during their life, they will earn a place in heaven: **Disagree Strongly**
Let’s compare the results for Born-again Protestants and those who claimed to be Nothing in Particular. As shown in Figure 3, for each of the questions those agreeing with a biblical worldview among the Nothing in Particulars is a small fraction of those among Born-again Protestants. When we combine the three questions together, we see one out of three Born-again Protestants vs. no NIPs. Certainly, some of these NIPs came from an evangelical background, but none of them interviewed in our survey ascribe to a basic evangelical worldview as adults. As noted in our first report, one in three Born-again Protestants is a disappointing percentage ascribing to these biblical worldview questions, but it is certainly dramatically better than the Nothing in Particular group.

**NIPs and Biblical Sexual Morality**

On another front, we compare views on biblical sexual morality held by Born-again Protestants and Nothing in Particulars. To do this, we will consider three of the questions from our survey as listed below.

1. Sex among unmarried people is always a mistake: from **Agree Strongly** to **Disagree Strongly**
2. Viewing explicit sexual material in a movie, on the internet, or some other source is:
   - a. **To be avoided**
b. Acceptable if no one is physically or emotionally harmed in them.

b. A matter of personal choice

d. Not a problem if you enjoy it

e. Don’t know

3. Living with someone in a sexual relationship before marriage:

a. Might be helpful but should be entered into with caution.

b. Just makes sense in today’s cultural environment.

c. Will have a negative effect on the relationship.

d. Should be avoided as not our best choice as instructed by God.

For this comparison, we are looking for the following answers:

1. Either Agree Strongly or Agree Somewhat

2. To be avoided

3. Should be avoided as not our best choice as instructed by God

The results from our survey are shown in Figure 4. Once again, we see a large difference between these two groups. Clearly, the NIPs do not ascribe to a biblical view on sexual morality. The majority of Born-again Protestants do not ascribe to those beliefs either, but a significant minority of them do.
Summary

As discussed above, we find that the Nothing in Particular group have

- less than one in five who say they are trusting in Christ for their salvation,
- none who accept a simple three question take on a biblical worldview and
- almost none who accept a biblical view on sexuality.

In each of the age groups considered in our surveys, the percentage of respondents selecting a NIP affiliation has grown as the age groups have grown older. There is no indication that any significant number of them are returning to or turning to an Evangelical Christian perspective.

Clearly for the upcoming decade a critical question for the Evangelical church is, How do we reach the Unaffiliated and especially the Nones with the good news of the gospel? Since the vast majority of NIPs do not accept the authority of the Bible, we need to be prepared to share with them why we can believe the Bible is an accurate communication from the Creator of this universe. In particular, that the biblical account of the death resurrection of Jesus is an accurate historical account. One source to use in this task is our article “The Answer is the Resurrection”[4] which can be found on the Probe website.

Notes
2. As we dive down into these subgroups remember that the smaller number of respondents of each type reduce the accuracy as we apply our limited sample to the entire group across the United States. In this case, we surveyed 68 LDS, 178 Other Religions not LDS, 124 Atheist, 167 Agnostic, and 245 Nothing in particular (between 18 and 39 years old).
3. Other answers to select from: God created but is no longer involved with the world today; God refers to the total realization of personal human potential; there are many gods, each with their different power and authority; God represents a state of higher consciousness that a person may reach; there is no such thing as God; and don’t know.
4. The Answer Is the Resurrection: Sharing Your Faith in Christ (probe.org)
Talking About the Problem of Evil

T.S. Weaver

T.S. Weaver has put together an intellectual response to the problem of evil that includes a theology of evil and suffering, and a philosophical/theological series of proper defenses of God and His righteousness considering evil.

What is Evil?

The problem of evil is famous. This problem is personal because my wife stayed stuck as an agnostic for a long time. An agnostic, by the way, is a person who says they don’t know if there is a God. Like so many people, she thought that if you believe in a God who is all good and all-powerful, then the presence of evil and suffering creates a problem.

Atheist philosopher David Hume said, “Epicurus’s old questions are yet unanswered. Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able to but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”

Let’s address this. I’ll give you a roadmap of where we’re going. First, we need to
address how one can even object to evil. Second, I will talk about what evil is and is not. Then I will talk about some possible reasons God allows evil. Finally, I’ll close with God’s solution.

To start, if this challenge were raised by an atheist, we need to address the moral argument. If there is right and wrong, then they are grounded in the existence of a good and moral God. Because without an absolute Moral Law, which requires an absolute Moral Law Giver, the atheist has no grounds for a complaint against evil.

Former atheist C.S. Lewis summarizes how this thinking eventually guided him to Christianity: “My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?”

Evil is not a “thing” that exists; and God is not the cause. Both Augustine and Thomas Aquinas point out that evil is not a real entity in the world. This means evil is not a material or a phenomenon that exists by itself. It’s like darkness, which is not a created thing; it’s the absence of light. Evil describes a deficiency or denial of good. Philosophers call this deficiency a privation. Evil is what occurs once the good is altered or distorted. In Genesis 1 and 2, God told us all that existed was good. Evil was not an innovation, but a distortion. So, God is not the creator or author of evil.

**The Best-of-All-Possible-Worlds**

Let us consider the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument. The place to start is God’s omniscience. This allows God to understand all possibilities. If God knows all possibilities, God knows all possible worlds. Since God is also completely good, He always wants and works out the best world and the best way.

Leibniz (the philosopher who came up with this defense) wrote, “The first principle of existences is the following proposition: God wants to choose the most
The power of this argument is to show that out of every world that a good God could have produced, His decision to generate this one means this creation is good.

There are several principles that tie into this defense.

The first major principle is centered on the truth that God acts for worthy causes. Again, God’s omniscience presumes that before God decides which world to produce, He understands the value of every possible world. This also implies God always decides on the base of sensible, stable rationales. This is called the “principle of sufficient reason.”

To believe God can intercede in what he has formed with sufficient reason, even to avoid or restrict evil, would be like a soldier who abandons his post and knowingly allows enemy infiltration to instead stop a colleague from drinking while in uniform. The soldier ends up allowing a greater evil in order to stop a lesser evil.

Another principle that reinforces this argument is the principle of “pre-established harmony.”

Leibniz describes it this way: “For, if we were capable of understanding the universal harmony, we should see that what we are tempted to find fault with is connected to the plan most worthy of being chosen; in a word we should see, and should not believe only, that what God has done is the best.”

**Human Free Will**

Above, we covered the principle of sufficient reason as part of the best-of-all possible worlds. The last principle of the best-of-all-possible-worlds is human free will. For Leibniz, this idea was just a principle in part of his greater defense. For Augustine, C.S. Lewis, and Alvin Plantinga it was an entire defense by itself. In its simplest form, it goes something like this: God set us up not to be machines but
free agents with the power to choose.

If God were to make us capable of freely choosing the good, He had to create us also able to freely choose evil. Consequently, our free will can be misused and that is the explanation for evil.

Jean-Paul Sartre communicates this wonderfully: “The man who wants to be loved does not desire the enslavement of the beloved. . . . If the beloved is transformed into an automaton, the lover finds himself alone.” God knows that a better world is created, if human beings are infused with free will, even if they decide to behave corruptly.

Were God to force us to make good choices, we would not be making choices at all, but simply implementing God’s instructions like when a computer runs a program.

For humans to have the capability to be ethically good, free will is necessary. Morality hangs on our capability to freely choose the good.

Plantinga asserts, “God creates a world containing evil, and he has a good reason for doing so.” John Stackhouse Jr. says, “God, to put it bluntly, calculates the cost-benefit ratio and deems the cost of evil to be worth the benefit of loving and enjoying the love of these human beings.”

Stackhouse sums up Plantinga’s argument like this:

“God desired to love and be loved by other beings. God created human beings with this in view. To make us capable of such fellowship, God had to give us the freedom to choose, because love, though it does have its elements of ‘compulsion,’ is meaningful only when it is neither automatic nor coerced. This sort of free will, however, entailed the danger that it would be used not to enjoy God’s love and to love God in return, but to go one’s own way in defiance of both God and one’s own best interest.”

God created us with free will because our decision to say “yes” to Him is only a real choice if we are also free to say “no” to Him.
The Greater Good

To review, so far, we’ve addressed how one can even object to evil, in the moral argument. We’ve talked about what evil is and is not, and the idea of it being a privation. We’ve talked about some possible reasons God allows evil, which included the best-of-all-possible-worlds argument and the free will defense. Now I want to go over the greater good principle. While all the arguments I’ve given so far are intellectual and do not necessarily help with the emotional side of evil and suffering, this principle is especially delicate. I say “delicate” because this defense may not help a questioner much if they have been a victim of a seemingly very unwarranted evil, and/or if they are still carrying anger or bitterness.

Again, the topic we are examining is the greater good principle, which argues that certain evils are needed in the world for certain greater goods to happen. To put it another way, certain evils in this world are called for, as greater goods stem after them. For instance, nobody would believe a doctor who cuts out a cancerous tumor is being evil because he made an incision on the patient. The surgery incision is much less evil than letting the tumor develop. The greater good is the patient being cancer-free. Parents who penalize children for poor conduct with the loss of toys or privileges or even giving spankings are instigating pain (particularly from the kid’s viewpoint). Although, without this discipline, the other possibility is that the kid will develop into a grownup with no discipline and would consequently face much more suffering. We do not understand in this world all the good God is preparing; therefore, we need to trust that God is good even when we can’t see it and we can’t understand the larger picture of what He’s doing.

Plus, nearly all individuals will award some truth to the saying ascribed to Nietzsche: “Whatever doesn’t kill me makes me stronger.” Consequently, the principle of allowing pain in the short term to bring about a greater contentment eventually is legitimate and one we know and use ourselves. That implies there is no mandatory contradiction between God and the reality of evil and suffering.
The Cross

Finally, I end with the cross and the hope of Christianity. Jesus agonized in enduring the nastiest evil that can be thrown at him: denial by His own adored people; abhorrence from the authorities in His own religion; unfairness at the hands of the Roman court; unfaithfulness and disloyalty from His closest friends; the public disgrace of being stripped nude and mocked as outrageous “King of the Jews”; anguish in the agony of crucifixion; and the continuous weight of the lure to despair altogether, to crash these unappreciative beings with shocks of heaven, to recommence with a new race, to assert Himself. Instead, Jesus remained there, embracing into Himself the sins of the world, keeping Himself in position as His foes wreaked their most terrible treatment.

Our faith in a good God is sensible, because Jesus suffered on our behalf, and took the punishment we deserve. He understands what it is to suffer. He has lived there.

The cross was a world-altering occasion where the love and compassion of God dealt efficiently with the immensity of human sin. His death and resurrection show evil is trounced, and death has been slain. Contemplate the many implications of the atonement: Jesus is the Victor, He has paid our ransom, God’s wrath has been satisfied, and Jesus is the substitution for the offenses we have perpetrated.

As if that is not enough, the Christian narrative ends with faith in the future where complete justice will be done, and all evils will be made right. When Christ returns, He will not once more give in to mortal agencies and quietly accept evil. He will come back to deliver justice. The Bible’s definitive solution to the problem of evil is that evil will be dealt with. God will create a new heaven and a new earth for persons God has loved so long and so well. This is the core of our faith in the middle of pain and suffering.

In conclusion, what I’ve just presented to you, and what my wife eventually figured out, is that evil is not a thing created by God. A valid complaint against evil cannot be made without the existence of God. God has plausible reasons for
allowing evil. And He clearly has a plan to defeat it. All He wants you to do is trust Him.

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Body and Soul in the Old Testament

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?

The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You *are* your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.
But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?

Let’s begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in which the Bible describes this event: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of “dust from the ground.” But he doesn’t become “a living creature” until God takes the second step of breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add “the breath of life” for Adam to become a living human being.

Here’s another observation. Notice that Adam doesn’t suddenly spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.\[1\] Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether “the breath of life” in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.
Surviving the Death of the Body

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin. We read that “as her soul was departing (for she died),” she named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, “as her soul was departing”? In Hebrew, the word here translated “soul” is the term nephesh. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that nephesh can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, “The term nephesh . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14).”

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah 5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: “the life [that is, nephesh] of the flesh is in the blood.” Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the “soul”—the immaterial component of a human being in which one’s personal identity is located.

So when we read that Rachel’s “soul was departing,” does this simply mean that she was dying, that the “principle of life” (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her “soul,” an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel’s body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” In Hebrew thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of
Hades.\textsuperscript{5} In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his “soul” from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, “There is virtual consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol.”\textsuperscript{6} What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of “ease,” where “the wicked cease from troubling” and “the weary are at rest” (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it’s also described as a place of “darkness” and “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, “Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive.”\textsuperscript{7}

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul (vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.
Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord’s prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as “an old man . . . wrapped in a robe” (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery “in a nonliteral way to describe immaterial, invisible realities.” Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

**Redemption from Sheol**

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even “beyond the grave.” As John Cooper notes, “Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death.”

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person’s life ends in death (vv. 5-12). But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless confidently proclaims: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that he was “envious of the arrogant” and “wicked” (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is “destruction,” his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God “there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him.” This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.
Of course, if we’re going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no “religious importance” whatever. What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the “good news” that friendship with Him can continue beyond death. Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

The Resurrection of the Body

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught throughout the New Testament, it’s even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in the “dust of the earth,” shall be “awakened” and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised “to everlasting life,” but others to “everlasting contempt.” Cooper writes, “This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal destinies.” The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, “Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit.
How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life” (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body (1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

**Notes**

2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.
4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.
9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope “beyond the grave” are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.

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**Prophecies of the Messiah**

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.*

**The Place of His Birth**

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future. It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a
coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that’s at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it’s not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.

Let’s begin with a prophecy about the Messiah’s birthplace. “Messiah” is a Hebrew term that simply means “anointed one.” When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes “Christ.” Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after Jesus’ birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that’s not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are “from of old, from ancient times.” How should we understand this? One commentator notes, “The terms ‘old’ . . . and ‘ancient times’ . . . may denote ‘great antiquity’ as well as
‘eternity’ in the strictest sense.”{1} Dr. Allen Ross states, “At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal.”{2} Micah’s prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself!{3}

The Time of His Appearing

Let’s now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion of many scholars, tells us when the Messiah would make His appearance. It’s found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, “Seventy ‘sevens’ are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin,” and so on. Although we can’t go into all the details, the ‘seventy ‘sevens’” concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490 years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine “sevens,” or 483 years. There are two views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C.{4} Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C.{5} Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months.{6} If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says “that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.”{7} The views thus differ
on the date of Jesus’ death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.\{8\}

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine “sevens” the Messiah will be “cut off” and have nothing. According to one scholar, “The word translated ‘cut off’ is used of executing . . . a criminal.”\{9\} All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus’ birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

The Nature of His Ministry

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God’s words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others.\{10\} Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two” (Zechariah 6:12-13). ‘The title “Branch” is a messianic title.’\{11\} So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as “the Branch,” uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God’s word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? “Because priests dealt with sin,” says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. “Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders.”\{12\} And this, of course, is precisely what Jesus did for us: “He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).
Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time. Dr. Brown comments, “Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.” So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus!

The Significance of His Death

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord’s “Suffering Servant.” According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’ suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant “the iniquity of us all” and punishes him “for our transgressions.” In other words, God’s servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah’s “Suffering Servant” and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah’s “servant” is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion however, insisting that ‘nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of
Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20.”{16} What’s more, he says, “Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Alshech said, ‘Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.’”{17}

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he feels “as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures” if Jesus is not the one in view!{18} Although this is a strong statement, it’s not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

The Mystery of His Resurrection

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God’s servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It’s important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that “he was cut off from the land of the living” (v. 8), and that ‘he poured out his life unto death” (v. 12). On the other hand, however, it also says that ‘he will see his offspring and prolong his days” (v. 10), and that after his suffering “he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (v. 11). So the text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage doesn’t explicitly teach the Messiah’s resurrection, it’s certainly consistent with it. This is really staggering in light of the compelling historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus!{19}

Let’s now pause to consider what we’ve learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy suggests that he’ll be a supernatural, possibly even divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around
A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus’ public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God’s word to the people. As a priest, he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn’t reign as king during his first advent, he was called “the king of the Jews” (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians believe that he’s in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he’ll one day reign on earth as well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament’s record of Jesus’ substitutionary death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we’ve not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn’t the Messiah, “there will never be a Messiah. It’s too late for anyone else. It’s him or no one.” Well, you’ve now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to you.

Notes

3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.


13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., 213.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 212.

19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at [www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org). For more scriptural support, please compare Peter’s sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.


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**Truth You Can Sing About - Part 3**

Steven Davis

*Probe radio producer Steven Davis provides spiritual truth in five Christmas*
carols, backed by new music written and performed by his son Jon Clive Davis.

**Coventry Carol**

Songs about Jesus’ birth have been close friends with Christmas for generations, but when’s the last time you thought about the great truth found in these Christmas hymns and carols? In this article we’re highlighting five Christmas songs, and first up is *Coventry Carol*.

*Herod the King in his raging charged he hath this day,*  
*His men of might in his own sight all children young to slay...*

Following a star, Magi arrive in Jerusalem, and ask Herod where they can find this new born King of the Jews. Herod rouses his biblical scholars to research this, and they find in Micah (5:2):

> But as for you, Bethlehem . . . too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
> from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.  
> His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.

*This King was a much bigger deal than Herod ever would be.* Still, Herod chooses to inform the Magi, encouraging them to return and tell him where they found this King, so that he too could “Worship Him (Matthew 2:8).”

But God knowing his heart, warns the Magi to return home another way. When Herod found out he was furious, and instructed his soldiers to kill all the baby boys two years old and younger. A second prophecy is fulfilled from Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.” (31:15)

It was this event which stirred the writing of the hauntingly beautiful *Coventry Carol*. Even though this is a dark and tragic theme, we need to know and to feel the entire context surrounding the birth of Christ.

One child born, and who knows how many dozens, if not hundreds, were
slaughtered.

2000 years later, few would respond to Christ as Herod did; but to even do something as “harmless” as ignore Him, places you at eternal risk. So, how do you respond to the Christ?

In the Bleak Midwinter

_Enough for Him, whom Cherubim worship night and day, a breastful of milk and a mangerful of hay;_  
_Enough for Him, whom Angels fall down before, the ox and ass and camel which adore._

The third verse speaks to something we often forget, especially when it comes to applying it. The Christmas narratives from the Gospels, prophecies and subsequent teaching speak plainly and forcefully to the deity and humility of Christ. The Apostle Paul explains it well:

> Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. (Philippians 2: 6-8 NLT)

Jesus Christ gives us the greatest example of a life of humility, first by laying aside His “divine privileges,” then humbled Himself further by dying for our sins on the cross. Going from the non-stop worship of the cherubim to mother’s milk and a bed of hay was entirely within His character. As was the stark contrast between angels falling prostrate before Him to simple barnyard beasts adoring Him.

Perhaps God’s greatest goal for your life and for mine is to make us like Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son.” (Romans 8:29) So do you think humility would be part of that process for us? Of course.
The author of the song Christina Rossetti wraps up her verses with an application:

**Yet what I can I give Him, give my heart.**

Humility is what brings us to Christ. Will you give your heart to Him this Christmas?

**God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen**

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen, let nothing you dismay,*  
*Remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day,*  
*To save us all from Satan’s power when we were gone astray.*  
*O tidings of comfort and joy, comfort and joy, O tidings of comfort and joy.*

Even though this is one of the oldest Christmas Carols still being sung today, it offers a unique blending of historic and contemporary perspectives.

The first and last verses are for us (the contemporary perspective), while the middle verses are about shepherds, angels, the Christ Child, and His mother Mary. Let’s look at the verses which apply to you and me.

The first line tells us how we are to rest merry and are not to dismay. How can we do that? Because Christ was born to save. The angel said: “Do not be afraid” (Luke 2:10). In other words, don’t be dismayed. And, “there has been born for you a Savior” (Luke 2:11), which allows us to rest merry. We learn more from Matthew 1:21, “He will save His people from their sins.” So not just saved—but saved from our sins.

The next line talks about how “we were gone astray.” Isaiah 53 shows us how far we’ve gone astray, listing the things Christ has done for us: bore our griefs, carried our sorrows, was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; chastised for our peace, and His wounds healed us. And after all Christ has done for us, it says: “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—everyone—to his own way.” Despite this, the Lord “Laid on him the iniquity of us all.”
What typically is the last verse, with the contemporary perspective, says:

**Now to the Lord sing praises, all you within this place.**

That’s what you do when the Son of God has come into the world, to save you from your sins.

**While Shepherds Watched**

While shepherds watched their flocks by night, all seated on the ground, 
An angel of the Lord came down, and glory shone around. 
“Fear not,” said he for mighty dread had seized their troubled mind 
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring to you and all mankind.”

Well, there’s no doubt from the title it’s all about the shepherd’s perspective of what happened the night Christ was born.

When you compare the lyrics of the carol with Luke 2, you discover that the shepherd’s perspective in this song is extremely Biblical. Examine all the main points from the Gospel narrative, and you find them in the song: the cast, the location, angelic appearance, fear, angelic announcement, new location, signs, chorus, praise.

Now a word about the cast, and their perspective. They were shepherds! But wait, wasn’t this the birth of the Son of God? King of kings and Lord of Lords? Why would God make such a stellar announcement to the working class? Two reasons:

The first reason is found in both Luke 2 and the first verse of the song. Here’s Luke’s account: “And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’” This good news was for ALL the people.

The second reason the shepherds were the recipients of such good news was pride. Had the message been brought to the elite, the royal, the upper class, do you think they would have shared such a great message with those of us less fortunate? Probably not. We wouldn’t have access to their social circles. Why
would they seek us out to share this good news?  Pride would have cut the Good News off from the rest of the world.

God did not want this message to miss anyone. Christ came humbly, and his announcement came humbly. After all, *God so loved the world.*

**O Holy Night**

*O holy night! The stars are brightly shining*
*It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth!*
*Long lay the world in sin and error pining*
*Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.*
*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices,*
*For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

*Long lay the world in sin and error pining.* Although one rarely “pines” anymore, as I read this line, I feel the hopelessness and helplessness pressing in. In the seventh chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, he said: “And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can’t. I want to do what is good, but I don’t . . . I am a slave to sin.” Yeah, that’s hopeless.

Speaking of slavery, the third verse declares: *Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother; and in His name all oppression shall cease.* In 1847, when the lyrics were written, slavery was rampant, especially in these United States. And a century and a half later, oppression still hasn’t ceased. Why?

Well, Paul said it in the previous passage: “I am a slave to sin.” We are *all* slaves to sin . . . until Christ breaks those chains.

The result of Christ breaking the chains of oppression is found in the choruses:

*Fall on your knees;*
*and*
*Behold your King! Before Him lowly bend!*
Christ humbled Himself to embrace our human weaknesses, and humbled Himself even further, unto death on the cross. And our response is to fall on our knees in humility and praise. I wonder if humility has a place in breaking the chain of oppression. Seems to work for Jesus.

This program’s scripts were written by the producer of Probe Radio, Steven Davis. The music was composed and performed by his son and Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis. May your Christmas be filled with praise!

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The Glory of Grace

Sue Bohlin

Sue Bohlin explores God’s marvelous grace as the unending flow of His power, presence and favor in our lives.

I bet you recognize “grace” as a theology word. Many of us are quick to say, “Oh yeah, I know what that is. We’re saved by grace through faith.” Or we know of churches with the word “grace” in their name. But many of us don’t have a real handle on it. Often that’s because we haven’t seen it modeled in our families, our churches, or our communities. We’re too focused on trying to prove ourselves good enough, too busy trying to keep God from getting mad at us.
But this misunderstood blessing of grace is hugely important. It’s one of the big things that sets Christianity apart from all other religions! Any other world religion involves performance-based works. Biblical Christianity says, “We’re messed-up broken people before a holy God, and there’s nothing we can do to earn His approval. But He loves us and delights in us despite the fact that we don’t deserve it.” With all other religions, the emphasis is on “do.” Because of grace, in Christianity the emphasis is on “done.”

One of the most powerful elements of grace is simply acceptance. The book of Romans assures us that we are accepted by both the Father (Romans 14:3) and the Son (Romans 15:7). We can do nothing to earn Their acceptance; it’s a gift. The Father says, “I accept you just the way you are, but I love you too much to leave you that way. Come to Me: My arms and My heart are open to you because of what My Son did in His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. I have always loved you, My precious child. I chose you before the foundation of the world, to adopt you into My family.”

Pastor Mark Driscoll has an especially great definition of grace. Instead of the one we’ve heard for years, “God’s undeserved favor,” Mark calls it “ill-deserved” favor. But my all-time favorite definition comes from John Ortberg: “Grace is the offer of God’s ceaseless presence and irrational love that cannot be stopped. It’s the flow of God’s power and presence and favor in your life from one moment to the next that enables you to do whatever it is God has for you to do.” I want to focus on God’s power, presence, and favor, as well as giving some real-life examples of what grace looks like.

**Power**

A little boy was playing in his sandbox one Saturday morning when he discovered a large rock in the middle of it. The boy dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With a little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the
rock across the sandbox. But then he found that he couldn’t roll it up and over the little wall. The boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox.

All this time the boy’s father watched from his window as the drama unfolded and his son burst into tears of frustration.

As the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy’s father. He asked, “Son, why didn’t you use all the strength that you had available?”

The boy sobbed, “But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!”

The father corrected kindly, “No, son, you didn’t use all the strength you had. You didn’t ask me.” With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock and removed it from the sandbox.

Experiencing God grace means depending on Him to provide the power for our lives, whether it’s dislodging a big ol’ rock in our sandbox or simply making it through the day.

I like to think of the power of God’s grace as electricity that is available twenty-four hours, seven days a week. God’s grace is always available to us at every moment of our life, and because of His goodness and faithfulness, we never have to fear a power shortage of God’s grace.

The key to experiencing the flow of God’s power is what Jesus called abiding, choosing to remain in a state of trustful dependence on God. Jesus said in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.”

I love to illustrate this by turning on a shop light that’s plugged into an electrical outlet. When I press the switch, the light goes off, even though the power is still flowing and available. We can shut off the expression of grace, the flow of God’s power, by quenching the Spirit—by actively disobeying God, or by passively ignoring Him. But His power can shine in our lives again as soon as we open
ourselves up to Him, asking for His help, intentionally depending on His power and not our own. Grace is the flow of God’s power in our lives.

**Presence**

One morning, as I swam laps in the health club pool, I was meditating on these three aspects of grace. I said, “Lord, what do You want me to know about Your presence?” At that very second, I “just happened” to see a large sign on the wall right in front of me: “WARNING: NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY.” I literally laughed out loud, realizing that this was code for “You’re on your own, buddy.” God’s grace means we never have to fear that there’s no lifeguard on duty, that we’re on our own, because He has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). The Lord Jesus’ last promise was, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

My favorite illustration of grace as God’s presence is the building of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Dwight Edwards relates that during its initial stages of construction, “Twenty-three workers fell to their deaths. Finally, halfway through the project, a large net was put in place beneath the bridge. From then on, only ten men actually fell—all caught by the net. Plus, the workers’ productivity was raised by twenty-five percent. Assured that their safety was no longer in question, they pursued their work with far greater freedom and effectiveness than before. This is exactly what God has done for us. Stretched wide beneath us, extending from eternity past to eternity future, is God’s perfect grace, assuring every believer that we can never fall from His favor. No matter how badly we falter or fail, we can never plunge past the grace of God.”

Think of grace as the hand of God ready to catch you when you fall. Because God is good and He is sovereign, that means nothing can happen that He cannot redeem. There is no such thing as an unrecoverable disaster. Even when we sin deliberately and stupidly, we cannot jump beyond the bounds of His grace. Now, His grace usually involves painful discipline, because God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but we cannot out-sin God’s love and grace.
Recently, a friend of mine was anguishing, “Why did God allow me to wreck my marriage and family? I wouldn’t let my children run out into the street and be hit by a car, why did He let me go that far?” As I turned to the Lord for an answer, He whispered, “I’m always protecting My children, but you don’t see the disasters I avert.” Part of God’s grace is the safety of His protecting presence.

**Favor**

One important element of grace is favor. One dictionary defines favor as “an attitude of approval or liking.”

Five-year-old Matt got up from his nap one day and said, “Guess what, mommy, I just had a dream about Jesus!” The mommy asked, “Well, what did Jesus say to you?” “Nothing.” “Well, what was Jesus doing?” “Nothing.” “Now Matthew, you just said you had a dream about Jesus, he MUST have said or done something!” Matt was quiet for a moment, and then with a wiggle and grin he looked up and said shyly, “He just stood there and liked me.”

When somebody likes you, their eyes light up when they see you. Did you know God’s whole face lights up when He looks at you? The Bible talks about His face shining on us.[6] God doesn’t only love us, He likes us! Experiencing God’s grace means He showers not only love but like on us, and His face reflects His heart of favor toward us.

Every child needs to receive the “3 A’s” of favor from his daddy: attention, affection, and approval. The Father poured out the 3 A’s on the Lord Jesus at His baptism when He said, “You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”[7] Those words are like gold, and we can receive them into our own hearts as well.

I love the way one daddy blogger expresses grace toward his daughter. He writes,

> I love you. I love the way your hair rolls into ringlets and falls into your eyes. I love the way you read yourself books, even though you can’t read. I love the way you dance and twirl around the kitchen. I love the way you wave at cars that pass on our walks. I love the way you scream “Dad” in the middle of the
night. I love the way you say “do it again” when we do something fun. I even love the permanent marker custom design you put on my new Mac. But as much as I love you, Jesus loves you more. I sacrifice a lot because I love you, but Jesus sacrificed everything because he loves you. So if somewhere along the way you fail a test or love a boy who does not love you back or have a mastectomy or develop Alzheimer’s or gain some weight or lose a job, you will still hold infinite value because Jesus loves you. No matter what. You are loved exactly as you are. Always.{8}

Oh yeah. That’s the beauty of grace.

**What Grace Looks Like**

I want to share some examples of what grace looks like, both the way God showers grace on us, and the way people share His grace with others.

God has poured grace on me in a huge way when traveling internationally. Because of a schedule change, I found myself flying back to Dallas from Germany just in time to speak at a weekend women’s retreat. I arrived home from the airport with just enough time to repack my bags and pick up my speaking notes and props. I then drove two hours to the retreat facility, arriving while the women were still singing. I literally got out of the car with my notebook in hand, walked in the door and up to the stage to start speaking. With the time difference, my body felt like it was five o’clock in the morning and I’d been awake for twenty-two hours. But God not only kept me alert, He filled me with His energy, and the women couldn’t tell any difference.

When we’ve received God’s grace, we are able to turn around and give it to others.

Grace means responding with patience when someone forgets they already told you something, or that you told *them* something, and just going with the flow. Grace means lifting off the burden of needless “shoulds” that weigh people down. One grace-filled speaker invited people to respond in song at the end of her
message, saying, “If you’d like to sing, great! Join us! If you need a rest, feel free to just listen.” She removed any pressure to perform. At our church, a couple of pastors managed to deliver a message on giving and stewardship without even a hint of shame, or condemnation, or pressure. That’s what grace looks like.

When my friend’s mother contracted Alzheimer’s, she told her daughter early in the progression of the disease, “If I get to the point where I don’t recognize you, don’t take it personally.” She was expressing grace in being more concerned about her daughter’s hurt than her own loss of memory.

Another friend needed eye surgery to keep her from losing her sight. Her friend Angela, who has been blind for a number of years, told our friend, “Don’t be concerned about talking about your vision to me—I am so over that!” That’s what grace looks like.

One of my favorite stories happened one night to my dear friend who was starting to realize what monsters her abusive parents were. She had always patterned herself after her mother, and suddenly realized she had even chosen the same dishes as her mother’s when they got married. Suddenly she couldn’t abide the thought of keeping them in the house a moment longer. She grabbed a plate out of the cupboard and hurled it to the floor, smashing it to pieces. Her husband heard the noise and came to see what was going on. When she explained the connection between their dishes and her mother, her husband calmly said, “Have at it. Tomorrow morning I’ll take you to get new dishes.” Not only did he clean up the mess when she was done, but all those shards damaged their kitchen floor—and he never once mentioned it. That’s grace.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, John 15:5; 19:30; Colossians 3:4; Ephesians 2:8-9.
2. Ephesians 1:4-5
3. [marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace](http://marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace)
4. This quote came from a sermon preached at Pastor Ortberg’s church, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California, 2003. When I emailed him asking for a specific citation, his answer was, “I have no idea, Sue.”
6. Numbers 6:25
7. Matthew 3:17

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**Ancient Perspectives on Happiness**

Dr. Michael Gleghorn

*After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.*

The Declaration of Independence says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[1] Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.
So what is happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness “results from the possession . . . of what one considers good.” A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider good? Many things can be described as good: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us happy . . . at least, for a while. But is there a good that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we’re getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.

Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . lofty, shall we say, in order to experience real happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just “having a good time.” Instead, they thought there was an important moral component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness “comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking.”

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don’t believe that this can be the final word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we’ll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.

**Epicureanism**

Let’s begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, epicurious.com, creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the pleasures
of a great meal. But as we’ll see, Epicurus was not the total “party animal” that people often think.

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it’s the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who’s been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his non-virtuous counterpart.

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn’t need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods*. And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D. 250-325), believed that only the fear of God “guards the mutual society of men.” In his view, if people think they aren’t accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even immoral—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this “can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus.”

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.
Stoicism

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it “was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy.” The Stoics’ manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed “the goal of life” as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed “as maintaining one’s dignity and grace whatever may happen.” The Stoics understood that things don’t always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we’re not prepared, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha’s teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, “Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well.” We often don’t have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, “the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity.” This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they’ll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there’s much to admire about Stoicism, as
a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.\{15\}

**Neo-Platonism**

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, “the supreme transcendent principle” and the “ground of all being.”\{16\} Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One not by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, “Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus’s account.”\{17\}

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there is a clear distinction between Creator and creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that “all” of reality is “Divine.” According to one scholar, Plotinus tried “to steer a middle course” between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).\{18\} But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus’s view is certainly close to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus’s perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their “oneness” with the One. In Plotinus’s view, “Happiness resides in a person’s realization that she is one with divinity.”\{19\} According to Plotinus, then, realizing one’s “oneness” with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there’s much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of God, creation, human nature, the
meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while the system is very religious, it’s not Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he’s not pointing us to the one true God.

**Augustinianism**

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we’ll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we’ve already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience lasting human happiness (and Augustine thinks that’s pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God.\[20\]

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine’s view quite nicely when she writes, “Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely.”\[21\] In Augustine’s view, happiness is a condition in which one’s desires are realized. Happy is he who has what” he wants,” he writes in his little book on happiness.\[22\] But he also believed that what we all really want is the everlasting possession of the greatest good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!
But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psalm 34:8). And those who do are promised joy in His presence and “eternal pleasures” at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine’s view on human happiness. In my opinion, it’s far and away the best perspective that we’ve examined in this article, and I hope you’ll think so, too.

Notes


4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book God and the Art of Happiness, 3-62.

5. For more, check out www.epicurious.com


7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, A Short History of Philosophy, 70-71.

8. Lactantius, “A Treatise on the Anger of God,” in Fathers of the Third and


10. Solomon and Higgins, A Short History of Philosophy, 71.


15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry’s discussion of Augustine’s critique of Stoicism in God and the Art of Happiness, 14-15.


17. Solomon and Higgins, A Short History of Philosophy, 122.


20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry’s discussion in God and the Art of Happiness, 3-62.


22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, “Happiness, Eudaimonism,” in Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand
What does the Bible say about Satan, and what do Christians believe about him? Not only is this an important biblical doctrine, but it has also been used to determine if someone has a biblical worldview. Kerby Anderson explains the basics about Satan, how he catches us in his snares, how to resist his temptations.

The Barna Group has found that a very small percentage of born again Christians have a biblical worldview. They define a “biblical worldview” as having the following six elements: “The Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches; Satan is considered to be a real being
or force, not merely symbolic; a person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works; Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth; and God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.”{1}

Various surveys (including the Barna surveys) show that many Christians think that belief in Satan is optional. After all, they argue, if I believe in Jesus that is enough. But if you believe that Jesus was God then you have to believe that Satan exists. Satan is mentioned in the Gospels twenty-nine times. And in twenty-five of those references, Jesus is the one talking about Satan.

It is also worth noting that Satan is mentioned many other times in the Bible. Satan is referred to in seven Old Testament books and every New Testament writer talks about Satan. Belief in Satan is not optional.

When Satan is discussed in the New Testament, he is identified by three titles. These three titles describe his power on earth and his influence in the world:

1. **Ruler of the world** – Jesus refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). This means that he can use the elements of society, culture, and government to achieve his evil ends in this world. That doesn’t mean that every aspect of society or culture is evil. And it doesn’t mean that Satan has complete control of every politician or governmental bureaucrat. But it does mean that Satan can use and manipulate the world’s system.

2. **God of this world** – Paul refers to Satan as “the god of this world” who “has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Satan sets himself up as a false god to many. His power over religion and the ability to promote false religions keeps people from know the true gospel.

3. **Prince of the air** – Paul reminds Christians that they were dead in their
trespasses and since in which they “formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air.” Satan is the prince of the air and thus controls the thoughts of those in the world system. The Bible says: “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). So we should not be surprised that we find ourselves in the midst of spiritual warfare.

**How Did Satan Fall?**

The Bible doesn’t say much about Satan and his fall. There are two passages in Scripture that many believe does describe Satan’s fall but not all theologians are convinced. These passages are Ezekiel 28:11-19 and Isaiah 14:12-19.

Ezekiel predicts the coming judgment of the Gentile nations and refers to “the prince (or leader) of Tyre” and then later to “the king of Tyre.” These do not seem to be the same person. The first is obviously the earthly leader of the city Tyre. Ezekiel is predicting his ultimate downfall and the destruction of his kingdom.

The person referred to as the “king of Tyre” seems to be a different person. He has “the seal of perfection” and was “blameless.” He is described as “full of wisdom and perfect in beauty.” It also says that he was “in Eden, the garden of God.”

It appears that the “king of Tyre” describes Satan who was serving God as an angel. The passage further says that Satan was “lifted up” because of his beauty which many commentators suggest mean that he was the greatest of all of God’s creations. But he sinned. This passage says “you sinned” and “you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor.”

Another passage that appears to be talking about Satan is where the prophet Isaiah is predicting that God will bring judgment against Babylon. The first part of chapter 14 (verses 1-11) is directed at the king of Babylon. But many theologians and commentators believe that the subject changes in the next section (verses 12-19) because it focuses on the “star of the morning.”

It worth mentioning that the “star of the morning” in verse 12 could just as easily
be translated “the shining one.” That connects with Paul’s statement that Satan is an “angel of light” (2 Corinthians 11:14). The passage also says that he has “fallen from heaven.” It seems like we are not talking about the Babylonian king but actually talking about Satan.

If this passage is talking about Satan, then it tells us more about his motivations that led to his fall. Five times in this passage we see the phrase “I will.” He is prideful and wants to achieve a position “above the stars of God” (Isaiah 14:13). He also sought to be “like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:14). And he wanted to “sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north” (Isaiah 14:13). Each of these desires tells us more about his motivations.

From this passage we discover three things about Satan. First, Satan wanted to be superior to creation. Second, Satan wanted to be superior to the Creator. Third, Satan wanted a superior place to rule all of creation.[2]

**What Do We Know About Satan’s Character?**

The Bible tells us a great deal about Satan through the various names that are given to him. Let’s begin by looking at the name “Satan.” In Hebrew the name means “adversary.” He is opposed to God and His plans. And Satan is also opposed to God’s plan in our lives. If we are to be successful in spiritual warfare, we must understand that he is our adversary. This characteristic of Satan is significant. The Old Testament uses this name for him eighteen times, and it is used thirty-four times in the New Testament.

Another common name for Satan is “the devil.” This name in the Greek is *diabolos* and is derived from the verb meaning “to throw.” The Devil throws accusations and lies at us. This is a significant part of spiritual warfare. He accuses believers while he slanders and defames the name of God. This name occurs thirty-six times in the New Testament.

There is one passage in the New Testament that uses both of these names for Satan. Peter warns believers about Satan who is an “adversary” and “the devil”
who is on the prowl like roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). He is a formidable adversary that believing Christians should not take lightly.

Satan is also known as the “tempter.” He tempts us to follow him and his evil ways rather than follow God’s plan for our lives. When he appears to Jesus in the wilderness, he is referred to as the tempter (Matthew 4:3). Also, Paul refers to Satan as “the tempter” (1 Thessalonians 3:5) and thus illustrates one of the key characteristics of Satan: he tempts humans to sin.

A related name is “serpent.” Satan took the form of a serpent to tempt Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Paul talks about Satan tempting Eve due to his subtle tempting and craftiness (2 Corinthians 11:3).

In addition to tempting believers, Satan is referred to as the “accuser of the brethren” (Revelation 12:10).

Satan is also called “the evil one” both by Jesus (John 17:15) and John (1 John 5:18-19). Satan can control the world system, but believers are given the power to resist his temptations and evil designs. Satan is the source of much of the evil in the world, and that is why believers must reckon with his impact and content with spiritual warfare.

We also see his power in the names that describe his dominion. He is described as “the god of this world” in 2 Corinthians 4:4. He is also called “the prince of the world” (John 14:30) and “the prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). And he is known as “the ruler of the demons” in Matthew 12:24.

**How Are We Caught in the Snares of Satan?**

The Bible teaches that Satan can capture our minds and divert us from God’s purpose. This is called a snare. In certain biblical passages (for example, Psalm 124), we read about fowlers and the use of snares. They would capture birds by spreading a net on the ground that was attached to a trap or snare. When the birds landed to eat the seeds spread out, the trap would spring and throw the net over the birds.
A snare could be anything Satan uses that entangles us or impedes our progress. It could be roadblock or it could be a diversion. A wise and discerning Christian should be alert for these snares that can prevent our effectiveness and even ruin our testimony.

The character of Satan gives us some insight into his methods and techniques. James gives us a perspective on this by telling us that when we are tempted we should not blame God. Instead we should understand the nature of temptation and enticement. “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14-15).

James shows that temptation toward sin in usually a process rather than a single act. We are tempted and then carried away and enticed by our own lust. Like a fisherman who tries to catch a fish using bait, Satan tries to entice us by placing before us something that will cause us to be carried away. Then when lust has conceived, we do it again, and eventually experience death.

Satan is not only the tempter, but he is a subtle deceiver “who deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9). Jesus warned that there will be “false Christs and false prophets” who will “show great signs and wonders.” They will be so convincing that they “shall deceive the very elect” (Matthew 24:24).

Paul teaches that Satan disguises himself as an “angel of light” and his demons transform themselves as “ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14-15). Satan’s main strategy is to lie. Jesus said concerning Satan, “When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it” (John 8:44). Paul prays that Christians would “no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting” (Ephesians 4:14).

**How Did Jesus Resist the Temptations of Satan?**

How can we resist Satan’s temptations? We can learn some valuable lessons
about how to deal with spiritual warfare by watching how Jesus was able to resist the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4; Mark 1; Luke 4) in the forty-day Temptation. The Bible records three attempts by Satan to get Jesus to act independently of His Father’s will for Him.

1. **Challenged God’s provision** – Satan first challenged Jesus to turn stones into bread (Matthew 4:3). The Bible tells us that Jesus was very hungry after fasting for forty days. While Jesus had the power to do so, He resisted because it was His Father’s will that he fast in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights.

   Instead Jesus quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 8:3 back to Satan. “But He answered and said, ‘It is written, man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4).

2. **Challenged God’s protection** – Satan next took Jesus into “the holy city and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple” (Matthew 4:5). He then commanded Jesus to throw Himself down in order for the angels to protect Him. In other words, Satan wanted Jesus to take His protection into His own hands and no longer trust in God’s protection. Notice that Satan even quotes Scripture (Psalm 91) to Jesus (Matthew 4:6) in order to tempt Him.

   Jesus, however, quotes a portion of Deuteronomy 6:16 back to Satan. “Jesus said to him, ‘On the other hand, it is written, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test’” (Matthew 4:7).

3. **Challenged God’s dominion** – Satan then took Jesus “to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory” (Matthew 4:8). And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You, if You fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). Satan would give Jesus rule and dominion over all that the world could provide if he were turn away from His mission to save mankind and worship Satan.

   Notice that Jesus did not challenge Satan’s claim that he had the kingdoms of the world to give to Him. After all, Satan is the “prince of this world” (John 12:31). But instead Jesus said to him, “Go Satan! For it is written, you shall worship the
Lord your God and serve Him only” (Matthew 4:10).

As believers we should remind ourselves that Satan is a defeated foe. Jesus tells us that “the ruler of this world has been judged” (John 16:11). But his influence is still felt. Jesus also refers to Satan as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31). John tells us that “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19). And Peter reminds us that “the Devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). The good news is that “greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Notes

2. You can find more information about Satan, demons, angels, and spiritual warfare in my book A Biblical Point of View on Spiritual Warfare (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009).

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See Also

Probes Answers Our Email: Angels and Demons