

The Scandal of Blood Atonement: “Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?”

The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection raises accusations that Christianity is obsessed with blood. Many believers struggle with this too. Byron Barlowe explores the biblical reasons for the focus on Christ’s blood and why its shedding was necessary.

The Bloody Cross: A Tough Thing to Handle

Easter season is all about the death and resurrection of Christ—which centers on the blood sacrifice He endured. Christianity is called a bloody religion, focusing on the execution of Jesus Christ on a cross. Why is this true and what does it mean when we say His blood atones for our sin?



Millions of Americans—and billions of Christians around the world—celebrated the death and Resurrection of Christ during Passion Week and Easter Sunday. The topic was everywhere from sermons to a CNN docudrama titled *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery*.

You may have questions about all the talk of “the blood of Christ” and songs saying things like “Jesus’s blood washed away my sins.” This bloody theme does raise understandable concerns that are shared by believers, seekers and skeptics alike.

In fact, more and more skeptics are posting on the Internet things like this book promotion:

“Christians are obsessed with blood! They sing about it, declare they are washed in it and even drink it! In this

book you will discover the crazy background to this Christian obsession and the truth about the bloodthirsty God they claim to know and serve.”[\[1\]](#)

In this article, we’ll discuss whether these charges are true and fair and explain the doctrine of blood atonement.

Again, even many Christians—including me—have wondered deeply about all the biblical imagery of shed blood, what some call the Crimson Thread of Scripture. I mean the grotesqueness of Old Testament animal sacrifice and the belief in Jesus’s torturous slaying as the core of salvation. Radical stuff for modern ears.

So what is blood atonement and why does it matter? In historic orthodox Christian thought, God’s Son is at the very center of history doing these things:

- reconciling man to God,
- ransoming humans from slavery to sin and well-deserved death and
- justly recompensing God for the horrific offense of rebellion and disobedience to Him.

Thankfully, the gospel (or good news) is simple. The Bible claims, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”[\[2\]](#)

The bottom line for all people is this: out of Christ’s death came the hope of eternal life—and His resurrection proved this. Our sin caused God’s Son to suffer and die. By grace, through faith, we can benefit. Otherwise, we suffer eternally for staying with the cosmic rebellion that started in a perfect Garden long ago.

Yet, this blood-centered good news is a scandal to both those who believe and those who deny it. In fact, the Greek root

word *skandalon* is used for Christ Himself.^{3} You see, Jews denied Christ as the Promised One and Gentiles thought it was all nonsense. Nothing has changed for mankind: the choices are either do-it-yourself religion, being too smart for all that, or believing in this radical hope.

The Reason Someone Had to Die

Why did anybody have to die? God's justice and holiness demands a death penalty for the sinner.

We are all in a serious spiritual and moral pickle. Biblical Christianity declares that each person ever born is stuck under an irreversible "*sin*drome" for which there is no human answer. History sadly records the habitual and continual effects of sin: oppression, addictions, self-promoting power plays, deceit, war, on and on.

Now for a reality check: no moral order, either in a family, a company, military unit or society survives ambiguity or failure to enforce laws. Just ask the victims of unpunished criminals set loose to perpetrate again. If the Creator were to simply wink at sin or let people off scot-free, where would justice be? What kind of God would He be?

God is holy and He called Himself the Truth. There is no way God would be true to Himself and the moral order He created and yet fail to punish sin. Such impunity would mock justice. As one theologian puts it, "Pardon without atonement nullifies justice . . . A law without penalty is morally unserious, even dangerous."

Ok, but penalties have levels of harshness. Why is death necessary? Scripture spells out clearly the decree that sinners must die. In God's original command He stated, "When you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). In Ezekiel the same formula appears slightly reworded: "The soul who sins is the one who

will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Paul boiled it down this way: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s justice and holiness demand death for sin. Blood must be shed. Detractors of the cross tend to underestimate sin and know nothing of its offense to a holy God. Everyone wants justice—for others.

Ok, so what does a just and holy God do with impure, treasonous creatures He made to bear His image? God was in a quandary, if you will.

Yet, even in the Garden, He was already hinting at a plan to reconcile this dilemma. “God so loved the world” that he sent down His own Son as a man to pay the death penalty.[{4}](#)

Thomas Oden writes, “God’s holiness made a penalty for sin necessary . . . Love was the divine motive; holiness [was] the divine requirement. [Romans 5:8 reads] ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. [And as Romans 8 teaches,] This love was so great that God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32).”[{5}](#)

Christ’s Death and Resurrection Was Unlike Other Religious Stories: It Was All for Love

God’s morally just demand for a death-payment is not the same as pagan gods, who maliciously demanded sacrifices. True for one big reason:

Isn’t this crucifixion thing simply about a grouchy god acting all bloodthirsty, as some atheists like popular author Richard Dawkins say? Should good people find this repugnant? One unbelieving critic wrote,

“Unfortunately, much of Christian art consists of depicting

the sufferings and agony of Jesus on the Cross. This reflects the obsession of Christianity with the Crucifixion "Crosstianity" [in the contemptuous words of one skeptic]. The obsession with 'our sins' having been 'washed away by the Blood of the Lamb' would be regarded as evidence of a serious mental illness . . . but when this is an obsession of millions of people it becomes 'religious faith'." {6}

Wow! Did you know that you, if you are a believer, are part of an insane global crowd? This vividly illustrates the scandal of the cross: "which is to them that are perishing foolishness" as the Apostle Paul described it. {7}

No, biblical sacrifice is not a bloodfest, but the way to deal with a sad reality. Put it this way: If God said, "Nah, don't worry about rebelling against your Creator," would that be a just and righteous God? Would a deity who fails to punish wrongdoing be worth following? Would His laws mean anything? Yet, we are unable to keep laws, so He steps in to pay that penalty. With His lifeblood. This storyline is utterly unique in the long human history of religions. And the resurrection Christians celebrate shows its truth in actual time and on this dirty earth.

Pagan myths of savior gods who rise from the dead have only a surface resemblance to the biblical resurrection. Such deities are more like impetuous and tyrannical people than the one and only Yahweh. The biblical God's love fostered the unthinkable: set up a sacrificial system for a one-of-a-kind people—the Israelites—that served as a foretelling of His *coup de grace*: dying in man's place as the spotless sacrificial Lamb. What a novel religious idea that only the true God could dream up! Theologian Thomas Oden says it this way: "It was God who was both offering reconciliation and receiving the reconciled." {8}

God's merging of perfect holiness, just retributive punishment and allowance of His Son's execution was actually a beautiful

thing. Francis of Assisi wrote that “love and faithfulness meet together [at the cross]; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.”[{9}](#)

But Why a Violent, Bloody Death?

I get that death was demanded of someone to pay for sin. So why a bloody suffering and execution? Why the constant shedding of blood?

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie theaters in 2004 to mixed reviews. It earned its R-rating for gory bloodshed and, ironically, became a cultural scandal itself. Seems that the bloody realism was too much for both soft-core Christians and high-minded unbelievers. But this vividly poignant portrayal of Christ's blood-stained Passion did raise a good question.

When it came to saving mankind, why the shedding of blood? Could God not have found another way? Church Father Athanasius believed that, if there were a better way to preserve human free will and still reconcile rebellious man to a holy God, He would have used it. Apparently, Christ's suffering and death was the only solution.

The Apostle Paul summarized Christ's entire earthly ministry this way: He “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). At the cross, “human hate did all the damage it could do to the only Son of God.”[{10}](#) God used the realities available to Him, including the masterfully grim method of crucifixion, honed to a fine art by Roman pagans who viewed human life as dispensable.

Again, why is death demanded of God to atone for sin? The grounding for such a claim appears early in the Bible, after the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In Genesis 9 Yahweh declares, “I will require a reckoning . . . for the life of

man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.”{11} Apparently, God has put the price of a man’s life as that of another’s life.

The highlight of Christ’s death was its substitutionary sense. The Apostle Peter wrote, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”{12} Justice, fairness, reality itself demanded a bloodguilt payment for sin. Christ paid it.

Substitutionary sacrifice was nothing new for the Jews who unwittingly had the Messiah crucified. From the beginning of God’s dealings with His people, agreements were blood covenants. What else could carry the weight of such momentous things? And, as the book of Hebrews teaches, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.**”{13}

One theologian plainly said, “Through this sacrificial system, the people of Israel were being prepared for the incomparable act of sacrifice that was to come in Jesus Christ.”{14}

His suffering, death and resurrection conquered sin and neutered the fear of death. Only blood could clean sin; only God’s Son’s blood could do it perfectly and forever.

Here’s the scandal we spoke of: only a perfect sacrifice would do for washing mankind’s sins away and reconciling us back to God.

Beautiful Obsession: God Was Glad to Allow This Brutality for Us!

God said it was His pleasure to pay the death penalty with His own self, in the Person of His son. Christianity’s so-called blood-obsession is a beautiful picture of perfect divine love.

Theologian Thomas Oden summarized well our discussion of

Christ's blood atonement. He wrote, "Love was the divine motive; holiness the divine requirement. 'God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8)."

Such claims trump the understandable disgust of doubters. But the red blood leads to clean white.

Chick-fil-A restaurant employees are trained to say, "My pleasure" when serving customers. Imagine God saying that to believers regarding the cross of Christ! Paul explains in his letter to the Colossian church that "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness of deity to dwell in Him . . . having made peace *through the blood* of His cross . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death . . ."[\[15\]](#)

God was glad to stand in as the essential scapegoat to restore us to right relations with Himself, to buy us back from slavery to sin, fear and death, and to abolish sin and its effects. This doesn't sound like a bloodthirsty tyrannical deity demanding a whipping boy or abusing his own child, as some acidly accuse. "My pleasure" brings in new dimensions of lovingkindness and servant-heartedness.

But wait, there's more! Scripture lists lots of wonderful effects created by the blood of Christ. These include forgiveness, propitiation or satisfaction of God's righteous wrath, justification or being made right, reconciliation with God, cleansing, sanctification, freedom from sin, and the conquest of Satan.

Yes, you could say that Christianity is blood-obsessed. As accused, even its hymns often focus on the benefits bought at the highest of prices: the life of the God-Man Himself. One famous hymn goes:

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This beautiful blood obsession finds its highest hope in Revelation. The following is a prophecy about persecuted believers:

“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”[\[16\]](#)

Maybe the revelations here are as crazy as skeptics say. The foolishness of God. We believe they are the most glorious story ever told.

Notes

1. Promotion at Amazon.com for *Obsessed with Blood: The Crazy Things Christians Believe*, Book 1, by Ex-Preacher.
2. 1 Peter 3:18, NASB.
3. Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 1 Peter 2:8.
4. John 3:16.
5. Oden, Thomas, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 405.
6. Meyer, Peter, “Why I Am Not a Christian”. Serendipity blog. Accessed 2-27-17, www.serendipity.li/eden/why_i_am_not_a_christian.htm.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:18.
8. Ibid., 414.
9. Ibid., 405.
10. Ibid., 389.
11. Genesis 9:4-6.
12. 1 Peter 3:18.
13. Hebrews 9:22-23, emphasis mine.
14. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 413-414.

15. Colossians 1:19.

16. Revelation 7:14b-17, emphasis mine.

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Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Forgiveness Can Be Good for Your Health

Have you ever been cheated or mistreated? Got any lingering grudges you're holding onto? Is there any "unclear air" between you and a family member, neighbor, or coworker regarding a dispute, a slight, an offense? Could those situations use some forgiveness?

More and more medical doctors and social scientists are extolling the benefits of forgiveness and reconciliation, benefits both to individuals and to society. This article examines some of these benefits and presents several inspiring case studies, stories of forgiveness in action.

Would you believe that forgiveness can be good for your health? Lingering anger, stress, or high blood pressure could indicate that you need to forgive someone (or to be forgiven yourself). Many religions—including, of course, the Christian faith—have long held that forgiveness is an important component of a fruitful life. Now secular research supports its value.[\[1\]](#)

In the early 1980s, Kansas psychologist Dr. Glenn Mack Harnden searched in vain to find studies on forgiveness in the

academic digest *Psychological Abstracts*. Today there exist an International Forgiveness Institute and a ten-million-dollar “Campaign for Forgiveness Research” (Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu have been among the ringleaders). The John Templeton Foundation awards grants in the field.

Harnden says forgiveness “releases the offender from prolonged anger, rage, and stress that have been linked to physiological problems, such as cardiovascular diseases, high blood pressure, hypertension, cancer, and other psychosomatic illnesses.”[{2}](#)

He’s big on this theme. When I ran into him in Washington, DC, a while back, he spoke enthusiastically about attending an international gathering in Jordan that saw forgiveness between traditional individual enemies like Northern Irish and Irish Republicans, Israelis and Palestinians.

George Washington University medical professor Christina Puchalski cites forgiveness benefits supported by research studies. Writing in *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, she says, “The act of forgiveness can result in less anxiety and depression, better health outcomes, increased coping with stress, and increased closeness to God and others.” [{3}](#)

Daily life brings many sources of conflict: spouses, parents, children, employers, former employers, bullies, enemies. If offense leads to resentment and bitterness, then anger, explosion, and violence can result. If parties forgive each other, then healing, reconciliation, and restoration can follow.

Startling Contrition

Robert Enright is an educational psychology professor at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and president of the International Forgiveness Institute. He laments the fact that

despite society's conflicts, "almost never do we hear public leaders declaring their belief that forgiveness can bring people together, heal their wounds, and alleviate the bitterness and resentment caused by wrongdoing." {4}

The year 2006 brought a startling example of contrition by Adriaan Vlok, former Law and Order Minister under South Africa's apartheid regime. During the 1980s, racial conflict there boiled.

In 1998, Adriaan Vlok confessed to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission that ten years earlier in 1988 he had engineered the bombing of the headquarters of the South African Council of Churches, a prominent opposition group. The bombing campaign also included movie theaters showing "Cry Freedom," an anti-apartheid film. {5} I had tickets to see "Cry Freedom" in Pretoria the night it opened, but the screening was cancelled. The next morning, a bomb was discovered in the theater I would have attended.

You can imagine my interest when BBC television told of Vlok's 2006 attempt to reconcile personally with Rev. Frank Chikane, former head of the South African Council of Churches, the group whose headquarters Vlok had bombed. Chikane, now director general of the South African president's office, reports that Vlok visited his office and gave him a Bible with these words inscribed: "I have sinned against the Lord and against you, please forgive me (John 13:15)." That biblical reference is Jesus' Last Supper admonition that his disciples follow his example and wash one another's feet.

Chikane tells what Vlok did next: "He picked up a glass of water, opened his bag, pulled out a bowl, put the water in the bowl, took out the towel, said 'you must allow me to do this' and washed my feet in my office." Chikane gratefully accepted the gesture. {6}

Vlok, a born-again Christian, later told BBC television it was

time “to go to my neighbor, to the person that I’ve wronged.” He says he and his compatriots should “climb down from the throne on which we have been sitting and say to people, ‘Look, I’m sorry. I regarded myself as better than you are. I think it is time to get rid of my egoism . . . my sense of importance, my sense of superiority.’”[\[7\]](#)

Startling contrition, indeed.

Strength to Forgive

Have you ever unexpectedly encountered someone who has wronged you? There you are, suddenly face-to-face with your nemesis. How do you feel? Frederic Luskin, director of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, says, “Our bodies react as if we’re in real danger right now to a story of how someone hurt us seven years ago. . . . You’re feeling anger, your heart rhythm changes . . . breathing gets shallow.”[\[8\]](#)

Corrie ten Boom and her Dutch family hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. For this she endured Ravensbruck, a concentration camp. Her inspiring story became a famous book and film, *The Hiding Place*.

In 1947 in a Munich church, she told a German audience that God forgives. “When we confess our sins,” she explained, “God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever.”[\[9\]](#) After her presentation, she recognized a man approaching her, a guard from Ravensbruck, before whom she had had to walk naked. Chilling memories flooded back.

“A fine message, *Fraulein!*” said the man. “How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!” He extended his hand in greeting.

Corrie recalled, “I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me. . . . But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. I was face to face with one of my

captors, and my blood seemed to freeze.”

The man continued: “You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. . . . I was a guard there. . . . But since that time . . . I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well, *Fraulein*.” He extended his hand again. “Will you forgive me?”

Corrie stood there, unable to forgive. As anger and vengeance raged inside her, she remembered Jesus’ death for this man. How could she refuse? But she lacked the strength. She silently asked God to forgive her and help her forgive him. As she took his hand, she felt a “healing warmth” flooding her body. “I forgive you, brother!” she cried, “With all my heart.”

“And so,” Corrie later recalled, “I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on [God’s]. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

“My Father, the Town Alcoholic”

When Stanford education and psychology professor Carl Thoresen and his colleagues began recruiting adult subjects for the Stanford Forgiveness Project, they had trouble signing up males. When they started using the terms “grudge” and “grudge management” in the recruiting, the men came. Thoresen thinks some men felt “forgiveness” was a feminine activity, but a “grudge” was something they probably should deal with.[{10}](#)

Consider a guy who had a longstanding grudge involving a family member. And aren’t family conflicts often causes of intense stress?

As a teenager on the family farm, Josh McDowell loved his mother but despised his father “more than anyone else in the

world.”^{11} His friends would joke about his dad being drunk. It tore him up inside. “I hated my father for the embarrassment and shame his alcoholism caused my family,” McDowell relates. “I also resented what it caused him to do to my mother. I’d go out in the barn and see my mother beaten so badly she couldn’t get up, lying in the manure behind the cows.” Eventually his mother lost the will to live and died, Josh says, “of a broken heart.”

In college, Josh met some followers of Jesus whom he liked. Skeptical about Christianity’s validity, he accepted their challenge to examine evidence regarding Jesus’ claims and found it convincing.^{12} He thanked Jesus for dying for him, admitted his flaws to God, and asked Christ to enter his life and take over. Soon he realized he no longer hated his father.

Josh says, “I had confessed to God my feelings for my dad, asked God to forgive me, and prayed that I could forgive. And it happened as quickly as I asked. No longer was my dad a drunk to be hated. Now I saw him as a man who had helped give me life. I called him and told him two things I had never told him before: ‘Dad, I’ve become a Christian and . . . I love you.’”

“But how . . . how can you love a father like me?” Josh’s dad asked on another occasion. Josh explained how to place his faith in Christ and his father made that decision, too. About fourteen months later, his alcohol-ravaged body gave out and he died. But the changed life of the town alcoholic influenced scores of people to place their lives in God’s hands. “My dad’s life was brand new those last 14 months,” recalls Josh. “His relationship with me and with God were both reconciled. Jesus Christ is a peacemaker.”

Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and You

Secular research supports the value of forgiveness, a concept at the core of Christian faith. You might wonder, “How does

all this relate to me personally?" May I offer some suggestions?

As a starting point, *become forgiven yourself*. The late and renowned ethicist Lewis Smedes wrote, "Forgiving comes naturally to the forgiven."^{13} Josh McDowell says once he was forgiven by God, he could forgive his alcoholic father. If you've never known for sure that God is your friend, I encourage you to ask Him to forgive you. You might say something like this to Him right now:

Jesus, I need you. Thanks for dying for my flaws and rising again. I ask you to forgive me and enter my life. Please help me to become good friends with you.

If you asked Jesus to forgive you and enter your life, He did. Tell another believer about your decision. Contact this radio station or the Web site Probe.org and ask how you can grow in your faith.

If you've already come to faith in Christ, *keep short accounts with God*. One early follower of Jesus wrote, "If we confess our sins to [God], he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."^{14} The proverbial country preacher said, "I 'fesses 'em as I does 'em."

Ask God to give you the strength to forgive others and love them as He does. Lewis Smedes mentions three components of forgiving others: "First, we surrender our right to get even. . . . Second, we rediscover the humanity of our wrongdoer . . . that the person who wronged us is a complex, weak, confused, fragile person, not all that different from us. . . . And third, we wish our wrongdoer well."

Contact the person you've wronged—or who has wronged you—and seek to make peace if appropriate and possible. The biblical prescription is that the offender and the offended should run into each other as each is en route to contact the

other.^{15} Of course, not everyone will want to reconcile, but you can try.

Realize that forgiving may take time. Shortly before his death, Oxford and Cambridge scholar C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think I have *at last* forgiven the cruel schoolmaster who so darkened my youth. I had done it many times before, but this time I think I have really done it."^{16}

Forgiveness and reconciliation can be contagious. They can make an important difference in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, and nations. A good relationship takes two good forgivers.

Is there anyone with whom you need to reconcile?

Notes

1. Gary Thomas, "The Forgiveness Factor," *Christianity Today*, January 10, 2000, 38-45.
2. Ibid., 38.
3. Christina M. Puchalski, M.D., "Forgiveness: Spiritual and Medical Implications," *The Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine*, September 17, 2002; <http://tinyurl.com/yw45eo>; accessed January 27, 2007.
4. Thomas, loc. cit.
5. "Botha implicated in Church bombing," BBC News online, July 21, 1998; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/136504.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
6. "Feet washed in apartheid apology," BBC News online, 28 August 2006; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/5292302.stm>; accessed September 3, 2006.
7. "Minister atones for race sins," BBC News video, 3 September 2006; <http://tinyurl.com/2ruu2l>; accessed October 4, 2006.
8. Joan O'C. Hamilton, "Peace Work," *Stanford Magazine*, May/June 2001, 78; <http://www.stanfordalumni.org/news/magazine/2001/mayjun/featur>

[es/forgiveness.html](#).

9. Corrie ten Boom, "Death Camp Revisited," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 35-36. Quotations from and details of this encounter as related in this section are from this source.

10. Hamilton, loc. cit., 77.

11. Josh McDowell, "Forgiving My Father," *Worldwide Challenge*, July/August 1994, 37-38. Quotations from and details of McDowell's story as related in this section are from this source.

12. To examine some of the evidence for Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-really.com and www.probe.org.

13. Lewis B. Smedes, "Keys to Forgiving," *Christianity Today*, December 3, 2001, 73;

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/015/42.73.html>.

Quotations and concepts from Smedes cited in this section are from this source.

14. 1 John 1:9 NLT.

15. Matthew 5:23-24; 18:15-17.

16. Smedes, loc. cit.; emphasis in the quotation is without attribution.

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What Happens After Death? A Christian Perspective

Dr. Zukeran brings a biblical perspective to a question we all would like to know: what happens to me after I die? He looks to the Bible to determine what we can and cannot know about our life after we pass out of our present bodies.

Differing Perspectives on Death

For the entire existence of mankind, we have struggled with the question, "What happens after death?" Our answer to this dilemma has great implications for our life here on earth. Although many avoid the issue, we must sooner or later address the question. There are many competing answers to this question.

Atheists believe that at death one ceases to exist. There is no afterlife or eternal soul that continues in eternity. All there is to look forward to is our inevitable death, the future death of mankind, and the universe. It is in the face of this future that the atheist must seek to find meaning and purpose for his own existence.

The Eastern and New Age religions that hold to a pantheistic worldview teach that one goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation until the cycle is broken and the person becomes one with the divine. What form a person becomes in the next life depends on the quality of life lived in the previous life. When one unites with the divine, he ceases to exist as an individual, but becomes part of the divine life force, like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

Those who hold to the animistic or tribal religions believe that after death the human soul remains on the earth or travels to join the departed spirits of the ancestors in the underworld, also called the realm of the shadows. For eternity they wander in darkness, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Some of the spirits of the deceased may be called upon to aid or torment those on earth.

Islam teaches that at the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise. The rest will be consigned to hell. The Koran teaches that in paradise men will be drinking wine and entertained by heavenly maidens and that they may

take several of these maidens for their wives.

Most worldviews must accept their belief in the afterlife on *untested* faith, but the Christian hope is sure for two reasons; the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of God's Word. The Bible gives us the true view of what happens after death. However, many Christians have a misunderstanding of the afterlife. Some believe that they become one of the angels, others believe they go into a state of "soul sleep," while others believe they will be floating on clouds playing harps. In this article, we will examine some popular misconceptions of what lies beyond the grave and perceive what the Bible teaches.

Christians can be assured that death is not something to be feared. Instead, at death we arrive home in heaven. To live means we exist in a foreign country. Death has lost its sting and now is a victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Near Death Experiences

For the past thirty years, thousands of people have reported experiencing what are called near death experiences (NDEs). NDEs are encounters where a person, being in full awareness, leaves the body and enters another world. Such experiences have resulted in life transformation in many individuals. What are we to make of these accounts?

Let us understand that NDEs come from those who have been *clinically* dead, not *biologically* dead. In clinical death, external life signs such as consciousness, pulse, and breathing cease. In such cases, biological death results if no steps are taken to reverse the process. Biological death, on the other hand, is not affected by any amount of attention, for it is physically irreversible.[\[1\]](#)

The NDE accounts occur at various stages of clinical death.

Some occur when the patient is comatose, very close to death, or pronounced clinically dead. Other accounts occur when the patient's heart stops beating. Others occur while the patient's brain ceases to register any activity on the EEG monitor. There have not been any cases of biological or irreversible death for a significant amount of time followed by a resurrection.

What has intrigued scientists and theologians in their study of NDEs is that many of the patients have similar experiences. These include leaving the body and watching from above as doctors work on it, entering a dark tunnel, seeing light, seeing others, meeting a spirit being, experiencing peace, and then returning to the body.

Scientists and doctors from various worldviews have sought to explain this phenomenon. Those from an atheistic worldview have sought to give naturalistic explanations. Their explanations range from hallucination induced by medication, chemical reactions the brain experiences in near death crises, previous encounters long forgotten, and others. These fall short of explaining NDE events.

Many NDEs have occurred without medication. Drowning victims are one example. Also, thousands of NDE victims were able to clearly describe places and people with exact detail while they were clinically dead. One girl, while near dead, was able to describe what her family did that night at home, what was made for dinner, where everyone sat and even what was said. Others were able to describe in detail objects in rooms nearby and far away from them. One patient described a shoe on the rooftop of a hospital. When the nurses looked, they found the shoe exactly as described. A boy in an accident involving his brother and mother told those around him moments before he died, "They are waiting for me now." The doctor discovered that at that exact time in another hospital the boy's mother and brother had just died. Dr. Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland provide a comprehensive discussion of NDEs in their book

Beyond Death, arguing that naturalistic explanations cannot satisfactorily explain the events that occur in NDEs.

NDEs may not conclusively prove there is a heaven or hell, but they do indicate that at death the soul separates from the body, and that a person's spirit is conscious and coherent at death.

However, NDEs do not accurately reflect what lies beyond the grave. NDEs deal with accounts that give a short glimpse behind the curtain of death and therefore they give us an incomplete picture. Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus "is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Christ overcame biological death and lives forevermore as ruler over all creation. His supremacy over everything was established through His resurrection. Also, we know that Satan masquerades as an angel of light and can produce counterfeit appearances. It is imperative that we evaluate all experiences in light of Scripture.

Can We Communicate with the Dead?

Do the spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate with the living? One of the most popular current TV shows is "Crossing Over," with psychic John Edward. He, like other psychics, claims to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. He amazes spectators with his ability to reveal details about which only the deceased loved one may have known. From this communication, people attempt to receive comfort, advice, and encouragement.

The Bible teaches that communication with the dead is not possible. Throughout the Bible God commands His people not to indulge in the practice of necromancy, the art of communicating with the dead.

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 states,

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead . . .

The Canaanites consulted spirits and the dead in hopes of gaining power and predicting future events. This practice is an abomination to God and it is for this reason the Canaanites were ejected from the land. Israel was warned not to imitate the Canaanites or they too would suffer a similar fate.

Contacting the dead is forbidden because the spirits of the dead cannot contact the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him.

Who, then, are mediums and spiritists contacting? If they are indeed contacting a spiritual being, it is most likely a demonic counterfeit. Although the demonic spirit may communicate some truths, the ultimate intention of the spirit is to deceive and take one away from the Lord. This practice can ultimately lead to demonic possession and injury to the person.

In Acts 16:16 Paul encountered girl who could predict the future because a spirit possessed her. Knowing this, Paul eventually cast the spirit out of the girl. Throughout the Bible the practice of necromancy is forbidden.

Some will try to defend necromancy by pointing to 1 Samuel 28. Here Saul requests the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel from the grave. The spirit of Samuel arises and delivers a prophetic message to Saul. Bible scholars take two views on this. Some believe it was a demonic counterfeit masquerading as Samuel. I believe since the prophecy given came to pass, this was indeed Samuel the prophet. Despite Saul's

disobedience to God, God made an exception here.

Whichever view you take, it is clear this verse does not encourage one to consult mediums. Saul at this point in his life was out of God's will and because the Spirit of God had left him, he could not receive any word from God. In desperation, he disobeyed God as was the pattern of his life and suffered the consequence. His story teaches us a lesson and is not an example to follow.

One Minute After Death

What happens when we breathe our final breath? The Bible teaches what will occur.

First our immaterial soul and spirit will be separated from our physical body. Second, we will immediately receive the judgment that will determine our eternal destiny. Those who have trusted in Christ's payment on the cross for our sins will enter into eternal life in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 5:8 states, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." There will be no delay in a state of unconsciousness many call "soul sleep." We will immediately be in God's presence.

Second, the soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle with sin that Paul described and all Christians fight comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

Those who reject this gift, will receive what they have chosen, eternity separated from God in Hell. Hebrews 9:27 states, "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." There is no second chance and there is no cycle of reincarnation. Our eternal destiny is determined by

the decision we make for Christ here on earth.

Many assume that after receiving Christ all that remains is a joyful entrance into heaven. Scripture teaches that Jesus will reward us according to how we lived our life on earth. He taught this principle in the parable of the talents in Luke 19. Each servant was entrusted to administer the talents the master gave him. Upon the return of the master, each servant had to give an account for his stewardship. The wise servants were rewarded doubly while the wicked servant was removed.

The lesson for the Christian is that each of us will give an account for our time here on earth. This is not the same as being judged on our salvation status. Christ's death on the cross allows all who believe to enter God's kingdom. We will be judged on our works done since the time of our salvation. This judgment of believers is called the *Bema Seat judgment*. This event is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work, which he has built upon it, remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul states that Christ is our foundation. Our works are the building on this foundation. The materials of gold, silver, and precious stones refer to works done with pure motives for the glory of God. The works of wood, hay, and straw are works done with the wrong motives to glorify self.

At the Bema Seat, our works will be tested with divine fire. Those works that were done for the glory of God will endure the flames and will be our reward. Some will regretfully see

all their works on earth burned up before their eyes and enter heaven with little or no reward.

The unbeliever will be judged and sentenced to hell. At the end of the age, he faces the Great White Throne judgment. Here, all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time are judged based on their rejection of the Savior. They are then thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Revelation 20:11-15 says:

And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; . . . and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Knowing that as Christians we will one day give an account for our lives, we should live as wise stewards over what God has given us. Knowing the fate of the unsaved should fill us with boldness to share Christ unashamedly, with urgency to all. Knowing what lies beyond the grave should motivate us to live life on earth with a mission.

What Will We Be Like in Heaven?

Upon our physical death, the soul is separated from the body and enters immediately into the presence of the Lord. Looking again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, he says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." The soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. As discussed above, Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle that Paul and all

Christians fight with sin comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

We will not remain in heaven as a soul without a body. At God's appointed time, there will be a final resurrection where the spirit will be unified with the resurrected body. Although Christians have various views on when this resurrection will take place, we all agree on the resurrection of the body. What will the resurrected body look like?

Philippians 3:20-21 says, "And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." 1 John 3:2 promises, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

From these two passages we know that our glorified bodies will be like that of Christ. We will not be deified, but we will have the same qualities of His resurrection body. First, our heavenly bodies will be our glorified earthly bodies. Christ's body that died on the cross was the same one that was resurrected. His glorified body was able to travel through walls, appear suddenly, and ascend to heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:1 reads, "[W]e have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." The hands of God will make the resurrected body. 1 Corinthians 15:39-40, 42b-43 tells us:

All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body,

it is raised a spiritual body.

In answering the mockers of the resurrection, Paul explains that our heavenly bodies will possess flesh that is of a different variety than our earthly ones. They will be bodies of flesh, but as different from our earthly bodies as humans are from animals.

We further conclude that, like a seed, the body will be sown or buried and then one day be raised to life. It is buried in death, decay, weakness, and dishonor. When it is resurrected, it will be changed in every way. It is raised imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. We will then have eternal, permanent, and perfected bodies.

We will also maintain our identities. In Luke 16:23, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham all retained their identity. Imagine, one day we will no longer struggle with the weakness of sin, sickness, and aging. A great future is in store for those in Christ.

What Will We Do in Heaven?

What will we do in heaven for all eternity? Some envision playing golf for eternity, while others envision saints floating on clouds strumming harps of gold. Although great thoughts, they fall short of the glorious future that actually awaits those in Christ. We are told relatively little about what activities will occur in heaven. We are only given a brief glimpse of our life to come.

First, the moment that saints of all the ages anticipate is seeing the Lord they served face to face. This will be the first and greatest moment after physical death. From then on we will have fellowship in His presence for all eternity.

Second, our life in heaven involves worship. A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:1-5:

After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. . . ." And again they shouted, "Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever." And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne, saying, "Amen. Hallelujah." Then a voice came from the throne saying: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him both small and great."

Like the sound of roaring waters comes the praise from the saints of all ages. Recently the men from our church described the experience of singing the hymn <i>How Great Thou Art</i> at a Promise Keepers conference. Nothing they said could accurately describe that majestic experience. The closest they could come to putting it into words was, "Awesome! Just awesome!" Can you imagine what it will be like when we sing "Holy, Holy, Holy" along with the saints of all ages in the presence of God? Our worship here is preparation for our future, grand worship in heaven.

Third is the aspect of rest. Heavenly rest here does not mean a cessation from activity, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. In Hebrews 4:9-11 the writer, addressing the people of God states, "There remains, then, a Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." Heaven is the final goal reached after our pilgrimage here on earth. We will rest from our sufferings and struggles against sickness, the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Fourth, we will serve the Lord. Luke 19:11-27 teaches a parable about stewardship. The wise servants who multiplied their master's talents were given rule over ten and five cities. Revelation 22:3 tells us, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him."

In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul rebukes the carnal Christians who cannot settle their own disputes and asks them, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" In Revelation 3:21 the Lord Jesus promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne." Apparently we will be given authority over a sphere in God's eternal kingdom. How much we are given depends on our faithfulness to Him on this earth.

Fifth, we will experience fellowship with God and with one another. One of the most painful experiences in life is to say goodbye. Whether it is to see loved ones move to another residence or because of death, farewells are a painful time. For the Christian, there is hope in knowing, our goodbyes are not permanent. One day we will meet again and this time we will never say goodbye again. What awaits the believer after death is a glorious future that cannot truly be imagined!

Notes

1. Gary Habermas & J.P. Moreland, *Beyond Death* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998), 156.

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See Also:

- [Probe Answers Our Email: "I Have Some Questions About What Happens After Death"](#)
 - [The Truth About Heaven](#) by Rick Rood
 - [Is There Really a Hell?](#) by Rick Rood
 - [Hell: The Horrible Choice](#) by Patrick Zukeran
 - [One Minute After Death](#) by Rusty Wright
 - [Communicating with the Dead](#) by Michael Gleghorn

The Meaning of the Cross

A Scandal At the Center

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* has created quite a bit of controversy, both inside the church and out. One objection from Christians is that the film is imbalanced for not giving

due attention to the resurrection of Jesus. There is at least one reason I disagree. That is because, as theologian Alister McGrath has pointed out, the focus today is primarily on the resurrection, and the cross takes second place.^{1} I recall Carl Henry, the late theologian, noting in the 1980s that the emphasis in evangelicalism had shifted from justification by faith to the new life. We talk often about the positive differences Christianity can make in our lives because of the resurrection. Gibson has forced us to focus on the suffering and death of Christ. And that's a good thing.

Before the foundation of the world, it was established that redemption would be accomplished through Jesus' death (Matt. 25:34; Acts 2:23; Heb. 4:3; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). Peter wrote that we were "ransomed . . . with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18,19). Isaiah 53:5 reads: "But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed."

But what a way to save the world! It flies in the face of common sense! From the time of Christ, the crucifixion as the basis of our salvation has been a major problem. "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing," Paul wrote (1 Cor. 1:18a). The Greeks saw the cross as foolishness (literally, "moronic"), for they believed that truth was discovered through wisdom or reason. For the Jews it was a scandal, a stumbling block, for they couldn't believe God would save through a man accursed. They asked for signs, but instead got a crucified Messiah.

In modern times the cross was a problem because it meant we could not save ourselves through our own ingenuity. In postmodern times, while many young people feel an affinity with Jesus in His suffering, they have a hard time accepting that this is the only way God saves. And the atonement was much more than a simple identification with suffering humanity.

It is easy for us to rush past the cross and focus on the empty tomb in our evangelism. Think about it. How many of us make the cross central in our witness to unbelievers? The new life of the resurrection is a much easier "sell" than the suffering of the cross. We want to present a Gospel that is appealing to the hearer that grabs people's attention and immediately makes them want it.

In our apologetics, our arguments and evidence must be presented in terms unbelievers understand while yet not letting unbelievers set the standards for us. Paul was an educated man, and he had the opportunity to show off his intellectual abilities with the philosophers in Corinth. But Paul wouldn't play the game on their turf. He wouldn't rest the Gospel on philosophical speculation as a system of belief more elegant and persuasive than the philosophies of the Greeks. In fact, he unashamedly proclaimed a very unelegant, even repulsive sounding message. He knew the scandal of the cross better than most, but he didn't shy away from it. He made it central.

A key word today among Christians is "relevant." We want a message that is relevant to contemporary society. But in our search for relevance, we can unwittingly let our message be molded by what current fashion considers relevant. We become confused between showing the relevance of the Gospel to our true situation and making the Gospel relevant by shaping it to fit the sensibilities of our neighbors.

Os Guinness had this to say about relevance:

By our uncritical pursuit of relevance we have actually courted irrelevance; by our breathless chase after relevance without a matching commitment to faithfulness, we have become not only unfaithful but irrelevant; by our determined efforts to redefine ourselves in ways that are more compelling to the modern world than are faithful to Christ, we have lost not only our identity but our authority and our relevance. Our

crying need is to be faithful as well as relevant. {2}

Guinness doesn't deny the relevance of the Gospel. Indeed, it is part of our task to show how it is of ultimate relevance to our situation as fallen people. If the message of Scripture is true— that we are lost and in need of a salvation we cannot secure on our own—then there is nothing more relevant than the cross of Christ. For that was God's answer to our problem. But it is relevant to our true situation as God sees it, not according to our situation as we see it.

Sin and Guilt in Modern Times

The cross of Christ addresses directly the matter of sin. But what does that mean? Do people "sin" anymore? What a silly question, you think. But is it? Of course, we all agree that people do things we call "bad". But what is the nature of this "badness"? Is it really sin? Or, is something "bad" just something inconvenient or harmful to me? Or maybe a simple violation of civil laws? Sin is a word used to describe a violation of God's holiness and law. While the majority of people in our country still believe in God, the consensus about what makes for right and wrong is that we are the ones to decide that, that there is no transcendent law. If there is no transcendent law, however, what are we to make of guilt? Is there such a thing as objective guilt? What do we make of subjective guilt—of guilt feelings?

As the battles of World War I raged in Europe, P.T. Forsyth reflected on the question of God and evil and the meaning of history. He reviewed the ways people had sought peace and unity and found them all wanting. Reason, basic emotions or sympathies, the fundamental workings of nature, and faith in progress all were found wanting. Turning back in history he could find no "plan of beneficent progress looking up through man's career." {3} Anytime it seemed enlightenment had come, it would be crushed by war. In his own day, World War I dashed

the rosy-eyed hopes of progress being voiced. He said, "As we become civilised [sic], we grow in power over everything but ourselves, we grow in everything but power to control our power over everything." {4} But what if we looked to the future? Could hope be found there? If the past couldn't bring in a reign of love and unity, he asked, why should we expect the future to? What is there to make sense of the world we know?

The problem was, and is, a moral one, Forsyth said. "All deep and earnest experience shows us, and not Christianity alone, that the unity of the race lies in its moral centre, its moral crisis, and its moral destiny." What could possibly deal adequately with the guilt, "the last problem of the race"? {5} Is there anything in the history of our race that offers hope?

From the beginning, the church has taught that our fundamental problem is sin, and the cross of Christ provides hope that sin can and will one day be overcome. In modern times, however, the concept of "sin" seems rather quaint, a hold-over from the days of simplistic religious beliefs. Arthur Cushman writes:

The concept of sin is largely outmoded in modern secular thinking because sin implies some form of disobedience against an absolute moral law having to do with man's relationship with God, and not too many people believe any such relationship exists. It would not be the same as social misconduct which has to do with man's relationship to man and is highly relative but obviously cannot be denied. We have reached the point where social custom has displaced the law of God as the point of reference, where mores have replaced morals. {6}

We seem to be caught between two poles. On the one hand, we accept the Darwinist belief in our accidental and even materialistic nature—really no more than organic machines. On the other, we can't rid ourselves of the thought that there's

something transcendent about us, something about us which is other than and even greater than our physical bodies which relates to a transcendent realm of some kind. We recognize in ourselves a moral nature that expresses itself through our conscience. In short, we know we do wrong things, and we know others do them, too. The problem is that we don't seem to know the nature and extent of the problem nor its solution. Many believe that there is no God against whom we sin, or if there is a God, He is too loving to hold our mistakes against us.

From a historical perspective, this is quite a turn-about, says Culance:

Throughout history there has never been a society like our own in which the reality of sin has been so generally denied. Even in the worst days of the Roman Empire men felt the need to propitiate the gods, not so much because they had an exalted view of the gods but because they had a more realistic view of their own worthiness. It is a curious thing that even some of the cruelest of the Roman Emperors, like Marcus Aurelius, for example, were very conscious of themselves as sinners. We may call it superstition, but it was a testimony to a very real sense of inward unworthiness which was not based on man's relationship to man but rather man's relationship to the gods. {7}

On the other hand, despite the contemporary dismissal of sin, guilt is still a constant presence in the human psyche. Karl Menninger writes:

I believe there is a general sentiment that sin is still with us, by us, and in us—somewhere. We are made vaguely uneasy by this consciousness, this persistent sense of guilt, and we try to relieve it in various ways. We project the blame on to others, we ascribe the responsibility to a group, we offer up scapegoat sacrifices, we perform or partake in dumb-show rituals of penitence and atonement. There is rarely a peccavi

[confession of sin or guilt], but there's a feeling. {8}

"This is a phenomenon of our day," writes Custance: "a burden of guilt but no sense of sin." {9}

But to what is the nature of this guilt? If there is no objective moral law that stands outside and above us all, what is guilt and who is guilty? Who judges us?

In the film, *A Walk on the Moon*, Pearl begins to have an affair with a traveling salesman. Pearl's husband, Marty, is a good man, but a bit of a square. It's 1969; Woodstock is about to make the news. And Pearl, who got pregnant by Marty when she was 17, is feeling a need to experiment, to capture what she missed by having to get married and starting the family life so early. When Pearl's affair is discovered, her husband is distraught. So is her daughter, Alison, who saw Pearl with her lover at Woodstock behaving like the teenagers around them. She's broken up that her mother might leave them.

But in all that happens following Pearl's confession, there is no mention of her affair being morally wrong. When she confessed, she told Marty she was sorry. Later, she told him she was sorry she'd hurt him. But her deed was at least somewhat excusable because there were things Pearl wanted to try, and her husband was too square, he didn't listen, he made jokes when she tried to suggest experimenting, especially sexually. Even in her interactions with others, there is no mention of her act being morally wrong. When Alison told Pearl she had seen her at Woodstock, her complaint was that she was the teenager, not Pearl (implying it would be okay for Alison to go wild at Woodstock but not Pearl). Pearl's mother-in-law pointed out what the early marriage cost Marty: a college education promised by Marty's boss, who withdrew the offer when Pearl got pregnant. "Do you think you're the only one with dreams that didn't come through?" she asked.

So the affair was understandable given Marty's old-fashioned

ways (which he shows to be shedding by switching the radio from a big band station to rock station, and when he's shown dancing to Jimi Hendrix on the stereo). The problem was the hurt Pearl cost a good man and a teenage girl. And that's about all there is to sin and guilt anymore.

According to one modern view, guilt is nature's way of teaching us what not to do in the future that has caused us problems in the past. Dr. Glenn Johnson, clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, said "Guilt seems to be a very primitive mental mechanism that was programmed into us to protect us in the future from mistakes we made in the past." It is a "simple debriefing and rehearsal process that the mind engages in after perceiving that something negative has taken place and has caused painful and/or anxious feelings. . . . By forcing repeated reviews of a painful experience and the behaviors and elements leading up to it and associated with it, guilt essentially burns into our brains the connection between our behavior and the uncomfortable feelings we feel."[10](#)

What can we do about guilt? According to Dr. Johnson, the issue is behavior and what might need to be changed to prevent future problems for us. "When guilt is appropriate," says Dr. Johnson, "tell yourself that. You might modify intensity with anti-anxiety medications or relaxation exercises—but if the bulk of the guilt feelings are avoided, so will the learning be." In other words, learn from your mistakes. Inappropriate, excessive guilt, says Dr. Johnson, can be dealt with using "hypnosis, meditation, guided imagery, NLP, Reiki, etc. . . . The focus of the self-help stuff should be on letting one's self grow from experience," he says, "trusting in one's own ability to be a better person, allowing one's self permission to make mistakes and go through losses, trusting in some form of higher power, etc."

People come up with all kinds of ways to rid themselves of guilt feelings. One of the strangest I found on the internet, one with a New Age flavor, was Aromatherapy Angelic Bath Kits

provided by Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc.[{11}](#) All one needs to do is pour some special herbs and oils in the tub, climb in, and read some prescribed meditations to “foster positive thoughts and reinforcements.”[{12}](#) One of these kits is a “ritual to clear feelings of guilt.” We’re asked, “Who hasn’t felt guilty in their lives? Who doesn’t still feel guilty about something? There are two kinds of guilt: good guilt and bad guilt. Good guilt is when you have truly done something that you feel remorse for. Bad guilt is for the rest.” The forgiveness kit includes “special mixtures [which] help wash the guilty feeling away.” Notice that “good guilt” has to do with things “you feel remorse for,” not necessarily for things that are truly wrong. It’s your feelings about such things that matter.[{13}](#) This may seem silly to you. Who would even bother with such a thing? we wonder. But people do.

Somehow, such remedies don’t seem to be working. Maybe it’s because we can’t rid ourselves of the knowledge Paul said we have by nature: a knowledge of the law written on our hearts (Rom. 2:15).

Sin and Guilt According to God

What does God say about sin and guilt? Briefly put, God has declared us guilty of violating His holy law by our sin and deserving of eternal banishment from His presence. Contrary to current opinion, there is transcendent law that has been broken and for which there must be payment.

Imagine that someone has done something to offend you, and his reaction to your complaint is something like, “Yeah, that really bothered me, too. But I’ve forgiven myself of that, and I’m fine with it now.” This is only a slight caricature of the mentality we all encounter today. The person clearly has missed the point that there was a real, objective violation against you!

The message of the cross is that there is a very real fracture

in our relationship with God. We're told in Scripture that there is nothing we can do to make up for what we've done. Is there anything to offer us hope?

There is: the cross of Christ, "the race's historic crisis and turning-point," says Forsyth.^{14} The cross dealt with our greatest need, namely, redemption. Humanists of a secular stripe who trumpeted the inevitable progress of humanity saw our fundamental nature as one of ordered process. The truth, though, is that it is "tragic collision and despair." All of man's efforts have been unable to reach down into the depths of our sinfulness and bring about fundamental change. All except that of the God-man Jesus Christ, who attacked the moral problem head on to the point of dying on the cross and came out victorious.

Several understandings of the atonement—of what Jesus accomplished on the cross—have been offered through history, and several of them have some truth in them. The key aspect of Christ's cross work was that it satisfied the demand for punishment for our sin. This is called substitutionary atonement: Jesus was substituted for us, so He took the punishment for sin in being separated from God and dying, thus paying the penalty for us. "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us." (2 Cor. 5:21) Paul wrote to the Romans that "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering." (Romans 8:3) And to the Galatian church he said that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Gal. 3:13)

By His death on the cross, Jesus, the one who "knew no sin, became sin for us." This was done because of His love for us: "Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us." (Eph. 5:2; Rom. 5:8) Jesus' sacrifice is appropriated by faith: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith," Paul wrote (Eph.

2:8). By putting our faith in Him, we participate in the payment He made. It counts for those who believe it and who receive Him.

I should note quickly, however, that the reality of our objective guilt isn't dependent upon our subjective guilt. In other words, whether we feel guilty or not, we are. And because we are guilty of violating God's law, we must do more than just forgive ourselves as we're taught today. We must, and may, participate in God's solution through Christ.

The Moral Triumph of the Cross

What I've been talking about is the judicial aspect of the cross work of Christ. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.

However, this payment isn't to be thought of like making a payment to the utility company for electricity. All that matters is that the money gets there. What it takes to get it there isn't really significant. The cross, by contrast, was a triumph over sin; it was a moral victory in itself. Jesus overcame evil through His perfect obedience and righteousness; "through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men," Paul wrote (Rom. 5:18). His death on the cross was the capstone of a life of moral victories over sin and Satan.

We're so used to thinking about Jesus as God and as sinless that we don't often think about His obedience. He said and did the things the Father told Him (Jn. 5:19, 30; 8:28). To the Jews he said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am He, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). In His high priestly prayer recorded in John 17, Jesus said, "I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do." (v. 4) Before He gave up His spirit on the cross, Jesus knew that "all things had already been accomplished." (Jn 19:28) He fulfilled the law perfectly

(Matt. 5:17), and thus put the basis of our salvation on our faith in him as the one who did so, thus robbing the law of its power to encourage us to sin (cf. Rom. 8:2-4; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). Jesus had defeated Satan; He had not given in to any temptation to not give up His life. He was obedient to death. (Phil. 2:8). And by His obedience He was made perfect or complete and able to be the source of eternal salvation to all who obey Him (Heb. 5:9; see also 2:10; 5:8; and Rom. 5:19).

P.T. Forsyth wrote that the cross “is the moral victory which recovered the universe. The Vindicator has stood on the earth,” he said. “It is the eternal victory in history of righteousness, of holiness, of the moral nature and character of God as Love.”[{15}](#) He continued:

The most anomalous thing, the most poignant and potent crisis that ever happened or can happen in the world, is the death of Christ; the whole issue of warring history is condensed there. Good and evil met there for good and all. And to faith that death is the last word of the holy omnipotence of God.[{16}](#)

What is the significance of Jesus’ cross work—indeed, His whole life—as a moral victory? Forsyth said that in creating the world, God revealed His omnipotence, His absolute power. In the new creation inaugurated through the cross, He revealed His moral power, His ability to triumph over His worst enemy, Satan, and the sin that infects His creation. God’s power has been revealed as “moral majesty, as holy omnipotence” said Forsyth. “The supreme power in the world is not simply the power of a God but of a holy God.”[{17}](#)

In the cross and resurrection, we see that good can triumph over evil now, and we have the promise that one day that triumph will be complete. Not only us but all of creation will be set free from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-24).

But this isn't just a promise for the future. Because, like Jesus, we have the Spirit living in us, we can live in obedience to God; we can stand firm in the presence of the evil that wages war against us (Heb. 2:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20). The cross bears witness to that.

The secular humanism and new spiritualism of our day have no resources for affecting us so deeply on the moral level. Christianity does—the cross of Christ—and it is this that makes it relevant for our day and for all time.

A Fully-Engaged God

It's easy to think of God as remote from us, as a judge way up there making His laws and wreaking vengeance on anyone who violates them. We hear about the love of God, but how does love fit in with a God of judgment? And if God does love us, how does He show it? Love comes near; it isn't afraid to get its hands dirty. Is God willing to come near? To get His hands dirty with us?

In the cross of Jesus we see both the judgment of God and His love. Herein lies its beauty. In the cross we find a God who does not stand afar off, but takes on the worst of what His own law requires! He has pronounced judgment, but He so much wants us saved that He is willing to take on the burden of paying for it Himself. "For God so loved the world that He gave His Son," says John (3:16).

In all the brouhaha surrounding the release of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, one complaint heard several times was that a God who would put His Son through that isn't a God to be worshipped.[\[18\]](#) But Jesus did this freely. "No one takes [my life] from me," He said, "but I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn.10:18). And He did this knowing that as He laid His life down, so also would He take it up again (Jn.10:17). For the joy set before Him, He took up the cross (Heb. 12:2).

We wonder if God can reach us in the messiness of our lives. But God is no stranger to mess. The Bible reveals a God who isn't afraid to get dirty, who engages life even with all kinds of difficulties it may bring. This message is appealing in our day especially, to GenXers who have suffered the fallout of the excesses of earlier generations. The optimism Boomers inherited from their parents fizzled out for a lot of their children. Regarding that generation, Tom Beaudoin says this:

I have witnessed a sadness and anger about the generation's suffering and dysfunction, a suffering that—whatever its economic reasons may be—expresses itself in psychological and spiritual crises of meaning. Clothing styles and music videos suggest feelings of rage, with the videos expressing this in apocalyptic images. Despair is common and occasionally leaps overboard into nihilism. Xers' relation to suffering lays the groundwork for religiousness. . . . Suffering is a catalyst for GenX religiosity.[{19}](#)

While they often reject the form of religion their parents embraced, many GenXers have a fascination and respect for Jesus, for his suffering didn't make sense, and yet it was redemptive.[{20}](#)

Here the true awesomeness of the cross is made plain. God, who deserves all glory and is so far above us in holiness and purity, became man, and endured horrific torture at the hands of people He created . . . for their benefit! The life and death of Christ make plain that God was willing to roll up his sleeves and engage life on earth fully, even accepting the worst it had to offer.

But, one might wonder, since Christ took on evil and won, shouldn't we be done with suffering? Eventually it will end. In the meantime we, too, learn obedience through what we suffer. If that was Jesus' way of learning, and the servant

isn't above his master (Matt. 10:24), can we expect anything else? Furthermore, we mustn't lose sight of the fact that hardship isn't just an inconvenience on the road of discipleship. Redemption wasn't brought about in spite of the cross but through it.^{21} Likewise, our growth comes not in spite of hardship but through it.

Someone who has suffered for many years might complain that Jesus' suffering doesn't compare. Jesus' sufferings and resurrection spanned a short period of time. But what He suffered was the experience of the weight of the guilt of the whole world on the shoulders of one who was sinless. It isn't anything new for us to feel guilt; we can become somewhat hardened to it. But Jesus felt it to the fullest extent imaginable. This isn't to mention the hurt of the betrayal of Judas (and to a lesser extent, of Peter). Worse yet, He experienced separation from the Father, the worst thing that can happen to anyone. Jesus knew suffering.

In the cross and resurrection we see what God has promised to do for us in a compressed timeframe. But what happened to Jesus will happen for all who believe. He suffered . . . and He arose. We suffer . . . and we will rise.

Jesus allowed people to see what God is like. He not only taught truth, he lived it. People could touch Him, and feel Him touch them. They could see how He lived and how He died. The cross was a real, live illustration of love.

In Jesus, people saw goodness and love demonstrated even toward those who persecuted Him. That should be no surprise, because it was just that kind of person Jesus came to die for! Sin was overcome through a love that gave all. This is the meaning and the message of the cross, the message we, too, are to take to our world.

Notes

1. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 28ff.
2. Os Guinness, *Prophetic Untimeliness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), 15.
3. P.T. Forsyth, *The Justification of God* (London: Independent Press, 1948), 17.
4. Forsyth, 18.
5. Forsyth, 19.
6. Arthur C. Custance, *The Doorway Papers*, vol. 3, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1975), 267.
7. Custance, 274.
8. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 17.
9. Custance, 273.
10. Dr. Glenn Johnson, head-cleaners.com, www.head-cleaners.com/guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).
11. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/wellness_about.htm (February 17, 2004).
12. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/ritual_package.htm (February 17, 2004).
13. Guru and Associates Wellness, Inc., www.wellnessguru.com/rituals_guilt.htm (February 17, 2004).
14. Forsyth, 19.
15. Forsyth, 121.
16. Forsyth, 122.
17. See Forsyth, 123.

18. See for example the comment by Kip Taylor in Susan Hogan/Albach, "The Purpose of the Passion," *The Dallas Morning News*, Feb. 21, 2004, 1G.

19. Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Question of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 99.

20. Beaudoin, 99.

21. Cf. Alister McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 30.

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One Minute After Death (radio transcript)

The Other Side of Life

Do you believe in life after death?[\[1\]](#)

Picture the operating room of a large hospital. A man is dying. As the doctors frantically try to save him, here is what he perceives and thinks:

"I am dying. I hear the doctor pronounce me dead. As I lie on the operating table, a loud, harsh buzzing reverberates in my head. At the same time, I sense myself moving very rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. Suddenly, I find myself outside of my own physical body. Like a spectator, I watch the doctor's desperate attempts to revive my corpse."

“Soon I encounter a ‘being’ of light, a loving, warm spirit who shows me an instant replay of my life and helps me evaluate my past deeds.

“Eventually, I learn I must return to my body. I resist, for my afterlife experience has been quite pleasant. Somehow, though, I am reunited with my physical body and live.”{2}

This composite account of a near-death experience or “NDE” is adapted from the best selling book, *Life After Life*, by Dr. Raymond Moody, who brought these experiences to wide public awareness. Often the episodes involve out-of-body experiences or “OBEs.”

While writing a book on this subject, I interviewed people with some fascinating stories. A Kansas woman developed complications after major surgery. She sensed herself rising out of her body, soaring through space, and hearing heavenly voices before returning to her body. An Arizona man in a coma for five months after a motorcycle accident said he saw his deceased father, who spoke to him.

Actress Sharon Stone has described her own close call with death. She was hospitalized with bleeding from an artery at her skull’s base. “I feel that I did die,” she relates. She tells of “a giant vortex of white light” and says “I kind of poof sort of took off... into this glorious bright...white light. I started to see and be met by some of my friends. people who were very dear to me. It was very, very fast, and suddenly I was back. I was in my body and I was in the room.” Stone says the experience affected her “profoundly” and that she “will never be the same.”{3}

What do these near-death experiences mean? How should we interpret them? This article offers a biblical perspective.

Interpreting Near-Death Experiences

What are some possible explanations for the NDEs? Hundreds of people claim that they have died and lived to tell about it. Are their near-death and out-of-body experiences genuine previews of the afterlife? Hallucinations caused by traumatic events? Or something else?

Some patients have been pronounced clinically dead and later are resuscitated. Others have had close calls with death, but were never really thought dead (such as survivors of automobile accidents). Still others did die permanently but described what they saw before they expired.

Determination of the point of death is a hotly debated issue. In the past, doctors relied merely on the ceasing of the heartbeat and respiration. More recently they have used the EEG or brainwave test. Whatever one considers the point of death, most would agree that these folks have come much closer to it than the majority of people living today.

A number of possible explanations for the OBEs have been offered. Different ones may apply in different situations.

The physiological explanations suggest that a “physical” condition may have caused some of the out-of-body experiences. For instance, cerebral anoxia (a shortage of oxygen in the brain) occurs when the heart stops. The brain can survive for a short while (usually only a few minutes) without receiving oxygen from the blood. Anoxia can produce abnormal mental states.^{4} Patients who recover from heart failure and report OBEs may be merely reporting details of an “altered state of consciousness,” some say.^{5}

Electronic brain stimulation can produce out-of-body sensations. Researchers at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland placed electrodes in the brain of a woman suffering from epilepsy. As they stimulated her brain’s

right angular gyrus, she reported sensing she was floating about six feet above her body.[{6}](#)

The pharmacological explanations say that drugs or anesthetics may induce some of the near-death experiences. Some primitive societies use drugs to induce OBEs in their religious ceremonies.[{7}](#) LSD and marijuana sometimes generate similar sensations.[{8}](#) Even many medically accepted drugs have produced mental states akin to those reported by the dying. Ketamine is an anesthetic that is administered intravenously[{9}](#) and produces hallucinatory reactions.[{10}](#)

Psychological and Spiritual Explanations

How should we interpret near-death experiences? What do they mean? So far this we have examined physiological and pharmacological explanations, that is, causes involving the body or drugs. Consider two other categories: psychological and spiritual explanations. The psychological explanations suggest that the individual's mind may generate the unusual mental experience. Sigmund Freud, writing about the difficulty of coping with the thought of death, said it would be more comfortable in our minds to picture ourselves as detached observers.[{11}](#) Some modern psychiatrists theorize that the OBE is merely a defense mechanism against the anxiety of death. That is, since the thought of one's own death is so frightening, the patient's mind invents the OBE to make it seem as if only the body is dying while the soul or spirit lives on.

Other psychologists wonder if the patient may be confusing his or her *interpretation* of the experience with what actually happened.[{12}](#) The conscious mind needs an explanation for an unusual vision; therefore, it interprets the event in familiar terms. Thus, say these psychologists, resuscitated patients report conversations with deceased relatives or religious figures common to their culture.

The spiritual explanations view many of the OBEs as real manifestations of the spiritual.

Many have noted that earlier reports of NDEs seemed to contradict some traditional Christian beliefs about the afterlife. All of the patients Christian and non-Christian reported feelings of bliss and ecstasy with no mention of unpleasantness, hell, or judgment.

However, further research uncovered negative experiences. For instance, Raymond Moody wrote of one woman who was supposedly "dead" for 15 minutes and said she saw spirits who appeared "bewildered." "They seemed to shuffle," she reported, "as someone would on a chain gang not knowing where they were going. they all had the most woebegone expressions. It was quite depressing."[{13}](#)

Dr. Moody observed, "Nothing I have encountered precludes the possibility of a hell."[{14}](#)

Some have felt that OBEs are inconsistent with the biblical concept of a final judgment at the world's end. No one reports standing before God and being judged for eternity. Dr. Moody responds that "the end of the world has not yet taken place," so there is no inconsistency. "There may well be a final judgment," he says. "Near-death experiences in no way imply the contrary."[{15}](#)

So, is there a life after death?

Is There Life After Death?

The spring of my sophomore year in college, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends were asking questions like, "Is there a life after death?" and "How can we experience it?"

Is it possible to know whether there is an afterlife? What method would you use to find out?

Some suggest using the *experimental method* of science and applying it to the near-death experiences. However, these events normally are not controlled, clinical situations. They're medical emergencies. Even if scientists could establish controls, we have no mind-reading machines to verify mental/spiritual experiences. And think about recruiting subjects. Would you volunteer to undergo clinical death for research purposes?

Some suggest relying on personal *experience* to answer the question. But the experiential method has its drawbacks, too. NDEs can provide useful information, but the mind can trick us. Dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, drug trips, drunkenness, states of shock all can evoke mental images that seem real but aren't.

What if we could find a *spiritual authority*, someone with trustworthy credentials, to tell us the truth about afterlife issues?

Following Mike's death, I encouraged my friends to consider Jesus of Nazareth as a trustworthy spiritual authority. As somewhat of a skeptic myself, I'd found the resurrection of Christ to be one of the best-attested facts of history.[{16}](#) If Jesus died and came back from the dead, He could accurately tell us what death and the afterlife are like. The fact that He successfully predicted His own resurrection[{17}](#) helps us believe that He will tell us the truth about the afterlife.

Jesus and His early followers indicated that the afterlife would be personal, that human personalities would continue to exist.[{18}](#) Eternal life would be relational, involving warm, personal relationships with God and with each other.[{19}](#) Eternal life would be enjoyable, defying our description and exceeding our imagination. "No mind has conceived what God has

prepared for those who love him," wrote one early believer.[{20}](#) And eternal life would be eternal. It would never end. "God has given us eternal life," wrote one of Jesus' closest friends, "and this life is in His Son."[{21}](#)

The sad thing is that some people don't want to take advantage of eternal life.

How to Be Sure You'll Live Forever

Maurice Rawlings, M.D., a cardiologist, tells of a patient who had a cardiac arrest in Dr. Rawlings' office. During the attempted resuscitation, the patient screamed, "I am in hell!" "Don't stop!" he begged in terror. "Each time you quit I go back to hell!"[{22}](#)

The biblical hell, or Hades, is the current home of those who do not accept God's forgiveness. The final abode of those who refuse forgiveness is called the "lake of fire."[{23}](#)

Not a pleasant subject. But remember, God loves you and wants you to spend eternity with Him.[{24}](#) He sent Jesus, His Son, to die and pay the penalty for our sins (attitudes and actions that fall short of God's perfection). We simply need to receive His free gift of forgiveness we can never earn it to be guaranteed eternal life. "Whoever hears my word," Jesus says, "and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."[{25}](#)

How should we interpret the near-death experiences? Here's my perspective as one who believes the evidence supports Jesus' and biblical reliability.[{26}](#) If a given NDE contradicts biblical statements or principles, I do not accept it as being completely from God. If the experience does not contradict biblical statements or principles, then it *could* be from God. (Body, drug or mind could also influence it.)

A given NDE could be completely spiritual and yet not be from

God. Jesus spoke of an evil spiritual being, Satan. We are told that Satan “disguises himself as an angel of light,”[{27}](#) but Jesus called him “a liar and the father of lies.”[{28}](#) I’m not accusing all near-death experiencers of being in league with the devil. Just a friendly word of caution that some may be being deceived.

Once a nightclub near Cincinnati was packed to the brim. Suddenly, a busboy stepped onto the stage, interrupted the program and announced that the building was on fire. Perhaps because they saw no smoke, many of the guests remained seated. Maybe they thought it was a joke, a part of the program, and felt comfortable with that explanation. When they finally saw the smoke, it was too late. More than 150 people died as the nightclub burned.[{29}](#)

Are you believing what you want to believe, or what the evidence shows is true? Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies.”[{30}](#) I encourage you to place your faith in Jesus if you haven’t yet. Then you, too, will live, even if you die.

Notes

1. This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, “One Minute After Death,” *Pursuit* magazine, Vol. V, No. 2, 1996; Rusty Wright, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the End,” *Collegiate Challenge*, Vol. 17, 1978, pp. 2-5; and Rusty Wright, *The Other Side of Life* (Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 1979, 1994).
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12. Dr. Charles Tart in Robert A. Monroe, *Journeys Out of the Body* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 6,7.
13. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Reflections on Life After Life* (New York and Covington, Georgia: Bantam/Mockingbird, 1977), 19-21.
14. Ibid., 36.
15. Ibid., 36, 37.
16. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 1999.

17. See, for example, Jesus' resurrection predictions in Luke 9:22 and 18:31-33; their fulfillment in Luke 24.
18. See for example Luke 23:42-43; Matthew 8:11; 2 Samuel 12:23; Matthew 17:1-8.
19. John 14:2-3; Philippians 1:23; John 17:3.
20. 1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV. See also Revelation 21:4; Hebrews 12:2.
21. 1 John 5:11 NASB.
22. Maurice Rawlings, M.D., *Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 19-20.
23. Revelation 20:11-15.
24. John 3:16.
25. John 5:24 NIV.
26. See, for example, McDowell, op. cit.
27. 2 Corinthians 11:14 NASB.
28. John 8:44 NASB.
29. "They Didn't Believe It," *The New York Times*, May 30, 1977, p. 16; Hal Bruno, "The Fire Next Time," *Newsweek*, June 13, 1977, pp. 24, 27.
30. John 11:25 NASB.

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Why A Moral Life Won't Get Us to Heaven

Man: The Worshiping Animal

This essay is concerned with the often-asked question, "Won't a good, moral life get me to heaven?"

We begin first with the nature of man himself. One of the most

remarkable things about humans is that from the dawn of history, and no matter where we find them on this planet, they are *worshipping* animals. In fact, humans are the *only* animals in the world who worship. *Homo Sapiens* is incurably religious. Why is man so inclined? What are the reasons, and how do they bear on our question about having good morals and getting to heaven?

Let's look briefly at some foundational elements that appear to be universals when it comes to human behavior. The first, as we stated above, is simply that humans *do* worship. Ethnic groups of all kinds and in all places, whether remote or close to other peoples, have their own history, folklore, deities, rituals, particular moral system and life-customs. All of these enable each culture to cope with the great issues of life and its passages—from childhood to maturity to old age, and to the ultimate passage through that dark gate, Death. Christians tie this human inclination to worship directly to the fact that God says man, and only man, is created in His divine image (*imago dei*).

Secondly, what is also curious is *how* and *what* humans worship. The most prominent feature of human worship from earliest beginnings has been a *sacrifice* of some sort, whether the sheep, goats or bulls of the early Mediterranean world, or the human beings hurled into the mouths of volcanos by the Polynesians, or the child sacrifices of the Canaanites, or the ritual slaughter practiced by the Aztecs, the Incas, and virtually all of the New World Indians. In all cases, it appears some kind of blood must flow. We can also add to this (in many cultures) the prominence of *self-sacrifice* through flagellation, severe asceticism, or acts of personal penance.

The centrality of sacrifice in all human religious thinking points to an unmistakable reality: that humans instinctively know, or at least suspect, that there exists One to whom they are accountable for their behavior. They also assume, or know, that they have fallen short of what that higher being (or

beings) requires of them. There is a universal sense that “God is not pleased with me.” So a third feature of worship is universal *guilt*. People worship because they feel guilty. They feel this guilt because they perceive they have fallen short of the standard that God, others, and they themselves require.

The Great Global Heresy: Religion

“Good little boys go to heaven and bad little boys go to hell!” Probably most of us, at one time or another, have undergone the ordeal of having a parent or a teacher point a finger at us (or a neighboring miscreant) and warn of the ultimate outcome of unacceptable behavior.

This “Santa Claus” mentality suggests that God is “makin’ a list and checkin’ it twice, gonna find out who’s naughty or nice.”

Everywhere we turn, we hear people speak of this religion: it is the most popular approach to God on the planet. We all know about the good little angel sitting on one shoulder and the bad little angel on the other. And we are very familiar with jokes about what happens to the person who dies and is immediately face to face with Saint Peter at the Golden Gates of Heaven. Peter stands there ready to evaluate and pass judgement on whether we’ve been good enough to be admitted and accepted inside. Saint Peter expects us to give moral account of ourselves before we can go inside.

The general, world-wide assumption is that, when we die, our good deeds and our bad deeds will be placed on the divine scales and weighed to determine if we go “up” or “down.” However, from Christianity’s viewpoint, this is a great, global heresy.

This is “religion,” but it is definitely not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is radically opposed to such an idea, teaching us that we are not to *do* something, but rather that

something has already been *done* on our behalf. This global heresy, which we call “religion,” actually comes from Hinduism. It is the idea that God resides at the top of a great mountain, and it makes little difference which path a seeker chooses in his ascent up that mountain, since all paths lead to the God on top. And it is up to you to climb if you want to reach the summit—and God.

At the western end of the Forum in ancient Rome, there stood the *Millenarium Aureum*, the Golden Milestone, a gilded bronze column set up by Augustus Caesar to mark the junction and the origin of the major Roman roads spreading out like the spokes of a great wheel in every direction to distant destinations throughout the Empire. On this column were inscribed the major towns and their distances from Rome. From this came the popular saying, “All roads lead to Rome.”

This is what religionists believe about God. They say things like, “Well, it really doesn’t matter what you believe. What’s important is that you try to do your best and be sincere about it. After all, we’re all trying to get to the same place; we all worship the same God.”

But in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, we encounter something very different: in fact, we discover that there are *two* possible approaches to God, but only *one* is acceptable. After Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, they immediately hid in the bushes, took out needle and thread, and began sewing fig leaves together to cover themselves.

God came and found them in the bushes—flunking the first home economics course ever offered! God looked at the clusters of fig leaves they had hastily sewn together, and He was not pleased. In fact, He scolded their efforts and their conduct. Adam and Eve not only had to admit their guilt and disobedience, they also had to acknowledge their inability to make things right *through their own efforts*. They could not cover, or atone, for what they had done. The account goes on

to say that God had to take the initiative to adequately clothe them. He killed some animals and made garments from their skins for a covering.

All philosophy, philanthropy, asceticism, religion, ethics, and all other systems which seek to gain the approval of God through human self-effort are the "fig-leaf" approach. This method is at the heart of what we call "religion," man's best effort to reach up and find God. But the problem every worshipper encounters when climbing the mountain is an impenetrable barrier which denies all further advance: it is the barrier of God's holiness and perfection. Each individual's personal sin and imperfection prevents him or her from coming any closer.

In his autobiography Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, speaks eloquently of his own struggle with this when he says: "Oh wretched man that I am. It is a constant source of torture to me that I am so far from the one I know to be my very life and being, and I know that it is my own sin and wretchedness that hides Him from me."

The Problem of Sin

When the word "sin" comes up in a conversation, most people look as though someone just slipped them a mildewed fig! We *do* a lot of it; we just don't like to *talk* about it! Many people do not know what sin or a sinner really is. What is sin? Sin is a violation of the law, the standard God requires of every human. A sinner is therefore someone who has broken that standard.

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying that there is no good at all in people. There is a great deal of good. Humans are not as bad as they *could* be. The point is simply this: if our premise is that to get to heaven one has to be good, then how good is good enough?

The Scriptures are quite clear about this. God is not demanding "goodness." We saw above that Adam and Eve's best efforts to cover themselves (fig leaves) were not enough. The good which is in man, all his moral achievement, is not acceptable to God—because God is not demanding goodness, He demands *perfection!*

Many will say they try to live by the Ten Commandments or by some other rule of life, such as the Golden Rule. And yet, if we are honest, each of us discovers we have violated our own standards at some point. This is what Paul meant when he said, "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

The Grand Canyon is 6 to 18 miles across, 276 miles long, and one mile deep. The world's record in the long jump, set by Mike Powell at the 1991 World Championships in Tokyo is 29' 4 1/2". Yet the chances of a person jumping from one side of the Grand Canyon to the other are greater than that of someone attempting to establish fellowship with God through his own efforts.

The standard man must meet is God's perfection. Who can match that? It is a goal so far away that *no one* could ever reach it. To make matters worse, James tells us that "whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all" (James 2:10). This means if someone breaks just one of the commandments, he is as guilty as if he had broken all ten!

The purpose of giving the Ten Commandments in the first place was not because God knew human beings would keep them perfectly. The Bible tells us that these revealed standards were intended to be to us what an X-ray machine is to a broken arm. The machine reveals the *condition* of the arm, but it will not set and knit the bones, nor will it put the arm in a cast. By the same token, the Ten Commandments can only reveal to us the condition of our lives; they cannot heal us or cover our

sin.

The Pharisees looked at the Law and then at their own lives and said, "I'm pretty good, really good." Jesus had wanted them to come to the opposite conclusion. He even called them hypocrites! He said they were wrong to claim they were righteous enough and that all was well between them and their Maker. That is why he said, "Those who are well do not need a physician" (Matthew 9:12). When you are well, you don't seek a doctor. The time to consult a physician is when you realize you are sick. Jesus was urging the Pharisees to be honest about themselves when He said, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (v.13).

When my wife Carol and I travel, and I discover I'm lost, I really hate for her to make her classic statement, "You're lost. Why don't you ask for directions?" In my case, the issue is always my male pride! With the Pharisees, it was *religious* pride, as it is for all who would seek heaven on the basis of their own merits.

A wise old Baptist preacher once said, "It isn't difficult to get people saved; it is difficult to get them lost!" This is man's dilemma: like the Pharisees, people cling to the old fig leaves of self-effort instead of submitting to the covering God Himself has provided for all (Christ's sacrificial death, the Cross). Each of us must choose one or the other (John 3:18, 36).

The Problem of Righteousness

While morality and human goodness are to be commended, God makes it clear from the very outset that no one, through his own efforts, possesses the ability to make himself presentable before God. It was Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said, "Man is basically a silkworm. A spinner and a weaver ... trying to clothe himself ... but the silkworm's activity spins it a shroud. So it is with man." Adam and Eve are classic examples.

Our problem is not only that we have fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23), by sinning; we also *lack* something. We not only need the removal of personal sin through blood sacrifice to satisfy divine *justice*; we need something *further* to make us fit for heaven and the divine presence of God. In other words, Christ's death in our place will keep us out of hell—but we still have the problem of getting into heaven. Isaiah spoke of this when he said, "For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and **all our righteous deeds** are as **filthy rags**." (Isaiah 64:6). Not our *sins*, but our good *deeds*! We need not only atonement for our sins, we also need righteousness to enter heaven! But it has to be a certain *kind* of righteousness.

The most righteous people of Jesus' day were the Pharisees. They knew the Old Testament by heart. They went to the synagogue three times a day and prayed seven times a day. They were respected in the community. But Jesus looked right through their religious veneer and, in their presence, admonished the crowds that "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

The crowds responded by staring at each other in bewilderment. "You mean the Pharisees aren't righteous enough to go to heaven? If *they* can't make it, who will?"

In the Garden of Eden we observe this conflict between two *kinds* of righteousness—*human righteousness*, which is clearly symbolized by the fig leaf garments Adam and Eve sewed together to make themselves presentable before God, and *divine righteousness*, which is symbolized by the adequate covering of the slain animals provided by God Himself. We find these two kinds of righteousness marching and clashing with each other all the way through both Testaments.

Paul referred to these same two righteousnesses when he said of his Jewish brethren, "I bear them witness, that they have a

zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1).

In the former Soviet Union, rubles are printed and circulated. With those rubles you can buy your dinner, pay your hotel bill, and purchase things in the shops. But if you brought those rubles back to America and tried to do the same thing, the rubles would not be honored. It would be futile to try to do business with rubles in America.

Let's think of these two righteousnesses in mathematical terms. Let's call God's righteousness "+R" and human righteousness "-R." The first righteousness is *absolute*, while the second is *relative*. Over a lifetime, a human being can accumulate a huge pile of -R, but added up, it still totals -R. To do business with God in heaven, we must deal with Him in the only "currency" honored and accepted by Him, and that is +R. It is futile to try to negotiate with God on the basis of relative, human goodness. We need +R.

Where do we get such "currency?" It is *given* to us as a gift if we will accept it—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. The yardstick God uses to measure everyone is His Son. This +R righteousness is ours only in Christ: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5).

This gracious provision is a radical departure from all other religious ideas humans have ever conceived or set forth. It is so radical that human beings would never have thought of it.

The Uniqueness of Christian Grace

We have sought to arrive at a biblical answer to the question, "Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?" We have examined

the bankruptcy of every attempt by people to reach that goal through any and every means of self-effort. We have discovered that the salvation offered by Christianity is uniquely opposed to all human efforts to secure it by working one's way into God's good graces. In fact, if God expected us to attain our salvation through good deeds, then God made a terrible mistake. He allowed His only-begotten Son to come to earth—robed in human flesh—and die a horrible death on a cross for our personal, eternal benefit. To choose a “good works” path to God is to negate the total significance of Christ's death, making it meaningless and unnecessary.

What God has to offer is free. It is a gift that is not deserved by any of us, nor could we ever repay what the gift is worth. God has dealt with humankind in grace and love. The only thing that God has asked us to do is to humbly admit that we have broken His laws, acknowledge that He has indeed made things right through His Son's sacrificial death on the cross, and accept His forgiveness by faith. We are invited to lay aside our own “fig-leaf” costumes and freely submit to the covering God has provided for us, the blood-stained garment of His Son, the very righteousness of Christ.

This is what Jesus sought to communicate in Matthew 22:1-14, the parable about the wedding feast that a king was preparing to give his son: “So the servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, *both good and bad*: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man who had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, ‘Friend, how came you here not having on a wedding garment?’ And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth!’”

The text does not tell us whether this person was one of the “good” ones or the “bad” ones. Why? Because it is irrelevant to what Jesus wants us to understand. The important issue was

proper *attire* for the occasion. God is telling us that the only acceptable attire for heaven is the righteousness of Christ.

As a gracious host, He stands holding out to humanity the most expensive, costly garment in the universe, and He eagerly desires to wrap us up in it—safe and warm and happy and secure:

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

So how does this apply to you and me? Simply this: Everything that *needed* to be done for your salvation and mine was *accomplished* the moment Christ died on the cross. The penalty has been paid and God’s righteous demands satisfied. God is now free to extend eternal life as a free gift. He declares, “The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Gifts, of course, must be received. For that reason, Jesus said, “He who believes has eternal life” (John 6:47). “Believe” means “to trust or depend on.” God is asking each person to come to Him as a sinner, recognize that His Son died on the cross of us, and trust His Son *alone* as our only hope of heaven.

This was the message, the good news which the first Christians took to the world: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men, by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

In reality, every human being is just a prayer away from receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and the promise of heaven. But it has to be the *right* prayer, based on the *right* facts: that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners,

not “Do-Gooders”: “I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13). You can begin to trust Christ for your salvation today instead of your own, futile efforts of trying to be a fairly nice person all your life. Obviously, your heart attitude, your sincerity, is what really counts. God knows your heart. But if the following suggested prayer will help to bring a sense of closure and certainty to your decision to believe in, to trust Christ, then please feel free to use it as a simple guide:

“Dear God, I admit that I am a sinner, and nothing I can do will ever get me to heaven. But I believe Jesus Christ died for me and rose from the grave to prove the validity of His claim to be my Savior. He took my place and my punishment. So right now, I place my trust in Christ alone to make me presentable and acceptable to you. Come into my life. I accept the gift of your Son. Thank you that you are now within me, not based upon my feelings, but upon your promise that if I open the door of my life and invite you to come live within me and be my Savior, you would (Rev. 3:20, John 1:12). Make me the kind of person you want me to be. Begin to show me that you really have entered my life and heart, and now give me the guidance I need to live a new life in fellowship with you. Amen.”

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Is There Really a Hell?

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

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

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

The common belief of godly rabbis during the intertestamental

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

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

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

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

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

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Doctrine of Hell: What Difference Does It Make?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

1. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992. p. 13
2. Dixon, pp. 10-13; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp.2-3.
3. John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992, p. 146.

4. Quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991, p. 171.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960, p. 133)
6. John Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd, p. 45.

Recommended Resources on the Subject of Hell:

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

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See Also: *Probe Answers Our Email*

- ["Are People in Hell Isolated and Alone?"](#)
- ["Do People Who Commit Suicide Go to Hell?"](#)
- ["How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?"](#)
- ["People in Hell Are Destroyed—They Don't Live Forever"](#)
 - ["People in Hell DIE, Not Suffer Forever!"](#)
- ["There is No Satan, No Hell, and No People Born Bad."](#)
- ["Why Can't God Just Destroy Those Who Reject Him Instead of Sending Them to Hell?"](#)
 - ["Why Did Jesus Have to Go to Hell After He Died?"](#)
 - ["Why Is There a Hell?"](#)

The Truth About Heaven

Introduction

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

Weep not for me, friend, tho' death do us sever, I am going to do nothing forever and ever. [{1}](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But

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

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

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Spiritual Changes!

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

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of “the hope of righteousness” for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body

(Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold "the glory of the Lord" we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him "just as He is." And when we do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

Second, in Heaven our comprehension of the nature of God will be greatly expanded. The apostle Paul says that "though now we see through a glass darkly," then we shall "see face to face" and "shall know fully, as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12). It is this knowledge I am convinced that will move us to spontaneously join the heavenly chorus in singing hymns of praise to Almighty God. From the few glimpses of heavenly worship we are granted in Scripture, we learn that our praise of God will focus both on who He is—the eternal, holy, almighty God (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8)—and on what He has done (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14). If our worship of God is muted now, it is at least partially because we do not yet fully comprehend the greatness of His glory and the awesomeness of His creative and redemptive work. But in Heaven we will gain much clearer insight into the wisdom of God displayed in the intricacies of His creation, and of His marvelous purposes manifest in His redeeming work. Some have wondered how we could be happy in heaven knowing that some of God's creatures are enduring His eternal judgment. It seems apparent, however, that in Heaven we will gain a much clearer perspective on the justice of God

(cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1-4). Perhaps the most perfect happiness of Heaven is impossible apart from some element of sorrow over the eternal loss of those who have rejected God's grace. No doubt, however, many of the mysteries of life and of God's ways in our individual lives will be more clearly understood, prompting us to join in His praise.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that there will be opportunity for growth in Heaven . . . not growth toward perfection, but growth in perfection. As a man, Jesus was indeed perfect. Yet Scripture tells us that He "grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man." Scripture also tells us that one of the three virtues that will abide forever is hope (1 Cor. 13:13). And what is hope but the expectation of better and better things yet to come . . . the prospect of all for whom Heaven is our eternal home!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

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

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will

“transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and “dies” (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is “spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!”

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

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united

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

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

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

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

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

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ's presence "with confidence," or "to shrink away from Him in shame" (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a "stumbling" fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be "rewarded," or "suffer loss"; that it is possible to be "saved, yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the "fire" referred to here is a reference

to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as “a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for “bad” in this case refers not merely to what is “evil” but to what from God’s perspective is “worthless.” Not only will our “works” be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

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

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

glory” to those who serve unselfishly as spiritual leaders (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

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

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

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

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

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

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

That’s why it exhorts us to set our minds and hearts on Heaven and to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3). God is urging us to turn aside from what in His eyes are “trivial pursuits” that end only in emptiness, and to devote ourselves to those ambitions that will yield fruit that will accompany us into the next world. When Jesus said to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness,” He was encouraging us to make these things our highest priority in life.

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

At the end of his beloved “Narnia Tales” C. S. Lewis describes the events that transpire as the characters in his story enter Heaven: “(T)he things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world

and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.”[\[7\]](#)

Notes

1. Gilmore, John. *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 175.
2. Sanders, J. Oswald. *Heaven Better By Far*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, p. 10.
3. Sanders, p. 19.
4. Stedman, Ray C. *God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1991, p. 334.
5. Stedman, 334.
6. Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 250.
7. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 183-184.

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The Sinfulness of Humanity

Over the last couple of years we have witnessed some incredible events in our world. In Europe, communism has become a thing of the past. In South Africa, apartheid finally appears to be on the way out. The former Soviet Union is in the throes of reorganization as it moves toward democracy and free enterprise.

Such events, coupled with recent successes on the battlefield, have caused many Americans to feel tremendously optimistic about the future. It has become fashionable to appeal to a new

world order in which nations will cooperate with one another in a spirit of peace, and some have even suggested that we are on the edge of the millennial kingdom.

Don't get your hopes up.

It's easy to be optimistic when looking at the trend of world events, but it's a little more difficult when one takes human nature into consideration. The sinfulness of humanity may be an uncomfortable subject, but it is absolutely necessary to understand sin in order to understand both ourselves and the world in which we live.

Many people like to focus on our tremendous potential as a society, maintaining that the only thing preventing us from fulfilling that potential is inadequate education. For example, consider the following statement from the second Humanist Manifesto:

Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life.

Humanists recognize the fact that such utopian dreams are not guaranteed, but they believe our potential for progress is essentially unlimited. If we as a society decide that we really want to achieve something, we are capable of achieving it.

The Bible presents a very different view of humankind and our future. From a biblical perspective, we have all violated God's laws, and our continuing tendency is not to seek the well-being of others but to seek our own satisfaction. Consider the following words from Romans chapter 3:

There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.

These words may sound pretty pessimistic, especially when compared with modern humanism, but they are true. We all know our own failings. God says that we are to be holy just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16), and we cannot honestly say that we meet that standard. You and I recognize that we have selfish desires, that we rebel against God, that we often find it easier to cheat people than to love them. The Bible tells us that everyone else has the same problem. As Paul put it, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

Forgiveness for Sin

Thinking about the sinfulness of humanity is unpleasant at best, but we must first understand that all humankind has sinned if we are to realize that, even so, all is not lost. The most important thing to realize about human sinfulness is that forgiveness is available!

The Bible says that we have all broken God's laws, and we all deserve punishment as a result. Jesus Christ, however, came to take that punishment on our behalf. Let me explain it this way. We have been sentenced to death because of our sin. God's justice demands that the sentence be carried out. If He were to simply lay the sentence aside, then He wouldn't be a very fair judge, and He is always fair.

At the same time, God's love demanded that He provide a way of forgiveness. He provided that forgiveness through Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus paid the penalty that we should have had to pay. He took the punishment for our sins.

Since God's justice has been satisfied in the person of Jesus

Christ, we are able to have peace with God through Jesus (Rom. 5:1). All we have to do to experience that peace is to place our trust in Jesus, believing that He died to take the punishment that we deserved (John 3:16). When we trust in Christ, our sins are forgiven. We no longer need to be afraid of death or of God's future judgment. We have been declared righteous in Christ, and we are at peace with God.

The idea that someone would or could take our punishment seems very strange to many in today's culture. The film *Flatliners* provides an excellent illustration of the way our world thinks about sin and life after death. In the film, several medical students take turns killing and then reviving one another, hoping to learn something about life after death. In their near-death experiences, they are confronted with past sins, in which they have offended not God but other human beings. They themselves must atone for their sins by making peace with the people they have wronged. There is no mediator to take their place. In addition, the sins for which they suffer are much less grievous than one might expect. What could a person do to obtain forgiveness for actions much worse than teasing another child or even causing another person's accidental death? Apparently nothing. Reflecting the perspective of many in our culture, *Flatliners* seems to say that there is no God to offend, no Christ to bear our punishment, and no hope for those who have committed grievous sin. What a sad perspective!

The Continuing Presence of Sin

When we accept God's forgiveness by placing our trust in Christ, we are completely freed from the penalty of sin. At the same time, however, we continue to experience the presence of sin. We still have the capacity, even the tendency, to rebel against God and to act independently of Him (Gal. 5:16-17). God's goal for us as Christians is that we would consistently obey Him, and the indwelling Holy Spirit works to change us from the inside out, but the process won't be

completed until we are in the presence of God in heaven (Rom. 8:12-25; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:7-18). In the meantime, we continue to struggle with the fact that we are sinful people.

As fallen creatures, we will always want to say no when God says yes and yes when He says no. All too often, we seek to please ourselves rather than to please God.

This thought doesn't sound very encouraging, and some have maintained that talking about the sinfulness (or depravity) of humanity causes Christians to have a pessimistic attitude about life. I disagree. Understanding that everyone is sinful gives us a realistic appraisal of life, one that explains the headlines we see in each morning's paper. If our natural tendency as sinful people is to seek power and control for ourselves or to lie, cheat, and steal, then we should expect people to act that way. Expecting these actions doesn't make them right, but it makes them understandable. Recognizing the sinfulness of humanity doesn't excuse crime, but it does protect us from the disillusionment that so many experience when their optimistic ideals eventually fall apart.

The belief that all persons are sinful can actually be a very liberating concept. We no longer place expectations on ourselves or others that no one could fulfill. We no longer demand perfection, for we expect a degree of failure. With regard to current events, we do not join those who continually hope for some kind of global transformation apart from divine intervention. We recognize that sinful people will continue to govern every nation, even our own, and that they will always seek their own interests.

The founders of this country believed in the sinfulness of humanity; indeed, this view of human sinfulness is central to the United States Constitution. We do not believe in giving any single individual limitless power, because we do not trust anyone enough to put him or her in that position. We regard a system of checks and balances, through which each person's

decisions must ultimately be approved by others, as safer than a government in which unlimited power is entrusted to one individual.

I am not saying that humanity should simply accept its lot; we must certainly work to improve our society. A proper understanding of human nature, however, prevents us from seeking to fulfill impossible goals through unrealistic means and keeps us from placing too much faith in humanity. We need to be involved in the political and social arenas, but we should not place too much hope in our involvement. Human sinfulness will keep us from doing all that we would like, but we must continue to do all that we can.

The Politics of Sin

Many people believe that humanity is basically good and that all we need to do to improve our society is provide a healthy psychological and physical environment. This belief is appealing because it makes us feel like we are in control of our own destiny, but unfortunately it isn't true. Humans are not good creatures in a bad environment. If anything, we are sinful creatures in a relatively good environment.

In this country we elect representatives who promise to uphold our interests in the public realm. Yet year after year we are disappointed when they break their promises. They may institute some helpful programs and make a few choices that we agree with, but often the entire exercise seems futile. One reason behind this sense of futility is that politics is built upon compromise, but another reason is that political programs are unable to deal with humanity's real problem—sin. Barry Goldwater, who served many years in the United States Senate, said it this way:

We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in government, it is the selfishness of multinational corporate

giants, it is the failure of the schools to teach and the students to learn, it is overpopulation, it is wasteful extravagance, it is squandering our national resources, it is racism, it is capitalism, it is our material affluence, or if we want a convenient foreign devil, we can say it is communism. But when we scrape away the varnish of wealth, education, class, ethnic origin, parochial loyalties, we discover that however much we've changed the shape of man's physical environment, man himself is still sinful, vain, greedy, ambitious, lustful, self-centered, unrepentant, and requiring of restraint.

That is a pretty profound statement, and it is one with which the Bible would agree. Political programs have no effect on society's real problem, the fact that we are all sinful and self-centered.

When we look at the seeming hopelessness of the situation, it is easy to see why some Christians have grown apathetic. They say, We try as hard as we can and it doesn't do any good. Why bother to keep trying? Theirs is a good question. Many Christian activists felt the same way at the end of the 1980s. Christians had been more involved in this country's politics than ever before, and there were several events in which they seemed to pull out all the stops. Many Christians lobbied intensively for the confirmation of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court, seeing him as a vital tool in their aim to bring an end to the abortion industry in this country. Their efforts failed. The troops were marshalled several more times during legislative battles on Capitol Hill, but they fell short more times than they succeeded. Many grew weary in the fight. I know I did.

Looking back on that decade, we have to ask, What did we expect? Did we expect our politicians to abandon the appeal of special-interest groups in favor of altruistic ideals and biblical ethics? We should not have been so naive. The

sinfulness of humanity means that people will always tend to enhance their own power and seek their own interests. When they do otherwise, we take their actions as grace, but we do not expect them to act in accordance with anything but their own interests.

That's why we as believers must continue to be active in political and social causes. True, we do struggle with our own sinfulness, but we are being transformed by the person of Jesus Christ, transformed to the extent that we should no longer fit comfortably into our culture (Rom. 12:1-2). Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and what He meant by that is that we are to be distinctive representatives of God in a world that is trying to forget Him (Matt. 5:13-16; cf. Phil. 2:15). If we abandon our culture, we abandon that duty. We realize that we won't necessarily win the day, but we might. In any case, we'll have done the right thing.

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