

“How Is It Just for God to Put Our Sins on Jesus?”

How is it just for God to put someone's sins on Jesus, making them sinless? I have heard the analogy of a judge fining someone, and then paying the fine on their behalf; but sin is surely really, really bad, and no court would allow a judge to die instead of a criminal who had been given the death sentence.

After talking through the gospel with friends, this seems to be a big sticking point. How can a murderer seemingly get away with what he's done and go to heaven, while Johnny Average gets punished—solely on the basis of whether he accepts Jesus? It is loving on God's part to give everyone the chance of salvation, and it is just for him to punish unrepentant sinners, but how is it *just* for God to forgive a repentant sinner, who though repentant still sins?

I think you might be confusing “just” with “fair.”

Justice is about making sure that someone pays the penalty for a wrongdoing. Fairness is about treating people appropriately and right.

It is *just* for God to insist that someone pay the penalty for sin. It wasn't *fair* for Jesus to pay that penalty Himself, because that's about grace, not justice. Someone has said that justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve, and grace is getting what we don't deserve. I find those distinctions very helpful.

It is just for God to forgive a repentant sinner who continues to sin (that would be all of us!) because all of our sins, those committed before salvation and all those committed after salvation, were all paid for at the cross. Maybe I can help with the “sticking point” with a very simple word picture: we

are all standing at the bottom of the waterfall of God's love and grace. Those who refuse to turn to God in trustful dependence, receiving His forgiveness and salvation, have their cups upside down and therefore can't receive what God is pouring out on them. Those who have trusted Christ have turned their cups right side up, and can receive what God is offering.

One of the most amazing truths about the gospel is that our sins are transferred to Jesus, who paid for them at the cross, and His righteousness is transferred to us. It is the most absurdly unfair transaction in the history of all creation, but it's true. Love does things like that.

Hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

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Is the Church Ready to Engage the World for Christ?

Christ's last commandment was to engage the world with the gospel. But today's church has often embraced postmodern attitudes that reject absolute truth, absolute values, and even the Bible's insistence that Jesus is the only way to God. We are hardly ready to engage the world anymore.

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



The Mission of the Church

The church is called to engage the world for Christ. Jesus commanded us to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you . . .”

Many churches and Christian organizations are doing a wonderful job in fulfilling this call. However, it appears that the majority of the church has responded in one of two ways. Some churches have chosen to retreat and protect themselves from the world by secluding themselves in their own isolated communities. We see huddles of Christian communities with their own sports leagues, schools, clubs, etc. There is nothing wrong with Christian programs, but if it is created with an isolationist mentality, we create a church that is withdrawn from the world, irrelevant, and unable to relate to the unbelieving world.

I saw a display of this at a funeral once. As an invited guest not knowing anyone, I sat with the non-believers in the audience and observed how the Christians at the funeral interacted with the non-believers. The pastor preached a message using terminology foreign to the non-Christian. After the funeral, at the lunch reception, I saw the Christians huddled together speaking “Christianese”—a language that sounded totally foreign. What a wasted opportunity! This moment was a small display of the danger that isolating ourselves from the world creates: Christians unable to relate with the lost world.

Another response has been that, instead of transforming the world, many churches have been transformed by the world. The popular thinking of the culture has dismantled the foundational truths upon which the church once stood. Major denominations are now in a battle or have given up their position on key tenets regarding truth, moral absolutes, and

religious truth.

The result of these two responses has been devastating. George Barna writes, “[A]s we prepare to enter into a new century of ministry, we must address one inescapable conclusion: despite the activity and chutzpah emanating from thousands of congregations, the Church in America is losing influence and adherents faster than any other major institution in the nation.”[\[1\]](#)

Charles Colson writes, “We live in a culture that is at best morally indifferent. A culture in which Judeo-Christian values are mocked and where immorality in high places is not only ignored but even rewarded in the voting booth. A culture in which violence, banality, meanness, and disintegrating personal behavior are destroying civility and endangering the very life of our communities. . . . Small wonder that many people have concluded that the ‘Culture war’ is over and we (the church) have lost.”[\[2\]](#)

Let us study some of the key issues facing the church in the 21st century and see how they have affected our witness. And let’s see if we are indeed ready to engage our world.

The Church and Truth

Our current, postmodern culture adheres to the position that universal objective truth does not exist. Truth is relative to each individual and to each culture. Jim Leffel summarizes postmodern relativism this way,

Relativism says the truth isn’t fixed by outside reality, but is decided by a group or individual for themselves. Truth isn’t discovered but manufactured. Truth is ever changing not only in insignificant matters of taste or fashion, but in crucial matters of spirituality, morality and reality itself.[\[3\]](#)

Leading postmodern thinker John Caputo writes, “The cold,

hermeneutic truth, is that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive.”{4} Both men summarize the postmodern belief that objective truth does not exist and therefore, we conclude that all truth claims are equal even if they are contradictory.

This understanding of truth permeates every area of our culture. Public schools, government, and the media all promote the view that ‘since there are multiple descriptions of reality, no one view can be true in an ultimate sense.

A survey of the American public revealed that 66 percent agreed with the statement, “There is no such thing as absolute truth.”{5} Among the youth, 70 percent believe that there is no such thing as absolute truth; two people could define “truth” in conflicting ways and both be correct.”{6}

This popular notion stands in opposition to biblical teaching. Truth is rooted in God. It corresponds to the facts of reality. It is embodied in Christ and revealed in God’s revelation, the Bible. Jesus states in John 14:6, “I am the way the truth and the life. . . .” God, who is truth, has revealed to us His word of the truth, the Bible. In John 17:17 Jesus prays for His disciples saying, “Sanctify them in truth; your word is truth.” Absolute truth is knowable because God has revealed it to us in the Bible. Truth is not a social construct created by a culture, nor is it relative as some postmodernists claim. It is transmitted to us by the God of truth to His creatures who are expected to conform themselves to this truth.

For two millennia the church has been the guardian of truth. However, unbridled postmodern philosophy appears to have influenced the church in a frightful way. According to the latest studies the church could be in danger of surrendering her position. According to the latest research, 53 percent of adults in church believe there is no absolute truth. Among the youth in church, research shows that 57 percent do not believe

an objective standard of truth exists{7}

Ephesians 6 exhorts us to engage in spiritual battle with the spiritual armor God provides. An essential component is the “belt of truth.” Without a clear understanding of truth, we cannot hope to successfully engage our culture for Christ. God’s truth is the foundation on which the church’s message stands.

The Church and Ethics

Most Americans reject the idea of absolute truth, so they naturally reject the idea of absolute moral truth. George Barna writes, “This transformation has done more to undermine the health and stability of American Society—and perhaps, of the world. . . .”{8}

The late Dr. Francis Schaeffer wrote,

If there is no absolute moral standard, then one cannot say in a final sense that anything is right or wrong. By absolute we mean that which always applies (to all people), that which provides a final or ultimate standard. There must be an absolute if there are to be morals, and there must be an absolute if there are to be real values. If there is no absolute beyond man’s ideas, then there is no final appeal to judge between individuals and groups whose moral judgments conflict. We are merely left with conflicting opinions.{9}

Dr. Schaeffer’s conclusion is what we must inevitably come to if we hold to the belief that truth is relative. The danger of rejecting moral absolutes is that we surrender our right to judge anyone’s beliefs or behaviors as right or wrong. We then arrive at the unbiblical position of tolerating all beliefs and lifestyles, whether those involve homosexuality, abortion, misogyny, or other behaviors. The Bible, then, becomes a book of suggestions on how to live and is no longer God’s universal

law for mankind.

Barna's survey shows that most people in our country have come to this conclusion. He records that only 25 percent of adults and 10 percent of teens believe there is absolute moral truth.[{10}](#)

The biblical position is that there are revealed moral absolutes. God, who is truth, has revealed His truth through His word, the Bible. The moral law revealed in God's word is universal. In Romans 2, God is just to judge every person according to His law. His law is given in His word and also He has placed a witness to His law in the moral conscience of men (Romans 2:14-16).

According to Barna's survey, only 49 percent of born again Christians agreed with the proposition that moral truth is absolute and 51 percent either disagreed or did not know what to think about moral truth.[{11}](#) 57 percent of Christian teens believe that when it comes to morals and ethics, truth means different things to different people; no one can be absolutely positive they have the truth.[{12}](#)

If there are no moral absolutes, we cannot clearly define sin. Teaching on holy living is lost in the absence of clear standards of morality. Without a moral foundation, churches and their members are *influenced by* the culture more than they are *influencing* the culture for Christ. That is what we are seeing in churches today. Mainline denominations are adopting the values of the culture and abandoning the biblical stand on several moral issues. Christian philosopher Søren Kierkegaard warns, "Once the church comes to terms with the world, Christianity is abolished."[{13}](#)

The Church and Spiritual Truth

If absolute truth does not exist, then moral absolutes do not exist. The same then applies to religious truth. The religion

of our culture would be syncretism. Syncretism combines complementary and often contradictory teachings from different religions to form a new system tailored to each individual's preferences. Indeed, Barna's research reveals that 62 percent of Americans agree that "it doesn't matter what religious faith you follow because all faiths teach similar lessons about life."[\[14\]](#)

Syncretism contradicts biblical teaching. The Bible teaches that the truth is found in Jesus Christ and in Him alone. In John 14:6 Jesus states, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me." The Apostles repeat this claim. In Acts 4:12 Peter states, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved."

The Bible teaches that the Bible itself is the source of spiritual truth and that salvation is found exclusively in Jesus. Not only does the biblical evidence argue against syncretism, logic does as well.

A brief study of the world's religions reveals that they are contradictory on their basic truth claims, and therefore, mutually exclusive. Ravi Zacharias writes, "Most people think all religions are essentially the same and only superficially different. Just the opposite is true."

However, if all religions are true, all religious practices are valid and cannot be judged good or evil. Then are we to tolerate cultures that burn living widows alive at their husband's funerals because of their religious convictions? How about religions that teach young men to execute acts of terrorism on innocent victims in the name of God? We would have to conclude that we couldn't say such practices are right or wrong.

Postmodern ideas have made their impact on the church

regarding the belief of absolutes, regarding spiritual truth, and the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ. Jesus made it clear in John 14:6 that He is the source of spiritual truth and the only way to eternal life. However, among born again Christians, 31 percent believe that if a person is good enough they can earn a place in heaven. 26 percent believe it doesn't matter what faith you follow, because they all teach the same lessons. 24 percent believe that while He lived on earth, Jesus committed sins like other people.[{15}](#) 30 percent believe Jesus died, but never had a physical resurrection.[{16}](#)

These surveys reveal that a growing number of Christians do not understand the basic teachings regarding the unique nature of Christ and His message. If Christianity is not true in its unique claims, the church is preaching a message of religious preference and not one of eternal truth. The power of the gospel is that spiritual truth and salvation is found in no one else but Jesus Christ.

The Church That Will Engage

Our postmodern culture brings some formidable challenges to the church of the 21st century. The church is struggling with foundational issues like the nature of truth, moral absolutes, and spiritual truth. What is required of us if we are to be successful in engaging the world for Christ? It is for Christians to have a courageous faith, committed hearts, a compelling defense, and a compassionate attitude.

1 Peter 3:14-16 states, “‘Do not fear what they fear, do not be frightened.’ But in your hearts, set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

The world is often hostile to the message of Christ, especially its message of salvation found only in Jesus and its teaching on moral absolutes. That is why courageous faith

that overcomes fear is essential.

Second, we are called to engage the world with committed hearts. Peter writes that instead of fear, we are to, “set apart Christ as Lord.” Courageous faith comes from a heart committed to Jesus. When Jesus is Lord of a believer’s heart, he or she responds properly in any situation. The church is the greatest witness for Christ when Jesus is Lord of every member’s life.

Third, to engage the world for Christ, we must have a compelling defense of the faith. Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have.” We are exhorted to never be caught unprepared; never unwilling, and never timid about our response. The word “answer” in the Greek is *apologia*, which was used in connection with a formal public defense often before magistrates and in judicial courts. Every Christian is called to defend the faith.

Unfortunately, much of the church is unable to do this. A recent survey by Josh McDowell showed that 84 percent of Christian college freshmen were unable to explain why they believed.[\[17\]](#) We can’t expect a skeptical world to believe our message if we can’t give them a compelling reason why they should. For this reason, every Christian is called to the study of apologetics.

Fourth, we must engage with a compassionate attitude. Gentleness refers to the attitude that relies on God to change attitudes and minds. Respect is the same word used in the New Testament for reverence shown towards God. We are not to witness with an arrogant or combative demeanor, but one of gentleness and respect. Without these two qualities, it is dangerous to attempt to evangelize.

Probe Ministries is committed to equipping the church to engage their world for Christ. Probe’s ministries include our

Web site, books, and conferences that will equip you to engage our world with insight and integrity, providing Christians a ready answer for their faith.

Notes

1. George Barna, *The Second Coming of the Church*, (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1998), 1.
2. Charles Colson, *How Shall We Now Live?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 1999), ix-x.
3. Dennis McCallum ed., *The Death of Truth*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), "Our New Challenge: Postmodernism," by Jim Leffel, 31.
4. John Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 192.
5. Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 16.
6. Barna, *Third Millenium Teens*, (Ventura, CA.: Barna Research Group, 1999), 44.
7. Josh McDowell and Bob Hostetler, *The New Tolerance* (Wheaton, IL.: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998) 172-173.
8. Barna, *Boiling Point*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 2001), 78.
9. Francis Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming Revell, 1976), 145.
10. Barna, *Boiling Point*, 78.
11. Ibid., 80.
12. McDowell and Hostetller, 21.

13. Quoted by Michael Horton, *Beyond Culture Wars* (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 37.
14. Barna, *Absolute Confusion*, (Ventura, CA.: Regal Books, 1993), 79-80.
15. Barna, "Born Again Christians," *Barna Research Online*, 19 April 2001, 2.
16. Barna, "Americans' Bible Knowledge is in the Ballpark, But Often Off Base," *Barna Research Online*, 12 July 2000.
17. McDowell and Hostetler, 173.

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1. Barna, George. *Absolute Confusion*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1993.
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6. _____. *Third Millenium Teens*, Ventura, CA: Barna Research Group, 1999.
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9. Groothius, Douglas. *Truth Decay*. Downer's Grove, IL:

InterVarsity Press, 2000.

10. McCallum, Dennis ed., *The Death of Truth*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996, “Our New Challenge: Postmodernism” by Jim Leffel, p. 31.

11. McDowell, Josh and Bob Hostetler. *The New Tolerance*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1998.

12. McDowell, Josh and Bob Hostetler. *Right From Wrong*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994.

13. Schaeffer, Francis. *How Should We Then Live?* Old Tappan, N.J: Fleming Revell, 1976.

14. Veith, Gene Edward. *Postmodern Times*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994.

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The Most Important Decision of Your Life

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



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

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

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

lived my life as a practical atheist.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Bible tells us in Romans 3:23 that "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." God has given us standards to live by in such things as the Ten Commandments. And James tells us that "if a man keeps the whole law (the Ten Commandments) but offends in **one** place, he is guilty of all."

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

Humans have tried to address this problem of personal, moral failure in various ways. Some, in the face of some 4000 years of documented history which records horrific, bloody, and unending incidents of man's inhumanity to man, some have

actually persisted in the belief that man is basically **good**.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

proper environment; we lack the necessary information.

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

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

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

*"Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man. . . .Are you too so uncomprehending? Do you not see that whatever goes into the man from outside cannot defile him; because it does not go into his heart, but into his stomach, and is eliminated? . . .That which proceeds out of the man, that is what defiles the man. For from **within**, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and immorality, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."*

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

"All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

(Romans 3:23).

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

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

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

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

"We are the hollow men,
We are the stuffed men,
Head piece filled with straw.
No head—No heart.
Life does not end with a bang,
But with a whimper."

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

The problem with these approaches is that one never knows when he or she has been good enough or done enough! Karl Marx said

that "Religion is the opiate of the people," meaning that it appeared to be something necessary and helpful for humans, whether true or not. And many people console themselves by attending church, trying to be basically good and decent, and drugging themselves into believing God will accept them for making such efforts. Marx believed these naïve human inclinations should be eliminated.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Him, may have eternal life: and I myself will raise him up on the last day.”

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

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

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

One of most beautiful cities in America is San Francisco, California. You may know that at the opening into the vast San Francisco Bay there stands a gigantic, rust-red suspension bridge called the Golden Gate Bridge. It allows people and cars to get back and forth from the city on the South to the picturesque little seaside village, Sausalito, and the Napa Valley on the North. People have a choice if they want to get to Sausalito: they can take the bridge, or they can swim in the cold Pacific with its treacherous currents flowing in and out of the Bay. Everyone decides to trust the Bridge.

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

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

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

"All we like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on
Him.
He was oppressed and He was afflicted,
Yet He did not open his mouth.
Like a lamb that is led to slaughter,
And like a sheep that is silent before its shearers,
So He did not open His mouth. . . .
He was cut off out of the land of the living,
For the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was
due. . .
Although He had done no violence
Nor was there any deceit in His mouth.
But it pleased the Lord
To crush Him, putting Him to grief;
If His soul would render Himself as a guilt offering. . .

By His knowledge the Righteous One,
My Servant, will justify the many,
As He will bear their iniquities.”
—Isaiah 53

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

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

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

But we must ask a second question: Does that fact that Christ died for *all* mean that everyone is a Christian? Obviously not. His death is *sufficient* for everyone, but it is only *efficient* for certain ones. Which ones? The fourth and final spiritual law tells us:

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

John 1:12 and 13 tell us that “As many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe on His name. . . who were born not of blood (through

inheritance), nor of the will of the flesh (human will power), nor of the will of man (priestly pronouncement), but of God (the new birth)."

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

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

We cannot earn this gift.

We do not deserve this gift.

We can only say "Thank you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

IN. Believing in something does not necessarily call for trust. Believing on something does. This is the true nature of faith. To “believe *on*” means to “*count on.*”

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

It is important to understand the nature of faith in our lives. Faith is something that we employ all the time. Faith that a chair will hold us up; faith the on-coming driver will stay in his lane; faith the plane will land safely. Everyone has faith—atheist, agnostic, Christian. The real issue is not having faith, in large or small quantities, but rather to have a *worthy object* for our faith. If you walked out on a frozen pond, which would you prefer, a little faith in a sheet of ice two-feet thick, or a lot of faith in an inch of ice? Faith is important, but the *object* of our faith is all-important.

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

Revelation 3:20 gives us a picture of how this spiritual birth

occurs: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine (fellowship) with him, and he with Me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

every day and every moment depending on our circumstances, emotions, and state of mind.

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

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

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

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

What we learn here is that a Christian receives eternal life not at death, but at the Second Birth. To receive Christ and "have the Son" is also to have eternal life as a **present possession**. No Christ, no eternal life. Possess Christ and also possess eternal life. We can see why this would be so. At our physical birth, our parents gave us the only kind of life

they possessed—human life. When we place our faith in Christ and are born spiritually into the family of God, He gives us the only kind of life *He* possesses—eternal life.

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

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

To not have this certainty in the Christian life is to live out one’s days motivated by fear. God does not intend this for His children, and plainly states it over and over again, that our lives are to be lived out with a motivation of love and gratitude for what God has done for us. We want to live for Christ. Our good works become, not a means of gaining our salvation, but the results of having been forgiven and a desire to please our Heavenly Father out of grateful hearts which have received mercy.

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

Newborn babies need a lot of care. Birth is followed by a process of growth and development and time. When this natural development in a little baby fails to proceed as intended, we consider it sad, a tragedy. In the spiritual realm, the new

birth goes through a similar process. New Christians need a proper environment so they can begin to grow spiritually and mature in their Christian faith. Here are several suggestions to speed your growth along:

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

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

Start with the Gospel of John. It is the baby food section. Get a Bible that you feel free to mark up so you can underline things which are meaningful to you. Read the Bible like you eat fish. When you come upon a bone, something indigestible, don't choke on it. If you don't understand it, say "Father, I don't understand this, but I trust that as I grow, I will come to understand it. It's probably meat I can't digest yet." Mark Twain observed, "It's not the things about the Bible that I don't understand that bother me; it's the things about the Bible that I *do* understand that bother me." There is plenty that we do understand even as young Christians to feed our souls. It is through the Bible that you let God talk to you.

- **Make prayer a habit.** This is how we talk to God. Prayer can happen at any time and any place, not just on Sunday. It can be long or short, eloquent or plain, important or trivial, and with or without "thee" and "thou." It can be done with eyes open or shut, standing, kneeling, or lying down. It is talking

to a Person, your Heavenly Father. He promises never to leave you or forsake you (Hebrews 13:5), and therefore is accessible to you 24 hours a day everyday. Prayer can involve:

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

(2) *praise and thanksgiving*,

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

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

• **Fellowship with other Christians.** Seek out the encouragement that comes from being and sharing with other Christians. Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” A hot coal removed from the fire and placed apart from the others quickly dies out, but left in proximity to other coals it burns brighter and longer. Christianity was never intended to be a solo affair. It is best served by a community of believers who mutually strengthen, support and challenge one another to “run a good race” (Hebrews 12:1,2).

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

• **Share Christ with others.** Jesus told the first disciples,

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

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Points of Contact

Making Contact

In 1988 at the Republican National Convention, George Bush called for “a thousand points of light” as a part of his campaign for president. His intention was to encourage the involvement of a small but committed number of people who could make a difference. If only a few would answer the call, a thousand points of light emanating from communities large and small would touch the country. The implications of President Bush’s phrase remind me of a phrase designed to instill the same concept in the members of a branch of our military: “The few, the proud, the Marines.”

These ideas are not far removed from a concept that should be descriptive of Christian communities. We should be “points of light” to the surrounding world, even if we are “the few.”

After all, Jesus said His disciples are "...the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). (Of course He did not say we are to be "the proud," and most of us are not Marines. But I think you get the idea.) Jesus continues with this exhortation: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). How can we shine the light of Christ in the surrounding world? I submit that one response to this question is this: We can be points of light by establishing points of contact.

You may be thinking, "Just what is meant by a point of contact?" Good question! Let me attempt to explain. For our purposes in this series a "point of contact" contains several points (pardon the pun).

1. Its purpose is to activate conversation that leads to evangelism.
2. It stimulates dialogue.
3. It enables you to make a transition from a non-Christian worldview to a Christian worldview.
4. It serves as a "bridge" to someone who might not otherwise respond to the gospel.
5. It encourages you to meet a person where "he lives" mentally and spiritually.
6. It provides a positive challenge to use your God-given creativity, instead of relying on a "canned" approach.
7. It stretches you to converse with non-believers in ways that can be understood by them. As C. S. Lewis wrote, "I have come to the conviction that if you cannot translate your thoughts into uneducated language, then your thoughts were confused. Power to translate is the test of having really understood one's own meaning."[1](#) Christians tend to have

their own “educated language.” We may understand one another. But the non-Christian probably has no idea what we are saying; he is uneducated in our language.[\[2\]](#)

All of these points assume that you are sharing what we will call a “common life” with those around you. What are some of the elements of this common life? You probably share time and space each day with friends, business colleagues, neighbors, sports opponents, people on the train or plane, and a host of other possibilities. But these refer only to the physical portion of your common life. What about such things as the news media, television programming, movies, magazines, sporting events, and many others that are shared, paradoxically, when we may be alone? They too are part of the common life we share, whether Christian or non-Christian. Such things provide points of contact. They can be bridges to the gospel.

Pertinent Points

Have you ever traveled over the Golden Gate Bridge, or maybe the bridge over the Royal Gorge? If so, why were you on such bridges? Usually we assume they have been constructed to transport us from one side of a gap to another. There is a significant gap between you and your destination on the other side. A bridge provides at least one way to get there.

How large is the gap between Christians and non-Christians? Most Christians would reply that the gap is enormous, and in a theological sense they are correct. The Christian worldview is on one side of a chasm, and non-Christian worldviews are on the other. Such a predicament could be left as it is, which is the case for too many Christians. But part of the Christian’s responsibility is to “bridge” that gap with the amazing truth of the gospel. Points of contact can provide the raw materials for the building of such a bridge.

Alister McGrath, a great theologian and apologist of our time,

has suggested several such points of contact that are shared by all people. These can be useful as you begin to erect a bridge.^{3} As we consider such points, use your imagination and think of ways in which you might engage someone in conversation.

First, most people have a *sense of unsatisfied longing*. We are made in the image of God. We have an inbuilt capacity—indeed, an inbuilt *need*—to relate to God. Nothing that is transitory can ever fill this need. Created things are substituted for God, and they do not satisfy.

A major portion of my life includes involvement in the musical world. I have performed a wide assortment of music styles. But in particular, I have developed a great appreciation for what most people call “classical music.”

One of the more intriguing aspects of classical music history of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a “sense of unsatisfied longing.” For example, Gustav Mahler continually composed in order to come to grips with that longing. One of his close friends, the great conductor Bruno Walter, put it like this: “Fundamentally, there never was relief for him from the sorrowful struggle to fathom the meaning of human existence.”^{4} When I hear Mahler’s music, I hear that “sorrowful struggle” and think of how I may have talked with the great composer himself.

Second, most people have a sense of *human rationality*. This resonance of reason with God is a harmony of rationality, hinting that human nature is still marked with the *imago Dei* [image of God]. Given the Christian understanding of who God is and what He is like, our knowledge of both our rational selves and the rational world ties in with belief in His rational and creative existence.

C. S. Lewis expressed this point by focusing on the probability of a mind. He wrote, “What is behind the universe

is more like a mind than it is like anything else we know. That is to say, it is conscious, and has purposes, and prefers one thing to another. It made the universe, partly for purposes we do not know, but partly, at any rate, in order to produce creatures like itself . . . to the extent of having minds.”{5}

Third, most people have a sense of *the ordering of the world*. Modern science has demonstrated that the world is ordered. But its disclosure of an intelligible and delicately balanced structure raises questions that transcend the scientific and provide an intellectual restlessness that seeks adequate explanation. Perhaps the most fundamental of these questions can be summarized in a single word: Why?

Think of the newspapers, books, and magazines you read. They consist of ordered arrangements of ink on paper. “Neither the chemistry of the ink nor the shapes of the letters determines the meaning of the text. In short, the message transcends the properties of the medium.”{6} The message requires a messenger.

Fourth, most people have a sense of *human morality*. Most humans realize the importance of moral obligation or at least they have an awareness of the need for some kind of agreement on morality.{7}

Perhaps this is noticed most easily when sensational crimes are committed, as when Charles Manson murdered Sharon Tate and her friends. Even though the public may not agree on how justice should be carried out, seldom do we hear that the crime was a good thing. Invariably there is a sense of moral outrage and a cry for justice.

Fifth, many people struggle with a sense of *existential anxiety and alienation*. This reflects a deeply rooted fear of meaninglessness and pointlessness, a sense of the utter futility of life, even sheer despair at the bewildering things

that threaten to reduce us to nothing more than a statistic—ultimately a mortality statistic. While it seems trite to talk about “the meaning of life,” it is a question that lingers at the edges (and sometimes squarely in the center) of reflective human existence.{8}

The twentieth century is replete with famous examples of this point. From the philosophical intricacies of people such as Jean-Paul Sartre, to the expletives of punk-rocker Johnny Rotten, many have struggled with anxiety and alienation. Even a German word, *angst*, has entered our vocabulary as a statement of such states of mind. “Man has a sense of dread (*Angst*); he is a being thrust into the world and headed for death (nothingness) with no explanation [that] ‘there is something rather than nothing at all.’”{9} Contrary to the openness of those such as Sartre and Rotten, this point of contact is one of the more “quiet” ones, in that it is not openly stated. Anxiety and alienation generally are not easily seen and heard; one has to be sensitive to what lies below the surface.

Sixth, most people have an *awareness of finitude and mortality*. The fear of death, often voiced in terms of a radical inability to cope with the brute fact of human existence, runs deep in human nature. As the writer/director/actor Woody Allen said, “I’m not frightened of dying. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

Physical death, perhaps the most universally realized truth, may be the least discussed. It is inevitable, but its mystery so often stirs terror or resignation. Listen to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

*To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.*

*Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*[{10}](#)

If you could talk with people like Charles Manson, Johnny Rotten, Woody Allen, or the fictional Macbeth, how would you respond? Would you consider how these points of contact could be used to engage them in conversation? Would you think carefully about how God may use you to get their attention?

Biblical Points of Contact

Mustard seeds, hidden treasure, vineyards, debtors, fig trees, sheep, money. What do such things have in common? You probably recognize such terms from the parables that Jesus used to teach spiritual principles. We could add many more phrases, because the Gospels contain many instances when Jesus used His favorite teaching device as a point of contact with His listeners.

Just what is a parable? Literally, the word means, “to throw alongside.” Parables “...were used by Jesus to teach a truth, illustrate a doctrine, or move His audience to a moral attitude or act.”[{11}](#) Apparently they were used spontaneously in light of an immediate situation or conflict, and they focused on what was familiar to the audience.[{12}](#) These characteristics are indicative of how Jesus was able to get the kind of attention that opened doors to important truths. When we attempt to find a point of contact, we are following Jesus’ example. We may not use a parable, but we are responding to an immediate situation spontaneously in a way that is familiar to our audience.

So a parable is one device found in the Bible that can be used

as a point of contact. When we read the Gospels they are hard to miss. But Jesus used other devices as well.

One example of this is found in the story of His encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. Both Jesus and the woman initially were at the well for water, but Jesus quickly engaged her in conversation concerning something beyond physical water. His point of contact was the water, but He quickly used that as a “springboard” that drew her focused attention. He said, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (John 4:10). Imagine if you had heard such a response! Don’t you think your interest would have been piqued? This encounter provides an example very different from a parable. Let’s call it a “curiosity contact.” That is, Jesus raised the woman’s curiosity about whom He was and what He had to say. Her life was forever changed as a result.

At this point you may be thinking, “Yes, I see what Jesus did through points of contact. But obviously, I’m not Jesus. I can’t do what He did.” To a point, you are correct. You certainly are not Jesus, but you can follow His example. The book of Acts contains instances of this. Let’s consider two of those.

The eighth chapter of Acts includes Philip’s famous dialogue with an Ethiopian eunuch. The Holy Spirit had led Philip to the eunuch, but it appears that Philip creatively and spontaneously addressed the man. He saw that he was reading, so he asked, “Do you understand what you are reading?” (Acts 8:30). What a wonderful point of contact! Philip then was given an opportunity to direct their conversation towards the gospel. Such an encounter reminds me of a question most of us have asked: “What are you reading?” In addition to asking that question, today we may ask, “What are you watching?”

Paul’s defense of the faith at Mars Hill in Athens provides

another illustration of selecting a point of contact. The city was filled with thousands of idols. Paul had noticed one such idol that was inscribed, "to an unknown god" (Acts 17:23). An idol became his point of contact! Thus he began to proclaim the truth in response to their admitted ignorance.

What are some of the points of contact in your daily life?

Contemporary Contacts

You are taking a walk around your neighborhood. As you turn a corner a few blocks from your house, you see an old friend whom you have not seen in a couple of years. She is riding a bicycle in your direction. As she gets closer she recognizes you and stops. The two of you strike up a conversation that revolves around the kinds of things that usually are discussed on such occasions: Have you seen Sally lately? Did you hear about Jim's divorce? How are your children? Then you realize that God's Spirit is encouraging you to guide the conversation toward Christ. You are thinking of a way to do this when you suddenly notice that she is wearing an especially beautiful necklace with a cross. You comment on her jewelry, then you ask, "What does the cross represent?" She responds by saying it's just a nice piece of jewelry that was given to her by her daughter. But it has no "religious significance." You respond to her statement by sharing the true meaning and significance of the cross.

This fictitious story demonstrates how a point of contact can lead to an opportunity to share the gospel. In order to bring this discussion to a conclusion, we will give attention to six ways points of contact can give you an open door for God's truth.

First, be attentive to your God-given imagination. Of all people, Christians should creatively interact with the world around them for the glory of God. This may mean you will need to practice the habit of "sharpening your focus" on the world

around you. Maybe you can begin to see with new eyes and hear with new ears.

Second, be attentive to the things most people have in common. A piece of jewelry was the common element in the illustration that was used to begin this program. Jewelry is something most people have in common. But whether it's jewelry, clothes, houses, cars, children, sports, or a long list of other things, you can find a point of contact among them.

Third, be attentive to those things that are most important to the person with whom you are sharing. For example, most people think of their immediate family as the most important part of their lives. Points of contact abound when you are sensitive to what is most important in a person's life.

Fourth, be attentive to the subjects that occupy someone's conversations. If the person with whom you are conversing talks a great deal about movies, find a point of contact there. If another person is fanatical about sports, find a point of contact there. If a hobby is the center of conversation, find a point of contact there. Such a list virtually is endless.

Fifth, be attentive to areas of greatest immediate need. Some people may dwell on their poor health. Others may concentrate on failures in their lives. Or maybe you will find yourself in conversation with someone who is bitter about something that happened in the past. Again, such a list of possibilities virtually is endless. All of them supply points of contact.

Sixth, and most important, be attentive to what the Spirit of God is telling you. He is not silent; He will bring appropriate things to your attention. Any point of contact will only be effective as the Spirit guides you to respond.

The world around us is starving for contact. People need to hear what God has to say through us. He will guide us to make contact for His glory. We are God's messengers of hope. I hope

we get the point.

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 98.
2. See my article [Christian Cliches](#).
3. Alister McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God & Other Modern Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 30-47.
4. Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler* (New York: Vienna House, 1941), 129.
5. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 31-32. Quoted in McGrath, *Intellectuals Don't Need God*, 35.
6. Stephen C. Meyer, "The Explanatory Power of Design: DNA and the Origin of Information." In *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design*, ed. William A. Dembski (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 135.
7. I recommend that you read the opening portion of C. S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943) for a brilliant exposition of this point. Actually, you should read the entire book; you will benefit from it. It has become a classic.
8. See my article [The Meaning of Life](#).
9. Norman L. Geisler and Paul D. Feinberg, *Introduction to Philosophy: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 48.

10. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene V. In *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Vol. 2, W. G. Clark and W. Aldis Wright, eds. (Garden City: Nelson Doubleday, n.d.), 813.

11. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 302.

12. Ibid.

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Apologetics and Evangelism

Probe's founder Jimmy Williams, a master in classical apologetics, explores the use of apologetics in sharing the gospel.

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

Today as never before, Christians are being called upon to give reasons for the hope that is within them. Often in the evangelistic context seekers raise questions about the validity of the gospel message. Removing intellectual objections will not make one a Christian; a change of heart wrought by the Spirit is also necessary. But though

intellectual activity is insufficient to bring another to Christ, it does not follow that it is also unnecessary. In this essay we will examine the place and purpose of apologetics in the sharing of our faith with others.

The word "apologetics" never actually appears in the Bible. But there is a verse which contains its meaning:

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and be ready always to give *an answer* to every man who asketh you the reason for the hope that is within you with meekness and fear (1 Peter 3:15).

The Greek word *apologia* means "answer," or "reasonable defense." It does not mean to apologize, nor does it mean just to engage in intellectual dialogue. It means to provide reasonable answers to honest questions and to do it with humility, respect, and reverence.

The verse thus suggests that the *manner* in which one does apologetics is as important as the words expressed. And Peter tells us in this passage that Christians are to be ready *always* with answers for those who inquire of us concerning our faith. Most Christians have a great deal of study ahead of them before this verse will be a practical reality in their evangelistic efforts.

Another question that often comes up in a discussion about the merits and place of apologetics is, "What is the relationship of the mind to evangelism?" "Does the mind play any part in the process?" "What about the effects of the fall?" "Isn't man dead in trespasses and sins?" "Doesn't the Bible say we are to know nothing among men except Jesus Christ and Him crucified?" "Why do we have to get involved at all in apologetics if the Spirit is the One Who actually brings about the New Birth?"

I think you will agree that today there are many Christians who are firmly convinced that answering the intellectual questions of unbelievers is an ineffectual waste of time. They

feel that any involvement of the mind in the gospel interchange smacks too much of human effort and really just dilutes the Spirit's work.

But Christianity thrives on intelligence, not ignorance. If a real Reformation is to accompany the revival for which many of us pray, it must be something of the mind as well as the heart. It was Jesus who said, "Come and see." He invites our scrutiny and investigation both before and after conversion.

We are to love God with the *mind* as well as the heart and the soul. In fact, the early church was powerful and successful because it out-thought and out-loved the ancient world. We are not doing either very well today.

Reasoning and Persuading

Most Christians today seem to prefer experiencing Christianity to thinking about or explaining it. But consider these verses:

Matthew 13:23: "But he who received the seed on the good ground is he who hears the word and *understands* it, who indeed bears fruit." They all heard it, but only the "good soil" *comprehended* it.

Acts 8:30: "When the Spirit prompted Philip to join himself to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch (who was reading Isaiah 53), he asked, 'Do you *understand* what you are reading?' The eunuch replied, 'How can I except some man should *guide* me?'"

Acts 18:4: Paul at Corinth was "reasoning in the synagogue every sabbath and trying to *persuade* the Jews and Greeks."

Acts 19:8: Paul at Ephesus "entered the synagogue and continued speaking out boldly for three months, *reasoning* and *persuading* them about the kingdom of God."

Romans 10:17: "So then faith comes by *hearing* and *hearing* by the word of God." Again the emphasis is on hearing with

perception.

2 Corinthians 5:11: “We *persuade* men,” says Paul. Vine’s *Expository Dictionary* describes this Greek word like this: “to apply persuasion, to prevail upon or win over, bringing about a change of mind by the influence of reason or moral considerations.”

All of these words—persuasion, dialogue, discourse, dispute, argue, present evidence, reason with—are vehicles of communication and are at the heart of Paul’s classical evangelistic model. Can there be saving faith without understanding? Can there be understanding without reasoning? The Bible would appear to say no. Paul urges believers in 2 Timothy 2:15 to study to show ourselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed.

J. Gresham Machen, a great Christian scholar, said the following words in 1912 to a group of young men at Princeton Seminary:

It would be a great mistake to suppose that all men are equally well-prepared to receive the gospel. It is true that the decisive thing is the regenerative power in connection with certain prior conditions for the reception of the Gospel. . . . I do not mean that the removal of intellectual objections will make a man a Christian. No conversion was ever wrought by argument. A change of heart is also necessary . . . but because the intellectual labor is insufficient, it does not follow that it is unnecessary. God may, it is true, overcome all intellectual obstacles by an immediate exercise of His regenerative power. Sometimes He does. But He does so very seldom. Usually He exerts His power in connections with certain conditions of the human mind. Usually He does not bring into the kingdom, entirely without preparation, those whose mind and fancy are completely contaminated by ideas which make the acceptance of the Gospel logically impossible.

If these words were true in 1912, how much more are they needed today?

Individual Responses

People respond to the gospel for various reasons—some out of pain or a crisis, others out of some emotional need such as loneliness, guilt, insecurity, etc. Some do so out of a fear of divine judgment. And coming to know Christ brings a process of healing and hope to the human experience. To know Christ is to find comfort for pain, acceptance for insecurity and low self-esteem, forgiveness for sin and guilt.

And others seem to have *intellectual* questions which block their openness to accept the credibility of the Christian message. These finally find in Christ the answers to their intellectual doubts and questions.

Those today who are actively involved in evangelism readily recognize the need for this kind of information to witness to certain people, and there are many more doubters and skeptics out there today than there were even twenty years ago.

We can see more clearly where we are as a culture by taking a good look at Paul's world in the first century. Christianity's early beginnings flourished in a Graeco-Roman culture more X-rated and brutal than our own. And we find Paul *adapting* his approach from group to group.

For instance, he expected certain things to be in place when he approached the Jewish communities and synagogues from town to town. He knew he would find a group which already had certain beliefs which were not in contradiction to the gospel he preached. They were monotheists. They believed in one God. They also believed this God had spoken to them in their Scriptures and had given them absolute moral guidelines for behavior (the Ten Commandments).

But when Paul went to the Gentile community, he had no such

expectations. There he knew he would be faced with a culture that was polytheistic (many gods), biblically ignorant, and living all kinds of perverted, wicked lifestyles. And on Mars Hill in Athens when he preached the gospel, he did somewhat modify his approach.

He spoke of God more in terms of His presence and power, and he even quoted truth from a Greek poet in order to connect with these “pagans” and get his point across: “We are God’s offspring” (Acts 17:28).

One hundred years ago, the vast majority of Americans pretty much reflected the Jewish mentality, believing in God, having a basic respect for the Bible, and strong convictions about what was right and what was wrong.

That kind of American can still be found today in the 90s, but George Gallup says they aren’t having much of an impact on the pagan, or Gentile community, which today holds few beliefs compatible with historic Christianity.

To evangelize such people, we have our work cut out for us. And we will have to use both our minds and our hearts to “become all things to all men in order to save some.”

A Variety of Approaches

As we’re considering how we as Christians can have an impact on our increasingly fragmented society, we need to keep in mind that many do not share our Christian view of the world, and some are openly hostile to it.

In fact, a college professor recently commented that he felt the greatest impediment to social progress right now was what he called the bigoted, dogmatic Christian community. That’s you and me, folks.

If we could just “loosen up a little,” and compromise on some issues, America would be a happier place. What is meant by

this is not just a demand for tolerance . . . but wholesale acceptance of *any* person's lifestyle and personal choices!

But the Bible calls us to be "salt and light" in our world. How can we be that effectively? I don't have a total answer, but I'll tell you after 30+ years of active ministry what isn't working. And by my observation, far too many Christians are trying to address the horrendous issues of our day with one of three very ineffective approaches.

Defensive Approach – Many Christians out there are mainly asking the question, "How strong are our defenses?" "How high are our walls?" This barricade mentality has produced much of the Christian subculture. We have our own language, literature, heroes, music, customs, and educational systems. Of course, we need places of support and fellowship. But when Paul describes spiritual warfare in 2 Corinthians 10, he actually *reverses* the picture. It is the *enemy* who is behind walls, inside strongholds of error and evil. And Paul depicts the Christians as those who should be mounting offensives at these walls to tear down the high things which have exalted themselves above the knowledge of God. We are to be *taking* ground, not just holding it.

Defeatist Approach – Other Christians have already given up. Things are so bad, they say, that my puny efforts won't change anything. "After all, we are living in the last days, and Jesus said that things would just get worse and worse." This may be true, but it may not be. Jesus said no man knows the day or the hour of His coming. Martin Luther had the right idea when he said, "If Jesus were to come tomorrow, I'd plant a tree today and pay my debts." The Lord may well be near, He could also tarry awhile. Since we don't know for sure, we should be seeking to prepare ourselves and our children to live for Him in the microchip world of the 21st century.

Devotional Approach – Other Christians are trying to say

something about their faith, but sadly, they can only share their personal religious experience. It is true that Paul speaks of us as “epistles known and read” by all men. Our life/experience with Christ is a valid witness. But there are others out there in the culture with “changed” lives . . . and Jesus didn’t do the changing! Evangelism today must be something more than “swapping” experiences. We must learn how to ground our faith in the facts of history and the claims of Christ. We must have others grapple with Jesus Christ, not just our experience.

Apologetics and Evangelism

I want to conclude this essay with some very important principles to keep in mind if we want to be effective in seeing others come to know Christ through our individual witness.

1. Go to people. The heart of evangelism is Christians taking the initiative to actually go out and “fish for men.” Acts 17:17 describes for us how Paul was effective in his day and time: “Therefore he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with the gentile worshippers, and in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there.”

2. Communicate with people. Engage them. Sharing the Gospel involves communication. People must be focused upon and then understand the Gospel to respond to it. It is our responsibility as Christians to make it as clear as possible for all who will listen. “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” (2 Cor. 5:11).

3. Relate to people. Effective witness involves not only the transmission of biblical information; it also includes establishing a relationship with the other person. Hearts, as well as heads, must meet. “So, affectionately longing for you,” said Paul to the Thessalonians, “we were well pleased to import to you not only the good news of God, but also our own

lives, because you have become dear to us" (1 Thess. 2:8).

4. Remove barriers. Part of our responsibility involves having the skills to eliminate obstacles, real or imagined, which keep an individual from taking the Christian message seriously. When God sent the prophet Jeremiah forth, He said, "Behold, I have put my words in your mouth . . . and I have ordained you to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." Sometimes our task as well is one of "spiritual demolition," of removing the false so the seeds of truth can take root. Apologetics sometimes serves in that capacity, of preparing a highway for God in someone's life.

5. Explain the gospel to others. We need an *army* of Christians today who can consistently and clearly present the message to as many people as possible. Luke says of Lydia, "The Lord opened her heart so that she heeded the things which were spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). Four essential elements in sharing the gospel:

- someone talking (Paul)
- things spoken (gospel)
- someone listening (Lydia)
- the Lord opening the heart.

6. Invite others to receive Christ. We can be clear of presentation, but ineffective because we fail to give someone the opportunity and encouragement to take that first major step of faith. "Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we beg you in Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20).

7. Make every effort by every means to establish them in the faith. Stay with them, ground them in the Scripture, help them gain assurance of their salvation, and get them active in a vital fellowship/church.

Hope For a World Gone Bad

"Give me your money," snarled the young intruder. He climbed my staircase, brandishing a knife and flashlight. Noises in the basement had distracted my Sunday afternoon study. I investigated when the sounds persisted. On the way to the basement I came face to face with a menacing looking 20 year-old. Recognizing the danger, I gave him the dollar bill in my wallet, then opened drawers as he ordered. My eyes kept darting back to the flashing knife blade. He snatched a small plastic bag containing white detergent. "What's this?" he demanded. "Laundry soap." "No, it's drugs," he countered.

Perhaps he was on drugs or out for revenge and had the wrong house. I assured him I hadn't stolen his truck. When he seemed convinced of his error, he became nervous, cut the kitchen phone line, and headed for the door, "Just don't call the cops," he pleaded. Then he fled.

On the phone to 911, my heart pounding, I described the invader. Reports, investigations, and questioning ensued. For the next several nights' sleep was fitful. Reinforcing the doors helped increase feelings of security. So did the news that this criminal was captured and sentenced to three years in prison.

But if this could happen in my own home, what hope was there for genuine safety?

FARAWAY THOUGHTS

The petite, fortyish woman sat in the imposing gray room with a high, ornate ceiling, her thumb toying with the ring on her left hand. Despite murmuring in the background, Melissa's thoughts were far away in the past, 15 years earlier—her

wedding day. Bright lights, festive flowers, and joyful friends filled the church. She felt secure seeing Tom's smile and welcoming gaze as she strode down the aisle. "Do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife ... for as long as you both shall live?" asked the black-robed minister. "I do," replied Tom with confidence,

A tear meandered down her cheek. Suddenly everyone in the gray room rose as if something important were happening. The entrance of another black-robed man interrupted Melissa's daydream. She heard Tom's voice: "Your honor, I am convinced that this marriage cannot be saved. There is no hope of reconciliation."

No hope? she wondered. Does he think that our 15 years of life, work, children, promises, struggles and successes amounted to nothing?

With her dreams dashed, the possibility of more unrealized expectations loomed enormously painful, was anything worth hoping for anymore?

IMAGES OF OUR WORLD

"Turning to international news we have some startling video to show you from Eastern Europe," intoned the television newscaster somberly. "We must warn you that the pictures you are about to see are quite graphic and, because of the violence they depict, may not be suitable for small children."

The screen fills with images of emaciated, shirtless men, apparently prisoners behind a barbed-wire fence. The despair on their faces haunts you. Next come scenes of what was an outdoor marketplace. A bomb had landed at midday, sending shredded canvas, shattered tables, bloodied limbs, and broken bodies everywhere. Then the scene switches to hot, tired, thirsty Caribbean refugees in overloaded rafts, bobbing in the ocean.

The TV images seem familiar by now and almost blend together. Where was that carnage and starvation? Somalia? Rwanda? Sudan? South Africa?

A vulture stalks a starving infant. Middle Eastern children throw stones. Their relatives wield automatic weapons. Their leaders shake hands and hail peace on the White House lawn. Will it last? Might a terrorist state harvest a nuclear bomb?

Can peace come to these troubled nations? Agreements are signed and broken. Often chaos reigns. "The world has gone bad," you decide, "What hope is there of people ever getting along?"

There is a good chance that you or someone you know has been a crime victim. Marriage is supposed to last forever. Now divorce increasingly rips apart hearts and homes, and with prospects of international peace rising and falling like a refugee raft on a stormy sea, is there anything that can save us from destroying ourselves? Will a baby born into our world today live to reach adulthood?

HUNGRY FOR HOPE

Two millennia ago a baby was born into a similarly troubled world. A foreign power occupied his parents' homeland. Poverty, greed, theft, and corruption were commonplace. Marriages faltered. Authorities ruled that a husband could divorce his wife simply for burning supper.

At the time of this baby's birth, people were hungry for hope. They wanted freedom from violence, family strife, and political uncertainty. They wanted the assurance that somebody loved and cared for them, that life counted for something, that they could muster the strength to face daily challenges at home and work.

Ironically, some saw hope in the birth of this particular baby. His mother, during her engagement, had become pregnant

out of wedlock while strangely claiming to remain a virgin. Though he was born in a humble stable, learned leaders traveled great distances to have the child as a king.

In his youth scholars marveled at his wisdom. In his thirties he began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose, inner strength, and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

A woman who had suffered five failed marriages found in his teaching “living water” to quench her spiritual and emotional thirst. A wealthy but corrupt government worker decided to give half of what he owned to the poor and repay fourfold those he had swindled. Hungry people were fed. Sick people became well.

The young man’s family thought he had flipped. His enemies plotted his demise and paid one of his followers to betray this innocent man. His closest friends deserted him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced, and executed. In agony during his execution he yelled out a quotation from one of his nation’s most revered ancient writers: “My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?”[\[1\]](#) At that moment he felt very alone, perhaps even hopeless.

FORSAKEN

Many crime victims feel forsaken by God. So do many divorced people, war prisoners, and starving refugees. But this young man’s cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion.

The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by a king. The details of the song are remarkably similar to the suffering the young man endured. It said, “All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads ... They have pierced my hands and my feet... They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.”[\[2\]](#)

Historians record precisely this behavior during the young

man's execution. {3} It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as the man slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 predictions or prophecies literally fulfilled in the life and death of this unique individual. Many of these statements written hundreds of years before his birth-were beyond his human control. One correctly foretold the place of his birth. {4} Another said he would be born of a virgin. {5} He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for his work, {6} He would enter the capital city as a king but riding on a donkeys back {7} He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of Silver, {8} pierced, {9} executed among thieves, {10} and yet, though wounded, {11} he would suffer no broken bones. {12}

Peter Stoner, a California mathematics professor, calculated the chance probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person. Using conservative estimates, Stoner concluded that the probability is 1 in 10 to the 17th power that those eight could be fulfilled by a fluke.

He says 10^{17} silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in 10^{17} , the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies "just happened" to come true in this man, Jesus. {13}

In his dying cry from the cross Jesus reminded His hearers that His life and death precisely fulfilled God's previously stated plan. According to the biblical perspective, at the moment of death Jesus experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place so that we might be forgiven and find new life.

He took the penalty due for all the crime, injustice, evil, sin, and shortcomings of the world-including yours and mine.

Though sinless Himself, He likely felt guilty and abandoned. Then-again in fulfillment of prophecy [{14}](#) and contrary to natural law-He came back to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history. [{15}](#) To the seeker Jesus Christ offers true inner peace, forgiveness, purpose, and strength for contented living.

SO WHAT?

"OK, great," you might say, "but what hope does this give the crime or divorce victim, the hungry and bleeding refugee, the citizen paralyzed by a world gone bad?" Will Jesus prevent every crime, reconcile every troubled marriage, restore every refugee, stop every war? No. God has given us free will. Suffering—even unjust suffering—is a necessary consequence of sin.

Sometimes God does intervene to change circumstances. (I'm glad my assailant became nervous and left.) Other times God gives those who believe in Him strength to endure and confidence that He will see them through. In the process, believers mature.

Most significantly we can hope in what He has told us about the future. Seeing how God has fulfilled prophecies in the past gives us confidence to believe those not yet fulfilled. Jesus promises eternal life to all who trust Him for it: "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."[{16}](#)

He promised He would return to rescue people from this dying planet.[{17}](#)

He will judge all evil.[{18}](#)

Finally justice will prevail. Those who have chosen to place their faith in Him will know true joy: "He shall wipe away

every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain.”[\[19\]](#)

Does God intend that we ignore temporal evil and mentally float off into unrealistic ethereal bliss? Nor at all. God is in the business of working through people to turn hearts to Him, resolve conflicts, make peace. After my assailant went to prison, I felt motivated to tell him that I forgave him because of Christ. He apologized, saying he, too, has now come to believe in Jesus.

But through every trial, every injustice you suffer, you can know that God is your friend and that one day He will set things right. You can know that He is still on the throne of the universe and that He cares for you. You can know this because His Son was born (Christmas is, of course, a celebration of His birth), lived, died, and came back to life in fulfillment of prophecy. Because of Jesus, if you personally receive His free gift of forgiveness, you can have hope!

Will you trust Him?

Notes

1. Matthew 27:46.
2. Psalm 22.
3. Matthew 27:35-44; John 20:25.
4. Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1.
5. Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35.
6. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1-2.
7. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21: 1-9.
8. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15.
9. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
10. Isaiah 53:12.
11. Matthew 27:38; Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
12. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.

13. Peter Stoner, *Science Speaks*, pp. 99-112.
14. Psalm 6:10; Acts 2:31-32.
15. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, pp. 185-273.
16. John 5:24.
17. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.
18. Revelation 20:10-15.
19. Revelation 21:4 NAS.

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