3 Truths to Feed Our Hope in a Pandemic

*When the world is upside down due to unforeseen circumstances, we need hope, but not just any hope. Sue explains that **biblical hope** is something different. Something better. Because it's about God.*

When pretty much the whole world is in stay-at-home mode . . . when pretty much the whole world is impacted by sudden unemployment because the whole world is in stay-at-home mode . . . when pretty much the whole world's economy might be affected by the crazy fall in oil prices . . .

We desperately need hope.

Hope that things will get better. Hope that we will be able to experience "normal" again. Hope that everyone's stress level will go down, especially health care heroes and first responders.

I've been thinking a lot about hope lately.

Your everyday kind of hope is a wish or expectation for the future. It's oxygen for the soul. An important part of mental health is being able to look forward to something good.

But *biblical hope* is something different. Something better. Because it's about God.

Where everyday hope is about wishing, biblical hope is a confident expectation that God will be good, and He will do good, toward us. It is faith in the future tense.

Everyday hope is horizontal, looking at circumstances, the world, and other people—which are all broken by the Fall, and they are guaranteed to disappoint. But biblical hope is vertical. It looks UP instead of out. Biblical hope is focused

on a perfect, loving God who is all-knowing and all-powerful. He doesn't just *know* the future, He *holds* the future.

We can encourage one another daily, as Hebrews 3:13 urges us, by reminding ourselves and each other of what is true. Let me suggest three truths that will feed our hope.

God is good.

Probably the #1 lie of the enemy is that God ISN'T good. It's what was behind his temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden: that God was holding out on her because He's not good.

And when life is hard and we live in pain, it's easy to look through the filter of "God is not good, that's why He's letting me hurt."

But the truth is that our circumstances are not an accurate indicator of whether God is good or not. Our logic and thinking are not accurate judges of whether God is good or not.

Even if we don't say it out loud, we can sit in the self-pity puddle of the belief, "If God was good, He wouldn't let me hurt."

But our pain is achieving something eternally significant, an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). When life is hard, God is doing something really big in us. And eventually, for those who have trusted Christ, God's goodness will mean He carries us to the place where there is no more pain, no more tears, no more sickness or weakness or even disappointment. That is our hope, that the future will hold nothing but GOOD for us.

We're not there yet. But it's coming!

God is faithful.

He is faithful in His character, He is faithful to His word, He is faithful to His promises.

Faithfulness means being a promise-keeper, even when it's hard. The Hebrew word for faithfulness means steadfastness, firmness.

On a trip to Colorado, my brother-in-law Phil learned that a cashier at Rocky Mountain National Park was also from Chicago. He said, "It must be cool to be here with these mountains all the time."

"Let me tell you something about the mountains," she responded. "They're . . . always . . . THERE." Meaning, they don't move, they don't change, and it takes a long time to get from A to B because those mountains are always THERE.

Like God's faithfulness.

We can have hope that God will remain faithful to His promises, such as Jesus promising, "I will be with you always."

Sports Illustrated covered a memorable incident at the 1992 Olympics when runner Derek Redmond tore his hamstring near the end of the race. He fell face first onto the track in agony.

> As the medical attendants were approaching, Redmond fought to his feet. "It was animal instinct," he would say later. He set out hopping, in a crazed attempt to finish the race. When he reached the stretch, a large man in a T-shirt came out of the stands, hurled aside a security guard and ran to Redmond, embracing him. It was Jim Redmond, Derek's father. "You don't have to do this," he told his weeping son. "Yes, I do," said Derek. "Well, then," said Jim, "we're going to finish this together." And so they did.

> Fighting off security men, the son's head sometimes buried in his father's shoulder, they stayed in Derek's lane all the way to the end, as the crowd gaped, then rose and howled and wept.{1}

Most people don't remember who won the gold medal in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, but millions will never forget the faithful love of a father who left his seat in the stands to enable his son to finish his race.

What a picture of our faithful heavenly Father who sent His Son from His seat in glory to earth to rescue and redeem us! Jesus promises that He will be with us always, to the end of the age—just as Derek Redmond's father was with his son to the end of the race.

God is at work in my life.

Philippians 1:6 promises that He who began a good work in me will continue to complete it. Once God gets started on the process of making us like Jesus, He doesn't quit!

One of my pastors has said that if you don't like how things are, it means the story's not over and God's not finished.

How encouraging is that??!

Romans 8:28 teaches us, "And we know that God causes all things to work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose."

Since God is at work in us, then He has a plan to make us like Jesus, and He's using every situation and every circumstance in our lives as His tools.

When we open our hearts and minds to God's plans to make us like Jesus, and we cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the process, it strengthens our hope that our future will be different from the past or the present.

But to be like Jesus means we have to follow Him, which means denying ourselves, and taking up our cross. It means not fighting the tools of sanctification He is using to make us like Jesus. The best way to do that is to obey scripture, which says to give thanks IN everything, FOR everything. If God has allowed it, there must be a purpose in it. It means developing an attitude of gratitude by disciplining ourselves to say, "This stinks, Lord, but You have allowed it in my life so I will give You thanks for this crummy boss, or this difficult roommate situation, or this physical challenge, or this thorn in my flesh."

When we realize we are not content with WHO we are or HOW we are, because we long to be better, it means God's not finished with us. We are still a work in progress. The story's not over.

It means there is hope. Biblical hope.

God is good, God is faithful, and God is at work in me. Those are the truths that will feed our hope and allow us to look at the future with confident expectation that it's going to be better than OK . . . it's going to be amazing. Either in this life, or on the other side, we can have hope.

A living hope. Hope has a name. His name is Jesus.

1. vault.si.com/vault/1992/08/17/track-and-field-ode-to-joy-carl-lewis-exulted-along-with-all-of-barcelonas-gold-medalists-many-of-whom-vanquished-giants-to-win-their-events. Accessed 4/21/2020.

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“Trusting God a Joke Since Wicked Prosper, Godly Suffer”

I write to you feeling perturbed about God. At times I really wonder the question of His existence.

I would appreciate if you could enlighten me in the area of trusting in God. I find it hard to trust Him nowadays. I trust in Him to provide financially, but instead I receive more financial problems. I see sinners who are ruthless and despicable earning tons of money, curse Him with the very breath He gave them. What a joke! His children suffered in hunger and He dared to claim that He will not allowed the righteous to suffer hunger. Sometimes when I see how He blessed those rogues, I told myself where is His logic? Of course He hopes that by showing mercy, these crooks will repent, then how about His children who are suffering hunger? You mean God enjoys people cursing Him so that He could bless them? Then I think His children will begin to curse and swear at Him.

I poured my hope on Him in several areas of my life. He said that whoever called upon the name of the Lord shall not be put to shame. I trusted Him time and time again in some areas of my life such as my career, my family problems etc. But none of them came true for me. Instead my feeling right now that He is a cheat and I feel more ashamed trusting Him. What a joke!

I thought to myself, if He cannot even keep up His promise as Jehovah Jireh, our providence, that can meet our needs on earth, how can we trust Him for our salvation?

My pastor emphasized a lot on His grace and prosperity. I believe wholeheartedly but now I feel very cheated by such

messages. I felt worse than Job, he suffered but at least God restored him eventually. I felt like a fool believing in a book that was claimed to be written by Him.

Jesus came to give us life so that we can have life more abundantly. Now instead of having life more abundantly, I guess it should be read as a bums life. A life that is cheap and useless comparable to the fate of a bum.

I winced when I read that your pastor emphasizes prosperity. If it's the same kind of prosperity theology that some preach here in the U.S. that God wants to lavish good stuff on His kids, including health and lots of money and whatever our hearts desire then no wonder you are disillusioned with Him. We believe this is a false gospel and it leads believers to stumble because it teaches a lie about God.

God is concerned about His glory, and about us having a close, intimate relationship with Him (the second produces the first). Making us or keeping us comfortable usually doesn't result in God getting the glory or in a close, dependent relationship with Him, because it's so easy to cherish the gifts instead of the giver.

So, because of false teaching, it is quite possible that you had unrealistic expectations of a God who is not the same God of the scriptures a God who is holy, just, righteous, sovereign, and not at all committed to jumping through our hoops. And then you blame God for not being faithful or good, correct?

But because God IS good and because He loves us so much, He only acts in our best interests. If our prayers are for things that are not in our best interest, He will not grant our requests (or our demands). Which is why I think Philippians 4:6-7 is so incredibly important: God wants us to let our requests be made known to Him *with thanksgiving.* However He chooses to answer, when we give thanks, we are relinquishing

our illusion of control and expressing our belief that He is sovereign and He knows what He's doing.

I learned this important (and now precious to me) lesson the hard way when He kept saying "no" to the huge prayer of my heart for physical healing. I invite you to read my story, How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change.

Blessings,

Sue Bohlin

[Editor's Note: The inquirer shares the frustrations of the psalmists in seeing the rich and ruthless get off apparently scot-free, seemingly unnoticed by a God who promises justice and blessings. This quandary is nothing new, but it is significant that a sovereign God would allow it into the Scriptures it would make God look bad if there were no bigger, truer picture as explained briefly above. See for reference: Psalm 73: 2-12.

Regarding the inquirer's reference to Psalm 37: 25-2 about the righteous never being forsaken or their children begging for bread, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. and others, explains, "David must surely have seen good people in great difficulties! But this misses the psalmist's point. He did not question that the righteous may be temporarily forsaken, needy and poor. Rather, he observed that nowhere can it be shown that the righteous have experienced continued desertion and destitution…. The point is this: in the long haul, God does not forsake his own whether they have little or much; their children will be blessed! (pages 267-268)." *Hard Sayings of the Bible* also addresses the issues of why the godly so frequently suffer and the ungodly seem so prosperous related to Psalm 73. For another Probe perspective on how Psalm 73 helps us deal with the problem of evil, please see Dr. Ray Bohlin's article "Where Was God on September 11?"]

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Crime and Punishment – A Christian View of Dostoevsky's Classic Novel

Michael Gleghorn looks at the famous novel through a Christian worldview lens to see what truths Dostoevsky may have for us. We learn that this great novel records the fall of man into a degraded state but ends with the beginning of his restoration through the ministry of a selfless, Christian woman.

Introduction and Overview

In 1866 the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment*, one of his greatest novels. It's a penetrating study of the psychology of sin, guilt, and redemption, and it haunts the reader long after the final page has been read. It tells the story of an intelligent, but impoverished, young Russian intellectual named Raskolnikov. Under the unfortunate influence of a particularly pernicious theory of society and human nature, he exalts himself above the moral law, grievously transgresses it by committing two murders, "and plunges into a hell of persecution, madness and terror."{1}

Raskolnikov had conceived of himself as a great and extraordinary man, on the order of a Napoleon. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't bound by the same tired old moral code that the vast mass of humanity lives in recognition of, if not obedience to—the merely *ordinary* men and women who accomplish little and amount to less. Nevertheless, after committing his horrible crime, he finds that he cannot escape his punishment: he cannot silence his sensitive and overburdened conscience. In the end, when he can stand it no

longer, he decides to confess his crime and accept suffering as a means of atonement.

Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky, the author of this story, had "long been preoccupied with the question of crime and conscience."{2} In one of his letters, Dostoevsky describes his story as the "psychological report of a crime."{3} The crime is committed, he says, by "a young man, expelled from the university . . . and living in the midst of the direst poverty." Coming under the influence of "the strange, 'unfinished' ideas that float in the atmosphere," he decides to murder an old pawnbroker and steal her money. Dostoevsky describes the old woman as "stupid and ailing," "greedy" and "evil." Why, it would hardly be a crime at all to murder such a wretched person! What's more, with the money from his crime, the young man can "finish his studies, go abroad," and devote the rest of his life to the benefit of humanity!

Inspired by these thoughts, the young man goes through with the crime and murders the old woman. But, notes Dostoevsky, "here is where the entire psychological process of the crime is unfolded. Insoluble problems confront the murderer, unsuspected and unexpected feelings torment his heart . . . and he finishes by *being forced* to denounce himself."

This, in brief, is the story of *Crime and Punishment*. In what follows, we'll take a closer look at the theory which led Raskolnikov to commit his crime. Then we'll consider why the theory proved false when Raskolnikov actually attempted to put it into practice.

The Ordinary and Extraordinary

Raskolnikov committed two murders, in part simply to see if he really has the bravado to put his theories into practice. But what are these ideas? Where do they come from? And why do they

lead Raskolnikov to such heinous actions?

Essentially, Raskolnikov's theory, which was partially developed in an article on crime that he had written, holds that all men, by a kind of law of nature, are divided into two distinct classes: the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary*. This theory, which finds some of its philosophical roots in the writings of men like Hegel and Nietzsche, claims that ordinary men exist merely for the purpose of reproduction by which, at length, the occasional, extraordinary man might arise. Raskolnikov declares, "The vast mass of mankind is mere material, and only exists in order by some great effort, by some mysterious process, by means of some crossing of races and stocks, to bring into the world at last perhaps one man out of a thousand with a spark of independence." The man of genius is rarer still, "and the great geniuses, the crown of humanity, appear on earth perhaps one in many thousand millions."{4}

The distinctive features of the ordinary man are a conservative temperament and a law-abiding disposition. But extraordinary men "all transgress the law." Indeed, says Raskolnikov, "if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can . . . find . . . in his own conscience, a sanction for wading through blood."{5} So the extraordinary man has the right—indeed, depending on the value of his ideas, he may even have the duty—to destroy those who stand in his way. After all, Raskolnikov observes, such ideas may benefit "the whole of humanity."{6} But how can we know if we are merely ordinary men, or whether, perhaps, we are extraordinary? How can we know if we have the *right* to transgress the law to achieve our own ends?

Raskolnikov admits that confusion regarding one's class is indeed possible. But he thinks "the mistake can only arise . . . among the ordinary people" who sometimes like to imagine themselves more advanced than they really are. And we needn't

worry much about that, for such people are "very conscientious" and will impose "public acts of penitence upon themselves with a beautiful and edifying effect."{7}

But as we'll see, it's one of the ironies of this novel that Raskolnikov, who committed murder because he thought himself extraordinary, made precisely this tragic mistake.

A Walking Contradiction

James Roberts observes that Raskolnikov "is best seen as two characters. He sometimes acts in one manner and then suddenly in a manner completely contradictory."{8} Evidence for this can be seen throughout the novel. In this way, Dostoevsky makes clear, right from the beginning of his story, that Raskolnikov is *not* an extraordinary man, at least not in the sense in which Raskolnikov himself uses that term in his theory of human nature.

In the opening pages of the novel, we see Raskolnikov at war with himself as he debates his intention to murder an old pawnbroker. "I want to attempt a thing *like that*," he says to himself.{9} Then, after visiting the old woman's flat, ostensibly to pawn a watch, but in reality as a sort of "dress rehearsal" for the murder, he again questions himself: "How could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy above all . . . loathsome!"{10}

This inner battle suggests that Raskolnikov has mistaken himself for an *extraordinary* man, a man bound neither by the rules of society, nor the higher moral law. But in fact, he's actually just a conscientious *ordinary* man. The portrait Dostoevsky paints of him is really quite complex. He often appears to be a sensitive, though confused, young intellectual, who's been led to entertain his wild ideas more as a result of dire poverty and self-imposed isolation from

his fellow man, rather than from sheer malice or selfish ambition.

In fear and trembling he commits two murders, partly out of a confused desire to thereby benefit the rest of humanity, and partly out of a seemingly genuine concern to really live in accordance with his theories. Ironically, while the murders are partly committed with the idea of taking the old pawnbroker's money to advance Raskolnikov's plans, he never attempts to use the money, but merely buries it under a stone. What's more, Raskolnikov is portrayed as one of the more generous characters in the novel. On more than one occasion, he literally gives away all the money he has to help meet the needs of others. Finally, while Raskolnikov is helped toward confessing his crime through the varied efforts of Porfiry Petrovich, the brilliant, yet compassionate, criminal investigator, and Sonia, the humble, selfless prostitute, nevertheless, it's primarily Raskolnikov's own tormented conscience that, at length, virtually forces him to confess to the murders.

So while Raskolnikov is guilty, he's not completely lost. He still retains a conscience, as well as some degree of genuine compassion toward others. Dostoevsky wants us to see that there's still hope for Raskolnikov!

The Hope of Restoration

After Raskolnikov commits the two murders, he finds himself confronted with the desperate need to be reconciled with God and his fellow man. From the beginning of the story, Raskolnikov is portrayed as somewhat alienated from his fellows. But once he commits the murders, he experiences a decisive break, both spiritually and psychologically, from the rest of humanity. Indeed, when he murders the old pawnbroker and her sister, something within Raskolnikov also dies. The bond that unites him with all other men in a common humanity

is destroyed—or "dies"—as a sort of poetic justice for murdering the two women.

This death, which separates Raskolnikov both from God and his fellow man, can only be reversed through a miracle of divine grace and power. In the novel, the biblical paradigm for this great miracle is the story of the raising of Lazarus. Just as Lazarus died, and was then restored to life through the miraculous power of God in Christ, so also, in Dostoevsky's story, Raskolnikov's "death" is neither permanent nor irreversible. He too can be "restored to life." He too can be reconciled with God and man.

While this theme of death and restoration to life is somewhat subtle, nevertheless, Dostoevsky probably intended it as one of the primary themes of the novel. In the first place, it is emphasized by Sonia, Porfiry Petrovich, and Raskolnikov's own sister, that only by confessing his crime and accepting his punishment can Raskolnikov again be *restored* to the rest of humanity. In this way, Dostoevsky repeatedly emphasizes the "death" of Raskolnikov.

In addition, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned at least three times in the novel. One time is when, in the midst of a heated discussion, Porfiry specifically asks Raskolnikov if he believes in the raising of Lazarus, to which Raskolnikov responds that he does.{11} This affirmation foreshadows some hope for Raskolnikov, for the fact that he believes in this miracle at least makes possible the belief that God can also work a miracle in his own life. Secondly, the only extended portion of Scripture cited in the novel relates the story of Lazarus. In fact, it's Raskolnikov himself, tormented by what he's done, who asks Sonia to read him the story.{12} Finally, at the end of the novel, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned yet again, this time as Raskolnikov recollects Sonia's previous reading of the story to him.{13} Interestingly, this final reference to the raising of Lazarus occurs in the context of Raskolnikov's own "restoration to life."

Restored to Life

Near the end of the novel, Raskolnikov at last goes to the police station and confesses to the murders: *"It was I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them."*{14} He is sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor prison. Sonia, true to her promise, selflessly follows him there. Early one morning she comes to visit Raskolnikov. Overcome with emotion, he begins weeping and throws himself at her feet. Sonia is terrified. "But at the same moment she understood . . . . She knew . . . that he loved her . . . and that at last the moment had come."{15} God's love, mediated through Sonia, had finally broken through to Raskolnikov: "He had risen again and he . . . felt in it all his being."{16}

Although Raskolnikov had previously been something of an outcast with his fellow inmates, nevertheless, on the day of his "restoration," his relations with them begin to improve. Dostoevsky writes:

> *He . . . fancied that day that all the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even entered into talk with them and they answered him in a friendly way. He remembered that now, and thought it was bound to be so. Wasn't everything now bound to be changed?{17}*

What's more, Dostoevsky also implies that Raskolnikov is being restored to relationship with God. Picking up the New Testament that Sonia had given him, "one thought passed through his mind: 'Can her convictions not be mine now? Her feelings, her aspirations at least . . .'"{18} And Dostoevsky then concludes his great novel by stating: "But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life."{19}

So by the end of the novel, Raskolnikov, as a type of Lazarus, has experienced his own "restoration to life." He is ready to begin "his initiation into a new unknown life." And interestingly, the grace which brings about Raskolnikov's restoration is primarily mediated to him through the quiet, humble love of Sonia, a prostitute. Just as God was not ashamed to have his own Son, humanly speaking, descended from some who were murderers and some who were prostitutes—for it was just such people He came to save—so also, in Dostoevsky's story, God is not ashamed to extend His forgiveness and grace to a prostitute, and through her to a murderer as well. *Crime and Punishment* thus ends on a note of hope, for the guilty can be forgiven and the dead restored to life!

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1987). Citation from cover blurb on back of book.
2. Joseph Frank, "Introduction" to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, ix.
3. The citations from Dostoevsky's letter come from Joseph Frank's "Introduction" to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment,* viii-ix.
4. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 229.
5. Ibid., 227.
6. Ibid., 226.
7. Ibid., 228.
8. James Roberts, *Cliffs Notes on Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, ed. Gary Carey (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc.), 70.
9. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 2.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 227.
12. Ibid., 283.
13. Ibid., 472.
14. Ibid., 458.

15. Ibid., 471.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 472.
19. Ibid.

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The Christmas Story: Does It Still Matter?

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

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

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

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

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

A Story that Has *Endured*

For two millennia, people have told of the child in a Bethlehem manger; of angels who announced his birth to shepherds; of learned men who traveled a great distance to view him.{1}

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

Second, the Christmas story is also . . .

A Story of *Hope* and *Survival*

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

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

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

In the midst of social and cultural challenges, the Christmas story offers hope and encouragement toward survival, hope of new life linked to something—someone—greater than oneself. One

of Jesus' followers said Jesus' "name . . . [would] be the hope of all the world."{3}

So, the Christmas story is important because it has endured and because it speaks of hope and survival.

Reason number three: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Peace* and *Goodwill*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, I’m a church member,” I replied, “but really the most important thing is knowing Jesus Christ as your personal friend. When I was eighteen, some friends explained to me that He died and rose again for me and that I could begin a relationship with Him. It made a big difference and gave me a real peace inside. He can also bring peace between people.”

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

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

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

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

Reason number four: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Family*

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

Joseph and Mary had their share of family challenges. Consider their circumstances. The historical accounts indicate that Joseph's fiancée became pregnant though she was a virgin. Mary believed an angel told her she was pregnant by God. Now, how would you feel if your fiancé/fiancée exhibited apparent evidence of sexual activity with someone else during your engagement? Suppose your intended said that God had sanctioned the whole thing. Would your trust and self-esteem take a nosedive? Would you cancel the wedding?

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

Fifth, the story is Christmas is also . . .

A story of *Humility*

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

Imagine that you and your child are walking in a field and encounter an ant pile with hundreds of ants scurrying about. In the distance, you see a construction bulldozer approaching. Suppose your child asks how to warn the ants of impending danger. You discuss various possibilities: shouting, holding up signs, etc. But the best solution would be if somehow your child could become an ant and warn them personally. Some ants

might not believe the danger. But some might believe and take steps to ensure their safety.

Paul, an early follower of Jesus, wrote of the humility Jesus displayed by becoming human:

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

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

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

A Story that Was *Foretold*

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

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

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

Additional prophecies concern the Messiah's lineage, betrayal, suffering, execution, and resurrection. Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of

just eight of the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in 10^{17} that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

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

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

A Story that Has *Substantial Support*

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

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

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

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

The Christmas story is notable for its enduring messages of hope, peace, goodwill, family and humility. It was foretold by prophets and has substantial manuscript support. But there is another reason for considering the story of Jesus' birth, perhaps the most important.

Reason number eight: the Christmas story is . . .

A Story of *Love*

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

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

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

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

> *Jesus Christ, thanks for loving me, for dying for my sins and rising again. Please apply your death as the means of my forgiveness. I accept your pardon. Come and live in me and help me to become your close friend.*

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

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

Notes

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

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

Adapted from Rusty Wright, "Christmas: More than a Story?" *Advance* magazine, December 2004, pp. 12-15. Copyright © 2004 Rusty Wright. Used by permission.

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Will Winter Ever End? Groundhog Day and Modern Thought

Rick Wade takes us on a journey through the movie Groundhog Day to see what light it sheds on a modernist worldview. The protaganist's self-centered, materialistic, career-driven view of life exemplifies the modernist thinking applies to actual life. As Christians, Rick points out a number of good examples from the movie that will help us better understand

this view of the world.

Its All About Me

Did you see the 1993 movie *Groundhog Day*? In this film, we meet Phil Connors, an arrogant and self-obsessed weatherman on a local TV station who is sent to Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, to report on the events surrounding Groundhog Day. Phil, played by Bill Murray, is rude to his co-workers, Rita the producer (played by Andie MacDowell) and Larry the cameraman (played by Chris Elliott). He has a condescending attitude toward the people of Punxsutawney who he calls hicks. Phil is very taken with himself. He tells his coworkers that a major network is interested in him, and at one point calls himself the talent. But now Phil is stuck in this awful assignment (too insignificant for someone of his stature) and only wants to finish up and get back to Pittsburgh. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately as things turn out), the team is trapped by a blizzard and forced to stay in Punxsutawney. The next day, however, something bizarre happens: Phil awakens to the same music on the radio and the DJs saying the same things as the morning before. Its February 2nd, Groundhog Day, all over again.

And thus begins Phil Connors nightmare. Every morning Phil awakens to February the second again . . . and again and again. We arent told how many times this happens, but it happens often enough that he is able to go from not being able to play the piano at all to being an excellent jazz pianist. What does Phil do with this strange situation?

Phil’s responses to his circumstances illustrate some modern ways of thinking and one distinctly *un*modern way. I’d like to use this film to focus on these philosophies. This won’t be a film review or an exercise in film criticism. *Groundhog Day* will simply serve as a mirror to hold up to modern thought.

In Phil Connors we see what Michael Foley, professor of early Christian thought at Baylor, calls a typical modern.{1} He is self-centered, materialistic, egotistical, and career-driven. He exemplifies what sociologist Craig Gay calls modern mans desire for *autonomy* and . . . what might be called the *will-to-self-definition.*{2} Gay quotes Daniel Bell who says that self-realization and even self-gratification have become the master principles of modern culture.{3}

This describes Phil, but not only Phil. What is more obviously true to moderns than the idea that one must look out for number one? Modernists want to define themselves. Were the captains of our own lives, and were our own number one concern.

But with this strange turn of events, Phil, the one who likes to think of himself as on the rise, finds himself stuck in one place. Every day he faces the same routine. Nothing he does seems to matter, for time is no longer progressing. The past doesnt matter, for yesterday was like today. And as far as he knows, tomorrow will be the same.

What Goes Around . . . Goes Around

When Phil finally accepts his predicament, he asks his new drinking pals, Gus and Ralph, a question: What would *you* do, he asks, if you were stuck in one place, and every day was exactly the same, and nothing that you did mattered? This question sets the stage for what follows in the film as Phil discovers over and over that nothing he did yesterday matters; nothing carries over.

But one can see something deeper going on here than simply an illustration of a boring, repetitive life. Perhaps not incidentally it also serves on the larger scale to describe the situation many people face. The situation of Phil going nowhere is a subtle illustration of a major philosophical

shift in modern times, namely, the abandonment of a *teleological* view of the world.

What do I mean by that? *Teleology* is the theory of purpose, ends, goals, final causes.{4} Before Christ, Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle taught that there was design behind the universe; its forming wasnt just an accidental occurrence. In the West, with the rise of Christian theology, there came the understanding of the universe as made by God for a purpose. That is what *teleology* is: the idea of design with a goal in mind.

In modern times, however, that understanding is gone. We are taught that the universe is an accident of nature, and hence that we are, too. We werent put here for a purpose; there is no goal to life beyond what we choose. Any meaning we have in life is meaning we supply ourselves. When this idea really sinks in, the ramifications are truly alarming. We want to have purpose; people with no sense of purpose have nothing to move toward. This idea was the root of the despair of existential philosophy. It drove thinkers such as Jean Paul Sartre to teach that the burden is on us to form our own lives, that to *not* do so is to live inauthentic lives. Although the existentialists tried to transcend this sense of meaninglessness, they werent successful. The sense of loss that comes with thinking we have no purpose reflects what we know deep down because of being made in Gods image: we were made by Someone for some purpose. To not have purpose necessarily diminishes our lives.

Phil Connors life no longer has purpose. He is stuck in one place going nowhere, and it isnt a happy situation.

So what does he do? He looks to Rita for help. You’re a producer, he says. Think of something. Rita advises him to see a doctor. In modern times we typically look to science for the answer, in this case medical science. First, a medical doctor is unable to find anything wrong with Phil. Then a

psychiatrist finds Phils problem to be beyond his abilities. Science is supposed to be modern mans savior, but here medical science fails. Technology fails Phil, too. The highways are closed because Phils own weather forecast is wrong he predicted the blizzard wouldnt hit Punxsutawneyso he cant drive back to Pittsburgh. Long distance phone service is down so he is unable to call home. So Phil is stuck. This modern man cannot be rescued by modern means.

What is Phils next move? He simply takes his hedonistic self-preoccupation to new levels. Its Feb. 2nd yet again, and Phil is out drinking with Gus and Ralph and reflecting on his predicament. After imbibing quite a bit, they get in a car to leave. As they drive away, Phil asks Gus and Ralph, What if there were no tomorrow? Gus responds that there would be no consequencesno hangovers! They could do anything they wanted! Phils eyes brighten. He can do whatever he wants! It’s the same things your whole life, he says. Clean up your room. Stand up straight. Pick up your feet. Take it like a man. Be nice to your sister. . . . Im not going to live by their rules anymore!

And thus begins Phils hedonistic binge.

Its All About Me . . . With a Vengeance

What does he do with this newfound freedom? When Phil realizes that there are no consequences to his actionssince there is no tomorrowhe indulges his every whim in a sort of hedonistic binge. He eats like a glutton, seduces a woman, robs an armored car and buys a fancy car with the money.

Then he sets his eyes on the real prize: Rita, the producer. Day after day (or Feb. 2nd after Feb. 2nd!) he collects tidbits of information from Rita about herself and about what her ideal man would be like. He then tries to fit the image himself in order to ingratiate himself to her with the hope of

seducing her.

Michael Foley says that in this Phil becomes Machiavellis prince.{5} In his book on political philosophy called *The Prince,* Machiavelli said a prince should always *appear* to be virtuous because that is what people expect. However, he said, the prince shouldnt actually concern himself with *being* virtuous, for that would often work against his own interests.

> *A prince should not necessarily avoid vices such as cruelty or dishonesty if employing them will benefit the state. Cruelty and other vices should not be pursued for their own sake, just as virtue should not be pursued for its own sake: virtues and vices should be conceived as means to an end. Every action the prince takes must be considered in light of its effect on the state, not in terms of its intrinsic moral value.{6}*

This is Phils attitude. He wants Rita, so he pretends to be the good man she desires. The end justifies the means, right?

As a society we have lost any sense of going somewhere. In the West, weve been taught to live for the moment, to savor the experiences of today. Yesterday is gone, and there is no ultimate tomorrow before us which will draw together the pieces of our lives into a meaningful conclusion. The world came about by accident and is going nowhere. In fact, were told its winding down to some cosmic death. The utopian vision of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was crushed by World War I. Following the devastation of the next World War, existentialist philosophers said we should create our own sets of values. Increasing or at least maintaining our personal peace and prosperity now seems to be our highest ambition because, quite frankly, we have nothing else to hope

for. What is left to do but enjoy ourselves as much as we can while here? Our national moral consensus goes little further than dont hurt other people unnecessarily, and we are left to our own ideas about what constitutes necessity. If there is nothing to hope for, today is all we have, so we pad our own nest and enjoy what we can out of life. I am the center of my universe, and its your duty to not interfere.

To be honest, there is nothing wrong with enjoying the experiences life offers (given the limits of biblical morality and wisdom, of course). I recently read Francis Meyes book *Under the Tuscan Sun* made into a movie starring Diane Lane. The movie barely scratches the surface of the pleasures of life in Tuscany described in the book: preparing and enjoying wonderful food; preparing the olive trees for next years harvest, and at harvest time discerning when and how quickly to pick to avoid mildew; picking herbs like sage and rosemary from plants growing in front of the house for seasoning the evenings dinner; choosing the best local wine for the main course at dinner; taking in the smells and sights of a small Italian town; discovering a portion of an ancient Roman road or a wall built by the Etruscans; enjoying the company of friends and loved ones outdoors in warm weather, or gathered around the hearth in winterthe riches of such experiences have been lost to many in modern times.

Problems come, however, when *I* become the center of my ultimately purposeless world, when other people become objects to enjoy or reject as I might a certain food. Its bad enough when we become the centers of our own worlds. We go further than that and expect to be the centers of *others* worlds as well! For some reason, we expect the lives of others to revolve around ours. But while we are crafting our own worlds, others are crafting theirs. What if my plans dont fit theirs or vice versa?

Phil tried repeatedly to win Ritas affection to satisfy his own desires. Night after night Phil tries to woo her, and

night after night she slaps him in the face when she realizes what hes up to. Phil cant manipulate Rita the way he wants to.

Phil is so much the center of his world that, at one point in the film, Phil the weatherman said he creates the weather! But of course he doesnt. He cant even predict it perfectly. If Phil cant control the weather which has no will of its own, how can he possibly control Rita who does? He could have learned something from Jim Careys character, Bruce Arnold, in *Bruce Almighty* who could not manipulate the free will of his girlfriend Grace to regain her love.

It Has to Stop

So Phil cannot have what he really wants. What happens when one realizes that there is nothing lasting to hold onto? That is, if one can get hold of it at all? In the mid-twentieth century, beginning with the despair that comes from believing that there are no fixed and eternal values, existentialists tried to infuse individual lives with value by saying we create values ourselves. Other people, however, simply fell into despair and stayed there. Thats what happened to Phil Connors. First he tried to solve his problem through medical science. Then he accepted the situation and tried to find fulfillment in the pursuit of pleasure. When that failed, he was lost.

A life with no tomorrow, and where yesterday and today dont matter, has no meaning because it has no explanation. But an explanation is what we crave. The discovery that there is no explanation is at the heart of what the existentialists called the *absurd.* Albert Camus said that a world that has no reason leaves a person feeling like a stranger. His exile is without remedy, wrote Camus, since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity.{7} As a result, for some peopleor

perhaps for manythe question that arises is, Why live at all? There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, said Camus, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.{8}

Even before Feb. 2nd, Phils life was absurd; he just didnt know it. His past wasnt forming his future, and he had no sure promised land before him anyway. He would be what he made of himself (a very modern idea), but he didnt seem to be doing a very good job. One of the key characteristics of the modern mind is the idea that the past is to be discarded in favor of the future because things just have to get better over time. There were such high hopes in modernity! But while Phil had hopes for tomorrow, he really was going nowhere. The repetition of Feb. 2nd only mirrored his real life.

The absurdity of Phils situation descended upon him on one of his many Feb. 2nds. Having tried to enjoy a life of no consequences, and having been rejected by Rita, Phil falls into despair. In his umpteenth report on Groundhog Day festivities he expresses his despair clearly. You want a prediction about the weather, you're asking the wrong Phil, he says referring to the groundhog. I'll give you a winter prediction: It's gonna be cold, it's gonna be grey, and it's gonna last you for the rest of your life.

Phil could only think of one thing to do. Remember that if the groundhog, Punxsutawney Phil, sees its shadow, winter will last another forty days. Phil reasons that, if winter is to end, the groundhog cant be allowed see its shadow again. So Phil the weatherman decides that Phil the groundhog must die. There is no way this winter is *ever* going to end, Phil tells Rita, as long as that groundhog keeps seeing his shadow. I don't see any way out of it. He's got to be stopped. And I have to stop him. Here the parallel between the two Phils is made clear. To bring an end to winter, both the season and his own personal winter, Phil kidnaps the groundhog and drives off

a cliff, killing them both. Neither Phil will now awaken to see his shadow again.

Or so he thought. The next morning, promptly at 6 AM, Phil awakens yet again to another Groundhog Day. A look of despair crosses his face. He gets out of bed, climbs into the bathtub with an electric toaster and electrocutes himself. But Feb. 2nd comes yet again. Phil tries many different ways to end it all. Later he tells Rita I've been stabbed, shocked, poisoned, frozen, hung, electrocuted, and burned. He keep trying to end his winter but he cant.

Although Camus raised the question of suicide, he didnt argue for it. He tried to persuade readers that there can be good reasons for living even though life as a whole has no meaning. But Phil, and many people in real life, have decided there is no reason to go on. Some dont go as far as suicide, but their nihilistic lives reflect the same idea: there is no meaning, nothing matters, nothing is of any value.

Is there any way out of this mess?

Phils Redemption

Phil Connors first two responses to his predicamenthedonism and despairwere failures. Once more he turns to Rita for help. He tries to prove to her he really is repeating the same day over and over. After seeing several convincing evidences that something strange really is going on, she offers to spend a day with him just to observe. Near the end of an enjoyable day, Rita takes a positive view and tells Phil that maybe what hes experiencing isnt a curse at all. It depends on how you look at it, she says.

With that little bit of encouragement, Phils whole attitude changes. He now sees Rita not as an object to possess, but as a person of intrinsic value. Before, he wanted to use her; now he appreciates her. As she sleeps he whispers to her that he

doesnt deserve someone like her. Now Phil has a purpose. Before he bettered himself to fool Rita; now his ambition is to be worthy of her.

So Phil sets about improving himself. He betters himself morally; Michael Foley sees here a turn toward an ethics of virtue. Phil begins doing good things for other people such as giving money and food to an old man who lives on the streets, changing a tire for a woman, saving a mans life, giving tickets to *Wrestlemania* to a pair of young newlyweds, catching a boy who falls out of the tree (who never thanks him, Phil notes!). Because he keeps repeating Feb. 2nd, Phil performs these good acts again and again. He also betters himself intellectually and artistically. And in the end, Phil wins Ritas affections.

Conclusion

In this simple film about a weatherman from Pittsburgh, we can see illustrated a few modernistic approaches to life. Having found himself in a purposeless existence, Phil looked for his salvation in science and in hedonistic pleasure seeking. Not finding it there, he fell into despair. With the encouragement of an upbeat lady as he called Rita, Phil decided to make himself a better man.

Several different religions have tried to claim the message of *Groundhog Day* as their own. Buddhists see Phil as the bodhisattva who must return to help others better themselves so they may all escape the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Jews see Phil as being returned to earth to do good works to help bring the world to perfection.

For evangelical Protestants this might sound suspiciously like works salvation. But *Groundhog Day* isnt a Christian film; we shouldnt look for more in it than it offers. As I said at the beginning, it holds up a mirror to modern thought, and shows the failure of some contemporary beliefs.

Nonetheless, the film still offers us a reminder. In our zeal to proclaim salvation by faith alone, its possible that we relegate the biblical admonitions to live good lives to too low a level. Our tickets are punched; we have our seats in heaven. As for now . . . well, you know how some say Its easier to receive forgiveness than permission. Maybe we just dont concern ourselves enough with living virtuous lives.

Groundhog Day illustrates the vacuousness of some modern ideas. But it also reminds us that living a good life *does* have its rewards: we are better people for the effort, and we become more attractive to people around us.

Notes

1. Michael P. Foley, "Phil's Shadow," *Touchstone* 17, no. 2 (April, 2004): 12.
2. *Craig M. Gay, The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It's Tempting to Live As If God Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 184.
3. Daniel Bell "The Return of the Sacred: The Argument on the Future of Religion," in *British Journal of Sociology* 28, no. 4 (1977): 424, quoted in Gay, 192.
4. Dagobert D. Runes, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1983), s.v. "Teleology," by Wilbur Long.
5. Foley, 13.
6. Sparknotes, "The Prince," www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/prince/themes.html.
7. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5.
8. Ibid., 3.

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A Conversation with an Atheist

Rick Wade distills an in-depth e-mail dialog with an atheist in which he addresses her doubts and arguments concerning the existence of God.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

About Our Dialogue

The Conversation Begins

In the fall of 1999 I became involved in an e-mail conversation with an atheist who wrote in response to a program I'd written titled *The Relevance of Christianity*. In this program [Ed. note: The transcripts for our radio programs become the online articles such as the one you are reading.] I contrast Christianity and naturalism on the matters of meaning, morality, and hope.{1} She wrote to say that she was able to find these things in her own philosophy of life without God. If such things can be had without God, why bother bringing Him in, especially given all the trouble religion causes?

Stephanie has an undergraduate degree in philosophy, and is pursuing her doctorate in physics.{2} Our conversation has been quite cordial, and in our over two-month long conversation I've grown to respect her. She isn't just out to pick a fight. I try to keep in mind that, if her ideas seem grating on me, mine are just as grating on her.

Stephanie seems genuinely baffled by theistic belief. If God is there, He is outside the bounds of what we can know. While someone like Kierkegaard saw good reason to take a "leap of faith" into that which can't be proved, she sees no reason to

do that. “I think that if I had faith it would be like his,” she says, “but the leap seems, at this point, both futile and risky.”

Stephanie has three general objections to belief in God. First, she believes that the evidence is insufficient. The evidence of nature is all she has, and God is said to have attributes beyond the natural. There’s no way to know about such things. Second, she believes that theistic belief adds nothing of importance to our lives or to what we can know through science. I asked her, “What is it about Christianity that turns you off to it?” And she replied, “I imagine believing, and I am no more fulfilled and no less worried than I am when I am not believing. God just does not seem to be a useful, beneficial, or tenable idea.” Third, she believes that religion is morally bad for people. It grounds morality in fear, she believes, and it produces a dogmatism in adherents that prompts such behavior as killing abortion providers.

Stephanie began our correspondence not to be given proofs for the existence of God, but for me “to explain more personally His relevance.” What is called for, then, is defense and explication rather than persuasion.

Basic Elements of Stephanie’s Atheism

There are three main elements underlying Stephanie’s atheism. The first is *reason,* which she believes is sufficient for understanding our world, for morality, and for understanding and cultivating human qualities such as “aesthetic appreciation, compassion, and love.” It is, of course, the final authority on religion as well. Reason does not admit faith. Insofar as one has admitted faith into the equation, one has moved toward irrationalism. As George Smith wrote, “I will not accept the existence of God, or any doctrine, on faith because I reject faith as a valid cognitive procedure. . . . If theistic doctrines must be accepted on faith, theism is necessarily excluded.”{3}

The second element, *nature*, is reason's best source for information. Stephanie says, "I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind."

The package is complete with Stephanie's commitment to *science,* which is the tool reason uses to understand nature. It alone is capable of giving us "objective, investigable knowledge," she says. In fact, I think it is fair to label Stephanie's approach to knowledge "scientistic." There seems to be no area of life which need not be submitted to science to be considered rational, and for which scientific investigation isn't sufficient.

The reason/nature/science triumvirate provides the structure for acquiring knowledge. To go beyond it is to move into irrationalism, Stephanie believes. There's certainly no reason to add God. She says, "As I understand it, the idea of God as a creator or guarantor adds nothing but unjustified mysticism to my knowledge."{4}

Theists have no problem with using reason to understand our world, or with the study of nature, or with using the tools of science. The problem comes when Stephanie concludes that nothing can be known beyond nature analyzed scientifically. She believes that nature is all that is there or at least all that is knowable. Stephanie says she doesn't consciously start with naturalism; she has no desire to "champion naturalism as a dogma," she says. However, since science "only permits investigation of natural, repeatable phenomena," and she is satisfied with that, her view is restricted to the scope of nature. She even goes so far as to say, "I equate rationality and naturalism."

It seems, then, that the deck is stacked from the beginning. Stephanie's emphasis on science doesn't necessarily prevent her from finding God, but her naturalism does.

Insufficient Evidences

The Evidentialist Objection

Let's look at Stephanie's three basic objections to theistic belief, beginning with the charge that there is insufficient evidence to believe. Rather than offer a defense for theistic belief, let's look at the objection itself.

Stephanie's argument is called the "evidentialist objection."

She quotes W. K. Clifford, a 19th century scholar who wrote, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."{5} Stephanie's objection is that there isn't enough evidence to believe in God. The first question, of course, is what constitutes good evidence. Another question is whether we should accept Clifford's maxim in the first place.

Some atheists believe they don't bear the same burden of adducing evidences for their beliefs as theists do. They say atheism is the "default" position. To believe in God is to *add* a belief; to *not* add that belief is to remain in atheism or perhaps agnosticism.{6} But atheism isn't a "zero belief" system. Western atheism is typically naturalistic. Atheists hold definite views about the nature of the universe; there's no reason to think that atheism is where we all automatically begin in our thinking, such that to move to theism is to add a belief while to *not* believe in God is to remain in atheism. It's hard not to agree with Alvin Plantinga that the presumption of atheism "looks like a piece of merely arbitrary intellectual imperialism."{7} If theists have to give evidences, so do atheists.

Stephanie, however, doesn't defend her atheism or naturalism this way. She believes that reason using the tools of science is the only reliable means of attaining knowledge. The result of her observations, she says, is naturalism. There simply aren't sufficient evidences for believing in God, at least the

kinds of evidences that are trustworthy. Which kind are trustworthy? Stephanie wants evidences in nature, because in nature one finds "objective, investigable knowledge." However, she doesn't believe evidences for God can be found there. God must be outside of nature if He exists. She said, "You may rightly ask what kind of naturalistic evidence I would ever accept for God, and I would have to answer, none.' Because once a naturalistic investigation turns to God with its hands up, it ceases to be naturalistic, and so it ceases to refer to anything that I can hope to investigate. I lack a sense for God and I have no access to anything outside of the natural universe and my own mind." She said in a later letter that the cause of the universe may have had an agent. But when we begin adding other attributes to this agent, attributes which can't be studied scientifically, we get into trouble. "As soon as you talk about God as having infinite attributes, those attributes actually begin to lose meaning," she says. "My view," she says, "is that it's just as well to call the unknown cause what it is—an unknown cause—until the means to investigate it are developed." And by this she means natural means. *A Naturalistic Twist*

The first problem here is obvious: Stephanie has biased the argument in her favor by her restrictions on knowledge to the realm of nature. She reduces our resources for knowledge to the scientifically verifiable. Such reductionism is arbitrary. By reducing all knowledge to that which can be discovered scientifically, Stephanie has cut out significant portions of our knowledge. Philosopher Huston Smith said this: "It is as if the scientist were inside a large plastic balloon; he can shine his torch anywhere on the balloon's interior but cannot climb outside the balloon to view it as a whole, see where it is situated, or determine why it was fabricated."{8} Science can't tell us what the final cause (or purpose or goal) of a thing is; in fact it can't tell whether there *are* ultimate purposes. It cannot determine ultimate or existential meaning. While it can describe the artist's paintbrush and pigments and

canvas, it can't measure beauty. *Clifford's Folly*

Beyond this difficulty is the fact that Clifford's maxim *itself* has problems.

First, the evidentialist approach is unreasonably restrictive. If we have to be able construct an argument for everything we believe¾and upon which we act—we will believe little and act little.

Second, this approach might have validity in science, but it leaves out other significant kinds of beliefs. Kelly Clark lists perceptual beliefs, memory beliefs, belief in other minds, and truths of logic as other kinds of "properly basic" beliefs that we hold without inferring them from other beliefs.{9} Beliefs involved in personal relationships are another example. Relationships often require a willingness to believe in a friend apart from sufficient evidences. In fact, the willingness to do so can have a positive effect on developing a good relationship. Beliefs *about* persons are still another example. I accept without proof that my wife is a person, that she isn't an automaton, that she has intrinsic value, etc. These kinds of beliefs don't require amassing evidences to formulate an inductive or deductive proof. Clifford's maxim works well in scientific study, but not for beliefs about persons.

More to the point, religious beliefs don't fit so neatly within evidentialist restrictions. They are more like relational beliefs since, in confronting a Supreme Being, one is not confronting a hypothesis but a Person.

Fourth, Stephanie's use of Clifford's evidentialism is biased in her favor because, as we discussed above, her satisfaction with the deliverances of scientific investigation means she will only accept evidences in the natural order. *Do We Have Good Reasons for Believing?*

Some Christian scholars are saying that we don't *have* to have

evidences for belief, meaning that we don't have to be able to put together an argument whereby God's existence is inferred from other beliefs. Our direct experience of God is sufficient for rational belief (using "experience" in a broader sense than emotional experience).{10} Belief in God is therefore properly basic.

This is *not* to say there are no *grounds* for believing, however. Drawing from John Calvin, Alvin Plantinga says that we have an ingrained tendency to recognize God under appropriate circumstances. Of course, there *are* a number of reasons or grounds for believing. These include direct experience of God, the testimony of a people who claim to have known God, written revelation which makes sense (if one is open to the supernatural), philosophical and scientific corroboration, the historical reality of a man named Jesus who fulfilled prophecies and did miracles, etc. Am I reversing myself here? Do we need reasons or not? The point is this: while there are valid reasons for believing in God, what we do *not* need to do is submit our belief in God ultimately to Clifford's maxim, especially a version of it already committed to naturalism. We can recognize God in our experience, and this belief can be confirmed by various reasons or evidences. Rather than view our belief as guilty until proven innocent, as the evidentialist objection would have it, we can view it as innocent until proven guilty. Let the atheists prove we're wrong.

Theism Adds Nothing

The second general objection to belief in God Stephanie offers is that it adds nothing of value to life and to what we can know by reason alone. Is this true? *Meaning*

Consider the subject of *meaning*. Stephanie said she finds meaning in the everyday affairs of life without worrying about God. Let me quote an extended passage from Stephanie's first letter on the subject of meaning. Her reference in the first

line is to a quotation from a book by Albert Camus.

> Your quote from *The Stranger* ("I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe") expresses well a feeling that I have had often. The universe is not concerned with me, so I do not need to bow and cater to anything in it; I can merely be grateful (yes, actually grateful to nothing in particular) that I can walk along a path with trees and breathe in the crisp late autumn, that I can watch cotton motes fly into my face, facing the sun, that I can struggle and wrangle my way into knowing that Heisenberg's uncertainty principle is that which keeps atoms from collapsing (in nanoseconds!!). I find meaning in my relationship with my parents, brothers, and in my marriage; my husband is the most kind, capable, ethical, and wise person I've ever met. These things are sufficiently meaningful for me; I do not think that true meaning is necessarily eternal and I do not demand recognition from the universe or the human notion of its maker. I am convinced that belief in a personal god could do nothing but dilute these things by subordinating them to something as slippery as God.

Thus, Stephanie believes that God isn't necessary for her to find meaning in life.

I replied that her naturalism provides no meaning beyond what we impose on the universe. We can *pretend* there is purpose behind it all, but a universe that doesn't care about us doesn't care about our superimposed meanings either. What does she do when the meaning she has given the universe doesn't find support in the universe itself? I wrote:

> You might see this earth as a beautiful 'mother' of sorts which nourishes and sustains its inhabitants. Do people who suffer through hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes see it as such? Do people who live in almost lifeless deserts who have to spend their days walking many miles to get water and

> who struggle to eke out a meager existence from the land find beauty and meaning in it? Often people who live close to the land do indeed find a special meaning in nature itself, but by and large they also believe there is a higher power behind it who not only gives meaning to the universe but who gives meaning to the struggle to survive and to the effort to preserve nature.

When I said that all her efforts at accomplishing some good could come to naught, and thus be ultimately meaningless, her response was, “That’s OK. . . . I’m not looking for universal or eternal meaning.”

It’s hard to know what to say to that. We might follow Francis Schaeffer’s advice and “take the roof off;”{11} in other words, expose the implications of her beliefs. Stephanie says she isn’t a nihilist (one who believes that everything is thoroughly meaningless and without value); perhaps she could be called an “optimistic humanist” to use J. P. Moreland’s term.{12} She believes there are no ultimate values; rather, we give life whatever meaning we choose. However, this position has no rational edge on nihilism. It simply reflects a decision to *act* as if there is meaning. Such groundless optimism is no more rationally justifiable than nihilism. It is just intellectual make-believe designed to help us be content with our lot¾adult versions of children’s fairy tales.

Since the loss of absolute or transcendent meaning undercuts all absolute value, each person must choose his or her own values, moral and otherwise. As I told Stephanie, others might not agree with her values. The Nazis thought there was valid meaning in purifying the race. What did the Jews think?

What can be seen as meaningful for the *moment* is just that—meaningful for the moment. Death comes and everything that has gone before it comes to nothing, at least for the individual. Sure, one can find meaning in, say, working to discover a cure for a terrible disease knowing that it will

benefit countless people for ages to come. But those people who benefit from it will die one day, too. And in the end, if atheists are correct, the whole race will die out and all that it has accomplished will come to naught.{13} Thus, while there may be *temporal* significance to what we do, there is no *ultimate* significance. Can the atheist really live with this?

By contrast, the eternal nature of God gives meaning beyond the temporal. What we do has eternal significance because it is done in the context of the creation of the eternal God who acts with purpose and does nothing capriciously. More specifically, belief in God locates our actions in the context of the building of His kingdom. There is a specific end toward which we are working that gives meaning to the specific things we do.

Strictly speaking, then, we might agree with Stephanie that it's true God doesn't *add* anything. Rather, He is the very *ground* of meaning. *Morality*

What about *morality*? Although Stephanie says that naturalistic morality is superior, when pressed to offer a standard she was only able to offer a basic impulse to kindness. In addition, she said, "I think that it is sufficient to have an internal sense of the golden rule, and I think that's a natural development." She used the metaphor of a child growing up to illustrate our growth in morality. Reason is all that is needed for good moral behavior. If biblical moral principles agree with reason they are unnecessary. If they don't, "they are absurd."

In response I noted that we can measure the growth of a child by looking at an adult; the adult we might call the *telos* or goal of the child. We know what the child is supposed to become. What is the goal or end, in her view, of morality? What is the standard of goodness to which we should attain? Stephanie accepts the golden rule but can give me no reason why *I* should. Reason by itself doesn't direct me to. The

golden rule assumes a basic equality between us all. Where does *this* idea come from? Even if it is employed only to safeguard the survival of the race, by what standard shall we say *that's* a good thing? Maybe we need to get out of the way for something else.

God, however, provides a standard grounded in His character and will to which we all are subject. He doesn't change on fundamental issues (although God has pressed certain moral demands on His people more at one time than another in keeping with the progress of revelation{14}), and His law is suited to our nature and our needs. The universe doesn't necessarily stand behind Stephanie's chosen morality, but God—and the universe¾stand behind His.

One final note. Showing the weaknesses of naturalism with respect to morality is *not* to say that all atheists are evil people. In her first letter, Stephanie wrote, "I take offense at your statement that the relativism of a godless morality permits things like the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race.' . . . I find this charge of atheist amorality from Christians to be horribly persistent and unfair." I noted that I never said in the *Relevance* radio program that all atheists are immoral or amoral. What I said was that "atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards." I asked Stephanie to show me what kind of moral standard naturalism offers. In fact, it offers none. As I noted earlier, Stephanie doesn't want to "champion naturalism." She knows it has nothing to offer. In fact, in one of her latest posts, she admitted that her philosophy only leaves her with "a frail pragmatism" and even "a certain moral relativism" because she doesn't have "the absolute word of God to fall back upon." She only has her own moral standards that have no hold on anyone else. Until she can show me what universal standard naturalism offers, I'll stand behind what I said about what naturalism allows. *Hope*

Let's turn our attention now to *hope*. Stephanie says that when

she dies she will cease to exist. She thus has to be satisfied with the here and now. If there *is* nothing else, one must make do. Stephanie said, “I am satisfied with the time that I have here and now to think and feel and explore. You say, ‘an impersonal universe offers no rewards,’ but I am simply unable to comprehend the appeal of the vagaries of the Christian Heaven, especially with the heavy toll that they seem to of necessity take on intellectual honesty. If your notion of true hope requires a belief that one is promised eternal glory and fulfillment, then I cannot claim it. I am unable to comprehend what that could mean.” Maybe the reason she is unable to comprehend it is her scientistic approach. Heaven isn’t something one can analyze scientifically. P>In response I noted that she stands apart from the majority of people worldwide. There is something in us that yearns for immortality, I said. Of course, the various religions of the world have different ways of defining what the eternal state is and how to attain it. Christians believe we were created to desire it; it is a part of our make-up because we were created by an immortal God to live forever. If naturalism is true, I asked, how do you explain the desire for immortality?

If we had no good reason to believe in “the vagaries of the Christian Heaven,” I suppose it would be foolish to allow it to govern one’s life. However, we *do* have good reasons: the promise of God who doesn’t lie, and the resurrection of Jesus. We also have the witness of “eternity set in our hearts.” (Eccles. 3:11) Because of this hope—which isn’t a “cross your fingers” kind of hope, but is justified confidence in the future—our labors here for Christ’s kingdom will not die with us, but will have eternal significance. They are what is called “fruit that remains” (John 15:16), or the work which is “revealed with fire.” (1 Cor. 3:13-14) *Science*

We’re still thinking about what belief in God adds to our lives and our knowledge. One area in which even some theists don’t want to bring God is science itself. Does theistic

belief add anything to science, or is its admission a source of trouble?

Much ink has been spilled over this question. Aside from naturalistic evolutionists, some theistic scientists believe that to go beyond what is called "methodological naturalism" is risky.{15} That's the belief that, for the purposes of scientific investigation, the scientist should not fall back on God as an explanation, but should stay within the bounds of that which science can investigate. However, not everyone is of this opinion. As scholars active in the intelligent design movement are showing today, it isn't necessarily so that the supernatural has no place in science.

William Dembski, a leader in the intelligent design movement, says that, far from harming scientific inquiry, design *adds* to scientific discovery. For one thing, it fosters inquiry where a naturalistic view might see no need. Dembski names the issues of "junk DNA" and vestigial organs as examples. Is this DNA really "junk"? Did these vestigial organs have a purpose or do they have a purpose still? Openness to design also raises a new set of research questions. He says, "We will want to know how it was produced, to what extent the design is optimal, and what is its purpose." Finally, Dembski says, "An object that is designed functions within certain constraints." So, for example, "If humans are in fact designed, then we can expect psychosocial constraints to be hardwired into us. Transgress those constraints, and we as well as our society will suffer."{16}

In sum it simply isn't true that belief in God adds nothing of value to our lives and our knowledge. After all, whereas Stephanie is restricted to explanations arising from the natural order, we have the supernatural order in addition.

Moral Problems with Theism

It Doesn't Live up to Its Promises

A third general objection Stephanie has to theistic belief has to do with moral issues. Atheists say there are moral factors that count against believing in God. To show a contradiction between what the Bible teaches about God's character and what He actually does is to show either that He really doesn't exist or that He isn't worthy of our trust.

One argument says that the Bible doesn't live up to its promises. Stephanie pointed to the matter of unanswered prayer. She referred to a man who claimed to have been an evangelical who lost his faith primarily because of "the inefficacy of prayer." She has concluded that "hoping at God gives you the same results' that hoping at the indifferent universe does—none that are consistent enough to be useful!"

In response, I noted first that people often put God to the test as if He is the one who has to prove Himself. Do we have the right to expect Him to answer our prayers 1) just because we pray them, or 2) when we haven't done what He has called us to do? People can't live the way *they* want to and then expect God to 1jump when they pray. Second, God has promised *His* people that He will hear them and answer, but He doesn't always answer prayers the way we expect or when we expect. Answers might be a long time coming, or they might come in totally unexpected ways. Or it might be that over time our understanding of the situation or of God's desires changes so that we realize that we need to pray differently. *Evil*

The problem of evil is a significant moral issue in the atheist's arsenal. We talk about a God of goodness, but what we see around us is suffering, and a lot of it apparently unjustifiable. Stephanie said, "Disbelief in a personal, loving God as an explanation of the way the world works is reasonable—especially when one considers natural disasters that can't be blamed on free will and sin."{17}

One response to the problem of evil is that God sees our freedom to choose as a higher value than protecting people

from harm; this is the freewill defense. Stephanie said, however, that natural disasters can't be blamed on free will and sin. What about this? Is it true that natural disasters can't be blamed on sin? I replied that they *did* come into existence because of sin (Genesis 3). We're told in Romans 8 that creation will one day "be set free from its slavery to corruption," that it "groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now." The Fall caused the problem, and, in the consummation of the ages, the problem will be fixed.

Second, I noted that on a naturalistic basis, it's hard to even know what evil *is.* But the reality of God explains it. As theologian Henri Blocher said,

> The sense of evil requires the God of the Bible. In a novel by Joseph Heller, "While rejecting belief in God, the characters in the story find themselves compelled to postulate his existence in order to have an adequate object for their moral indignation." . . . When you raise this standard objection against God, to whom do you say it, other than *this* God? Without this God who is sovereign and good, what is the rationale of our complaints? Can we even tell what is evil? Perhaps the late John Lennon understood: "God is a concept by which we measure our pain," he sang. Might we be coming to the point where the sense of evil is a proof of the existence of God?{18}

So, while it's true that no one (in my opinion) has really nailed down an answer to the problem of evil, if there is no God, there really is no problem of evil. Does the atheist ever find herself shaking her fist at the sky after some catastrophe and demanding an explanation? If there is no God, no one is listening.

Biblical Morality

Moral Character of God

Another direction atheistic objections run with respect to moral issues is in regard to the character of God. Is He good like the Bible says?

The "Old Testament God" is a favorite target of atheists for His supposed mean spirited and angry behavior, including stoning people for picking up sticks on Sunday, and having prophets call down bears on children.{19} The story of Abraham and Isaac is Stephanie's favorite biblical enigma. She asked if I would take a knife to my son's throat if God told me to. Clearly such a God isn't worthy of being called good.

Let's look more closely at the story of Abraham. Remember first of all that God did not let Abraham kill Isaac. The text says clearly that this was a test; God knew that He was going to stop Abraham.

But why such a difficult test? Consider Abraham's cultural background. As one scholar noted, "It must be ever remembered that God accommodates His instructions to the moral and spiritual standards of the people at any given time."{20} In Abraham's day, people offered their children as sacrifices to their gods. While the idea of losing his promised son must have shaken him deeply, the idea of sacrificing him wouldn't have been as unthinkable to him as to us. Think of an equivalent today, something God might call us to do that would stretch us almost to the breaking point. Whatever we think of might not have been an adequate test for Abraham. God needed to go to the extreme with Abraham and command him to do something very difficult that wasn't beyond his imagination given his cultural setting.

Next, notice that Abraham said to the men with him "*we* will worship and return to you." (Gen. 22:5) The book of Hebrews explains that "He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type" (11:17-19). Abraham believed what God had told him about building a great nation through Isaac. So, if Isaac died

by God's command, God would raise him from the dead.

Stephanie also objected to stories that told how God commanded the complete destruction of a town by the Israelites. The only way to understand this is to put it in the context of the nature of God and His opinion of sin, and the character of the people in question. God is absolutely holy, and He is a God of justice as well as mercy. To be true to His nature, He must deal with sin. Read too about the people He had the Israelites destroy. They were evil people. God drove them out because of their wickedness (Deut. 9:5). Walter Kaiser explains why the Canaanites were dealt with so severely.

> They were cut off to prevent Israel and the rest of the world from being corrupted (Deut. 20:16-18). When a people starts to burn their children in honor of their gods (Lev. 18:21), practice sodomy, bestiality, and all sorts of loathsome vices (Lev. 18:23,24; 20:3), the land itself begins to "vomit" them out as the body heaves under the load of internal poisons (Lev. 18:25, 27-30). . . . [William Benton] Greene likens this action on God's part, not to doing evil that good may come, but doing good in spite of certain evil consequences, just as a surgeon does not refrain from amputating a gangrenous limb even though in so doing he cannot help cutting off much healthy flesh.{21}

Kaiser goes on to note that when nations repent, God withholds judgment (Jer. 18:7,8). "Thus, Canaan had, as it were, a final forty-year countdown as they heard of the events in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and what happened to the kings who opposed Israel along the way." They knew about the Israelites (Josh. 2:10-14). "Thus God waited for the 'cup of iniquity' to fill up—and fill up it did without any signs of change in spite of the marvelous signs given so that the nations, along with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, 'might know that He was the Lord.'"{22}

One more point. Stephanie seemed to think that God still does

things today as He did in Old Testament times. When I told her that God does not require all the same things of us today that He required of the Israelites, she said that “the advantage of the absoluteness of the biblical morality you wish to trumpet is negated by your softening of OT law and by your making local and relative the very commandments of God.” In other words, we say there are absolutes, but we give ourselves a way out. I simply noted that where it was commanded by God, for example, to put a rebellious son to death, we do not soften that command at all. But when in God’s own economy He brings about change, we go with the new way. God doesn’t change, but His requirements for His people have changed at times. This doesn’t leave everything open, however. The question is, What has God called us to do today?

Its Harmful Effects on Us

For Stephanie, biblical instruction on morality not only reveals a God she can’t trust, it also is harmful for us, too. So, for example, she says, “The desire not to harm can be overcome by the desire to do right by [one’s] idea of God (look at Abraham, my favorite enigma). That’s where the real harm to society can creep in.” She believes that the certainty of religious dogmatism regarding it own rightness encourages “excesses,” such as “holy wars and terrorism for possession of the holy land, and the killing of doctors and homosexuals for their own good.” She said that Christianity permits the kind of horrors we accuse atheists of perpetrating but with the endorsement of God. “Hitler was a very devout Catholic, as I understand it,” she said.

There is serious confusion here. Loaded words like “terrorism” bias the issue unfairly, and Stephanie takes some “excesses” to be rooted in Scripture when in fact they have nothing to do with biblical morality. It is unfair of her and other atheists to ignore the commands of Scripture that clearly reflect God’s goodness while ignoring sound interpretive methods for understanding the harder parts. It’s also wrong to let

religious fanaticism in general count against God. Just as some atheists aren't going to live up to Stephanie's high standards, some Christians don't live up to God's. Gene Edward Veith says that, while Hitler had a "perverse admiration for Catholicism," he "hated Christianity."{23} What is clear is that there is no biblical basis for Hitler's atrocities. To return to the point I tried to make earlier, if he looked, Hitler *could* have found moral injunctions in Christianity to oppose his actions. Naturalists, on the other hand, have no such standard by which to measure anyone's actions. Conclusion

We have attempted to respond to Stephanie's three main objections to believing in God: there's not enough evidence; it adds nothing to what we can know from science; and theism is bad for people. These are stock objections atheists present. I think they have good answers. The next step is to try to take the atheist to the place where she or he can "see" God. Removing the reasons for rejecting God is one step in the process. The next step is to show her God. I can think of no better way to do that than to take her to Jesus, who "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature" (Heb. 1:3). I recommended that Stephanie read one or more of the Gospels, and she said she would read John. This is the point of apologetics, to take people to the Lord in the presence of whom they must make a choice. Now we'll wait to see what happens.

Notes

1. Rick Wade, *The Relevance of Christianity* (Probe Ministries, 1998).

2. Stephanie is aware of this program, and has given me permission to use her name.

3. George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 98.

4. One is reminded of the time when the eighteenth century

mathematician and physicist the Marquis de Laplace was asked where God fit in his theory of celestial mechanics. He replied, “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

5. W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief,” in *Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Baruch A. Brody (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 246.

6. Antony Flew, “The Presumption of Atheism,” in *Faith and Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 337-38. See also George Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1989), 7-8.

7. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God* (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 28.

8. Huston Smith, *Beyond the Post-Modern Mind,* rev. ed. (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1989), 85.

9. Kelly James Clark, *Return to Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 126-28. I am indebted to this book for this portion of my discussion.

10. A good introduction to the evidentialist objection and this kind of response to it (what is being called Reformed epistemology) is found in Clark, *Return to Reason*. See also J.P. Moreland, S*caling the Secular City; A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 116-17. The seminal work is Plantinga and Wolterstorff, *Faith and Rationality*.

11. Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 128-130.

12. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, 120ff.

13. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, rev. ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 59.

14. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand

Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 60-64.

15. Papers from the "Naturalism, Theism and the Scientific Enterprise" conference in Austin, Texas in 1997, which included several presentations on this subject can be accessed on the Web at www.dla.utexas.edu/depts/philosophy/faculty/koons/ntse/ntse.html.

16. William A. Dembski, "Science and Design," *First Things* 86 (October 1998): 26-27.

17. There is an article on Probe's web site about the problem of evil, so I'll only make a few comments here. See Rick Rood, The Problem of Evil: How Can A Good God Allow Evil? (Probe Ministries, 1996).

18. Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102-03.

19. For a in-depth discussion of the moral difficulties in the Old Testament, the reader might want to refer to Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, in which he devotes three chapters to such difficulties.

20. W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 197.

21. Kaiser, 267-68.

22. Kaiser, 268.

23. Gene Edward Veith, *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 50.

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The Relevance of Christianity: An Apologetic

Rick Wade develops and defends the relevancy of Christianity, encouraging believers to find points of contact with an unbelieving world.

This article is also available in Spanish.

Christianity and Human Experience

In his book, *Intellectuals Don't Need God and Other Modern Myths*, theologian Alister McGrath tells about his friend's stamp-collecting hobby. His friend, he says, "is perfectly capable of telling me everything I could possibly want to know about the watermarks of stamps issued during the reign of Queen Victoria by the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago. And while I have no doubt about the truth of what he is telling me, I cannot help but feel that it is an utter irrelevance to my life."{1}

Christianity strikes many people the same way, McGrath says. They simply see no need for a religion that is 2000 years old and has had its day. How is it relevant to them?

One of the duties of Christian apologetics is that of making a case for the faith. We can prepare ourselves for such opportunities by memorizing many facts about our faith, such as evidences for the reliability of the Bible and the truth of the resurrection. We can learn logical arguments such as those for the existence of God or the logical consistency of Christian doctrines. While these are important components, such things can seem very remote from people today. They will not do much good in our apologetics if people are not

listening.

This is why some Christian thinkers are now saying that before we can show Christianity to be *credible*, we must first make it *plausible*. In other words, we must get people's attention first by bringing Christianity—at least in *their* thinking—into the position of being possibly true.{2} We need to find those points of contact with people that will encourage them to want to listen.

Why do we need to begin at such a basic level? A few reasons come to mind. First, many people think religion has nothing important to say regarding our public activities. So, in our daily lives religion is only allowed a minor role at best. This attitude quickly affects how we view our private lives as well. Second, many people hold that science is the only worthwhile source of meaningful knowledge. This often—although not necessarily—leads to a naturalistic worldview or at least causes people to think like naturalists. Scientism and naturalism seem to go hand-in-hand. Thus, in order to get a person's attention, the first step we might need to take is to show him how Christianity applies to his life's experience.{3}

Even though we are physically better off because of our scientific knowledge applied through various technologies, are we better off all around than before we had such things? I am not deriding the benefit of science and technology; I am simply wondering about our spiritual and moral health. Our society is trying to find itself. This is clearly seen in current debates over important ethical and social issues. At the root of our culture wars is the question, Who are we, and what are we to be about? The age-old questions continue to haunt us: Where did I come from? Why am I here? What am I supposed to be doing? Where am I going? With the loss of his exalted place in the universe following the loss of a Christian world view, man now wonders what his place is. Am I significant in a universe that sees me as just one more piece of cosmic dust? Is there any intrinsic meaning to my

existence? Or must I determine for myself what my place and role will be?

In addition to apologetic arguments from logic and factual evidence, we should also be prepared to answer questions such as these. We need to let people know that in Christ are found answers to the major issues of life. By doing this, we can engage people where they really live. We can show them that God is not some abstract force separated from the concerns of life, but "is intimately related to personal and human needs."{4} As one writer put it, "God must be shown to be necessitated or justified by *practical* or *existential* thinking."{5}

In this article I will address these three issues: meaning, morality, and hope.{7} offers and contrast it with the Christian view.

The Matter of Meaning

Let us begin with the matter of *meaning*. The question What is the meaning of life? might not be one which most people give serious attention to. But a similar question is often heard, namely, What's the *point*? When we look for the significance or the point of our activities, we are wondering about their meaning. Reflective individuals carry this idea further, wondering What's the point—or what is the *meaning*—of it *all*? Although many people would argue that life *has* no ultimate meaning, most people seem to expect it to. We search for it in creativity, in helping others, in "finding ourselves," and in a variety of other ways.

The question of meaning encompasses other questions: Where did I come from? What is the significance of the experiences of my life? What is my overall purpose, and what should I be doing? Where is all this heading?

The prevailing view in the West today, for all practical

purposes, is naturalism. This is not only the prevailing philosophy on college campuses, but we have all been encouraged by the successes of science to believe that if something is not scientific, it is not reliable. Since science investigates the natural order, we tend to see nature as all that is really important, or even as all that exists. This is called scientific reductionism.

However, the scientific method is capable of dealing only with quantitative matters: How much? How big? How far? How fast? Philosopher Huston Smith has argued that, for all the achievements of science, it is incapable of speaking to such important issues as values, purpose, meaning, and quality.{8}

This focus on science is not meant to pick on this discipline, but to point out that science cannot give answers to some of the major issues of life. Moreover, if we go so far as to adopt naturalism as a world view, we are really in a bind, for naturalism *has* no answers to give, at least to the question of ultimate meaning. Naturalism says there was no purpose for our coming into being; the only meaning we can have now is that which we superimpose on our own lives; and we are all just going back to the dust. If the universe is just a chance accident in space and time; if living beings intrinsically are nothing more than just so many molecules, no matter how marvelously arranged; if human beings are merely cousins to trees, trapped on a planet caught somewhere "between immensity and eternity," as Carl Sagan said; then there is no meaning to life that we ourselves do not give to it. Being finite, we are by nature incapable of providing ultimate meaning.

If we should seek to establish our *own* meanings, what is to guide us? By what shall we measure such things? What if that which is meaningful to me is offensive to you? Furthermore, what if the goals we pursue are not capable of bearing the meaning we try to put into them? Many people strive to move up the ladder, to attain the power and prestige that they think will fulfill them, only to find that it's not all it's cracked

up to be. The possession of material goods defines many of our lives. But how much is enough? Does the one with the most toys when he dies really win? Or, as some have said, is it simply that the one who dies with the most toys . . . still dies?

Thus, there is no ultimate meaning in a universe without God, and our attempts at providing our own limited meanings often leave us looking for more.

If naturalism is true, we should be able to shake off the fantasies of our past and give up worrying about questions of ultimate meaning. However, we continue to look for something bigger than ourselves, something that will give our lives meaning. Christianity provides the explanation. We are drawn toward the One who created us and imbues our lives with meaning as part of His purposes. We are significant in ourselves because He made us, and there is meaning in our daily activities because that is the context in which we work out His ambitions for us and our world. Recognizing the true God opens to us the reality of value and meaning. The meaning of life is found when we find our place in God's world.

The Matter of Morality

In his book, *Can Man Live Without God*, apologist Ravi Zacharias makes this bold assertion: "Antitheism provides every reason to be immoral and is bereft of any objective point of reference with which to condemn any choice. Any antitheist who lives a moral life merely lives better than his or her philosophy warrants."{9} What a bold thing to say! Is Zacharias saying that all atheists (or antitheists, as he calls them) are immoral? Not at all. But he is saying that atheism itself makes no provision for fixed moral standards.

One very important aspect of being human is morality. A basic understanding of the concept of right and wrong or good and bad is fixed in our nature. We constantly evaluate actions and events—and even people—as good or bad or, in some cases,

neither. These are moral evaluations. They are significant for our personal choices, and they are critical to our participation in society.

In our culture today naturalism is the reigning public philosophy. Even if many people claim to believe in God, practical naturalism (or atheism) is the rule of the day. Regarding morality, the general attitude seems to be that there is no moral code to which we all are subject. We say in effect, I'll choose my morality, and you choose yours. But if Zacharias is correct, naturalism (or atheism) provides no solid foundation even for personal morality.

The question we might pose to an atheist (which could be directed at a practical atheist as well) is this: How do you justify your own actions? To that question the atheist could simply answer that he has need no for justification apart from his own desires and needs. While I think it is possible to argue that naturalism cannot be trusted to provide a moral compass—even for one's own needs—we can bring the real issue to the fore more quickly by asking two questions: How do you justify your moral outrage at the actions of others in any given instance? and, Do you expect others to take your objections seriously? To expect someone to take my objections to his behavior seriously, I must presuppose a moral standard that stands in authority above us all, unless, of course, I think that I *myself* am that standard. But what does that do to his right to determine his *own* morality? The atheist sometimes wants to have it both ways. He wants to be his own standard-maker. But is he willing to give this privilege to others?

Now, some atheist might respond that, of course, as a culture we have to have laws in order to live together peacefully. Individuals are not free to do anything they please; they have to obey the laws of society. The well-known humanist philosopher Paul Kurtz believes that "education, reason, science and democratic methods of persuasion" are adequate for establishing our norms.{10} But there are educated people who

hold different beliefs. Intelligent reason has led people to different conclusions. Science can not instruct us in morality. And in a society where there are a variety of opinions about what is right and wrong, how do we know which opinion is correct? Simple majority rule? Sometimes the minority is in the right, as the issue of civil rights has shown. No, Kurtz's reason, education, science, and democracy will not do by themselves. They need to be informed by a higher law.

Besides all this, Kurtz has certain presupposed ideas about the proper end of our laws. For example, does furthering the human race mean giving everyone an equal opportunity? Or does it mean joining with Hitler and seeking to exterminate the weak and inferior?

Naturalism provides no transcendent law that stands over all people at all times to which we can appeal to establish a moral order. Nor is there a solid basis upon which to complain when we are wronged. Christianity, on the other hand, *does* provide a transcendent moral structure and specific moral laws that serve to both restrain us and protect us.

When the question of morality arises, atheists will often offer the rebuttal that Christian morality is apparently not sufficient to lead people into the "good life" because Christians have done some terrible things to other people {and to each other) over the years. While it is true that Christians have done some terrible things, there is nothing in Christianity that requires it, and there are definite commands not to do such things. The Christian who does evil goes against the religion he or she professes. The atheist, however, can justify almost any kind of activity since man becomes the measure of all things. Again, this does not mean that all or even most atheists lead blatantly immoral lives. It just means that they have no fixed point of reference by which to establish laws or to condemn the actions of others.

Christianity not only provides a moral structure and specific moral laws, it also provides for the power to do what is right. The atheist is left on his own to do what is right. Those who submit to God also have the Spirit to enable them to obey God's moral law.

There is turmoil in our society today as we try to decide all over again what is good and what is evil. In our encounters with non-believers, by tapping into the need we all have for a moral structure suitable for both our preservation and our betterment, we can pave the way for their consideration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Matter of Hope

You have likely heard the expression "hope against hope." It refers to those times when there is no hope in sight, yet we keep on hoping anyway. There is something within us—most of us, anyway—which continues to see some possibility for good beyond a present crisis, or at least causes us to long for it.

As we consider the role human experience can play in apologetics, we should give serious attention to the question of hope because it quickly finds a home in our souls. Few of us have absolutely no hope. What worse state can we imagine than to have no hope at all? What we are more likely to see than no hope at all is hope in things that are not worthy. Nonetheless, the presence of hope in the darkest of places is something with which we are all familiar.

Nowadays, however, hope seems to be in short supply. In spite of all the glorious advances made in a number of areas of life, there is a prevailing mood of unease. Americans seem to be scrambling for something in which to put their confidence for the future.

For centuries the Western world found its hope in God, the One who was working out His purposes toward a glorious end. But by

the early part of this century, naturalism had taken hold of the academy and then our social consciousness as well.

From there, people went in different directions in their thinking. Secular humanists took the optimistic route and declared their hope in mankind. They continue to do so in spite of the fact that, in this "enlightened" era, our means of advancing the cause of humanity include aborting the unborn and helping the desperate kill themselves. Education, reason, science, and democracy—the gods of humanism—have yet to give us any real cause for hope.

Other people have grown cynical. With nothing more to hope in than what they see around them, they have lost faith in everything. They do not trust anyone anymore; they doubt that anyone can be truly virtuous; and they have simply settled into hopelessness. {11} Still others of a more philosophical bent have been drawn to atheistic existentialism, the philosophy of despair, which declares that God is dead and with Him that in which we once put our hope.{12}

A good illustration of someone trying to find something positive in the loss of hope in the Christian God is found in Albert Camus' novel, *The Stranger*.{13} The protagonist, Meursault, winds up in jail for the senseless murder of a man on a beach. After his trial, as he is awaiting either an appeal or his execution, Meursault is visited by a chaplain who tries to get him to confess belief in God. Meursault informs him that he does not have much time left, "and [he] wasn't going to waste it on God."{14} Meursault angrily rejects all the priest says. He believes that the fate of death to which everyone is subject levels out everything people believe. One action is as good as another; one way of life is as good as another.

After the priest leaves and Meursault has slept for awhile, he says this as he considers his fate:

> *[I] felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great gush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe.* {15}

If there is no God out there, the best we can do is accept the reality of our nothingness, and begin to make of ourselves whatever we can. Like the bumper sticker I once saw which read, "I've been much happier since I gave up hope." Previously Meursault had admitted being afraid, and he had betrayed his own humanity when, after coolly thinking about how death comes to everyone, and how it really does not matter when or how one dies, the thought of a possible appeal brought a sudden rush of joy through his body and brought tears to his eyes.{16} Now he bravely faces a universe that does not care, and he feels free.

If anyone ever truly feels this way in real life, that person is the exception rather than the rule. The word *hopeless* has negative connotations; we do not normally think of it as a positive thing. The atheistic existentialist must go against what appears to be the norm to achieve this state of happiness in the face of a purposeless universe.

Of course, not all atheists will opt for Camus' philosophy. To some extent, hope for the fulfillment of our various earthly ambitions fits in with a naturalistic worldview. A boy can practice his swing with the hope of doing better in the batter's box. A woman with the hope of getting married can very likely see that hope fulfilled. A man may get that promotion he hopes for by working hard. Yet frequently people find that what they had hoped for fails to provide the fulfillment they expected.

And what about hope for the future? Is there anything to hope for after death? When old age creeps up and the elderly man

reviews his life, is there any hope that something will come of all the labors and heartaches and wins and losses of his life? Was it all leading somewhere? The most naturalism can allow is that our lives might benefit others. But naturalism cannot of itself undergird such a hope. An impersonal universe offers no rewards. And no one can predict what the next generation will do with one's efforts. Besides, we might wonder why we should worry about the benefit of others who, like ourselves, are just pieces of cosmic dust. To take this even further, naturalism can just as easily allow for the destruction of the weak and the development of a master race as it can for an altruistic attitude toward all people.

Of course, naturalism has nothing beyond the grave to offer the individual him- or herself. There is no culmination, no reward, no "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21). You live, you do your best (according to your own standards, of course), and you die.

Yet, we continue to hope. I wonder if the "hope [that] springs eternal" is rooted within us in that "eternity" which is "set . . .in the hearts of men"(Eccl. 3:11)? Or, maybe it stems from the knowledge we all have of Deity, even though that knowledge might be warped by sin. An inescapable awareness of something transcendent continually draws us upward.

Christianity holds that the psychological reality of hope, and the content of hope that does not fail, is found in Jesus who is our hope (1 Tim. 1:1). Let us look at that in more detail.

The Answer Found in Jesus

One of the great benefits of addressing the matters of meaning, morality, and hope in Christian apologetics is that they take us right into the Gospel message. Our meaning is rooted in the personal God who created us and is actively involved in our affairs. Lasting, objective moral values to which we all are accountable and which serve to protect us

find their source in God's nature and will. And hope is what He sent His Son to give us along with forgiveness and new life and a host of other things.

Before looking at these issues more closely, I should address a couple of potential objections to bringing human experience into apologetics. One objection is that the apologist can quickly fall into *selling* the faith by an appeal to the felt needs of consumeristic Americans. Such needs are not always valid.

Another objection is that such matters are subjective. To appeal to them is to become trapped in matters that are at best non-rational and at worst irrational. Our consideration of Christianity should not be based upon such flimsy foundations.

These problems can be avoided by concentrating on those aspects of our experience which are universally shared. Someone has called these "objective-subjective" matters. That is, they are subjective matters of a kind shared by all of us by virtue of our membership in the human race. The desire for moral order is something felt inwardly, but it is a universal need. Faith is subjective, but the disposition to believe is a universal one. Personal meaning also is an inward desire, but it is one we all have.

Let us consider now the answers the Bible gives to the questions we're considering.

Remember that one of the questions encompassed by the question of meaning is, Where did I come from? In John 1:1-3, Colossians 1:16-17, and Hebrews 1:2 we learn that we were created by God through Jesus. Furthermore, we learn from the examples of David and Jeremiah that God created us and knows us individually (Ps. 139:13-16; Jer. 1:5). Unless we are prepared to argue that we were made on a whim or maybe just for sport—and nothing in Scripture indicates that God does

anything like that—we must conclude that He made us for a purpose.

The question, Is there meaning in the experiences of daily life?, is answered by the understanding that God is working out His own purposes in our lives (Phil. 2:12-13; Rom. 8:28; 9:11,17; Eph. 1:11).

Finally, to the questions, What is my purpose? and What should I be doing?, Scripture teaches that I am to obey God's moral precepts (Jn. 14:23,24; 1 Jn. [entire book]), and that I am to participate in God's work by doing the things He has given me to do in particular (Jn. 13:12-17; Eph. 2:10; 1 Pe. 4:10).

Regarding morality, the noble acts of people and the ravages of war are understandable in light of our being created in God's image, on the one hand, and corrupted by sin, on the other. Although we typically do not think of Jesus as the law-giver as much as the exemplar of moral goodness, this is not to say that He does not Himself define for us what is good. Being fully God He shares the moral perfection of God the Father. He also created us as moral creatures and planted in us the awareness of right and wrong. Furthermore, His central position in the plan of redemption—which was put into effect because of our sin-induced estrangement from God—makes Him a focal point in the matter of good and evil. Thus, in Jesus is found an understanding of our consciousness of sin and judgment as well as the solution to the crucial issue of guilt and forgiveness.

This is all too often forgotten in evangelical witness today. One theologian has noted that the central theme of the Gospel is no longer justification by faith, but the new life. But people know that they do wrong, and they want to have the burden of guilt lifted. Many do this by denying any kind of universal morality. All they have to do to maintain a clear conscience, they think, is to be "true" to themselves. But in practice this does not work. We react negatively when an

individual who is being “true” to himself does something mean to us. We also know that others are justified in objecting to our actions that are hurtful to them. Our moral outrage at the actions and words of others betrays our sense that there is a moral law that transcends us. Naturalism has no means of dealing with all this, but Jesus does.

I have already touched on the important place that hope occupies in the Christian life. We have something specific to hope for, and in our walk with Christ we can experience hope on the psychological level.

For the apostles Paul and Peter, hope finds its objective focal point in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 23:6; 24:14-15; 1 Pe. 1:3). For our hope is eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7), and Jesus’ resurrection is objective, concrete evidence that the promise of eternal life is sure. It is with the objective content of our hope in mind that Paul can say the Gentiles had no hope and were without God in the world (Eph. 2:12).

The hope we have is not something we can see (Rom. 8:24-25); it is waiting for us in heaven (Col. 1:5). Nonetheless it provides the context for our joy today (Rom. 12:12). Hope is strengthened as we learn what God has done in the past, and as we persevere in our Christian walk (Rom. 15:4). As our faith grows and we experience the joy and peace Jesus gives, our hope is brought alive (Rom. 15:13). Rather than put our hope in earthly riches (1 Tim. 6:17), we put our hope in the God who cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

In short, the answers to the questions of meaning, law, and hope—which have no answers in naturalism – are found in Jesus. These truths, buttressed by the facts and logical consistency of Christianity, can be a significant part of our case for the truth of Jesus Christ. Although truth is not ultimately determined by experience, the common experience of humanity provides a point of contact for the Gospel. Even if such matters are not persuasive by themselves, they might at least

serve to show that Christianity is relevant to our lives today.

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The Truth About Heaven

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

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But there is really no reason to believe we will not be. To be infinite in relation to time is an attribute only God can possess. We know that Scripture speaks of "months" in Heaven (Rev. 22:2) and even "ages" to come (Eph. 2:7). Certainly also, the music which will be sung in Heaven requires a

temporal mode of existence. It seems apparent also that in Heaven we will be cognizant, to some degree, of what is transpiring on earth. When Moses and Elijah met the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, it's recorded that they discussed Jesus' coming return to glory (Luke 9:30-31). And during the coming tribulation period we are told that the saints in Heaven will be anxiously awaiting the completion of God's purposes on earth (Rev. 6:10-11). Until His kingdom comes, even in Heaven the question will be asked, "How long, O Lord?" (as these saints are recorded as imploring).

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

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Spiritual Changes!

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

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of "the hope of righteousness" for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body (Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold "the glory of the Lord" we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him "just as He is." And when we

do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

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

prompting us to join in His praise.

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

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

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

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and

“dies” (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is “spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!”

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

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united worship of God, we will serve (Rev. 22:3) and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). The domain over which we will reign will no doubt encompass all of creation, for we’re told that for Christ “all things have been created” (Col. 1:16), and that with Him we will inherit “all these things” (Rev. 21:7)!

Though in many respects there will be a certain continuity between our present and future life, many tasks and occupations of the present order will no longer be needed. The enterprises in which we will engage will be totally creative and productive far more fulfilling and exciting than anything we know on earth today!

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

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

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

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

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ’s presence “with confidence,” or “to shrink away from Him in shame” (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a “stumbling” fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be “rewarded,” or “suffer loss”; that it is possible to be “saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the “fire” referred to here is a reference to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as “a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for

“bad” in this case refers not merely to what is “evil” but to what from God’s perspective is “worthless.” Not only will our “works” be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

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

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

The most important fact about our heavenly rewards is that they are based not on our position or ability, but on our faithfulness. Time and again Jesus told His followers that “he

who is faithful in a little thing, will be faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10; 19:17).

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

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

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

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

Second, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the true nature of success. On every side we hear the message that the "good life" consists in the accumulation of material possessions, the acquisition of power, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Scripture does encourage us to enjoy the many good things of life with which we may be blessed (1 Tim.

6:17); but the hope of Heaven should remind us that this world and all that is in it is passing away, that its glory is for only a season (1 John 2:15 17), that we truly are “strangers and aliens” in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

3. Sanders, p. 19.

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

5. Stedman, 334.

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

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

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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 prophesies 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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