

# Why A Moral Life Won't Get Us to Heaven

*Will a good, moral life get me to heaven?' The answer is no, and Probe's Jimmy Williams spells out why, including how we CAN get to heaven.*

## Man: The Worshiping Animal

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

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

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

Secondly, what is also curious is *how* and *what* humans worship. The most prominent feature of human worship from earliest

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

The centrality of sacrifice in all human religious thinking points to an unmistakable reality: that humans instinctively know, or at least suspect, that there exists One to whom they are accountable for their behavior. They also assume, or know, that they have fallen short of what that higher being (or beings) requires of them. There is a universal sense that “God is not pleased with me.” So a third feature of worship is universal *guilt*. People worship because they feel guilty. They feel this guilt because they perceive they have fallen short of the standard that God, others, and they themselves require.

## **The Great Global Heresy: Religion**

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

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

Everywhere we turn, we hear people speak of this religion: it is the most popular approach to God on the planet. We all know about the good little angel sitting on one shoulder and the bad little angel on the other. And we are very familiar with jokes about what happens to the person who dies and is

immediately face to face with Saint Peter at the Golden Gates of Heaven. Peter stands there ready to evaluate and pass judgement on whether we've been good enough to be admitted and accepted inside. Saint Peter expects us to give moral account of ourselves before we can go inside.

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

This is "religion," but it is definitely not Christianity. In fact, Christianity is radically opposed to such an idea, teaching us that we are not to *do* something, but rather that something has already been *done* on our behalf. This global heresy, which we call "religion," actually comes from Hinduism. It is the idea that God resides at the top of a great mountain, and it makes little difference which path a seeker chooses in his ascent up that mountain, since all paths lead to the God on top. And it is up to you to climb if you want to reach the summit—and God.

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

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

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

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

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

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

# The Problem of Sin

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A wise old Baptist preacher once said, "It isn't difficult to

get people saved; it is difficult to get them lost!" This is man's dilemma: like the Pharisees, people cling to the old fig leaves of self-effort instead of submitting to the covering God Himself has provided for all (Christ's sacrificial death, the Cross). Each of us must choose one or the other (John 3:18, 36).

## The Problem of Righteousness

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

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

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

enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

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

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

Paul referred to these same two righteousnesses when he said of his Jewish brethren, "I bear them witness, that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and *seeking to establish their own*, they did not submit themselves to the righteousness of God" (Romans 10:1).

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

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



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

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

## **The Uniqueness of Christian Grace**

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

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

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

The text does not tell us whether this person was one of the "good" ones or the "bad" ones. Why? Because it is irrelevant to what Jesus wants us to understand. The important issue was proper *attire* for the occasion. God is telling us that the only acceptable attire for heaven is the righteousness of Christ.

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

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

So how does this apply to you and me? Simply this: Everything that *needed* to be done for your salvation and mine was *accomplished* the moment Christ died on the cross. The penalty has been paid and God's righteous demands satisfied. God is now free to extend eternal life as a free gift. He declares, "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Gifts, of course, must be received. For that reason, Jesus

said, "He who believes has eternal life" (John 6:47). "Believe" means "to trust or depend on." God is asking each person to come to Him as a sinner, recognize that His Son died on the cross for us, and trust His Son *alone* as our only hope of heaven.

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

In reality, every human being is just a prayer away from receiving the grace and forgiveness of God and the promise of heaven. But it has to be the *right* prayer, based on the *right* facts: that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners, not "Do-Gooders": "I have not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners" (Matthew 9:13). You can begin to trust Christ for your salvation today instead of your own, futile efforts of trying to be a fairly nice person all your life. Obviously, your heart attitude, your sincerity, is what really counts. God knows your heart. But if the following suggested prayer will help to bring a sense of closure and certainty to your decision to believe in, to trust Christ, then please feel free to use it as a simple guide:

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

Amen.”

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# Blaise Pascal: An Apologist for Our Times – A Defense of Christianity Ringing True Today

*Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist.*



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

One of the tasks of Christian apologetics is to serve as a tool for evangelism. It is very easy, however, to stay in the realm of ideas and never confront unbelievers with the necessity of putting their faith in Christ.

One apologist who was not guilty of this was Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth-century mathematician, scientist, inventor and Christian apologist. Christ and the need for redemption through Him were central to Pascal's apologetics.

There was another feature of Pascal's thought that was, and remains, rare in apologetics: his understanding of the human condition as both created and fallen, and his use of that understanding as a point of contact with unbelievers.

Peter Kreeft, a modern day Christian philosopher and apologist, says that Pascal is a man for *our* day. "Pascal," he

says, "is three centuries ahead of his time. He addresses his apologetic to modern pagans, sophisticated skeptics, comfortable members of the new secular intelligentsia. He is the first to realize the new dechristianized, desacramentalized world and to address it. He belongs to us. . . . Pascal is our prophet. No one after this seventeenth-century man has so accurately described our twentieth-century mind."[\[1\]](#)

Pascal was born June 19, 1623 in Clermont, France, and moved to Paris in 1631. His mother died when he was three, and he was raised by his father, a respected mathematician, who personally directed his education.

Young Blaise took after his father in mathematics. In 1640, at age 16, he published an essay on the sections of a cone which was much praised.[\[2\]](#) Between 1642 and 1644 Pascal developed a calculating machine for his father to use in his tax computations. Later, he "invented the syringe, refined Torricelli's barometer, and created the hydraulic press, an instrument based upon the principles which came to be known as Pascal's law" of pressure.[\[3\]](#) He did important work on the problem of the vacuum, and he is also known for his work on the calculus of probabilities.

Although a Catholic in belief and practice, after the death of his father and the entrance of his younger sister into a convent, Pascal entered a very worldly phase of his life. Things changed, however, on the night of November 23, 1654, when he underwent a remarkable conversion experience which changed the course of his life. He joined a community of scholars in Port-Royal, France, who were known as Jansenists. Although he participated in the prayers and work of the group, he didn't become a full-fledged member himself. However, he assisted them in a serious controversy with the Jesuits, and some of his writings on their behalf are considered "a monument in the evolution of French prose" by historians of the language.[\[4\]](#)

In 1657 and 1658 Pascal wrote notes on apologetics which he intended to organize into a book. These notes were published after his death as the *Pensees*, which means “thoughts” in French. It is this collection of writings which has established Pascal in Christian apologetics. This book is still available today in several different versions.{5}

Pascal was a rather sickly young man, and in the latter part of his short life he suffered from severe pain. On August 19, 1662, at the age of 39, Pascal died. His last words were “May God never abandon me!”{6}

## The Human Condition

To properly understand Pascal’s apologetics, it’s important to recognize his motive. Pascal wasn’t interested in defending Christianity as a system of belief; his interest was evangelistic. He wanted to persuade people to believe in Jesus. When apologetics has evangelism as its primary goal, it has to take into account the condition of the people being addressed. For Pascal the human condition was the starting point and point of contact for apologetics.

In his analysis of man, Pascal focuses on two very contradictory sides of fallen human nature. Man is both noble and wretched. Noble, because he is created in God’s image; wretched, because he is fallen and alienated from God. In one of his more passionate notes, Pascal says this:

What kind of freak is man! What a novelty he is, how absurd he is, how chaotic and what a mass of contradictions, and yet what a prodigy! He is judge of all things, yet a feeble worm. He is repository of truth, and yet sinks into such doubt and error. He is the glory and the scum of the universe!{7}

Furthermore, Pascal says, we know that we are wretched. But it is this very knowledge that shows our greatness.

Pascal says it's important to have a right understanding of ourselves. He says "it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness, and to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can free him from it." Thus, our message must be that "there is a God whom men can know, and that there is a corruption in their nature which renders them unworthy of Him."[\[8\]](#) This prepares the unbeliever to hear about the Redeemer who reconciles the sinner with the Creator.

Pascal says that people know deep down that there is a problem, but we resist slowing down long enough to think about it. He says:

Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. Man finds nothing so intolerable as to be in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. Then he faces his nullity, loneliness, inadequacy, dependence, helplessness, emptiness. And at once there wells up from the depths of his soul boredom, gloom, depression, chagrin, resentment, despair.[\[9\]](#)

Pascal says there are two ways people avoid thinking about such matters: diversion and indifference. Regarding diversion, he says we fill up our time with relatively useless activities simply to avoid facing the truth of our wretchedness. "The natural misfortune of our mortality and weakness is so miserable," he says, "that nothing can console us when we really think about it. . . . The only good thing for man, therefore, is to be diverted so that he will stop thinking about his circumstances." Business, gambling, and entertainment are examples of things which keep us busy in this way.[\[10\]](#)

The other response to our condition is indifference. The most important question we can ask is What happens after death? Life is but a few short years, and death is forever. Our state

after death should be of paramount importance, shouldn't it? But the attitude people take is this:  
Just as I do Rick Wade examines the contemporary relevance of the apologetics of Blaise Pascal, a 17th century mathematician, scientist, inventor, and Christian apologist. not know where I came from, so I do not know where I am going. All I know is that when I leave this world I shall fall forever into oblivion, or into the hands of an angry God, without knowing which of the two will be my lot for eternity. Such is my state of mind, full of weakness and uncertainty. The only conclusion I can draw from all this is that I must pass my days without a thought of trying to find out what is going to happen to me. [{11}](#)

Pascal is appalled that people think this way, and he wants to shake people out of their stupor and make them think about eternity. Thus, the condition of man is his starting point for moving people toward a genuine knowledge of God.

## Knowledge of the Heart

Pascal lived in the age of the rise of rationalism. Revelation had fallen on hard times; man's reason was now the final source for truth. In the realm of religious belief many people exalted reason and adopted a deistic view of God. Some, however, became skeptics. They doubted the competence of both revelation and reason.

Although Pascal couldn't side with the skeptics, neither would he go the way of the rationalists. Instead of arguing that revelation was a better source of truth than reason, he focused on the limitations of reason itself. (I should stop here to note that by *reason* Pascal meant the reasoning process. He did not deny the true powers of reason; he was, after all, a scientist and mathematician.) Although the advances in science increased man's knowledge, it also made people aware of how little they knew. Thus, through our reason we realize that reason itself has limits. "Reason's last



step," Pascal said, "is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it."[{12}](#) Our knowledge is somewhere between certainty and complete ignorance, Pascal believed.[{13}](#) The bottom line is that we need to know when to affirm something as true, when to doubt, and when to submit to authority.[{14}](#)

Besides the problem of our limited knowledge, Pascal also noted how our reason is easily distracted by our senses and hindered by our passions.[{15}](#) "The two so-called principles of truth\*reason and the senses\*are not only not genuine but are engaged in mutual deception. Through false appearances the senses deceive reason. And just as they trick the soul, they are in turn tricked by it. It takes its revenge. The senses are influenced by the passions which produce false impressions."[{16}](#) Things sometimes appear to our senses other than they really are, such as the way a stick appears bent when put in water. Our emotions or passions also influence how we think about things. And our imagination, which Pascal says is our dominant faculty[{17}](#), often has precedence over our reason. A bridge suspended high over a ravine might be wide enough and sturdy enough, but our imagination sees us surely falling off.

So, our finiteness, our senses, our passions, and our imagination can adversely influence our powers of reason. But Pascal believed that people really *do* know some things to be true even if they cannot account for it rationally. Such knowledge comes through another channel, namely, the heart.

This brings us to what is perhaps the best known quotation of Pascal: "The heart has its reasons which reason does not know."[{18}](#) In other words, there are times that we know something is true but we did not come to that knowledge through logical reasoning, neither can we give a logical argument to support that belief.

For Pascal, the heart is "the `intuitive' mind" rather than

“the ‘geometrical’ (calculating, reasoning) mind.”<sup>{19}</sup> For example, we know when we aren’t dreaming. But we can’t prove it rationally. However, this only proves that our reason has weaknesses; it does not prove that our knowledge is completely uncertain. Furthermore, our knowledge of such first principles as space, time, motion, and number is certain even though known by the heart and not arrived at by reason. In fact, reason bases its arguments on such knowledge.<sup>{20}</sup> Knowledge of the heart and knowledge of reason might be arrived at in different ways, but they are both valid. And neither can demand that knowledge coming through the other should submit to its own dictates.

## The Knowledge of God

If reason is limited in its understanding of the natural order, knowledge of God can be especially troublesome. “If natural things are beyond [reason],” Pascal said, “what are we to say about supernatural things?”<sup>{21}</sup>

There are several factors which hinder our knowledge of God. As noted before, we are limited by our finitude. How can the finite understand the infinite?<sup>{22}</sup> Another problem is that we cannot see clearly because we are in the darkness of sin. Our will is turned away from God, and our reasoning abilities are also adversely affected.

There is another significant limitation on our knowledge of God. Referring to Isaiah 8:17 and 45:15<sup>{23}</sup>, Pascal says that as a result of our sin God deliberately hides Himself (“hides” in the sense that He doesn’t speak). One reason He does this is to test our will. Pascal says, “God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will.” God wants to “humble [our] pride.”<sup>{24}</sup>

But God doesn’t remain completely hidden; He is both hidden and revealed. “If there were no obscurity,” Pascal says, “man would not feel his corruption: if there were no light man

could not hope for a cure.”{25}

God not only hides Himself to test our will; He also does it so that we can only come to Him through Christ, not by working through some logical proofs. “God is a hidden God,” says Pascal, “ and . . . since nature was corrupted [God] has left men to their blindness, from which they can escape only through Jesus Christ, without whom all communication with God is broken off. *Neither knoweth any man the Father save the Son, and he to whosoever the Son will reveal him.*”{26} Pascal’s apologetic is decidedly Christocentric. True knowledge of God isn’t mere intellectual assent to the reality of a divine being. It *must* include a knowledge of Christ through whom God revealed Himself. He says:

All who have claimed to know God and to prove his existence without Jesus Christ have done so ineffectively. . . . Apart from him, and without Scripture, without original sin, without the necessary Mediator who was promised and who came, it is impossible to prove absolutely that God exists, or to teach sound doctrine and sound morality. But through and in Jesus Christ we can prove God’s existence, and teach both doctrine and morality.{27}

If we do not know Christ, we cannot understand God as the judge and the redeemer of sinners. It is a limited knowledge that doesn’t do any good. As Pascal says, “That is why I am not trying to prove naturally the existence of God, or indeed the Trinity, or the immortality of the soul or anything of that kind. This is not just because I do not feel competent to find natural arguments that will convince obdurate atheists, but because such knowledge, without Christ, is useless and empty.” A person with this knowledge has not “made much progress toward his salvation.”{28} What Pascal wants to avoid is proclaiming a deistic God who stands remote and expects from us only that we live good, moral lives. Deism needs no redeemer.

But even in Christ, God has not revealed Himself so overwhelmingly that people cannot refuse to believe. In the last days God will be revealed in a way that everyone will have to acknowledge Him. In Christ, however, God was still hidden enough that people who didn't want what was good would not have it forced upon them. Thus, "there is enough light for those who desire only to see, and enough darkness for those of a contrary disposition."[{29}](#)

There is still one more issue which is central to Pascal's thinking about the knowledge of God. He says that no one can come to know God apart from faith. This is a theme of central importance for Pascal; it clearly sets him apart from other apologists of his day. Faith is the knowledge of the heart that only God gives. "It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason," says Pascal. "That is what faith is: God perceived by the heart, not by the reason."[{30}](#) "By faith we know he exists," he says.[{31}](#) "Faith is different from proof. One is human and the other a gift of God. . . . This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts. . . ."[{32}](#) Pascal continues, "We shall never believe with an effective belief and faith unless God inclines our hearts. Then we shall believe as soon as he inclines them."[{33}](#)

To emphasize the centrality of heart knowledge in Pascal's thinking, I deliberately left off the end of one of the sentences above. Describing the faith God gives, Pascal said, "This is the faith that God himself puts into our hearts, often using proof as the instrument."[{34}](#)

This is rather confusing. Pascal says non-believers are in darkness, so proofs will only find obscurity.[{35}](#) He notes that "no writer within the canon [of Scripture] has ever used nature to prove the existence of God. They all try to help people believe in him."[{36}](#) He also expresses astonishment at Christians who begin their defense by making a case for the existence of God.

Their enterprise would cause me no surprise if they were addressing the arguments to the faithful, for those with living faith in their hearts can certainly see at once that everything which exists is entirely the work of the God they worship. But for those in whom this light has gone out and in who we are trying to rekindle it, people deprived of faith and grace, . . . to tell them, I say, that they have only to look at the least thing around them and they will see in it God plainly revealed; to give them no other proof of this great and weighty matter than the course of the moon and the planets; to claim to have completed the proof with such an argument; this is giving them cause to think that the proofs of our religion are indeed feeble. . . . This is not how Scripture speaks, with its better knowledge of the things of God.{37}

But now Pascal says that God often uses proofs as the instrument of faith. He also says in one place, "The way of God, who disposes all things with gentleness, is to instil [sic] religion into our minds with reasoned arguments and into our hearts with grace. . . ."{38}

The explanation for this tension can perhaps be seen in the types of proofs Pascal uses. Pascal won't argue from nature. Rather he'll point to evidences such as the marks of divinity within man, and those which affirm Christ's claims, such as prophecies and miracles, the most important being prophecies.{39} He also speaks of Christian doctrine "which gives a reason for everything," the establishment of Christianity despite its being so contrary to nature, and the testimony of the apostles who could have been neither deceivers nor deceived.{40} So Pascal *does* believe there are positive evidences for belief. Although he does not intend to give reasons for everything, neither does he expect people to agree without having a reason.{41}

Nonetheless, even evidences such as these do not produce saving faith. He says, "The prophecies of Scripture, even the

miracles and proofs of our faith, are not the kind of evidence that are absolutely convincing. . . . There is . . . enough evidence to condemn and yet not enough to convince. . . .” People who believe do so by grace; those who reject the faith do so because of their lusts. Reason isn’t the key.{42}

Pascal says that, while our faith has the strongest of evidences in favor of it, “it is not for these reasons that people adhere to it. . . . What makes them believe,” he says, “is the cross.” At which point he quotes 1 Corinthians 1:17: “Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”{43}

## The Wager

The question that demands to be answered, of course, is this: If our reason is inadequate to find God, even through valid evidences, how *does* one find God? Says Pascal:

Let us then examine the point and say: “Either God exists, or he does not.” But which of the alternatives shall we choose? Reason cannot decide anything. Infinite chaos separates us. At the far end of this infinite distance a coin is being spun which will come down heads or tails. How will you bet? Reason cannot determine how you will choose, nor can reason defend your position of choice.{44}

At this point Pascal challenges us to accept his wager. Simply put, the wager says we should bet on Christianity because the rewards are infinite if it’s true, while the losses will be insignificant if it’s false.{45} If it’s true and you have rejected it, you’ve lost everything. However, if it’s false but you have believed it, at least you’ve led a good life and you haven’t lost anything. Of course, the best outcome is if one believes Christianity to be true and it turns out that it is!

But the unbeliever might say it’s better not to choose at all. Not so, says Pascal. You’re going to live one way or the

other, believing in God or not believing in God; you can't remain in suspended animation. You must choose.

In response the unbeliever might say that everything in him works against belief. "I am being forced to gamble and I am not free," he says, "for they will not let me go. I have been made in such a way that I cannot help disbelieving. So what do you expect me to do?"[\[46\]](#) After all, Pascal has said that faith comes from God, not from us.

Pascal says our inability to believe is a problem of the emotions or passions. Don't try to convince yourself by examining more proofs and evidences, he says, "but by controlling your emotions." You want to believe but don't know how. So follow the examples of those who "were once in bondage but who now are prepared to risk their whole life. . . . Follow the way by which they began. They simply behaved as though they believed" by participating in various Christian rituals. And what can be the harm? "You will be faithful, honest, humble, grateful, full of good works, a true and genuine friend. . . . I assure you that you will gain in this life, and that with every step you take along this way, you will realize you have bet on something sure and infinite which has cost you nothing."[\[47\]](#)

Remember that Pascal sees faith as a gift from God, and he believes that God will show Himself to whomever sincerely seeks Him.[\[48\]](#) By taking him up on the wager and putting yourself in a place where you are open to God, God will give you faith. He will give you sufficient light to know what is really true.

Scholars have argued over the validity of Pascal's wager for centuries. In this writer's opinion, it has significant weaknesses. What about all the other religions, one of which could (in the opinion of the unbeliever) be true?

However, the idea is an intriguing one. Pascal's assertion

that one must choose seems reasonable. Even if such a wager cannot have the kind of mathematical force Pascal seemed to think, it could work to startle the unbeliever into thinking more seriously about the issue. The important thing here is to challenge people to choose, and to choose the right course.

## Summary

Pascal began his apologetics with an analysis of the human condition drawn from the experience of the new, modern man. He showed what a terrible position man is in, and he argued that man is not capable of finding all the answers through reason. He insisted that the deistic approach to God was inadequate, and proclaimed Christ whose claims found support in valid evidences such as prophecies and miracles. He then called people to press through the emotional bonds which kept them separate from God and put themselves in a place where they could find God, or rather be found by Him.

Is Blaise Pascal a man for our times? Whether or not you agree with the validity of Pascal's wager or some other aspect of his apologetics, I think we can gain some valuable insights from his ideas. His description of man as caught between his own nobility and baseness while trying to avoid looking closely at his condition certainly rings true of twentieth-century man. His insistence on keeping the concrete truth of Christ at the center keeps his apologetics tied to the central theme of Christianity, namely, that our identity is found in Jesus, where there is room for neither pride nor despair, and that in Jesus we can come to a true knowledge of God. For apart from the knowledge of Christ, all the speculation in the world about God will do little good.

## Notes

1. Peter Kreeft, *Christianity for Modern Pagans: Pascal's Pensees Edited, Outlined and Explained* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 13, 189.



2. Hugh M. Davidson, Blaise Pascal (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983), 4.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia, 15th ed., s.v. "Pascal, Blaise."
4. Davidson, 18.
5. James Houston's translation, Mind On First: A Faith for the Skeptical and Indifferent (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), will be quoted extensively in these notes. This version was edited to retain only the individual pensees which are pertinent for apologetics. Mind On Fire also includes edited versions of some of Pascal's Provincial Letters, the ones he wrote against the Jesuits. The reader might also want to refer to Peter Kreeft's version (cf. note 1 above) which includes Kreeft's comments on individual pensees.
6. Davidson, 22.
7. Houston, 91.
8. Blaise Pascal, Pensees, trans. W.F. Trotter, 97.
9. Kreeft, 187.
10. Houston, 96.
11. Ibid., 122.
12. Kreeft, 238.
13. Ibid., 124.
14. Ibid., 236.
15. Houston, 58.
16. Ibid., 58.
17. Ibid., 53.
18. Trotter, 50.
19. Kreeft, 228.
20. Ibid., 229.
21. Ibid., 238.
22. Ibid., 120-26, 293.
23. Trotter, 178; see also 130.
24. Kreeft, 247.
25. Ibid., 249.
26. Ibid., 251.
27. Houston, 147.

28. Ibid., 149.
29. Kreeft, 69.
30. Ibid., 232.
31. Houston, 130.
32. Kreeft, 240.
33. Houston, 223.
34. Kreeft, 240.
35. Houston, 151.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. Kreeft, 250-51.
38. Ibid., 240.
39. Houston, 205; Trotter, 52.
40. Trotter, 52; Kreeft, 266.
41. Houston, 116-17.
42. Ibid., 221-22.
43. Ibid., 223.
44. Ibid., 130-31.
45. Kreeft, 292.
46. Houston, 133.
47. Ibid., 133.
48. Kreeft, 251, 255.

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## **The Sinfulness of Humanity**

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

Such events, coupled with recent successes on the battlefield,

have caused many Americans to feel tremendously optimistic about the future. It has become fashionable to appeal to a new world order in which nations will cooperate with one another in a spirit of peace, and some have even suggested that we are on the edge of the millennial kingdom.

Don't get your hopes up.

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

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

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

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

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

Consider the following words from Romans chapter 3:

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

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

## **Forgiveness for Sin**

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

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

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

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

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

## **The Continuing Presence of Sin**

When we accept God's forgiveness by placing our trust in Christ, we are completely freed from the penalty of sin. At the same time, however, we continue to experience the presence of sin. We still have the capacity, even the tendency, to rebel against God and to act independently of Him (Gal. 5:16-17). God's goal for us as Christians is that we would consistently obey Him, and the indwelling Holy Spirit works to

change us from the inside out, but the process won't be completed until we are in the presence of God in heaven (Rom. 8:12-25; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:7-18). In the meantime, we continue to struggle with the fact that we are sinful people.

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

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

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

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

system of checks and balances, through which each person's decisions must ultimately be approved by others, as safer than a government in which unlimited power is entrusted to one individual.

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

## **The Politics of Sin**

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

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

*We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in*

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

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

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

Looking back on that decade, we have to ask, What did we expect? Did we expect our politicians to abandon the appeal of special-interest groups in favor of altruistic ideals and



biblical ethics? We should not have been so naive. The sinfulness of humanity means that people will always tend to enhance their own power and seek their own interests. When they do otherwise, we take their actions as grace, but we do not expect them to act in accordance with anything but their own interests.

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

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