

“My Hurting Friend Has Stopped Believing in God”

I have a friend who has had a rough couple of years. Her parents split up and she doesn't like her mom's boyfriend and she recently told me she has stopped believing in God though she has been brought up to be a Christian. She just told me and a friend all this stuff and we don't know what to say, could you please help?

I wouldn't worry about what your friend is saying right now about not believing in God. Those are the words of a broken heart. Often when people feel God has abandoned them or betrayed them because He has allowed something bad to happen, they respond by saying, “OK, God, I'll show you, I won't believe in You anymore!” They don't really mean it. . . they're just hurting so bad they don't know how else to respond.

If she were my friend, I would just be there for her, put an arm around her and hug her and love on her, and silently ask God to love her through me. She needs friends, she needs support, she needs to feel loved and cared for. That's how she'll eventually come to realize how God was loving her in her pain.

I also wouldn't get into any arguments about God. If she says things like “Well, I don't believe in God anymore, if God were there He wouldn't let stuff like this happen,” I'd just nod and say, “Yeah, it really stinks what's going on, and I don't blame you for hurting so bad.”

Just keep in mind what her heart needs instead of what her mouth is saying. And love her, love her, love her through it. Later on you can tell her you were doing it in Jesus' name.

I hope this helps.

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries

A Doctor's Journey with Cancer

When you suddenly learn you might have only 18 months to live, its a good time to sort out what really matters in life.

Last December, Yang Chen, MD, dismissed an aching pain under his shoulder as muscle strain. Five weeks later, as the pain persisted, a chest x-ray brought shocking results: possible lung cancer that might have spread.

A highly acclaimed specialist and medical professor at the University of Colorado Denver, Yang knew the average survival rate for his condition could be under 18 months. He didnt smoke and had no family history of cancer. He was stunned. His life changed in an instant.

I wondered how I would break the news to my unsuspecting wife and three young children, he recalls. Who would take care of my family if I died?

Swirling Vortex of Uncertainty

When I heard his story, I felt a jab of recognition. In 1996, my doctor said I might have cancer. That word sent me into a swirling vortex of uncertainty. But I was fortunate; within a month, I learned my condition was benign.

Yang did not get such good news. He now knows he has an inoperable tumor. Hes undergoing chemotherapy. Its uncertain

whether radiation will help. Yet through it all, he seems remarkably calm and positive. At a time when one might understandably focus on oneself, hes even assisting other cancer patients and their families to cope with their own challenges. Whats his secret?

I learned about Yangs personal inner resources when we first met in the 1980s. He worked at the Mayo Clinic and brought me to Rochester, Minnesota, to present a seminar for Mayo and IBM professionals on a less ponderous theme, Love, Sex and the Single Lifestyle. With the audience, we laughed and explored relationship mysteries. He felt it was essential that people consider the spiritual aspect of relationships, as well as the psychological and physical.

Later he founded a global network to train medical professionals how to interact with patients on spiritual matters. Many seriously ill patients want their doctors to discuss spiritual needs and the profession is taking note.

Reality Blog

Now a patient himself, Yang exhibits strength drawn from the faith that has enriched his life. He has established a websitewww.aDoctorsJourneyWithCancer.netto chronicle his journey and offer hope and encouragement to others. The site presents a compelling real-life drama as it happens.

As a follower of Jesus, Yang notes [biblical references](#) to Gods light shining in our hearts and people of faith being like fragile clay jars containing this great treasure. He sees himself as a broken clay jar through which Gods light can shine to point others who suffer to comfort and faith.

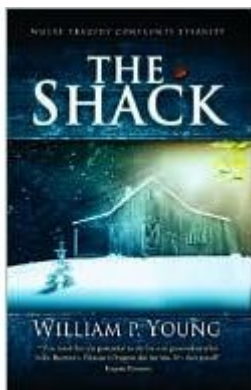
As he draws on divine strength, he reflects on Paul, a first-century believer who wrote, We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but not driven to despair.

A dedicated scientist, Yang is convinced that what he believes about God is true and includes information about evidences for faith. Hes also got plenty to help the hurting and the curious navigate through their pain, cope with emotional turmoil, and find answers to lifes perplexing questions about death, dying, the afterlife, handling anxiety, and more.

With perhaps less than 18 months to live, Yang Chen knows whats most important in his life. He invites web surfers to walk with me for part, or all, of my journey. If Im ever in his position, I hope I can blend suffering with service while displaying the serenity and trust I observe in him. Visit [his website](#) and youll see what I mean.

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Response to “The Shack”



The buzz is growing in Christian circles about this novel, [\[1\]](#) for good reason. Response to it seems to be strong: the majority of people grateful and testifying how deeply it impacted their relationship with God, and others decrying it as heresy for its unconventional presentation of God and religious systems. (For an excellent rebuttal by a theologically sound man who knows both the book and the author, please read [“Is The Shack Heresy?”](#) by Wayne Jacobsen.)

It's a story about a man whose young daughter had been abducted and murdered several years before he receives a note from God inviting him to the shack where his daughter died. It's signed "Papa," his wife's favorite term of endearment for God. He spends an unimaginable weekend with all three members of the Godhead, a weekend which changes him forever.

It is similar to *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*,^{2} where Jesus appears as a contemporary businessman and answers the main character's questions and objections over their dinner conversation. What *Dinner* did for basic apologetics, *The Shack* does for theodicy: the problem of "How can a good, loving and all-powerful God allow evil and suffering?"

Personally, *The Shack* became one of my all-time favorite books before I had even finished it.

Most people don't read novels with a highlighter in hand, but this one made me want to. Since I was reading a borrowed copy, I didn't have that freedom. But I read it with a pen in hand because I kept finding passages to record in my "wisdom journal," a book I've been adding to for years with wisdom from others that I didn't want to forget.

I started to say that I absolutely loved this book, but I didn't. I did love it, but not absolutely, because of one (and totally unnecessary, in my opinion) sticking point that I believe is not consistent with Scripture, on the nature of authority and hierarchy. More on that later.

The author, who grew up as a missionary kid and who took some seminary training as an adult, clearly knows the Word, and knows a lot about "doing Christianity." It is also clear that he has learned how to dive deep into an intimate, warm, loving personal relationship with God, and he knows and shows the difference.

Fresh Insights

Through a series of conversations between the main character, Mack, and the three Persons of the Godhead, we are given fresh insights into some important aspects of Christianity, both major and minor:

- God is warm and inviting
- He collects our tears in a bottle
- Jesus was not particularly handsome
- God is one, in three Persons
- The Holy Spirit is a comforter
- There is love, affection and fellowship within the Trinity
- God prefers us to relate to Him out of desire rather than obligation
- God values what is given from the heart
- God understands that difficult fathers make it hard for us to connect with God
- God is compassionate toward the anguished question, "How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?"
- The substitutionary atonement of Christ
- The faulty dichotomous perception of the OT God as mean and wrathful, and the NT God in Jesus as loving and grace-filled
- There is a redemptive value to pain and suffering
- How good triumphs over evil
- The nature and purpose of the Law
- The healing nature of God's love
- Through the cross, God was reconciled to the world, but so many refuse to be reconciled to Him
- God's omniscience coexists with our freedom to make significant choices
- In the incarnation, Jesus willingly embraced the limitations of humanity without losing His divinity

Those are some pretty heavy concepts to put into a novel, but it works. It not only works, it draws the reader into the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit as well as how

each member of the Godhead lovingly engages with the main character.

How God is Portrayed

Some people have been deeply offended by the fact that God the Father presents Himself to Mack as “a large, beaming, African-American woman” (p. 82) because God always refers to Himself in the masculine in the Bible. And the Holy Spirit is represented as a small Asian woman. I have to admit, this sounds a lot more jarring and heterodox than it actually is in the book. I was touched by Papa’s reasons for manifesting as a woman to Mack, who had been horribly abused by his father as a boy:

“Mackenzie, I am neither male or female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I choose to appear to you as a man or as a woman and suggest that you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning.”

She leaned forward as if to share a secret. “To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf, would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes, and this weekend is not about reinforcing your religious stereotypes.”

. . . She looked at Mack intently. “Hasn’t it always been a problem for you to embrace me as your father, and after what you’ve been through, you couldn’t very well handle a father right now, could you?”

He knew she was right, and he realized the kindness and compassion in what she was doing. Somehow, the way she had approached him had skirted his resistance to her love. It was strange, and painful, and maybe even a little bit wonderful. (pp. 93-94)

For the record, before the book ends but not until after God does some marvelous healing in Mack's heart about his father, Papa does appear to him as a man. The Papa/Father persona is never compromised by any sort of "God is our Mother" garbage.

Apart from the fact that this is a work of fiction, I do think it is appropriate to note that God has also chosen to reveal Himself as a burning bush, a pillar of fire, a cloud, and an angel.

Deep Ministry

On his personal [website](#), the author reveals he has a history of childhood sexual abuse, so he is very familiar with the deep wounds to the soul that only God can touch and heal. The anguished cry of a broken heart is real and well-portrayed. So is the even deeper love and compassion of a God who never abandons us, even when we lose sight of Him. And who has a larger plan that none of our choices can foil.

I appreciated the explanation of the Christ-life, the indwelling Christ, that allows us to "kill our independence" (crucify the flesh) in His strength. I appreciated how the author writes what the healing power of God's love looks like. I appreciated the portrayal of God as warm and affectionate and accessible, without losing His majesty and power. I appreciated the sense of being led into deeper truths of a relationship with God that allow me to revel in the sense that God doesn't just love me, He *likes* me.

An Unfortunate Error

The biggest problem I had with the book—apart from the fact that it came to an end!—is the denial of authority and hierarchy within the Trinity, and the suggestion that hierarchy is a result of the Fall, not of the created order.

"We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity."

. . What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense to us." (p. 122)

What, then, do we do with 1 Cor. 11:3? "But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ."

"We are indeed submitted to one another and have always been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me (Jesus) as I to him, or Sarayu (Holy Spirit) to me, or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way." (p. 145)

I think perhaps the author has confused *submission* with *serving*. God submitting to His creation? I don't think so! The faulty notion of mutual across-the-board submission, with husbands submitting to wives and parents submitting to their children, and elders submitting to the church body, is troublesome, and not at all necessary to the point or the story in this book.

But that is a minor point compared to the rest of *The Shack*, one that does not cancel out the value of everything else. We should be reading *everything* through a discernment filter anyway.

Who the Book Is For

On a personal note, besides my work at Probe, I also have the privilege of serving in a ministry with people whose difficult relationships early in their lives have caused trouble in their relationships with themselves, other people, and God. Many of them were sexually abused, and they usually find it impossible to trust a God who would allow that kind of pain to

happen to them. I am recommending *The Shack* to them because of the hope it can offer that they were not alone, that God was with them in all the painful times that left such deep wounds, and that He has a plan for all of it that does not in the least compromise His goodness.

Particularly because so many of these precious broken people had deeply flawed relationships with a parent, I was brought to tears (for only the first time of several) when God tenderly offers Mack, "If you'll let me, I'll be the Papa you never had." (p. 92) I have seen God heal a number of broken hearts by manifesting the loving, wise, nurturing parent they always longed for.

This is a good book for Christians who feel guilty for not doing or being enough, who fear they will see disgust in God's eyes when they meet face to face, who can't give themselves permission to rest from their "hamster treadmill" for fear of disappointing God. It is for those who love Christ's bride, but wonder what it would be like for the church to be vibrant, grace-drenched, and warmly affirming of people without affirming the sin that breaks God's heart. It is for those who are not satisfied with a cognitive-only "Christianity from the neck up," but want a relationship with the Lord that connects the head and the heart.

I thank Papa for *The Shack* and for William P. Young who brought it to us.

Notes

1. William P. Young, *The Shack*. Los Angeles: Windblown Media, 2007.
2. David Gregory, *Dinner with a Perfect Stranger*. Colorado Springs: Waterbook Press, 2005.

Addendum: August 5, 2009

Recently I returned to speak at a church MOPS (Mothers of Pre-Schoolers) group where I had spoken last year. One of the ladies greeted me warmly and told me that the best thing she heard all year was that “boys express affection aggressively.”

The interesting thing is that I never said that. She had apparently conflated two different observations I had made about boys, and combined them into the best “take-away” of the year.

What struck me about that incident was how that is a picture of much of the criticism of *The Shack*. Many people’s hostility toward the book isn’t about what it actually says, it’s about their perception of what the author says. And they ascribe hurtful labels like “heresy” and “dangerous” to a book that appears to be greatly used by God to communicate His heart to millions of people in a way they can hear.

Just as we do with Bible study, it’s important to keep in mind the context of the book: why it was written, its original intended audience, and pertinent facts about the author that make a difference in how we understand the final product.

Paul Young has always written as gifts for people. He wrote the book in response to his wife’s urging, “You think outside the box. Write something for our kids that will help them understand how you got to this place of your relationship with God.” He had come through an eleven-year journey of counseling, prayer, and wrestling with God and with himself; he emerged with a very different, intimate relationship with God.

He intended the story to be a Christmas gift for his six children and a few friends. His goal was to get sixteen copies printed and bound in time for Christmas, and that would be the end of it. But a few of those copies were copied and circulated among more friends as readers recognized something powerful in the story, something they wanted to share with

others. Quickly the viral marketing took on a life of its own.

When neither Christian nor secular publishers were interested in *The Shack*, two friends, Wayne Jacobsen and Brad Cummings, formed a self-publishing company. The three men spent a year hammering through the book, editing it, sharpening it, and discussing the theology. In the process, some of Paul Young's "out of the box" theology was shaped and brought back to a more biblically sound position.

This book is a novel—a long parable. It is a "slice of God," so to speak, not a novelized systematic theology. The point was to show, in story form, how Paul's view of God as a mean, judgmental, condemning cosmic bully—"Gandalf with an attitude," as he put it—had been transformed to allow him to see the grace-drenched love of a Father who longed for relationship, not hoop-jumping lackeys. He uses imagery to communicate spiritual truth, and I think that asking "What is the author using this imagery to portray?" is essential to not jumping to the wrong conclusions. Paul Young does not believe in a feminized God; that was the way he chose to communicate the tenderness and compassion of a loving God, the [heart of El-Shaddai \("the breasted one"\)](#). He does not believe that the Father and the Spirit hung on the cross with Jesus; when he wrote that they bore the same scars as Jesus, that was a way to portray the oneness of the Trinity because the Father's and the Spirit's hearts were deeply wounded in the crucifixion as well. The scars are about their hearts, not a misunderstanding about Who it was that hung on the cross.

Paul's children would have understood his starting point. He had grown up as a missionary kid in Irian Jaya, with an angry father with a lot of emotional baggage who didn't know any other strategy than to pass it on to his children. On top of that, Paul was sexually abused by the members of the Dani tribe until he was sent away to boarding school, where the abuse continued, starting the first night when the older boys immediately began molesting the new first graders.

He was a mess.

And then he grew into a mess with a degree from a Bible college and some seminary education. He knew a lot about a God who looked and acted a lot like his father (an unfortunate truth that is repeated millions of times over in millions of families). Paul Young understands about a God of judgment, who hates sin. He gets that.

The Shack presents another side of the heart of God that took years for him to be able to see and embrace. And the breathtaking grace and delight of a heavenly Father who knows how to express love to His beloved son is something he wanted to show his children and friends. So he wrote *The Shack*. It is intentionally not a full-orbed exploration of the nature and character of God; it focuses on the grace and love of God. That doesn't mean the rest of His character doesn't exist.

The people that have the most problems with the book usually have the most theological education. They have finely-tuned spiritual Geiger counters, able to detect nuances in theological expression that the majority of people reading the book cannot. Our culture is more biblically illiterate and untaught than we have ever seen in the history of our country. And even in good Bible-teaching churches we can regularly see confusion about the Trinity; I have lost track of the number of times I have heard someone pray from the pulpit or platform something like, "Father, we praise You today and we thank You for Your great goodness. Thank You for making us Your children and showing us Your love for us by dying on the cross. . ."

The objectionable theological nuances are lost on the millions of people who are still foggy on the concept of three Persons in one God.

There is nothing in *The Shack* that contradicts Probe Ministries' doctrinal statement. The issues that people have with this book are not about central, core doctrines of the

faith. It's about how one's understanding of biblical truth is expressed. And just like my MOPS friend, many of the objections are grounded in people's *perceptions* of what they read: "The author implies. . ." or "We can deduce that . . ."

Theologians play an extremely important role in protecting truth. But sometimes they can get so committed to their understanding of biblical truth, to their "box," that they perceive anything outside the box as wrong. As one wise seminarian told me, "We need theologians. But we also need people who can think outside the box, who are able to present the gospel and the truths of the Bible in ways people can get. And those two groups of people usually drive each other crazy."

I believe much of the controversy about *The Shack* is because people's understanding of the book is crashing into their current understanding of theology. There are people who loved the book, as well as people who are critical of and hostile toward the book, who all love the Lord and love His word. It's a lot like the in-house debate about the age of the earth: there are old-earth and young-earth believers who are all fully committed to the Word of God as truth, who disagree on this issue. Unfortunately, as with the age of the earth debate, there is some mud-slinging toward those who disagree. In both arguments, some people have lost sight of the call to "be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:3). Paul Young is a fellow brother in the Lord. He loves the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and He loves the Word of God. He loves the bride of Christ, the church. I think that's important.

I recently learned that someone with a Ph.D. in theology was warned of the controversy about *The Shack*. "Controversies don't bother me," this wise believer said. "I remember when C.S. Lewis was scheduled to speak at a church in New Haven when we were at Yale. He was banned from the church because *The Screwtape Letters* was too controversial. As with Lewis,

time will tell whether this book is a blip on the radar screen, or if it has the hand of God on it.”

The night before I did a presentation on the book and the controversy at my church, I tossed and turned much of the night. I knew I would be presenting a perspective that is diametrically opposed to many evangelicals’, and it troubled me. As I prayed, “Lord, what’s up with the furor over this book? Give me Your perspective,” I believe He answered me: “He doesn’t get everything right.” Ah. That makes sense. No, Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and I do see that. None of us get everything right, but we don’t know what our blind spots are and we don’t know what we get wrong. Many believers seem to have confused the gospel with “getting your theological beliefs right.” And not “getting everything right” is a cardinal sin, which I am reminded of every time I get a strong email urging me to repent of my wrong belief about this “heretical” book. For the record, what I got from the Lord is that He knows Paul Young doesn’t get everything right, and He’s using the book to draw millions to Himself anyway. I think there’s something to be said for that.

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Reflection on the Virginia Tech Shootings

We moved our household this weekend, so I had not heard anything about the shootings at Virginia Tech until that same night. Next morning, I began reading articles to bring myself up to speed. The situation hurts. It was a student at the university, not some outsider. The gunman was 23, only three years younger than me.

Another person from my generation lashing out in violence; this is not the first time it's happened. This situation brings to mind several other recent occurrences, both locally and nationally. On a personal level, I recently found out that a guy from my high school who also graduated from my alma mater, University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), committed suicide recently. He was 26, an accomplished musician, national merit scholar, and earned a computer science degree.

During my junior year at UTD, a friend of mine at a Christian university came home for Christmas. While she was in Dallas, she received word that her dormitory roommate had committed suicide. She was a bright girl with a promising future and was apparently from a Christian family.

A month after I had graduated UTD, a news report came out that a student drugged, raped, and assaulted another student—during an exam study session.

Lastly, while reading about the Virginia Tech gunman's angst that finally snapped into a violent rage, I could not help but remember the Columbine shootings. That report came out my senior year in high school. The two teenage perpetrators were my age.

With all of these cases of violent crimes on campuses among young, educated people, I have to wonder, *What is wrong with my generation?* Why are these twenty-somethings breaking like this? Crime and violence are a part of the fallen world that we live in, but the inordinate amount of violent and sexual crimes on campuses is staggering.

My generation has received the most "information" from media than any other. We have seen the rise of technological advances that only Gene Rodenberry (*Star Trek*) could dream of. We have grown up thinking that every opportunity and possibility is at our fingertips (or at the click of a mouse). We have some of the fastest, most efficient cars, the biggest

malls, and some of the best plastic surgery that money can buy. The nation is rich, and although material resources may not satisfy us in the long run, they sure feel good right now. We have medications for nearly everything, and beauty products for everything else. But apparently all of the riches, technology, beauty, and opportunities still leave us in despair—for some, despair to the point of death. Why? Is this an artifact for only this generation, or does the Bible speak to the despair plaguing us?

Consider the words of Solomon:

“I made great works. I built houses and planted vineyards for myself... I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house. I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces... Also whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:4,7-8,10-11).

Just as Solomon was blessed and lived in a time of education, materialism, and plenty, I think his hopelessness rings true of my generation as well. Compared to prior generations, we have it all, and yet it only fills us with despair that is really no different. There is a void that only God can fill. At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon concludes that the end of the matter is to fear the Lord and keep his commandments (12:13). In other words, when all is said and done, no amount of education, riches, or technology can compare to knowing the Lord through His Son Jesus Christ.

Deadly College Shootings in U.S.

Some deadly shootings at U.S. colleges or universities, listed by number of fatalities:

April 16, 2007

A gunman kills 32 people in a dorm and a classroom building at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va. The suspect then dies by gunshot himself.

Aug. 1, 1966

Charles Whitman points a rifle from the observation deck of the University of Texas at Austin's Tower and begins shooting in a homicidal rampage that goes on for 96 minutes. Sixteen people are killed, 31 wounded.

July 12, 1976

Edward Charles Allaway, a custodian in the library of California State University, Fullerton, fatally shoots seven fellow employees and wounds two others. Mentally ill, Allaway believed his colleagues were pornographers and were forcing his estranged wife to appear in their movies. A judge found him innocent by reason of insanity in 1977 after a jury was unable to reach a verdict and he was committed to the state mental health system.

Nov. 1, 1991

Gang Lu, 28, a graduate student in physics from China, reportedly upset because he was passed over for an academic honor, opens fire in two buildings on the University of Iowa campus. Five University of Iowa employees killed, including

four members of the physics department, one other person is wounded. The student fatally shoots himself.

May 4, 1970

Four students were killed and nine wounded by National Guard troops called in to quell anti-war protests on the campus of Kent State University in Ohio.

Oct. 28, 2002

Failing University of Arizona Nursing College student and Gulf War veteran Robert Flores, 40, walks into an instructor's office and fatally shoots her. A few minutes later, armed with five guns, he enters one of his nursing classrooms and kills two more of his instructors before fatally shooting himself.

Sept. 2, 2006

Douglas W. Pennington, 49, kills himself and his two sons, Logan P. Pennington, 26, and Benjamin M. Pennington, 24, during a visit to the campus of Shepherd University in Shepherdstown, W.Va.

Jan. 16, 2002

Graduate student Peter Odighizuwa, 42, recently dismissed from Virginia's Appalachian School of Law, returns to campus and kills the dean, a professor and a student before being tackled by students. The attack also wounds three female students.

Aug. 15, 1996

Frederick Martin Davidson, 36, a graduate engineering student at San Diego State, is defending his thesis before a faculty committee when he pulls out a handgun and kills three professors.

Jan. 26, 1995

Former law student Wendell Williamson shoots two men to death

and injures a police officer in Chapel Hill, N.C.

April 2, 2007

University of Washington researcher Rebecca Griego, 26, is shot to death in her office by former boyfriend Jonathan Rowan who then turned the gun on himself.

Aug. 28, 2000

James Easton Kelly, 36, a University of Arkansas graduate student recently dropped from a doctoral program after a decade of study and John Locke, 67, the English professor overseeing his coursework, are shot to death in an apparent murder-suicide.

Source: Associated Press

Accessed Apr. 17, 2007 © 2007 MSNBC.com
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/18137414/>

A Christian Response to the Horror at Virginia Tech

Many of us found ourselves glued to the television, watching videos of the events surrounding the mass murder in Blacksburg, Virginia. A day like all other days for thousands of college students, faculty, administrators, and all the rest that make up the mini-city of Virginia Tech University suddenly turned into a waking nightmare, the kind of experience that happens on TV but never really happens to us. Or so we think. I've been to the campus in Blacksburg; it isn't the kind of place one would imagine mass murder. But where *would* one expect such a thing, except in far away places

like Iraq?

In such situations, our emotions typically take the lead since it takes awhile to get all the information that informs our thinking. What emotions do we experience? Shock? Fear, as we think about students of our own there or at similar campuses? Sadness for the loss of life, especially for such senseless loss? Another sense we have, sometimes not till after the initial shock has worn off, is moral outrage, a deep-seated sense that what happened was wrong: not in terms of economics or simply the proper functioning of an organization, but in terms of moral wrong. Deep down we know there is good and there is evil, and this event was evil.

But upon what do we base this sense? Before you just brush the question aside with the ubiquitous "Duh!" or ask incredulously, "What kind of question is *that*?!" pause a moment and give it some thought. Why is such a thing wrong? After all, if we push a Darwinian, naturalistic worldview to the limit, we might think ourselves justified in seeing this kind of horror as really no different from animals attacking and killing each other. Keep in mind that the Nazis were able to carry out their slaughter because they had relegated Jews to a lower level in the evolutionary chain.

The first point I want to make is that *Christianity explains our moral outrage*. It's explained by the fact that we are created in God's image and have in us a sense of moral right and wrong. The apostle Paul wrote that "the requirements of the law are written on [our] hearts," that our "consciences [are] also bearing witness, and [our] thoughts now accusing, now even defending [us]" (Romans 2:15). God is the standard of moral right and wrong, and we reflect that knowledge in ourselves. Of course, we can deaden that knowledge; a conscience can be trained to ignore promptings to do good.

Have you seen someone get angry (or maybe you got angry yourself) when a person who commits such an evil act commits

suicide immediately afterwards? Oh, I know: some people ultimately want the person to die himself. But there's something about being denied to express our moral outrage at the person. We want justice for the crime committed, and we don't always want it to be a quick and dirty justice. Frankly, we'd like the person to suffer and know what he's suffering for.

How do we explain our desire for justice? What I described above is more a desire for vengeance. However, we do want justice. We want the person to face up to the charges, to hear the condemnation (consider the trials where families of victims get to speak their minds to the accused). We want him to know he did wrong and to know he's going to suffer the consequences, and then we want justice meted out.

Along the same lines that Christianity explains moral outrage, it also *explains our desire for justice*. We know some things are morally wrong and are deserving of punishment. And we want to make a strong enough impression on the guilty that he (or observers of the case) doesn't do it again. God is *very* interested in justice. A quick search in the New International Version lists almost one hundred twenty instances of the word "justice" in the Old Testament. The psalmist writes, "The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love" (33:5). "Truth is nowhere to be found," God said through Isaiah, "and whoever shuns evil becomes a prey. The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice" (Isa. 59:15). And, "Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow" (1:15-17).

This isn't just an Old Testament concern. In the New Testament we have this promise: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead"

(Acts 17:31).

A question comes naturally to mind. If God is so interested in justice, why doesn't He fulfill it now? This is an extremely important question. However, it's one I'm going to forego for now (search Probe's Web site for articles on the problem of evil; Sue Bohlin's article "[The Value of Suffering](#)" is a good start). The long and short of it is that we don't know just what God is up to. We can hazard some guesses. C. S. Lewis said that suffering is God's "megaphone to rouse a deaf world."

Let's say we *can't* give an answer to the question, Why is evil allowed? What then? If that's the primary criterion for accepting a particular religion or philosophy as true, we will be able to accept none, not even secularism!

What, then? Where does that leave us? Christianity does have an answer to that: *Christianity offers hope*. Even in the worst of situations, the person who has received the grace of God in salvation has the hope of a future in which death has no place. This isn't "hope" as in cross-your-fingers hope, like, "I sure hope the game doesn't get rained out this weekend." In the New Testament, hope is presented as the assurance of the future. We have the hope of eternal life—of that life which has no room for death—by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The apostle Peter wrote, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). Jesus proved that He had broken the hold of death through His own death on the cross by breaking free from the tomb and appearing live to hundreds of people. Because He rose and conquered death, we who trust in Him will, too.

Hope is a fundamental ingredient of Christianity. Faith enables us to say "yes" today to what we know we should do; hope enables us to say "yes" to the future, because it rests

in the hands of the God Who loves us. One of my favorite verses in Scripture is in Romans. Paul wrote: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (15:13). This is God's desire for us, to live in the (sure) hope that our future is secure in Him.

One more thing. Christianity isn't just some set of religious dogmas and practices that keeps some of us off the streets on Sunday mornings! *Christianity provides a way of life that minimizes such tragedies.* It provides both the framework within which we order our lives *and* the ability to do it by the power of the Holy Spirit living in us. Blaise Pascal held out the value of Christian morality as an enticement to see if Christianity is true. Even if it isn't true, he said, look at the kind of life it calls us to lead! Thomas Jefferson, who so rejected the miraculous in the Bible that he edited out of the New Testament all such things, recognized a high level of morality in its pages. And when you ask people who the best exemplars of goodness have been in history, Jesus is typically on the list, even the lists of those who don't believe He is the divine Son of God.

The point is that built into Christianity is a structure of life that prohibits people hurting each other. Of course, this isn't to suggest that Christians never do wrong! But it *is* to say that we have more than just pragmatic reasons for doing right. We do right to honor God, to honor people, because we believe in moral right and wrong. Sometimes we do the right thing—only because it's the right thing to do, regardless of the rewards! However, I would be dishonest if I didn't note that there *does* lie in our future many blessings for obedient lives.

But Christianity goes beyond simply providing a moral code. It also provides the power to follow it! The Holy Spirit somehow resides in us (one of the mysteries of the faith!), and He transforms us, changes us through a number of ways into the

image of Christ (cf. Rom. 8:5-17; 12:1,2; Gal. 5:16-26).

To sum up: Christianity explains our moral outrage at the mass murders at Virginia Tech this week. It explains our desire for justice, and guarantees that it will be carried out eventually. It offers real hope, hope that is sure, for those who suffer. And it provides a way for people to live with one another without having a reason to give in to such evil impulses.

It's likely that some people will read this who aren't Christians. If you're one of them, I'd like to ask you to consider thoughtfully what I've said about Christianity, but also consider what *you* believe. You may be an adherent of another religion or philosophy, or you may simply be a secularist who believes in God but believes He doesn't really have much to do with our lives. My question is this: If you agree that the issues I've raised are important, how does your belief system answer them? If it *does* answer them, do the answers seem plausible? Is there good reason to believe them? If not, maybe the whole belief system needs to be evaluated.

If you'd like to know more about a Christian understanding of these issues, hunt around on our Web site for other articles. Or [send us an e-mail](#). You can even use the old-fashioned method of calling on the phone!

We'd love to hear from you.

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Virginia Tech Massacre:

Coping with Grief

As the world joins Virginia Tech in mourning a terrible massacre, I've found myself experiencing poignant memories of an earlier visit to that campus when students also struggled with recent death. Though that tragedy was smaller in scope, grief and confusion abounded then as now.

Several months before my evening lecture at Virginia Tech, I had recommended that my hosts have me speak on love, sex, and dating . . . nearly always a popular campus draw. But they preferred I speak on death and dying: [*One Minute After Death*](#). Reluctantly, I agreed; they publicized accordingly. Though they didn't claim clairvoyance, their selection proved providential.

A few days before my presentation, three Tech students died tragically in separate incidents involving suicide and a fire. The campus buzzed with concern about death and dying. The lecture venue was packed; the atmosphere electric.

Death's Shuddering Finality

I told the audience of similar sadness: The spring of my sophomore year at Duke, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends wrestled with questions like, "What's life all about?" "What does it mean if it can be snuffed out in an instant?" "Is there life after death?"

Our springtime happiness became gloom. A memorial service and personal interaction helped us process our grief. I vividly recall a classmate driving Mike's ashes home to Oklahoma at the end of the term. Death had a shuddering finality.

Now, in the recent massacre's immediate aftermath, stories both heartrending and inspiring are emerging. Rescue workers

removing bodies from Norris Hall, where the bulk of the killings occurred, encountered cellphones ringing, likely parents or friends trying to contact missing students. Parents wandered the campus that first evening seeking to learn their children's fate.

During the siege, engineering professor [Liviu Librescu](#), an Israeli Holocaust survivor, blocked a door with his body, sacrificing his life so students could flee.[{1}](#)

God and Evil?

As mourners process their anguish, it's only natural to wonder where God is in all this. Virginia Governor Tim Kaine, who once served as a volunteer missionary, noted at the campus convocation that even Jesus, in his dark hour on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[{2}](#) He encouraged grieving students to embrace their community to help everyone process their pain.

The late William Sloane Coffin gained fame as a controversial peace and civil rights activist during the Vietnam War. He also served as chaplain of Yale University and had a helpful take on the question of God and suffering.

"Almost every square inch of the Earth's surface is soaked with the tears and blood of the innocent," [Coffin told Religion and Ethics Newsweekly](#), "and it's not God's doing. It's our doing. That's human malpractice. Don't chalk it up to God."

"When [people] see the innocent suffering," continued Coffin, "every time they lift their eyes to heaven and say, 'God, how could you let this happen?' it's well to remember that exactly at that moment God is asking exactly the same question of us: 'How could you let this happen?'"[{3}](#)

The problem of evil has many complex facets, but the horror in Blacksburg resulted from human action. Students and faculty

face considerable healing. President Bush reminded them, "People who have never met you are praying for you.... In times like this, we can find comfort in the grace and guidance of a loving God.... 'Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'" {4} Sound counsel for a grieving campus community.

Notes

1. Laurie Copans, "Holocaust Survivor Killed in Virginia Shootings," Associated Press, April 17, 2007; on ABC News at <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3048967&page=1>, accessed April 18, 2007. See also Richard T. Cooper and Valerie Reitman, "Virginia Tech professor gave his life to save students," Los Angeles Times, April 18, 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/2lnomg>, accessed April 18, 2007.
2. Matthew 27:46, quoted here from the more contemporary language of the New Living Translation. Kaine appeared to be quoting from the King James Version. Audio of Governor Kaine's April 17, 2007, Virginia Tech convocation speech is at <http://www.vbdems.org/>, accessed April 18, 2007.
3. "Profile: William Sloane Coffin," Religion & Ethics Newsweekly interview with Bob Abernathy, Episode no. 752, originally broadcast August 27, 2004; rebroadcast in 2007; <http://tinyurl.com/2vdr6t>, accessed April 18, 2007.
4. Text of the president's April 17, 2007 speech at the Virginia Tech memorial convocation is at <http://tinyurl.com/2t6txa>, accessed April 18, 2007. The third sentence in the Bush quotation here is from Romans 12:21.

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Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician's office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, "Have you been under stress recently?" Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life's mission? Would life itself last much longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you've excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents

in recent years. "How did you cope?" I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. "But how did you deal with their deaths?" I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. "I guess I haven't," he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother's needs after her father's passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother's death, she felt quite somber. "People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around," she recalls. "That was very sobering." Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I certainly don't have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas that have worked for me and for others along life's sometimes challenging journey?

Grieve the loss. Don't ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

A little help from your friends. During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending, good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don't try to handle enormous loss alone.

Watch your vulnerabilities. In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men

processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. “Guard your heart,” advises an ancient proverb, “for it affects everything you do.”[\[1\]](#)

Look for a bright spot. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. “It was very difficult for me when they dropped me,” he recalls. King says one can view firing as “a terrible tragedy” or a chance to seek new opportunities.[\[2\]](#)

Cherish your memories. Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don’t become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to. . .

Turn the page. After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you’ll emotionally process and respond to the common question, “Where do you work?” Perhaps you’ll want to take a course, exercise

and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

Sink your spiritual roots deep. I'm glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life's curve balls, I've had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ "become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!"^{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He'll never let you down.

This article first appeared in [Answer](#) magazine 14:1 January/February 2007. Copyright © 2007 by Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Notes

1. Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
2. Harvey Mackay, *We Got Fired!...And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 150-153 ff.
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

7 Questions Skeptics Ask – Radio Transcript

Rusty Wright considers some common questions skeptics ask about our belief in Christianity. He shows us how to answer these questions from an informed biblical worldview.

Questions of Faith

Picture the scene. You're discussing your faith with a coworker or neighbor, perhaps over lunch or coffee. You explain your beliefs but your friend has questions:

How could a loving God allow evil and suffering? The Bible is full of contradictions. What about people who've never heard of Jesus?

How do you feel about these questions and objections? Anxious? Confused? Defensive? Combative?

Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."[\[1\]](#) This series looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my

left. “Aimee,” a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. “How could a Christian do such a thing?” she asked.

I told her that Christians weren’t perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: How can you believe the Bible? Why do Christians say there is only one way to God? How does one become a Christian?

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God’s love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,^[2] an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.^[3] Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if

Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers^{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands? His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as

valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.[\[5\]](#)

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, “I don’t have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?”

I don’t have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I’ll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain “God’s megaphone” that alerts us to our need for Him.[\[6\]](#) This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain’s emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection[\[7\]](#) I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He “causes all things to work together for good to those who

love God.”{8}

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, “The secret things belong to the LORD.”{9} Some issues may remain mysteries. God’s perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.{10}

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won’t need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, “If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself.”{11} If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ’s message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here’s a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don’t know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don’t bluff. It’s dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus’ tomb after the Resurrection.{12} Matthew mentions “an angel.”{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.[\[14\]](#) Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.[\[15\]](#) The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.[\[16\]](#) Your life and friendship can

communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."[{17}](#) That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him? To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.*
- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way? He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans "by grace...through faith... not...works"[{18}](#) was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.*
- *Was Jesus' plan true? Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy[{19}](#) and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament[{20}](#) convinced me I could trust His words.*

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith not blind faith, but faith based on

evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, "Why would God allow this to happen?" I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven't acted like Jesus. Maybe they're angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one's death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.

2. John 1:14.

3. John 1:45-47.

4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.

5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.

6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.

7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "Who's Got the Body?" 1976, www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/ ; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.

13. Matthew 28:1-8.

14. Luke 1:26-2:40.

15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.

16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.

18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

19. A summary of some of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

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7 Questions Skeptics Ask About the Validity of Christianity

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Sensitively and appropriately answering questions that skeptics ask you can be an important part of helping them to consider Jesus. Peter told us, "In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."[\[1\]](#) This series

looks at seven common questions skeptics ask and gives you some pointers on how to respond. Consider first a story.

As the flight from Chicago to Dallas climbed in the sky, I became engrossed in conversation with the passenger to my left. "Aimee," a French businesswoman, asked me about my work. On learning I was a Christian communicator, she related that a professing Christian had signed a contract with her, attempted to lead her to Christ, then later deceitfully undercut her. "How could a Christian do such a thing?" she asked.

I told her that Christians weren't perfect, that some fail miserably, that many are honest and caring, but that it is Jesus we ultimately trust. Aimee asked question after question: "How can you believe the Bible?" "Why do Christians say there is only one way to God?" "How does one become a Christian?"

I tried to answer her concerns tactfully and explained the message of grace as clearly as I could. Stories I told of personal pain seemed to open her up to consider God's love for her. She did not come to Christ in that encounter, but she seemed to leave it with a new understanding.

Hurting people everywhere need God. Many are open to considering Him, but they often have questions they want answered before they are willing to accept Christ. As Christian communicators seek to blend grace with truth,^{2} an increasing number of skeptics may give an ear and become seekers or believers.

As you interact with skeptics, compliment them where you can. Jesus complimented the skeptical Nathanael for his pursuit of truth.^{3} Listen to their concerns. Your listening ear speaks volumes. It may surprise you to learn that your attitude can be just as important as what you know.

Dealing with Objections

How do you deal with questions and objections to faith that your friends may pose?

When I was a skeptical student, my sometimes-relentless questions gave my Campus Crusade for Christ friends at Duke University plenty of practice! I wanted to know if Christianity was true. After trusting Christ as Savior, I still had questions.

Bob Prall, the local Campus Crusade director, took interest in me. At first his answers irritated me, but as I thought them through they began to make sense. For two years I followed him around campus, watching him interact. Today, as I am privileged to encounter inquisitive people around the globe, much of my speech and manner derive from my mentor.

Consider some guidelines. Pray for wisdom, for His love for inquirers^{4} and for your questioner's heart. If appropriate, briefly share the gospel first. The Holy Spirit may draw your friends to Christ. Don't push, though. It may be best to answer their questions first.

Some questions may be intellectual smokescreens. Once a Georgia Tech philosophy professor peppered me with questions, which I answered as best I could.

Then I asked him, "If I could answer all your questions to your satisfaction, would you put your life in Jesus' hands?" His reply: "[Expletive deleted] no!"

Okay. This first objection is one you might have heard:

1. It doesn't matter what you believe as long as you are sincere.

I once gave a speech arguing *for* this proposition. Later, I reconsidered. In the 1960s, many women took the drug

thalidomide seeking easier pregnancies. Often they delivered deformed babies. Sincerely swallowing two white pills may cure your headache if the pills are aspirin. If they are roach poison, results may differ.

After discussing this point, a widely respected psychologist told me, "I guess a person could be sincere in what he or she believed, but be sincerely wrong." Ultimately faith is only as valid as its object. Jesus demonstrated by His life, death and resurrection that He is a worthy object for faith.[\[5\]](#)

Focus on Jesus. Bob Prall taught me to say, "I don't have answers to every question. But if my conclusion about Jesus is wrong, I have a bigger problem. What do I do with the evidence for His resurrection, His deity and the prophecies He fulfilled? And what do I do with changed lives, including my own?"

I don't have complete answers to every concern you will encounter, but in what follows I'll outline some short responses that might be useful.

The second question is:

2. Why is there evil and suffering?

Sigmund Freud called religion an illusion that humans invent to satisfy their security needs. To him, a benevolent, all-powerful God seemed incongruent with natural disasters and human evil.

God, though sovereign, gave us freedom to follow Him or to disobey Him. Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis estimated that eighty percent of human suffering stems from human choice. Lewis called pain "God's megaphone" that alerts us to our need for Him.[\[6\]](#) This response does not answer all concerns (because God sometimes does intervene to thwart evil) but it suggests that the problem of evil is not as great an intellectual obstacle to belief as some imagine.

Pain's emotional barrier to belief, however, remains formidable. When I see God, items on my long list of questions for Him will include a painful and unwanted divorce, betrayal by trusted coworkers, and all sorts of disappointing human behavior and natural disasters. Yet in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection^[7] I have seen enough to trust Him when He says He "causes all things to work together for good to those who love God."^[8]

3. What about those who never hear of Jesus?

Moses said, "The secret things belong to the LORD."^[9] Some issues may remain mysteries. God's perfect love and justice far exceed our own. Whatever He decides will be loving and fair. One can make a case that God will make the necessary information available to someone who wants to know Him. An example: Cornelius, a devout military official. The New Testament records that God assigned Peter to tell him about Jesus.^[10]

A friend once told me that many asking this question seek a personal loophole, a way so they won't need to believe in Christ. That statement angered me, but it also described me. C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* wrote, "If you are worried about the people outside [of faith in Christ], the most unreasonable thing you can do is to remain outside yourself."^[11] If Christianity is true, the most logical behavior for someone concerned about those without Christ's message would be to trust Christ and go tell them about Him.

Here's a tip: When someone asks you a difficult question, if you don't know the answer, admit it. Many skeptics appreciate honesty. Don't bluff. It's dishonest and often detectable.

4. What about all the contradictions in the Bible?

Ask your questioner for specific examples of contradictions. Often people have none, but rely on hearsay. If there is a specific example, consider these guidelines as you respond.

Omission does not necessarily create contradiction. Luke, for example, writes of two angels at Jesus' tomb after the Resurrection.^{12} Matthew mentions "an angel."^{13} Is this a contradiction? If Matthew stated that only one angel was present, the accounts would be dissonant. As it stands, they can be harmonized.

Differing accounts aren't necessarily contradictory. Matthew and Luke, for example, differ in their accounts of Jesus' birth. Luke records Joseph and Mary starting in Nazareth, traveling to Bethlehem (Jesus' birthplace), and returning to Nazareth.^{14} Matthew starts with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, relates the family's journey to Egypt to escape King Herod's rage, and recounts their travel to Nazareth after Herod's death.^{15} The Gospels never claim to be exhaustive records. Biographers must be selective. The accounts seem complementary, not contradictory.

Time precludes more complex examples here. But time and again, supposed biblical problems fade in light of logic, history, and archaeology. The Bible's track record under scrutiny argues for its trustworthiness.

5. Isn't Christianity just a psychological crutch?

My mentor Bob Prall has often said, "If Christianity is a psychological crutch, then Jesus Christ came because there was an epidemic of broken legs." Christianity claims to meet real human needs such as those for forgiveness, love, identity and self-acceptance. We might describe Jesus not as a crutch but an iron lung, essential for life itself.

Christian faith and its benefits can be described in psychological terms but that does not negate its validity. "Does it work?" is not the same question as, "Is it true?" Evidence supports Christianity's truthfulness, so we would expect it to work in individual lives, as millions attest.

A caution as you answer questions: Don't offer "proof" but

rather evidences for faith. "Proof" can imply an airtight case, which you don't have. Aim for certainty "beyond a reasonable doubt," just as an attorney might in court.

Don't quarrel. Lovingly and intelligently present evidence to willing listeners, not to win arguments but to share good news. Be kind and gentle.[{16}](#) Your life and friendship can communicate powerfully.

6. How can Jesus be the only way to God?

When I was in secondary school, a recent alumnus visited, saying he had found Christ at Harvard. I respected his character and tact and listened intently. But I could not stomach Jesus' claim that "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me."[{17}](#) That seemed way too narrow.

Two years later, my spiritual and intellectual journey had changed my view. The logic that drew me (reluctantly) to his position involves three questions:

- *If God exists, could there be only one way to reach Him?* To be open-minded, I had to admit this possibility.
- *Why consider Jesus as a candidate for that possible one way?* He claimed it. His plan of rescuing humans – "by grace...through faith...not...works"[{18}](#) was distinct from those requiring works, as many other religions do. These two kinds of systems were mutually exclusive. Both could be false or either could be true, but both could not be true.
- *Was Jesus' plan true?* Historical evidence for His resurrection, fulfilled prophecy[{19}](#) and deity, and for the reliability of the New Testament[{20}](#) convinced me I could trust His words.

One more common objection:

7. I could never take the blind leap of faith that believing

in Christ requires.

We exercise faith every day. Few of us comprehend everything about electricity or aerodynamics, but we have evidence of their validity. Whenever we use electric lights or airplanes, we exercise faith – not blind faith, but faith based on evidence. Christians act similarly. The evidence for Jesus is compelling, so one can trust Him on that basis.

As you respond to inquirers, realize that many barriers to faith are emotional rather than merely intellectual.

As a teenager, I nearly was expelled from secondary school for some problems I helped create. In my pain and anger I wondered, “Why would God allow this to happen?” I was mad at God! In retrospect, I realize I was blaming Him for my own bad choices. My personal anguish at the time kept me from seeing that.

Your questioners may be turned off because Christians haven’t acted like Jesus. Maybe they’re angry at God because of personal illness, a broken relationship, a loved one’s death, or personal pain. Ask God for patience and love as you seek to blend grace with truth. He may use you to help skeptics become seekers and seekers become His children. I hope He does.

Notes

1. 1 Peter 3:15 NIV.
2. John 1:14.
3. John 1:45-47.
4. Romans 9:1-3; 10:1.
5. For useful discussions of evidences regarding Jesus, visit www.WhoIsJesus-Really.com.
6. C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 89-103 ff. The Problem of Pain was first published in 1940.
7. A short summary of Resurrection evidences is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, “Who’s Got the Body?” 1976,

www.probe.org/whos-got-the-body/.

8. Romans 8:28 NASB.

For more complete treatment of this subject, see Rick Rood, "The Problem of Evil," 1996, www.probe.org/the-problem-of-evil/; Dr. Ray Bohlin, "Where Was God on September 11?" 2002, www.probe.org/where-was-god-on-sept-11-the-problem-of-evil/.

9. Deuteronomy 29:29 NASB.

10. Acts 10.

11. C.S. Lewis, "The Case for Christianity," reprinted from *Mere Christianity*; in *The Best of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 449. The Case for Christianity is copyright 1947 by The Macmillan Company.

12. Luke 24:1-9.

13. Matthew 28:1-8.

14. Luke 1:26-2:40.

15. Matthew 1:18-2:23.

16. 2 Timothy 2:24-26.

17. John 14:6 NASB.

18. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

19. A summary of some of the prophecies Jesus fulfilled is at Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" 2004, www.probe.org/are-you-listening-do-you-hear-what-i-hear/.

20. A summary of evidences for New Testament reliability is at Rusty Wright and Linda Raney Wright, "The New Testament: Can I Trust It?" 1976, www.probe.org/the-new-testament-can-i-trust-it/.

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How to Handle the Things You Hate But Can't Change

Sue Bohlin presents her personal testimony of how Christ led her to a biblical worldview understanding of her physical state. She explains how understanding her situation ministered to her and others spiritually and emotionally.

The most unique and distinctive thing about me is something I absolutely HATED when I was growing up. I'm one of the last polio babies. I got polio when I was eight months old, in October of 1953, just a few months before the vaccine was developed. My left leg was paralyzed from the hip down, but a couple days after I got sick with polio, some limited use started to return to my virtually dead leg.

Polio left me with one leg shorter than the other, one foot smaller than the other, weakened muscles, and a serious limp. I had several orthopedic surgeries and went to physical therapy once a week. Every day until I was 14, I did exercises with a weighted boot strapped onto my shoe. I would cry, "But I don't *want* to do my exercises!!!" and my mother would insist, "But you *have* to do your exercises!!!" Before I learned to walk, I was fitted with a full-length steel and leather brace. I was so glad when the movie *Forrest Gump* came out, because my kids were able to see what braces looked like, since they never knew that part of my life!

Polio profoundly affected my body, but it only crippled my body a little compared to what it did to my self image. I hated the way I looked. I hated what the polio had done to me, and I despaired every time I looked in the mirror, thinking, "Ugly! You are so UGLY!!"

So I got good at two things. One was repressing the polio altogether. I got in the habit, which I actually have to this day, of avoiding looking in mirrors, or seeing my reflection in store windows, or even acknowledging my shadow. I don't want to see the way I walk, because it hurts to see the way I walk. I consider myself an expert on denial; in fact, one of these days I have to get that T-shirt that says, "Call me Cleopatra—Queen of Denial!"

The other thing I got good at was a very special fantasy. It was so private, so personal, that I never even wrote it down. I loved to fantasize that when I grew up, I would become a princess, and my polio troubles would be behind me because those sorts of things don't bother princesses! Now, the chances of a vacuum cleaner salesman's daughter from Highland Park, Illinois, becoming a princess are mighty slim, but I loved my fantasy.

In high school, the polio got in the way of dating. No one seemed able to just accept *me* as someone worth going out with. I had friends who were boys, but hardly anyone was interested in anything more than friendship. My sixteenth birthday was bittersweet because I was "sweet sixteen and never been kissed." High school boys then, like now, weren't exactly paragons of sensitivity and acceptance! My self-esteem dropped even lower.

I went to college at the University of Illinois to work on a degree in Elementary Education. One day in my sophomore year, something happened that changed the entire course of my life.

A friend was handing out flyers inviting students to see that evening's performance of an illusionist-magician. I thought, "Great! I love magic!" I love to see women get sawn in two, and the fake levitating, and all that David Copperfield sort of stuff, and I started to get excited about it. But then I noticed the small letters at the bottom of the flyer: this performance was sponsored by a campus religious organization.

"Forget it," I thought. "I am NOT interested in Jesus freaks." But as the day wore on, I felt like a huge magnet was pulling me to the performance, and I found myself buying a ticket and planning on going. I'm so glad I did.

The illusionist, Andre Kole with Campus Crusade for Christ, was excellent. But I don't remember his magic nearly as much as I remember his message. For one thing, he stopped halfway through the evening and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're going to take a short intermission. After the break I'm going to use my illusion to illustrate some spiritual principles. If this will offend you, I want to give you an opportunity to leave during the intermission." I thought, "What in the world is this guy going to say?" Besides, I had spent one whole dollar on my ticket and I was going to get my money's worth!

When he started again, he said some things I'd never heard before, but which were quite intriguing. He quoted a famous philosopher who said that we each have a God-shaped vacuum within us, and nothing will fit that shape or fill that emptiness except for God Himself. He quoted someone else who had said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. He pointed out that there's a huge difference between Christianity and "Churchianity." Churchianity, he said, is man trying to earn favor with God, trying to work his way to heaven. But Christianity as the Bible explains it is a relationship. It's God reaching down to man and calling us into an intimate friendship with Himself, not because of anything we deserve or anything we can do to please Him, but because He desires to have a relationship with us.

Andre Kole really got my attention when he asked, "Do you know what a Christian really is?" I thought, "Of course I do! A Christian is someone who isn't Jewish!" But he said that according to the Bible, Christian means "Christ-in-one," and that a true Christian is actually indwelled by Jesus Christ Himself. That blew me away.

Then he said, “I’m going to use my illusion to illustrate some points. Just as there are physical laws that govern the physical universe, so there are spiritual laws that govern the spiritual universe.

The Four Spiritual Laws

“The first law is that God loves you and He offers a wonderful plan for your life. When Jesus was on earth, He said, ‘I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.’ Now what do you suppose He meant by ‘abundant life’? I think He meant a life filled with purpose and joy and direction and fulfillment. But as you look around the world today, you see that, obviously, most people are not living that kind of life. Something is terribly wrong.

“That brings us to the second spiritual law: Man is sinful and separated from God. We don’t like to use the word ‘sin’ today, but it’s a word the Bible uses a lot. It’s actually an archery term, and it means missing the mark or the target. It doesn’t matter if you miss the target by one inch or one mile, you’re still missing it. God commands us to be holy and perfect, just as He is holy and perfect. But we don’t even meet our *own* standards, much less God’s!

“The Bible also tells us that ‘the wages of sin is death.’ That means that the penalty for missing the mark of being absolutely perfect and holy is death—not only the physical death of our bodies, but that when we die, we can’t ever be with God in heaven. It means the death of our spirits as well. And once we commit one sin, there’s nothing we can do to restore ourselves. We’re stuck. There’s a huge chasm between us and God, and there’s nothing we can do to cross it.

“That’s where the really good news comes in. The third spiritual law is that God has provided a solution to this dilemma. Since the Bible says that the punishment for sin is death, someone has to die because of our sin. God didn’t want

us to have to pay that penalty, so He sent His own Son, Jesus, from heaven to earth. He took on human flesh—that's what Christmas is about—and lived a perfect life. Then He died a heinous death on a cross, even though He was innocent, and He died in our place. Three days later, God raised Him from the dead because He was pleased with Jesus' sacrifice."

Now, I had heard a lot of this stuff before when I was growing up in church, but it had never had any impact on me. I knew a lot of religious facts, but they didn't affect my life in any way. I believed that George Washington was the Father of our Country, I believed that Abraham Lincoln was the best president (I was from Illinois, remember. . ."the Land of Lincoln"!), and I believed that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the world. They were all in the same category in my head, and they all had the same affect on me— which is to say, none at all.

But I had never, ever heard what he said next, the fourth spiritual law. "Each of us must accept Christ's gift of eternal life *personally*." He explained that Jesus was offering each of us the gift of eternal life, which means not only going to heaven when we die but, starting that moment, He would live His powerful, holy, beautiful life from INSIDE US. Whoa!! This was a *totally* new concept!! I thought that God stayed in His corner of the universe, and I limped along in my little corner, and never the twain shall meet. But suddenly I was hearing something completely new and different—that God Himself loved me so much He wanted to come live IN MY HEART!!!! As I sat there, reveling in this new information and this incredible offer, I saw that all along, I had thought I was doing all right with God because I was basically a "good girl." But now I realized that I was missing the boat entirely, because I had never entered into a personal relationship with God at all; I had been caught up in rules and rituals and traditions, and had rejected them all because they had no meaning to me. And here was God offering me

HIMSELF instead of those dead rules and rituals and traditions!

My whole spirit cried out in one big “YES!!!!!!” It felt rather like a flower turning to the sun and bursting forth in full blossom. Andre Kole prayed a short prayer, which I followed along in my heart, but my real prayer consisted of one incredibly joyful “YES!!!”

I went home to my dorm, where I told my roommates, “Guess what? When I left tonight, we were in a triple, but now we’re in a quadruple, because Jesus is now living in my heart!” They just groaned, “OH NO!! You got RELIGION!!” They dismissed what I was saying: “We know what this means, Sue. There’s a guy involved in this somewhere. We know how you work. Every two weeks or so you fall in love with somebody new, and whatever the guy believes, that’s your new philosophy. Last month you were in love with Tony Hunter, and you thought you were Jonathan Livingston Seagull! So this is nothing more than a fad, and it will pass when THIS guy doesn’t work out either.”

So my roommates waited for the fad to pass. That was 1973.

Just a fad? No way!

It wasn’t a fad, and it didn’t pass, because my new relationship with Jesus Christ was the most real thing that had ever happened to me. My life became a perpetual surprise box. No one warned me that when God came to live inside me, He’d be making all sorts of wonderful changes! They just started happening.

For one thing, my language cleared up. When I was still at home, I was a “good girl.” But when I went to college, my crippled self-esteem made me crave the acceptance of my friends. And since they all had mouths like sailors, I started talking like that too. I was never really comfortable with it (because princesses don’t swear!). But within about two weeks

of the night I trusted Christ, I realized that it was as if God reached down into my vocabulary box with a great big soapy sponge and cleaned out all the garbage that was in there—without asking Him to!

I discovered that, for the first time in my life, I wanted to go to church. The friend who had invited me to the Andre Koe show also invited me to his church, which was a block from my dorm but somehow I had never noticed it. I didn't even own a dress, but I got one, and went to church of my own free will for the first time in my life. I made a startling discovery. The church was filled with college students who were there because they WANTED to be, not because their parents had made them go! From the very first time I went, I was captivated by the lights on in everyone's eyes. These people were honestly joyful and so glad to be there! Not only that, but they sang all the verses of the hymns, with enthusiasm! This was a *whole* new experience for me. Then, the pastor got up and taught us from the Bible, relating it to our 20th-century lives. I loved it!

And the third thing that happened was a new hunger to read the Bible. I didn't own one of those, either. I had tried it a couple of times; when I was in elementary school, a priest had told us one day that if we wanted to read a love letter from God, to go home and look in our family Bible and read the epistles. So I tried it. Didn't look like any love letter **I** wanted to read! It was too hard to understand, and seemed so dull and boring, I shut the dusty book and put it back on the shelf. Another time, another priest told us that if we wanted to see how the end of the world would happen, to read the last book of the Bible. What a disaster *that* was! But now I really wanted to read and understand the Bible, so I went to the college bookstore and found the Living Bible, a modern-day paraphrase that I could easily understand. In the first few pages, I found just what I needed: "If you're new to this book..." It gave a suggested order for reading certain books,

and I knew I had the help I needed. I couldn't wait for 4 o'clock every day, when I could go back to my dorm room and read about Jesus, this new, wonderful Friend who was now living in my heart.

But it wasn't the immediate changes that I want to talk about. Far more important are the long-term changes that God has been working in my life, healing my self-image and helping me deal with the polio.

Healing a Crippled Self-Image

The more I read and studied the Bible, the more I learned to see myself as God said I was, and realized that what He said was so much more accurate and trustworthy than how I felt. I'm a woman, and the way I felt about myself completely depended on external things like whether my hair was clean, whether I was wearing make-up, and the time of the month. So I could wake up, force myself to look in the mirror, and whimper in defeat—then, 30 minutes later, not be so depressed once I'd had a chance to do something about myself. But as I learned to embrace the truth about what God said I was, that it was more valid than my fleeting feelings, it profoundly changed the way I felt about myself.

When I studied Genesis, the first book of the Bible that explains the beginnings of everything, I learned that when God made Adam and Eve in His image, that made them infinitely valuable—not because of themselves, but because of their Creator. And, because I'm descended from Adam and Eve, I learned that I was also made in the image of God, and that makes me infinitely valuable as well. But this was a truth I only learned in my head; I didn't learn it in my heart until my first son was born.

The whole time I was pregnant with Curt, I prided myself on being a thoroughly modern, non-emotional mother. I knew that newborn human babies weren't particularly beautiful, as

compared to, say, newborn lambs. When I saw my baby, I was going to say, "Yes, that's a baby all right. Take him and clean him up, and when you bring him back we'll bond."

And then Curt was actually born.

When I first laid eyes on this child who was made in my husband's and my image, this child that God had made by taking Ray's intangible love for me and my intangible love for him and creating a tangible baby that we could hold and love, I thought, "WHOA! This is THE most BEAUTIFUL baby the world has ever seen!" I instantly fell in love with this little bundle of baby, and he was infinitely valuable to me, NOT because of anything intrinsic with him—I mean, all babies do is eat and sleep and poop and cry—but because he was made in our image.

A few days later, in the hospital, I had him on my lap doing a finger and toe check, and just sort of smelling his awesome newborn-baby smell, when I suddenly realized with a rush of mother- tiger protective love, that IF ANYONE SO MUCH AS LAID A HAND ON THIS CHILD, I WOULD PERSONALLY TEAR THEM LIMB FROM LIMB!!!! I didn't know I could love anyone that much, but I loved my baby with a ferocious, passionate love that surprised and overwhelmed me. (Okay, okay, I realized this was probably hormones, but it sure felt real enough at the time!) Then, as I lay there in the hospital bed overtaken with these strong emotions, I suddenly realized something else: that if I, being such a finite and limited human being, could love my child so ferociously and passionately, how much more must my heavenly Father, who is infinitely huge and powerful, love me? God loved me even more ferociously and passionately than I could imagine, and that meant that even if the rest of the world thumbed their noses at me and rejected me, if I knew that God loved me like that, it wouldn't matter.

Another truth that God used to heal my broken self-image came when I read in the gospel of John that "as many as received Christ [and I had], to them He gave the right to become

children of God, even to those who believe in His name." I learned that simply being a human being doesn't make us a child of God—that just means we are creatures made in His image. I became a child of God when I trusted Christ to save me from my sins, and according to what Jesus said, I was born again at that point into God's family. Shortly after I learned about being a child of God, I came across one of my favorite names for God in the Bible: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Then suddenly I put the two things together: if God is the King of Kings, and I am a child of God, then the female child of a King is a PRINCESS!!



I made it!! When you look at me, I might not look like much on the outside, but I know that I am a princess on the inside because my heavenly Father the King made me one when I became His child!!

The Hole in My Soul

The other area where God keeps working with me is the whole issue of polio. After I'd been a new Christian for a few months, I heard about a counselor who was sometimes able to pray for people and they received physical healing. So I made an appointment and went to see her.

I said, "Look, I've had polio almost all my life and I don't want it anymore. Would you please pray for me and heal me?"

She replied, "Well, I must tell you that sometimes God chooses to heal people in heaven, but first, tell me about how you

feel about your polio.”

“I don’t like it, and I want you to heal me.”

“Not so fast. How do you feel about God for letting this terrible thing happen to you?”

“Everything’s fine with God and me. Could we just get on with this?”

“No, wait. Having polio is an awful thing. Aren’t you just a little bit angry with God for letting this bad thing happen to you?”

I instantly thought, “Good girls don’t get mad at God,” and said, “NO, I’M NOT ANGRY WITH GOD!! Please, just pray for me and I’ll get out of here.”

The counselor smiled gently at me and said, “Sue, I’m afraid that no amount of healing is going to happen in your life until you’re honest with God. I can see that you have a great deal of anger and bitterness and resentment toward God for letting you have polio, and you need to deal with that first.”

“You’re not going to heal me?” I asked plaintively.

She shook her head and said, “I’m not the One who does the healing. I think you need to go pray about what’s going on inside of you first.”

I was terribly disappointed. I had had such hope that finally—FINALLY—I would be rid of the awful, horrible effects of this disease! Polio had ripped a huge wound in my soul as well as damaging my body, but this woman wasn’t going to do things my way. Sadly, I got in my car and drove home.

Along the highway, I prayed, “God, this woman seems to think I have all this anger and bitterness and resentment stored up against You because of the polio. Is there anything to this?”

It was as if God said, "Finally, My precious daughter, you ask the right question!" I realized that I had been stuffing a lifetime of disappointment and pain into an emotional basement, and God was opening the door that I had kept shut for years. Feelings and memories started coming back to me out of the basement, like the time I was about ten years old.

I knelt next to my bed one night and poured out my heart to God. "God, please PLEASE heal me! I *hate* this polio, You know how much I hate this polio! Please, please give me two normal legs! I hate my body, I hate limping, I hate doing the exercises with the boot, I hate going to physical therapy. I hate the lift on my shoe, and I hate having my left leg shorter than the other, and I hate having to wear such ugly shoes. Oh God, I want to go into a shoe store and buy one pair of beautiful shoes so bad! I hate having to wear different size shoes! And You know I can't wear high heels with my leg and foot being so weak. And God, if I can't wear high heels, how can I get married? Everybody knows that brides wear high heels on their wedding day! Besides, who would want to marry me with polio anyway? I hate this toothpick leg, and I hate *hate* HATE the way people stare at me in public, especially little kids. God, please PLEASE heal me tonight while I'm sleeping!"

Then I proceeded to help God out by giving Him helpful suggestions on how to go about healing me. "You can take the extra muscle from my right leg and transfer it over to my left leg. Then stretch the left leg so it's as long as the right, and pull on my toes so they're not crumpled up anymore. And in the morning I'll run downstairs yelling, "Mom! Mom! God healed me!" and she'll call the *Chicago Sun Times*, and it'll be on the front page: "God Heals Suburban Girl." And I won't be able to go to school because I'll need to go to a shoe store and pick out some beautiful shoes like everybody else's, since my different-sized shoes won't fit. Oh! And God, I'll be able to SKIP down the street! I've never been able to skip!! It'll be

great! Now, I'll just go to sleep and while I'm sleeping, You work a miracle. Then, in the morning, I won't even have to throw back the covers to see what You've done. I'll *know*." I fell into bed exhausted, having poured out my hurting heart to God, and so hopefully confident that He had heard me and would do what I asked.

In the morning, I was right: I didn't have to throw back the covers to see what had happened during the night. I knew without checking: absolutely nothing. NOTHING!! God had ignored me! I was *furious*. "God, how could You? I poured out my heart to You and You ignored me! You KNOW how much I hate the polio, You KNOW how much I want to be healed! It's no big deal for You to do this for me! If You could part the Red Sea, I know you could heal me! HOW COULD YOU?????" Then suddenly, I realized that, in my little ten-year-old heart, I was yelling at God, and I was horrified. Good girls don't get mad at God! So I took all the feelings of anger and disappointment and grief and stuffed them all down in my basement, along with all the other feelings I'd stuffed down there over the years.

And now, here I was, 20 years old, and all these feelings and memories were flooding back, and I realized that the counselor was right. I *did* have a huge amount of anger and bitterness and frustration stored up against God. . .and I didn't have a clue as to what to do about it. I'd never heard anyone speak on "What To Do When You're So Mad At God You Want to Spit in His Face." That sounds blasphemous! But that's how I felt, and I didn't know what to do about it.

So I prayed, "God, I don't know how to handle all these feelings, so I'm asking You to show me what to do. And God, it looks like You're not going to heal me of the polio either, are You? So please help me deal with it. I've always hoped that when I was grown up, it would magically go away, but that isn't going to happen. You're going to have to show me how to deal with the polio, too."

God is faithful, and He answered my prayer. In two ways.

God is Always in Control

First, I learned what has been the single most comforting truth I've ever learned as a Christian: that God has always been in control, and nothing has happened to me that He did not allow to pass through the grid of His love and purpose for my life. It was as if there were a suit of armor around me from the moment I was conceived, and nothing has touched my life that God did not purposely allow to get past the armor. I did not get polio by accident; there was a reason for it. When God saw that polio virus heading for me, He allowed it to do the exact amount of damage to my body that was in His plan for me. But once again, this was a truth I only learned in my head, and the heart-understanding didn't come until the day I took my second son Kevin to an immunization clinic for a shot.

I held him in my arms so that he was facing outward, his little thigh exposed. When the nurse stuck him, he wheeled around, and just before letting out a huge yell, he fixed me with a look of intense betrayal. I knew that if he had been able to put into words what he was feeling, he would have screamed, "You're my MOTHER!! I can't believe you let this woman attack me with that huge STICK!!" I thought, "Oh Kevin, I know you can't understand why I would allow this woman to attack you with that stick. Honey, I *drove* you here so she could attack you with that stick."

What I wanted to say, but it would have been pointless, was "Baby, I know how hard it is for you to understand what's happening. But my Mommy mind is so much bigger than your Baby mind, there's no way I can explain that I know what I'm doing, and I'm letting you hurt because I love you and I'm acting in your best interests, even though all you can feel right now is the pain. I'm so sorry, but you're just going to have to trust me."

I thought, "I'm going to take you home and give you some Tylenol, and you'll start to feel better, and in a few days all the pain and discomfort will be gone, but the good medicine inside you will make you strong and healthy for many years. Some day you won't even remember that today happened, but the benefits of this shot will last for a long, long time."

Right about then we walked out into the sunlight, and God spoke to me very quietly, on the inside: "My precious Sue, I know how much you hurt because of the polio. I hate it too—in fact, I hate it even more, because it was never part of My perfect Creation in the beginning. When sin entered the world and spoiled everything, polio was unleashed into My beautiful world. I hate for you to suffer like this. But just as My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts are higher than your thoughts, I can't explain to you what I'm doing with the polio any more than you can explain what you're doing to Kevin, and that his suffering is good. Sweetheart, you're just going to have to trust Me."

Then I realized that just as Kevin's pain was going to go away in a matter of days, leaving him years and years free from the pain from the diseases he wasn't going to contract, I needed to see the pain of my polio'd body in the scope of eternity. If my body lives to be 100, which is a very generous estimate, and I have to deal with polio for over 99 years, all that time is still only going to be the length of a pinprick compared to the billions and billions of "years" I'm going to live in heaven—in a *perfect* body. My life on earth does have its difficulties and pain, but it's still temporary when I remember that the majority of my life will be lived in heaven where all pain will be behind me. And just as Kevin's vaccination produced health in his body, I realized that God was using polio to produce character and depth and His kind of beauty in me, which will last for all eternity.

Giving Thanks for Everything

The other way God answered my prayer was in discovering a little book (Merlin Carrothers' *Power in Praise*) that said God wants us to give thanks for *everything* that happens to us. Not just *in* everything, not just the things we think will work out all right, but everything that comes into our lives. The reason we can give thanks is because of the first lesson I learned, which is that God is in control and has unseen, unknown purposes for what touches our lives. The Bible never tells us to FEEL thankful; it just says to give thanks, which is an act of the will and not of emotion. I looked it up, and sure enough, in black and white, there it was Ephesians 5:20. Even in the Greek!

The book is full of story after story of how God changed people's hearts when they thanked Him for things they hated but couldn't change, and I knew I had stumbled across some wonderful wisdom. I remember where I was the first time I told God "thank You" for the one thing I never, ever thought I could give thanks for: my polio.

"God," I started, "I certainly don't FEEL thankful for polio, but Your word doesn't say to go by feelings but by faith, and Your word says to give thanks for all things. So I thank You for letting me have polio. Thank You for my limp. Thank You for the problem that shoes constantly give me, and how hard it is to find them for my mismatched feet. Thank You that I will never be able to wear high heels. Thank You for the way people stare at me. Thank you for all the physical therapy I had to go through, thank You for the boot, thank You for the surgeries, thank You for the brace I had to wear. Thank you that I don't know how well my body will hold up as I get older. I thank You for all these things."

As I disciplined myself to say "thank You" for these things I hated but couldn't change, something interesting started to happen. I realized that saying "thank You" enabled me to

relinquish all the pain and anger I had stored up in my emotional basement, and God took it away and replaced it with His peace. Pain had carved huge caverns in my heart, but now instead of being filled with all the negative emotions I had hidden in there, all that space was now filled with peace and a marvelous joy that came from trusting in the One who loves me perfectly. (In fact, since I'm only 5 feet tall, sometimes I think I'm bigger on the inside than I am on the outside!)

Something else that was interesting happened as I made myself give thanks for this horrible thing I hated but couldn't change. In addition to giving thanks by faith but not by feeling, I found that there were a bunch of things that I could easily, and with feelings of gratitude, give thanks for. I thank God for my parents, who loved me enough to make me exercise and endure surgeries so that I could walk as well as I did. I thank God for my husband, who, even though he's a runner, has never made me feel in the least bit inferior for not being able to keep up with him, and who is exceptionally gracious and sensitive in making allowances for my limitations. I thank God that if I had to have polio, it was in my leg and not in my arms. I'm a calligrapher, and it would be awfully hard to do hand lettering with my toes! I thank God that, even though I have to use a wheelchair in places like airports and amusement parks and malls, when I get to where I'm going, I can get up and walk. And there isn't a day that goes by that I don't thank God for my handicap permit! I get the best parking spaces!

I love happy endings, but this story doesn't have one. At least not as far as my earthly life is concerned. I still have to discipline myself in my reactions and attitudes concerning my body, because I'm now forced to deal with post-polio syndrome. 30 to 35 years after the onset of polio, a whole new set of symptoms crop up: bone-crushing fatigue, increasing muscle weakness, and pain. So far I don't have much trouble with the pain part (thank You LORD!!!!), but I've had to

completely restructure my lifestyle to accommodate a body that is losing strength and ability.

One day, as I was reading 2 Corinthians 12, I puzzled over Paul's re-statement of what God told him concerning his thorn in the flesh: that His power was perfected in weakness. I knew there was a nugget of comforting wisdom in that, and asked God to reveal to me what He meant. He answered my prayer one day when I was looking out a large plate glass window. Next to it was an expanse of brick wall. I was able to look out through the window and see not only a beautiful landscape outside, but I noticed that the sunlight was streaming in through the window. The sun was shining on the other side of the brick wall, too, but I couldn't see it. Then I realized that a glass window is fragile, transparent, and easily broken, but it lets the light shine through. A brick wall is strong, opaque, and is difficult to break it down, but nothing gets through it. When we are weak, whether physically or emotionally, we're like the fragile glass window, and God's power can stream through us, bringing power where we are powerless. When we're strong, like the brick wall, it's difficult to trust God because we're content in our own human strength—but no light, no supernatural power comes through. I am at the place where I'd rather be a window than a wall, because I want God's power and light to shine through me more than I want strength within myself.

At the time of this writing, I've had a chance to share my story with over 10,000 women, and I've never yet found a person who didn't have some sort of private heartache. Everyone has something about herself that she hates but can't change. Mine is on the outside, but for the majority of women, their heartbreak is on the inside. Allow me to encourage you to think about two things as you consider *your* private heartache.

What To Do With the Things You Hate but Can't Change

First, think about how much God loves you. He proved it once and for all by sending His only Son to die a horrible death in your place, so that you could be reconciled to Him. One truth has been of untold comfort to me: His love is stronger than my pain.

Second, the way to truly relinquish the anger about your private heartache is to give thanks for it. It occurred to me one day that every difficulty in our lives is a beautiful gift wrapped in really ugly wrapping paper. That's because God loves paradoxes, and He wraps His best gifts in tremendously daunting "paper." Imagine if someone held out a gift to you wrapped in the newspaper that had spent several days at the bottom of the garbage can, soaked in chicken juice (ew YUCK!) and covered with coffee grounds, with maggots crawling all over it. You'd say, "What in the world kind of gift could possibly be inside such a grotesque wrapping?" and shrink back from it. But God does exactly that. Many of us never get past the paper to open the gift. But that's what giving thanks will do for you—get you past the ugly wrapping paper to the choice gift inside. For me, it was a heart full of peace and joy. For others, who were sexually abused for example, it's the delight of discovering He will restore the chunks of your soul that other people stole from you. For still others, it's learning that even though you never had the earthly Daddy you should have had, you have a heavenly Daddy who loves you more perfectly and intimately than you can ever know till heaven.

But giving thanks is not a magic formula; it doesn't do any good unless you first have a personal relationship with God by knowing and trusting His Son, Jesus Christ. It is essential that you turn from depending on yourself and your own efforts, and trust Jesus to save you from your sin, placing yourself in God's hands. If you're feeling like there's a rope wrapped

around your heart and it's being tugged from the other end, please let me encourage you to identify that as God Himself, pulling you toward Himself and saying, "I love you! I created you to be in fellowship with Me! Please come to Me and give Me yourself so I can give you Myself." If that's what you're feeling, I suggest you tell God something similar to what I'm going to share with you, and what Andre Kole shared with me the night I trusted Jesus:

"Dear God, I realize I'm a sinner and You are a holy, perfect God. Thank You for sending Your Son Jesus to die on the cross in my place. I trust Him now to save me from my sin and to come live inside me. Please make me into the person You want me to be. Amen."