

**HOPE FOR HUMANITY:**  
**GOD'S FIX FOR A BROKEN WORLD**  
**BY BRIAN JOHNSTON**

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1. <http://www.Lockman.org>



# CHAPTER ONE: THE BIGGEST LIE IN THE WORLD

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It's said that author C. S. Lewis once expressed himself to be amused at the wrongheadedness of those who claimed they could identify his sources of inspiration. And then he added tellingly, "If people get it so wrong on earthly things, what chance do they have with eternal realities?"

And people do get it so very wrong when they attempt to second-guess eternal realities. 'Do your best,' they say, 'and at the end of life when you stand before God, he'll weigh the good you've done over against the bad, and if the good outweighs the bad, he'll let you into heaven.' This same basic lie takes a variety of different religious forms, sometimes specifying sacraments or so-called 'pillars' or 'noble truths' or saying that we must pay tithes or observe special days or be baptized as qualifying good works towards that final assessment of whether or not we make it into heaven.

These are all rejections of the truth. They come about as a result of having considered it, and, in one way or another, found it to be a strange thing. Another author, G. K. Chesterton, once said: "the truth is always bound to be strange - because the fiction is what we've invented to suit ourselves in order to replace the truth which doesn't suit us."

The ultimate reality check comes from the Bible. Even those who may be highly sceptical of the Bible will find its statement in this regard to be consistent with their own personal observations. The Bible declares: *"A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by*

*faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Galatians 2:16).*

The reality, soberly documented in the Bible, and, true to our experience, is this: No-one born of a human father in the entire history of the planet has managed to make him or herself acceptable to God based on their own performance of keeping God’s rules. That’s quite some claim. But where’s the evidence to deny it? Think about that for a moment. Take the Ten Commandments:

*“Then God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

*You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.*

*Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you*

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*shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”*  
(Exodus 20:1-17)

It's a lot easier to list them than to keep them! The truth is, we've all broken them. Would anyone dare to make the claim they've never told a lie?

And that reminds us of our topic we're exploring: which is the biggest lie in the world. I definitely think it's one of the most popular. In every place and from every background you find some version of the claim that we must do our best, and at the end of life when we stand before God, he'll weigh the good we've done over against the bad, and if the good outweighs the bad, he'll let us get into heaven – or whatever other term is used for heaven.

We really should try to understand that in trying to do good, we're on to a loser. Even if we could strip away all of our vices, it doesn't make us to become good by nature. And, another thing, there's no need to wait until life is over before we learn God's verdict on our life. You can know God's verdict on your performance right now. It's really no secret. The Bible tells us God's advance verdict on each and every one of our lives. It's found in Romans chapter 3 verse 12: and it says, *“There is no-one good.”* So, there it is, and we need to listen to it. But, a couple of chapters later in Paul's letter to the Romans (chapter five and the eighth verse) we read about the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us – and we discover that there's no need for us to attempt to do anything to get ourselves right with God.

The biblical Christian message is ... Not 'Do!' But 'Done!' Let me try to illustrate it for you like this. David Morse, an American missionary to India, became great friends there with the pearl-diver, Rambhau. Many an evening he spent in Rambhau's cabin reading to him from the Bible, and explaining to him God's way of salvation. Rambhau enjoyed lis-

tening to the Word of God, but whenever the missionary tried to get him to accept Christ as his Saviour - he would shake his head and reply, "Your Christian way to heaven is too easy for me! I cannot accept it. I want to earn my place in heaven - and so I am going to work for it."

One evening, however, the missionary heard a knock on his door, and on opening it he found Rambhau there. He said: "In a week's time I start working for my place in heaven; I am leaving for Delhi - and I am going there on my knees." "You are my dearest friend on earth, Sahib Morse. Through all these years you have stood by me in sickness, in want - you have been sometimes my only friend."

Rambhau left only to return soon with a small but heavy box. "I have had this box for years," he said, "and I keep only one thing in it. Now I will tell you about it, Sahib Morse. I once had a son. My son was a diver too. He was the best pearl diver on the coasts of India. He had the swiftest dive, the keenest eye, the strongest arm, the longest breath of any man who ever sought for pearls. My boy always dreamt of finding the 'perfect' pearl - one beyond all that was ever found. One day he found it! But even when he saw it - he had been under water too long. That pearl cost him his life, for he died soon after." The old pearl diver bowed his head and worked the combination on the strongbox and drew from it a carefully wrapped package. Gently opening the cotton, he picked up a mammoth pearl and placed it in the hand of the missionary. For a moment the missionary was speechless and gazed with awe.

Then he said, designedly, "Rambhau, this is a wonderful pearl, an amazing pearl. Let me buy it. I would give you ten thousand dollars for it." "Sahib! What do you mean?" "Well, I will give you fifteen thousand dollars for it, or if it takes more - I will work for it." "Sahib," said Rambhau, stiffening his whole body, "this pearl is beyond price. No man in all the world has money enough to pay what this pearl is worth to me. On

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the market a million dollars could not buy it. I will not sell it to you. You may only have it as a gift." "No, Rambhau, I cannot accept that. As much as I want the pearl, I cannot accept it that way. Perhaps I am proud, but that is too easy. I must pay for it, or work for it."

The old pearl-diver was stunned. "You don't understand at all, Sahib. Don't you see? My only son gave his life to get this pearl, and I wouldn't sell it for any money. It's worth is in the life-blood of my son. I cannot sell this - but I can give it to you. Just accept it in token of the love I bear you."

The missionary gripped the hand of the old man. "Rambhau," he said in a low voice, "don't you see? My words are just what you have been saying to God all the time." The diver slowly began to understand. "God is offering you salvation as a free gift," said the missionary. "It is so great and priceless that no man on earth can buy it. Millions of dollars are too little. No man on earth could earn it. No man is good enough to deserve it. It cost God the life-blood of his only Son to make the entrance for you into heaven. Tears were now rolling down the cheeks of the old man. "Sahib, I see it now. I have believed in the doctrine of Jesus for the last two years, but I could not believe that his salvation was free. Now I understand. Some things are too priceless to be bought or earned. Sahib, I will accept his salvation!" (Author Unknown)

I hope you, too, will understand and accept God's gift of salvation for every repentant sinner who trusts in Jesus' death for his or her sins on the cross. This is the greatest truth – that "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*" (1 Timothy 1:15).

## CHAPTER TWO: SYMPTOMS OF SOMETHING DEEPLY WRONG

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Just think of a few things that have been happening recently around the world. Civil unrest as a reaction against a law enforcement that's considered to be corrupt or racist. Brutal executions of people who are of a different religious persuasion. Civil airline passengers being caught up as victims of warring factions on the ground. Threats and negotiations about the existence of weapons capable of mass destruction. Once respected entertainers and politicians whose reputations are now shredded and mired in infamy. And so on ...

The most understated conclusion that we can draw from all this is: something's wrong! There's overwhelming, factual evidence that the human condition is corrupt. And this is not only something that affects everyone else. Here's a biblically recorded statement of what the Apostle Paul once said: "*I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*" (Romans 7:19 English Standard Version). If we're honest, we know that we can fully identify with that.

The 'evil' Paul described there are the symptoms of what the Bible labels as 'sin.' Let's examine a few general symptoms of this universal disease which the Bible calls 'sin.' The first I'd like to draw your attention to is the symptom of moral weakness. Here's what we find written in the Bible at Romans 5 verse 6: "*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*" (Romans 5:6 ESV).

To take one example, a man known as Mel Trotter once sold his family's only means of transport – which was a horse and buggy – so that he might support his drink habit. After one ten-day drinking session, he returned home to find his wife with their two-year-old son dead in her

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arms. Desperate and penniless, he promised his wife he'd never drink again, but within hours, he'd returned home drunk yet again – and one version of this testimony adds the detail that he'd even removed and sold the shoes taken from his infant son's corpse to buy that drink. He professed that he wanted to do good, but he was morally weak when trying to turn those good intentions into reality.

Another general symptom of sin which the Bible describes is ungodliness. In First Timothy 1 verse 9 it says: “... *understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners ...*” (1 Timothy 1:9).

The actual Bible word used there for ‘ungodly’ suggests a lack of respect or reverence. This can be expressed as a lack of respect or reverence for either the creator or the creature. Lack of respect for the creature will follow from a lack of reverence for the creator. It often comes down to failing to respect the sanctity of our bodies – which can lead to all kinds of sexual perversions. Or it can be a lack of respect for the sanctity of truth, resulting in all manner of lies. There again, it can be a lack of respect for the sanctity of life itself, which brings violent crime and bloodshed in its wake – the very sorts of things we began by listing as typical of the human condition on a world scale today.

Then what about a third symptom - which is hostility. At first, that might seem like a strong word, as many people of no particular faith might say they're not so much hostile to the notion of God, but simply indifferent. But doesn't hostility start out as indifference? The Bible in Romans 1:28 says: “*they did not see fit to acknowledge God*” (Romans 1:28 ESV) and this, in turn, two verses later, led them to be described as “*hateful to God*”, as shown by their actions (1:30).

In any case, we shouldn't under-rate indifference as a problem. It certainly depends on what the topic under discussion is. Suppose someone says ‘I'm not interested in music’ – well, that's their personal choice –

there are no ethical or moral implications. We might feel it's a shame: that they're missing out on something worthwhile, but so be it. Now, suppose someone says: 'I'm not interested in my husband – or I'm not interested in my wife.' That's quite a different matter, wouldn't you agree? If we were to hear that sentiment, we'd have to conclude that something tragic has happened in their relationship. Such an indifference is wrong. Next, we can take it a stage further, suppose someone says: 'I'm not interested in God.' The Bible-based reaction to that has got to be to declare it as the ultimate tragedy. If that should happen to be your position right now – that you're simply not interested in God – then a plain reading of the Bible would show that he's interested in you.

When one listener to SFT radio discovered that while on Death Row in an African country, he wrote back to us and said that previously he thought nobody cared about him. But having heard of how God gave his one and only son, he said that he now realized 'somebody cared ... He is *the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me*' – that's exactly what he wrote in his moving testimony.

Remember, we're tracking down major symptoms of our fallen, sinful human condition, as revealed by God's Word, the Bible. Here's yet another, our fourth: it's the desire to be independent. The Bible reveals to us that this desire erupted early on, with our first parents. They were tempted to eat forbidden fruit as follows: "*For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil*" (Genesis 3:5). Eve and Adam imagined they could be masters of their fate by accessing something God had denied them. Whenever we try to act as if we are god, and do what we want, it's an act of rebellion or defiance against God.

Finally, one last general symptom of the sinful condition is lawlessness. The Bible says: "*Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices*

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*lawlessness; sin is lawlessness*" (1 John 3:4 ESV). It's easy enough to understand this. Even in the practical tasks of life, we learn that the same thing is true – for example, if we ignore electrical installation instructions, we may well get electrocuted or it can certainly prove costly. A plumber I recently employed wired up our central heating pump all wrong, and it cost me three days' time and labour to rectify it.

So, we tend to explain 'sin' as being this wrong action or some other bad behaviour, but the reality is these things are symptoms of a deeper problem. Take the case of jaundice as an illustration. Having a yellowish tinge to the whites of your eye and skin is a sign that you're suffering from jaundice. Jaundice is often a symptom of a liver problem. To try to treat a liver problem with an application of cosmetic make-up to cover over the skin colouration symptom, is like trying to treat sin with a dose of religion. Any religion can only treat the symptoms of sin. So what's the answer? Is there one? There is indeed – and it can be found in the same verse we looked at when we spoke of sin's first symptom – Romans 5 verse 6 which says: "*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly*" (ESV).

The solution – God's solution – applies at the point of us being 'still weak.' This is a realistic remedy that's being described. It's not one which requires us to have successfully overcome our own problems first. It's not a self-help cure that God's encouraging us to take. The patient always needs the medicine while they're still ill – it's of no use once they're recovered. In the same way, God's remedy for the disease of sin applies while we're still trapped in our moral weakness, our irreverence, our indifferent hostility, our defiant spirit attitude of independence or our refusal to follow instruction. He doesn't wait for us to change before saving us. The famous hymn correctly says: 'Just as I am' ... 'O, Lamb of God, I come.'

But we do need to be prepared to be changed by the work of God's Holy Spirit – that's where the only power which can transform our sinful human condition comes from. So, when the Bible calls on us to repent of our sin, it means we're no longer to take pleasure in sin as we once did, but now instead to hate it since it was our sin which led Christ to die on the cross for us.

There's nothing to pay for real, lasting satisfaction ... it's said through the Bible prophet, Isaiah, to be '*without money and without cost*' (chapter 55:1). In Christ alone, the power of sin is broken. And in Christ alone no-one will ever be disappointed (Romans 9:33; 10:11; 1 Peter 2:6). But, they will be "*born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*" (1 Peter 1:3).

## CHAPTER THREE: LET'S TALK ABOUT JESUS

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The Apostle Paul liked to quote contemporary celebrities such as Aratus when he was at Athens. At the time of writing this, I'm in the Philippines, and following Paul's example I'm here quoting one of that country's icons. José Rizal once said: "One only dies once, and if one does not die well, a good opportunity is lost and will not present itself again." A statement like that has a resonance with many Filipinos, and leads easily into how various Bible writers have developed that same point of life's one certain event and what lies beyond it (e.g. Hebrews 9:27). The Apostle Paul himself talked about death being 'gain' (Philippians 1:21) provided we share his assurance that when we depart this life, we will be with Christ (Philippians 1:23). That, and that alone, would be dying well and making the most of the opportunity.

When the Apostle Paul wrote those last referred to words from the capital of the Roman Empire, Roman roads were at the cutting edge of the then communications network; nowadays, of course, it's the superhighway of cyber-space that dominates our communications – and I'm making use of it as I prepare this: an updated medium for an unchanged message.

Sometimes in this far eastern setting, the most effective way to interact with an audience and provoke participation is through text-messaging as virtually everyone there has a basic mobile phone – more of a necessity than a luxury when access to infrastructures is limited. Back then, say when at Athens 2,000 years ago, Paul would have preached in the common Greek which was more or less the universal language in which to reach the most people then, just as the English language often is today.

It's impressive to see how Paul also adapted the presentation of his core Gospel message to whichever culture he was engaging with. To Jewish audiences, he styled it around the theme of updating their expectations surrounding God's kingdom. But since this wasn't relevant background as far as Gentiles were concerned, Paul used a different approach for them. At Athens, he tapped into their religious uncertainty and their quest for new discoveries.

As he introduces God to the people of Athens, he begins with the observation that they're worshipping something other than the real creator God. For them, the substitutes were objects made of '*gold or silver or stone*', crafted by human skill which they were worshipping, but for us it's more likely to be whatever we fill our lives with or whatever we dream about or whatever we devote the majority of our time and energy and money to. Our god is whatever we think will bring us satisfaction. The problem is that it doesn't. The substitutes didn't work 2,000 years ago and they're still not working today. The rock musician still sings 'I can't get no satisfaction'; and the philosopher agrees that 'there's a God-shaped hole inside each one of us' and trying to fill it with other things doesn't work. We end up feeling empty simply because you and I were made to be in a relationship with God – our creator. Only that can fulfil and truly satisfy in a lasting way which meets our in-built capacity.

At Athens, the Apostle Paul goes on further to introduce God to them as the creator. He begins by referencing '*the God who made the world and all things in it.*' A typhoon blowing through a junkshop has no chance of rearranging all the scrap and junk randomly in such a way that a brand new, fully working car appears. Time and chance alone cannot create a universe like ours. Things cannot make themselves all by themselves. It's a fantasy to think that the laws of physics can actually bring into existence the reality which they merely describe. It's a sophis-

licated fantasy, for sure, but it's a fantasy nonetheless. Simply because 'to create' is a part of a verb, and a verb needs a subject.

In the same way as a watch needs a watch-maker, so this world needs a world-maker. All talk of a blind watch-maker is absurd when we take a moment to consider seriously the complexity of the genome of a mere germ – which it takes the power of 128 computers to simulate. As confirmed by the best established of scientific laws, left to themselves things tend to become more and more chaotic, and definitely not more and more complex. When even what we think of as the simplest things turn out to be very, very complex, we need to rethink the fairy-tale that once upon a time it all emerged from nothingness by pure random chance and gradually made itself complicated over deep time.

The judgement of the Bible on those who reject the clear evidence of a supernatural designer is that they are being 'wilfully ignorant.' And Paul was trying to end the time of ignorance when at Athens by telling them that the world-maker is the one whom the Bible introduces as God. What's more, it tells us later on in the New Testament that he's come as near as breathing. Yes, he once entered this creation of his. And so it tells us about Jesus who walked on water, calmed storms, turned water into wine and cured diseases. He finally rose from the dead in the miracle which is the hardest of all to dispute, because it's supported by changed lives around the world – still happening even 2,000 years later.

The next point Paul made was to affirm that God is good and '*he himself gives to all people life and breath and all things.*' God provides everything for our need but not for our greed. God provides us with everything we need to enjoy life. In fact, more fully than you can imagine, for the Bible goes on to show the extent of God's generous heart in the person of Jesus Christ who reached out and touched the untouchables and brought joy, relief and blessing into the numerous lives reported upon in the four Gospels. Their recorded reactions echo down through time

to us: *'He has done all things well'*, as *'He went about doing good.'* *'He saved others'* out of many a desperate situation.

Next Paul follows this up by saying that we each already have a sense of this true God. For whom do we turn to in difficulty? Whom do you tend to blame when tragedy strikes? In fact, tragedy can't be considered a problem unless deep down you actually believe in God. For atheists have no-one to blame. To them there's nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. Equally, atheists have no-one to express their gratitude to. It's not convincing, is it? Instinctively, we reach out for God – especially for comfort in our troubles, and express our hurt and anguish in our confusion. If only we could connect more strongly with the reality Paul expressed to the Athenians, *'[God] is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist.'* But we can know so much more when once we encounter God in Jesus Christ.

There was always a point to Paul's preaching. He preached for a verdict. He left the audience in no doubt as to what response was looked for. At Athens, he tells them God had *overlooked the times of ignorance* but was now declaring to them their need to repent in view of the day already appointed for God's judgement when *he will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom he has appointed* – even the one he's raised from the dead (Acts 17:30,31).

We'll all stand before God's appointed judge – he's the same one who once hung on the cross, judged by the world. Once judged by the world, and bearing the world's judgement, he will soon judge the world. But he will judge us in righteousness. The world judged him unjustly, served him an injustice, he died the just for the unjust, but he will judge us with perfect justice. There'll be no hiding, no excuses, no defence – but there can be salvation. There's one condition, and one only: that you repent and take up the pardon he's now offering at this time.

About 1830, a man named George Wilson killed a government employee who caught him in the act of robbing the mails. Wilson was tried and sentenced to be hanged. The President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, prevailed upon by the accused's friends, sent Wilson a pardon. But, Wilson did a strange thing: he refused to accept the pardon. No one seemed to know what to do because of this, so Wilson's case was sent to the U. S. Supreme Court. Chief Justice Marshall wrote this verdict: "A pardon is a slip of paper, the value of which is determined by the acceptance of the person to be pardoned. If it is refused, it is no pardon. George Wilson must be hanged." And so he was. If we refuse the pardon God offers now, we too will be sentenced – and in our case that means sentenced to the second death, even the lake of fire.

## CHAPTER FOUR: HIT FOR SIX!

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“Does anybody know what we’re living for?” (Freddie Mercury (died 1991), lead vocalist of Queen, in a song from the *Miracle* album). That must be the most important question in the universe. It captures concerns like: Where did we come from? Who am I? Where are we going? In response, I’d like to invite you to check out with me 6 things which Christianity claims God wants us to know. Together, we’ll check out 6 points the Bible presents as facts which, when taken together, give a satisfying answer to that most important question. The message at the heart of Christianity is from the Bible and is about God and his son Jesus; it’s also about life and death and the choice we all face.

The first point of the Christian message is that God is a loving Creator. He’s the ruler, the boss, the king – the one who’s in charge of the world. He owns it because he made it. He also made us, and set us to look after the world under his authority and by obeying his directions. This is nothing other than what the Bible itself tells us – beginning with those famous words: *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ... in the image of God He ... created ... male and female ... blessed them and ... said to them ... rule over ... every living thing”* (Genesis, chapter 1).

So summing up then, God is the ruler and we were created to live in and rule God’s world for him under his own loving authority. Sounds ideal, doesn’t it? But that’s not how things are now. What happened? What’s gone wrong? Something has – for it’s not even safe to walk the streets after dark. There’s racist thuggery of the most poisonous kind in the towns and cities we live in. What’s gone wrong? The answer is: we have!

The fact is: we rebelled. We're all rebels at heart, rebelling against God. From the beginning, we've rejected God by doing things our own way. We don't like someone telling us what to do or how to live - least of all God - so it's as if we shake our puny fists in his face and tell him to go away. It doesn't have to be as blatant as that: either we just ignore him and get on with our own lives or we disregard his instructions for living in his world. However we do it, we're all rebels, because we don't live God's way, but want to be our own boss instead. Like little kings, we want to run things our own way, without God. Doing this is what the Bible calls 'sin'. And it underlines it like this: *"Each of us has turned to his own way"* (The Bible prophet Isaiah, chapter 53 verse 6). 'Doing our own thing', as we would say.

The trouble is, in rejecting God's way, we make a mess - not only of our own lives, but of society around us. The world is full of people doing what suits them and not following God's way. We all act like little gods and the result is misery. The suffering and injustices around us go back to our basic rebellion against God. The Bible diagnoses that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. *"There is no-one ... who does good, not even one"* (Romans 3:10-12).

So what's God going to do about it all? Well, God cares enough about us to take our rebellion seriously. Because it matters to him how we treat him and other people, he calls us to account for our actions. The sentence God passes against us is fair. In rebelling against God, we are saying to him, "Go away. I don't want you telling me what to do. Leave me alone." And this is precisely what God does - he gives us exactly what we ask for - his judgement on rebels is to withdraw from them - permanently. As the Bible says: *"They will be punished ... shut out from the presence of the Lord"* (Second Thessalonians chapter 1 verses 8,9).

But since God is the source of life and, indeed, of all good things, to actually be cut off from him means death in its ultimate form. God's

judgement against rebels is an endless, God-less death. If we can just pause a moment and state the obvious: it's a terrible thing, to fall under a sentence like that, and it's a prospect we all face - since we're all guilty of rebelling against God. So is that it then? Well, if it were not for God's own miraculous intervention, it would be – since, as the Bible puts it: “[We’re] *destined to die once, and after that to face judgment*” (Hebrews 9:27).

However, because of his great love and generosity God didn't leave us to suffer the consequences of our foolish rebellion. He did something to save us - he sent his own divine son into our world to become also a man - Jesus of Nazareth. Unlike us, Jesus didn't rebel - he always lived under God's rule, and so didn't deserve death or punishment. But Jesus did die. Although he had the power of God to heal the sick, walk on water and even raise the dead, Jesus allowed himself to be executed on a cross. Why? We can let the Bible answer directly: “*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God*” (1 Peter 3:18).

Yes, the amazing news is clear: Jesus died as a substitute for us (rebels)! Jesus paid the debt we owed God (which was due to our having rebelled) by dying in our place -so that forgiveness and pardon might be available to us. All this is undeserved by us – it's a generous gift - from start to finish! As the apostle Peter said in his first Bible letter, “*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed*” (1 Peter 2:24).

God accepted Jesus' death as payment in full for our sins, and raised him from the dead. Jesus is now what humanity was always meant to be: God's ruler of the world. As God's ruler, he's been appointed God's judge of the world. The Bible promises that one day, he'll return to hold all of us accountable for our actions. Here's exactly what it says: “*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).*

In the meantime, Jesus offers us new life - both now and eternally we're forgiven: a fresh start with God, no longer as rebels but as friends - for in this new life, God himself comes to live within us by his Spirit. This makes it possible for us to experience the joy of that new relationship with God. What's more, when we're pardoned through Jesus' death - not because we've earned it, or deserve it, but because he's died in our place, we can be sure that when Jesus does return to judge, we'll be acceptable to him. The Bible promises: *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).*

So now it's our choice. We can stay rebels against God and try to run our own lives in our own way without him. Sadly, this is the option that a lot of people persist in. The end result is that God gives us what we ask for, and indeed deserve - he condemns us for our rejection of his rightful rule over our lives. Not only do we have to put up with the messy consequences of rejecting God here and now, but we face the dreadful prospect of being separated from him for ever - without life or love or relationship. As the Bible says: *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him” (The Gospel by John, chapter 3, verse 36).*

For those of us who realize that our situation is hopeless, there's a life-line. If we turn back to God and appeal for mercy, trusting in Jesus' death and resurrection, then everything changes. God wipes our slate clean - he accepts Jesus' death as payment for our sins and totally forgives us. He pours his own Spirit into our hearts and gives us a new life that stretches past death into forever. We're no longer rebels, but part of God's own family and live with Jesus as our ruler.

*“Now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation” (from the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, chapter 6 verse 2).*

A possible prayer:

**I recognize**, before a holy God, that I'm a sinner (for '*all have sinned*' & '*the wages of sin is death*' – Romans 3:23; 6:23)

**I realize** I can do nothing, but **repent** of the offence this is to a holy God (for salvation '*is ...not of works*' – Ephesians 2:8,9)

**I believe** in Jesus Christ, the Son of God – and that he died to bear the punishment for my sins (for '*Christ died for our sins*' – 1 Corinthians 15:3)

**I invite** him into my life and so receive the gift of God's grace, even forgiveness (for '*as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God*' – John 1:12).

## CHAPTER FIVE: TWO SIGHTS

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I often travel to the Far East to tell people about Jesus. I think it would be true to say I've seen sights there which have had a big impact on my life. But, right now, I want to show you two rather different sights. My prayer is that they'll change your life. By the way, talking of the Far East, there's a story of a little boy in India who had lots of rather nice marbles. But he was jealous – of all things - of his sister's bag of sweets. So he said to her, 'Let's do a deal, if you give me all your sweets, I'll give you all my marbles.' She thought about it and agreed to the swap. So he took her sweets, all of them of course, and went back to his room to fetch his marbles by way of exchange. But, you know, the more he looked at them, the more reluctant he was to give them all up. So he took the best ones and put them under his pillow, and only took the remainder to give to his sister. Well, that night she slept soundly while he tossed and turned restlessly, unable to sleep – all the while thinking, I wonder if she gave me *all* the sweets.

Let me ask you this: '**Have you seen your own heart?**' When we doubt others – and maybe even God – think about it, could it be we're really acknowledging our own deceitfulness? The boy wouldn't have doubted his sister if he'd not been all too aware of his own deceit in the matter. And our suspicions are usually well-founded; because all hearts are like our own heart – which is basically deceitful. Is that a bit too harsh? Well, no, for Jeremiah, the Bible prophet says: *'the heart is more deceitful than all else ...'* (Jeremiah 17:9). And so I ask – I ask everyone reading this today: '**Have you seen your own heart?**'

There's a strange story in the first part of the Bible. It's about a man wrestling with God. And he says to God *'I will not let you go unless you bless me.'* And God says to him *'What's your name?'* Seems like an un-

usual question at that precise moment - until I tell you this man had once tricked his own blind father – deceived him into giving him a blessing by using his brother’s name. You see, his father had asked his name, and that time he’d lied and said ‘Esau, my name’s Esau’. But now, later, and alone with God, when the all-seeing Father of eternity asks his name, he says: ‘Jacob - it’s Jacob’. I wonder, in that split second, did Jacob think to himself: ‘Ah, you’ve got me! – you’ve exposed my heart. It’s true, the last time I asked someone for a blessing, I deceived them by giving a false name.’ In that moment he saw the deceitfulness of his own heart. He admitted it, and his life was changed. That’s helpful information: before God can change anyone’s life, they’ve first to realize what the heart of their problem is – it’s the problem of their heart!

So, let me ask you again: **‘Have you seen your own heart?’** It’s one of those two sights we talked about that could really change your life. Not that you’re able to change it for yourself. I read once that the former world boxing champion, Muhammad Ali, on an airplane, during turbulence, refused to fasten his seat-belt. He said to the air stewardess – with the quick wit he was famous for, ‘Superman need no seat-belt.’ But the stewardess was equal for him that day, and back she came at once with: ‘Superman also need no airplane – so you will please fasten your belt’!

We are no super men and women in God’s sight. Because he sees our heart. And what’s more, we can do nothing about the state of it. Maybe you’ve heard of someone who’s been styled as the world’s least successful kite-flyer? Apparently, he was a Californian whose kite hit a high voltage power cable. It caught fire and came crashing down to earth where it started a fire that damaged 385 homes, 740 acres of scrub-land, and caused 3,000 people to be evacuated. The bill? Twenty million dollars. Now what does your average guy do? Reach for his chequebook? No, I don’t think so; nor is it any more realistic to offer to come every weekend with your paintbrush and tools and try to make it right all by

yourself. Meeting that kind of debt is overwhelmingly beyond us. Our indebtedness to God because of the deceitfulness of our heart is something we can do nothing about. '*Our heart ...*,' the Bible says, '*... is desperately sick*,' (Jeremiah 17:9). Its condition is way beyond critical, it's desperate – and no religious therapy of any kind can cure it.

The story's told of two brothers who were notorious gang members. When one died, the other went to a pastor and asked if he would take his brother's funeral. He offered the pastor a great deal of money for doing so - upon one condition: that at some point in his sermon the pastor would speak of this rogue as a saint. The pastor said he felt he could just about manage that. When the day came: the pastor waxed eloquent about the vile character of the deceased. This man, he said, was a rotter to the core of his being, capable of - and indeed guilty of - the most horrific crimes - but compared to his brother - he was a saint!

**Have you seen your own heart?** Who do you compare yourself with? Compared to whom are you a saint? When we compare ourselves with a Hitler or a Stalin, we feel pretty comfortable with the idea of ultimate justice, don't we? But when we compare ourselves to the standards we glimpse in the Bible, we sense how much we stand in need of God's mercy.

The 26<sup>th</sup> of April (2007) was the day the verdict was announced in the Lucie Blackman murder trial in Japan. On that same morning, in the BBC's Today programme, on 'Thought for the Day', Anne Atkins spoke about a paradox. On the one hand, the accused had been found guilty and sentenced for life: on the other hand, the victim's family was still devastated at the verdict. Why? Because he'd not been found guilty of crimes committed against *her* specifically.

But what's the point of them demanding more? Joji Obara already has a life sentence. The point, we were reminded, was Lucie. She was beautiful, she was young, she was loved. A dreadful sin was committed

against her. If that isn't addressed, there's a slur on her worth. I mention this because some say 'why shouldn't God simply forgive every one of us - of all our wrongs against each other?' Well, if he did, he'd be suggesting that all the Lucies who have ever suffered injustice in the world don't matter. But they do matter. Just ask Lucie's father. Ask Lucie Blackman's father if justice is important. Without justice for his daughter's death, it seems like her life is just to be considered worthless; it seems like it's belittled as of no value. Our sins – meaning all our wrongs, not just crimes - devalue others, as well as offending God. So many times our thoughts demean, our words belittle. That's why on the appointed day to come, God will address everything that we've ever done wrong. **Have you seen God's heart?** There's no deceit there - only true justice – the justice which basic human dignity demands.

God brought loving mercy and justice together at the cross. It's there we see his heart revealed. **Have you seen God's heart?** How he served the fine – our fine - with one hand, and wrote the cheque (to pay our fine) himself with the other - because Jesus Christ, whose life as a man showed him to be actually more than a man, paid the debt for us. His words and the Bible's claims clearly declare him to be God's son, sharing our humanity for the deliberate purpose of dying sacrificially in order to satisfy God's justice on account of our sins. For us to receive forgiveness on this basis – which is both loving and just – all God asks us to do is to turn from our self-centred, self-choosing, self-serving ways and trust fully in his son, Jesus Christ, who served our sentence in his death on the cross for our sins.

**Have you seen God's heart?** How absolutely amazing that it's full of such mercy as well as justice! But I need to say this - to be true to the Bible - if we don't embrace God's mercy at the cross, let there be no doubt in anyone's mind – we'll be left with God's justice, and no defence.

A sight of our heart; and a sight of God's heart: these are the two sights we need for a life-changing experience: first a sight of our own heart; then, a sight of God's. Seeing the desperate sickness of our own heart, and seeing the amazing generosity in the heart of God – giving his own son for our healing through the cross. I appeal to you to come to Christ, just as you are, because he'll change you, but come believing that the only remedy to the problem of your heart lies in the provision of God's own heart through the cross.

# CHAPTER SIX: THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO A.A. MILNE - THE POPE, THE PROFESSOR & POOH BEAR

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One of the oldest jokes from our earliest years at school is where some bright spark in the class shouts out ‘absent’ when the teacher is calling out the names from the register in order to check on attendance. Each child calls out ‘present’ when his or her name is mentioned; except for the one who jokingly calls out ‘absent.’ Why is it funny? Simply because it’s a denial of someone’s presence which by itself proves that the exact opposite is true!

A version of the same thing is found in the classic children’s story about a bear called Winnie the Pooh. I’m encouraged to think this is a story known outside the United Kingdom where I’m based, because as I travel to far flung parts of the world, I see huge, cuddly toy Winnie the Pooh bears for sale by the road-side, even in developing countries!

So here goes ... Winnie the Pooh goes to visit his friend, Rabbit. Rabbit, you may guess, is a rabbit, simply called Rabbit. Winnie the Pooh calls into the hole in order to see if Rabbit is at home: Is anybody at home? At first, there’s no answer, so Winnie the Pooh calls again: What I said was, “Is anybody at home?” This time, from within the hole, comes Rabbit’s voice saying: “No.” “Bother,” says Winnie the Pooh. “Isn’t there anybody here at all?” Again Rabbit (who doesn’t want visitors) answers: “Nobody.” A puzzled Winnie the Pooh bear scratches his head: ‘Must be somebody there because somebody must have said “Nobody.”’

Quite so, the logic is simple but inescapable. But we adults don't fall for silly things like that, do we? Well, er, quite readily, it turns out. It's common enough to hear someone say these days: 'There's no such thing as absolute truth.' And when you ask: "Are you sure?" Often the answer is "Absolutely!" You see what they have done? They've declared they're absolutely sure that no one can be absolutely sure about anything! Which thing is a contradiction of itself. Even Winnie the Pooh could see there was something wrong with that. This way of denying absolutes serves only to prove the opposite. And let me say this: the denial of absolutes – whether it be absolute morality or absolute truth – is a necessary part of any attempt to deny the existence of God.

Atheism has been described as 'the dogmatic denial of God.' Svetlana Stalin, the daughter of Josef Stalin spent some time with Malcolm Muggeridge in his home in England while they were working together on their BBC production on the life of her father, Josef Stalin. 'According to his daughter, Svetlana, as Stalin lay dying, plagued with terrifying hallucinations, ... he suddenly sat halfway up in bed, clenched his fist toward the heavens once more, fell back upon his pillow, and was dead.' (Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live Without God*, (Word, Dallas: 1994 p. 26).

But you've got to ask: who was he shaking his fist at? The irony of his life is that at one time Josef Stalin had been a seminary student, preparing for the ministry, before making a decisive break from his belief in God. This dramatic and complete reversal of conviction resulted in his hatred for all religion. The name Stalin, which means "steel," wasn't his real name, but was a description of his character given to him by his contemporaries. Certainly, that one last gesture of a clenched fist toward God, tragically seems to show his heart was as cold and hard as steel. It's very far from comical, but of course as we think of a man shaking his fist at God while at the same time denying God's existence, we

can't help but again be reminded of the Winnie the Pooh and Rabbit story which we shared earlier.

One day, on a university campus in Manila, the Philippines, a student interrupted a preacher by shouting out from the back of the hall: 'everything in life is meaningless.' The preacher was alert, and at once took up the challenge. 'Let's analyze what you just said,' he shouted back. 'I assume you believe your statement is meaningful ... [if so] then everything is not meaningless [like you've just claimed].' '[But]... on the other hand, if everything is meaningless [like you said], [then] what you just said was meaningless too, so [in effect] you said nothing!' (Beyond Opinion, p.320). I'm pleased to say there was a sequel to that exchange in which the young heckler was led to receive Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour through faith.

In the Bible book, Ecclesiastes, the author explores this same claim that 'everything is meaningless' or 'all is vanity' (1:2). So it's a claim that's been around for a long time. It's still around because if – as some who should know better claim today – if, the universe was not in fact created by God, but somehow created itself, then ultimately there's no meaning to life: and all is indeed vanity. We either have God, absolute moral values, universal truth and real meaning - or none of those things.

There's nothing new in this, the apostle Paul when visiting Athens, that ancient centre of learning, came across so-called Epicurean philosophers (Acts 17) with whom he went head-to-head. Epicurus (c. 341–c. 270 BCE) himself followed the thinking of Democritus who invented the theory of atoms. To Democritus, atoms and what he called 'the void' were all that existed. Atoms came pouring through the void, forming stars and ultimately ourselves – so that, he could claim, all that exists is the result of mindless processes. Epicurus used this thinking to attack what he saw as the superstitious notion of divine intervention.

In response, Paul took his audience that day to explore creation-based evidence for a creator. Now some say it's taking an easy way out to say God started it all going. They say that it's no explanation at all. But what they fail to understand is that 'all explanations have to come to an end somewhere' (Alvin Plantinga). Do we not have two alternatives here? Either 'In the beginning God' or 'In the beginning a sea of energy and elementary particles.' If you think the last suggestion is more satisfying, and more rigorous than the first, I suggest you try asking a thoughtful scientist 'what is energy?' There's no easy answer to that. So in their attempt to deny answers which are in terms of things that can't fully be understood by us, they are actually doing the very same themselves!

The United Kingdom's Professor Richard Dawkins is a modern disciple of Epicurus, being himself a materialist. What does he believe? He's on record as saying there's "No God ... no evil ... just blind, pitiless indifference." But in my opinion, he's recently demonstrated that not even he can live with the unliveable philosophy he enthusiastically tries to spread.

For in 2010 we had the first ever state visit of a Pope to Britain. Writing in the *New Humanist* magazine, Dawkins told the Pope he was 'not welcome.' He described the Catholic church's attitudes towards women and sex as "inhumane and immoral" (Quoted from *This Week*, 18<sup>th</sup> Sept, p.6). From his point of view, I think I can understand the inhumane bit, but when he labels anything at all as immoral, it appears he's affirming what he's previously denied when he declared there was no God, no evil and so, no objective morality. One of his previous colleagues at Oxford (Prof. Mackie), also an atheist, conceded there was a logical path from belief in absolute morality to belief in the existence of God. Try to remember this: whenever you feel yourself to be full of moral indignation expressed against some outrage, that's not consistent with atheism, but it's consistent with the reality of the existence of God.

But let's round off with a historical, biblical example of a denial which affirmed the very opposite was in fact true. It's when Matthew in the last chapter of his Gospel records details about the weekend Jesus Christ died at Jerusalem, including how Jesus' empty tomb was to be explained: *"The guard ... reported to the chief priests all that had happened. And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, and said, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.' 'And if this should come to the governor's ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.'"* And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day" (Matthew 28:11-15).

But their denial only helps to affirm the opposite! Because it shows that even Christianity's enemies conceded that the tomb was in fact empty! Christianity is in a unique position in that it stands or falls on just one testable historic fact: the resurrection of Christ, which historians and lawyers have called the best attested fact in all of history. As the apostle Paul said: *'if Christ has not been raised, our faith is worthless.'* But, equally, if Christ has been raised then everything the Bible claims for him is true. And, in particular this:

*"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."* (Acts 17:30-31)

## CHAPTER SEVEN: LOOKING FOR THE GARDENER

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Years ago, I recall scanning through adverts looking for a gardener, someone who'd look after my mother's garden. Perhaps that was in the back of my mind while preparing my thoughts for this chapter.

Adam, the first human created, was the first gardener, since we read: *"The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it."* (Genesis 2:8,15)

*"They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:8,9)

There were two separate readings there: one from chapter 2 when everything was still perfect; and the second from chapter 3 when suddenly there was tension in the garden. What had happened between the two readings? Of course, our first parents had eaten the forbidden fruit. Their disobedience had shattered their relationship with God. Notice this, before any human ever thought of looking for God, God was looking for us! *"Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"* (Genesis 3:8,9). But wait a minute, why does the all-knowing God ask where they are? It's so that we might recognize we're lost without him. For unless we confess our lost state before God we cannot be found, we cannot be saved.

I remember as a child, playing hide and seek with my parents. I'd run away and hide behind some chair in the house, and if they were taking too long to find me, I'd start shouting out some clues. I was keen to be found – the excitement was in being found! Imagine trying to hide from God! Adam tried it, and Jonah was no more successful either: because you simply can't hide from God - one man in modern times who tried to hide intellectually from even the very idea of God later spoke about how he came to sense that 'the hound of heaven' was on his trail - so there was no hiding.

The *Hound of Heaven* is a religious poem written by English poet Francis Thompson, first published in 1893. This was to be the poem that influenced authors J.R.R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. It begins like this:

I fled Him down the nights and down the days

I fled Him down the arches of the years

I fled Him down the labyrinthine ways

Of my own mind, and in the midst of tears

I hid from him ...

But please remember from Adam's experience there's no hiding from God; and learn – even from my boyhood experience - that there's nothing better than being found!

Now, there's a second gardener I want to talk about. He's not a real gardener, he appears in a parable. Not a parable that's found in the Bible, but this is an atheist's parable, written by a famous British philosopher and atheist called Anthony Flew who died in 2010. It goes like this:

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There

is no gardener.” So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. “But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.” So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H. G. Well’s *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. “But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.” At last the Sceptic despairs, “But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?”

I think we can all follow the point that’s being made. For the garden we’re meant to think of the universe; and for the gardener, we’re meant to think of God. Despite writing this, Anthony Flew came to renounce atheism before he died. For over 50 years he’d been the United Kingdom’s number one proponent of atheism; a world-class scholar with over 30 books on philosophy in print; and one of the twentieth century’s most imposing intellectual figures. It was learning about the complexity of the DNA molecule which we have in every cell of our body that led him to change his mind. He said: ‘What I think the DNA material has done is that it has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved in getting these extraordinarily diverse elements to work together.’ And so, in 2004 the world’s leading atheist, Antony Flew, announced that he was no longer an atheist.

I don’t know that it helped him change his mind at all, but a third gardener was invented in another parable by a man called John Frame. This

parable was designed as an answer to the challenge of Flew's parable – and so it used the same method and technique to make its point.

Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. A man was there, pulling weeds, applying fertilizer, trimming branches. The man turned to the explorers and introduced himself as the royal gardener. One explorer shook his hand and exchanged pleasantries. The other ignored the gardener and turned away: "There can be no gardener in this part of the jungle," he said; "this must be some trick. Someone is trying to discredit our previous findings." They pitch camp. Every day the gardener arrives, tends the plot. Soon the plot is bursting with perfectly arranged blooms. "He's only doing it because we're here - to fool us into thinking this is a royal garden." The gardener takes them to a royal palace, introduces the explorers to a score of officials who verify the gardener's status. Then the sceptic tries a last resort: "Our senses are deceiving us. There is no gardener, no blooms, no palace, no officials. It's still a hoax!" Finally the believer despairs: "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does this mirage, as you call it, differ from a real gardener?"

Now, I want to finish this chapter with the mention of a fourth 'Gardener.' Our reading is from John's Gospel, from the end of chapter 19, a chapter which deals with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

*"In the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid"* (John 19:41).

*"But Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping; and so, as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her,*

*“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to Him in Hebrew, “Rabboni!” (which means, Teacher)” (John 20:11-16).*

If only those who choose not to believe in God would stop looking only for a gardener - then they too might be surprised at who they would find! Or, better still, at who finds them! The story's been told of a little girl who lived on the edge of some woods, and one evening she went exploring. It grew dark and she got totally lost in the woods. She sobbed so much she exhausted herself and fell asleep. Her father and others came looking for her, but when it became really dark, they had to stop their search until morning. At dawn the father got up and resumed his search. Finally, he saw his little girl asleep on the ground some distance away. He yelled out and ran to her. At that very moment the girl awakened, saw her dad who was by this time right in front of her, flung her arms around him, and said: 'Daddy, I've found you!' That brings us back full cycle to where we started off with Adam, the first gardener. He didn't find God, but God found him. Even when a person has been trying to find God, in reality it's God who finds us. He's been looking for us, long before we started to look for him, indeed that's why we're looking for him. I hope the words of this hymn captures your own experience:

It was a lonely path He trod,  
From every human soul apart;  
Known only to Himself and God  
Was all the grief that filled His heart,  
Yet from the track He turned not back,

Till where I lay in want and shame,

He found me - Blessed be His name!

## CHAPTER EIGHT: SACRIFICIAL GIVING

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Jim Dillingham Young and his wife Della are the subjects of a short story, *The Gift of the Magi*, written by O. Henry in 1906. Struggling to make ends meet in their one-room apartment, Jim and Della have only two prized possessions. In Jim's case, it's a pocket watch given to him by his father, and in Della's case, it's her long, beautiful hair.

When Christmas comes, Jim and Della each have no money to buy even a simple gift for the other. Yet, longing to give something meaningful out of great love, each, without the other knowing, sacrifices the greatest treasure of the house; Della sells her hair to buy her husband a silver chain for his precious pocket watch, and Jim sells his pocket watch to buy Della pearl combs for her beautiful hair. Thus unfolds *The Gift of the Magi* and “the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house.” But in a last word the author says, “Let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest.”

Jim and Della acted out the ultimate display of love. Each, for the sake of the other, surrendered the very thing which they themselves most wanted to hold onto. In the biblical Christian account of Christmas, heaven released its greatest treasure. God gave the greatest gift he could possibly give. God's gift of his son into hands that would ultimately harm him, surely represents the most sacrificial giving and becomes for us in return a striking invitation to sacrifice everything we have in order to possess it.

Rather than the seasonal spend, spend, spend, the Christian basis of 'Christmas' is really all about giving, and I've recently been thinking in

that connection about the life of Abraham, whose life-story is given in some considerable detail in the Bible. Of course, the Bible draws our attention to him perhaps primarily as being for us an example of faith. But I've been seeing more clearly than before that he's also a challenging example of what it means to be a great giver, a sacrificial giver such as we've been thinking about already.

At its greatest, Abraham's giving seems also to have more than a touch of irony about it – because, as you might know, God asks him to give up his son, his one and only son in whom all the promises God has already given to Abraham are invested. If Abraham should surrender his son in sacrificial giving back to God, by that very act he would seemingly destroy all of God's revealed purpose for his life and so render it utterly meaningless. It's this 'catch-22' or 'no-win' situation that has shades of our opening story of Jim and Della with their sacrificial giving.

But before Abraham gives up his son, he's already given up many other cherished or valuable things. God seems to call on him to give up a whole series of things in the sense of surrendering them in order to deepen his spiritual life, his walk with God. For example, God asked him to give up all the comfort and security and even sophistication of life in the large city where he'd been brought up and which he called home.

Then, years before God ever asked Abraham to give up his son, he first asked him to give up his father. Then he yielded the well-watered plains of the Jordan river, which was in those days very desirable real estate, but he surrendered them in preference to his nephew Lot. Then after a tremendous victory over an eastern invasion, he gave up all the spoils of war. Then getting more up close and personal still, he gave up Hagar, the mother of his son Ishmael, as well as Ishmael himself – whom he once viewed as serving as his intended heir. Ultimately, of course, God asked him for the son of his old age, the miracle baby, the son

of promise, his special one-of-a-kind son whom he loved with all his heart. No doubt Abraham learnt a lot about himself – as well as about God – at each step of his journey through life with God. It's as if God seemed intent on narrowing this man's focus, and deepening his trust in God and his word of promise.

Abraham has the singular honour of being designated in the Bible 'the friend of God.' Such an extreme honour is not reached easily. Abraham's character was gradually formed, as we travel with him through these various episodes of his life. At first, his character weaknesses are exposed – weaknesses like cowardice and shrewdness, seen in terms of a calculated scheming by means of which he was careful to ensure his own safety at the risk of endangering those close to him. Early on, as he grew impatient with his wife's childlessness, he turned to his own resourcefulness even if his overall game plan was God's. But as God faces him up repeatedly with choices, and Abraham successively bows and surrenders the things that he must surely have valued, God is shaping his friend's character as pleased him best.

In giving, giving and giving, Abraham reflects the very character of a God who himself has shown us that he gives and gives. True Christianity is not what some have styled as 'easy believism' but, as C.S. Lewis writes: "The Christian way is different: both harder and easier. Christ says, 'Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you - no half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there, I want to have the whole tree down. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think innocent, as well as the ones you think wicked - the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. I will give you *Myself*: my own will shall become yours."

The story of Christmas, the historical drama, of the eternal God, God the Son, entering the human race, stunningly reminds us of this quality

of giving in which God alone sets the gold standard. God gave his special, one-of-a-kind, son. Christ himself gave every step of the way which led him to the unlimited giving of the cross. This is nothing other than an invitation to respond. Reflecting again on the gifts of the Magi – the story with which we began this chapter – we recall how the popular Christmas poem and song says:

“What can I give Him,

Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd

I would bring a lamb,

If I were a wise man

I would do my part.

Yet what can I give Him?

Give my heart.”

Too often, we focus on what we hope to get at any Christmas-time. God’s focus is on giving. What will you give next Christmas? What is God asking you to surrender? I like the way Juan Carlos Ortiz tells Jesus’ story of the pearl of great price found in Matthew’s Gospel chapter 13, verse 45. A man sees this pearl and says to the merchant, “I want this pearl. How much is it?” The seller says, “It’s very expensive.”

“How much?” he asks. “A lot!” “Well, do you think I could buy it?” the man asks. “Oh, yes,” says the merchant, “everyone can buy it.” “But I thought you said it was very expensive.” “I did.” “Well, how much?” “Everything you have,” says the seller.

“All right, I’ll buy it.” “Okay, what do you have?” the seller asks.

“Well, I have \$10,000 in the bank.” “Good, \$10,000 then. What else?” “That’s all I have.” “Nothing more? – are you sure?” “Well, I have a few dollars more in my pocket.” “How much?” “Let’s see ... \$100.”

“That’s mine, too,” says the seller.

“What else do you have?” “That’s all, nothing else.” “Where do you live?” the seller asks. “In my house. Yes, I own a home.” The seller writes down, “house.” “It’s mine too,” he says.

“But where do you expect me to sleep” the buyer asks — “in my camper?” “Oh, you have a camper, do you? That, too. What else?” “Wait a minute,” the buyer says, “Am I supposed to sleep in my car?” “Oh, you have a car?” “Yes, I own two of them.” “Well, they’re also mine now.”

“Look,” the buyer says, “you’ve taken my money, my house, my camper, and my cars. Where’s my family going to live?” “Oh, so, you have a family?” “Yes, I have a wife and three kids.” The seller says: “They’re mine now.”

Suddenly the seller exclaims, “Oh, I almost forgot! You yourself, too! Everything becomes mine - wife, children, house, money, cars, and you, too.” Then he goes on, “Now, listen, I will allow you to use all these things for the time being. But don’t forget that they’re all mine, just as you are. And whenever I need any of them, you must give them up, because I am now the owner.”(Adapted from *The Disciple* [Creation House], pp. 34-35.)

Abraham was prepared to give up everything. And God gave his all when he gave us Jesus. Now, in the terms of what we’ve just been hearing – as adapted from Jesus’ very own story – it’s our turn. Do you wish to save your life (for yourself) or surrender it for Jesus’ sake (Matthew 16:25)?

“What can I give Him,

Poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd

I would bring a lamb,

If I were a wise man

I would do my part.

Yet what can I give Him?

Give my heart.”

Have you given your heart to Jesus and received him as your saviour?

## CHAPTER NINE: HISTORY SHAPED IN CRADLES

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Two women were having lunch in an elegant hotel when they were approached by a mutual friend who asked the occasion for the meal. One of the women replied, “We’re celebrating the birth of my baby boy.”

“But where is he?” inquired the friend.

“Oh,” said the mother, “you didn’t think I’d bring him, did you?”

Isn’t that a picture of the way the world treats Jesus at Christmas? For so many it’s a party without a purpose; a season without a saviour; a carolling without a Christ. The guest of honour is uninvited. But how foolish it is to ignore the child in the manger! This is the most climactic example of history being shaped in a cradle. Before we unpack that, first let me share with you a few other examples of history being shaped in a cradle.

Take the year 1809. The international scene then was tumultuous. Napoleon was sweeping through Austria; blood was flowing freely. Nobody then cared about babies. But the world was overlooking some terribly significant births. For example, William Gladstone was born that year. He was destined to become one of England’s finest statesmen. That same year, Alfred Tennyson was born to an obscure minister and his wife. That child would one day impact the literary world in a remarkable way. On the American continent, that very same year produced the cries of a newborn infant in a rugged log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. The baby’s name? Abraham Lincoln.

If there'd been news broadcasts at that time, I'm certain these words would have been heard: "The destiny of the world is being shaped on an Austrian battlefield today." But history was actually being shaped in the cradles of England and America. Similarly, everyone thought taxation was the big news when Jesus was born. The new census was grabbing all the headlines. Everyone was grumbling about those pesky Romans. But a young Jewish woman cradled the biggest news of all: it concerned the birth of the world's saviour.

Whichever way you look at it, this was no ordinary birth of a child. He was cradled in a manger – of all places. This was among the signs to show that the child born was also God's son given (Isaiah 9:6). Yes, he was cradled in a manger – in an animals' feeding-trough - while the world was looking elsewhere for news. Christ was content with a manger on earth when he was born so that we could have a mansion in heaven when we die.

At many times in biblical history, when the world was distracted with some calamity which threatened to become a total disaster, God was looking to the birth of a child. It happened in the days of Moses. The Israelite slaves in Egypt, while being whipped by the Egyptian taskmasters, must have longed for an invincible hero who would rescue them with his strong-arm tactics, but God was looking to the birth of a child to save his chosen nation, as we see from Exodus chapter 2:

*"When [Moses' mother] could hide him no longer, she took for him a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in it and placed it among the reeds by the river bank. And his sister stood at a distance to know what would be done to him. Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her young women walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it.*

*When she opened it, she saw the child, and behold, the baby was crying. She took pity on him and said, "This is one of the Hebrews' children." Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child away and nurse him for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed him.*

*When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, "Because," she said, "I drew him out of the water." One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." (Exodus 2:3-12)*

Well, there were still to be twists and turns in the story, but the rest is history, as they say. God would ultimately use Moses to free the Israelite slaves from Egypt. But for another example of how history was shaped in a cradle – in other words, by the birth of a certain child - let me transport you to the later time of when kings ruled in Israel, after God's chosen people had been in their promised land for about 500 years. These times were no different from the lawlessness of our own days in some respects. When the southern king Ahaziah was killed, his own mother did a very wicked thing. She seized the reins of power and set about destroying everyone else who had a rightful claim to the throne which had been her son's.

But one of them escaped - or, at least someone helped him to, for he was a baby son of the king who'd been killed. Yes, baby Joash was hidden away in a bedroom while the slaughter of the king's descendants was taking place. For the next six years he was kept tucked away from

view, hidden in God's house, the temple at Jerusalem. This is how the Bible sums it up:

*“So he was hidden ... in the house of the LORD for six years, while Athaliah reigned over the land. In the seventh year Jehoiada sent and brought the captains of hundreds—of the bodyguards and the escorts - and brought them into the house of the LORD to him. And he made a covenant with them and took an oath from them in the house of the LORD, and showed them the king's son (2 Kings 11:3,4 New King James Version).*

I find that inspiring reading. The man Jehoida, who was a priest, bringing in the military leaders into the temple and letting them into the secret - that for all of those six terrible, dark years of oppression there'd been a secret survivor - and that he was the rightful king! How those soldiers must have gasped with amazement – not to mention, relief too - at the sight of the young boy who was born to be king! Someone whose existence had been a closely guarded secret up till that moment. And from that moment something like a military-style coup was launched to bring this young boy to the throne.

But let's stay a little longer with that moment of revelation in the temple. It certainly had come as a wonderful revelation to those soldiers: to get a glimpse of the king's son in God's house. I'm pausing with you at this point, because I can't help but see an illustration there of something that's right up to date. Do we not live in a time when Satan has usurped God's rightful place in the thoughts and lives of men and women? Late on in the Bible the apostle John says: *'the whole world lies under the sway of the evil one'* (1 John 5:19). In that sense these are dark days we live in, for this controlling influence is *'the power of darkness'* (Colossians 1:13). It's tyranny and oppression of a spiritual nature and it's throughout the world system today.

But what a revelation there is to be found in our Bibles! There's salvation found in the child born and cradled in a manger - outside of the

royal palaces of his day. Someone whose identity was hidden from all but a few. And still remains hidden to so many whose aim is to have nothing other than a good time at Christmas. Oh, if only we can get a glimpse of the King! Yes, I'm talking about Jesus Christ, God's son and the saviour. He's the son of the King of kings. And something I've come to understand from God's Word, the Bible, is this: that when we come to appreciate the revelation of Jesus as he stands related to what the New Testament describes as God's house today, then we've come to appreciate the full extent of God's good news for the people of this world. It's something I rejoice in as I share it with you.

## CHAPTER TEN: A HARSH REALITY

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The year 2012 saw the war crimes trial of ex-Bosnian Serb commander Ratko Mladic, who faced 11 charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity over the 1992-1995 Bosnian conflict, including the charge that he orchestrated the massacre of more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys at the Bosnian town of Srebrenica in 1995. It once again reminded us of the horrific and inhumane behaviour of some leaders who use whatever power they have to massacre other human beings - women and children included. The sanctity of human life seemingly means nothing to them.

As we come to the end of each year, we prepare to hear again the biblical story of the nativity, with the shepherds, the wise men, their gifts and the star. It's a story many receive with warm and happy ritual, often regardless of religious affiliation. Whether we hear it merely culturally, or as the bold story of Christ's Advent, it's a story which has been considered fit for children's plays and their accompanying joyful music at schools and shopping malls. But to many it must seem surreal, far removed from the harsh realities of the real world with its sickening headlines. Perhaps they're among the many victims who at that same time await news of the search for yet another child sexual predator or the outcome of the hunt for the brute who bludgeoned to death a nearby defenceless pensioner in her own home for a few pounds or dollars.

What's the relevance, after all, of what's increasingly regarded as a mere winter's tale? Is it at best just a form of escapism? But make no mistake about it. This is no mere wintery tale. This is the historical account of a reality which itself is more than a little tinged with harshness. For even here, in this story which we tell with appropriate joy, a story of joyful news and memorable characters, there's also a dark side with tears and

fear and sorrow. Even Christians who thoroughly love the story and believe the accounts of the infant's birth often forget its harsh reality. So, allow me to remind you.

When Herod discovered that the Magi had tricked him, leaving town without reporting where they'd found the new child king, he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under. He was leaving nothing to chance in his paranoid desire to be rid of all known rivals whom he thought might want to take his throne from him. At Herod's murderous decree, Matthew recalls what was said through the prophet Jeremiah long ago, now again sadly fulfilled: *"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more"* (Matthew 2:16-18).

Herod's violent reaction to the news of a newborn king casts a very sad shadow on a beautiful story. Well might we remember with delight the Magi outsmarting Herod by leaving for their country using another road for the return journey. We remember with triumph that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were able to escape to safety despite the murderous attempts of a powerful ruler. But at what cost? In that little town of Bethlehem, Herod's command caused excruciating sorrow. In fact, the inclusion of this frightful incident is a really grim addition - no wonder we rarely think about it.

But what if its inclusion turns out to be the very thing that can move us to believe that the story of Christ's birth is actually about the real world we know and not a world of fanciful stories? For here, within the greatest story of God's reaching out to our world is a realistic account of humanity's destructive ways. Here is recorded the deep and painful suffering of the very real world into which Jesus came. The grave offence of humanity, the pain of humanity, and the agonizing need for a radically different hope - they're all part of this same story.

We live in a world of tinpot dictators who corruptly cling to the reins of power by ruthlessly crushing all who threaten to get in their way. History, as well as modern times, is strewn with examples. We live in a world where a silent holocaust of inconvenient infant life takes place. And where senseless killings shatter the tranquillity of simple village life. It was like that in Dunblane, Scotland, when a troubled loner turned his weapon on innocent children at the village school, and created a blood-bath, leading to this response in print the following day ...

‘Christ was born among innocent slaughter and died on the Cross to pay the cost of our terrible freedom - a freedom by which we can do the greatest good or the greatest evil.’ That was taken from the London Times leader column, the day after the 13 March 1996 massacre at an Infant School in Dunblane, Scotland.

The essence of the Christmas story is that God has joined us in suffering. I recall that expression first being used by a Church of Scotland minister when he was interviewed by a BBC News reporter after Pan Am Flight 103 exploded in the sky over Lockerbie in Scotland on December 21, 1988. “It was like meteors falling from the sky,” described one resident, while others described the sky lighting up and a large, deafening roar. They soon saw pieces of the plane as well as pieces of bodies landing in fields, in backyards, on fences, and on rooftops. Fuel from the plane was already on fire before it hit the ground; some of it landed on houses, making the houses explode. One of the plane’s wings hit the ground in the southern area of Lockerbie. It hit the ground with such impact that it made a crater 155 feet long, displacing approximately 1500 tons of dirt. Twenty-one of Lockerbie’s houses were completely destroyed and eleven of its residents were dead. Thus, the total death toll was 270 (the 259 aboard the plane plus the 11 on the ground).

Finally, and quite unprofessionally revealing, I suspect, his own unbelieving sentiments, the reporter turned on the minister and almost spat

out his next and last question: 'Where is your God now?' To which the calm, unforgettable reply was: 'God has joined us in suffering - in the person of his son, he came as a man, Jesus Christ, and joined us in suffering.'

Through the Christmas story, God has answered critics like that reporter. For he did indeed come down to suffer the injustices of life on earth as it is now, very different from the original condition in which he created it. Jesus was born in what we think of as a 'stable bare' and was with 'the poor and mean and lowly'. He was born in a land that was under an occupying force, the Romans. While still a child, He experienced the rigours of life as a refugee; as a displaced person. In public life, he was soon to learn what it was like to be misunderstood, even to be ostracized, and be at the receiving end of a gross miscarriage of justice.

Yes, we can safely say that God has joined us in suffering. He's not some cosmic spectator, standing callously by. God has joined us in our suffering. You see, in one sense, Elie Wiesel was right when in a Nazi concentration camp he imagined it was God hanging on the gallows as he watched a young boy who'd been hanged. For God has joined us in suffering. He didn't exclude himself from human suffering. He, too, hung on a gallows, just outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago.

One Christian commentator (J.R. Stott) has said: 'I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. ... In the real world of pain, how could [any]one worship a God who was immune to it? I have entered many ... temples in different ... countries and stood respectfully before the statue ... a remote look on [its] face, detached from the agonies of the world. But each time after a while I have had to turn away. And in imagination I have turned instead to that lonely, twisted, tortured figure on the cross, nails through hands and feet, back lacerated, limbs wrenched, brow bleeding from thorn-pricks, mouth dry and in-

tolerably thirsty, plunged in God-forsaken darkness. That is the God for me! He laid aside his immunity to pain. He entered our world of flesh and blood, tears and death. He suffered for us. Our sufferings become more manageable in the light of his. There is still a question mark against human suffering, but over it we boldly stamp another mark, the cross which symbolises divine suffering.'

It seems so fitting to come back in concluding this chapter to the suffering involved in the Christmas story. Someone has written:

Jesus Christ

Unwanted as a baby

Fugitive as a child

Misunderstood as a boy

Rejected in His home town

Laughed at by the religious leaders

Betrayed by His friends

Condemned by the government to die

Forsaken by God to die on a cross.

The second verse adds:

But then He arose

And since then the initiative is in the hands of those who follow Him

To make every baby wanted

To give every fugitive a home

To give everyone a purpose for living

To make every town a place where He is worshipped!

Let's not romanticize the nativity scene in the way some Christmas cards do. It was hardly a sterile chamber in which to give birth. Surely there was dirt; surely, too, there were animal smells and flies when 'Immanuel' was born: Immanuel whose name means 'God with us' - with us in experiencing the hardships of this life. Sympathy is one thing; salvation is quite another. And there has been born to us *a Saviour who is Christ the Lord*. He joined us in suffering here that we might one day join him where suffering will be a thing of the past, gone for ever. Have you truly believed in your heart that the central figure of the Christmas story once suffered and died for you?

# CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE BIGGEST DECISION

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I want us to reflect on the heart of what might be called ‘the Christmas event’. By that I mean the nativity story. It’s very easy to write about in print because I don’t need any visuals – and that’s because you can visualize the scene so easily since it’s represented so often on Christmas cards. You know what I mean: the scene with the crib, with Mary and Joseph and the shepherds along with the cattle.

Yes, we can picture it easily enough, but I want to ask if you believe it, I mean really believe it. Did it actually happen the way it’s told us in the Bible, for example in the opening chapter of the Gospel by Matthew? Is it credible to believe in a child being conceived and born without a human father being involved? You’d not be alone if your reaction was: ‘Come on, you don’t really believe that, do you? Isn’t it just a comforting delusion to warm our winter evenings? It’s pure escapism – it’s got to be, hasn’t it? I mean people were simpletons back then. They didn’t properly understand where babies came from. This story must have grown out of superstition along with the misplaced trees and tinsel and the even more inappropriate reindeer!’

The same people would say to us ‘We’ve long since outgrown that stuff; get real - we’re modern thinkers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century: this is an age of reason. We live in a universe governed by science and the laws of Nature.’ Many people - especially humanists and the new atheists - get hot under the collar about the Christmas story, as it’s referred to. Some even take strong exception to it and splutter and fume against it.

Others just take a fuzzy, patronizing view of the nativity story. ‘Yeah, the Bible says it happened, but there again ... well it would say that,

wouldn't it ... Still, don't make a fuss, it's nice for the kids. Can't do any harm.' But the new breed of atheists would say 'Rubbish! We shouldn't be telling lies to our kids. The facts are wrong, it's utterly impossible.' There again, of course *they'd* say that (after all it's *their* belief). The question is: which side are you on?

Lots of people just avoid the issue altogether, and simply major on having a good time, possibly singing along to much-loved Christmas Carols. It's such a nostalgic time, for we remember the Christmases of our childhood. It's sentimentalism gone wild, unashamedly so, because there's a kind of fairy-tale romance about the story. In other words, there's a feel-good factor about all of this. We can make believe there's going to be peace on earth and we're going to have a prosperous new year – despite any recession. Ah, don't use the R-word ... don't spoil it, don't burst the bubble, let's just enjoy the feel good factor a bit longer. Long live the make-believe!

But wait a minute. Sentimentalism or scientific nonsense: are those the only choices on the menu this Christmas? No, they're not! And, do you know what, I think Joseph can help us see that. Don't we tend to forget about Joseph in all this? What was his take on it back then – in those simple times when people allegedly believed anything – no matter how unscientific it was?

*“Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: when His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send her away secretly.*

*But when he had considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”*

*Now all this took place to fulfill what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD AND SHALL BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which translated means, "GOD WITH US." And Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took Mary as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus." (Matthew 1:19-25)*

When Joseph saw his fiancé was going to have a baby, he didn't stroke his beard in wonder. He started filing for divorce! Now why on earth would a simpleton want to do that? Could it be because he already had a pretty good working knowledge of biology? Yeah, that was it. The laws of Nature dictate that a girl doesn't ordinarily have a baby unless she's been sleeping with a man. He knew that fact just as well as we do – and he knew it wasn't him. So he drew what he thought was the obvious conclusion.

Do you get it? He didn't buy the myth! His actions remove the argument for all this being irrational superstition. Good old Joseph. He was a cynic like the best of us! He acted just exactly like modern sceptics do – with the difference being: he was a lot closer to the action than we are.

And the point is: something changed his mind. In the end Joseph didn't divorce Mary. Instead, he became a believer! Which helps me to see that faith doesn't have to be a denial of biology or any other science for that matter. Joseph did not have blind faith. He first of all agreed with the usual science of child-birth, but was persuaded by the evidence to the contrary.

Our modern objections were already built into the original story, meaning Joseph's faith wasn't blind faith. His decision not to divorce Mary was as rational a decision as any that he, you or I have ever made. Without any doubt this was the biggest decision of this man's life – and

one he took with the greatest of care – when he'd every reason at first to come to the opposite conclusion. His final decision (not to divorce) was one for which he'd have needed - and did clearly receive - undeniable evidence that something – or Someone – had wonderfully stepped into the picture.

Joseph became a totally convinced believer in the identity of the child in the manger. Remember, he'd everything to lose if he was deluded. Until the day he died he had to put up with the town gossip wherever he went, with all its smirking innuendo. Joseph's actions are a small, but significant, part of the reason why I'm not an atheist. I tell you, honestly, I've no interest in the sentimentalism of a feel-good Christmas. That doesn't cut it for me. But I intend to have a level-headed celebration of how the one who wrote the laws of biology later re-wrote them when he was supernaturally born to be my saviour.

In fact, I'm not sure if I should say that he re-wrote the Laws of Nature at all. Let me share this illustration with you. A man one day put £20 British pounds in his bedside drawer. The next day he put another £20 pounds into the same drawer. Then on the third day he counts the money in the drawer and finds it amounts to only £15! How can that be? How is it possible that the laws of arithmetic have been broken? Ah, you say, they've not. The laws of arithmetic have not been broken but it seems as if the laws of England have been broken by some thief breaking in and stealing some of the money he'd deposited there. That thief wasn't a prisoner to the laws of arithmetic when he stole the money. And I say to you, that neither was God a prisoner to the laws of Nature when he became a glorious intruder into our history!

This story of the origin of the child in the manger defines our search for the origin and meaning of life itself – and, if we let it, it also *ends* our search for the origin and meaning of life. I believe God's son entered into a simple home on earth so that I can go to a mansion in heaven

(and by the way, so can you if you seriously believe in what it all led to some 33 years later). If we know where this baby came from, then we can know too where we're going. I urge each of us to believe in a grown-up way that 'God gave his one and only son.' Like Joseph, you have now the biggest decision of your life to make.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: RESEMBLANCE

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I heard of a Christmas Eve service which featured a short play. It wasn't an elaborate play, in fact it was a monologue by Joseph – supposedly set moments after the birth of Jesus. The actor playing Joseph held a little one in his arms and spoke to him. He looked into the face of the baby and, with all the happy wonderings of a new father, he playfully talked about the child's resemblance to his mother. But then he paused and in all seriousness whispered, "I wonder what your father looks like."

Interestingly enough, those who actually saw that child full-grown asked him: "*Show us the Father.*" To capture Jesus' response, we should take the whole opening section of John's Gospel, chapter 14 where Jesus is speaking to his disciples at a point in time which was only hours away from his crucifixion, a fact of course that Jesus is well aware of. He says to them: "*Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you*" (John 14:1-2).

Perhaps we can pause there for a moment. Some older language versions of the English Bible translate this in perhaps the more familiar terms: "*In My Father's house*" – that is, in heaven – "*there are many mansions*". The contrast between the mansions awaiting Christ's disciples in heaven and the 'stable bare', 'mean and lowly', which awaited Christ's arrival on earth is quite striking. He came to such a simple dwelling on earth that we might go to a mansion in heaven. This earth was at no pains to prepare a welcome or a place for God's son. There was no room for him 'in the inn'. But Jesus continues to talk about the place he is even now preparing for his followers:

*“If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.” Thomas said to Him, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me. “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.”*

*Philip said to Him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves” (John 14:3-11).*

It’s good to want to know more about Jesus. Indeed, one of the first questions the disciples ever asked of Jesus was, “Where do you live?” John records it like this, in the first chapter of his Gospel:

*“Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour.” (John 1:35-39)*

But compare this with the end of chapter one where his true residence in heaven is revealed. This was the time when ...

*“Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to him, “How do you know me?” Jesus answered him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered him, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!” Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.” (John 1:47-51)*

You see, Jesus had a place to stay on earth – at least at that time – but that was only a temporary address. Jesus was a man whose real home was in heaven, who’d come from heaven, and would return to heaven when his mission was complete. He’s the heavenly man.

And, in the Father’s grace and wisdom, God has blessed us with intellects and senses that long to see, to hear, and to know him. But, while allowing our imaginations liberty, God has also imposed some limitations too. For example, God cautioned us never to make a graven image to represent him. It bears reminding that though we exalt a person by carving him or her in stone or by painting a likeness of them on canvas, attempting the same for God, we are warned in the Bible, only reduces God, and is therefore wrong.

So, coming back to our main point, the Scriptures tell us very little about the physical appearance of Jesus. So, we’ll all just have to wait for the day when *“every eye will see Him”* (Rev. 1:7). But while physical features have been guardedly presented - and with good reason - the Bible is full of descriptions of God’s person and character.

Around the end of each year, we hear people talking about ‘the spirit of Christmas.’ There’s an end-of-term sort of feeling, a building sense of anticipation. But I want to share with you as we conclude this chapter, what the real spirit of Christmas is. There’s a place in our Bibles, in the

New Testament, where we're invited to focus on the attitude that lies behind the 'Christmas story.' Christians everywhere are called upon always to strive to emulate this attitude. Here is, if you will, the real, the true spirit of Christmas:

*"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"* (Philippians 2:5-11).

In mining the wealth of that content found in Philippians chapter 2, verses 5 through 11, we come to understand how profoundly God has responded to the cry of the human heart - "Who are you, God?" and "What are you really like?" Getting to know God ought to be the major interest of every man, woman, and child on this planet, because from that knowledge flows every other answer to the cries of the heart and mind. In writing to his friends at Philippi, Paul was urging them to realize that the best possible thing we can do in life is to get to know Jesus better and better and become more like him, and in doing so we'll become more like our heavenly father. I sincerely wish that, when the Christmas season next comes, it will be one in which we get to know God better.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: WHICH VIRGIN BIRTH?

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A lot of people say: “No way can I believe in a virgin birth.” They imply that it would be crazy to believe in such a thing. But really, every person – every single one of us - is committed to belief in a virgin birth, whether we realize it or not. For there are two kinds of virgin birth. There’s, of course, the one we find in Chapter 1 of Luke’s Gospel: *“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God”* (Luke 1:38).

Okay, you say, yes that’s the virgin birth Christians say they believe in, but tell me what other virgin birth is there? Well, a Princeton professor (Peter Singer) who is one of the world’s most influential atheists has stated: “We can assume that somehow in the primeval soup we got collections of molecules that became self-replicating; and I don’t think we need any miraculous or mysterious [explanation].”

Wait a minute! How is that not a mysterious explanation? Or take the brilliant Cambridge physicist Stephen Hawking’s latest attempt to propose an atheistic explanation for our universe: “... the universe can and will create itself from nothing. Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist.”

He’s talking, in effect, about the birth of the universe, isn’t he? And he’s saying he believes – because he certainly can’t prove it – he believes the universe just spontaneously created itself out of nothing and out of nowhere. No-one or nothing else was involved in the birth of the uni-

verse: it was a virgin birth. So, it's not a matter of *whether* we believe in a virgin birth, it's just a matter of *which* virgin birth we choose to accept – either the virgin birth of the universe or the virgin birth of Jesus Christ - either the virgin birth of the whole creation or the virgin birth of the creator.

We can believe in the virgin birth of an atheistic universe that's indifferent to us - a universe where “there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference” (Dawkins). Or we can believe in the virgin birth of a creator who loves us so deeply that he came to be born among us and to live beside us, to call us “family” (Hebrews 2:11) and “friends” (John 15:15), and to give himself the name “God with us” (Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 7:14). Let's explore the chance option a bit further. That's the atheistic view that talks about the virgin birth of the universe all by chance. The poet Steve Turner has written about such a thing, saying:

If chance be the Father of all flesh,

disaster is his rainbow in the sky,

and when you hear

State of Emergency!

Sniper Kills Ten!

Troops on Rampage!

Whites go Looting!

Bomb Blasts School!

It is but the sound of man worshiping his maker. (Steve Turner)

I'm sure his brilliant satire isn't lost on you! He begins by saying 'If chance be the Father of all flesh ...' One professor who believed in chance being our Father said this: we are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available (so thank your lucky stars in a literal sense); because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a "higher" answer - but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling, if not terrifying, is ultimately liberating and exhilarating. (Stephen Jay Gould)

Let me ask you: is that exhilarating? Is that more sensible than belief in the virgin birth of Christianity? Once, Malcolm Muggeridge may have once thought so, but he faced up to the bankruptcy of that way of thinking, and later in life embraced Christianity, then wrote:

"In one lifetime I have seen my own fellow countrymen ruling over a quarter of the world ... I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian proclaim to the world the establishment of a German Reich that would last a thousand years; an Italian clown announce that he would restart the calendar to begin with his own assumption of power. I've heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the world as a wiser than Solomon ... All in one little lifetime. All gone with the wind. ... Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy. Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades... "All in one lifetime, all gone. Gone with the wind. Behind the debris of these self-styled, sullen supermen and imperial diplomatists, there stands the gigantic figure of one person, because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone mankind might still have hope. The person of Jesus Christ."

So, in summary, he's saying: Over the wreck of time, standing tall above the debris of history, is the person of Christ – a life so powerful it reset the clocks some 2,000 years ago – and in him alone forgiveness can be found.

Let me conclude the chapter now by sharing an illustration about God's provision of forgiveness for the problem of human sin. I'm going to use the biblical example of a man called Saul, the first king of Israel. God said to him one day: *'you shall ... be changed into another man'*. Then the Bible confirms by telling us: *'God changed his heart'* (1 Samuel 10:6,9). That's what we also need.

He'd been out searching for some animals that'd gone astray when God, through his Old Testament prophet, spoke into his life's situation. God pictures us like straying animals who've all strayed away from him. If you read Saul's story, you'll find that in one day, God met him with his problem; provided for his needs and gave him the power to be changed into a new person. Associated with these things were a hill, a tree and a tomb.

And it's because of 'a green hill far away outside a city wall', and because of the tree there on which Jesus Christ the son of God died for our sins, and because of the fact that his nearby tomb is now empty – that our deceitful, sin-sick heart, the source of all life's problems, can be changed by God and cleansed by faith. All God asks us to do is to turn from our self-centred, self-choosing, self-serving ways and come to Christ, just as we are, because he'll change us, but come believing that the only remedy to the problem of your heart lies in God's provision at the cross of Jesus. There's no other power to change.

Those who come to Christ find completeness in him, and learn to worship God for:

- 1) The quickening of our conscience by his holiness

- 2) The nourishing of our minds by his truth
- 3) The enlarging of our hearts by his love
- 4) The purifying of our imagination by his beauty
- 5) The submission of our wills to his purpose.

That's how we can truly worship our Maker!

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: DON'T PUT JESUS AWAY WITH THE DECORATIONS

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I wonder what your agenda is for a typical Christmas holiday season? For example, perhaps it includes travelling to meet up with family and friends? In the original Christmas story, Mary had to travel more than 80 miles even before Jesus was born – while she was heavily pregnant! And I also wonder if anything surprising or unexpected has ever happened to you over a Christmas period? Mary, I'm sure, never expected to cradle her new-born in an animal feeding-trough, of all places! That would definitely not have been on their agenda, but by the time they arrived at Bethlehem there were no other options left open to them.

I suppose it's quite likely that your doorbell has sounded at some point over the holidays and you received some unannounced well-wishers and visitors. Well, I hope it was a nice surprise! In Mary's case, she welcomed shepherds she'd never met before - they just walked in from the fields to welcome her new arrival!

But, tell me, what do you do when the holidays are over? Do you quickly forget it all? Well, that's where Mary gives us the very best example. Luke's Gospel chapter 2:19 says: *'Mary treasured all these things [about Jesus], pondering them in her heart.'* At home, like a great many other people – probably every family – we have a baby book for each of our children. Very occasionally we come across those books and so remind ourselves of the significant early milestones in the lives of our children. Each of that type of book tends to follow a standard design with spaces to allow the parents to put in a description and a photograph of 'baby's

first outing,' 'baby's first flight,' 'baby's first birthday,' 'first time found standing up unaided in the cot' etc. etc.

Mary's baby book – if we could imagine her having such a thing – would have featured such milestones as a visit by the angel Gabriel; contact she'd had with her close relative Elizabeth who was six months or so further into her pregnancy carrying John the Baptist; then there was the first visit of the shepherds; - oh, and their meeting at Jerusalem with Anna and Simeon!

That first Christmas was truly memorable! And Jesus is what's really valuable about Christmas, so don't just lay aside any thoughts of him along with all the leftover clutter. Jesus is for ever; not just for Christmas.

I once heard someone mention a slogan they'd read on a T-shirt. They'd spotted one which read: 'Dear Santa, I want it all!' Is that all that Christmas really means for some people – perhaps for you – is it just an opportunity to grab the latest must-have gadgets? Sometimes we want so much, and maybe we even have so much, that we can even lose track of what we already have.

William Randolph Hearst was a wealthy newspaper publisher in the 1920s. He was also an art-lover and had a huge collection of paintings. One day he read about a particular painting and decided he simply must own it. He immediately sent two men to Europe to track it down and buy it. The two men scoured European art galleries for seven weeks. They finally located the painting and contacted Mr. Hearst with the information. "Where is it?" Hearst demanded. They replied, "It's in your own warehouse in California - you already own it!"

Yes, people want many things, they want to own the latest devices, and so they put them on their Christmas list – possibly their Amazon wish list - often what we want is nothing more than a passing craze – as when

last year's iPhone or iPod Touch – or whatever - is now discarded in favour of this year's latest device.

May I suggest that we try to remember - as good advice - the example of Mary which we were thinking about earlier? Luke's Gospel chapter 2:19 says: *'Mary treasured all these things [about Jesus], pondering them in her heart'* ... Her good example was to keep safe and close the precious memories of Jesus' birth, collating and storing all the information – all the memories – so that she could enjoy them again afterwards. I guess what I'm saying is: among all the valuable things you hold in your heart, please don't lose track of the fact that to possess Jesus by faith in your heart is the greatest treasure anyone can possibly have in this life ... for in Jesus, God has given the greatest gift of all.

I've never forgotten the story of a little boy out at night walking with his dad. It was a clear, cold night, and their walk took them past a row of terraced houses. Many of them were displaying a star in their window. The boy asked his dad what this might mean. His father explained to him that there was a war going on and each time there was a window with a star in it, that meant that the family who lived in that house had sacrificed a son in the war – meaning, of course, a son of theirs had gone to fight for his country and had been killed in action. This was naturally a great sadness for those families and to commemorate their loss, they'd each put a star in their window. The little boy listened quietly to his dad's explanation, and they again walked on in silence for a while. After a while, they came to a break between the rows of terraced houses. At that point the boy looked straight up into the section of sky which was visible between the houses – and he saw a single bright star there. 'Oh Daddy, look,' he said, 'God has given his son too!'

And how true! Yes, God gave his son to the mean circumstances of his birth and then – most importantly – some thirty-three years later, to the cross: to the outside place at birth and the outside place at death.

Why? So he can be IN our lives. We did say above that to possess Jesus by faith in our heart is the greatest possible treasure anyone can have in this life, for to know Jesus is to know that all your shortcomings in God's sight are already fully forgiven, for always. We've sinned, but he was born to die that he might deliver his believing followers from their sins.

If you're not sure if you already own him as your saviour – remember how William Randolph Hearst was very far from sure that he owned the painting he wanted – so if you're not totally sure you already own Jesus in your heart as saviour, it's best for you to make sure now by turning your thoughts away from centring on yourself and your own gratification and turning them towards him instead, by consciously inviting him into your life.

Once, a mother was very carefully putting away all the Christmas decorations for another year. It can be such fun to bring them out, and such a chore to put them all away again. This particular year, as she stored all the items belonging to the little nativity display back into the box, she noticed the baby Jesus was missing. She asked her young daughter if she'd seen the missing piece. The little girl nodded, and admitted that she'd taken it. She then explained: 'I don't want you to put Jesus away with the decorations for another year.'

Very soon the holidays are over, and it's back to school and back to business as normal again, and so the decorations – and the sentiments – get packed away for another year. That little girl's appeal is worth listening to. 'Don't put Jesus away with the decorations' – but instead enjoy your treasure ever after! Jesus is for ever, not just for Christmas.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: COUNTING DOWN THE COMMANDMENTS

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The Ten Commandments which we find in Exodus chapter 20 have often been used as the basis of a country's legal framework. What they give us, in fact, is the clearest insight into the standard which God has set for humanity and which we've failed to live up to. Let's take a look at them again:

"You shall have no other gods before Me.

"You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.

"You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing lovingkindness to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments.

"You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in vain.

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; *in it* you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male or your female servant or your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you. "For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

“You shall not murder.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Let’s check out how we are doing by counting down from the tenth to the first of the commandments.

We’re told not to covet what belongs to our neighbour, including our neighbour’s wife. The now natural habit of humans to compare themselves with others opens up the possibility, in fact the likelihood, for us to be envious and jealous of what others have. Then we’re commanded not to steal, which would require us to always have had total integrity in matters of filing expense claims and when making tax declarations etc. Next we’re told not to tell lies. At this point we might recall again the story of the minister, the boys and the stray dog.

A clergyman was walking down the street when he came to a group of about a dozen boys between 10 and 12 years of age. The boys surrounded an old dog. Concerned that the boys were hurting the animal, the minister went over and asked, “What are you doing with that dog?” One of the boys replied, “This dog is just an old stray. We all want him, but only one of us can take him home. So we’ve decided whichever one of us can tell the biggest lie gets to keep the dog.” The minister was taken aback. “You boys shouldn’t have a contest telling lies,” he said.

“Don’t you boys know it’s a sin to lie?” Then he began a 10-minute sermon about lying and ended with, “When I was your age, I never told a lie.”

There was complete silence lasting about a minute afterwards, and just as the minister was beginning to think he’d really got through to them, the smallest boy gave a deep sigh and with a shrug of resignation said, “All right, give him the dog!”

The command against adultery comes next. Adulterers and fornicators – all the sexually immoral – whether that impurity is before or outside of marriage, will be judged by God. It makes no difference at all if those kind of behaviours are regarded less seriously by society. The ruin of families and the trauma inflicted on children are more than sufficient testimony to the correctness of God’s standard. Then there’s the command against murder, the taking of another human life. Who could argue that it’s not deeply encoded within our being that taking the life of another fellow human is a gross and fundamental violation of something sacred - the sanctity of human life?

Next up is the command about honouring our parents. At some point throughout childhood that requirement defeated us all – even if it wasn’t a major rebellion. The rebellious streak cuts very deeply into the human psyche, does it not? Having respect for a day of rest in each weekly cycle is involved in the fourth of the famous commandments. Of course, in its original setting, this carried with it the requirement to be reflective about God’s dealings with us, and so to be grateful and reverential for his providence. I suppose such things would very widely get short shrift in most quarters today. Perhaps, it’s nearer the mark that we’ve made a requirement, if not a virtue, out of 24/7 working, leaving no place for the ‘distraction’ of thinking about the God question.

And what about the command that was given as the third in the original list? It’s the command against taking God’s name in vain. For those

with any sympathy for this, it is grating, if not galling, to hear the inevitable, overblown reaction of 'O my God' – or OMG in text language, which has become, it seems, a required and fashionable way of behaving. It completely fails to register – even alas to professing Christians – that this is an empty and inappropriate use of God's name – and one which therefore breaks the third command.

Next up is the command not to worship anything other than God our creator, and not to have wrong mental images of him. I wonder how our lives measure up to this when we think of what we direct our time, money and energies towards. And then, at number one, we're faced up with our failure to live with our relationship with God as number one priority in life. Here, we most definitely can only talk in terms of failure ... which only goes to demonstrate what the Bible says in Romans 3:12 about none being good. Allow me to quote that verse, for we do need to absorb its significance: *"All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one."*

If you take all the mangoes from a mango tree ... it doesn't become a coconut tree. And in the same way, if we even try to stop all our bad deeds, we don't become good, but we're still sinners by nature with evil thoughts. The fact is that no-one born of human parents has ever been approved by God by doing the good works of the Law (Galatians 2:16). The way the Bible puts it is as follows in ... *"nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified."*

So, altogether, what we've seen is this: we've failed to live up to God's standard, in fact God's candid verdict on all our lives – again without exception – is that we're not good. We are capable, for sure, of wanting to make the effort to do good works, but even this cannot bring us ac-

ceptance with God. What then must we do to escape the eternal punishment we deserve?

The preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus, and his apostles all began with one word: and that word was 'repent'! It was a command to turn our behaviour away from bad works, for sure ... but also to turn our trust away from our own good works as well. And instead, believe what the Word of God says about us and about the grace of God.

And it says that without blood being spilled there is no forgiveness (Hebrews 9:23). What does that mean? We need to remember that the Bible says that sin results in death (Romans 6:23) - the soul that sins dies - meaning that only the lifeblood of a substitute dying in our place can rescue us from guilt. There is, for us all, only one acceptable substitute - Jesus - God declared from heaven that the life of Jesus was good - the only one good and perfect and acceptable to take our place.

That's why he came to die ... that's why God allowed the brutal cruelty of the cross to happen. If God had not planned it, it for sure could never have been possible for men to do that terrible thing. Jesus is our only sacrifice - once for ever on the cross - he bore our sins; died for them; took our blame; and suffered our guilt and shame - all to set us free. But that freedom, that forgiveness is not automatic. The Bible teaches our only - but very necessary - responsibility is to receive God's gracious gift of salvation through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

I vividly remember someone illustrating this to me as a young teenager. He held out a £5 note to us and promised to give it to whoever took it. No-one moved. Finally, one lad hesitantly reached out and claimed it. The note was transferred as promised. The point was made. Please don't you be so reluctant to take God at his word. Reach out in faith and you will receive.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: GREATLY MISTAKEN! (HUMAN OPINION IS INVARIABLY WRONG)

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**W**e all make mistakes. Sometimes great people are greatly mistaken. I'll be reminding you of a few of them in this chapter: people who got it so wrong that it's amusing to us in retrospect. Like, for example, the workers whom Edwin Drake tried to enlist for his project to drill for oil in 1859. They reacted by saying: "Drill for oil? You mean drill into the ground to try to find oil? You're crazy". In the Bible, Joseph's brothers thought he was crazy too ...

*"Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Please listen to this dream which I have had; for behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf." Then his brothers said to him, "Are you actually going to reign over us? Or are you really going to rule over us?" So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words."* (Genesis 37:5 -8)

But the brothers' opinions were totally wrong! Motivated by jealousy, they sold him into Egypt to become a slave. There he was falsely accused and sent to prison. Who then would have predicted he'd end up as prime minister of Egypt?! Speaking of Prime Ministers, here's a quote for you: "It will be years - not in my time - before a woman will become Prime Minister." That was the confident prediction of Margaret Thatcher in 1974. Five years later, she herself was Prime Minister of the United Kingdom!

The Emperor Ferdinand didn't show any better judgement when he offered this opinion: "Far too noisy, my dear Mozart. Far too many

notes.” That was after the first performance of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Clearly not everyone agreed with the Emperor’s opinion! Staying with music, but of a very different style in more modern times, we come across this quote: “We don’t like their sound. Groups of guitars are on their way out.” This was the verdict of Decca Recording Company when turning down the Beatles in 1962 - before they went on, of course, to international success. Decca’s decision to reject the group is considered to be one of the biggest mistakes in music history<sup>1</sup>, and no doubt lost them a fortune.

But sometimes much more than money is at stake when mistakes are made and subsequent events show human opinion to have been disastrously wrong. One day ...

*“The Jews ... said to [Jesus Christ], “What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.” The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” But He was speaking of the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken” (John 2:18-22).*

In the most important matter of faith, with eternity in the balance, we dare not rely on the opinion of others when making our personal judgement. If all of human opinion is against it, you can still depend confidently on any statement of Jesus Christ. No-one who puts his or her trust in him will ever be disappointed – or ever have cause to look back with regret.

Every word of Christ stands to this day, unlike the words of other great men which the passage of time reveals now as foolish and hopelessly misjudged. The greats of the world of science are no exceptions. “Radio has no future. Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible. X-

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1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music\\_history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Music_history)

rays will prove to be a hoax” – so said British scientist, Lord Kelvin, in 1899. In 1932, no less a scientist than Albert Einstein said: “There is not the slightest indication that nuclear energy will ever be obtainable. It would mean that the atom would have to be shattered at will”. And the same happened with medical science. Listen to this howler: “The abdomen, the chest, and the brain will forever be shut from the intrusion of the wise and humane surgeon.” This was then the considered opinion of the illustrious Sir John Eric Ericksen, Surgeon-Extraordinary to Queen Victoria 1873.

One day, Jesus Christ gave a medical diagnosis which flew in the face of current medical opinion. It was when ...

*“One of the synagogue officials named Jairus came up, and on seeing Him, fell at His feet and implored Him earnestly, saying, “My little daughter is at the point of death; please come and lay Your hands on her, so that she will get well and live.” ... While He was still speaking, they came from the house of the synagogue official, saying, “Your daughter has died; why trouble the Teacher anymore?” But Jesus, overhearing what was being spoken, said to the synagogue official, “Do not be afraid any longer, only believe.” And He allowed no one to accompany Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James. They came to the house of the synagogue official; and He saw a commotion, and people loudly weeping and wailing. And entering in, He said to them, “Why make a commotion and weep? The child has not died, but is asleep.”*

*They began laughing at Him. But putting them all out, He took along the child’s father and mother and His own companions, and entered the room where the child was. Taking the child by the hand, He said to her, “Talitha kum!” (which translated means, “Little girl, I say to you, get up!”). Immediately the girl got up and began to walk, for she was twelve years old. And immediately they were completely astounded (Mark 5:22-42).*

Who would presume to cross swords with Jesus Christ – and offer a contrary opinion, as they did? Whose opinion are you listening to today? Don't be swayed by any amount or weight of human opinion if the conclusion drawn is at variance with the claims of Christ.

During the course of technological progress, there've been many classic examples of human short-sightedness in assessing the potential of new inventions. Here's one from a Western Union internal memo, dated 1876: "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value." Whereas on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, the British Post Office sniffed: "The Americans have need of the telephone, but we do not. We have plenty of messenger boys" (Sir William Preece, chief engineer of the British Post Office, 1876).

Similar, dismissive opinions were made about television and military aircraft, but perhaps the greatest misjudgement came in 1943 from Thomas Watson the Chairman of computing giant IBM: "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers". At least one engineer at IBM didn't learn from this, and when commenting on the microchip in 1968, said: "But what ... is it good for?" (Advanced Computing Systems Division of IBM). Even more recently in 1977, the president, chairman and founder of Digital Equipment said: "There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home" (Ken Olson, Digital Equipment Corp.).

One man who was much more reserved in his judgement was:

*"Gamaliel, a teacher of the Law, respected by all the people ... he said ..."Men of Israel, take care what you propose to do with these men [Christ's apostles]... let them alone, for if this plan or action is of men, it will be overthrown; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them; or else you may even be found fighting against God."* They took his advice ...

(Acts 5:34-40) – and today Christianity is still flourishing on a global scale.

But not all school-teachers have been as judicious. Take the Munich schoolmaster who – shockingly – announced to a 10-year-old: “You will never amount to very much.” He was speaking then to young Albert - that’s Albert Einstein. Much the same with the Sunday school teacher who came to a shoe shop in April of 1855 and led a young worker to Christ. Another of his Sunday school teachers later wrote, ‘I’ve never met anyone who seemed less likely to become a Christian of clear and decided views, much less fill any place of public usefulness.’ But under God, DL Moody became a spokesman for God and a changer of nations. But the greatest Teacher the world has ever known was put on trial as follows:

*“Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death ... many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent ... The high priest stood up and came forward and questioned Jesus, saying, “Do You not answer? ... “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” And Jesus said, “I am; and you shall see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:55-64).*

They never saw it in their lifetime, but one day they will. This is no mere opinion or wide of the mark prediction. The man they ridiculed and judged worthy of death will soon judge them while seated at God’s right hand. Do you believe that? With its poor track record, will you err on the side of human opinion? Or will you follow the man whose claims confounded critics again and again? *‘It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’ (1 Timothy 1:15).*

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: CHANGED LIVES

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One of the most gripping examples of a changed life which I've come across recently is the story of Stephen Lungu. He tells it in his book 'Out of the Black Shadows'. The Black Shadows was the name of the gang he ran with in Zimbabwe, back in the days in which it was called Rhodesia. Rejected by his father, and abandoned by his mother when they split up, Stephen grew up with an angry and bitter heart. One night he and his gang-members decided to petrol bomb a mission tent where a preacher was addressing hundreds of people. He made the mistake of first stopping to listen for a few minutes.

He describes in his book how the preacher jabbed with his pointed finger: 'all have sinned'; 'the wages of sin is death', adding 'some here are not ready to die tonight'. Stephen couldn't understand how this preacher already seemed to know about their plans to kill as many people as possible in the tent that night. But he didn't like that jabbing finger, so in wonderful naivety he began ducking up and down whenever it jabbed in his direction! The preacher that night went on to speak about how Jesus became poor that we might become rich. Stephen could relate to poverty all right, and quite fancied exchanging it for riches, so still clutching his bag of petrol bombs, he was soon moving, almost involuntarily, to the front in a state of emotional and spiritual turmoil.

There, he slumped in front of the preacher and, of all things, held onto his feet! Stewards next attempted to remove this sobbing man who was clutching at their preacher. All the while, the preacher kept on preaching – except for when the heaving shoulders and flailing arms of those trying to remove Stephen disrupted his line of vision! The meeting was then interrupted when others started the petrol bomb attack which

Stephen had meant to lead. At that point the preacher acknowledged Stephen. 'Can your Jesus save someone like me?', Stephen asked. 'Yes', came the reply along with a request to share a bit of background information. As Stephen told of his rejection, the preacher himself began to cry. 'Young man,' he said 'I shall now tell you a story. Many years ago there was a 14-year-old girl who became pregnant.' He went on to tell of how the father refused to take responsibility, so the girl dumped the baby in a toilet, but someone heard it drowning and rescued it, taking it to hospital'. 'I was that child', the preacher said. Stephen stared at him in astonishment. The preacher then read to him Psalm 27 verse 10: '*Though my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up*'.

Hearing that verse became the turning point in Stephen's life. 'God', he cried, 'I have nothing. I am nothing. I can't read. I can't write. My parents don't want me. Take me up, God, take me up. I'm sorry for the bad things I've done. Jesus, forgive me, and take me now'. A throw-away child among the millions of Africa, but Jesus had found him – and turned his life round. To this day he tells others, all across Africa and beyond, of how God took him up.

Another equally dramatic testimony begins in the maximum security cell in the federal prison in Miami where General Manuel Noriega – the former Panamanian President -was even then awaiting trial on charges of international drug trafficking. General Manuel Antonio Noriega has since been found guilty of international drug trafficking and sentenced to 40 years in the federal penitentiary.

But back in early January 1990, a copy of a Spanish New Testament came into the notorious prisoner's hands. As a follow-up to that, in May of the same year, Clift Brannon, a former attorney turned preacher, and a Spanish interpreter, Rudy Hernandez, were allowed to visit Noriega in the Metropolitan Correctional Center of Dade County, Florida. Following their visit, Noriega wrote to Brannon as follows: 'I

can tell you with great strength and inspiration that receiving our Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour guided by you, was an emotional event. The hours flew by without my being aware.’ (Manuel A. Noriega).

Then, in October, 1992, a portable baptistry arrived at the back door of the Federal Court House in Miami. “That was a first”, Brannon said. “We were told this had never taken place in a federal courthouse before”. When the baptistry was filled, the Deputy Marshall brought General Manuel Antonio Noriega into the courtroom to be baptized. Surrounded by 12 guards, Noriega, wearing civilian clothes, took off his jacket and shoes, and got into the baptistry. Here, in part, is the testimony of General Manuel Antonio Noriega, the notorious international drug lord and ruthless dictator of Panama:

“Before, Jesus to me was only an image of that which was learned from Catholicism, an historic being who worked miracles. All was transformed on Tuesday, January the 16th, 1990... Today, this is what He means to me: He is the Son of God, who died on the cross for our sins, who arose from the grave and is at the right hand of God the Father and above all things He is my Savior, and has mercy on me, a sinner.”

Finally, a third example of a stunningly changed life. Mitsuo Fuchida grew up loving his native Japan, attended a military academy, joined Japan’s Naval Air Force, and by 1941, had become established as the nation’s top pilot. And so, when Japanese military leaders needed someone to command a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, they chose Fuchida. His was the voice that sent his aircraft carrier the message “Tora! Tora! Tora!” (Tiger! Tiger! Tiger!), indicating the success of the surprise mission.

The attack on Pearl Harbour was a surprise military strike conducted by the Imperial Japanese Navy against the United States naval base at Pearl Harbour, in Hawaii, on the morning of December 7, 1941 (December 8 in Japan). The attack was intended as a preventive action in

order to keep the U.S. Pacific Fleet from interfering with military actions the Empire of Japan was planning.

The base was attacked by 353 Japanese fighters, bombers and torpedo planes in two waves, launched from six aircraft carriers. All eight U.S. Navy battleships were damaged, with four being sunk. The attack came as a profound shock to the American people and led directly to the American entry into World War II.

Jacob DeShazer was a young American serviceman. He was peeling potatoes at his army base in California when he heard of the Pearl Harbor attack. DeShazer's first impulse was to shout for revenge. DeShazer got his chance of revenge. He took part in the surprise retaliatory air raid on Tokyo. However, things didn't go to plan. The plane he was in ran out of fuel. He and others had to parachute down somewhere in China. Some vanished forever in the mountains, but DeShazer was captured by the Japanese. The Japanese prison into which DeShazer and the other American POWS were thrown was a brutal place, where torture was added to the starvation. Formerly strong-muscled men were reduced to pitiful, living skeletons. DeShazer watched helplessly as his room-mate died from the effects of starvation and as a result of a fatal heart attack.

While imprisoned, first in Nanjing and later in Beijing, DeShazer became a Christian. He'd been reading First Corinthians chapter 13, the Bible's great chapter on love, the one so often read at weddings. Reading this, in these circumstances, transformed him. Jacob DeShazer's almost insane hate for the torturing Japanese prison guards was replaced with love, the kind of love he'd been reading about from the pages of the Bible. He found his heart softened toward his Japanese captors. After being liberated, he began to feel the urge to go back to Japan to share the good news of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, after the war, Mitsuo Fuchida, the Pearl Harbour attack squadron commander, now bitter over Japan's humiliating defeat and unconditional surrender, left professional army life and returned to his family farm and settled for a life of menial drudgery. All the while, he'd later say, his soul was churning with misery and torment over a once highly successful life in the military that had gone nowhere.

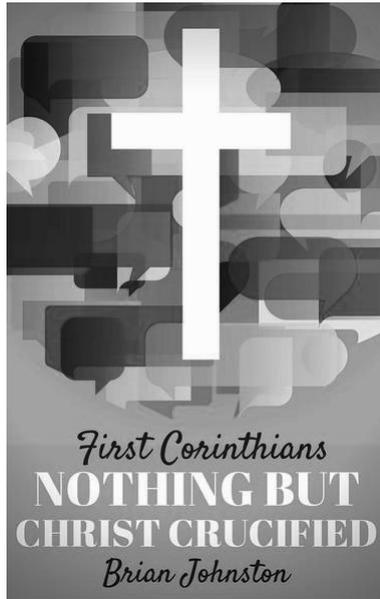
One day, DeShazer, now back in Japan, was sharing his life story in an essay of his – now a pamphlet, entitled, "I was a Prisoner of War." He was standing at the busy Shibuya train station in Tokyo. And guess who should come along? Yes, Mitsuo Fuchida, the commander of the Pearl Harbour attack squadron, passed by. Mitsuo received one of the pamphlets Jacob DeShazer was handing out to passers-by. Of course, DeShazer did not know Mitsuo Fuchida by sight – he'd only heard of him.

Fuchida and DeShazer met in 1950. Fuchida told DeShazer how he'd read his pamphlet, bought a Bible, and then converted from Buddhism to Christianity. The irresistible power of Christ's love in Jacob DeShazer's story had transformed him into a believer in Jesus Christ.

Isn't it wonderful to hear of such changed lives! Changed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek* (Romans 1:16). The greatest argument in support of the Christian message is the powerful change which it has brought into countless lives around the globe down through the centuries. Has it impacted yours yet?



Did you love *Hope for Humanity: God's Fix for a Broken World?* Then you should read *First Corinthians: Nothing But Christ Crucified* by Brian Johnston!



Bible teacher Brian Johnston unpacks the first letter of the apostle Paul to the Corinthians in this informative book, exploring such important topics as spiritual gifts, the body of Christ, headcoverings, the Breaking of Bread and the powerful wisdom of God in Christ crucified!



## **About the Author**

Born and educated in Scotland, Brian worked as a government scientist until God called him into full-time Christian ministry on behalf of the Churches of God ([www.churchesofgod.info](http://www.churchesofgod.info)). His voice has been heard on Search For Truth radio broadcasts for over 30 years (visit [www.searchfortruth.podbean.com](http://www.searchfortruth.podbean.com)) during which time he has been an itinerant Bible teacher throughout the UK and Canada. His evangelical and missionary work outside the UK is primarily in Belgium and The Philippines. He is married to Rosemary, with a son and daughter.



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