

“I WISH I HAD A BELIEF SYSTEM” [PART II]

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Part I of this two-part series appeared in the September issue. Part II follows below, and continues, without introductory comments, where the first article ended.]

“If there is a God, Why is the World in Such a Mess?”

Fifth, there is the perennial problem of evil, pain, and suffering. Consider, for example, an article—“For These Girls, It Is All Happening”—that appeared in the March 5, 1964 issue of the London *Daily Mirror* by reporter Marjorie Proops. Ms. Proops interviewed a nineteen-year-old British girl, and asked her: “Do you believe in God?” The girl’s response was: “No. I used to, but not now. I don’t see how there can be a benevolent God. There are too many tragedies—personal, and in the world. Religion is disgusting” (as quoted in Pike, 1967, p. 174). “Too many tragedies....” How many times have people echoed that same refrain—whether they live in London or Lexington? In addressing God’s existence as it relates to the problem of evil, pain, and suffering, James A. Pike asked: “To put it bluntly, if He’s all that strong, all that smart, and all that nice, why are so many things such a mess?” (1967, p. 175). Steven Pinker wrote: “Most perplexing of all, if the world unfolds according to a wise and merciful plan, why does it contain so much suffering? As the Yiddish expression says, ‘If God lived on the Earth, people would break his windows’ ” (1997, p. 560).

“I’m Afraid...”

Sixth, as odd as it may sound, there are some people who simply are afraid to believe. And, given the commitment that be-

lief entails, I suggest that we should not be shocked at such a fact. The Gospel makes a powerful claim on the life of its adherents. Christ made that clear when He said:

If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not his own father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. Whosoever doth not bear his own cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple.... So therefore whosoever he be of you that renounceth not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:26-27,33).

Alister McGrath wrote:

The specificity of the gospel to the life of an individual is too easily compromised through a failure to think through its relevance in a given situation. The gospel does indeed talk about—and offer!—liberation. But from what does a person need to be liberated?... From the fear of death?... From the paralyzing fear of guilt? (1993, p. 73).

There are occasions when fear—blinding, paralyzing, strangling fear—freezes us in place and prevents us from doing what we should (and know we ought to) do. In a book with the unusual title, *Afraid God Works, Afraid He Doesn’t*, Terry Rush spoke to this very point.

When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit, a phenomenal paradox took place. Their eyes were opened, causing them to see a segment of reality they had been blind to. Simultaneously, they were blind to a portion of reality they had previously seen....

When they sinned, their eyesight was impaired by being opened to see more. At the same time, they apparently lost the ability to see what is now the invisible world.... One thing clearly took place. As soon as Adam and Eve

possessed this alternative view, an entirely foreign sensation emerged. **Fear.** And to this day it has plagued our efforts to walk with the Creator. “And he said, ‘I heard the sound of Thee in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid myself’ ” (Gen. 3:10).

We have hidden ever since, all because we are afraid.... Blindness to the unseen activity leaves us mistaken and terribly disoriented.... Faith or fear. Belief or cynicism. Fruitfulness or caution. The equation seems to be consistent (1991, pp. 10, 11, 13, emp. added).

Man—whether he likes to admit it or not—is incapable of guiding himself successfully through the vicissitudes of life. The prophet Jeremiah, in the great long ago, wrote: “The way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). Humanism and its concordant cousins suggest otherwise, of course. The 1973 *Humanist Manifesto* boldly asserted:

Human life has meaning because we create and develop our futures. Happiness and the creative realization of human needs and desires, individually and in shared enjoyment, are continuous themes of humanism. We strive for the good life, here and now. The goal is to pursue life’s enrichment despite debasing forces.... **Reason and intelligence** are the most effective instruments that humankind possesses. There is no substitute: neither faith nor passion suffices in itself (pp. 17-18; emp. in orig.).

But what has “striving for the good life” gotten us? Drug addictions. AIDS. Clinical depression. Unwanted pregnancies. Venereal diseases. Overcrowded jails and prisons. World wars. Need I go on?

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Editor:

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.*
(*Microbiology, Texas A&M University)

Associate Editor:

Brad Harrub, Ph.D.*
(*Neurobiology, University of Tennessee)

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Jesus said that He came that we "may have life, and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The apostle Paul spoke of the fact that faithful believers who live "in Christ" would possess "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). But in order to obtain that "abundant life," in order to possess "the peace of God, which passeth all understanding," the fear-filled person first must acknowledge his dependency upon God and, second, be willing to "commit all" to a personal belief system based on the existence of that God and the truthfulness of His Word. No easy task, that. It does indeed winnow down to "faith—or fear." Far too many choose fear, to the detriment of faith.

THE BENEFITS OF BELIEF

But why believe? Why commit? Why strive to overcome fear? Why admit to actually **needing** a personal belief system based on God and His Word? The age-old question, "What's in it for me?" begs to be asked. Are there benefits to believing? Is there something "in it for me"? The answer to both questions is "yes." An examination of the benefits of belief makes for a rich and rewarding study.

First, however, we need to ask this question: Doesn't it make sense that if God created men and women in His image, then we should **want** to relate to Him in some way? I suggest that it does. As McGrath observed:

If we are indeed created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27), is it surprising that we should wish to relate to him? Might not a human desire for God be grounded in the fact that he brought us into being, with an inbuilt capacity to relate to him? (p. 97).

Is this not the very point of Ecclesiastes 3:11, where the inspired writer wrote that God "hath set eternity in their heart"?

Man may indeed "refuse to have God in his knowledge" (Romans 1:28), but his religious inclination is undeniable nevertheless. As one writer observed, all the available evidence reveals that "no race or tribe of men, however degraded and apparently atheistic, lacks that spark of religious capacity which may be fanned and fed into a mighty flame" (Dummelow, 1944, p. ci). Even unbelievers admit as much, albeit inadvertently (and, at times, begrudgingly). Evolutionist Pascal Boyer, in *Religion Explained*, lamented:

There is no religious instinct, no **specific** inclination in the mind, no particular disposition for these concepts, no special religion center in the brain,

and religious persons are not different from nonreligious ones in essential cognitive functions.... [P]eople who are shocked or repulsed by religion would like to find the **single** source of what is for them such egregious error, the crossroads at which so many human minds take the wrong turn, as it were. But the truth is that there is no such single point, because many different cognitive processes conspire to make religious concepts convincing.

Yet he then went on to admit:

Religious concepts and norms and the emotions attached to them seem **designed** to excite the human mind, linger in memory, trigger multiple inferences in the **precise** way that will get people to hold them true and communicate them. Whoever designed religion, or designs each religion, seems to have uncanny prescience of what will be successful with human minds (2001, pp. 329,330, emp. in orig.).

What did he say? Religious concepts seem "designed"? Yes, but inherent design demands a designer. One does not get a law without a lawgiver, a poem without a poet, or a painting without a painter. And one does not get design without a designer. But **who** designed man's "religious concepts"? Who is it, exactly, that "seems to have such an uncanny prescience of what will be successful in human minds"? Could it be the Creator of those minds—He Who "set eternity in their heart"? The evidence (which I have discussed at length elsewhere; see Thompson, 2000, pp. 123-181) documents that God **does** exist and that belief in Him **is** justified. But are there actual **benefits** that accrue as a result of belief? Yes, there are. Consider just a few of them.

Belief in God and His Word Allows Us to Understand Sin, Its Effects, and Its Cure, and to be Free from the Guilt Associated with It

Adam and Eve, the first man and woman on Earth, used the freedom of choice with which God had endowed them to rebel against their Maker. And people after them have done no better. Mankind has made some horribly evil choices, and as a result has entered the spiritual state biblically designated as "sin." The Old Testament not only presents in riveting fashion the entrance of sin into the world (Genesis 3), but also alludes to the ubiquity of sin within the human race when it says: "There is no man that sinneth not" (1 Kings 8:46). The Old Covenant discusses time and again both sin's presence amongst humanity and its debilitating consequences. The prophet Isaiah reminded God's people:

Behold, Jehovah's hand is not shortened that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, so that he will not hear (59:1-2).

The New Testament is equally clear in its assessment. The apostle John wrote: "Every one that doeth sin doeth also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Thus, sin can be defined as the act of transgressing God's law. The apostle Paul observed that "where there is no law, neither is there transgression" (Romans 4:15). Had there been no law, there would have been no sin. But God **had** instituted divine law. And mankind willfully chose to transgress that law. Paul reaffirmed the Old Testament concept of the universality of sin when he remarked that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23).

As a result of man's sin, God placed a curse of death on the human race. Mankind's predicament became serious indeed. Ezekiel lamented: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (18:20a). Once again, the New Testament writers reaffirmed such a concept. Paul wrote: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned" (Romans 5:12). He then added that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

By sinning, man created a vast chasm between himself and God. Unless remedied, this condition will result in man's being unable to escape the "judgment of hell" (Matthew 23:33) and in his being separated from God throughout all eternity (Revelation 21:8; 22:18-19). Disease and death were introduced as a direct consequence of man's sin (Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12). And, man generally is without the peace of mind for which his heart longs. Isaiah opined: "They have made them crooked paths; whosoever goeth therein doth not know peace" (59:8; cf. 57:21).

Man, undoubtedly, was in sin. The problem thus became: How could a loving, merciful God pardon rebellious humans? Paul addressed this matter in Romans 3. How could God be **just**, and yet a **justifier** of sinful man? The answer: He would have to find someone to stand in for us—someone to receive His retribution, and to bear our punishment. That "someone" would be Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The apostle John wrote: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). A propitiation is a substitutionary sacrifice. And that is exactly what

Christ became; He personally would pay the price for human salvation. In one of the most moving tributes ever written to the Son of God, Isaiah summarized the situation like this:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all (53:5-6).

Jehovah's intent was to extend His grace and mercy freely—through the redemptive life and death of His Son (Romans 3:24ff.). As a member of the Godhead, Christ took upon Himself the form of a man. He came to Earth as a human being (John 1:1-4, 14; Philippians 2:5-11; 1 Timothy 3:16), and thus shared our full nature and life-experiences. He even was tempted in all points, just as we are, yet He never yielded to that temptation (Hebrews 4:15).

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But what has this to do with us? Since Christ was tried (Isaiah 28:16), and yet found perfect (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:22), He alone could satisfy Heaven's requirement for justice. He alone could serve as the "propitiation" for our sins. Just as the lamb without blemish that was used in Old Testament sacrifices could be the (temporary) propitiation for the Israelites' sins, so the "Lamb of God" (John 1:29) could be the (permanent) propitiation for mankind's sins.

In the gift of Christ, Heaven's mercy was extended; in the death of the Lamb of God, divine justice was satisfied; and, in the resurrection of Christ, God's plan was documented and sealed historically forever! I repeat: belief in God allows man to acknowledge sin, recognize its effects, un-

derstand its cure, and be free from the guilt associated with it. This was exactly Paul's point in Romans 6:17:

But thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered; and being made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness.

No unbeliever ever can be free from sin, or from the guilt of that sin. That alone is reason enough to believe!

**Belief in God and His Word
Inspires Us, Gives Us Vision,
and Allows Us to Trust**

At the beginning of this series, I mentioned a woman, Felice Gans, who was afflicted with a terminal illness. She acknowledged to the reporter who interviewed her shortly before her death that many days brought her nothing but "stark terror," and that she spent "part of every day mourning my own death." [Mrs. Gans died on October 7, 2000, at the age of 72. The obituary that appeared in the *New York Times* on October 10 said simply: "As she wished, there will no funeral service."]

Mrs. Gans was not alone in her mourning. There are millions of unhappy, distraught, depressed people in the world who live a life day by day that, in their view, hardly is worth living. It may well be a life filled with stark terror. It may be a life of utter hopelessness. It may be a life of failed dreams, broken promises, and lost aspirations. It may be a life of complete emptiness or mind-numbing loneliness. For many, the three great questions of life—"Whence have I come?," "Why am I here?," and "Where am I going?"—have no answer. Such people wander aimlessly—from cradle to grave—in a sea of uncertainty, doubt, and misery. Their present lives are dreary, and their futures bode no better. They, like the patriarch of old, believe that "man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (Job 14:1). Or, they, like that ancient sage, may echo the refrain: "Vanity of vanities,....all is vanity. What profit has a man from all his labor in which he toils under the sun?" (Ecclesiastes 1:2, NKJV).

What a sad and pitiful existence. And how unnecessary! How much better to say, as Habakkuk did many years ago, "I will rejoice in Jehovah, I will joy in the God of my salvation. Jehovah, the Lord, is my strength" (Habakkuk 3:18). The apostle Paul wrote:

Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, rejoice. Let your forbearance be known unto all men.... In nothing be anxious; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which

passeth all understanding, shall guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (Philippians 4:4-8).

People who believe in God, and who take Him at His word, need not be lonely, depressed, or dreary. Quite the opposite, in fact. As Erickson noted:

...[I]f we correctly understand God, we will not fear or be lonely. We will recognize that when we think we are alone or in danger, he is always there, knowing our situation and caring for us.... Recognition that God is the Creator of everything will spare us from the hopelessness and despair that is so common in our world. For us, life can never be merely a maze of meaningless wandering. Someone supremely wise and powerful is in control, and is planning our days and our ways. It is a comfort to know that whatever happens in our lives is not the result of chance factors.... We can have the assurance that we are constantly being changed for the better. The work begun continues. Whether or not we feel good about ourselves on a given day, God is at work within us. And we can have the assurance that one day the process will be complete (1992, pp. 168, 169, 173).

We, like the apostle to the Gentiles, “know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). We realize that we are but “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” and that we, like those spoken of by the writer of the book of Hebrews, “are seeking after a country” of our own.” We “desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God; for he hath prepared for them a city” (11:13-16).

No unbelievers have such a promise, or such a hope. For them, it is “you live, you die—end of story.” As the writer of Ecclesiastes said, “all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (3:20). Paul spoke of some who were “strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). What a fitting description of the person who has no personal belief system in God and His Word. Compare statements from people like Dawkins, Weinberg, and Davidson (quoted earlier) that speak about the “drabness,” “meaninglessness” and “pointless nature” of the Universe and man’s existence, with the “peace that passeth understanding.” Which would you prefer?

Belief in God and His Word Helps Us Cope with Evil, Pain, and Suffering

Let’s face it. Things do not always go our way. Plans go awry. Fortunes are forfeited. Friendships are broken. Wars are fought. Lives are lost. Illnesses occur. People suffer. People die. The sufferings of this life are real. They are painful. And no one—young or old—is exempt. No one!

The unbeliever points to evil, pain, and suffering and uses it as a reason not to believe in God. No “good God” would allow, much less create, a world filled with such atrocities, goes the argument. [I have dealt with this more extensively elsewhere (see Thompson 1990; 1993; 2000, pp. 95-105), so my comments here will be brief.]

The fact that man possesses personal volition explains much of the evil, pain, and suffering found in today’s world. The Scriptures explain that since God is love, and since love allows freedom of choice,

A “meaningless, pointless” existence, or the “peace that passeth understanding”—which would you prefer?

God allows freedom of choice (cf. Joshua 24:15; John 5:39-40). God did not create men and women as automatons to serve Him mindlessly with no free moral agency on their part. Man reaps the benefits of the **use** of freedom of choice, but he also reaps the consequences of the **misuse** of that freedom of choice. The apostle Peter wrote: “Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or an evil-doer, or as a meddler in other men’s matters” (1 Peter 4:15). Suppose a man chooses to rob a convenience store? When he is apprehended, tried, convicted, and sentenced, is it “God’s fault”? Of course not. When a person chooses maliciously to murder another human being and then is sentenced to death by the state or federal governments for having done so, is it “God’s fault”? Again, no, it is not. The misuse by humankind of freedom of choice is responsible for much of the suffering in our world.

Too, there are times when we suffer because of the wrong choices of generations long since gone. Children starve to death in third-world countries today because their ancestors ignored God’s divine law about worshiping idols. In the midst of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, God issued this warning regarding idols: “Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them nor serve them, for I Jehovah thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generation of them that hate me” (v. 5). The “iniquity” of the fathers (i.e., the consequences of sin) fell upon future generations who turned to the false concept of reincarnation and, as a result, will not eat animals (pigs, chickens, cattle, etc.) because they wrongly believe they are someone’s long-dead, now-reincarnated ancestors. Is it “God’s fault” that tiny children starve? One last time, no, it is not.

Furthermore, God created a world ruled by natural laws established at the Creation. If a man steps out of an airplane at 10,000 feet with no parachute, gravity will pull him to his death below. If a girl steps in front of a moving automobile, since two objects cannot occupy the same space at the same time, the car will strike the child and likely kill her. The same laws that govern such things as gravity, matter in motion, or similar phenomena also govern weather patterns, water movement, and other geological/meteorological conditions. Truth be told, **all** of nature is regulated by these laws—not just the parts we find convenient. And **everyone** (believer and unbeliever alike) must obey them or suffer the consequences. In Luke 13:2-5, Jesus told the story of eighteen men who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed. Had these men perished because of their sin? No, they were no worse sinners than their peers. They died because natural laws were in force. Fortunately, those laws work continually so that we can understand and benefit from them. We are not left to sort out some kind of haphazard system that works one day, but not the next.

When all is said and done, the most important issue is not why “this” or “that” evil thing occurred, but rather, “How can we as humans understand what has happened, and how should we react to it?” As McGrath put it:

The sufferings of this earth are for real. They are painful. God is deeply pained by our suffering, just as we are shocked, grieved, and mystified by the suffering of our family and friends. But that is only half of the story. The other half must be told. It is natural that our at-

tention should be fixed on what we experience and feel here and now. But faith demands that we raise our sights and look ahead to what lies ahead. We may suffer as we journey—but where are we going? What lies ahead? (1993, pp. 105-106).

McGrath went on to say:

The love of God, then, is not some happy-go-lucky outlook on life that makes hedonism its goal. It is a divine love that proceeds from God and leads back to God, that embraces suffering as a consequence of the greater gifts of life and freedom. Real life implies suffering. Were God to take suffering away from us, he would take away that precious gift of life itself.... Suffering is not pointless, but leads to glory. Christianity has been unequivocal on this point, and its voice must be heard (pp. 104,105).

Karl Marx regarded such an outlook on life as “nauseating sentimentality.” To him (and thousands of other unbelievers like him), the promise of either present or future “glory” represented little more than idealistic “pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by-when-you-die” emotional baggage that served no purpose except to distract humans from more important concerns in the here and now. But is that necessarily true?

No, it is not. As much as the unbeliever hates to admit it, there **are** times when suffering actually is **beneficial**—both physically and mentally. Think of the man whose side begins to ache at the onset of acute

appendicitis. Consider the woman who blacks out unexpectedly due to an undiagnosed brain tumor. Is it not true that pain often sends us to the doctor for prevention or cure? Is it not also true that, at times, suffering helps people develop the traits that humankind treasures the most? Bravery, heroism, altruistic love, self-sacrifice—all flourish in less-than-perfect environments, do they not? Whom do we respect and admire more—the woman who day after day cares for an ailing husband afflicted with Alzheimer’s disease that robs him of his mental and physical health, or the young couple that abandons their newborn Down Syndrome child to die on a cold, stainless-steel table in a cubicle next to the delivery room because they do not want to be “bothered” by having to care for that child in the years to come? Is it not people who exhibit personal honor and valor in seemingly impossible circumstances who are considered to have gone “above and beyond the call of duty”? Was this not the very point Christ was making when He said: “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13)?

Instead of blaming God because evil, pain, and suffering exist, we should turn to Him for strength, and let tragedies, of whatever nature, remind us that this world never was intended to be a final home (Hebrews 11:13-16). Our time here is temporary (James 4:14), and with God’s help, we

are able to overcome whatever comes our way (Romans 8:35-39; Psalm 46:1-3). With Peter, the faithful believer can echo the sentiment that God, “who called you unto his eternal glory in Christ, after that ye have suffered a little while, shall himself perfect, establish, strengthen you” (1 Peter 5:10).

Belief in God and His Word Helps Us Avoid the Fear of Death, and Promises Us Eternal Life

In the chapter titled “Life After Death” in his book, *If This be Heresy*, James A. Pike included a section heading labeled “The Fear of Death.” He began that section as follows:

The phenomenon of death and its inevitability is in everyone’s mind—although not so frequently in the conscious mind, because either we deliberately suppress it or our automatic processes keep it repressed—most of the time. But it is never far beneath the surface. Nor is the corollary: the fear of death. Not very profound reflection is required to perceive what it is that is actually feared.... For many, it is **the fear of the absolute end of one’s conscious existence as a person** (1967, p. 114, emp. in orig.).

Indeed it is. The writer of the book of Hebrews spoke to this very point when he discussed those “who, **through fear of death**, were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (2:15). A sad existence—to live an entire lifetime “subject to bondage” because of the “fear of death.”

In his book, *How the Mind Works*, psychologist Steven Pinker discussed several “puzzles” about humankind that members of “that group” have yet to solve. He listed among those problems:

...consciousness in the sense of sentience.... How could an event of neural information-processing cause the feel of a toothache or the taste of a lemon or the color purple? How could I know whether a worm, a robot, a brain slice in a dish, or you, are sentient? Is your sensation of red the same as mine, or might it be like my sensation of green? **What is it like to be dead?**

Another imponderable is the self. **What or where is the unified center of sentience that comes into and goes out of existence**, that changes over time but remains the same entity, and that has a supreme moral worth?...

People have thought about these problems for millennia but have made no progress in solving them. They give us a sense of bewilderment, of intellectual vertigo (1997, pp. 558,559, emp. added.).



Dr. Bert Thompson
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“Fear of death.” “Lifetime of bondage.” “Sense of bewilderment.” “Intellectual vertigo.” And all so unnecessary! God never intended that we live like that, which was exactly Paul’s point in Romans 5:1: “Being therefore justified by faith, **we have peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” God wanted us to know—and went to great lengths to make sure we did—that we are made in His image and likeness. As He is an eternal spirit Who never will die (Revelation 1:8; Psalm 90:2), so, we, too, possess within us an immortal soul that never will perish (Ecclesiastes 12:7). Paul went on to write:

Behold, I tell you a **mystery**: We all shall not sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. But when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” The sting of death is sin; and the power of sin is the law: but thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:51-58, emp. added).

Jesus Himself said:

“Work not for the food which perisheth, but for the food **which abideth unto eternal life....**” They said therefore unto him, “What must we do, that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said unto them, “**This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent**” (John 6:27-29, emp. added).

As Erickson explained:

Human experience tells us that death is sure for each of us. But what lies beyond that? The Bible tells us that death is but the transition to an eternal existence. Those who die in Christ will go to be in the presence of God. **... This is a source of immense comfort to us.** We can know that Christian loved ones who have died are now in the presence of the Lord. We can be assured that there is a judgment coming in which the apparent inequities of life will be righted (1992, pp. 174-175, emp. added).

Writing in the book of Revelation, the apostle John described in incomparable language the destiny of the righteous when this

world finally comes to an end: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them” (21:3, RSV). Thousands of years earlier, God’s pledge to Abraham had foreshadowed just such a covenant relationship. Moses wrote: “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” (Genesis 17:7, NKJV). Paul spoke of the fact that “if ye are Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29), and referred to those who serve Christ faithfully as “heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7). James rejoiced in the fact that those who were “rich in faith” would be “heirs of the kingdom that he promised to them who love him” (James 2:5). The writer of Hebrews spoke of Christ as being “the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (5:9, NKJV). Paul told the first-century Christians in Corinth: “God both raised the Lord, and will raise up us through his power” (1 Corinthians 6:14). God raised Christ, and we have His promise that He will raise us as well: “Knowing that he that raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also with Jesus” (2 Corinthians 4:14).

No doubt that is exactly what John had in mind when he went on to say in Revelation 21: “He that overcometh shall inherit these things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (vs. 7). God will be Father to the man or woman who demonstrates faith in Him, perseveres to the end, and lives in humble obedience to His divine will. Such is the promise of sonship to believers. God will welcome those who believe in and obey His Son as “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:17), and will—according to His promise—bestow upon them all the riches and blessings of heaven. Paul told the Christians in Thessalonica: “Comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The faithful **are** comforted by them.

The unbeliever, however, is not. His fate is radically different. John, in recording the words of Christ on this subject, wrote: “He that believeth on the Son hath eternal life; but **he that obeyeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him**” (John 3:36, emp. added). Notice how disobedience is tied to unbelief? In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus described exactly what would happen to the wicked on that great Judgment Day yet to come: “And these shall go away into **eternal punishment**” (v. 46).

CONCLUSION

Belief, or unbelief? Peace that “passeth understanding,” or “fear of death” during “a lifetime subject to bondage”? Eternity in paradise, or eternity in punishment? How difficult a choice is this?

But, some might say, “believing does not make it so.” True, very true. The idea that **any belief—held with sincerity**—may be regarded as true, is not itself true. British philosopher John Hick summarized the absurdity of such a view when he wrote: “To say that whatever is sincerely believed and practiced is, by definition, true, would be the end of all critical discrimination, both intellectual and moral” (1974, p. 148).

But this is not what Christianity advocates. One of the laws of thought employed in the field of logic is the well-known Law of Rationality, which states that one should accept as true only those conclusions for which there is adequate and justifiable evidence. This is sensible and reasonable, for accepting as true a conclusion for which there is no evidence (or inadequate evidence) would be irrational. And Christianity is not irrational. It is not, as some have suggested, “the power of believing what you know is not true,” or “an illogical belief in the occurrence of the improbable.”

It is quite the opposite, in fact—which is where the discipline of Christian apologetics comes into play. The English word “apology” derives from the Greek *apologia*, which means to “defend” or “make a defense.” The New Testament employs the word in this manner, in fact. Two examples are noteworthy. Peter stressed the importance of a rational foundation upon which to build a saving faith when he exhorted Christians: “But sanctify in your hearts Christ as Lord: being ready always to **give answer** [Greek *apologian*] to every man that asketh you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, yet with meekness and fear” (1 Peter 3:15). Paul recognized this obligation, and said that he was “set for the **defense** of the Gospel” (Philippians 1:16-17). His epistles teem with sound arguments that are intended to provide a rational undergirding for his readers’ faith.

The Christian Faith is not a vague, emotionally based belief-structure designed for uncritical simpletons. Rather, it is a logical system of thought that may be both accepted and defended by analytical minds. One does not have to be formally trained in logic, of course, to understand the Gospel (for even children can understand its basic premises), but Christianity is capable of a logical, rational defense. The “case for Christianity” involves presenting the evidence for the existence of God, creation

at the hand of God, the inspiration of the Bible, the deity and Sonship of Jesus Christ, and the uniqueness of Christianity as the one true religion of the one true God. Evidence for each of these propositions may briefly be summarized as follows.

God Exists

Belief in God's existence is warranted by a simple acknowledgment of the principle of causation. Every material effect has an adequate, antecedent cause. And the effect never is quantitatively greater than, nor qualitatively superior to, the cause. The Universe is here—what is its cause? Since it is a truism that no material thing can create itself, the Universe must have had an adequate antecedent cause. Similarly, an examination of the world around us reveals intelligent and intricate design. Design demands a designer. The Bible argues from cause to effect in revealing that Designer: "For every house is built by someone; but he that built all things is God" (Hebrews 3:4). Nature's testimony alone is sufficient to lead to belief in a Creator (Psalm 19:1-2; 14:1). In fact, the evidence is so compelling that man has no excuse for unbelief (Romans 1:19-20). Furthermore, the moral faculty of man is an effect that requires a cause. Since among Earth's life forms man alone is a moral creature, there must be a cause that resides beyond the reach of this material world; hence, God must exist.

Creation or Evolution?

There are basically two views of origins: (1) God created everything; or (2) living things evolved naturalistically from non-living matter, and continue to evolve into varied life forms. These views are locked in an eternal struggle, and illustrate the critical dichotomy between theism and atheism. No compromise between the two is possible. Theistic evolution and its counterparts (progressive creationism, threshold evolution, etc.) are illegitimate children rejected by both parents. Evolution knows nothing of God, and Christians cannot accept a theory that calls upon God only temporarily to fill gaps until they can be filled with data gleaned from empirical inquiry. Additionally, God told us **that** He created everything ("in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"—Genesis 1:1), **how** He did it ("he spoke and it was done; he commanded and it stood fast"—Psalm 33:9), and **when** He did it (the biblical evidence for a young Earth is both obvious and overwhelming; see Thompson, 2003). To accept evolution (or any compromise position) as true is to reject God's testimony and count His Word as untrue. If a man cannot believe God's Word concerning creation, how can he be sure it has the truth on salvation?

The Bible is God's Word

Accepting that God exists, leads one to inquire as to whether or not God would communicate with mankind. If God has any information to which mankind needs access (a credible concept, to be sure), it stands to reason that He would reveal it in the form of a permanent communication to humans (e.g., through the written word). This being true, it is appropriate to examine the Bible to see if it qualifies as a book from God. There are several things that we reasonably might expect of such a divine volume. The Bible not only meets such expectations (e.g., it claims divine authorship, it exhibits miraculous unity, it is flawless and timeless, etc.), but actually exceeds them. The Bible is replete with examples of fulfilled prophecy and scientific foreknowledge—factors that elevate it far above any book of mere human invention. Paul said, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God [literally "God breathed"—BT], and is profitable..." (2 Timothy 3:16). When investigated honestly, the truth of this claim is obviated.

Jesus is Divine

Belief in the deity of Jesus Christ is mandated by an impressive array of evidence. Some of this proof comes in the form of fulfilled messianic prophecies (over three hundred, in fact). Much of Christ's biography was written by the prophets hundreds of years before He was born in Bethlehem. This proves He was, and remains, all He claimed. The miracles of Christ also confirm His deity. John wrote: "Many other signs [i.e., miraculous works—BT] therefore did Jesus in the presence of the disciples...but these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of God" (John 20:30-31). One of the most impressive miracles involving Jesus was His resurrection. Not only did it occur precisely as predicted by David (cf. Acts 2:22-36; Psalm 16:8-11), and Jesus Himself (e.g., Matthew 20:18-19), but His resurrected form was seen by over five hundred witnesses (1 Corinthians 15:4-8)! By this miracle, Christ's deity was demonstrated with power (Romans 1:4; see Butt, 2002).

Christianity: The One True Religion

Christianity's distinctive position (as the only religion approved by God) is substantiated overwhelmingly by the New Testament. Since Jesus truly possesses all authority (Matthew 28:18), it stands to reason that His religion is the only one that is divinely authorized. Jesus spoke of building His church (Matthew 16:18). That church is His body (Ephesians 1:22-23), and there is only **one** body (Ephesians 4:4). The sug-

gestion that we are free to "attend the church of our choice" is an insult to the One Who died for the sins of the whole world and gave His blood to purchase the church (see John 1:29; 3:16; 14:6).

When the Lord asked in John 5:44, "How can ye believe, who receive glory one of another, and the glory that cometh from the only God ye seek not?," He summed up one of the main reasons why many are unprepared to believe in God. Man is so busy seeking and reveling in his own glory that he has neither the time nor the inclination to offer glory to His Maker. An unhealthy lust for power wrapped in a cloak of pride breeds unbelief.

It is no wonder that the world is filled with people like Felice Gans who, in their private moments of reflection, agonizingly admit: "I sometimes wish I had a belief system." Such individuals **could** have a belief system—based on the triple truths of God's existence, Christ's Sonship, and the inspiration of the Bible. Yet they choose **not** to believe. Surely, the words of poet John Greenleaf Whittier mentioned earlier are appropriate here: "For all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: 'It might have been.'"

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ANNOUNCING A NEW BOOK: INVESTIGATING CHRISTIAN EVIDENCES

Over a decade ago, Apologetics Press produced a book titled *A Study Course in Christian Evidences* that became one of our most popular offerings. Over the years, however, new information became available in almost every area of study with which that volume dealt. Accordingly, Dr. Brad Harrub (the director of scientific information at Apologetics Press) and I decided to completely rewrite the book. In the process of updating it, we ended up enlarging it in order to include much more information than was contained in the original edition.

We believe that the new volume, *Investigating Christian Evidences*, will be an extremely valuable tool for those who are looking for information in the areas of Christian apologetics and Christian evidences. The book contains three chapters that present evidence (from cause and effect, design, and morality) for the existence of God, two chapters on the inspiration of the Bible (including one on The Book's scientific foreknowledge), two chapters that respond to the arguments most frequently used by evolutionists to defend their theory, plus individual chapters on the problem of evil, pain, and suffering, the Sonship and deity of Christ, and the historicity of Genesis 1-11 (including a heavily illustrated chapter titled "Walking Amidst the Dinosaurs," which, we suspect, will be one of the most fascinating and popular sections of the book). Closing out the book are two important chapters on what a person must do to be saved, and the uniqueness and singularity of Christ's heaven-sent, spirit-filled, blood-bought church.

The book contains 13 chapters, along with discussion questions for each lesson, which makes it ideal for use in college classes or group Bible studies. In addition, each chapter is extensively referenced, so that those students who wish to do additional research will have the source materials at their fingertips to aid them in further study of the various topics that are covered within the text.



Because we have published other volumes on Christian evidences that are suitable for use by junior high and high school students (such as Kyle Butt's two best-selling books, *Out With Doubt* and *A Matter of Fact*), *Investigating Christian Evidences* has been designed specifically for college students and adults, both of whom, we believe, will benefit tremendously from the exhaustive review of the subject matter.

Dr. Harrub and I wanted each of the chapters in this new book to be able to stand "on its own," so to speak. Individually, any one of the chapters represents a powerful weapon in the apologetics arsenal. Taken together, however, the 13 chapters provide an incredibly valuable tool that can be used to help someone build a personal faith in the God of the Bible, His Son, and His Word. And, in addition to **building** faith, the book also is intended to aid Christians in **defending** their faith. Once you have seen the book's contents, I have no doubt that you will agree that it will be useful in both arenas.

As with all Apologetics Press materials, the content of *Investigating Christian Evidences* is scientifically accurate and biblically sound. The 396-page book (which has a stitched spine and full-color cover) is only \$8.95. Why not order your copy today? Call us toll free at 800/234-8558 to order with your credit card. Or, mail us your check (plus \$2 shipping). We'll do the rest.

Bert Thompson

POSTSCRIPT: In this space in August, I introduced you to Thomas Tarpley, our new scientific illustrator. Thomas illustrated *Investigating Christian Evidences*, as well as another new book (*The Truth About Human Origins*) we will soon release. You can better understand his incredible talent when you see the elegant drawings of the trilobite he prepared for our feature article ("Lenses Beyond Compare") in the *Resources* section of this issue of *Reason & Revelation*. Stay tuned; more is yet to come.