

COMING BACK TO GOD

Answers to Men's Honest Questions and Doubts

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Author of The Man in the Mirror

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By the Author of *The Man in the Mirror*

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To my brothers, Pete and Bill

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Introduction

On my computer I have a library system with hundreds of research books. Sometimes after several complicated searches, the software will freeze up. I think it must be like overloading an electrical circuit with too many strings of Christmas lights or extension cords. Fortunately, the software developer anticipated this and built some grace into the system. There is a reset button I can push that lets me start over. This book is a “reset” button for men who want, or need, some grace to start over.

In business we have the helpful idea *Your system is perfectly designed to produce the result you are getting*. This book may be particularly useful to men who have become jaded about life in general and doubtful about Christianity in particular because of a bad experience or some faith-shaking book, fact, or professor and therefore have lived by a system that has led to a feeling of futility.

In this book I will show you the four systems by which men live. I will help you identify, explain, and correct the problem of futility. I will show you how to resolve the most common honest causes of doubt. Then I will explain how you can progress to a system that will satisfy your deepest yearnings for happiness, meaning, and purpose.

A word to women readers: The principles in a book on this topic, of course, apply to all people equally. While I have contextualized this work for men, I believe you will also find the book helpful, and I encourage you to read it.

Part One

Systems That End in Futility, The Soul's Search for Rest

“Why Am I Still So Restless?”

Bill Reed heaved a sigh of relief as he left his office to meet his friend Jerry Steele for lunch.

Reed's morning had been filled with too many meetings, too many people, too many opinions, and too many decisions. It was all so exhausting.

The economy had been booming for several years. A strong market had catapulted his real estate development company into a manic state of *grow, grow, grow*. Bill Reed had hit it big, but he was tired.

Jerry Steele sells cars, the kind of cars that men stare at when sitting at a red light. Jerry had sold Bill Reed three of these power cars during the last six years. They first met during a charity golf tournament at their country club and hit it off later after a few more rounds together. Steele recognized Bill Reed as a good prospect for his luxury cars; Reed enjoyed the chance to play with a scratch golfer.

Earlier in the week Jerry had invited Bill to lunch. With all the pressures of the morning, Bill was really looking forward to seeing Jerry. Frankly, Jerry's call about lunch had surprised him. He'd purchased a new car from Jerry a mere six months ago. He figured Jerry must be out raising money for a charity or something like that. Whatever. Bill Reed genuinely liked Jerry Steele.

The waiter served them salads. During lunch they must have greeted a dozen friends who walked by their table. After they finished eating, their waiter brought coffee. Bill asked, “So, what's up, Jerry? Why did you want to get together today?”

For the next few minutes Jerry Steele shocked Bill Reed by sharing personal details about Jerry's own search for happiness. At first, Bill was extremely uncomfortable. *Why's this guy spilling his guts to me?* Bill thought. But Jerry seemed so genuine that Bill soon calmed down. Jerry explained how he had “found God” fifteen years ago, but without much impact. About five years ago, though, things had changed.

Jerry explained, “By the age of thirty-five I'd achieved most of the goals I had set for my life. Yet the more I achieved, the emptier I felt. I couldn't understand why I was still so restless, and I was really getting down about it. My chest was starting to feel like it was imploding—like one of those gas cans crunched up in a high school chemistry experiment.

“For several months I tried to hide my feelings from my wife. One Saturday morning, though, she asked me, ‘What's wrong?’ The next thing I knew, I had spent over an hour

pouring out my frustrations to her. Together we decided to look for some encouragement—for someone to help me sort it out.

“A friend of mine had been after me for some time to have lunch with him. But I had avoided him because I knew what he’d want to talk about. God. I guess it was just my time, though, because the next thing I knew we were sitting together over lunch.” Jerry went on to describe their conversation. Bill was drawn into the story. At the same time he was terrified of becoming too interested.

Though surprised and still somewhat uncomfortable about Jerry’s revelations, Bill was touched by Jerry’s story and genuinely happy for him.

On the drive back to his office, Bill reviewed Jerry’s story in his mind. It was a terrific story, and for a brief moment Bill Reed envied Jerry Steele. Bill was more successful than Jerry, but not nearly as happy. All such thoughts were quickly washed away, though. One of his managers was waiting for him as he pulled into his private parking space.

“There’s been an accident on the Granada job site.” And with that, fate sucked Bill Reed back into “the real world.”

For the rest of the day Bill continued privately to replay parts of Jerry’s story. Jerry appeared to be at peace. That was the main reason Bill liked Jerry so much. Jerry Steele had something going for himself.

Tending to the Granada accident consumed most of Bill’s afternoon. An exterior wall had collapsed during a storm. Fortunately, no one was injured. Then Bill worked late that night on a contract revision that “had” to go out the next day—a pattern he had slipped into over the last several months. On the way home he continued thinking about Jerry. He just couldn’t let it rest.

It was 9:00 P.M. when he finally walked from the garage into his kitchen. His wife had left a note, pointing him to dinner in the microwave. She had gone to bed. He realized he had not seen any of his three children for three days. He was already feeling weary. Suddenly he felt bitter, too. The business he owned was starting to own him.

Three days later Bill was sitting in a staff meeting at about 10:00 A.M. His employees were droning on about “this” banal project and “that” trivial problem. He stifled a yawn. He thought, *You know, I need to do something for myself. I need to have some fun.* For about the twentieth time he remembered Jerry—happy Jerry. *I’ll bet he’s having fun.* Unexpectedly, he lurched forward in his chair. The current “talking head,” midway through a sentence, fell silent and obediently waited for another signal from the boss. “Mary!” Bill yelled to his secretary. “Can you come here for a moment?”

“Yes, Mr. Reed,” said Mary, who through efficiency kept his schedule moving and through good looks kept his lenders smiling. Nothing was more important to Bill Reed

than his schedule and his lenders.

“Would you give Jerry Steele a call and see if he’s open for lunch today?” Maybe Jerry could cheer him up with more of his stories.

Mary returned moments later to say that Mr. Steele would meet him at their club at noon. Bill felt a small wave of joy—ironically, the same way he would feel if he had just closed a big deal. He realized there had not been much of that joy in his life for a long time.

A little before noon Bill got into his car and turned left out of the parking garage onto Central Boulevard. His car could find its own way to the club. He lunched there two or three days a week. His mind wandered. Bill suspected that Jerry Steele, a car salesman he barely knew, had put his finger on the problem he was facing.

Bill grew up believing that happiness and success were the same thing. If you achieve your goals, you get “happy.” If you don’t, well, then you’re unhappy. But that wasn’t the way it had worked out for Bill.

While still in college Bill decided that he didn’t have to be the richest guy in town, but he still wanted to make a lot of money. That was “success” for him, and so he decided that’s what would make him happy.

Bill competed on his college debate team, where he displayed a knack for persuading people. Several people told him he would be natural for a sales career. He found that thought agreeable and decided to look into it. Since he also wanted to make a lot of money, he decided to sell something big. As graduation approached he networked with several of his father’s friends. They helped him zero in on commercial real estate.

The owner of the first real estate company where Bill interviewed told him, “You’re too young. No one will do business with you until you have some experience.” Many lesser men would have absorbed that as a fatal blow. Instead, this comment only motivated Bill to prove the man wrong.

Eventually, Bill was introduced to a top salesman at one of the city’s most respected commercial real estate agencies, who told him, “Let’s get together sometime.” This proved to be easier said than done. After several persistent phone calls, though, Bill finally arranged an appointment.

They had barely seated themselves when Randy Wood, the salesman, said, “You know, I can’t keep up with all the deals I’ve got going. Why don’t you come aboard as my assistant? You do some of the background and research work that I’m having a hard time getting done. In exchange, I’ll teach you how to sell real estate. What do you say?”

Bill almost leaped on top of the desk, but he restrained himself and said, “Well ... yes! Of course I’ll do it.” So began an incredible five-year “partnership” and learning curve.

Bill did the grunt work, but in the process he learned the ins and outs of commercial real estate like few others in his city ever had. And the money started to flow too. He loved looking at the growing balance on his monthly bank statement.

After five years of rustling up deals for Randy Wood, Bill hung up his own shingle. First-year sales were astounding. For the second year he set a goal to move 20 percent more property than he did the first year. He worked hard to make it happen. When he ran the final tally, second-year sales were up a whopping 83 percent! A wave of euphoria swept over him. Bill Reed was going to be somebody. He bought himself a new platinum watch as a reward. But two weeks later the novelty wore off. So Bill set a new goal.

This process became his custom. Set a goal. Work hard. Meet the goal. Euphoria. Two weeks go by. Novelty wears off. Have to set a new goal. Each new goal he set, of course, had to be bigger, brighter, and shinier than the previous goal. After a decade of repeating this cycle, the whole success process had become repetitive and boring. The goals reached had become a string of hollow achievements—more frustration than fulfillment. He felt like a hamster spinning in a wheel. He couldn't help but wonder, *Surely there's more to life than this endless repetition of accumulating more and more?*

Unexpected Questions

One day in Oxford, England, I was walking between two buildings that captured sound like the acoustics of an old European cathedral. This had not gone unnoticed by a street musician who was playing his guitar and singing for pocket change. Chills went up and down my spine as I walked by and heard his lyrics reverberating off the buildings:

So this is what it feels like to be lonely,
So this is what it feels like to be small,
So this is what it feels like to realize, my work doesn't matter at all.

His words capture the feelings of a man who has run his experiment—perhaps successfully, perhaps not—and is asking, “Does anybody care?”

Many men feel as though their lives are futile, not because they didn't get what they wanted, but because they did. One man struggling with futility put it this way: “If I had known how empty I would end up feeling, I wouldn't have done it that way.”

Here is a common complaint. A man will say, “After all I've been through, after all I've achieved, after surviving several major crises, after all the obstacles I've overcome, after all the work I've put into this life of mine, after enjoying some success, after getting the spouse that I wanted, after getting the children that I assumed would bring me joy, after all of this, why am I still so restless?”

Another man, Warren, at an age when most men are playing with grandchildren, doesn't know where his ex-wife is living, and his son, much to Warren's disappointment, cannot keep a job.

Even when we get what we want, it often doesn't make us happy. As Jerry said, "I got what I wanted, but it's not enough." I think our real estate developer, Bill Reed, would agree.

These few illustrations point to a handful of unexpected questions that many people find themselves struggling to answer:

- Why am I still so restless?
- Why do I feel empty?
- Why do I feel lonely?
- Where can I go for relief?

If the answers were easy, everyone would have them. Diagnosing the disease is no problem, but the cure is elusive. And older doesn't necessarily make wiser. As the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once wrote, "The wisdom of the years is confusing."

If these are some of the questions you are attempting to answer, then it is for you that I've written this book. I want you to be happy. The great philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote these timeless words: "Despite these afflictions man wants to be happy, only wants to be happy, and cannot help wanting to be happy."²

Your "System"

No one who ends up feeling empty inside would have let it happen if they had seen it coming. So how does it happen?

America is great because our economic system gives us the freedom to pursue our own ideas. This is important, because ideas are more powerful than labor. Ideas set forces into motion that cannot be contained. For example, Bill Gates pronounced his idea of "a computer on every desk and in every home"—an idea that has animated Microsoft since its inception. By thought, more than by sweat, you can achieve nearly anything to which you set your mind.

This is also true in our private lives. The "collection" of ideas we embrace forms a *system* that guides our choices and, hence, shapes the course of our future. Here's the problem: If the "system" you build will not work, you will not know it doesn't work for ten or twenty years. By then the damage is done, and you will have given the best years of your life to a system that has failed you.

However, this failure usually comes at a point when you can ill afford to "drop out" or make sweeping changes. The uncontrollable forces your system set in motion have blown you far off course into a sea of stressful obligations. I asked a friend, "How are you doing?" He said, "Friday night I got back into my office at 6:00 P.M. I had 148 e-mails and 45 voice mails. I couldn't go home until I returned the priority voice mails. Now, what was your question?"

Here's the catch: You can get all you want in this world, but only that. And that is not enough to make you happy. What makes it even worse is that you must pretend you are happy.

As tennis superstar Andre Agassi said, "Without the cake the icing sucks." I realize this is indelicate, and I don't mean to offend anyone's sensibilities, but this is the way many people think these days, and it does capture the intangible pain of emptiness many are feeling.

Perfectly Designed That Way

In business we have the useful idea, "Your system is perfectly designed to produce the result you are getting."

For example, if you manufacture cars and every third car that rolls off the assembly line is missing a front right fender, you can be certain that your system is perfectly designed to produce that result. Or if you sell insurance and the person in the office next to you consistently sells twice as much as you, his or her system is perfectly designed to produce that result. Unfortunately, your system is perfectly designed to sell the lesser amount.

There are many types of systems: banking systems, solar systems, justice systems, civil defense systems, transportation systems, data processing systems, national defense systems, welfare systems, farming systems, distribution systems, heating and air conditioning systems, digestive systems, circulatory systems. There are also belief systems.

We can say that we each have a belief system that is perfectly designed to produce the result we are getting.³ A good synonym for belief system would be *worldview*. So we could also say: We each have a worldview that is perfectly designed to produce the result we are getting. The difference between Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa comes to mind.

Systems are good. They provide order, efficiency, and predictable results. But once the wrong system is designed, the wrong result is inevitable. Someone who is feeling puny about life—whether that feeling is emptiness or restlessness—has a "systems" problem. Their system is perfectly designed to produce the result they are getting—even though it's not what they want. Their souls are searching for rest.

What is the problem we need to solve? That I will take up in the next chapter.

The Feeling of Futility

“There Must Be More”

The first time Sarah saw Bill in class she found herself attracted. They sat next to each other, and from the way Bill answered questions in class, she knew he was a sharp guy with good character.

Character was especially important to Sarah because of her dad. He was a respected banker who lifted up integrity as the highest virtue a person can have. All her life she had dreamed of a marriage like the one her parents had. Besides, her father had doted on her mom, and Sarah wanted a man who would do the same.

When they first began dating, Bill had been so attentive. Sarah’s every interest had captivated Bill. Boy, had that changed!

What Sarah didn’t understand (Bill either, for that matter) was that Bill viewed courtship in the same way he viewed everything else: It was a mission. He had been a man on a mission—to win Sarah’s love and her hand in marriage. Once the mission was accomplished, though, he quickly moved on to the next challenge.

Meanwhile, Sarah was stunned at how quickly Bill had changed his colors. She tried to talk to him about it. She said, “I thought we were going to build a life together.” He always assured her that this was the case, but he just needed to get the business on a solid footing.

“Once I get a few important deals done, then I can back off. Just a few more months, baby, I promise. Then we’ll concentrate on us. I promise. You’ll see.”

This went on for three years, Bill always assuring her that he’d be right there—where he promised he’d be. But his deals didn’t come together as easily as he hoped they would, and he often worked weekends to keep his growing business on an even keel.

Three years into their marriage everything changed. Sarah became pregnant. Little Brent weighed in at seven pounds three ounces and measured twenty-one inches. For a few weeks Bill was a changed man. He fussed over Brent. He loved that baby so much. Sarah’s heart surged with hope that little Brent was, after all, the answer to all her concerns.

About two months later a big deal Bill had been working on for nearly a year started to unravel. The out-of-town buyer wouldn’t return his calls. If this deal fell through, Bill didn’t know whether or not he could survive. He had nearly bet the whole farm on this one deal. Bill started having trouble sleeping. He’d wake up at 4:00 A.M. and wouldn’t be able to get back to sleep. His head would spin as he worried about all the possible disasters, none of which, of course, he could do anything about as he lay there in bed. So, he would get up, chug several cups of coffee, and go into the office early and do more worrying there. Once the phones started ringing and he could at least “do”

something, he felt some relief.

Relief. That was it in a nutshell, really. Bill wanted some relief. Over the course of fifteen years this cycle had become Bill's pattern. He worked on big deals, had too much riding on the success of any one project, then endured severe worry, which led in turn to overwork. That, of course, meant neglecting Sarah, Brent, and the next arrivals, Jonathan and Josh.

In his heart Bill always believed he was one deal away from being able to relax and spend more time with his family. He also was addicted to the thrill of the deal. The deals won this tug-of-war, and he never quite got around to spending more time with his wife and kids.

Meanwhile, Sarah had grown tired of Bill's promises. On at least six occasions Sarah had asked Bill when they were going to build the life together they had dreamed about late into the night, when they were enraptured with each other many years ago. Bill continued to fool himself—but not her—as he said, “Baby, I know I promised we'd build a life together, and we will. But it's just taking longer than I thought it would to get myself established. But I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, honey.”

In the early years of their marriage Sarah believed Bill, but by the ten-year mark she realized that Bill was more committed to his career than to his family. One day a thought hit her like a ton of bricks: *Bill will never change.*

Sarah felt betrayed. She began to brood on this thought; she turned it over and over in her heart. She stopped talking to Bill about their future. Something inside Sarah had died.

A group of women in Bill and Sarah's neighborhood had been meeting for several years. On many occasions Sarah had been invited to attend. She had gone once, but they had talked about the Bible, and frankly, though she was “religious” and believed in God, she was embarrassed because she couldn't find the passages they were reading.

Still, there was something very attractive about these five women. When Sarah bumped into them at the grocery store, the country club, or the annual block party, she was always taken aback by their apparent joy. This was a mystery to her, because she knew that one woman's husband had had an affair and divorced her, leaving her with four children under the age of eight. Another woman had a child with Down's syndrome. Still another was recovering from breast cancer.

About once a year one of these women would again ask her if she would like to join them. For several weeks she had been secretly wishing they would invite her now. More than anything, Sarah too needed some relief from the pain of her shattered dreams. She was thinking about divorcing Bill.

Jerry Steele's wife, Diane, was part of the group. Actually, Diane was the leader of the

group. Sarah had no idea that Bill and Jerry had been talking about spiritual things, but Jerry and Diane talked about everything. Diane had been waiting for an opportunity to get to know Sarah better.

It wasn't too many days later that Sarah and Diane ran into each other at a Little League game. Diane said, "Sarah, I've been thinking about you lately. Would you like to have lunch sometime?" Sarah's heart leaped into her throat, because she felt so attracted to this "together" woman. She said, "I'd love to." The next morning she prayed that Diane would have some secret recipe that would save her marriage. Little did she know.

A few days later Diane and Sarah met at a popular tearoom and took a booth near the back. Sarah started the conversation by dropping a bombshell. "I've decided to leave Bill," she said matter-of-factly.

For the next two hours Diane and Sarah retraced the entire story of Sarah's marriage to Bill and where it had gotten off track, and Sarah's resulting disillusionment and loss of hope. Toward the end of the conversation Diane suggested that Sarah could find the strength to go on by inviting Jesus Christ into her life.

"But I'm already a Christian," Sarah protested. "I've been religious all my life. I even take the kids and go to church when Bill stays home." She resented the suggestion that she might not be a Christian.

Diane continued, "Sarah, I know you have a good heart. I know you are a religious person. But I'm not talking about that. Haven't you ever felt like there must be more?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I have," Sarah conceded.

Diane said, "I know you are committed to a set of Christian values. What I'm talking about is something entirely different from Christian behavior. It's even different from having the correct information about God. What I'm talking about is a commitment to a Person—Jesus Christ."

"What difference does it make whether we are committed to a set of values or to a Person? How could that help my marriage?" Sarah asked.

"Sarah, the plain truth is that your marriage may or may not work out. The only person you can work with, though, is yourself. If you bring your own life into a right relationship with God, then you'll be okay, no matter what happens. The first issue is your own salvation and life."

"I think I'm beginning to see what you mean," said Sarah.

The Third Force

What is the problem people like Bill and Sarah are trying to solve? It is the sting of futility. The Christian system claims to solve a number of problems, but perhaps the

most sharply felt problem it remedies is the feeling that life is futile.

Suppose a man went fishing, cast his rod, forgot to keep his thumb on the line, and ended up with a big knot of fishing line that took fifteen minutes to unsnarl. This is not a good, but neither is it an evil. It is a futility.

If you had a flat tire, ran out of gas, got stuck in a forty-five-minute traffic delay, or lost a valued customer to a competitor, you would not say, "This is evil." These disappointments are not evil things, but they do seem pretty pointless.

We are all aware that in the world we experience the forces of good and evil. Some things are distinctly good and some things are distinctly evil. There is, however, a *third force* at work in the world—futility, or that which seems like a waste. There are many things which happen to us that are not evil as such, yet leave us wondering, "What was that all about?" They are futile. Synonyms for *futility* include words like *meaninglessness, vanity, frustration, and insignificance*.

Other examples are more serious. At the age of thirty-one Alan has twenty-four people reporting to him. Yet he says, "I'm just not happy." He finds it hard to see how his work is important.

Sam has been passed over several times for management—his dream job. At his present age he is too old to be considered again.

Elliot came up to speak to me after a seminar I had taught and said, "You know that plaque you were talking about in your message—the one the salesman worked so hard to get? That's me. Two weeks ago I received a plaque for being the top salesman in my company. But it just doesn't satisfy. There is no purpose. It didn't mean anything. What's the use?" There were tears in his eyes.

Both success and failure can lead to the same result. We can work hard and achieve a goal that leaves us wondering, *What's the point?* Or on another occasion we can fail to achieve a goal that leaves us thinking, *Why bother?*

Futility is life not turning out the way you planned it, not necessarily because some evil befell you but simply because life is so messy. Perhaps one of the most pervasive problems we face is futility.

Our systems are perfectly designed to produce the result we get—and that includes futility. This was certainly the case with King Solomon.

Solomon's Project

Among the talented men of history, few stand in the league of Solomon. He was the richest, most powerful, most respected leader of his era. He was a man able to have whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it. He lived at a level of luxury unparalleled in his day.

Solomon pursued every possible earthly avenue to find meaning and happiness. It became his passionate mission. He wrote, "I wanted to see what was worthwhile for men to do under heaven during the few days of their lives."¹ He was interested in the

question “What does a man gain for all his toil?”² Because of his virtually unlimited resources Solomon had opportunities few of us will ever have. He amassed a formidable résumé in business, education, literary achievements, science, massive real estate developments, military power, and wealth accumulation. He also indulged his senses with a wide array of worldly pleasures.

After decades of achievement Solomon still found happiness elusive. Every gift was an empty box. He wrote these stirring words:

I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;
I refused my heart no pleasure.
My heart took delight in all my work,
and this was the reward for all my labor.
Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done
and what I had toiled to achieve,
everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;
nothing was gained under the sun....
So I hated life....³

Solomon’s system was perfectly designed to produce futility. We’ll come back to Solomon in a later chapter. For now, though, let’s ponder why Solomon’s system failed him.

Why Systems Break Down

A lot of people are living with a system they built ten or twenty years ago. Their theory is not working out. Their whole paradigm seems to be breaking up. They are not happy campers.

Why do our systems not work out? Let me suggest a reason. Often we form our system when we are young and immature. It seems we have to make many of our most important decisions at an age when we are the least prepared to make them wisely. It can then take many years before we see how empty or useless that system is.

Actor Ben Affleck captured the futility of a young man who realizes his system isn’t working when he said, “The reason I’m single is that I wouldn’t want to be with anybody right now who would be willing to be with me.”⁴

Thomas Kuhn, author of *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is the guru of why systems come and go. He makes a wonderfully transferable insight we can apply to our personal systems. Simply stated, one man develops his system, or paradigm. After a while, anomalies start to appear. A few of these can be explained—or explained away. However, with the passage of time the anomalies keep adding up and become increasingly difficult to fit into the old system. Eventually the whole theory of the system comes under suspicion. Suddenly someone proposes a new system (or theory), which solves the problems of the existing system. Because it seems to be good, it is enthusiastically embraced, until after a while it too has anomalies that begin to appear.

And so the cycle repeats.

This is exactly what happens to belief systems, or worldviews. I teach a Bible study to about 150 men on Friday mornings in Orlando. Our single largest category of weekly visitors are men who have made some type of commitment to God at a point in their lives. But for a decade or two they have lived by a different system—a system of their own design (often these men do not stop professing a commitment to God). But after many years the wheels start coming off the wagon, and they realize they need to get to, or back to, a biblically based Christianity (but I'm starting to get ahead of myself).

I always tell our first-time visitors that they could just as easily have attended one of a dozen other meetings taking place around Orlando where interesting philosophies of life are being discussed. The problem is that these philosophies are systems that will soon be replaced by new systems that explain all the anomalies the current systems cannot explain. The current followers will soon be disillusioned to learn they have believed what was not true, and they will be bitterly disappointed as well to have likely given the best years of their lives to an idea that didn't work.

Solomon's system broke down because he still felt empty inside, even after getting everything he ever wanted. It is the same today.

If a man's system is not working, he shouldn't pretend it is. Our first choice would be not to make a mistake at all, but if we do, let's at least not pretend we didn't err. No matter how far one has traveled down a wrong road, the only solution is to turn back.

Useless or Confusing?

A man thirsty for relief from futility must decide whether his condition is hopeless or merely confusing.

There are two types of futility. *Futility–Type One* ends with the thought *This is all there is*. It expresses the loss of all hope. If God cannot be known or does not exist, then life is hopeless: "Let's feast and get drunk, for tomorrow we die." After looking at the human condition, the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre concluded there was no God and that life was hopeless: "Man is an empty bubble with nothing at the center. Man commits himself, draws his portrait, and that's all there is. Life is a useless passion."⁵

Is it true that life is a useless passion—that man is nothing? Indeed, the nature of life can be tragic and futile. Why? Because man has a problem. He is alienated from God. However, man is not nothing. Christian thinker Francis Schaeffer explained it this way:

The Bible teaches that, though man is lost, he is not nothing. Man is lost because he is separated from God, his true reference point, by true moral guilt. But he will never be nothing. There lies the horror of his lostness. For man to be lost, in all his uniqueness and wonder, is tragic.⁶

Futility–Type Two ends with the thought *There must be more*. A man is confused but

feels intuitively that he has been made for a reason—he knows that he is *not* nothing. His futility is that he has not yet discovered what that reason is.

Sartre was correct that life is filled with anguish, abandonment, and despair.

Sartre's system does accurately describe the feelings of the human lot but fails to understand the reasons why. As we will see, he was wrong to say that's all there is. There is hope.

In the next chapter I'll begin looking at the different systems by which people live and how they can derail.

The Worldly System

“I Can’t Take It Anymore”

Bill pulled into the parking lot at the club and went inside. Jerry was already seated, waiting for him.

They plowed through the usual “buddy, buddy” chitchat, but about halfway through their salads Bill said, “Jerry, I really resonated with what you said the other day about meeting goals and then later feeling empty again. I’m also real interested in what you had to say about finding God and all that. I’d like to talk with you about it some more.”

“Sure, Bill, I’d love to. But first let me ask you something. Would you mind taking a few minutes and telling me about your own experience with God in the past?”

“Well, okay then,” Bill said haltingly, as a wave of second thoughts rushed through his bloodstream.

Bill weighed carefully just how honest he ought to be. He decided to be direct, and so he plunged in. “Jerry, the plain truth is that I’m bored to tears with my life.

“You know, I go to church—the same one I grew up in. But to be honest, I guess I’ve been hanging around the fringes of church for most of my adult life. Religion just didn’t seem to ‘take’ for me. It sure hasn’t done for me what it’s done for you or, for that matter, a number of other guys in my church. Sometimes I envy those guys, but mostly I think they’re a bit odd—too zealous or something. It’s like they’re not really in touch with reality.

“I was a lot more active when Sarah and I first married. We met on a blind date when I was a senior in college. One of my fraternity brothers fixed us up.”

Bill went on to explain that Sarah had always been a very religious person. But as his business had grown, church involvement had dropped away. Frankly, Sunday mornings were a good time to catch up on sleep. And when he did get up early, he really enjoyed lounging around and reading the Sunday paper. Now, though, his kids were starting to ask questions about God, life, and heaven, and Bill didn’t really know how to answer them.

“You know, Jerry, since our lunch the other day I’ve been thinking. I believe I may have a real problem here. I’m an expert at developing buildings because I’ve studied it. But I just realized that I’ve never spent any serious time thinking or studying about God. In fact, I’ve blamed God for a lot of my problems. Then yesterday I think I had an epiphany. I realized I only know enough about God to be disappointed with him.”

Jerry looked into Bill’s eyes for so long before speaking that it made Bill feel uncomfortable. Finally, to Bill’s relief, Jerry spoke.

“Bill, here’s the deal. You’ve been pursuing happiness, and it has eluded you. Right?”

“Well, basically, yes. That’s right.”

“There is a good reason why that’s happened. Do you want me to tell you what it is?”

Uh oh, thought Bill. *Here it comes. I’m not sure I’m ready for this. But, hey, what have I got to lose. I’m already miserable. How much worse could this make it?* “Yes,” he said. “Yes, I do.”

“Did you know that I row for exercise?” Jerry asked.

“No, I didn’t. What do you mean? Like on a rowing machine? Do they have one here at the club?” Bill responded.

“No, I mean I have a one-man rowing scull, and three days a week I row on our lake for about thirty minutes,” Jerry continued.

“That’s great,” said Bill, not knowing exactly what to say.

“I get started at first light and time it so I get back to my dock just about the time the sun rises,” said Jerry. “It’s always a beautiful sight.

“So one day I’m feeling like everything seems so futile and meaningless—like I’m on a sinking ship. I decide to go for a row. Just as I pull away from shore I look down and see a chameleon sitting on the deck of my boat staring at me. By then we were already a few hundred feet from shore. My scull is bouncing every which way, and this little guy is really getting jostled around.

“I feel sorry for him. I mean, the night before he obviously thought he had found a nice comfortable place to bed down. Then I come along, flip the boat over, plop it in the water, and the next thing he knows, he’s on the sea cruise from hell.

“Anyway, I look at this little guy, and you can tell he’s confused and shaken. I’m thinking, *I know how you feel, little fella*. So I decided to try to help him out. I started talking to him—real soft at first, because I didn’t want to scare him out of his wits.

“ ‘Hey there, little buddy,’ I said. ‘I know you must wonder, *What in the world is going on!* I’d be terrified, too, if I were you. Listen, guy, I want you to hang on and not get scared. I don’t want you to go and do anything foolish, like jump into the water. Just hang on, and I’ll save you. I’ll get you safely back to shore, but you’ve got to trust me. If you don’t trust me, if you try to save yourself, you’re going to end up as fish food. But you’re going to have to be patient because it’s going to be a while.’

“You could tell he was nervous. He just kept looking up at me. I didn’t know what to do, so every couple of minutes I said something to keep him from doing something stupid. About halfway back to shore the chameleon took a step or two toward the side. I said to him, ‘Don’t do it, little guy. You’re going to make it if you just don’t give up. We’re almost

there. Don't quit now. You've almost survived. Relax, fella. Take deep breaths.'

"That seemed to work. But by then he'd moved away from the middle of the deck—it's only sixteen inches wide anyway—and crawled to within a couple of inches of the side. I could just tell what he was thinking: *Should I trust this guy or should I try to save myself?* I couldn't blame him one bit. On his scale, the boat was bobbing around like a dinghy in a typhoon. He kept glancing back and forth between me and the water. So I stepped up my encouragement.

" 'Okay, guy, we are really close now.' Shore was only a few hundred feet away. I tried to reassure him, so I said, 'Listen, little fella, haven't I done what I said I would do? You're almost home. Now is not the time to give up. Hang on for a few more minutes, and I'll be able to put you safely back on solid ground.' I was starting to feel pretty good about myself. I was doing a good deed.

"The chameleon kept looking at me, then glancing over the side of the boat. I kept coaxing him to be patient. He looked up at me one more time—and then disappeared into the water. I felt so deflated. We only had a hundred yards to go.

"Bill, that's the story of my life. Every man at a point finds himself on a confusing journey, unable to explain how or why he ended up where he is, not knowing where he's going or how long it will take, wondering if he will be saved or if he will perish. Make sense?"

Bill reflected on what Jerry was saying. *I can sure identify. Sometimes I'd like to jump ship myself.*

"You know, Jerry," Bill responded after a moment's silence, "I'm starting to get the picture. I was blessed with a great wife, great kids, and a wonderful business. But my wife seems distant, I'm missing it with my kids, and the business, for all its gains, is boring me to death. It *is* confusing. I sure know success has not made me happy. But how does it work? I mean, I believe in God. I'm not the most religious guy in the world, but I believe. I may not be the most faithful churchgoer in the world, but I don't chafe against it. I'm willing, but there must be something I just don't get.

"Jerry," he said. "I want to come back to God. What do I need to do?"

In the weeks that followed, Sarah and Bill became aware that they both had been on a spiritual track that was leading them back to God. They began to encounter God in a way they had never experienced before. Over the next year a lot of tears were shed—the wounds were deep—but with God's help, Sarah began to think that maybe the marriage could work after all. Jerry invited Bill to join a small group of men that met in the locker room at the club once a week. There Bill realized that Christianity claimed to answer the most difficult questions about life, meaning, and purpose. One morning he admitted, "I guess I need a new paradigm."

The "Systems" of the Soul

Our lives vacillate between joy and sorrow, sickness and health, success and sadness. Yet no matter how much joy, health, and success a man finds, Solomon's futility always overtakes that man in the end. There are no exceptions; it is an iron law. Men have therefore always devised systems to explain and cope with their futility.

When reading the literature on life and spirituality, a pattern of four different "systems" emerges—*worldly, moral, religious, and Christian* (see endnote for additional detail).¹ Each of these systems has "goods," each contains truth, and each has wonderful people as disciples. Nevertheless, there is a ladder of progress as systems break down and are replaced. Since every system has some good to it and contains some truth, it seems natural that after a man has lived by a system for ten or twenty years and it has failed, he would blow away the chaff but carry the remaining kernels of good and truth into his new system. In other words, each new system builds on the strengths of the system it leaves behind. Of course, a man can also lapse and fall backward, for example, from a religious system into a worldly system.

Suppose an ambitious young man who has just completed college wants to "strike it rich" and thus adopts a worldly system. Suppose he leads that worldly life for ten years. He comes to realize that this dog won't hunt. Over the course of ten years, though, he has found joy whenever he helped other people. Then he reads a book like *Tuesdays with Morrie*, written by Morrie Schwartz's disciple, Mitch Albom. He finds that the values of Morrie, an evangelist for the gospel of "try to be a better person and love others," resonates with his spirit. It is an uplifting book with a lot of truth and good in it. It is a book about the *moral* system. So the young man adopts the moral system.

Another fifteen years peel off the calendar, and even though he can say, "I tried to do the right thing by every person I met," he still experiences a vacuum in his soul for peace. One day he is sitting alone on the beach in contemplation. He reviews his life "so far" and recognizes a spiritual void. He watches the sun set and the evening sky turn dark. As the stars appear he is overwhelmed by the grandeur of the heavens. He has a religious experience.

In the weeks ahead he begins attending a church. He finds one that emphasizes the values he still believes to be true. This church preaches a gospel of love and social responsibility. He has always thought that these values were important, so he embraces a *religious* system. Another ten years fly by, and he asks himself, *Why am I still so restless?* It occurs to him that there were elements of truth in each system he tried, and elements of truth in the religious system he has now embraced, but somehow it still doesn't satisfy. He feels as though he has been robbed of the best years of his life.

All Systems Have Evangelists

We are attracted to our systems by people we respect—people we might call *evangelists*. All systems have evangelists who are seeking disciples. It makes sense. If you believe in something strongly enough, you seek converts, whether it's Mothers Against Drunk Driving or coin collecting.

Often people are attracted not so much by the truth of the system as by the charisma of the evangelist. Madonna and Hugh Hefner have their followers, just as does the Dalai Lama of Tibet. To their followers they each have the ring of authenticity.

Why is Billy Graham so admired? Even though some people may not necessarily believe what he believes, they are utterly convinced that *he* believes what he believes. There is no falsehood in him. There is a one-to-one correlation between what he says and how he lives. This is authenticity; this is integrity. (On the other hand, people are sometimes turned off by a system because its strongest proponents are polemical and harsh. Certain televangelists come to mind.)

All belief systems are trying to solve the same problem: “At the end of the day, after I got what I wanted (or didn’t), what do I do with the futility of it all? Do I anesthetize the pain, give something back to the world, try to be a better person, love more, seek spiritual relief—which is it?”

All Systems Have Truth

All systems contain traces of truth. No man would adopt a belief system unless he honestly believed it addressed the problem he was trying to solve. The more “true” the system seems, the more followers its evangelists will attract. Which counterfeit bill makes it successfully into circulation? Isn’t it the one that looks most like the real thing? We would never intentionally adopt a system that wasn’t the real thing, yet just as people unwittingly accept counterfeit bills for the real things, we often adopt systems that don’t deliver because they *can’t* deliver—they’re not true. As one of my professors was fond of saying, “It takes a lot of truth to float an error.”

As you read the explanations of these systems in this chapter and the ones that follow, you may want to consider which system best describes the one you’ve adopted. For the rest of this chapter we will briefly examine the worldly system.

The Worldly System

Only a tiny fraction of people wake up in the morning planning to carry out an evil deed; the rest of us are trying to raise families, be good neighbors, show some civic pride, earn a decent living, and enjoy a few pleasures.

As has already been seen in Bill Reed’s life, we pursue our lives out of a system, or worldview, that is perfectly designed to produce the result we are getting.

The level where we all start—the “default” system, so to speak—is the worldly system.

The worldly system changes with each generation. Boomers from the 1960s have a different worldly system from Gen Xers. What they share in common, however, is a core value of “getting the most out of life.” For some that means leaving the world a better place; for others it means getting the maximum pleasure with the minimum pain. These two approaches are in reality not so different. Writer C. S. Lewis put it this way:

Every age has its own outlook.... All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing

strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united—united *with* each other and *against* earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions.²

Every system has its gods. In the worldly system athletes are our “living” gods, and CEOs have become our high priests. Pleasure, no doubt, is also a favorite god. Money, too.

One day a man was talking to a college student who was about to graduate.

“What’s your next step?” the man asked.

“Law school,” he answered.

“So, then, you’re going to change the world!” said the man.

“No, I’m going to make some money,” said the young man.

The older man replied, “Ah, you’re going to let the world change you.”

The worldly person is looking for diversions. Pascal said, “They spend all day chasing a hare that they would not have wanted to buy.”³

Perhaps a man still thinks pleasure is the highest good. Or perhaps, after realizing it is not, a man wants to anesthetize his futility. These unbelievers’ motto is “Let’s enjoy life while we can, for tomorrow we die.”

Some worldly people are crass pagans who would disgust even radio personality Howard Stern, but most are refined businesspeople who scurry around like industrious ants building empires in the sand. They throw themselves into their work—or get sucked in. Mike, a lawyer, said, “The law is like a jealous woman. It will suck you in. I used to work nights and weekends. Most of [the other lawyers] still do.”

The worldly man sees no meaning beyond the physical realm. He is not yet looking for rest for his soul. He is still enamored with the idea of leaving his mark. He is not asking any questions for which Christianity is the answer.

The biblical language is that he is conformed to the pattern of this world,⁴ not concerned with doing right, and living according to the desires of the flesh (or sinful nature).⁵ He is a slave to his passions.

We all experience seasons of discouragement and futility. There are watersheds, though, when our worldly system no longer works. It has produced too many anomalies. It is a system doomed to fail. When this system crashes, the worldly person is filled with anguish and despair. He asks, “Why is my marriage breaking apart?” and a dozen other questions just like it.

Twenty adult years (or fewer) into the worldly system leave most people weary, confused, and bored. That was what Solomon found after devoting his entire adult life to

a search for meaning in the worldly system. He had all the pleasure he could handle but still found no lasting joy in it.

Like Solomon, these people call out, "Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless, a chasing after the wind." They become ashamed of the things that used to make them proud. They cry out and, if they come to their senses, take (per Kierkegaard) "a leap" into the moral system.

The Leap: "I can't take it anymore."

The Moral System

“I Can’t Fake It Anymore”

Mary divorced Don because he was unfaithful, but she had never been unpleasant about it. If anything, she killed him with kindness, which only made him feel that much more rotten.

Don was not a scoundrel. He hadn’t set out to fail. He didn’t wake up one day and think, *Well, I wonder what I can do to ruin my life today.* Rather, his fall followed on the heels of thousands of small daily choices he made in his private thoughts over the course of several years.

It all started the day after he and Mary moved into their first home, when he fixed the blinds just right so he could watch the woman next door sunning herself in her backyard. What began as a single act of curiosity snowballed into a regular habit of lust. He was also a little too huggy-kissy around the office, where he was the leading salesman year after year. Don was no Brad Pitt, but he could tell that women found him attractive. This flattered his ego, especially since girls had not noticed him at all in high school. He tended to let his eyes fix a moment too long on his female associates. Often Don found himself engaging in sexual fantasies as he crept along down the freeway on the way home after work.

Evelyn was an ambitious young woman who also worked in the sales department. She was bright, a quick learner, and was already earning more commissions than most of the men in the office. By virtue of her ambition she was eager to learn from Don, and by virtue of her upbringing she was lonely for love. She had not been hugged enough by her daddy. There was a natural sexual attraction between Don and Evelyn. But for Don this was no more than most men felt toward a physically sensuous woman, which Evelyn certainly was—she had “the look.” Neither of them ever overtly acted on the physical attraction by flirting, but the chemistry was there.

One of the company’s biggest customers was interested in getting a quote for a privately labeled product. If the numbers worked, it would prove to be one of the biggest sales in the history of their company. Four top salespeople were assigned to work out the details, including Evelyn and Don. About two weeks into the project it became clear that the four of them needed to travel to the customer’s home office to work out kinks in the pricing.

After checking in at the hotel two of them wanted to hit the downtown entertainment district that night, but Don and Evelyn both declined. Don and Evelyn waved good-bye as their associates’ cab pulled away from the curb. As they walked inside, Don’s senses were alert. There was a sense of danger in the air, and he welcomed it. He said, “I’m going to get something to eat. Would you like to join me?”

Evelyn simply nodded as her eyes fell to the carpet, and they walked to the dining room. The maître d' seated them in a booth near the back of the restaurant. Don had already made his first mistake, but it wasn't his biggest mistake. His biggest mistake was mixing wine with dinner. But his real mistake had been made thousands of choices earlier. The wine lowered their inhibitions, which led to exploratory questions. The questions became more and more provocative. Each successive answer signaled interest in going further. By the time Don signed the check, he had pulled the noose tight around his own neck. They walked to the elevator and went up to her room—and Don became an adulterer.

Don woke up the next morning laden with guilt, remorse, and shame. The balance of the business trip was extremely awkward. He resolved in his mind that it was a one-shot tryst and that he was going to change a number of his ways. Unfortunately, that thought came several years too late. Don was addicted, and he couldn't walk away from his lusty habits.

Evelyn, his colleague, was equally flustered by the affair, but she was single. Furthermore, she was highly attracted to Don, and that fed his ego. Less than two weeks later Don found himself at Evelyn's apartment during lunch. For the next three months this was to become their regular rendezvous two or three times a week.

Meanwhile, Mary had been frustrated several times because she had been unable to reach Don during lunch, which in days past he had typically eaten at his desk. He explained his absence by lying to her that he had started taking key customers to lunch from time to time. Meanwhile, it didn't take long for Evelyn's and Don's coworkers to add things up. Several of the women in the office felt scandalized. Don naively thought no one had noticed. One day Mary called and reached Susan, one of the scandalized women. Mary asked, "Is my husband there?" Susan, who could be as vicious as a cornered cat, shot back in a villain's voice, "No, and you may want to look into it a little further."

Mary sat with the phone hanging limp in her hand until the phone company's "you-didn't-hang-it-up-right" ringer brought her back to earth. The next day Mary—she couldn't help herself—went to Don's office and followed his car as it pulled away at lunchtime. When she saw him go into an apartment, she didn't want to see any more. She sped away, sobbing hysterically.

As soon as she arrived home, Mary called her mother and spent ten emotional minutes telling her what she had just seen. "Mom, I'm just so scared. I don't know what to do."

"Honey, I am so, so sorry," her mother began, then followed with twenty questions. After talking out every possible explanation and course of action, they agreed that Mary would tell Don that very evening exactly what had happened, step by step, starting with Susan's offhand phone remark.

After the children were in bed, Mary asked Don to come with her into the den. As she

shut the door, she began trembling, and tears streamed along the creases of her face. Don knew he had been caught before Mary even said a word. The guilt had been eating away at him. He started crying, too. He made it easy for her by asking, "How did you find out?" For the next two hours they covered every angle. Don, a former altar boy, was defrocked. He confessed how it all got started, including the hundreds of little sins that led up to the big one.

Mary heard more than she thought she could bear. That night Mary set her course, and she never wavered from it. She was a woman of faith—strong faith—but she would not be married to an unfaithful husband.

The divorce process took six months. The awful pain didn't begin to recede for two years. Then she met Sid. Sid was a lot like Don. After all, she had never found anything wrong with Don's personality, just his character. At the end of twelve months of dinners and picnics with Mary's three children, both Sid and Mary started thinking, *This might work*.

Four years after Don took Evelyn to be his unlawful mistress, Sid took Mary to be his lawful wife.

It took another year or so to work out the details of shared parenting. Eventually the children each had two toothbrushes, two beds—two of everything. The children spent every other weekend with Don, and he was permitted to attend all their contests and concerts, which he faithfully did.

One Saturday morning he arrived a few minutes early to pick up the kids for the weekend. Don's children—ages 14, 12, and 9—were sitting at the breakfast table when he knocked on the kitchen door. Mary and new-husband Sid were scurrying around the kitchen, fetching more milk and cooking scrambled eggs. Mary went to the door, swung it open, smiled a genuinely friendly smile, and invited Don to come in for a cup of coffee while the kids finished breakfast.

Don came in, feeling quite awkward—this was the first time they were all together in the same room. He sat down at one end of the kitchen table. The kids were at the other end of the table, with a couple of empty chairs between him and them. The kids didn't greet him right away because they were arguing about who should get the last piece of toast. He felt like he wasn't really even there—like he was a ghost—and he felt like a giant horrible, smelly toad.

Mary intervened and calmed the toast storm. Sid said, "Thanks, honey," gave her a soft kiss on the cheek, then served the kids their eggs and asked if they wanted more milk. Sid tousled Tommy's hair, and Tommy smiled that toothy grin that had always melted Don. But today he was flashing it at Sid. Don was melting anyway, but for a different reason. Then Sid turned to get the milk bottle and brushed his arm across Mary's back, giving her a love pat. He poured the milk into Anna's glass, and she said, "Thank you." Sid said, "You're welcome, sweetie." Sid turned toward Don and exhorted the children, "Okay now, kids, your dad's here. Aren't you going to say hello?"

I cannot believe this is happening to me, Don thought, as he turned numb. Here is "another man" doing what I'm supposed to do. Here is "another man" calling my wife "honey," kissing her face, cooking for my children, tousling my son's hair, touching my wife's body, calling my daughter "sweetie," and my children can't seem to get enough of him. Meanwhile, it's like they didn't even see me come in. There must be some mistake!

There had been a mistake, but it was too late to do anything about it now. Don was going to watch another man raise his children and love his wife.

Becoming a "Good Boy"

The decision to leap into a moral system is the decision to be "a good boy." If the god of the worldly person is *pleasure*, the devotion of the moral person is *good deeds*. His aim is a Pelagian salvation by the merit of ethical living: "I can do this on my own."

C. S. Lewis noted that all the human beings history has heard of acknowledge some kind of morality. In other words, they feel toward certain proposed actions a feeling captured by the words "I ought" or "I ought not."¹ To live by this sense of "ought-ness" is the most noble thought of the moral system.

Filled with fresh passion and revived motives, the moralist abandons self in an admirable attempt to leave the world a better place. Full of optimism, the moralist believes the world can be set right. He is a crusader, a motivator, an industrious worker. This is the stage of positive thinking and success seminars. Great communicators help us realize that our potential is greater than what we see. We awaken to the holy idea that we have value and dignity as human creatures. We sense we have been made with a certain nobility, and our task is to discover our destiny among men. We are captivated by the possibility of our potential. We want to leave the world a better place and take our place among men. Joining a church may well be part of this system—Jesus is a wonderful example to follow, after all. It is very important to "look" good. A church membership can't hurt.

Our impulse or instinct is to do something good for ourselves and others. We begin this stage with optimism. Along the way we experience joy and success, we progress through disappointments, we eventually get what we wanted—or we don't—but toward the end of this stage of the soul, optimism in the genius of the human spirit lies mortally wounded, defeated by the "laws" of the jungle.

There is devotion to Solomon's task of finding meaning and happiness. It is a season of exploration, experimentation, and finding one's identity and purpose. We experiment to find out who we are, and in the process we find out who we are not.

This is an exhausting experience because man is not as good as we thought we could make him; what's more, our own nasty secrets keep rearing their ugly heads. As C. S. Lewis noted, all moral systems "agree in prescribing a behavior which their adherents fail to practice. All men alike stand condemned, not by alien codes of ethics, but by their own."² We are at a loss to explain the gaping inconsistencies, the lack of genuine

power, the seeking to be righteous yet the experiencing of constant failure. He who would start strong in humanity ends up anemic.

There may be successes along the way—but not enough to cover up the anomalies, as the following story illustrates.

The Rogers Kirven Story

As an investment banker, Rogers Kirven got tired of watching other men take his advice and get rich. So, nine years after he began his career, Rogers started his own company and plunged into the world of accomplishment, accumulation, and recognition.

By the age of forty-four, Rogers had met his goal—a net worth in the top one percent of the United States. “I’m a counter,” he confessed.

Then Rogers received an unsolicited offer to sell. “My first impulse,” said Rogers, “was to take the money and run. Instead, I called up three friends who had sold their companies, told them I was getting ready to pull the trigger, and asked them to join me for dinner to give me their advice.

“These were good moral men, some of the most successful men in the world of business,” said Rogers. “As the four of us sat at dinner, I only asked them two questions. First, what was your planned use of the time you would gain? They all had the same three answers:

- I want to spend more time with my soul and grow personally.
- I want to spend more time with my family.
- I want to do some things (basically toys and travel).

“Then I asked the second question: What is your actual use of time? All three had gone through a divorce since selling their companies. Each had bought a bigger toy. All were in a deep crisis of meaning.

“They stepped into a stream so strong. They had no idea. They want all of life as fast as they can get it in the shortest amount of time possible. As Mike Tyson said, ‘They all have a strategy until they get hit.’”

Fortunately for Rogers, when he sold his company he remained as the president and CEO. But the subject continued to fascinate him. Since that dinner meeting Rogers has formally interviewed thirty-nine men who have sold their companies. Here is a summary of what he found:

- None could robustly say their lives were better.
- Money and freedom had made life more fragile.
- Some who didn’t have “keel below the water line” had breaches of character.
- Thirty-three were divorced.
- Many took up golf, which lasted, on average, six months.

- Many bought exotic cars, which held their interest, on average, ten months.
- Many bought boats, which lasted, on average, eighteen months.
- All had a crisis of meaning.

Evidence and observation prove that the worldly system and the moral system are insufficient to solve the problem of futility.

Why the Moral System Fails

Why does the moral system fail? Quite simply, because we cannot keep the principles of our own system. We lack the power to do what we “ought” to do, even when we want to. Even the good we do just never seems good enough. This system is a black hole that swallows up everything we give it, then demands more.

Even for all of its wonderful contributions toward making the world a better place, the moral system, in the end, has no power to deliver us from our darkest thoughts and deeds. As we walk to the podium to receive a plaque acknowledging our service to the community, our mind can be lusting for a woman in the front row of the audience. People are not as bad as they can possibly be, but neither are they as good as they would have to be in order for this system to work. If this system were to work, the nature of man would have to be basically good—an experimental view that has undeniably collapsed in the twentieth century under the weight of two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the discovery of the Gulag camps in Russia, and countless other examples. My brother came back from Vietnam permanently damaged psychologically by the evils he had seen men do to one another. It eventually took his life at the age of thirty-one. As hard as we try to be good, it is not our basic nature. We can make progress, but at our core we are selfish and sinful.

Eventually the moral system collapses under the weight of a million little lies. You just cannot keep pretending forever. It simply isn’t working out. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

When we finally realize our “bad deeds” are more than a few minor anomalies, the moral system begins to break apart. Perhaps you destroyed the self-confidence of your wife; perhaps you have driven your children away. It begins to dawn on us that we cannot become the men we want to be without “outside” assistance.

Thoughts come to mind ...

*Deep in my soul is a question,
a pain, a thirst, a hunger,
a faint melody growing stronger.
Is it you, God?*

Humbled, anxious, we take another “leap”— this time into the religious and spiritual sphere.

The Leap: "I can't fake it anymore."

The Religious System

"Why Do I Feel Robbed of the Best Years of My Life?"

The weekend after the sobering kitchen scene Don found himself alone, with no plans. It was Mary's turn to have the kids. On Saturday he watched a little of the NBA play-offs. He surfed the other channels during commercials. *Man, am I bored*, he kept saying to himself. During one commercial he flipped to a religious channel. The station was airing a local church service from the previous Sunday. Don found himself engaged by what the minister had to say. This guy didn't seem to speak in the religious clichés and singsong sound bites Don was used to hearing as he crunched through the channels. At 10:30 P.M. he crawled into bed, too tired to stay up but too awake to go sleep. He thought for quite a while about what the pastor had said. *I think I'll just drop by his church tomorrow and check him out.* With that settled, he drifted off to sleep.

When he called the church early the next morning, an answering machine said, "Thank you for calling Southlake Community Church. Our single reason for existing is to help you find rest for your soul. Please join us at our service for seekers at 11:00 A.M. Sunday morning. Child care is available for all ages. Just follow the signs to New Visitors parking. Hope to see you then!" *This was not what I expected*, Don thought. *They make you feel wanted but not smothered.*

Don had been walking around in a daze for several years. Right after his divorce was finalized, he had attended his wife's church a couple of times, but he was such a basket case he couldn't bring himself to talk to anyone. He was still weak now but getting stronger. After completing his dressing ritual, he looked in the mirror, straightened his tie, and evaluated his smile. *This is going to be a good day*, he thought.

Don pulled into the church parking lot and followed the directions of the volunteers in orange vests. His palms were sweaty, and he started having second thoughts. He was directed to a special parking area for first-time visitors. He just knew someone was going to latch on to him and try to "save" him.

He pulled into his space, turned off the engine, looked to the right and then the left. He didn't see anyone and thought, *Well, the coast is clear so far.*

When he shut his car door, he noticed signs pointing him in the direction of the sanctuary. As he stepped into the air-conditioned building, he noticed how upscale the finishes were. A friendly man, but not overly so, greeted him and offered him a church bulletin and program for the day. "First time?" he asked in a nonthreatening way.

"Yes," Don replied weakly.

"Well, feel free to sit anywhere. And you're our guest today, so don't feel like you need

to put anything in the offering plate.”

With that Don kept moving down the aisle, as the usher had already started greeting the people behind him. He sat toward the back in a seat that wouldn't attract much attention. The singing was upbeat, and the people around him seemed very sincere about the words they were singing. *This is very different from what I remember growing up,* thought Don.

After a surprisingly stirring solo, during which time the offering plates were passed, the man he had seen on TV the night before stood and walked to a small Plexiglas lectern—you couldn't really call it a pulpit—and smiled broadly as he looked around the auditorium. He greeted first-time visitors and invited them to join him after the service in a room to which he gave directions.

The pastor told a joke that left everyone howling. Don was feeling more comfortable by the minute. The pastor next asked everyone who had a Bible to open it to a passage in Luke—Don didn't hear exactly where. Then he said, “If you don't have a Bible, why don't you look on with someone who does. And if you see someone around you without a Bible, why don't you let them look on with you. Again, that's the Gospel of Luke, chapter nineteen, verse one.”

With that a very nice young couple in their mid-thirties who had been sharing one Bible between them shifted it so Don was able to see it. “Thanks,” he whispered. The couple smiled back warmly.

The pastor read directly from the Bible: Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a ‘sinner.’” But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Don's heart was warmed by this touching story.

One thing I know for sure, Don thought. *I'm as lost as a golf ball in tall grass. I wish salvation would come to my house today,* although he would have been hard-pressed to

explain what “salvation” actually meant. But it sounded good.

Then the pastor said, “Jesus came to seek and save people who are lost. So how do you get found if you’re lost? Consider Zacchaeus. Notice that the crowd will often prevent you from seeing the way of salvation. They will block your view and mutter when you finally get to see.

“Notice also that he crawled out on the limb of a tree. Are you willing to go out on a limb to see Jesus? That’s it, really. Are you willing to go out on a limb to see Jesus? If you are, he wants to come give you a visit—just like he did Zacchaeus. And exactly why was Zacchaeus willing to go out on a limb? Zacchaeus was sick of himself. He just didn’t want to be Zacchaeus anymore. He wanted to make right what he had made wrong.”

Wow! Don thought. I’ve never heard anyone explain what the Bible actually means like this. This is pretty cool. He especially liked the way he could sit anonymously in the back of this church and learn about Christianity.

The pastor continued, “Now, Jesus is considered a great teacher and leader in virtually all religions. One sign of greatness would be the truth of a man’s words. Notice what Jesus claimed: ‘Today salvation has come to this house.’ Either this statement is true, or Jesus was deranged. It cannot be both. We are free to believe what we want, but the results are very different. If we choose to believe he was deranged, we reject his salvation. If we choose to accept that he has the authority to offer salvation, then he will open our eyes so that we can believe and be saved.”

The man spoke some more, but Don had already heard enough. He was ready to go out on a limb. *After all, he figured. What have I got to lose that I haven’t already lost. I’m pretty sick of myself—that’s for sure. I really don’t want to be me anymore. I want to make right what I’ve made wrong.*

As the service concluded, the pastor reminded the attendees that first-timers could join him in a room just outside the side door to his right. As the young couple next to him stood, they asked, “First time?”

His face flushed a little. He really didn’t want to be singled out in any way. But they were nice and didn’t seem to attach any expectations to their question, so he said, “Yes, and I really enjoyed it.”

Sensing that he was uncomfortable, the couple said, “Well, we hope you’ll come back. It’s a terrific church.” And with that they said good-bye.

Don started making his way to the exit and found himself strangely curious about meeting the pastor. He had every intention of bolting to his car and getting out of there before anyone buttonholed him. But no one tried to block his exit. On the contrary, people smiled and seemed to make way for him. The visitor parking area was also

reached by going out the side door to which the pastor had referred. Don passed by an open door with a sign above it that read, "FIRST-TIME VISITORS MEET HERE." No one was guarding the door, and Don found himself stretching his neck a little to see what was going on in there as he walked by. He was nearly to his car when he planted his foot and turned around. In less than a minute he was standing with the pastor and another normal-looking guy, probably a businessman. Don could hardly believe it as he heard himself say, "Listen, I haven't been doing too well for several years now. I think I'm ready to go out on a limb."

Suddenly Don froze up. He didn't know what to expect next. The pastor put him at ease, though, and said, "Why don't we get together sometime this week and talk about it?" After they discovered a mutual love for golf, they made a date to play nine holes together the following Tuesday after work.

Religious Experiences

As the anomalies of the worldly and moral systems reduce those worldviews to piles of rubble, the clock keeps ticking and the inward groan for relief from futility grows louder. The groan is becoming a monster. It wants to be fed. Once we realize this groaning is pointing to a spiritual need, we begin looking to religion for the answer. The leap to a religious system is the decision to seek salvation in the spiritual realm. It is to become a "seeker."

All people have "religious experiences" at critical points in their lives. (Whether they do anything about it is, of course, a different matter.) Rudolph Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, called them *numinous* experiences. Otto said we notice that religion doesn't exclusively consist of "rational" assertions. We sometimes experience the holiness of God in a "moment," in ways that remain inexpressible and elude description. During these encounters with God, we become profoundly aware of our creatureliness and, simultaneously, sense the presence of an overpowering, absolute might. Otto goes on to describe these encounters:

The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its 'profane,' non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport, and to ecstasy.... It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a *mystery* inexpressible and above all creatures.¹

Down through the centuries this "feeling" of the holiness of the Divine Being has been described by various names: *the religious instinct*, *the seed of religion*, *the sense of divinity*, *the numinous*, or *the sense of God*. Elsewhere I have called it *the moment of humility*.

In these moments we palpably sense the presence of a Power. It is a feeling of awe, a sense of majesty, a weightiness, a feeling of gravity, or a sense of the holy. It may come by contemplating our own mortality or the greatness of God. (I will explore these contemplations in later chapters.)

Men become religious when they identify this Divine Power for which they feel awe as the guardian of the morality to which they feel obligation.² If the devotion of the worldly person is *pleasure* and the devotion of the moral person is *good deeds*, then the devotion of the religious person is *good deeds to please God*.

Performance for God

Instead of doing good deeds to earn favor with *men*, the spiritual person does good deeds to earn favor with *God*. Or perhaps to avoid his wrath. The religious person thinks, "If I can just be good enough and do enough good deeds, then God will accept me, or at least not punish me." It's performance-based religion. How well you do is up to you. The focus is on *outward* behavior and performance rather than on *inward* change of heart.

Unfortunately, the religious system is perfectly designed to produce despair, because no matter how much this person does, it is never enough. Mike, a father of four kids, said, "I put everything into it. I ushered and served on a committee in my church but then got tired of that. Religion wore me out, so I said to myself, 'I'll just put that effort in at work.' Now it's ten years later, and I'm nowhere." In the end, religious systems are "attempted" salvation by works that never seem to be enough or have any real power to overcome ungodly behavior.

The religious person stands on the fringe of the church. He is present but unaccounted for. Or absent. This person has tried to be a good boy and has tried to obey God—but without power. Ironically, the spirit was still willing, but the flesh was *still* weak. Still perplexed by secret sins, these folks have yet to feel like a beggar before a holy God. They have tried to "deserve" that which can only be had as a gift. They don't know enough to know what they need, but they do know enough to know that this isn't it. It's frequently easier to know what won't work than what will, as this story illustrates. One day after using a bar of soap I asked my wife to buy some deodorant soap. "What kind do you want?" she asked. "I don't know," I answered. "All I know is that *this* is not it."

Every worldview can be identified as either a worldly, moral, religious, or Christian system. Philosophies of pleasure and self-fulfillment are worldly; philosophies of love and acceptance are moral; philosophies of self-actualization and sin management are religious.

Is This How You Feel?

Dear God:

If there is a God. Oh, I don't actually doubt the existence of God—not really. True enough, I would like to see, even feel, the weight of the evidence for his existence. But I don't really doubt there is a God. My problem is more practical. I'm lonely. I feel isolated. Empty. Disillusioned.

I don't know the state of my soul. It concerns me. I've done some things I regret, but I don't want to die because of them. But even more, I don't want to live—at least not the way I've been living. Something needs to change. Something's got to give. I've tried to live a good life—a moral life, but it's not working out. I don't seem to be able to control my destructive emotions. Ironically, the more I care for someone, the more I seem to hurt them. Some of the things I say to those I love the most baffle me—I can be so negative.

To be honest, I'm proud. My pride is killing me. I pretend to know things I don't. I've been religious, but it just seemed like another way of saying “Do this” and “Don't do that.” I've been judgmental of people who use Christianity as a crutch. I've ridiculed my Christian friends and associates for being weak. But, hey, I'm feeling pretty weak right now myself. Frankly, I could use a crutch.

Sometimes I feel like I'm nothing but a piece of meat. I feel like a product that people use, then discard. Is there anyone who cares about “me”—just me, not what I can do for them? God, I think that would be you.

I've picked up this book because, if you're really there and if you will have me back, I really need you in my life. I want to come home. My simple, honest prayer is this: I confess that I have been living by my own ideas. It hasn't worked out. I am ready, even eager, to come back to you. But in all honesty, I do not know who you are—not really. But I've created the illusion that I do. So, it's going to take some courage on my part to admit that I've been wrong—courage I'm not sure I have. I'm asking you to give me the courage I need in order to take this step.

I want to know you as you are, not as a figment of my imagination. Not like the caricatures I see on television. Not in a “man-made” way, but as you really are. I open my mind to you, and I ask that you open your heart to me. With this prayer I ask you to reveal the truth to me. Amen.

In the next chapter I'll begin to explain how the Christian system is the most developed form of religion, and how it offers grace where “merit” inevitably fails.

Part Two

Barriers to Recovering Belief in God

Giving the Christian System Another Look

Don's divorce was too much for his company to handle. When it became obvious that Evelyn was going to stay, Don realized the brass had decided she was the victim and Don was the perpetrator. They never *asked* him to leave, but it was clear enough that the time had come to move on.

He was too tired to be bitter about it, so he started shopping the job market.

Unfortunately, he was so depressed that he wasn't a very good interviewee. After three months he landed a job selling used office equipment. In a good year he might make two-thirds of what he had made before, but he was too weary to care. It all seemed so pointless anyway.

After joining his new company Don's sales steadily increased during his first two years. When it finally dawned on his new employer what a diamond in the rough they had found, they promoted Don to sales manager. His professional progress paralleled his emotional healing. Don had worked through a lot of the grief of his divorce but still had a long way to go. What he really wanted to do was rewind the tape and start over. He knew, of course, that this was impossible. Sensing no future to look forward to, he dwelled on the past. Don realized he had probably gone about as far down the road to recovery as he could on his own. If he was ever going to become a whole person again, he knew instinctively that he would have to come to terms with God and find some spiritual reality. The guilt was eating him alive. The futility was feasting on his remains. The Monday morning after Don had attended his first church service since his youth, he had a full-fledged anxiety attack as he drove to work. *What have I done?* he wondered. *I've made a golfing date with a preacher. I must be nuts.*

Don arrived at his office Monday morning fully intending to cancel his golf outing. At 9:00 A.M. he picked up the phone to call the pastor's secretary, but instead of a dial tone he discovered that he had picked up the receiver just as a customer was calling in. "Hello?" he said, and then he spent twenty minutes handling a complaint.

For the rest of the day, every time Don made a move toward canceling the golf date, something interrupted. Once his boss walked into his cubicle. Another time a coworker asked him to help put a quote together. He had to spend an hour with a walk-in customer—something that rarely happened. By the time he actually placed the call at 5:30 P.M. the church office was closed. He vowed he would call again first thing Tuesday morning.

Tuesday morning he never stood a chance. His sales meeting started at 7:30 A.M., and people lined up outside his office for the next several hours to get his approval for special prices or for his help in putting together a complex quote. By noon he hadn't yet

canceled; he realized it would be bad manners to pull out now. He laughed at the pickle he had put himself into and thought, *I wonder if this is the work of angels or devils.* At 4:00 P.M. Don hastily left his office to make their tee time. The aroma of freshly mowed grass calmed him like a tonic. By the time he and Hal Dawson, the pastor, found each other, Don was not nearly as fearful as he expected. "Please call me Hal," said the pastor.

Hal teed up his first shot and whacked it a good 225 yards down the center of the fairway. Don's first shot hooked 150 yards into the tall grass on the right side of the fairway. *Figures*, he thought. *I'm not sure that's where I belong, but that's where I always end up.*

Dawson let Don carry and lead the conversation. No pressure. When they climbed into the golf cart after hitting their tee shots on the fourth hole, Don could no longer take the chitchat he was generating and said, "Hal, I've ruined my life. My current existence is only a shadow of my former life. I don't feel like I'll ever get back to that level again. I've pretty much recovered emotionally, but I just have this sick feeling that won't go away. My divorce counselor keeps telling me that I'm not a bad person, I need to forgive myself, and I need to move on.

"But I've got this nagging feeling that what he says doesn't add up. I don't like to think of myself as a bad person, but I really did do something terribly wrong." Don spent the next two holes rehearsing the painful details of his adultery and divorce.

"You know, Hal," continued Don, "I can't move on. I just have this sense that I've got some unfinished business. I keep having this sense that I have offended and let down a higher power. I feel guilty and dirty and unlovable. I can't forgive myself. Maybe I *am* a bad person. Have you ever had to deal with anyone like me before?"

Hal had listened carefully and felt full of pity for Don. Hal didn't let it show, but he was angered by the counseling Don had been given. He was irritated by a therapeutic approach that tried to tell people they were merely victims. People know they really have done sinful things. How can a man accept forgiveness, though, if he's been taught that he hasn't done anything that deserves punishment? How frustrating it must be to hear that everything's all right when you know it's all wrong.

"Don, around this city tonight dozens of groups will be meeting to discuss different philosophies about life—New Age, self-help, twelve-step programs, meditation, Scientology, Hinduism, and all sorts of Eastern religions. Some of them will be quite novel. I know. Before I committed myself to the Christian faith, I explored many of these ideas.

"Many of these ideas will be disguised as Christianity. The problem today is that the true meaning of Christianity has been so watered-down and caricatured that many people think they have understood and rejected Christianity when in actuality they have yet to understand it at all."

“That’s me,” interjected Don.

“In my own faith search what I discovered is that Christianity is the only religion that offers a coherent, satisfying explanation for why the universe operates as it does. God has given ample proof of his existence. He also has a plan to deal with the true guilt we feel for the truly sinful things we have done. Would you like me to explain how Christianity can get you over this hump?”

Don didn’t hesitate. “I sure would. Like I said Sunday, I’m ready to go out on a limb.”

The Claim

The Christian system makes the claim that it will get us over the “hump” and solve the problem of futility. That in itself is not unusual, since all systems justify their existence by making the same claim. If your system has been worldly, moral, or religious, you have quite likely already concluded that the anomalies just don’t add up to a solution. Can the Christian system, though, really solve the problem of futility—a problem the worldly, moral, and religious systems fail to solve?

In the movie *The Hurricane*, Denzel Washington portrays Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, a real-life boxing champion wrongfully imprisoned for nineteen years in the aftermath of the 1966 slayings of three people in a New Jersey bar.

A group of people believed in his innocence and began to champion his cause. They met repeated disappointments in their legal challenges, which was psychologically tough on Carter. He would get his hopes up only to have them dashed. One day Carter sat down and wrote a letter, telling his friends that while he appreciated their efforts, he wanted them to stop visiting him. He wrote, “Please find it in your hearts not to weaken me with your love.”

Carter believed he would never be set free. He believed he needed to toughen himself up in order to survive the cold, harsh, jaded “system” of which he had become part. He thought that to survive the system, he needed to reject the love that was being freely offered—that it would somehow make him weak. He just didn’t think he would ever get to be part of any new system. He didn’t want to get burned again.

Maybe you have considered the Christian system, or are willing to, but, to be honest, you don’t want to get burned again. No doubt many men today feel that if they are going to survive the cold, harsh realities of their systems, they need to become hardened, tougher, even mean. Like Carter, they may not think there is any way out. So they become cynical and jaded in an attempt to anesthetize the pain of their futility. They don’t want to make another mistake. They don’t want to give the next ten years to a system that will let them down.

I will confess this to you now: The Christian system claims to be rooted in the love God has for you. If you proceed, God will weaken you with his love. By this, I mean he will lovingly pry your hands off the system that has failed or is failing you. It will be easier for

you if you decide now to open yourself up to this love.

Getting a Fair Trial

A professor of mine once told the story of a man out hiking on a cold winter day. He came to a river that appeared to be frozen over. Since he was unfamiliar with the area, he didn't know how thick the ice was. Naturally, he was afraid of walking out and falling through. So he got down on his stomach and slowly began to inch his way out onto the ice.

When he had crawled near the middle of the river, the air began to tremble as he heard a rumbling sound drawing closer and closer. Suddenly a wagon with four horses at a full gallop shot over the crest of the riverbank, thundered across the river, then disappeared over the crest on the other side. And there he was, lying on the ice, feeling foolish.

It's difficult to trust something we don't know much about. The man lying on the ice had difficulty trusting the ice because he didn't know much about the river. But it isn't odd that he would do so. What would be odd is to see a man walk up to an unfamiliar frozen river and confidently walk out on it. In the same way, it would be odd to trust an unfamiliar God we have not properly understood.

People are often opposed to things they have never properly understood. Christianity is no exception. C. S. Lewis once said of the atheists and agnostics he debated, "Our opponents had to correct what seemed to us their almost bottomless ignorance of the faith they supposed themselves to be rejecting."¹ Pascal made a similar observation: "Let them at least learn what this religion is which they are attacking before attacking it."²

It would be intellectually dishonest to never give Christianity a fair trial, then claim it doesn't work. If you became a true Christian, accepted the gift of faith, and *then* it didn't work, *then* you would have a basis for honestly rejecting it. No jury ever gave their verdict until they first heard the evidence.

I have no problem with a man who, after making a thorough and honest investigation, correctly understands Christianity and decides to reject it. That passes every test of honesty I can think of. The person I feel pity for, and would like to challenge, is the one who rejects Christianity without ever understanding it.

In any event, in this book I will explain the Christian system so that one can at least reject the right thing. Let's at least make sure that if a man rejects Christianity, he is rejecting what Christianity actually is and not what it is not.

Confusing a Little Knowledge for a Lot

Each summer I study a subject completely unrelated to my vocation. In recent years, for example, I've studied sailing, sculling, interior design, container gardening, and cigars. It's a nice diversion.

In the process I usually end up knowing more than most people about the subject under my microscope—at least until the forgetfulness of age sets in. However, I usually fall prey to a common mistake. The tendency is to confuse knowing a little with knowing a lot.

Because I do know more about certain things than some other people do, it's easy to get mixed up and think I know more about the subject than I really do. Can you remember how embarrassing it is to act like a know-it-all around someone, and then you discover you're talking to a person who really knows what they're talking about? I can. I remember confidently telling my sister-in-law about one of the Miami Dolphins' football players—something I'd read in the paper. I was feeling pretty smug ... until she quoted his college record, year-to-date performance, and family information. A real fan can make a pretender feel like a fool.

It's the same with God. Our tendency, if we're not careful, is to think that because we know a little about God, we know more than we actually do.

Pseudo-Christianity: Inoculation

Some commentators suggest that America has become a *post-Christian* culture, a *formerly* Christian nation. However, most Americans still consider themselves Christians—one poll revealed 88 percent are sure they are going to heaven (ironically, in the same poll only 67 percent are sure there is a heaven, so 21 percent of Americans are sure they are going to a place they are not sure exists).

For this reason I think it would be better to say that we live in a *pseudo-Christian* culture. A pseudo-Christian culture is a non-Christian culture that thinks it is Christian. A pseudo-Christian is someone who is Christian by *custom* rather than *conviction*. I know from my ministry work that many men become closely associated with their Christian churches but don't really know what's going on. Although they are often regulars at church—and sometimes even pillars—they are too embarrassed to admit they don't really get it. They know enough of the lingo to make it seem like they know what they don't really know.

Many men *think* they have heard the true gospel, found it wanting, and have rejected it, when in fact they have yet to hear it. What they have heard instead are enough sound bites and clichés to inoculate them against the real thing. An inoculation is a small dose of the real thing.

An Age of Spiritual Novelty

Another barrier to authentic Christianity is that we live in an age flooded with spiritual novelty. Every year new movements pop up. Perhaps the digital speed and ease with which these new ideas can be disseminated has caused, or at least is contributing to, this phenomenon.

Creativity and novelty are different. Creativity finds fresh ways to express time-tested truth; novelty attempts to “rewrite” truth. Creativity is grounded in orthodoxy; novelty is

running loose. It is no easy task to tell the difference.

Most of these movements will collapse in ten or twenty years—just after you’ve given them the best years of your life. I don’t want that to happen to you. Here is the risk: Do you really want to stake your present contentment and eternal destiny on an idea that didn’t even exist forty years ago—especially when it contradicts orthodox ideas that have stood the test of centuries?

While I’m writing in reaction to all of the spiritual novelties of our time, I’m offering nothing new. It comes directly out of the tradition of classic, historic, orthodox Christianity. It is intended to give you the feeling of a solid mass across which you can safely walk—not thin ice.

The Problem with Busy

As a salesman Joe was without peer, which eventually resulted in him becoming the sales manager for his company. One day he flew into Texas to help a new salesman, Mike, make an important presentation. Over the course of that twenty-four hours they talked about their lives and became friends.

When Mike dropped his boss, Joe, off at the airport, he said, “Joe, you’re amazing the way you present our product. You’re brilliant. As smart as you are, though, you baffle me. You don’t have a clue about where you came from. You don’t have a clue about where you’re going. And you don’t have a clue about your purpose in life.” With that out of the way, Mike said good-bye, and Joe got on the airplane and flew home.

Several months later Joe attended a prayer breakfast, sponsored by local businessmen, where he heard how Christianity answers those deeper questions about life posed by Mike. He listened and made some changes. A month later he suffered a mild heart attack (at the age of forty-four) and needed bypass surgery.

The night before his surgery he took his Ph.D.-educated wife out to dinner. She was a basket case and could not understand his incredible calm in the face of this trial. He said, “You know. I love you very much. You’re brilliant. But you baffle me. As smart as you are, you don’t have a clue about where you came from. You don’t have a clue about where you’re going. And you don’t have a clue about your purpose in life.”

Personal Reflection

Pascal once said, “The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”³

Picture your life recorded on a single sheet of paper. Suppose the front side is the first half of your life, and the back is the second half. Some percentage of your “life script” has already been written—whether a quarter, a third, half, or more. The rest is blank—waiting to be written. Ask yourself, “Where did I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose of my life?”

What else can we learn from this sheet of paper? First, think for a moment about the past. Are you surprised by the path your life has taken? Was it the script you set out to write, and why or why not? Perhaps you lived for yourself or someone else. If for someone else, do you appreciate or resent them now? Did you “consume” and discard them? Second, think about the present. Are you happy with the way the script has turned out so far? Or would you like to change?

To change you have to become uncomfortable with something.

Conclusion

In the next chapters I would like to introduce, or reintroduce, you to the Christian system by proving to you that it is not unreasonable to believe Christianity.

There are many things about the Christian system that are matters of faith, but you may be surprised to learn that many things are also matters of fact. Factual evidences of the Christian God are found in creation, science, history, and suffering.

Is the Idea of God Logical?

It happened so fast. Peter's cell phone rang. His brother, Paul, was talking hysterically on the other end. Paul wasn't making any sense, so it took a few seconds for Peter to figure out that something was wrong with their father, who had a history of heart disease.

"Slow down, Paul, and start at the beginning."

Paul said, "I just called Dad a minute ago, and when he answered, all I could hear was the television in the background. I called back, and the same thing happened. What do we do?" Peter had always been the one the family depended on to know what to do. He always did know—and this would be no exception.

"Paul, hang up the phone. I'm going to call 911." Peter didn't wait for an answer. He pressed end and punched in 911.

"Is this for fire, police, or ambulance service?" said the voice.

"I need an ambulance."

"What's the address?"

"I think my father may be having a heart attack."

"Yes, sir, may I have the address?"

"3601 Beverly Lane."

"Okay, now what's the problem, sir?"

"Well, I just tried to call my dad ... well, actually it was my brother who called him.

Anyway, he has a history of heart trouble, and when he picked up the phone he couldn't talk. So my brother called him back. Same thing. All he could hear was the TV blaring in the background."

"Okay, sir, we're already rolling. We'll be there in just a few minutes. I have your number here, and I'll call you back just as soon as we have some word."

"Please ask them to hurry."

"Yes, sir, I will. I'll call you back as soon as I have word."

"Thank you," Peter said, and he hung up.

He pressed the speed-dial number for Paul. "Hello?"

"Yeah, Paul, an ambulance is on the way. How far are you from Dad's house?"

"Peter, I'm way down on the south side of town delivering some lumber. It would take me forty-five minutes to get there."

"Okay, Paul. I'm going to leave my job site and run over there. I'll be there in about fifteen. I'll call you from there as soon as I know something." Peter was a self-employed carpenter. He usually had a couple of apprentices working for him. He jogged to his truck without speaking to either of them and sped away.

Peter and his dad had rarely seen things eye to eye, but below the veneer of friction he still loved his father. He made the drive in twelve minutes, but it seemed like an hour. The ambulance was already in the driveway. The lights were still flashing. One man had just rushed out of the front door. He motioned, and two paramedics ran inside with their equipment. A small crowd of neighbors had started to gather on the sidewalk. Peter raced up the street at nearly fifty miles per hour and skidded to a stop in the middle of the street. He jumped out of his truck and ran toward the house. The door to the truck was still open.

As Peter entered the house, he saw that the paramedics had removed his father's shirt and were preparing to hit him with two shock pads.

"Sir, I think it would be best if you waited outside." The directive was intended as an act of mercy.

"I'm not going anywhere," said Peter in a stern voice the paramedics had heard before. Nothing else was said as they went back to their work. They hit Peter's dad with a shock. His body jolted. The monitor showed no response. They hit him again. Still the monitor showed no response.

After the third shock the woman looking at the displays said, "Still nothing. We've got nothing here."

Peter could not believe what he was hearing. This was no movie set. This was his father, and he was watching him die.

The one holding the pads said, "Let's try it one more time."

Still nothing.

"We've lost him," the paramedic said.

Peter was speechless. A feeling of numbness began to overtake his arms and legs. For the next several minutes he watched in disbelief as the paramedics loaded the body of

his father onto a gurney, pulled a sheet over his face, and carried him to the ambulance.

Peter stood in the front doorway and dialed his brother. "Hello?"

"Yeah, Paul, this is Peter. Paul, Dad didn't make it. He's gone."

The Idea of No God: What If We Are Alone?

Once I saw a poster of outer space taped up in a hallway leading to a high school cafeteria. The poster read:

Either we are alone in the universe or we are not.

Both ideas are overwhelming.

In the movie *Contact*, a scientist, portrayed by Jodie Foster, asks a troubled priest, "What makes more sense: That an all-powerful, mysterious God created the universe and then decided not to give any proof of his existence? Or that he simply doesn't exist at all, and we created him so we wouldn't have to feel so small and alone?"

"I don't know," the priest responds. "I couldn't imagine living in a world where God didn't exist. I wouldn't want to." The ultimate futility would be that we are alone.

Are we alone? Is it true that God has given no proof of his existence? Is God just something we have created to take care of a psychological need?

Most philosophers, scientists, and theologians did not debate the question of God's existence until the last few centuries, as scientific knowledge gained stature and philosophy engendered a climate of skepticism. It seems the more we know the more confused we become. These debates over God's existence leave a lot of good people doubtful, especially now that new ideas streak across the globe at digital speed. There are, of course, skeptics who will never accept what's been proved, much less what's probable. But what can we do for the many people who are open to considering a reasonable explanation but have sincere, honest doubts. What constitutes "reasonable proof"?

What Is Reasonable Proof?

In a court of law there are two different standards of proof, depending on whether the case is criminal or civil. The lowest burden of proof is for a civil case, like a contract dispute. In a civil case the plaintiff must only prove "a preponderance of the evidence," so a jury can render a guilty verdict even though doubt remains.

In criminal cases, however, the prosecutor must prove his or her case "beyond and to the exclusion of every reasonable doubt." The most brutal judgment our judicial system can render is capital punishment; you cannot punish a person more severely than taking his life. It is interesting that even for the most severe form of punishment, the standard is not *absolute* proof, but the exclusion of reasonable doubt. (This explains why O.J.

Simpson could be found innocent in his criminal case but guilty in his civil wrongful death case with the same evidence.)

It is worth mentioning that neither of these two standards of proof requires the 100-percent elimination of all doubt. Instead, the jury or judge must apply wisdom to the evidence they are given, then make a reasoned decision.

For our purposes we will hold to the higher standard of proof. Our goal will be to eliminate every reasonable doubt.¹ Christianity teaches that faith is a gift, but addressing honest doubts with known proofs will make any seeker more confident to move forward.

Some of the most brilliant skeptics in history, once they decided to make an intellectually honest investigation of Christianity, have found reasonable proof for the existence of God and the deity of Jesus Christ. Christianity offers a satisfying antidote to futility. Let's turn our attention to some of the proofs.

The Idea of God

I'm going to ask you to do some "heavy lifting" in this section. I would like to ask you to picture "the world" in your mind. You may want to picture the earth, the United States, your community, our solar system, or the universe. You may choose to picture the world of your relationships. Any of these will work. Whatever comes to your mind, focus on that picture for a few seconds until you "see" it clearly.

Next I'd like to ask you a question, one you have no doubt already considered many times: Where did this world come from? Ponder this for a moment.

When we picture the world, we are *not* forced to conclude that the world is *necessary*.

There is no necessary reason why there is "something" instead of "nothing."

Nonetheless, there is "something," so when we ask "Where did it come from?" it is natural to be struck with the idea that it had to come from "somewhere." This leads us by *intuition*² to the idea of a *Necessary Being*, which most people call God. For example, if you were to come into your kitchen and see a cake on the counter, you would immediately conclude that someone had put it there. You may be surprised that there is a cake rather than no cake, but once you have seen it, you would never think it got there by itself. You would know that it was *necessary* for someone to have been in your kitchen.³

I clearly remember the first time this epiphany dawned on me. It happened in college. I was lying in the grass on my back, looking into the night sky. My eyes were feasting on a dazzling display of stars. Suddenly the mystery of it all became overwhelming. I felt like such an ant. I felt so small and "contingent." It was at that moment that the idea of a Necessary Being hit me.⁴ Since I was raised in a Protestant church, my exact thought was *For this to exist it is necessary for God to exist*.

Though I grew up in the church, and so had been taught to believe in God, this was the first time it occurred to me that it was impossible for a Necessary Being *not* to exist. And so, as nearly all people do, I chose to accept the inescapable deduction that there exists a Necessary Being.

I'm not yet suggesting whether this Necessary Being is a machine, a spirit, or a personal being. For Aristotle it was the Uncaused Cause (or sometimes the Unmoved Mover). Some people think of this Necessary Being as a great watchmaker. A few people think of it as a mechanistic, impersonal "Star Wars-like" force ("May the Force be with you"). A few people don't believe it at all. Since most people refer to this Necessary Being by the name *God*, we will use the term *God* from this point forward. I'm only trying to make this one point: Because the world exists, all people through intuition can have the idea that "God must exist necessarily."

When Mikhail Gorbachev led Russia away from seventy years of Communism, one high-ranking official said, "All these years they have told us there is no God. But we have always known that was not true. Even though they erased the memory of God from our schoolbooks, they could not erase him from our genetic memory."

If you have accepted the idea of a Necessary Being—that "God must exist necessarily"—that is all I'm asking you to presuppose. This, however, is a huge step, a step based on certain and indisputable reason. Unfortunately, for skeptics who cannot accept this starting point, I must regretfully say that I have nothing further to offer here. On the other hand, if you already believe *more* than "the idea of a Necessary Being," that may or may not be an advantage. I say this because Christianity is just as likely to be misunderstood as understood. So there may be times when you will need to reconsider some things you thought you had already settled.

Once you are struck by this intuition, you may choose to believe it or not—but it is still true. As English essayist Aldous Huxley once said, "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." God is who he is, and whether we believe it or not is immaterial to whether or not he exists, or to what he is like.

What kind of Entity or Being could create this universe?

What Can Be Known About God Through Observation

Rational contemplation is not always rational, but what God is like can be deduced by contemplating the work he has done in Creation. Consider these examples.

The naked cosmos would be much too harsh for life—the vast freezing-cold vacuum of space, the desolate asteroids and planets, the extreme heat and unfiltered harmful rays of billions of suns. Yet the earth has air, rain, crops, food, and many joyful hearts. We don't have to gasp for air, or always be thirsty, or waste away from hunger. Whether gazing into the evening sky, appreciating the intricacies of the human organism, marveling over the miracle of human birth, or observing the delicate balance of the environment, we, by intuition, conclude there must be a purpose to it all.

As a painting reveals something about its painter or a poem reveals something about its poet, so the Creation reveals something about its Creator. We would always assume that the character of any creator is in some way revealed in his creation. A building reflects something of what the architect is like. This hospitable environment in a hostile cosmos suggests a God who cares for his creatures.

In chapter 4 we looked at the moral system. We noted that all men history has known have acknowledged some kind of morality, captured by the phrases *I ought* and *I ought not*. Suppose a man got on a plane, opened the overhead bin, and removed someone else's suitcase to make room for his own. All people would feel the injustice—the “ought not”—of such an action. Through contemplation we can ask, “Where did this sense of ‘ought-ness’ come from?” The immediate intuition is that the attributes of the creature must be attributable to its Creator, who is, therefore, moral and righteous.

Thoughts of eternity lead us rationally to a Supreme Being without beginning or end. Thoughts of infinity lead us rationally to conclude that however large Creation is, it is “contained” within a larger context where God exists. Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English Christian mystic, once pictured something in the palm of her hand the size of a hazelnut. When she asked, “Lord, what is it?” God replied, “This is all that ever has been created.” The earth is a pebble in the palm of God's hand. We are struck by the intuition that God must be indescribably powerful.

All of us have moments when we are overwhelmed with a sense of gratitude for our blessings, however magnificent or meager they might be. Feeling grateful is linked to an intuition that we have received something beyond what we deserve—a gift that must come from a Giver.

We have all experienced the joy of love, parenting, doing useful work, providing for a family, or enjoying relaxing days—an accumulation of experiences that seem to say there is something intrinsically valuable about the human experience, and that the Giver of such life must be good. This thought can come suddenly, like being jolted awake by an intense dream, or more gradually, like a gentle whisper that comes softly but repeatedly and finally grows louder and comes more often.

Ockham's razor is the theory that the simplest logical explanation tends to be correct. The simplest logical explanation for the existence of a Creation is that there is somewhere a Creator. Where there is a Design there must be a Designer. Where there is Purpose there must be a Reason. There is somewhere an Architect, a Painter, a Sculptor, a Poet, whose imagination and ability infinitely exceed the limits of human comprehension.

Which seems more reasonable to you—to require proof that there is a Creator, or proof that there is not? Creation exists. Creatures exist. If there were no cake, I would say there was no baker. But since there is a cake, there must necessarily be a baker. It is more than reasonable to suggest that someone claiming that Creation made itself has the burden to prove how that could be.

When we gaze into the bejeweled evening sky, what is it that the twinkling stars are trying to say? They utter, "There is so much more you do not know. The cosmos is so big, and you are so small. Yet look at how magnificently you have been made. We stars didn't appear from nowhere. Where do you think we came from?" Where, indeed?

Shouldn't Science Rule over Theology?

In high school Peter had been the coolest guy on campus. The other students mistook his bravado for self-confidence. They looked to him for leadership. Peter, for his part, was very outgoing but had no sense of direction in life. So he led a crowd of other sharp but aimless youths into a party life of excess and wastefulness.

Peter lived a double life. He was the party animal of Roosevelt High—the kid everyone wanted to impress. Girls swooned over him, and guys nearly genuflected. At home Peter was a model son. His parents were active in their church, and Peter could vividly remember sticking Noah's ark figures onto a green felt board. By the time he entered high school he was commissioned to lead the youth fellowship that met on Sunday nights.

Most days Peter was a nervous wreck that kids from school and kids from church would get together and expose his little lie. Peter picked up his knack for duplicity from his dad. While his father was charming at church, he made their home into hell. He was extremely strict—one reason Peter was so “religious”—and demanded unquestioning obedience. Any deviation from the rules meant swift and angry punishment.

One day, when he was ten years old, Peter rode his bicycle from their house to the ice cream store about three-quarters of a mile up a busy boulevard. When his dad found out, he spanked him so hard he had welts for a week—and his dad sold his bicycle. The welts went down in time, but Peter withdrew from his father after that incident.

Peter had two brothers and a sister. His sister, Penny, had married a man just like their father. Her husband had beaten her severely on several occasions—the last time she had him arrested. Peter, the oldest of the four children, had the “caretaker” personality, so he spent a lot of time trying to advise his sister about what to do.

One of Peter's brothers, Paul, was an alcoholic. The youngest brother, John, had left home at the age of eighteen, and no one had heard from him since. That was ten years ago. Peter had reason to believe he wasn't even alive anymore—though he never mentioned this possibility to their mother. Still, through it all, his father tried to maintain the facade of a happy family.

Peter married his high school sweetheart and became a carpenter. It was a job he loved. He was quite adept at the intricate detail work involved in trim carpentry. His first boss, Ed, recognized Peter's potential immediately and took him under his wing. For several years Peter worked by his side, and Ed taught him all the ins and outs of being a skilled craftsman. Peter found a great deal of satisfaction in doing his work well. That work ethic was the one legacy from his father for which he could be thankful.

Three months after his brother, John, graduated from high school and left town Peter's mother filed for divorce. It slowly came out that his father had been abusing his mother for almost all of their twenty-six married years.

Peter's first and only love had begun the moment he saw Rhonda walk into their ninth grade geometry class. She shook her long blonde hair to the side as she sat in the desk in front of him. By the time her scent arrived a split second later Peter was madly in love. Rhonda, for her part, also came from a religious family. Peter and Rhonda adored each other and couldn't wait to get married. They had three children within four years of their high school graduation date.

Peter wanted to be everything to his kids that his dad had never been to him. He showered them with the affection he had never received when he was a boy. His father had been so aloof when calm, and so dogmatic when upset, that he was like a stranger, and Peter never quite felt like he actually "knew" his father. Instead, to Peter he seemed more like a military commander. You don't ask questions—you just do what you're told. When Peter's kids—boy, girl, boy—qualified to play T-ball, Peter jumped right in and began coaching his kids' teams. Usually two of his kids would be on the same team, but once Peter found himself coaching three different teams—an almost impossible scheduling challenge. But he loved it. He did the same with soccer. He was going to be the "hands-on" father his own father never was. Every day he made it a point to tell each child, "Brent, I love you," or "Brittany, I am so proud of you." He'd flash his trademark smile and watch his children be transformed into kids who really thought they were special.

If Peter was sunshine, Brian was rain. Brian, a computer technician, was extremely quiet and rarely smiled, but he hadn't missed a single one of his son's soccer games and made it to nearly all the practices, too. Peter coached Brian's son. Peter, as usual, struck up a cordial relationship with Brian. He made it a personal goal to get him to smile at least once whenever he saw him.

Brian, it turns out, knew more about soccer than just about anyone in town. He played the game himself long ago, but, more than that, he was just one of those guys who knows how everything works. It was only a matter of time until Peter realized that Brian could be a big help.

"Brian, you're here every time I am—what would you think of becoming my assistant coach? You know stuff about soccer I'll never know. I could really use your help. Whadda ya say?" Peter asked.

I've always wanted to coach, Brian thought. "Oh, I don't know," he responded dolefully. He couldn't help responding that way—it was such an ingrained habit.

"I could really use you, man. You know this game inside out," said Peter.

Brian, at thirty-two years of age, had never had a close friend his entire life. He spent his high school career building computers after class. His personality didn't exactly attract people either.

"Okay, I'll do it," said Brian.

During two years of coaching together Peter and Brian confided a number of private matters to each other. Brian, though, had one rock in his pack that he had never mentioned to anyone—yet, it forever troubled him. It was an intangible pain that hummed continuously in the background, drowning out all but the loudest joys in life. After practice one day, as they were stuffing equipment into the bags, they got on the subject of their dads. Peter told Brian about how stern his father had been. Peter was surprised by how much emotion Brian showed—he was actually quivering.

“No matter what I did,” confided Brian, “I could never please my father. Just once I’d like to hear him say, ‘You know, son, I’m really proud of you.’ But who am I kidding? I know it will never happen.”

Brian’s comment struck a raw nerve with Peter. He had never heard it put that way before. For the first time he saw how much a father can cripple a son. For the first time he realized that this was exactly what had happened to him. Maybe that’s why they liked each other so much. In any event, they now had a bond built on common pain. After Brian drove away from the practice field, Peter, who by then was alone in the dusk, looked up as the vast evening sky came to life, and he broke down.

So far Peter had managed to control publicly the volcano of inarticulate rage that had plagued him all his adult life. Sometimes, though, life was too much. That day was such a day. Even though his father had been dead for three years, Peter finally understood that, like Brian, he was still living under his father’s spell. He drove home, pulled into his garage, walked over to his Peg-Board, picked up a sledgehammer, and in less than five minutes destroyed his workbench. Peter stiffened, gathered himself, and walked into his house as though nothing had happened.

The Vastness of Creation

When the vast size of the cosmos is considered, man is either very insignificant or very special.

Our solar system is located 26,000 light years from the center of the pinwheel-shaped galaxy we call the *Milky Way*. One light year is six trillion miles. Our sun is one of 100 billion stars in our galaxy, one galaxy among billions of other galaxies. It takes 226 million years for our sun to circle our home galaxy, traveling at the speed of 135 miles per second.¹ Our bodies are hurtling through space at 135 miles every second. Our small planet is teeming with life—humans, plants, animals, reptiles, fish, birds, and insects. The conditions for life as we know it to exist fall within an amazingly narrow range of values. Leading scientists now believe that the universe is so delicately balanced that it could not have happened by chance.

Stephen Hawking, the most famous physicist since Albert Einstein, notes, “The odds against a universe that has produced life like ours are immense.” For example, Hawking points out that if the electric charge of the electron had been even slightly different, stars wouldn’t burn. If gravity were less powerful, matter couldn’t have congealed into stars and galaxies. These forces seem minutely adjusted to make life possible. One

astronomer calls it “a put-up job.” A great conspiracy to make intelligent life possible.² Hawking asks, “Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?”³ He concludes, “It would be very difficult to explain why the universe should have begun in just this way, except as the act of a God who intended to create beings like us.”⁴

Consider the remarkable efficiency of food chains, insect kingdoms, photosynthesis, animal life, the bird and fish worlds. Not only are these elements of creation remarkably interesting, but they also have beauty and purpose.

To appreciate how delicately conditions for life are balanced, we need only to consider the devastation caused by a flood, famine, or fire. When one considers the precision required of atoms, neutrons, electrons, quarks, and the force of gravity, and how volatile conditions *could* be, the question isn’t “Why are there so many natural disasters?” but “Why are there so few?”

Not Only Big, But Small

If for the last 15 billion years you had removed one molecule per second from a glass of water, you would not be able to notice any change in the water level. And a molecule may be like an entire universe of its own. You are for all practical purposes “infinitely” larger than a molecule. You are as much larger than a molecule as the known universe is larger than you. Cosmology, the study of the very large, may in the end be eclipsed by quantum mechanics and string theory, the study of the very small.

The Orderliness of Creation

Consider the regularity of sunrise and sunset, moon phases, seasons, tides, crops, forests, ecosystems, air, water, digestion, and procreation. I am profoundly encouraged by every sunrise—its predictability is a powerful symbol, especially when things aren’t going so well. Imagine the chaos if we couldn’t predict the boundaries of day and night, river and land, or winter and spring. We couldn’t leave the house for a walk without a flashlight, build a house near water, or know when to plant a crop.

A man who watches a lot of news will likely wonder *Why is there so much chaos in the world?* The nightly newscast draws our attention to the anomalies, but what goes wrong is infinitesimally small compared to what goes right. What is extraordinary is not that we have so much chaos but so little. Why is there not more chaos? A man who ponders the whole of creation will wonder *Why is there so much order in the world?*

Christianity teaches that God provides order for Creation. Acts 14:17 declares, “Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.”

Science and Theology

People want to know “What is the universe all about? What is reality? What is the stuff the universe is made of?” The task of science is to explain how nature works. To do this, scientists observe nature and then form what at the time seem to be reasonable

paradigms (systems) to explain the realities they see.

As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, when too many anomalies show up, a new system emerges to replace the one that doesn't hold water anymore. There have been four major scientific paradigms in the last two thousand years—Ptolemaic, Copernican, Newtonian, and Einsteinian. In about A.D. 150 Ptolemy said, "The earth is round and stationary, the center of the universe"—a geocentric universe. C. S. Lewis was fond of pointing out that, according to Book I, Chapter 5 of Ptolemy's *Almagest*, scientists already knew the universe was very large. The passage says that in relation to the stars, "earth has no appreciable size and must be treated as a mathematical point!" Ptolemy's system prevailed for fourteen hundred years. But in 1543 Nicolas Copernicus said, "The earth is moving, and the sun is the center of the universe"—a heliocentric universe—and the Ptolemaic system collapsed. Isaac Newton built his science on the foundation of Copernicus.

The "absolute" Newtonian paradigm of gravitation, motion, time, and space lasted for two hundred years. Then in the early twentieth century Albert Einstein observed "relativity" in time, space, mass, motion, and gravitation. He noticed, for example, that starlight bent as it passed near the sun, which led him to postulate a universe of curved space. Suddenly a virtually infinite number of dimensions became possible. His discoveries led to a breakup of the Newtonian paradigm.

You may be surprised to learn that science and Christianity were on friendly terms until the twentieth century. The hostility of science toward Christianity was popularized by the writings of Cornell University president Andrew White (1832–1918). Even in the nineteenth century, when hostilities were just beginning to brew, the vast majority of scientists were adherents of Christianity.

Many twentieth-century scientists and mathematicians (A. W. Whitehead, for instance) said that Christianity and Greek thought provide the soil that enables science to grow. Their argument has much to recommend it. First, the Christian system asserts order and design in nature.⁵ Second, Christianity creates a sense of wonder, awe, contingency, and dependency on something bigger than ourselves. Third, the Christian system asserts an open rather than a closed universe, and it is responsive to explanations from beyond nature.⁶ Fourth, Christianity, unlike many Eastern religions, believes that nature is real. There is a reality out there, and we can deal with it. In the middle of the twentieth century, at the encouragement of Albert Einstein and C. F. Weizsacker, leading European physicists invited scientists and theologians to meet together and share their special insights into reality. The annual "Gottinger" meetings took place from 1949–1961 and were succeeded by a younger group of scientists and theologians from 1963–1968. They viewed science and theology as complementary. Science deals with questions about "How does the cosmos work?" while theology focuses on the questions of "Why?" Both groups affirmed the importance of finding answers to both questions.⁷

Science looks at nature and asks, "How does this work?" Theology looks at the same

truth and asks, "Why is this important?" Science is, or should be, the friend of Christianity, and Christianity the friend of science. Christianity has nothing to fear from science; science has nothing to fear from Christianity. Science is exciting because it helps us discover more about God and his ordering of the universe. The problems come when scientists try to do theology, or theologians try to do science. Once the scientist begins asking "Why?" he moves from science to theology.

Supernatural and Natural

One day Ted, a scientist, said to his friend Roy, a pastor, "The problem I have with Christianity is that it depends on the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Now, as a scientist, I believe that natural phenomena can only be explained by natural causes." "But, just a minute, Ted," Roy interrupted. "I also believe that natural phenomena can only be explained by natural causes."

"Well, then, what about the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection?" asked Ted.

"Oh," said Roy, "I was only trying to agree with you about natural phenomena. I also believe there are *supernatural* phenomena that can only be explained by supernatural causes. But if I get your drift, are you wanting to say that *everything* must be explained by natural causes?"

"Exactly. As a scientist, I observe nature, and I believe everything that happens must be explained by natural laws," said Ted.

"Let me ask you a question," said Roy. "Do you believe it's possible for something to exist beyond or outside of nature? Now, before you answer please understand my question. I'm not asking if something *does* exist, merely if it is *possible* for it to exist. Does anything *necessarily* exclude it?"

"Well, since you put it *exactly* that way," Ted said hesitantly, "I guess to be intellectually honest I would have to say that nothing can disprove the possibility. But it doesn't seem very likely."

"All right, then, but it's possible," continued Roy. "Suppose for a moment that something beyond nature did exist—let's call it *supernatural* for debating purposes. I'm not yet saying it *does* exist, but *if* it did, could it be possible that some of the hard-to-explain phenomena we observe are actually not caused naturally at all, but supernaturally? Again, don't misunderstand me. I'm not asking if you believe it, only if you can exclude it?"

"Roy, you're trying to box me in," said Ted.

"No, Ted, I'm only asking you, 'Is it possible? Does anything necessarily exclude it?'"

"Well, I feel like you're trying to trap me," said Ted. "Anyway, the answer is *no*, I cannot logically exclude the possibility."

"Well, Ted, we've made a lot of progress. You started out two minutes ago by saying

that nature is a closed system. Now you have at least agreed that we know of no necessary reason why it *must* be a closed system. At least it is possible that something exists *beyond*, and, whatever it is, it could possibly act *within* the world alongside natural causes. So, I agree with you. Natural phenomena need to be explained by natural causes, but, as you've now agreed, perhaps not all phenomena are natural. If supernatural phenomena do occur, like the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection, then they could be explained by supernatural causes."

A little black cloud lingered over Ted. He looked as though he had just been bushwhacked.

"Ted, do you know why you feel like I've boxed you in? It's because you've been caught practicing theology without a license. You would dismiss me as a quack if I started drawing scientific conclusions. I would be practicing science without a license. It cuts both ways. I'll make a deal with you. I won't try to explain the natural world of science with theology if you won't try to explain the supernatural world of theology with science." Ted muttered an answer Roy couldn't understand.

Miracles

Miracles like turning water into wine, raising the dead, and multiplying fish and bread are impossible naturally. They cannot happen by natural causes. Christianity does not claim that they do. Everyone should understand this point. What Christianity does claim is that "other than natural" causes also exist.

Because things do happen that cannot be explained by natural causes, an "other than natural" explanation is required. The Christian system calls this "other than natural" force a miracle.

Hard-to-believe miracles can be made much easier to accept if we would think for a moment of all the "regular" miracles that take place all around us, which we take for granted. For example, a seed of corn smaller than a fingernail is buried in early spring, then watered and fertilized; life appears, the corn grows knee-high by the Fourth of July, and three weeks later there stands a six-foot-tall plant.

Though a common occurrence, doesn't the fact that the full plant resided in a small kernel have its own reality of miraculous proportions? What is the Intelligence that informs the corn plant to escape from the seed? If this act only happened once, or occasionally, would we not call it a miracle? Such as it is, it is a "regular" miracle. All things considered, the biblical miracles are no more outrageous or amazing than the life of a single corn plant.

The Reliability of Science

It is no small matter that since the time Jesus established the Christian paradigm, at least four major scientific paradigms have found prominence. Science has changed dramatically across the years. Scientists understand that they may have the rug pulled out from under their theories at any time. Science is a "partial" explanation of the

“whole” of nature. Does it make sense to have the partial explain the whole? Science and theology are both trying to help regular guys like Peter, Paul, and Brian. Science, for example, tried to save the life of the father of Peter and Paul. Science could tell them *how* their father died, but only theology could tell them *why*.

Science *discovers* truth in nature, but science doesn't *create* truth—and has never claimed to. Christianity, on the other hand, claims that God is the Creator of all that is, and therefore of all that is true.

Christianity teaches that God created and sustains the universe. Science is limited to discovering what God has already made possible. While scientists keep building bigger telescopes and more powerful microscopes (that lead to still more paradigm changes), the Creator of the scientists offers supernatural stability. Science needs the cosmic glue of Christianity. Science changes, but basic Christianity remains the same.

Notice also that the “useful life” of scientific paradigms has become shorter—the Ptolemaic system lasted 1,400 years, the Copernican system 150 years, the Newtonian system 200 years, and the Einsteinian system has been around for fewer than 100 years. Some prominent theoretical physicists believe that in the first half of the twenty-first century the two great theories of the twentieth century—*general relativity* and *quantum mechanics*—will be fused into a new paradigm, perhaps using *string theory*. As scientific knowledge increases faster and faster, will paradigms fall faster and faster? Christianity has a track record for durability in its essential beliefs. Would it not make sense to explain the “changing” by the “changeless,” instead of the other way around? When we use science to explain theology, we are using the finite to explain the infinite. The truth of archaeology, for example, is limited by what has not yet been found. It is worth mentioning that every major archaeological discovery ever found has increased the confidence of scholars in the authenticity of the Bible.

Much more so than Christianity, science has a lot of unanswered questions. For example, “Does light travel in waves or bundles?” Another is “If the universe is moving from order to disorder (entropy), then how at the same time can evolution move from disorder to increasing levels of order?” Or “If the universe is expanding in every direction and everything is moving farther away from everything else, then where is the point from which everything is moving away—the point where Creation (a.k.a. the Big Bang) began?”

Christianity is a chest full of tools, one of which is science. To be fair, science has never claimed to answer the ultimate questions. Perhaps we should fit the “partial” views of reality given by science into the more “comprehensive” view given by Christianity. As psychologist Abraham Maslow said, “If the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to view every problem as a nail.”

Some may argue, “What a waste of space,” but another can argue with equal plausibility, “Man must be very special. All of this so that I might have life.” I heard that in the 1990s physicist Stephen Hawking was attending a small Baptist church on the

outskirts of Cambridge, England, where he resides. In the end, science can still offer no bread for the deepest hungers of the soul.

Since Life Is So Futile, Why Should I Believe God Cares about Me Personally?

During his first several years of working for himself Peter freelanced his carpentry skills to a dozen different residential contractors. Over the last year, however, he started working exclusively for one builder whose designs required some ingenuity—something Peter enjoyed.

Ben Silversmith may have built great designs, but he was a ruthless cutthroat. He had a reputation for squeezing his subcontractors. Peter was not unaware of Silversmith's reputation, so he had a candid conversation about working for him before he drove the first nail. For the better part of a year things worked out fine.

On a monthly basis Peter submitted draws for payment. He had to pay his helpers weekly, so this all required a modicum of management on Peter's part. One day Peter opened his monthly pay envelope and immediately saw that Silversmith had deducted ten percent of the requested draw and labeled it "retainage." Peter's blood boiled over. This was exactly the kind of thing he'd heard about. With the check in one hand and the envelope still in the other, Peter stormed up to Silversmith, who was standing next to his truck talking to his superintendent.

"This stinks!" he yelled. "What are you trying to pull here? I thought we had an understanding."

Somehow Silversmith was able to calm Peter down and turn him around. Ten minutes later Peter walked away thinking that the mistake had been his. Silversmith was smooth. He had successfully completed "step one" in the standard scheme he had used to get his hooks into other subs. He smiled at Peter's backside as he walked away. Silversmith's son was on the soccer team Peter coached. Through this sports involvement Peter had seen a side of Silversmith that most people had never seen. The man did love his family. That meant a lot to Peter, so he cut Silversmith a little extra slack.

For each of the next two months Silversmith again held back ten percent. He convinced Peter that he couldn't give what he didn't get himself, because the owner was retaining ten percent until the job was finished to the owner's and bank's satisfaction. Silversmith was pretty convincing. Peter didn't like it one bit, but there didn't seem to be much he could do about it.

For three months Peter's household finances had been under a strain. He was thirty days late with his mortgage payment, and the bank was calling on his credit card payments. His wife was a jewel and put her full confidence in Peter, counting on him to take care of the bills. He had to carry the weight of the whole thing alone, but at least he wasn't squabbling with Rhonda.

Meanwhile, the work on the house was wrapped up, and the owner moved in on a Tuesday. The next morning Peter went by Silversmith's construction office to pick up his

check. The secretary told him that they only cut checks on Friday. At this point Peter was steamed. He had to stifle the urge to put a chair through the front window. He said, "That check had better be waiting for me when I come by late Friday morning," and he stomped out of the office.

On Friday Peter intentionally waited until after lunch to stop by Silversmith's office. The secretary lied and said, "Mr. Silversmith has left for the day. There was a mix-up on the bank's paperwork, and they won't be releasing the final draw until next week, so we won't be able to cut your check until next Friday." She swallowed hard, knowing she could only take telling lies like this a few more times before she would quit.

Peter didn't say anything. He gave her a disgusted look, turned around, and left. Peter knew that Silversmith would be at the soccer game Saturday morning, and he started plotting what he wanted to do.

On Saturday morning Peter was surly. He barked at the kids for not executing plays well, but, of course, ten-year-olds *never* executed them well. Several of the parents noticed that Peter was in a foul mood. When the game was over, Peter asked Brian to give the kids their postgame talk. He then made a beeline to Silversmith. "I don't know what you're trying to pull, but it ain't gonna work, mister," Peter said. The veins in his neck bulged out, and his contorted face was bright red.

Peter sincerely thought he was going to embarrass Silversmith into paying him right there on the spot. Silversmith didn't back up an inch, though, and it was clear to a couple of fathers that a fight was about to start. The women backed away. The young children hid behind their mothers. The yelling escalated. Everyone was watching to see what would happen next.

No one could remember when Dick Mason had not been the president and chief referee of this soccer league. Nothing ruffled Dick. He always brought sanity and wisdom to the Saturday soccer rituals. Well, Dick heard the commotion and jogged toward Peter and Silversmith, not stopping until he was literally standing between them. "Hey, fellas. What's going on?" he said. He pulled Peter aside and said, "Listen, Coach, I don't know what's going on here, but you can't act like this. It's behavior unbecoming to a coach. You want to tell me what's going on?"

"No, I don't," said Peter. He rushed back to where his team was finishing up, gathered up his son, asked Brian to take care of the equipment, and left the field in a huff. Some of the men had picked up the gist of what was going on. Two of them were in a Bible study group that Dick led on Tuesday mornings at his insurance office. These two guys gave their hypotheses to Dick Mason. Dick thought about the situation and decided to stop by Peter's house after lunch.

He knocked on the door, and Peter answered, looking sheepish. He realized that what he had done was foolish. And now everyone knew what a terrible temper he had. Doubly embarrassing was that he respected Dick Mason more than any other man he

could think of. He figured Dick had dropped by to fire him from his coaching job.

“Can I come in for a minute?” asked Dick.

“Yeah, sure, of course. Come on in.”

They sat down, and Dick, twenty years Peter’s senior, speaking like a father figure, said,

“You know, Peter, I’ve always liked you. You have such a gentle, caring way with your players. And you have a keen sense of what’s fair, too. You strike a good balance between trying to win and yet making sure you play all your kids.

“After you left, a couple of men I know from a Bible study I teach told me what they thought happened. They surmised Ben Silversmith hadn’t paid you for quite some time, that you were under a lot of financial pressure, and that Silversmith had been repeatedly putting you off. Is that about right?”

Peter couldn’t believe how real it sounded to hear someone else actually describe the situation out loud. A wave of emotion engulfed him, and he began heaving. Half of it was the deep encouragement he felt for the kind things Dick was saying; the other half was hearing from someone else’s lips how desperate his situation sounded.

“Take your time,” Dick encouraged him.

It took nearly five minutes for Peter to gather himself. Quietly he said, “I guess you’ll want my resignation.”

“Not at all,” said Dick. “I came by because I thought you might need a friend to talk to.” Peter had never encountered a man like Dick Mason. They talked for an hour. At the end of their meeting Dick said, “Peter, I want you to know I’m here for you. First off, I want you to call my lawyer right away on Monday morning. I think we can get this problem resolved quickly with a little legal muscle. Secondly, I have a home builder for a client who does upscale custom homes—beautiful homes—and he’s as honest as they come. He’s been my client for over twenty years. I’d like to get you two together.

Finally,” he said as he pulled out his checkbook and began writing, “I’d like to loan you enough money to get your bills caught up and then to cover the next couple of weeks.”

Peter protested, but Dick wouldn’t hear of it. Dick was the father Peter had never had.

“There is one thing I’d like you to do for me, though,” Dick said.

“Sure, anything. You name it,” said Peter.

“Our Bible study is having a special meeting with Joe Gibbs as our guest speaker. He’s going to tell about his own struggles to make sense out of life. Do you know who I’m

talking about?”

“Well, of course. He won the Super Bowl when he coached the Redskins, and now he’s a top NASCAR race-car owner.”

“That’s right. He’s in town for a race, and he agreed to speak to our group. Would you like to hear him? You’d also get to meet him personally, since you’d be my guest and he’ll be sitting at my breakfast table.”

“I’d really like that.”

“Then it’s settled. And you can bring a friend if you want to.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“Well, I know Brian, my assistant coach, loves NASCAR racing. I’m sure he’d like to come.”

“Why don’t you ask him, and you can give me a call to let me know.”

Two weeks later Peter and Brian listened spellbound as Joe Gibbs talked openly about his struggles, failures, and search for meaning in life.

One day later that week, after practice had ended, Brian said to Peter, “You know, that Gibbs meeting meant a lot to me—it got me thinking. I think he’s right. I don’t think a man can ever have any lasting happiness unless he has God in his life. Peter, I’m going to tell you something that not even my wife knows. You’re talking to the loneliest man in the world. I need God in my life. I think I know what I need to do.”

For his part, Peter was also interested, though he didn’t want to discuss it. Peter had grown up in a “Christian” home, and he was still mad about it. When a few days later Dick Mason asked if Peter would like to go out for breakfast and chat awhile, he reluctantly agreed. After a surprisingly stimulating conversation at breakfast, Peter looked him in the eye and said, “You’re going to make a Christian out of me yet, Dick. I’m close, real close.”

Peter and Brian started hanging around later and later after practice to discuss their growing interest in God. One day Peter said, “You know what, Brian? I can’t manage my life. I’m just so sorry. It would be nice if Christianity was true. I just don’t want to be Peter anymore.” Together they discussed this until the darkness around them was complete.

Through the course of several breakfast meetings with Dick Mason, Peter began to realize that the Jesus he had heard about—and rejected—early in life, and the Jesus

revealed in the Bible—the Jesus that Mason was showing him—were not the same Jesus.

He and Brian discussed these things, and they both decided it was time to give Christianity another shot. Both were simply tired of fighting it—tired of being themselves, really.

The Embarrassing Claim of Christianity

It is best to call things plainly, to call them as they are. Many of the basic claims of Christianity are not only the most difficult to explain but also the most embarrassing. A Christian writer, however, has the duty to explain Christianity, not explain it away. There is one claim in particular that many Christians find terribly embarrassing: Christianity makes the remarkable claim to not only solve the problem of futility but also to cause it. Christianity teaches that the whole world has been subjected to futility (synonyms: frustration, vanity, and meaninglessness) by God. He has done this with the hope of liberating us from our bondage to decay and bringing us into the fold of God's children.¹ It is the Christian view that if man could find even a trace of meaning in any earthly pursuit apart from God, he would take it. In an earlier chapter we saw how Solomon pursued every conceivable earthly avenue to find meaning and happiness independent of God, and he came up empty.

Christianity teaches that God causes every system that seeks meaning and happiness apart from him to end in futility, while at the same time teaching that this futility is considered a "grace" or kindness from God. In other words, failing was for Solomon's benefit. Christianity teaches that God makes us feel the weight of futility in every worldly pursuit—getting the big promotion, making the big bucks, living in the big house, or getting none of those things. He makes us so miserable through futility that we choose him of our own free will. He sovereignly removes any possibility of finding meaning except in him. We might put it this way: Futility is the chief tool by which God sovereignly draws us to himself of our own free will.

God will not force a man to revere him, but he will make it impossible for a man to be happy unless he does. Solomon said it this way: "I know that everything God does will endure forever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it. God does it so that men will revere him."² So even if we get exactly what we want, we will still not be happy apart from God. Apart from God, life has no meaning. That's the deal. I am just reporting it; don't shoot me.

Futility Is Protection

Christianity goes yet one step further and states that if you were to get what you think you want, you would destroy yourself, and your failure to get it is an expression of God's grace and kindness. I personally spent my twenties and thirties working and praying to achieve a type of success that I now realize would have destroyed me, and then I was disappointed when I was spared.

Ken worked for a Fortune 100 company for eleven years. A star, he wanted the brass

ring, and he was putting in the seventy hours a week required to get it. What's more, he was a deacon in his church. Ken met once a week with another man in an accountability group. In his hunger for worldly success, Ken became so busy that his accountability partner was driving Ken's son to Little League games. One day he told Ken, "You need to do something about your life. Your son is starting to be closer to me than to you." It woke him up.

Men are interested in *goal* success; God is interested in *soul* success. Would we really want to get what we think we want if we knew it would be our undoing? Of course not. Christianity declares that an all-knowing, all-wise, all-good God actually protects us from greater disasters than the ones we bring on ourselves.

The Bible contains several passages that further explain why *bad* may not be so bad after all:

- But by means of their suffering, he rescues those who suffer. For he gets their attention through adversity.... Be on guard! Turn back from evil, for it was to prevent you from getting into a life of evil that God sent this suffering (Job 36:15, 21 NLT).
- When times are good, be happy; but when times are bad, consider: God has made the one as well as the other (Ecclesiastes 7:14).
- For the creation was subjected to frustration [futility, vanity, meaninglessness], not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God (Romans 8:20–21).
- It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.... I know, O LORD, that your laws are righteous, and in faithfulness you have afflicted me (Psalm 119: 71, 75).

The Christian God is the God of love. Christianity explains that while we work and pray for things that would destroy us, a loving God—like a loving parent—graciously slows us down. We may wish he would just leave us alone, but as C. S. Lewis noted, that would not be asking for *more* love, but less.³

We Are Easily Deceived

We are made in such a way that we want to lead comfortable, happy, meaningful lives. We also are made in such a way that we think we know the best way to pull this off. Sin deceives us, and we leave God out of our systems. Commenting on sin's deceitfulness, sixteenth-century Reformer Martin Luther once said:

It is rightly called the deceitfulness of sin because it deceives under the appearance of good. This phrase "deceitfulness of sin" ought to be understood in a much wider sense, so that the term includes even one's own righteousness and wisdom. For more than anything else one's own righteousness and wisdom deceive one and work against faith

in Christ, since we love the flesh and the sensations of the flesh and also riches and possessions, but we love nothing more ardently than our own feelings, judgment, purpose, and will, especially when they seem to be good.⁴

In order to change we have to become uncomfortable with something. Christianity states that God loves us so much that he will never let us become comfortable in the world. He does this by removing the possibility of finding any meaning apart from him. So what's the bottom line? If God does not introduce futility into our lives and make us uncomfortable, nothing will ever change. Christianity never claims that futility is good, but that God uses it for good. Futility sets in when our system fails. It leads us to despair. Despair leads us to the leap. Futility is the grace of God that allows us to be disturbed out of complacency and error.

What we would be willing to accept in life is so inferior to the abundant life God would like us to have.

The Grace of an Untamable God

By this point you may be thinking *Isn't this a rather brutal system to get men to become Christians?* I suppose it is in one sense. It is brutal for a surgeon to amputate a gangrenous leg, but he does so in order to save the rest of the body. In the same way, Christianity is a gracious system designed to save us from ourselves.

When I was a teenager, I tried to tame my parents. I couldn't. Then I tried to tame my brothers, and I failed there, too. Next I tried to tame my teachers. No dice. I quit high school. My dad escorted me down to the Army enlistment office. I couldn't tame my dad. Then I got married and tried to tame my wife. I couldn't tame my wife either. Next we had children, and I tried to tame them too, but I couldn't. Then I became a Christian, and, following the pattern, I tried to tame God.

And God is an untamable God. He just will not allow himself to be tamed. The truth is, if we didn't try to tame God, he wouldn't have to tame us.

Is there any doubt that men think they can tame God? Is there any doubt that they will fail? We are being sought by an untamable God. He is the immovable rock dropped in your path. He loves you so much that he will brutalize you, if he must, so that you will choose him of your own free will. It is precisely because of this fierce love of God that worldly, moral, and religious systems don't work. Life becomes futile when we try to tame God.

Abundance, Not Comfort

In the Christian system, God desires men to lead an abundant life. Yet, sadly, men often mistake abundant for *comfortable*.

Someone has told the story about a farmer and his son who cleared a field together over a couple of weeks. They placed the brush in a pile, and after a few days birds came and started to build nests. When the farmer chased the birds away, his son

thought he was being extremely cruel.

At the end of the two weeks the field was cleared, and the farmer proceeded to set the pile of brush on fire. Only then did his son see that what he had at first thought was an act of cruelty was actually an act of kindness. This world is not our home. Someday the world will come to an end. God doesn't want us to get too comfortable here.

Everyone experiences futility. That's why Solomon said, in essence, "I'm writing Ecclesiastes because I want to spare my readers the grief I went through. Here are my conclusions: Everything apart from God ends in futility. So revere God and obey his commands."

Futility is the love of God that restrains a man from ruining his life of his own free will.

How Can a Man Stake His Entire Life on Believing the Bible Is True?

Cliff Jackson sat across the mahogany conference table from three smirking lawyers, all ten years younger and impeccably dressed, sporting power ties in a rainbow of yellow, red, and purple—even the female lawyer wore one. They smelled like ambition, greed, and power. Cliff was unimpressed.

After the perfunctory five-minute exchange of social amenities, the hotshot in the dark blue suit briefly reviewed the facts, then threw the first punch. “Will your client return the deposit money by Friday or not? If not, our client has instructed us to file suit for recovery and damages,” said blue.

This guy thinks he’s pretty tough, thought Cliff, stifling a smile. Far more experienced, he stared at Mr. Tough for a long minute. Hotshot or not, blue’s hands started to sweat. Cliff was one of those lawyers who could make you wish you had never been born. Gifted with an incisive mind, he could cut through the blather and get straight to the meat of the coconut.

Cliff said, “If you will look at paragraph 14.c.1 of the contract between our clients—you did reread the contract for this meeting, didn’t you?— you will notice that your client agreed the \$500,000 deposit you want returned would serve as liquidated damages if your client failed to complete the purchase of my client’s company. Sorry, boys, but you’ve got a dog here that won’t hunt. We’re not running a charitable organization. By the way, did we mention we turned down three other offers and went instead with your client because your client said they had never failed to close a deal? I guess there’s a first time for everything, huh ... but it ain’t gonna be for free, people.” Cliff didn’t intentionally try to embarrass anyone, but he could make an adversary feel dumber than Bart Simpson.

In law school Cliff was editor of his law school review and graduated near the top of his class. His professors had predicted great things for Cliff. “He has such potential,” they would say. He was heavily recruited by the best law firms in the state, all of which told him, “You’ve got great potential.” In the expectation that law firms would consolidate into larger statewide and regional firms, Cliff went with the local office of a large statewide firm. From his first day on the job different partners repeatedly told him, “You’ve got a lot of potential, Cliff.” He got sick of hearing about it. He was soon ready for all that potential to become some “actual.”

Cliff had put in the requisite seventy-hour weeks expected of partner candidates. He made manager right on schedule but couldn’t understand why he didn’t make partner during his eighth year. Cliff wanted answers. He entered the richly appointed corner office of the managing partner, who suggested they sit in two leather chairs by the window. He was about to hear words that would bring his world tumbling down. The managing partner said, “Cliff, you’re one of our best men, but you have a lot of unmet potential.”

Unmet potential? thought Cliff. *What's this guy trying to say?* Clearly something wasn't adding up.

Soliciting new business had never been Cliff's strong suit. He was uncomfortable asking people for their business. Instead, he was content to take whatever work the partners assigned him. Actually, many of those assignments had turned into loyal clients who actually preferred Cliff over the partner-in-charge. So in addition to not bringing new clients into the firm, he was viewed as one who took clients away from existing partners. Some of the younger, hungrier partners were not humored. So when partnership status came up at the annual associate review, a small but powerful group of partners always had a knock on Cliff. The unaffected partners didn't want to die on that hill, so they let the blackballers have their way. Cliff was repeatedly passed over for promotion to partner.

For each of the next three years Cliff raised the issue with the managing partner at his annual review. The first year the managing partner parried by saying, "It's something that will happen—but not this year." Cliff thought, *Okay, so I missed it by a year. I'm sure they'll make it right.*

The second year the managing partner said, "Let me be honest and say that a few partners have reservations because you don't bring in new clients." For the next six months he tried to develop some new business, but nothing came of it. Besides, he could barely keep up with the work he already had. So he pulled back from pursuing clients he didn't really want anyway.

The third year Cliff knocked on the managing partner's door. Motioning Cliff in, the managing partner signaled that he was about to wrap up a phone call. He pointed for Cliff to take the chair facing his massive desk instead of the elegant leather chair in which Cliff had sat in previous years. He hung up the phone, cleared his throat, and proceeded with what they both knew was an obvious lie. "Cliff, you're doing a terrific job. We are doing some organizational restructuring right now, however, so we're putting the brakes on a few things." *Blah, blah, blah ...* He droned on for a few more awkward minutes until they both sensed that enough time had passed to make it comfortable to adjourn the meeting, which they did hastily.

Cliff knew he had been blackballed, but he didn't know by whom—and he really didn't know why either. For the next several months he tried to be philosophical. As time passed, though, he began to resent not only being passed over, but also that the partners had been less than candid with him. What especially galled him was that he knew his work was better than any other associate and nearly every partner in the firm. He hated that he had been manipulated and misled. Even more, though, he hated that he hadn't seen it coming.

Life continued on for Cliff. During his eleventh year in the firm he finally made partner—but his election was a hollow achievement for him. He felt used. Frankly, he was so

bitter that he hated all his new partners—the ones who had held him back and the ones who had allowed it to happen. And he had no idea who was who.

When Cliff's meeting with the three hotshot lawyers adjourned, he went straight to the club for his weekly racquetball match with Rick Barrington, his roommate in law school. Rick was everything Cliff would never be, and vice versa. Cliff was thorough, careful, analytical, and serious. Rick was careless, impulsive, and a compulsive party boy. It was only the fate of being assigned roommates that would have ever brought them together, but they clicked. Cliff came from a hardworking middle class family. Rick's father was a nationally prominent heart surgeon. If great things happened for Cliff, it would come as a pleasant surprise; great things were expected of Rick. Rick found it a difficult mantle to wear.

During late-night "share-alls" in law school they had revealed their greatest hopes, fears, and shameful secrets to each other. That had made them soul mates who each felt like the other was the only one he could truly trust. Their other friends saw them as sort of an "odd couple," but their bond of friendship was genuine, forged before any worldly achievements—so neither had to worry about the motives behind the friendship of the other.

Cliff and Rick kept up with each other by playing racquetball once a week. After this week's game they got to talking over beer and pretzels about John Thompson, the client Cliff had just protected from the three sharks. Thompson, one of their classmates, had built a successful software company. In a voice dripping with contempt, Cliff said, "John Thompson and I had lunch last Tuesday. I think John has found religion."
That doesn't sound like such a bad idea, thought Rick.

Rick had recently been reflecting on his own life. He realized it was shallow—futile, really. Most days he felt like the sad clown of a cruel puppeteer who was pulling his strings. He wondered why Cliff would express such a problem with religion. Cliff's life, after all, was no picture of contentment. Rick knew Cliff's marriage was hanging on by a thread. "Cliff," he said, "we've been buddies for a long time, right?"

"That's right."

"Well, don't you ever get frustrated that life seems so pointless? What's so wrong with finding a little relief in religion?" He paused as the waitress brought another round of beer and pretzels.

"Let me just be real honest with you, Cliff. You and I both know that I barely scraped my way through law school. I'm a celebrity sports agent by dumb luck. I careen around town at ninety miles an hour, cell phone constantly ringing. I know everybody, and I'm a favorite on everyone's party list. I've tried a lot of different paths. They've all been dead ends. I've gotten everything I ever wanted, and I'm miserable—just miserable. So here it is: I'm squandering my life. I feel like my soul is wandering around in a wilderness."
Rick had no religious background at all. He had never been to a church service, unless

you counted funerals and weddings. Nevertheless, he believed in God.

What Rick could not have known from Cliff's comment about John Thompson was that Cliff secretly envied John. Cliff himself was religious. Always had been, thanks to his mother. Even in college he somehow made it to church about two out of three Sundays—no matter how much of a hangover he had. By disposition Cliff always seemed to be carrying around a burden of guilt about his past. His father drank too much; he thought it was his fault. His parents argued too much; he thought it was his fault. He felt guilty for the money it cost his parents to get him through law school. He felt guilty for doing so well financially while his three brothers all went to work in the same lumber mill where their father worked his entire life. When Cliff climbed on the bus that would take him to college and waved good-bye through the window to his mother, he knew he would never live in that town again. He needed some space.

Cliff had always tried to make his father proud of him, but no matter how much he achieved, his father never praised him. *Once, just once*, Cliff had thought many times, *I wish my dad would say, 'Son, I know we've had our differences, but I want you to know how much I love you, son.'* It never happened. Then four years ago Cliff's father committed suicide without leaving a note. Cliff was so devastated and embarrassed that he told no one—not even Rick. His father's death happened about the same time he finally made partner, which caused his gaining of the delayed prize to feel even more pointless. Since the funeral—he had played the strong caretaker role then—he repeatedly peppered God, *Haven't I always tried to do the right thing? If you're so good, how could you let all these crummy things happen? And why couldn't you answer the one thing that would have really made me happy—to make partner on schedule?* Over the years Cliff had grown bitter toward God.

"Look, Rick," he said, "I've tried religion. When I was in high school, I attended a weeklong summer camp. When the speaker they brought in asked, 'Does anyone want to give their life to Christ?' I thought, *Sure, why not.* So I prayed the prayer he suggested. But following through on living a religious life once I returned home wasn't as easy as I thought it would be."

Cliff confessed to Rick that he had pretty much put that commitment in the background in order to pursue his dreams. Still, he had never forgotten what he had done. Rick's mournful comments were awakening a hunger for God Cliff had not felt in many years. Rick was puzzled by Cliff's comment about praying and "giving" his life to Christ. Frankly, Cliff could just as easily have been talking about nuclear physics, because Rick didn't understand a word of what he was talking about.

"Do you know much about the Bible?" Rick asked Cliff.

"Not really. How about you?"

"Actually, I've tried to read it several times recently. But it's hard because I don't have anyone to explain to me what it means. I feel like the secret of life has been encrypted

and that maybe the Bible is the decoder. I was wondering. Maybe we could find someone to teach us. What do you think?"

Cliff pondered this for a long moment. He had always hoped religion would be meaningful, but he had never put any genuine effort into understanding what Christian faith would really look like in action. He had set foot on the path but, he had to confess to himself, had "turned back" when the way got tough. Now Rick, his only true friend, was asking him to set out once again. *But Rick is naive*, he thought. Cliff knew there would be many trials ahead.

Cliff was feeling very uncomfortable. Bitterness about his lot in life had created a "wounded pride." He didn't want to "give in" to a God he had doubts about. He reasoned that, because Christianity declares God to be good and powerful, God *could* have prevented all the pain if he is all-powerful and *should* have if he is good. But apart from those worn-out questions, which never seemed to find answers, he also found a desire taking shape inside him that he could only describe as a "thirst" or "hunger" for the One who had let him go through that pain.

"Let me think about it," Cliff said in response to Rick's question.

With that, Cliff and Rick finished their beers and headed out to two very different worlds. Rick was a bachelor again after an amicable divorce three years earlier. He would attend a civic fund-raiser at which he would typically drink too much, but not tonight. Cliff would go home to a wife whose heart was breaking as she saw her marriage slipping away. She felt so disconnected. At least Cliff was a good dad. He would play board games with their two children after dinner. He would tousle their hair and read them bedtime stories. It was the one thing that kept a glimmer of hope alive in his wife, Ellie.

A Rosetta Stone for the Soul

For over a thousand years ancient Egyptian written culture had been lost because we couldn't understand hieroglyphics. Then in 1799 the Rosetta Stone was discovered near the mouth of a tributary of the Nile.

The Rosetta Stone records three languages—hieroglyphics, demotic, and Greek. Scholars were able to use the Greek language to decipher the hieroglyphs and reconstruct the lost language.

Like Rick, nearly all men reach a point when they feel life is written in some undecipherable code. In my opening chapter I referred to the words of Søren Kierkegaard: "The wisdom of the years is confusing." His complete thought was this: "The wisdom of the years is confusing. Only the wisdom of eternity is edifying."¹ He believed this "wisdom of eternity" is found in the Bible. The Bible makes the astonishing claim to decipher the mysteries of life—a Rosetta Stone for the soul.

The core issue about the Bible, even before the question of Christian belief, is "Am I looking at reliable data?" Since the Bible perfectly explains both the cause and the

solution to the problem of futility, it would be of profound interest if it is also true.

Haven't Theologians Concluded That the Bible Isn't Reliable?

The popular press and broadcast media frequently run articles and specials about Jesus and the Bible. In June 2000, Peter Jennings hosted ABC's landmark television special called "In Search of Jesus." It was exactly the kind of "sound bite" reporting that creates doubts about the truth and reliability of the Bible. Often this type of "reporting with an agenda" makes it sound like only an ignoramus *could* believe, much less *would* believe. I would like to answer just a handful of the questions raised by this particular program—questions that tend to apply to most "popular" reporting on the Bible. You do not need to have seen the program to get the gist:

- **Are the negative things they said about Jesus and the Bible true?** There are both liberal and conservative Bible scholars. Unfortunately, ABC only interviewed liberal scholars. Many, maybe most, liberal scholars do not believe that Jesus is who he claimed to be. Their opinions, therefore, are skewed by their worldview. (I am using *liberal* and *conservative* in a theological and not a political sense. There are, of course, many people who are both politically liberal and theologically conservative.)
- **Isn't it reasonable to assume that all Bible scholars are Christians?** It isn't a requirement. Bible scholars are no more all Christians than all Presbyterians are Christians or than all salesmen are extroverts.
- **Why were the people who were interviewed so skeptical?** Everyone speaks out of their own worldview. It should not be surprising that someone whose private motivations are personal ambition, prestige, and notoriety would attribute those same motives to Jesus. They see him attempting a political revolution. It was exactly *not* that—at least according to Jesus' own words in John 18:36—"My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place."
- **But these people seemed so persuasive, while the believers in the program were, by and large, not believable?** If you saw the program, I hope you noticed that all of the comments of the skeptics were carefully selected portions of scheduled interviews with educated scholars in their areas of expertise. The comments from the enthusiastic believers—a taxi driver, for example—were all unrehearsed, spontaneous comments from average people on the street (the exception was a well-spoken pastor leading a group to the Holy Land). Personally, I wouldn't go to a taxi driver to learn about archaeology any more than I would go to a Bible scholar for directions if I was lost. The scholar may want to be helpful, but when I'm lost, I'm going to listen to the taxi driver, even if he gives me bad directions. The fact that a Christian taxi driver may be mistaken about an archaeological detail doesn't disprove Christianity. It only proves he doesn't know much about archaeology.

- **What about the differences among the four Gospel stories?** Which would cast greater doubt: that the accounts had differences, or that the accounts were the same? If all four Gospel accounts recorded the same events in the same way, the scholars who now charge that the differences prove they are *fabrications* would no doubt then complain that the similarities prove they are *plagiaries*. Doesn't it seem a bit ludicrous to postulate that since the Last Supper is not included in the Gospel of John, the writers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke fabricated the event? It seems much more satisfying to say simply, "John did not include the Last Supper in his Gospel, and he had a very good reason for not doing so." There are differences because each writer had a different purpose and different audiences. The essential facts are true and rock-solid.
- **When does a scholar cease to be a scholar?** When he or she allows personal belief or unbelief to predetermine his or her conclusions. It is intellectually dishonest to decide what you want to prove and then look for evidence to support the position you have already taken.
- **Was there anything good about "In Search of Jesus"?** I thought it was incredibly interesting that, in spite of these scholars' obvious desire to explain it away, and as theologically liberal as they were, as a matter of intellectual integrity even *they* could not explain away the Resurrection. They didn't go so far as to say they believed, but they at least would admit, "Something happened." Why did they say that? Because it would be the only time in history that a conspiracy of that type had ever held together. If deceivers had intended to devise a false religion, they would not have made up such incredible claims as the Resurrection and the deity of a man or the working of so many miracles. Nor would they have told so much about their own failures, like deserting Jesus in the face of his terrible suffering. Nor would eleven of the twelve disciples have gone to their deaths for a conspiracy. That theory doesn't work, even for a nonbeliever.

The Bible's Internal Claim

Christianity cannot be merely what one wants it to be. It must be what it is, and then one can decide to accept or reject it. Theologian Ron Nash has put it well: "I don't mind if people want to make up a new religion. I just wish they wouldn't call it Christianity." The Bible is the sourcebook for our understanding of Christianity.

Even a casual observer of Christianity knows there is a huge debate about the truth and authority of the Bible. Why is the Bible such a lightning rod? The Bible attracts so much controversy precisely because it does claim to be the word of God. For example, the Bible contains the following verses:

"Your word is truth" (Jesus—in John 17:17).

"Every word of God is flawless" (Proverbs 30:5).

"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking,

correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

“Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so ... we might have hope” (Romans 15:4).

While an internal claim cannot prove that the Bible is the word of God, it is not insignificant that the Bible makes this claim. In fact, if the Bible did not make this claim, there would be no debate. But since it does make this claim, and since millions of Christians down through the ages have believed the Scriptures to be true, it is a question every thinking person must settle in his or her own mind: Is the Bible true? The orthodox Christian view is that God inspired human writers with his very thoughts, which they expressed through their own personalities. Christianity teaches that the Bible is true and without error.

Christianity is a “revealed” religion. In an earlier chapter we saw how God reveals himself in nature, and that the idea of God is an intuition we know is true. This is *general revelation*.

The Bible is *special revelation*, which simply means that what cannot be known about God and redemption through nature is “revealed” through the written word. The Bible is so important because it claims to be the map by which we understand the life and work of Jesus, the way to salvation, and the way to godly living. Why should someone who refuses to ask for directions be irritated with the Mapmaker when they arrive at the wrong destination?

Tying It All Together

Not long ago I went to a favorite garden center to purchase some spring annuals. It was a warm day and, noticing my warm-up suit, the twenty-five-year-old woman (her name was Amy) who waited on me struck up a conversation. “I’ll bet you’re hot in that outfit,” she said.

“Well, it is a little warm,” I said. “How about you? You work in this heat all day.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” she began. “I just moved back from Vermont, and I’m having a tough time adjusting to the Florida heat.”

“Oh,” I said, “what were you doing in Vermont?”

“Well, I had to get away to try and find myself,” she offered.

“So how did you do?” I asked.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I’m pretty confused. My father is from India, my mother is a nominal Catholic, and my brother is a Baptist who keeps wagging his finger in my face and yelling that if I don’t accept Jesus, I’m going to hell. I’ve been studying world religions, and I think there are many ways to God. What do you think?”

“Actually, you’re probably asking the wrong person,” I said. “You see, I’m what you might call a born-again Christian. In other words, I have put my faith in Jesus Christ to forgive my sins and give me eternal life. But it does bother me that your brother would confront you like that. I guess that’s not a very sensitive way of making his point, is it?”

“No,” she said, “it’s not.”

“Listen, Amy,” I continued. “Your brother is, basically, talking like a nut. Even if he’s right, that’s no way to talk about matters of faith. Let me suggest a couple of things to consider.

“First, if you go to the tomb of Confucius—occupied. If you go to the tomb of Buddha—occupied. If you go to the tomb of Muhammad—occupied. If you go to the tomb of Jesus—empty. That intrigues me, Amy, and it ought to intrigue you, too.

“Second, in a high school I once saw a poster of the vast cosmos with the caption “ ‘Either we are alone in the universe or we are not. Both ideas are overwhelming.’”

“Wow. That’s heavy,” said Amy.

“Yes, it is. And I think you owe it to yourself to investigate that issue. Jesus is the only one of those four men who claimed to be God. If that’s true, then don’t you think you owe it to yourself to find out if he really is who he says he is?”

“Yeah, but there’s no way to know for sure,” she offered lamely.

“Actually, there is,” I suggested. “Do you have a Bible?”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “My brother gave me a big, thick Life Application Bible.”

I said, “You mean the nut?”

She said, “Yes.”

“Okay, then. Let me make a suggestion. Is that all right?” She nodded approval.

“In the Bible there’s a short book called the Gospel of John. It contains twenty-one chapters. Why don’t you investigate the claims of Jesus for yourself—who he claimed to be, why he came to earth, what belief in him means? You could read a chapter a day for three weeks. John recorded some of Jesus’ most remarkable words in those few pages. I would also suggest you begin each time by praying something like *Jesus, if you are God, then I’m asking you to reveal yourself to me in these pages*. Frankly, Amy, I can’t do any better than that. If he is who he says he is, then he doesn’t need me to argue his case. You can decide for yourself. What do you think?”

“You know, I think I’ll do that,” she said conclusively.

Deciding for Yourself

You can decide for yourself whether or not to believe the Bible is true and whether you can stake your life on it. You could do this by reading it for yourself. Perhaps you'd want to follow the suggestion I made to Amy—reading the Gospel of John, a chapter a day for three weeks. Interact with the text, asking questions like:

- Why did the writer record these particular sayings and events?
- What was his purpose for writing his book?
- What is being said?
- Does what is being said make sense?
- What does Jesus say?
- What does Jesus do?
- Why does Jesus say and do these things?
- How did the people respond?
- How do you respond?
- What does Jesus claim about himself?
- What does Jesus claim about believing in him?
- Does this book hang together?
- Does this book have the ring of authority?
- Does this book seem cogent?
- Does this book have the ring of truth to you personally?

You don't have to trick yourself into Christianity. Let Jesus speak for himself. Once you have come to understand, if Jesus doesn't draw you, nothing I can add will draw you either. There is no sense arguing about it. That would be a waste of time.

COMING BACK TO GOD

Shouldn't Science Rule over Theology?

COMING BACK TO GOD

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Since Life Is So Futile, Why Should I Believe God Cares?

COMING BACK TO GOD

Since Life Is So Futile, Why Should I Believe God Cares?

Part Three

Coming Back to God

How to Come Back to God

On the drive home from racquetball Cliff began thinking again about Rick's question. He was genuinely puzzled and disappointed that he had never been able to integrate his religion and his life. How could he? He had always considered God and faith to be "otherworld" issues and thus kept them in a separate compartment from everyday life. Cliff had developed a tidy little world that he could control. He had a system. Yet he had no anchor for his soul—nothing that felt solid enough to stand on. At the age of thirty-eight he realized he had overlooked one small potential problem—what if his system didn't work? Truth is, it didn't. His wife was bored with him. He couldn't blame her—he bored himself.

He felt as though there was a hostile "force" that always worked against him, a battle always raging within him. He did not know what that force was. No one had ever explained to him that Christianity isn't magic—not that he had ever given anyone a chance. You have to educate yourself about how it works, just as you would educate yourself about how to be a good lawyer, or plumber, or whatever. Cliff went to church like a lawyer who shows up in court without ever having reviewed his case files—the kind of lawyer Cliff, ironically, would despise.

It dawned on him, *You know, I'm spiritually ignorant. It's never occurred to me that I may have a responsibility to learn how Christianity actually answers the most difficult questions about life.* As this thought entered his consciousness, he felt a heavy wave of emotion sweep over him and envelope him in what he could only describe as a sensation of warm syrup. What Cliff didn't know—how could he?— was that God's Spirit was initiating a process of leading him into the fold.

Cliff had known for several years that his cordial relationship with his wife, Ellie, disguised a much deeper problem. There were whole tracts of territory they had once reveled in together that had now become too touchy and, so, off-limits. He knew he had broken her spirit. Ellie just wasn't the same cheerful, upbeat person he had married fifteen years earlier. Knowing that he was to blame made him ashamed, but he had no idea what to do about it. How do you turn around a battleship, anyway, when you're not even qualified to be on the bridge? So Cliff had been content to let the currents take them where they may. But inside he was sincerely troubled.

Ellie's life revolved around their two wonderful children. Nathan was nine, and Brittany was six. As she felt Cliff slipping away, Ellie made her children the center of her world. She lavished them with the affection she desperately wanted to share with Cliff but couldn't. Ellie herself was genuinely puzzled. She had reached out to Cliff, but that only seemed to make him even more moody. *What does he want?* she would rehearse over and over in her mind. *He has everything in life he ever wanted. He loves law. We have two great children. We live in a wonderful home.* She wanted so much to help him, but

she couldn't. No matter what she said or tried, he always seemed just beyond her grasp—just outside the range of her voice. She could never really put into words how she felt, and he could never really appreciate how much she tried.

Cliff came into the kitchen, laid his briefcase on the counter, and gave Ellie a surprisingly sincere kiss on her cheek and said, "I love you"— words she hadn't heard for a long, long time. As she watched him open the refrigerator door, Ellie saw something she hadn't seen in many years. It was a crack in Cliff's armor. The bitterness that usually covered him like a brittle shell wasn't quite so harsh. The effect was like water to a drooping plant. She was startled by the emotion that gripped her heart. She left the room so Cliff wouldn't see the tears running down her cheeks. She had been crying herself to sleep often for the past several months.

Ellie was extremely discouraged. She was right on the verge of becoming clinically depressed. Her marriage was dying, and nothing she said or did seemed to help. In fact, a lot of what she did—like suggesting they go to a marriage counselor—only seemed to make things worse. Cliff only viewed these suggestions as a threat. Teaching school was a great release for Ellie. She became friendly with another woman who ate lunch at the same time. Over the first couple of years they shared funny and sad stories about their students. Gradually, they got to know about each other's families, too. Something about Vickie made a deep impression on Ellie. She had an inner beauty and calmness that Ellie came to envy. One day Vickie caught Ellie off guard—they had never spoken about personal problems—by asking, "Ellie, you never say much about Cliff. How is your relationship with him?"

Being a very private person, Ellie felt a deluge of conflicting emotions. On one hand, every fiber in her screamed, *Say nothing*. But an equally loud voice shouted, *You've got to tell someone what you're going through*. The two voices were shouting back and forth so loudly she could barely think. The next thing Ellie knew she was sharing the whole bloody mess. Ellie couldn't believe she was doing it, but Vickie just seemed so interested—and so trustworthy and wise, too.

"Ellie," said Vickie, "I know what you're going through. Five years ago I was in your shoes. My marriage had been through its own ups and downs. Something has happened in my life, though, that has changed all that. I'd love to tell you about it if you'd like to know." Vickie did not want to cross a boundary without permission. "Well, of course, Vickie. I want to save my marriage."

"What I'm about to share with you may or may not save your marriage. What it will do is resolve your own personal struggle for a meaningful life. It will allow you to find contentment, regardless of your circumstances. Not to say that things that hurt won't still hurt, but that you will have the strength and faith to carry on, no matter what comes. Do you still want to know?"

"Yes, I do," said Ellie.

Vickie continued, “Five years ago everything started to change when my husband, Jeff, started dabbling with Christianity. He joined a group of guys meeting in a small group once a week at his office before work. Gradually he learned that Christianity isn’t at all like what he had seen depicted in popular culture but is instead a belief and trust in the Christ of history. The changes in his life were so profound I couldn’t help it—I found myself being attracted to at least explore Christianity. Together we started attending a church that emphasizes worshiping God joyfully; we even joined a Bible study for couples offered by the church, and our faith life slowly changed from dabbling to serious.” It showed. This is what Ellie had seen in Vickie but hadn’t recognized. During the next ten minutes Ellie learned a truth so simple and so profound she could hardly believe it. But, in the end, she did.

Now, two weeks later, her husband had kissed her on the cheek, said “I love you,” and a glimmer of hope had sprung back to life.

“Cliff, can we talk tonight after the kids go to bed? Some things are happening to me that I want you to know about.”

“Sure,” said Cliff, a little nervous about what might be coming.

After Ellie shared her experience from a couple of weeks earlier, Cliff almost laughed out loud. *I’m surrounded!* he thought. *They’re all going crazy. John Thompson, Rick, and now Ellie. Or maybe I’m the one who’s crazy.*

The Business of Soul Making

A man put his “eternal soul” up for auction on eBay.com. He received nine bids—the highest offer was \$20.50; eBay then removed the item from their system.

Why would a man want to sell his soul? Only if, because of futility, he thought it was worthless. Christianity solves a number of problems, but the central problem is “What will happen to my soul?”

Christianity claims that every person has a soul, and that God is in the business of “soul making.” The soul is that which animates this life and remains in the next. The soul does not dissolve in death. Christianity claims that a single soul is of infinite value and is precious to God. In his own words, Jesus poses the focusing question: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?”¹

Other systems do capture bits and pieces of truth, but Christianity is the most highly developed of all religious systems—the culmination. The purpose of Christianity is “soul making.” God has a “system” by which this is done. Among all religious systems the Christian system is unique; it claims to be perfectly designed to solve the problem of futility. It claims to be a system that leads to an abundant life here on earth (though not without troubles) and, in the world to come, everlasting life.

Review

It is important to believe that which we can reasonably believe is true. So far in this book we have demonstrated that it is reasonable to believe ...

- that God exists.
- that nothing in nature demands a closed system in which God could not supernaturally intervene.
- that we each have a system perfectly designed to produce the result we are getting.
- that even if we get exactly what we want, we will still not be happy apart from God.
- that the Bible is the word of God. It claims to be the word of God, and it is not insignificant that it makes this claim. It continues to change men's lives, while rebuffing attempts to discredit it.
- that Christianity solves the problem of futility, and you don't have to trick yourself into believing it.

Everything we have discussed to this point demonstrates the possibility of a Divine Being intervening in our human affairs to rescue us from our futility and sins. I am not saying anyone has to actually believe these conclusions, but only that it would not be unreasonable if they did. My personal conviction, however, is that we have demonstrated that it is more unreasonable *not* to believe than to believe. In Christianity, the names *Messiah*, *Christ*, and *Savior* are used to describe the one who makes this intervention into our world to save us.

Interviewer Larry King once said, "As a Jew, I have had nothing but the greatest and most profound respect for Jesus Christ of Nazareth. He was, after all, Jewish—born Jewish, died Jewish. I think Jesus Christ was the greatest single individual of both millenniums, and he had a more profound effect on mankind than any individual ever born. If there's one person in history I would like to interview, it would be Jesus."² There are too many great thinkers who have concluded that Jesus was the Christ for us to dismiss the possibility that Christianity is true. If you have honest doubts about the identity and mission of Jesus, a modest goal might be to spend enough time investigating Jesus so as, if not to believe, at least to doubt the certainty of your doubt.

The Correct Information

Describing Christianity reminds me of the old story about three blind men describing an elephant. One grabbed its leg and said, "It's like a tree." Another grabbed the trunk and said, "It's like a hose." The third grabbed an ear and said, "It's like a great fan." All true, but only partially.

To understand the Christian system we must first have the correct information. Over the course of the nearly two thousand years since Jesus walked the earth—an established historical fact that scholars no longer debate—thinkers and writers have developed many helpful devices to summarize and explain the system Jesus proclaimed. Tens of thousands of Christian and non-Christian writers have spent millions of hours figuring out how best to explain the Christian system to their readers by means of such things as

confessions, creeds, liturgies, catechisms, systematic theologies, and apologetics. All are designed to help ordinary people understand Christianity.

Our task here is much simpler: What is the minimum description of Christianity that still explains the whole? Christianity itself helps us at this point by breaking itself down into two parts: “the gospel” (*kemrygma*) and “the teachings” (*didachem*). You don’t need to know how an engine works in order to drive a car. Likewise, you don’t need to know all the Christian teachings in order to become a Christian. You only need to understand the gospel, often called “the Good News.”

There is no single best way to explain “the gospel” of Jesus. There are, however, some essentials that must be included—universal beliefs that have always been believed everywhere by everyone who professes a Christian faith. These essentials have come to be known as “the rule of faith.” The risk in explaining the faith that Jesus proclaimed is to add any “test” or “rule of behavior” that Jesus did not.

The Necessary Information

Everything I am about to mention can be confirmed by attending an evangelical church service anywhere in America this coming Sunday morning. Read the bulletin, the words to the hymns or choruses, and the creeds. Listen to the Scripture reading, the prayers, and the sermon. Everything can be found there.

The simplest expression of “the gospel” is quoted by the apostle Paul: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”³ If we step back from this gospel statement, we see three things that need to be fleshed out. The first is *the problem of man*, the second is *the issue of Jesus*, and the third is *the gift of eternal life*. These three elements of the gospel have traditionally had formal names: the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ, and the doctrine of salvation. I would summarize this message, and the Christian system, by saying ...

- Adam failed.
- Jesus nailed.
- Grace prevailed.

Let’s briefly look at these three parts.

Adam Failed

The paradox of man is that he is a product of both the Creation and the Fall. The Creation made him like a god, and the Fall made him like a devil.

When we observe the animals, we notice that we are the highest order of creatures by a wide margin. Intuition tells us that human beings have dignity. Christianity teaches that mankind is God’s crowning achievement, the full expression of God’s creative genius, and that he has good plans for us.

The true tragedy of our existence is not what we have become, but what we could have been. We all sense by intuition that mankind has not reached its potential. We each

have an instinct that tells us the human race was destined for better, that our dignity has been tarnished. Logic tells us that something catastrophic has happened to mankind. Christianity teaches that this catastrophe took place in the Garden of Eden. Evil entered the world, and people began to make sinful choices. A downward spiral of sin continues to the present day.

Christianity teaches that all people are guilty of sin, which halts our progress toward an abundant life. Not only is progress halted, but we also have become alienated from our Creator. It is just this gap—between our sinful state and the abundant life—that creates futility. Futility would not be so horrific if we did not know by instinct what we had lost. In the first chapter the question was posed, “Why am I still so restless?” Saint Augustine gave the answer in the first paragraph of his book *The Confessions*: “You have made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” The core solution of Christianity is that no matter how futile your life has become, Jesus Christ wants to restore you to your original dignity and give you rest for your soul both now and forever. This is true Christianity: No matter what you’ve done, you can be forgiven.

Jesus Nailed

The Christian solution for sin is that God came into the world to be a Savior. Why do we need a Savior? We wouldn’t need a Savior if we had done nothing wrong.

Theologian J. Gresham Machen once wrote, “Jesus died—that’s history. Jesus died for my sins—that’s doctrine.”⁴ The *history* and *doctrine* of Christ, though intertwined, are different.

The *history* of Jesus is the story of his *Incarnation*. Jesus was a living person who existed in history, performed remarkable miracles, claimed deity, and was resurrected from death. If the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus had never happened in history, there would be no Christian religion. The Jesus of history is the Christ of faith. Christianity *is* Jesus Christ. The *doctrine* of Christ— “he died for our sins”— is understanding that Jesus Christ claimed to make *atonement* for our sins, or to satisfy the “wages of sin is death” problem.

In his own words Jesus said, “I came that you may have life and have it abundantly. I came to seek and to save the lost. For God so loved that world that he sent me into the world so that whoever believes in me will not perish but have everlasting life. I tell you the truth, whoever hears my words and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned, he has crossed over from death to life. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. I shall lose none of them that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. My sheep know my voice, and no one can snatch them out of my hand.” About his identity Jesus said, “He who has seen me has seen the Father. The Father and I are one. I who speak to you am the Messiah.”⁵

These claims, of course, are either true, or they are not true. At this point, however, I am not asking you to believe Christianity, only to understand it.

Why a Human?

Christianity offers two compelling reasons why God sent his Son to become a human being. First, he reduced himself to flesh that we might comprehend him (the *Incarnation*). Second, through Jesus he offered a final, perfect sacrifice for our sins (the *Atonement*).

You might have imagined that if God had, say, one hundred characteristics, that in Jesus you might see ten characteristics on display. It is not like that at all. The Christian system teaches that Jesus is “the exact representation” of God’s being, all of God in a human body, and that seeing Jesus is seeing the Father.⁶

A favorite story of unknown origin illustrates the Incarnation of Jesus. Flurries of snow swirled on a chilly Christmas Eve. Standing at the front window a man waved as his wife and children drove away to attend the candlelight service. He couldn’t understand all the fuss about Jesus.

Alone, he busied himself decorating the family tree. Suddenly, he heard a *thump* against the window, and then another, and another, *thump ... thump*. He looked out, and there, shivering on the ground outside the window, lay several tiny sparrows attracted by the light and warmth inside.

Touched, the man went to the garage, turned on the light, and opened the door. The birds didn’t move. He got behind them and tried to shoo them in. They scattered. He made a trail into the garage by crumbling some crackers. They wouldn’t budge.

He was frustrated as it sunk in that he was a giant, alien creature who terrified the tiny birds. Why couldn’t he make them understand that what he wanted more than anything was to help them?

Disheartened, the man went back inside and stared out the window at the frightened little birds. Then, like a bolt of lightning, a thought struck him. *If only I could become a little bird myself—for just a moment. Then they wouldn’t be afraid, and I could show them how to find warmth and safety.*

Just then it dawned on him. *Now I understand. That’s why Jesus came.*

The Screen People

Physicist Hugh Ross depicted the same point by creating what I’m sure will become a renowned illustration. Imagine a couple of two-dimensional people who live on your computer screen—a couple of “stick” figures.

Suppose you, living in three dimensions, are sitting with your face eight inches away from the screen. To the “screen people,” who can only see in height and width, you are invisible. Now suppose you wanted to make yourself known to the screen people. How would you do it? First, you could touch your finger to the screen. How would you be perceived? The screen people would think you were a dot. And when you removed your

finger, you would once again be invisible to them.

Now suppose you wanted to try again, so this time you placed your finger lengthwise on the screen. How would you be perceived? The screen people, perceiving only height and width, would think you were a line. Next, imagine that you could actually push your hand through the screen—that it was a liquid surface. If you pushed your finger through, the screen people would perceive that you were a circle. If you kept pushing your arm through, they would perceive you as a bigger circle. But because they are unable to perceive in the third dimension, they will never perceive you as you are. The only way to communicate with them on their level would be to somehow reduce yourself to two dimensions and become a screen person. Then they could perceive you.

Ross makes the point that God, who has many more dimensions than we do, no doubt does interact with us in the same way we might interact with screen people—which would explain why people perceive God so differently, depending on what “part” of his other dimensions he happens to be revealing at the time.

The unique claim of Christianity, however, is that not only does God relate to us from his multidimensionality, but he has also reduced himself in his Son Jesus to *become*, in effect, a screen person so that we might comprehend him.⁷

Grace Prevailed

One day Mark was explaining Christianity to Ed. Ed was interested and said, “But I have nothing to offer!”

“You’re beginning to understand,” said Mark.

Another man said, “I don’t feel like I’m worthy of God.” He is close, very close, to understanding Christianity.

The principal requirement for becoming a Christian is to admit that you are not worthy to be one. Christianity is unique among all religions because it is the only religion based on nonperformance. Becoming a Christian is not about “doing” something but about acknowledging one’s inability to do *anything* to save oneself. It’s not about modifying your behavior to make God happy (more on this in the next chapter).

Rather, the work of salvation is a work of *grace*. The apostle Paul wrote, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”⁸ Once this simple idea called *grace* is grasped, it begins a chain reaction in the soul. There is no “merit” to be earned. Rather than receiving justice, we have through God’s mercy received grace, which leads to godly sorrow and to faith.

The New Testament declares this:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.... God was

reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.⁹

The Minimum Belief

The Christian system could be the subject of endless books. On second thought, I should say the Christian system *is* the subject of endless books. What is the minimum, though, that a true Christian believes?

No one can require a more qualified testimony, or can accept less, than "I, _____, a sinner, trust the Savior, Jesus, for the forgiveness of my sins and eternal life." Behind this confession of faith are the following truths:

About Ourselves

- Though created for glory and honor, we have all become sinners.
- No matter what we've done, we can be forgiven.

About Jesus

- Jesus, the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit, became a man, lived a sinless life, was crucified as a sacrifice for the sins of all men, was buried, was resurrected to life, ascended to heaven where he lives today with God the Father, and will come again to redeem those who believe in him and to judge the world.

About Salvation

- Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
- The apostle Paul said he only had one message—the necessity of turning from sin and turning to God, and of faith in our Lord Jesus.¹⁰
- It is by grace that we are saved, through faith.
- Jesus came to give us an abundant life (contra a life of futility).

Coming Back, or Coming, to God

I love a story C. S. Lewis tells in *Prince Caspian* (Book Four of *The Chronicles of Narnia*). The four heroes, Peter, Edmund, Lucy, and Susan, make an association with a dwarf named Trumpkin—a great warrior.

The five of them take a journey. The four children talk about a lion, Aslan—the Christ-figure in the story. Trumpkin doesn't believe in lions. Peter, Edmund, Lucy, and Susan do, because they have seen Aslan before; yet to this point in their journey they haven't seen him because of their doubts. Then, in the course of their trek, one by one all four children see Aslan; Trumpkin does not.

Susan, the last child to see Aslan, is filled with remorse for having wanted to go in a different direction. She says, "What ever am I to say to him?" Lucy suggests, "Perhaps you won't need to say much."

Then Aslan turns and faces the fivesome, filling them with both gladness and fear. Peter, their leader, approaches Aslan, drops to one knee, and says, "I'm so glad. And I'm so sorry. I've been leading them wrong ever since we started and especially yesterday morning." Aslan says only, "My dear son."

Then Aslan turns to Edmund and says, "Well done."

Then the deep-voiced lion says, "Susan, you have listened to your fears. Come, let me breathe on you. Forget them. Are you brave again?" Susan replies, "A little."

Then, in a much louder voice bordering on a roar, Aslan bellows out to Trumpkin, who now finally can see the lion, "Come here!" Trumpkin gasps, but the children aren't worried because they know Aslan well enough to see that he likes the dwarf very much. Trumpkin, though, has never seen a lion before, especially *this* lion. He does the only sensible thing and slowly obeys Aslan's command.

Aslan pounces. Holding him like a kitten in its mother's mouth, Aslan gives him a shake; Trumpkin's armor rattles, and he flies up in the air. As he comes down, the huge paws catch him as gently as a mother's arms and set him upright on the ground. Then Aslan asks, "Son of Earth, shall we be friends?"

"Ye-he-he-hes" comes the dwarf's response.¹¹

And this is how the Lord works with us. When the futility is unbearable, when it looks like we are about to perish, he turns to face us, forgives us, breathes courage on us, and, if we need it, pounces on us. It may feel like he's going to rip us limb from limb. He tosses us, but then he catches us in his soft, velvety paws and sets us upright and asks us if we can be friends. That's the end of living by any other system. Even when we are in utter, complete, total rebellion against God, in his kindness he shakes things up and asks us if we would like to be his friend.

Have you let your fears take you in a wrong direction but now are ready to come back? Perhaps you won't have to say much. Let him breathe on you. Have you been stubbornly going astray? Bow your knee, say I'm sorry, and hear him say "My dear son." Have you not believed in Christ? He likes you very much, and he says, "Come here!" He is the one who by means of futility has shaken you up. And now he is asking you, "Shall we be friends?"

If you are ready to be his friend for the first time, or ready to come back to him, all you have to do is tell him. Tell him you're sorry for your sins, you feel weighed down by them, you want to change, you believe in him now, you want him to save you and be your Lord. If you don't know exactly how to put it, you may want to pray the following prayer (or one similar to it):

Lord Jesus, I need you. The burden of futility and my sorrow for my sins weigh heavily

on me. I believe in you, Jesus. I believe you came and died for my sins. Thank you for giving me the gift of eternal life, as well as the promise of abundant life and rest for my soul. I want to be your friend. I receive you as my Savior and Lord. Change me from the inside out. Amen.

If you have prayed and received Christ, or renewed your relationship with him, welcome to the family, or welcome back. In the next chapter I will suggest a few steps you might take to develop a deepening relationship with him.

How to Have a Deepening Relationship with God

When Rick drove away from the racquetball club, he, too, was pensive. He went on to his dinner party and now sat lost in his thoughts as the speaker rambled on about the virtues of civic pride. *Man, I just don't know if I can take another one of these. I need something with more meat to it.* This wasn't the first time Rick had felt he wanted more out of life.

By nature Rick just wasn't very ambitious. He had never really had to work for grades, girls, or good things. As a result he took the good life for granted. He was much happier hunting and fishing or hitting the nightclubs than engaging in the pedestrian pursuits of law. The one gift that thrust Rick into the spotlight was his throwing arm. He had been the starting quarterback for Clemson University during his junior and senior years. He set several conference records, which earned him a brief mention in the hallowed pages of *Sports Illustrated*.

That's pretty much the way his entire life had gone—a minimum effort producing a charmed result. His football career ended after college, but a network of sports buddies who went pro had begun to blossom. When Rick decided to go to law school—only because his father had made such a big deal out of it—several of these guys wanted Rick to represent them. By a fluke, while still a law student, he had negotiated the largest salary and signing bonus in history for a tight end. And with that, Rick found himself in growing demand as a celebrity sports agent.

In recent months Rick had tried praying to God on several occasions, but it hadn't seemed to work. One of the things he had prayed was *God, if you exist, I want to know you.* Ironically, his racquetball conversation with Cliff was taking him in a direction from which he would never turn back. He had been living far away from God, but he had started a journey that would eventually lead him to the door of Christianity. Several years earlier his marriage had dissolved as fast as a sugar cube in hot tea. He and his ex-wife, Linda, were on friendly, even charitable, terms. Linda had been the prettiest girl on campus, but she wanted to settle down long before Rick wanted to. He had always been flying "somewhere." She was motivated to start a family partly by her work with special-needs children. She recognized that he was just a big kid she thought would never grow up. It turns out she had been right about the big-kid part but not about the never-grow-up part.

It's time to grow up, Rick thought. Sunday I'm going to church. I'm going to find out what John Thompson has found out about Christianity. I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired of my life. I need some relief.

On Sunday morning Rick sat next to a man who was friendly and helpful. *He looks normal enough,* thought Rick. He helped Rick follow the order of worship in the bulletin without smothering him. Rick noticed something in this man he could only describe as a "presence." It was a blend of self-confidence and humility, a genuine interest in others but apparently not for any personal gain and a profound happiness that issued from an

inner strength. Rick was captivated. The man's name was Jim.

Jim asked Rick, "Why don't we have breakfast sometime?"

Before he could stop himself, Rick had said, "How about Tuesday at my club. I'll buy." On Tuesday morning they greeted each other and spent the first cup of coffee on sports. After the waitress brought a second cup of coffee, Jim and Rick exchanged details about their marriages, work, education, and life ambitions. Jim was at peace with himself; Rick was not. It was a simple calculus. Rick wanted to know how to get what Jim had. Rick, however, had no idea how to lead into a conversation about the attractive quality he was observing in Jim's life. Jim helped him out by taking the initiative. "Rick, I'm glad to hear of your growing curiosity about spiritual things. Perhaps it would be useful for you to hear my story. Interested?"

"Very much so," Rick said.

"Okay then," he began. "I never really chafed against the idea that God exists when I was growing up. Actually, I never thought much about it one way or the other. My parents were agnostics, and I suppose I inherited the same point of view. They believed that God exists and that he created the world but that he isn't involved on a day-to-day basis. They were very moral people.

"I was raised to believe that if you want something badly enough, and if you're willing to work hard to get it, there's nothing you cannot accomplish in life. God gives us talents, and we become what we make of them.

"So I married my college sweetheart, went into business, and started building what I thought was a pretty good life. In fact, I did very well. But the more I achieved the emptier I felt."

At this point Rick, fifteen years Jim's junior, couldn't restrain himself and blurted out,

"Yes, that's exactly how I've been feeling."

Jim nodded knowingly and continued, "I tried a lot of different ways to fill the hole. I pursued all the normal avenues—Rotary Club, Chamber of Commerce, sales awards, country club. I accumulated money and bought several expensive toys. We moved into the big house and sent the kids to a private school. Nothing, though, satisfied my deepest longings for significance and purpose."

"That's it," Rick chimed in. "That's exactly what's been happening to me. How did you resolve it? I mean, you seem so at peace with yourself now."

"Well, that's true. I am, Rick. But I took the long road to get here. I really did try every possible avenue to find meaning until, finally, I ran out of options. The one avenue I had not tried was Christianity, because I was afraid I would lose what I thought I was trying

to gain. I thought coming to the Christian God would mean I would never be happy—that I would have to live in bondage to rules I didn't think I could keep. I also didn't want to give up my lifestyle.

“Was I ever wrong! I ended up in bondage all right, but it was bondage to monthly payments for a hollow lifestyle that never really got below the surface to anything deep about life and meaning. I thought that money would do what it won't and that God won't do what he will. I thought that money would make me happy and that God wouldn't bring peace and purpose to my life.

“By the ten-year mark in my business life, however, I was weary of it all. Money didn't deliver. I turned to God, and he *did* deliver.”

“That's nice,” said Rick. “I think that's where I'm at today. I don't know much about God, though. But unlike you, I'd be more than willing to give up my lifestyle if that's what it takes.” What Rick didn't say was that he had been drinking too much, trying to anesthetize the intangible pain that gnawed at his gut. In fact, he was drinking alone, keeping a bottle under the front seat of his car and getting blitzed several nights a week. It frightened him. He was close, very close, to becoming an alcoholic.

“It's an interesting thing about lifestyle, Rick,” Jim responded. “The guy who helped me get right with God told me, ‘You don't have to change your lifestyle at all. God may change what you desire, but it will still be what you want to do. Christianity,’ he said, ‘isn't about changing your behavior; it's about putting your faith in Christ.’ He was right. That's how it happened with me. I still live in the same house, drive the same kinds of cars, have the same job. But some appetites did change. I didn't ask them to change; they just did.”

“You know,” said Rick, “I've prayed to God several times recently that if he really exists, I'd like to know him. My best friend recently told me he went to a youth camp when he was in high school and prayed a prayer to give his life to Christ, or something like that. Does that make any sense? Is that what you're talking about? Is that the same religion? Because, frankly, I don't have a clue what he was talking about. Are you and he talking about the same religion? If it is, it sure didn't take root for him. He's miserable.” After what seemed like a satisfactory answer—though Rick didn't understand a word of it—they finished their breakfast and agreed to meet again in a week.

Meanwhile, Cliff was miserable. After Ellie's late-night talk with him he couldn't get to sleep. He lay there, just staring at the ceiling for over an hour. He may have thought everyone he cared about was going crazy on him, but he was drawn to have what these crazy people had—or were getting.

Ellie just about flipped the next morning when Cliff suggested they attend church that Sunday. A few days later they all got dressed up and went to the 11:00 A.M. service at the church where they had been married. What the pastor said connected with Cliff, as he painted word pictures of God as a loving Father, a forgiver, a healer, and a

physician. *Lord knows that's what I need*, Cliff thought, but he struggled to grasp the imagery because of the bad experiences he had had with his own father.

Cliff bowed his head in church and prayed silently, *Lord, I've been a bitter, resentful man. I've blamed you for my problems. But I was wrong. You are not the problem. I am. You are the solution. I've been living by my own best thinking for all of my life. My system hasn't worked. Help me if you can.* It was an honest prayer.

Cliff wrestled with how to tell Rick that he had become religious again. He didn't have to. Three weeks later Rick asked, "Well, have you had a chance to think about our studying the Bible together?"

"Rick, you'll never believe what's happened to me. After our conversation about God, I started thinking about my own life. I realized that everything you were saying about yourself fit me, too. You're quite an evangelist! Even on the drive home that night something came over me. It was like a spiritual experience, a sense of feeling pulled toward God. I felt a love for God and my wife like I had never felt before. It was extraordinary.

"Then I asked Ellie if she'd like to go to church. She about passed out. The pastor really spoke to me. Bottom line is, I'm starting to change. I have become very interested in taking a deeper look at Christianity. I have some doubts, but I think they're honest. I think I can work through them."

Rick couldn't wait another moment. He jumped in and told Cliff the story about his breakfast with Jim. Jim and Rick had already started meeting once a week to explore Christianity. Once Rick explained that Jim had already approved of the idea that Cliff join them, he said, "So what do you say? Want to join us?"

Cliff said, "Yes, I think I'd like that."

Justification and Sanctification ...

In the last chapter I mentioned that Christianity breaks itself down into two parts: "the gospel" (*kemrygma*) and "the teachings" (*didachem*). I mentioned that you don't need to know how an engine works in order to drive a car. You do, however, need to know a few things about driving. Embracing "the gospel" is like getting your license; "the teachings" make it safe for you to be on the road.

Salvation includes both *justification* and *sanctification*. The "act" of becoming a Christian is called *justification*—like getting a license to drive. The "process" of becoming a Christian is called *sanctification*.

Christianity teaches that once you have been *justified*—that is, declared righteous before God—you will be a Christian always and forever. That's the "Good News." No man can lose the salvation God grants. Jesus said it this way:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.¹

Christianity also teaches that God will *sanctify* you, or make you holy, and you must also seek holiness, which simply means, "become more like Christ." As someone has said, "God loves you just the way you are, but he loves you too much to leave you that way."

"The teachings" in the Bible tell us how to imitate Christ; it is a system—a worldview. Christian philosopher Francis Schaeffer once observed that after someone becomes a Christian, we have a responsibility to confirm them in a biblical worldview. If we don't, said Schaeffer, we risk losing them to an alien worldview—basically back to a worldly, moral, or religious worldview.

It is not duty that motivates Christians to obey the teachings, but gratitude—a gratitude that grows as the believer increasingly understands the grace given to him.

Not Behavior Modification

The core value of all religious systems except the Christian system is behavior modification—change and you will make God happy.

After I became a Christian, I assumed the core value of Christianity was behavior modification—to "act Christianly"—a view I mistakenly held for fourteen years. I knew I was saved by grace, but I figured it was up to me to prove that God had not made a mistake.

Exactly *not* that. Christianity is not behavior modification (a thing I do) but heart transformation (a thing grace does). Romans 12:2 does *not* say, "Do not conform any longer to the system of this world *but conform to the system of Christ.*" That would simply be substituting a system that doesn't work with a system we can't keep. It would be using human strength, desire, discipline, and willpower to modify our behavior—a tiring game people can play well for no more than a few hours at a time. Instead, the essence of what Romans 12:2 teaches is this: "Do not conform any longer to the system of this world *but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think.*" Christianity is not what man does for God by intense human effort, but what God does for man by sheer grace. Romans 9:16 puts it this way: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

The core value of the Christian system is not behavior modification but heart transformation. We don't change ourselves; we let God change the way we think. Philippians 2:13 tells us that God is working in us, giving us the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him. Behavior does then become "modified," but it is because our *minds* change. We truly, and increasingly, desire to please God from within, not superficially by becoming a martyr or a self-righteous prig.

God Is Like a Puzzle

It's fun to be a Christian. But not if you don't know what a Christian is and what he does. Perhaps the only thing more futile than not being a Christian is to be an inept one. When in despair I first embraced Christ, I started reading the Bible every day and found great comfort. I soon saw that Christianity was made up of a few major themes, which the Bible explains over and over again from different angles. I thought of it as a puzzle, in which, when you get 80 percent of the pieces put together, the whole picture makes sense.

Then it dawned on me that Christianity is more like a cube. In other words, below each puzzle piece there is depth. Each theme is not a single puzzle piece, but rather a sentence or paragraph. Then later I realized, "No, it's more than a paragraph, it's a whole chapter." Later still I saw that each puzzle piece is like the cover of an entire book. Eventually I came to understand that there has been a centuries-long conversation taking place about each of Christianity's great themes—grace, mercy, love, obedience, forgiveness, money, holiness, and so on. An entire library lies beneath the surface of each theme.

The Lord

John believed that Jesus Christ was his Savior. He assumed it was up to him to live in a way that was worthy of the name Christian. His experience, however, was that he couldn't. He wondered why his life was so powerless—until he attended a college campus-ministry meeting where, he said, "I heard that he was Lord."

Some men know God as Lord and don't live accordingly, but others just don't know. John simply didn't know. The right kind of knowledge changed everything. Usually it's simply a matter of lacking knowledge. The best, and only, way to fully enjoy Christianity is to fully immerse yourself in it. Let's talk about how to do that as a grateful response, rather than merely as a behavior-modification technique.

Spending Time with God

One thing inexperienced Christians find irritating about experienced Christians is their relentless talk about "spending time with God." A rabid Republican will, of course, irritate even a mild Democrat, and an enthusiastic football fan will unnerve almost anyone pulling for the other team, but why do people on the same team see things differently? A friend of mine, John Smith, says, "If someone told you that if you would spend thirty minutes a day with a man for one year you would receive \$10,000,000, it's pretty certain that at the end of the year you would have \$10,000,000." Experienced Christians are so relentless about "spending time with God" because they actually believe they have found something so valuable that they willingly forsake (that is, make secondary) all things to possess it.

In the same way, once a man changes allegiance and embraces Christ, he, too, will find a growing desire—perhaps an ache—to know more about the Liberator of his soul. It has been well said, "The soul that has once been waked, or stung, or uplifted by the desire for God, will inevitably awake to the fear of losing him."²

The Principles of Abundance

Many books have been written to assist us in the sanctification process, but here are ten basics and a declaration that one could make about each:

- **God:** I will seek to love God with all my heart, and all that this implies.
- **Personal Holiness:** I will seek to lead a holy life, and all that this implies.
- **Marriage:** I will seek to be a faithful, loving husband, and all that this implies.
- **Children:** I will seek to be a godly father and grandfather, and all that this implies.
- **Work:** I will seek to honor God in my work, and all that this implies.
- **Money:** I will seek to be a faithful steward, and all that this implies.
- **Ministry:** I will seek to serve God by building his kingdom, and all that this implies.
- **Health:** I will seek to lead a balanced life, and all that this implies.
- **Church:** I will seek to join and support a church, and all that this implies.
- **Friendship:** I will seek to be a loving, honest friend, and all that this implies.

It would be quite easy to convert these ten areas into a “To Do list” in order to earn favor or merit with God—it happens all the time. That would simply be inserting Christian values into a moral or religious system. I want you to do the right thing but not for the wrong reason. The right reason is because you are grateful to God for salvation. No man, of course, can do all these things. We are human beings, not machines. For that reason the Holy Spirit offers us ongoing power to obey, and Jesus offers us ongoing forgiveness when we don’t. Our calling is to live by the Spirit, not the flesh, but when we sin, which we will continue to do, we must confess it, accept God’s ongoing forgiveness, and invite the Spirit of Christ to guide us. The Bible says, “But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”³ And when we fail, Hebrews 5:2 teaches that “[Jesus] is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray.”

So what *are* the guidelines for Christian behavior? After carefully thinking about this, I offer the following thoughts as a credo for any man seeking to obey God as a grateful response to grace:

- Some things are specifically commanded in Scripture and must be obeyed.
- Some things are specifically prohibited in Scripture and must be avoided.
- Everything not specifically prohibited is permissible.
- Not everything permissible is beneficial.
- The Holy Spirit, through the Scriptures privately read or preached, will guide us into proper behavior by his grace.
- All things must be approached in the attitude of humble submission and obedience to God’s will and calling.
- The goal is to be wise.

The Cigar Story

For twenty-five years I have regularly enjoyed a good cigar—but never more than when

traveling abroad, where you can get your hands on some good Cuban stogies.

As almost everyone knows, America has held an embargo against bringing any Cuban products into the United States since 1962. Cigar lovers, though, maintain an underground that keeps these peerless Cuban stogies showing up from time to time.

Two years ago our family undertook a trip to the Holy Land, which I'd been dreaming about for twenty years. Just before returning, I purchased four premium Cuban cigars and put them in my backpack. I did not mention this to my wife or two children.

Thus began a great spiritual battle. No sooner had I buckled my seat belt than the Lord started dealing with me. A great moral test followed.

During the course of the twenty-seven hours it took to get back home I scoured my Bible looking for a loophole. The Holy Spirit kept convicting me of my "little" sin. The more I tried to wiggle free, the tighter the noose around my conscience became.

I would open my Bible to where I had placed my bookmark, read a few pages, put the bookmark back, then rest for a moment with my eyes shut. A few minutes later I would open to the bookmark, read a few more pages, then put it back and rest some more. This went on for several hours.

After hours of reading the Bible and looking for an answer that would make me less culpable, I finally asked the Lord, "What would you have me do?"

Just then I remembered that my two children had given me the wine-colored leather bookmark as a gift a dozen years earlier. It had been in and out of my hand a dozen times already. I glanced down and read its message, "It is a wonderful heritage to have an honest father"— Proverbs 20:7.

That was about as clearly as God had ever spoken to me. I confessed my sin, but, of course, my mind rationalized, *You already have the cigars in your backpack.* It wasn't difficult to go from there to the thought *Okay, I'm going to declare the price of these cigars, but I'll put it in with the leather cigar case I bought as a souvenir of the trip. Then, if they ask me any question whatsoever, not only will I tell the truth, I'll volunteer information. I'll offer them these four contraband cigars for confiscation. In fact, I'm going to put them in the very top of my backpack, where they will be most conspicuous.* These things I did, but I still felt queasy.

We deplaned and started working our way through the customs maze. No one said a word. My guilt was so strong, I almost asked someone to ask me a question. Finally, we had one last stop—the one where they randomly ask some people to open their luggage.

I led our family toward the final exit. About ten steps from the agent my wife looked me straight in the eye and asked, "Are you bringing any Cuban cigars into the country?"

My knees wobbled, and my legs buckled. *I can't believe she did that! Ten steps from the agent!*

We finished running the gauntlet and gave the agent our passports and customs form. She smiled sincerely, gave a quick glance, then waved us through. I couldn't believe it. I wanted to confess! I wanted to turn over those cigars to someone! But, no. She waved us through.

So I kept going, the cigars practically screaming to be noticed.

The next morning, now riddled with guilt like Swiss cheese, I went upstairs and called my two children to my side. "I've done something wrong," I began, then proceeded to confess everything. I even shared the jolt I got when I saw the verse on the bookmark they had given me.

"Will you forgive me?" I asked. They both said of course they would, and it wasn't *that* bad, so don't worry about it.

"Well, what should I do with the cigars?" I asked.

"Dad, you shouldn't have brought them into the country in the first place, but now that they're here, don't worry about it," they told me.

Guilt somewhat assuaged, I thanked them. But I was still troubled.

During the entire trip a portion of Scripture I had memorized twenty-five years ago kept coming to mind, though hazily. The next morning, after a thankful night of good rest in my own bed, I rose early and turned to the passage containing these words of Jesus: Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?⁴

I was starting to get the message! After my wife and kids stirred to life, I called a family meeting, read them the passage, and told them I had decided that I needed to destroy the cigars.

Let me hasten to point out that I'm not trying to tell anyone else what they should do. I'm only speaking for myself. To be completely honest, I had smuggled a few Cuban cigars into the country on three, maybe four, previous occasions. This particular day, though, God spoke to me in a crystal-clear voice through his Word and Spirit. For me, destroying those delicious but contraband stogies was a test I could not afford to fail. However, I have enough larceny left in my heart that I wanted to get *some* value in return. So I told the story at the Bible study I teach on Friday mornings, then I cut up the cigars in front of the group. It got a good laugh, so not all was lost.

The lesson for me was simple: *scrupulous obedience*.

As someone has said, "Make sure that your bumper sticker isn't the only thing in your life that tells people you're a Christian."

I don't know about you, but I have so many "big" things I'm dreaming about and working toward, I can't afford to have *any* "little" thing disqualify me. This attitude will ultimately do no good, however, if it's merely behavior modification. It can only come from an increasing desire to please God out of a grateful, transforming heart. It will only come from a growing understanding of the Christian system and a deepening relationship with Jesus Christ.

And when is the best time to do all this? A Chinese proverb says, "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now."

Afterword

As you have been able to see for yourself, it is not unreasonable to believe that Christianity is true. If anything, given the weight of the evidence and the coherence of the arguments, it is more unreasonable not to believe.

What makes the Christian system so encouraging is that it provides meaningful answers to our deepest questions about life—questions for which other systems simply don't have satisfying answers. There are agreeable explanations to resolve the things that create doubt. Christianity is a religion that offers us a hope that quenches—God wants to redeem our lives from futility, despair, sin, and death. We are not alone. Someone cares. God cares. And that's an idea that is overwhelming.

As you now turn your attention to other affairs, let me encourage you to do three things. First, take Jesus Christ with you. Let him transform your heart. Let him increasingly be your first and best thought in every situation. Pray to him about everything. Second, become part of a “community”—a church that honors Jesus Christ and faithfully teaches the Bible. It is doubtful that one can be a successful Christian in isolation. Third, think of someone who needs to read this book, and give it to them.

Keep the faith. God is good. I've been praying for you.

—PATRICK MORLEY

Notes

Chapter 1—THE SOUL’S SEARCH FOR REST

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 36.
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #134 (London: Penguin Books, 1966).
3. I got the idea of co-opting this “business” thought for a spiritual purpose from Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

Chapter 2—THE FEELING OF FUTILITY

1. Ecclesiastes 2:3.
2. See Ecclesiastes 2:22.
3. Ecclesiastes 2:10–11, 17.
4. *Orlando Sentinel*, September 9, 1999, sec. A, p.2.
5. Cited in Walter Kaufmann, *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 345–360.
6. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 90.

Chapter 3—THE WORLDLY SYSTEM

1. These systems are given various names like phases of the soul, the strands or elements of religion, worldviews, life stages, spheres, or stages along life’s way. Søren Kierkegaard, the Christian writer many also consider the father of existentialism, called his systems the *aesthetic*, *ethical*, and *religious* spheres, and then further divided his religious sphere into *religiousness A* for what all religions have in common, and *religiousness B* for true Christianity.

C. S. Lewis in *The Problem of Pain* identified three strands or elements in all developed religions, and in Christianity a fourth. He called them the experience of the *numinous* (which I will explain in a bit more detail in chapter 5), the consciousness of a *moral law* at once approved and disobeyed, and making the numinous power of which we feel awe the *guardian* of the morality to which we feel obligation. The fourth strand—*Christianity*—is based on a historical event. Elsewhere he identifies the unbeliever as a *pagan*.

The apostle Paul, using categories he writes about in the Bible, calls his stages the *flesh*, the *law*, and the *Spirit*.

This table compares these four systems:

	One	Two	Three	Four	
Kierkegaard	Aesthetic	Ethical	Religiousness A	Religiousness B	
Lewis	Pagan	Moral Law	Numinous	Christianity	
		Guardian			
Apostle Paul	Flesh	Law I	Law II	Spirit	
My Categories	Worldly	Moral	Religious	Christian	

For our purposes I will call these four systems *worldly*, *moral*, *religious*, and *Christian*.

2. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 202.

3. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #136 (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 68.
4. See Romans 12:2.
5. See Galatians 5:16; Ephesians 2:3

Chapter 4—THE MORAL SYSTEM

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 21.
2. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 21.

Chapter 5—THE RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

1. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1923), 12–13.
2. Discussed in C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 22.

Chapter 6—GIVING THE CHRISTIAN SYSTEM ANOTHER LOOK

1. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 127.
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #427 (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 155.
3. Pascal, *Pensées*, #136, 67.

Chapter 7—IS THE IDEA OF GOD LOGICAL?

1. I will attempt to show the reasonable grounds for concluding that Christianity is true. My goal will be to increase the reader's confidence in what can be known about Christianity by presenting a progression of proofs and probabilities, the most persuasive and compelling first, the end result being a movement in the reader's mind from possible to plausible to probable to certain belief. In our look at the Christian system it is not one piece of evidence but the cumulative weight of all the evidence that brings us to a point of saying, "Yes, the weight of the evidence has moved me beyond reasonable doubt." Each proof gives a degree of confidence, not completely, but the accumulation of the partials is complete. First, I will begin with the most certain facts and proofs and proceed to the least certain. In this way we will never lay a stronger brick on top of a weaker one, thereby giving the strongest structural integrity to our case at any particular point. Second, I will blend systems together, freely picking out ideas that are most helpful to whatever stage we are in at a given point. For example, we will begin in the rationalist mode of Descartes and end in the third order of Pascal's system.
2. Here I am consciously selecting Descartes' term *intuition* because I am at this point using his method of rational doubt to arrive at an idea with such absolute clarity and distinctness that it can be taken as a certain truth immediately apprehended by any honest person. This gives us a surefooted starting point of absolute certainty. Though our ultimate goal is to prove Christianity beyond reasonable doubt (probability), at this early point we have found an idea about which we can have certainty. Descartes would say that the value of a conclusion depends on whether the premise is true or not. I agree. I disagree that for a premise to be true it must be demonstrated as true. However, at this point we do have a premise that can be shown as a clearly true idea. From this foundation we can reason and build in a progressive and orderly manner.
3. If there were "nothing," then there would be no necessity of a Necessary Being (but then, of course, you wouldn't exist to talk about it).

4. The idea of a Necessary Being, what I call God, includes at least two subintuitions: a “creative” power and a “sustaining” power. The Bible, for example, refers to God and Jesus as Creator and Sustainer. We do not find in intuition, however, the necessity of a “redeeming” power. Notwithstanding, the Bible also refers to God and Jesus as a Redeemer. This I will explore throughout the remainder of the book.

Chapter 8—SHOULDN'T SCIENCE RULE OVER THEOLOGY?

1. These numeric values were determined in 1999 by astronomers making measurements using the Very Long Baseline Array, a system of ten large radio-telescope antennae placed 5,000 miles across the United States from the U.S. Virgin Islands to Hawaii. Working together as a single unit, the antennae can measure motions in the distant universe with unprecedented accuracy.
2. Cited in Kitty Ferguson, *Stephen Hawking: Quest for a Theory of Everything, The Story of His Life and Work* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 94.
3. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 174.
4. Stephen Hawking, *The Illustrated A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 163.
5. This assertion grows out of the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of natural law.
6. Science grew out of a culture that required answers from beyond, from something transcendent.
7. For this section I have depended on my lecture notes from Dr. Charles MacKenzie, professor of philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary/Orlando.

Chapter 9—SINCE LIFE IS SO FUTILE, WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE GOD CARES ABOUT ME PERSONALLY?

1. See Romans 8:19–21.
2. Ecclesiastes 3:14.
3. See C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 44.
4. Cited in Philip Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 149.

Chapter 10—HOW CAN A MAN STAKE HIS ENTIRE LIFE ON BELIEVING THE BIBLE IS TRUE?

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1948), 36.

Chapter 11—HOW TO COME BACK TO GOD

1. Matthew 16:26.
2. Cited in a press release on the Jesus Film Project, March 23, 2000.
3. Romans 6:23.
4. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1923), 27.
5. See John 10:10; Luke 19:10; John 3:16; 5:24; 6:37, 39; 10:27–28; 14:9; 10:30;

- 4:26.
6. See Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 2:9; John 14:9.
 7. Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996), 74–76, 89–100.
 8. Ephesians 2:4–5.
 9. 2 Corinthians 5:17–19, 21.
 10. See Acts 20:21.
 11. C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: HarperTrophy, 1951), 152–55.

Chapter 12—HOW TO HAVE A DEEPENING RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

1. John 10:27–29.
2. C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Fountain, 1963), 73.
3. John 16:13.
4. Luke 16:10–11.

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Patrick Morley

Since the late 1980s, Patrick Morley has been one of America's most-respected authorities on the unique challenges and opportunities that men face. After spending the first part of his career in the highly competitive world of commercial real estate, Patrick has been used throughout the world to help men think more deeply about their lives. In 1973 Patrick founded Morley Properties, which for several years was hailed as one of Florida's one hundred largest privately held companies. During this time he was the president or managing partner of fifty-nine companies and partnerships. In 1989 he wrote *The Man in the Mirror*, a landmark book that burst forth from his own search for meaning, purpose, and a deeper relationship with God. This best-selling book captured the imaginations of hundreds of thousands of men worldwide. As a result, in 1991 Patrick Morley sold his business and founded Man in the Mirror, a ministry to men. Through his speaking and writing, he has become a tireless advocate for men, encouraging and inspiring them to change their lives in Christ. He has now written nine books.

"Our ministry exists," says Patrick Morley, "in answer to the prayers of all those wives, mothers, and grandmothers who have been praying for the men in their lives for decades."

Man in the Mirror's faculty members conduct church-sponsored men's events nationwide. Patrick's dream is to network with other ministries and churches of all denominations to reach every man in America with a credible offer of salvation and the resources to grow in Christ.

Patrick Morley graduated with honors from the University of Central Florida, which selected him to receive its Distinguished Alumnus Award in 1984. He has completed studies at the Harvard Business School and Reformed Theological Seminary. Every Friday morning Patrick teaches a Bible study to 150 businessmen in Orlando, Florida, where he lives with his wife, Patsy, and his dog, Katie. Patrick and Patsy have two grown children.

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