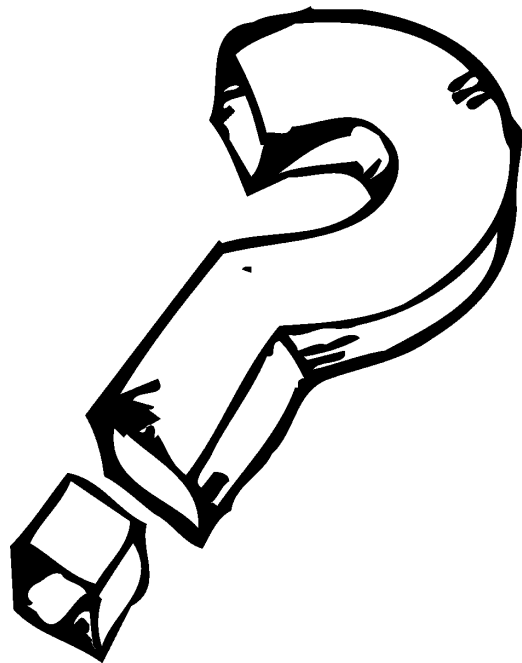
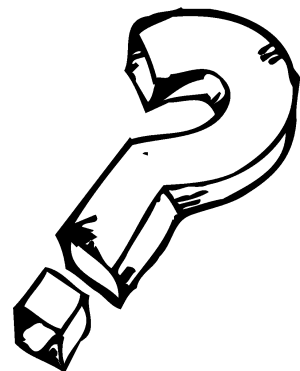


A Reasonable Faith



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by Brian Johnston



1. Subway surprise

Marcel Sternberger was a methodical Hungarian of nearly 50, with bushy white hair. He always took the 9 minutes past 9 Long Island train from his suburban home to Woodside, New York, from where he caught a subway into the city.

On the morning of January 10 1948, Sternberger boarded the 9:09 as usual. But while he was travelling, he suddenly decided to visit Laszlo Victor, a Hungarian friend who lived in Brooklyn and whom he knew was ill. So, at Ozone Park, Sternberger changed to the subway for Brooklyn, went to his friend's house and stayed there until mid-afternoon.

He then boarded a Manhattan-bound subway for his Fifth Avenue office. The subway car was crowded, and there seemed no chance of a empty seat. But just as he entered, a man sitting by the door suddenly jumped up and left, and so he slipped into that empty place. By now, he'd been living in New York long enough not to even try to start conversations with strangers. But being a photographer, he had developed the habit of analyzing people's faces, and was immediately struck by the features of the passenger on his left.

The face belonged to a man who was probably in his late 30s, whose eyes seemed to have a hurt expression in them. Strangely enough, he

happened to be reading a Hungarian-language newspaper, and something prompted Sternberger to say in Hungarian, "I hope you don't mind if I glance at your paper." The man seemed surprised to be addressed in his native language. But he answered politely, "You may read it now. I'll have time later on."

During the half-hour ride to town, they had quite a conversation. The man told Sternberger that his name was Bela Paskin. He'd been a law student when World War II had broken out, and he'd been placed in a German labour battalion and sent to the Ukraine. Later he was captured by the Russians and put to work burying the German dead. After the war, he covered hundreds of miles on foot until he reached his home in Debrecen, a large city in eastern Hungary.

As it happened, Sternberger knew Debrecen quite well, and they talked about it for a while. Then Paskin told Sternberger the rest of his story. When Paskin had returned to the apartment once occupied by his father, mother, brothers and sisters, he found strangers living there instead. Then he went upstairs to the apartment that had belonged to him and his wife. It, too, was occupied by strangers - none of whom had ever heard of his family.

As he was leaving, full of sadness, a boy ran after him, calling "Paskin bacsi! Paskin bacsi!" - which means Uncle Paskin. The child was the son of some old neighbours of his. He went to the boy's home and talked to his parents. They told him: "Your whole family is dead. The Nazis took them and your wife to Auschwitz."

Auschwitz was one of the worst Nazi concentration camps. Paskin gave up all hope.

A few days later, too heartsick to remain any longer in Hungary, he set out again on foot, stealing across border after border until he reached Paris. From there, he managed to immigrate to the United States in October 1947, just three months before this encounter on the Brooklyn subway.

All the time he'd been talking, Sternberger kept thinking that somehow this story seemed familiar. A young woman he'd met recently at the home of friends had also been from Debrecen; and she'd been sent to Auschwitz; and from there she'd been transferred to work in a German munitions factory. Her relatives had been killed in the gas chambers.

Later, she was liberated by the Americans and brought to the United States in the year 1946. He'd written down her address and phone number, because he'd been intending to invite her to meet his family. It was highly unlikely there could be any connection, but still, as

he neared his station, he asked Paskin, "Was your wife's name Marya?"

The man's face turned pale. "Yes!" he answered. "How did you know?" He looked as if he were about to faint. Sternberger took him by the arm at the next station and led him to a phone booth. It seemed hours before Marya Paskin answered, for she was in the habit of never answering it because she had so few friends that the calls were always for someone else. This time, however, there was no one else at home and, after letting it ring for a while, she responded.

Sternberger explained who he was, and asked her to describe her husband. She seemed surprised at the question, but gave the description. Then he asked her where she'd lived in Debrecen. After turning to confirm the answer, Sternberger then invited the man he'd met on the subway to take the telephone and talk to his wife!

He then put Paskin into a taxicab, directed the driver to take him to Marya's address, paid the fare, and said goodbye. Bela Paskin's reunion with his wife was a moment so poignant, so electric with suddenly released emotion, that afterward neither he nor Marya could recall much about it.

By any standards, that afternoon beginning with the encounter on the Brooklyn subway was a memorable one for all concerned.

But was it chance that made Marcel Sternberger suddenly decide to visit his sick friend and so take a subway line he'd never ridden before?

Was it chance that caused the man sitting by the door of the car to rush out just as Sternberger came in?

Was it chance that caused Bela Paskin to be sitting beside Sternberger, and reading a Hungarian newspaper?

Was it chance, someone has asked, or did God ride the Brooklyn subway that afternoon?

The remarkable story which ended in reunion for Bela and Marya on that January day in 1948 had begun with the disaster of the Second World War. As with millions of others, calamity had engulfed them and forced them to be separated for years, with all hope gone of ever being together again. That was certainly the case once it had been reported to Bela that his wife Marya had perished in Auschwitz. (1)

The entire human race, in fact, was engulfed in disaster almost from the start. A disaster which not only led to a breakdown in human relationships, but a breakdown in the relationship between the Creator, God, and his creatures. Of course, I'm referring to the Biblical revelation of what took place in the Garden of Eden. We dismiss this as fiction at our peril. In fact, many years ago I came across a well-documented account of how the earliest Chinese writing system was

based on word pictures which retold the history of the early chapters of the book of Genesis. I've since shown it to Chinese students who have confirmed that it's accurate, and by removing what had seemed like a cultural barrier, it's been instrumental in leading at least one of them to personal faith in Jesus Christ. The earliest beliefs and understanding of the Chinese people about God are perfectly consistent with what we read in the early chapters of Genesis. The biblical account of Adam and Eve is certainly no myth or fable.

And when our first parents disobeyed God, by defying his word and eating forbidden fruit - which was the vital test of human obedience - it was the beginning of a long outward journey from God. Nothing has shaped human history as profoundly as that disastrous decision by our first parents. All the suffering we presently see in the world can be traced back to having its origin in the separation between humanity and God which was the consequence of them falling into that first temptation. Wars and misery and every conceivable disruption of human lives have followed in its wake.

Alienated from the life of God, we had no hope of recovering what had been lost. Like Marya, we could be thought of as dead, as good as dead, certainly dead as regards God, 'dead in our sins' the Bible says.

But the Bible goes on to speak into our situation, and what it has to say to us is good news. Return and reunion are amazingly possible! Not only the reconciling of human differences by the grace of God, but a remedy for the basic problem of our separation from God. Yes, the Bible claims we can find God again! It even tells us, 'he is not far from each one of us' (Acts 17:27). In a way that's like Bela and Marya in our story - after separation for years brought about by the Second World War, they'd actually come to be living close to each other in the United States without being aware of it.

But if providence was involved in their story - remember one commentator's question: "Did God ride the Brooklyn subway that afternoon?" - then the reality of the big picture of what's happened in human history is infinitely more

amazing. God entered history in human flesh. More than riding the subway; he - in the person of his Son, and as man, hung on a Roman cross just outside the city of Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago!

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

If you trust in that Bible verse with all your heart - if you truly believe the truth it contains about Jesus Christ, God's Son, dying as your substitute to pay the price of your forgiveness before a holy God - then you, too, are part of the ultimate story of reunion! For then Christ has brought you to God: enmity has been reconciled and distance eliminated.

(1) Paul Deutschman, *Great Stories Remembered*, edited and compiled by Joe L. Wheeler, Focus on the Family Publishers, December 1996

2. Something worth repeating!

There's a verse in the Bible which says: *the righteous will live by his faith* (The Bible Prophet, Habakkuk 2:4). That verse has been described as 'a diamond in a pile of soot', because we find this sparkling verse in a very dark and sombre historical context.

The prophet Habakkuk has been complaining to God about the shortcomings and failures of his own people, the Jews. God agrees, but then gives Habakkuk a shock by telling him that his plan is to use the cruel military might of the Babylonian Empire to discipline and judge his own Jewish people. At this, Habakkuk is horrified: aren't the Babylonians even worse! In what way is it fair that they should become the instruments of God's judgement on the Jews? Another famous Bible verse talks of judgement as 'God's strange work' (Isaiah 28:21) - and with this description, I have to say, Habakkuk would have agreed.

There's a wider issue here - one that's always relevant - and contained in the question: Why do bad things happen to good people? We're in a better position than Habakkuk to answer that, due to the

fact that we can see further - now that we've got the New Testament in our possession - and that reveals more of God's purposes. But even so, we can't claim to have all the answers. When a person close to us is overwhelmed by tragedy, the most appropriate reaction, at least initially, may simply be *to weep with those who weep* (Romans 12:15) Later, we may be able, sensitively, to share a few words - perhaps along the lines of what someone else has said when he wrote: 'a question mark still remains over human suffering, but it needs to be set over against the cross of Christ, the mark of divine suffering' (Stott).

When the intellectual challenge comes - rather than the emotional - which asks: "Where is God when it hurts?" then it would only be fair to reply: "But where is atheism when it hurts?" Surely, there's cold comfort in being told there's nothing out there but 'blind, pitiless indifference' (Dawkins). The Bible assures us God is there and he cares.

But let's return to Habakkuk and his dilemma. Remember he's just been told by God that the wicked among his people are to be judged by those

whom he considers to be even more wicked - not to mention brutal as well. It's in this context that we find the words which the Bible considers worth repeating - three times in fact, in different parts of the New Testament. The words - part of God's fuller answer to the prophet - are: *the righteous will live by his faith* (Habakkuk 2:4). It's here we find the 'diamond in a pile of soot', as one commentator put it. It could be that in the original historical situation we've been thinking about, back in Habakkuk's day, these words meant that each Jew who believed what God had said about the Chaldean besieging of Jerusalem, would be able to make his escape from the place, and save his life.

But, for us, these words mean so much more, in terms of how they are applied later in the Bible. They actually speak to our need of getting right with God. I'm reminded of the time when I pulled into a bus station in the Philippines, and there on the platform was a large sign which said: 'Get right with God or be left by God'. It had a directness which made it memorable. Which is good, if we understand it properly. It's about our need to be in a right relationship with God, so that we don't get left behind when Christ returns, as promised, to receive all true believers on himself to be with himself (John 14:3).

We may struggle at first to understand what that Bible verse says about getting right with God.

Martin Luther certainly did. He's been described as the tormented monk in the Black Tower - because he was studying the bible letter to the Romans chapter 1, verse 17 in the heated study of the tower belonging to the Black Cloister in Wittenberg - and he was wrestling with its meaning. The verse says:

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "but the righteous man shall live by faith" (Romans 1:17). As you'll notice, that's a quotation of Habakkuk's original words.

This was when the light broke upon Luther - his conversion and this breakthrough in his thinking involved the correct understanding of God's righteousness. This is how Luther himself put it: 'Night and day I thought over it until ... I understood that the righteousness of God is of such a nature that He justifies us by grace and mercy through faith. Upon that I felt I was reborn and had entered Paradise through an open door'.

These, then, were the words that energized Luther's faith: 'The righteous shall live by faith' or as we might equally well translate it: 'The righteous by faith shall live'. I'll come back to that, if I may. But first, let's be clear about the righteousness: the righteousness of God which is revealed from faith to faith, is not righteousness as in a characteristic of God, but it's a God-type of righteousness which we, too, can

have. But how? Notice that it says that it's 'from faith to faith'. This righteousness is both itself the result of faith, and is also capable of producing faith in our lives. The righteousness that is from faith is our standing before God - we're at once made right with him. And the faith that such righteousness leads to, or gives rise to, seems to be a reference to our day-to-day state before God, as we live holy lives that are pleasing to him by faith. It's as if we could say: 'The righteous by faith shall live by faith'. For both thoughts are true. The first part of the letter which the apostle Paul writes to the Romans is about defending the truth of how - before God - we are made righteous by faith; and the second part, from chapter 12 onwards, is all about the practical results which are to be seen in our lives - as we, who have become righteous, now need to live by faith - but these two things will be explained further by the other two repeats of this famous Bible text, as we'll see.

For we meet it again in Paul's letter to the Galatians, where in chapter 3 we read:

For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, "cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them."

Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "the righteous man shall live by faith."

However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, "he who practices them shall live by them."

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us - for it is written, "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (Galatians 3:10-13).

'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law'. 'By all things', notice - nothing less than perfect performance is God's standard. I wonder if you can image with me there being two persons: one standing on a valley floor, and the other standing on the hill-top? Such a big difference in their height as measured above sea-level, but it's equally true of both of them that neither of them can touch the stars. Now the point is this. We may live a better life than someone else, but neither of us can reach God's standard. That's a sheer impossibility for anyone.

And so God's answer is to gift to us through faith what we do not (and can never) merit: and that gift is a God-type righteousness, just like his own. He's able to do that because the curse of our failure was taken and borne by Christ in our place (as our substitute - he being God's son - that's what the cross was about).

Now, we've got one last place to visit where again we read about 'The righteous by faith shall live'. This final time is in the Bible letter to the Hebrews chapter 10:

For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay. But my righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.

But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul (Hebrews 10:37-39).

Christ, who bore the curse in his first appearing, will judge the world at his second appearing. But notice again the insistence that true Christianity is not a religion of works; it's about having a personal relationship with God. Those who belong to God, in the secure relationship Christianity offers, can never fall away from salvation. The shrinking back to 'utter loss' that's mentioned here has to do with

failing to preserve our present life in worthwhile service for the Lord. It's about the here and now; not the hereafter. The writer was confident his appeal would find acceptance, and so his readers would go on to live out the life of faith. Not only could nothing change their standing with God, but he was also confident that the good state of their Christian lives would be preserved.

So if the emphasis in Romans is on 'the righteous'; and the emphasis in Galatians is on 'by faith'; then the emphasis in Hebrews is on 'shall live' - for there the issue is about living to please God in our service. I hope you agree that this key text is worth repeating: 'the righteous by faith shall live'.

3. The deadliest day

Anyone lifted up from sea level and dropped on the top of Mount Everest would lose consciousness within minutes and quickly die. A properly trained and prepared climber can perform at that altitude with an oxygen supply - but not all that well, and not for long. An experienced climber tells us that even with a delivery of two litres of oxygen per minute, a climber might still have to stop and draw three or four heaving lungfuls of air after each awkward step.

Climbing with oxygen along the blade of the summit ridge leading to the peak of Mount Everest, John Krakauer says (in his book *In Thin Air*) he felt drugged and disengaged from what was happening around him. The world beyond his rubber mask seemed like a movie projected in slow motion across the front of his goggles. He needed to remind himself over and over again that there was 7,000 feet of sky on either side of him, and he'd pay for a single wrong step with his life.

This was May 10th, 1996, and it would turn out to be a fateful date in the history of attempts on the world's most famous mountain. Plodding slowly up the last few steps to the summit, John had the sensation of moving slowly as if under water. Then he says he found himself on top of a

slender wedge of ice littered with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminium survey pole - but with nowhere higher to climb! He'd actually reached the top of the world! A string of Buddhist prayer flags snapped furiously in the wind. To the north, the Tibetan plateau stretched to the horizon.

Reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation; but John suddenly realized that the summit was in reality only the halfway point. Any feeling of self-congratulation was immediately banished by the terrifying thought of the dangerous descent that lay ahead. It was even as he turned to go down, he experienced the first moment of alarm - a glance at his regulator showed that his oxygen was almost all used up.

Dizzy, and fearing he'd black out, he began his descent. Shortly, over at the South Summit he could see another climber, one of the guides, Andy Harris, and he appeared to be sorting through a pile of oxygen bottles. "Yo, Andy!" he yelled. "Bring me a fresh bottle."

"There's no oxygen here!" the guide shouted back. "These bottles are all empty!" John panicked with no idea what to do. Just then, another climber went past on his way down

from the summit, and he didn't seem too concerned about going without an oxygen bottle. So he gave John his bottle, and they quickly scrambled over to the South Summit together.

But when they got there, an examination of the oxygen supplies lying there actually showed that they were, in fact, six full bottles – not empty after all, as Andy Harris had told them. Harris, however, refused to believe it. He kept insisting that they were all empty, and nothing could convince him otherwise. Right then it should have been obvious that Harris was acting irrationally - his brain confused by lack of oxygen, but the judgement of the other climbers was also affected by lack of oxygen, so they didn't register how irrational Andy was. As John said later, the thought never entered his own crippled mind that Harris was in deep trouble, and he wasn't going to make it back down the mountain alive.

Many of the events that day make harrowing reading, but nothing has made a more vivid impression on me than the thought of Andy Harris, left behind on the unforgiving mountain-side to die. And, all the time, all he needed to save his life at any moment that day was within easy reach, but his oxygen-starved mind deluded him into thinking there was nothing in those life-saver bottles. How tragic! To perish in the snow, when all the provisions he needed were right there.

Unfortunately, I see this same sort of

behaviour repeated around me every day. The sin-infected mind behaves like the oxygen-depleted brain. It rejects as 'foolishness' the only thing that can save it. The Bible says:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
(1 Corinthians 1:18)

It's one of the most tragic effects of sin on the human mind that it makes us consider God's answer to our need as 'foolishness'. The Bible describes those who don't know God or his salvation as operating out of *the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding* (Ephesians 4:17,18).

And how darkened is the understanding of some like Richard Dawkins who seems to delight in styling himself as Britain's most famous atheist. In his mind, the unprovable belief that all things came about by chance strongly supports his other belief that God does not exist.

His is undoubtedly an extreme position, not one which the majority of people take, but some think the existence of evil in the world is an obstacle to believing in an all-powerful, all-loving God. But surely that's warped or twisted thinking - the output of a futile, sin-affected mind. For if there is such a thing as evil, and there undoubtedly is, then there must also be that which is good. Its existence is also required

so that the very term evil is meaningful by contrast. And, if good and evil both exist, there must in fact be a whole range of values in between, determined by some scale of measurement - known as a moral code or law. That moral law is a clear indication of the existence of the moral law-giver, whom the Bible identifies as God.

But some have tolerance and respect for just about any religious system except Christianity. Perhaps it's the exclusive nature of Christianity's truth claims that cause some to react in this way. Society tends to want to be more inclusive in its policies these days. But Christianity's claims are non-negotiable. To be authentic, it has to remain true to the claims of Christ himself who said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, no-one comes to the Father except by me"* (John 14:6). Of course, that's exclusive. If it wasn't, it would also be meaningless. Truth is exclusive, full stop. For if truth was inclusive of error, then error, as such, wouldn't exist, and as a result truth would no longer be able to be distinguished, so truth too would cease to exist. Truth by definition has to be exclusive.

Even within so-called Christianity there are many schools of thought varying widely from what the Bible teaches - even on such a fundamental issue as the way of salvation. Here we're talking about knowing salvation from the penalty of our sins; in other words knowing

we're forgiven or 'right with God.' Is there a verse which ought to make it clear? Well, the apostle Paul's statement at the beginning of First Corinthians chapter 15 scores top marks for clarity and simplicity surely. It's there we find him saying:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved ... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time. (1 Corinthians 15:1-6)

Notice Paul says this is of first importance, as communicated directly from Christ. The gospel, or good news - the heart of the Christian message - boils down to just two points: that Christ died for our sins; and that he was raised from the dead on the third day. His burial is evidence for his death; and his appearances are evidence in support of his resurrection.

These are the two outstanding historical facts with which we must engage, and it's absolutely essential that we do. Life or death hangs in the balance, and it's an eternal decision. Even though this is all that stands between a person and a lost eternity,

the sin-infected mind shrouded in darkness and futile in its thinking refuses to see this as good news. This gracious provision from God for our eternal well-being is within reach, yet so many push it away from themselves believing it to be nonsense or foolishness. These are verdicts which come from minds crippled by sin and depleted of true reason.

Just as Andy Harris insisted that the oxygen bottles were empty because his mind was already starved of oxygen, so many today pronounce Christianity as a vain or empty thing. The Bible reveals the source of this fatal mistake when Paul says a little further on in his writing:

if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world [that's Satan, the Devil] has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they

might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. (1 Corinthians 4:3,4)

Satan is here unmasked as the source of the 'there is no God' delusion; and of the 'all religions lead to God' delusion, as well as the ones which say, 'just do your best' or 'there's plenty of time to think about this later'. Please don't be deceived any longer, ask God to clear your mind of these infectious ideas. *He who comes to God must believe that he is*, the Bible says (Hebrews 11:6). Again, we say, it's reasonable to believe that God exists. Anything that has a beginning surely has a cause; and there's good scientific evidence that this universe had a beginning; must it not then also have a cause - a great uncaused First Cause, who is God?

God help us to think straight as we cling onto the rock-face of eternity!

4. Unsafe foundations

The Wexner Center for the Performing Arts, at Ohio State University, has been called 'America's first de-constructionist building' (Newsweek). Among other things, that means, we're told, that it's 'designed to reflect the fact that life itself is senseless'. On the outside, an observer sees white scaffolding; red brick turrets; and Colorado grass pods. On the inside, there are stairways that go nowhere; pillars that hang from ceilings with no purpose; and angled surfaces that seem as though they are designed simply to give you vertigo. It's particularly these features, I suppose, that have earned it the title of being America's first de-constructionist building, reflecting the fact that life, in the architect's eyes, is senseless.

When Christian philosopher Ravi Zacharias was given a tour and told about the architect's purpose, he asked: "What about the foundation? ... did he do the same with it?" That question is as serious as it is humorous. We can indulge our architectural fancies in the superficial aspects of building design, I suppose - if we really want to - but we dare not mess around with the foundations! If we were to compromise the structural integrity of the foundations, it's then that we'd

risk a total collapse of the whole building.

Actually, this illustrates something that's already happened in society. For when we play around with society's most basic values: its good thinking and morals, then society itself collapses because it's had its foundations weakened. We know this for a fact. For in the nineteenth century, the German philosopher, Frederick Nietzsche, wanted to de-construct or dismantle the scaffolding effect of Christianity upon society. He felt that Christian morality stood in the way of building a really strong ethical infrastructure in Europe. What Nietzsche wanted to do was to try an alternative foundation - one without God. It was Nietzsche who popularized the statement 'God is dead' - as dramatically portrayed in his popular parable called The Madman, which goes like this:

'Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly, "I'm looking for God! I'm looking for God!" As many of those who did not believe in God were standing there, he excited considerable laughter. "Why, did he get lost?" said one. "Did he lose his way like a child?" said another. "Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Or emigrated?"

Thus they yelled and laughed. The madman sprang into their midst and pierced them with his glances. "Whither is God?" he cried. "I shall tell you. We have killed him - you and I. All of us are his murderers ... God is dead, and we have killed him."

When Nietzsche was talking about killing God, he meant killing God philosophically, of course. He had little idea how costly this attempt would be in terms of human deaths, however. First of all, in his own life and health, because for the last dozen or so years of his life he himself became the madman. Then along came his fellow-country-man, Hitler, to put Nietzsche's ideas into practice and to build on them. The world soon learnt of the horrors that follow when we de-construct the foundations of good thinking, and begin to build instead on the basic idea that God is dead, and life is senseless.

When Hitler and Stalin built on the philosophical ideas of Nietzsche and the totally naturalistic ideas of Charles Darwin, disaster unfolded. In the Bible, the Psalmist asks the question:

*If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?"*
(Psalm 11:3)

I'm sure many of us have heard the objection 'more blood has been shed in the name of religion than anything else'. It's a common way by which people attempt to avoid a conversation on Christianity. But that

opinion that more blood has been shed in the name of religion than anything else at least needs to be challenged.

I know how people in the west tend to throw up the example of the Spanish Inquisition as serving as an example of religious horror. But, wait a minute, is not atheism actually responsible for the greatest crimes in modern human history? The scientific racism of Nazi Germany killed forty million and attempted genocide against Europe's Jews. And the scientific socialism of the Communist countries killed a hundred million (and still counting) around the globe. The Inquisition in the course of three centuries, killed fewer people - probably around three thousand - than the Soviet Union killed on an average single day.

We ask again with the psalmist:

*If the foundations are destroyed,
What can the righteous do?"*
(Psalm 11:3)

We hear of one intellectual or another rejecting the Bible's objective truth claims or standing in judgement on its framework of morality, but let's not forget the terrible lesson which we ought to have learned from these fearful social experiments of the twentieth century. When society acts consistently with its rejection of all absolutes, then we're headed for disaster.

The rock musicians have become

modern philosophers when they say:

'Knowledge is a deadly friend
When no one sets the rules
The fate of all mankind I see
Is in the hands of fools.'

And yet you still do hear people criticizing the Bible. One popular way of trying to reject the moral basis of the Bible is to gather 'scary quotes' from the Old Testament, and compare them with modern assumptions of what's fair. But are we right to single out the Old Testament, and play it off against the New?

The judgements which we find recorded in the Old Testament are usually temporal; but the judgements Jesus speaks of in the New Testament are, on the other hand, eternal. In fact, of all the preachers and prophets in the Bible, the foremost hell-fire and damnation preacher is the Lord Jesus himself. So, it would seem to be clear, that the Old and New Testaments stand or fall together.

One recent attack on the Bible which I came across homed in on a passage in the Old Testament which, it's claimed, permitted a father to sell his daughter into 'sexual slavery'.

Perhaps we should take a moment to read it:

"When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he

shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her marital rights. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money." (Exodus 21:7-11)

Remember the allegation was the Bible here is permitting a father to sell his daughter into sexual slavery. But what a careful reading shows, however, is that the law in question was to regulate an already existing custom and was aiming at preventing outrageous abuses from occurring. The whole point of that biblical law was to limit human excesses. It certainly was not about encouraging these behaviours.

But while we're on that point about sexual slavery, it's relevant to ask if anything of this nature - or worse - happens in the modern world. Sadly, it does, for we hear far worse reports about the sexual slavery of children in countries like Thailand. Now here's the question: who would be most likely to go there and exploit these children? Would it be someone who believes the Bible is the Word of God - including that specific Old Testament section we've highlighted - or would it more likely be someone who resented the morality of the Bible. I'll leave you to make up your own mind.

In a public debate, the Oxford atheistic philosopher Jonathan Glover was asked: "If you Professor Glover, were stranded at the midnight hour in a desolate Los Angeles street and if, as you stepped out of your car with fear and trembling, you were suddenly to hear the weight of pounding footsteps behind you, and you saw ten burly young men who had just stepped out of a dwelling coming towards you, would it or would it not make a difference to you to know that they were coming from a Bible study?" While the audience laughed, the professor admitted it would make a difference.

It makes a difference because there's an obvious connection between reading and respecting the Bible and the way we live our lives.

Back again in the Psalms we read:-

*How blessed are those whose way
is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the LORD.
How blessed are those who
observe His testimonies,
Who seek Him with all their heart.
They also do no unrighteousness;
They walk in His ways.*

(Psalm 119:1-3)

Yes, the moral absolutes of the Bible are the best foundation for life!

5. Heard the news, by any chance?

The poet, Steve Turner, wrote:

If chance be the Father of all flesh,
disaster is his rainbow in the sky,
and when you hear
State of Emergency!
Sniper Kills Ten!
Troops on Rampage!
Whites go Looting!
Bomb Blasts School!
It is but the sound of man
worshipping his maker.

The poet is showing us - very deliberately, of course - the results that follow when we evict God from our thoughts. He's pointing out that if we believe that we're all alone in the universe, if we believe that we're simply the product of some cosmic accident, then increasingly as these ideas gain in popularity, we can't complain if we see a rapid breakdown in social law and order. Why is that? Well, just for the same reason that you might see a group of teenagers spoiling a nice house when left to have a party there unsupervised after their parents have gone out. For as long as we think we're alone, we tend to forget that we might be accountable to someone. We can do as we please, we think. And when lots of people all try to do as they please, the result is

chaos and disaster.

One man who believed chance was the father of us all was humanist Stephen Jay Gould who wrote:

'We are here

because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures;

because comets struck the earth and wiped out dinosaurs, thereby giving mammals a chance not otherwise available (so thank your lucky stars in a literal sense);

because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age;

because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook.

We may yearn for a 'higher' answer - but none exists. This explanation, though superficially troubling ... is ultimately ... exhilarating.'

Superficially troubling, but ultimately exhilarating. Sniper Kills Ten! Whites go Looting! Bomb Blasts School. Which part of that is exhilarating? He might have been closer to reality if he'd said that this whole idea, this belief of his - that we've all come

about by chance - was superficially exhilarating, but ultimately troubling. This belief that we're simply here by chance ought to trouble us, and trouble us deeply.

State of Emergency! Sniper Kills Ten! Troops on Rampage! This is the reality we have to live with in our broken world - helped along by people who think we're the random product of chance. People who think that 'if we're here by accident, we may as well remove each other by incident'.

At the 1994 Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington, Mother Teresa gave a talk in which she touched on the sensitive theme of abortion. When a reporter afterwards asked President Clinton what he thought of her remarks, he simply stated, "It is very hard to argue against a life so well lived."

But I now want to point you to the unparalleled life of Jesus Christ. The recognition of uniqueness in the person of Christ has been made by some of history's greatest scholars, both Christian and non-Christian.

An anonymous author has written:

'All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as this One Solitary Life.'

Lecky, the historian of European morals, wrote: 'Christ has exerted so deep an influence that it may be truly

said that the simple record of three short years of active life has done more to regenerate and soften mankind than all the disquisitions of philosophers and all the exhortations of moralists.'

Napoleon, in Elba and after studying the life and character of Jesus, wrote: 'From first to last, Jesus is the same; always the same - majestic and simple, infinitely severe and infinitely gentle ... I know men; and I tell you that Jesus is not a man. Everything in Him amazes me ... He is truly a being by Himself ... great with a greatness that crushes me. I defy you to cite another life like that of Christ.'

Victor Hugo said: 'Pythagoras, Epicurus, Socrates, Plato, these are the torches of the world; Christ is the light of day.'

The atheist Rousseau admitted: 'It would have been a greater miracle to invent such a life as Christ's than to be it.'

H G Wells acknowledged: 'An historian like myself, with no theological bias whatever, cannot portray the progress of humanity honestly without giving Jesus of Nazareth foremost place.'

The poet, Coleridge, wrote: 'Beyond that which is found in Jesus Christ, the human race has not and never will progress.'

Russian novelist Feodor Dostoyevsky claimed: 'There has never been anyone lovelier, deeper or more

sympathetic than Jesus.'

And no doubt, we could go on ... But from very different standpoints across the centuries and cultures, they all agree in this: that the life of Christ stands supreme and impeccable. Atheist Bertrand Russell admitted that it was debatable whether the method adopted by Mahatma Gandhi when calling for Indian independence from British rule would have succeeded, except for the fact that it appealed to the conscience of a nation that had been influenced by the gospel. Today, in the city of Ahmedabad in central India, Russell's quotation greets each visitor. How remarkable is that! In a predominantly Hindu nation, a quote by an atheist testifies to the impact of Christ upon both East and West in the world today!

Such has been the impact of 'a life so well lived' that it's felt around the world, in all its cultures. Listen to the biblical address of the apostle Peter as he first preached God's message to the nations:

"God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him. The word which He sent to the sons of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ (He is Lord of all) - you yourselves know the thing which took place throughout all Judea, starting from Galilee, after the baptism which John proclaimed. You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him

with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross. God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible, not to all the people, but to witnesses who were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead. Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins."
(Acts 10:34-43)

A life so well lived - 'he went about doing good'! The life of Christ alone is sufficient to defeat the notion that we're here by accident and not by design. His life evidences the purpose of God our maker, even as it fulfils his plan. This is how Malcolm Muggeridge summed it up:

"In one lifetime I have seen my own fellow countrymen ruling over a quarter of the world ... I've heard a crazed, cracked Austrian proclaim to the world the establishment of a German Reich that would last a thousand years; an Italian clown announce that he would restart the calendar to begin his own assumption

of power. I've heard a murderous Georgian brigand in the Kremlin acclaimed by the intellectual elite of the world as a wiser than Solomon ... All in one little lifetime. All gone with the wind ...

Hitler and Mussolini dead, remembered only in infamy. Stalin a forbidden name in the regime he helped found and dominate for some three decades ... All in one lifetime, all gone. Gone with the wind.

Behind the debris of these self-styled, sullen supermen and imperial diplomatists, there stands the gigantic figure of one person, because of whom, by whom, in whom, and through whom alone mankind might still have hope. The person of Jesus Christ."

Evangelist Billy Graham once told of a meeting he had with German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer. Now Adenauer had once been imprisoned by Hitler for opposing the Nazi regime, but later became chancellor

of the West German Federal Republic - in which post he picked up the broken pieces of his country and helped to rebuild it in a fractured world. On this occasion, he looked the evangelist in the eye and said, "Mr. Graham, do you believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead?" Graham, somewhat surprised by his question answered, "Of course I do." Chancellor Adenauer then said something which may have surprised Graham . He said, "Mr. Graham, outside of the resurrection of Jesus, I do not know of any other hope for this world."

Please don't leave the outcome of your life to chance. We neither entered this world, nor will we enter the next, by chance. The Bible says: *repent, because [God] has fixed a day in which he will judge the world ... through a Man whom he has appointed, having furnished proof ... by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:31).*

6. Zero at the bone

"Were the death penalty applicable," the U.S. Attorney said, "the Government would undoubtedly be seeking it in this case." But US federal law doesn't provide capital punishment for spying in peacetime. So, back in the 1980s, Judge John Vukasin chose the closest thing to it as he sentenced Jerry Whitworth, a member of the Walker family spy ring.

"Jerry Whitworth," the judge said, "is a zero at the bone," a man who'd betrayed his country for money because "he believes in nothing." Whitworth said only, "I'm very, very sorry."

The former Navy radioman had good reason for remorse. He and his Spymaster John Walker, had been paid hundreds of thousands of dollars by the then Soviet Union. Apparently, the KGB regarded the Walker-Whitworth operation to be the most important in its history. The secrets learned from Whitworth and Walker enabled the KGB to decipher and understand over 1 million secret, coded (U.S. Navy) messages.

At that time this potentially had "... war-winning implications for the Soviet side," according to US Naval Intelligence. It's claimed that as thousands of US soldiers went to their deaths in Vietnam, Walker and Whitworth were making themselves

rich from the sale of the secrets which were compromising their countrymen's security.

No wonder the description 'zero at the bone' was given to them. The judge had intended this to mean that these men believed in nothing. In other words, their actions weren't prompted by any preference for Soviet values over against those of the capitalist west. They couldn't even claim to be acting out of a sense of principle. They were selling people's lives, in effect, for money - and it was simply all about making themselves rich. As the judge said, 'they believed in nothing'.

That made me think about people who dispute the very existence of God. By trading in alternative, intellectual reasons for our existence, they, in effect, kill the very notion of God in the minds of others who listen to them.

Whitworth and Walker brought about the deaths of others, not for the sake of having something better to believe in, but their betrayal was only motivated by the desire they had to make themselves rich. Similar to that, some God-killers betray others with impressive-sounding arguments which really come from nothing more than some baseless motive.

Of course, it's rare for them to admit

these hidden agendas publicly. But occasionally it happens. Aldous Huxley once admitted what lay behind his anti-God stance. He said: "I had motives for not wanting the world to have a meaning; consequently I assumed that it had none, and was able without any difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption ... We don't know because we don't want to know ... Those who detect no meaning in the world generally do so because, for one reason or another, it suits their books that the world should be meaningless."

He said about this 'philosophy of meaninglessness' which he advanced, that it was aimed at securing 'liberation from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom.' He saw such a system of morality as filled with Christian meaning, so he became decidedly anti-Christian and, as he himself says: "There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves in our political and erotic revolt: we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever."

Isn't that breathtakingly cynical? How many souls have been betrayed by this preaching of a human philosophy - whose root is exposed here as nothing other than personal preference in being able to do what it so shamefully pleased him to do.

I find myself compelled to contrast this with the equally candid remarks of the apostle Paul:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we received mercy, we do not lose heart, but we have renounced the things hidden because of shame, not walking in craftiness or adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God ... For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord (2 Corinthians 4:1-5)

Notice what Paul says about his preaching. There are 3 negatives, followed by 3 positives. He's renounced the hidden things of shame - no double standards; he's not walking in craftiness - no deceitful methods; and he's not adulterating the Word of God - no distorting the biblical message. Then come the 3 positives. He's manifesting the truth, commending himself to everyone's conscience, and that in the sight of God.

This is ethical preaching by a true servant of God with a character of real integrity. There's no room for hypocrisy in his own life, because his target is the conscience of everyone in his audience. He's not aiming at the intellect or the emotions, but at the conscience. That's why he must be a man who practices what he preaches. He fully realizes that his innermost thoughts, just as much as his public proclamation, are open to

divine scrutiny. All he does, he does in the sight of God. Paul is no demagogue influencing the thinking of others for personal profit. This is the profile of every authentic preacher of the Christian message.

The appeal of the Christian message penetrates to the conscience. Quite literally, our word for conscience is based on the idea of 'knowing with' - it's as if our conscience is viewed almost as a distinct, inner part of us - one which retains more objectivity, still in touch with the God standard - which outwardly in our behaviour and even in our thinking - we may already have begun to reject. So the Bible's appeals are very deep and searching - it's as if it reaches down to our conscience when it asks why we 'wilfully forget' (2 Peter 3:5) or 'refuse to have God in our knowledge'?

What we've just quoted is from the apostle Paul's letter to Christians at Rome, which is contained in our Bibles, and it says this:

that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions. (Romans 1:19-26)

We've seen the same double standard in operation in the lives of men and women as we see being exposed here. The Bible challenges the integrity of those who say they don't believe in God. Fundamentally, it's not because there's no evidence for God. No, 'they knew God', but they 'exchanged the truth'. It was simply their choice, for whatever reason or motive. They betrayed their conscience by wilfully forgetting. And if they go on to influence others, they betray their souls too.

Please don't be fooled into thinking science has removed the need for belief. Today, Professor Richard Dawkins is probably the best-known atheist in Britain. He was asked: "What do you believe that you cannot prove?" He answered: "I believe, but I cannot prove, that all life, all intelligence, all creativity and all 'design' anywhere in the universe, is

the direct or indirect product of Darwinian natural selection." In other words, he believes we are here by chance.

I refuse to speculate on what motivates Richard Dawkins to be hostile to Christianity, indeed to all religions, and against the very thought of there being a God, but, by his own clear admission, the big idea which he spends so much time promoting is an unprovable belief. This is atheism in its most damaging form today, but I'd like you to be very clear that what lies behind these intellectual arguments is not proof, but only a different belief.

Now I want to speak to your conscience. What will you choose to believe - and, may I add, are you sure you have a good reason for your choice of belief?

Earlier, we mentioned Huxley and his 'philosophy of meaninglessness'. A young student attending a lecture once shouted out, "Everything is

meaningless!" It was an interruption to the Christian lecture, however, the preacher took the little time required to address the issue there and then. "You don't believe that," he said. The student said that he did. The preacher then said he assumed the student believed that what he'd said must be meaningful, because if it, too, was meaningless then he'd simply wasted his breath! The student gradually realized that his statement, 'everything is meaningless' must be either untrue or itself be meaningless. In either case, it wasn't the answer to anything, and later that same day, I think it was, he came to acknowledge that Jesus Christ spoke meaningful truth when he said, *"I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me"* (John 14:6).

May you, too, have the integrity to agree with your conscience and so discover Jesus and therefore true meaning and real purpose in life.

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