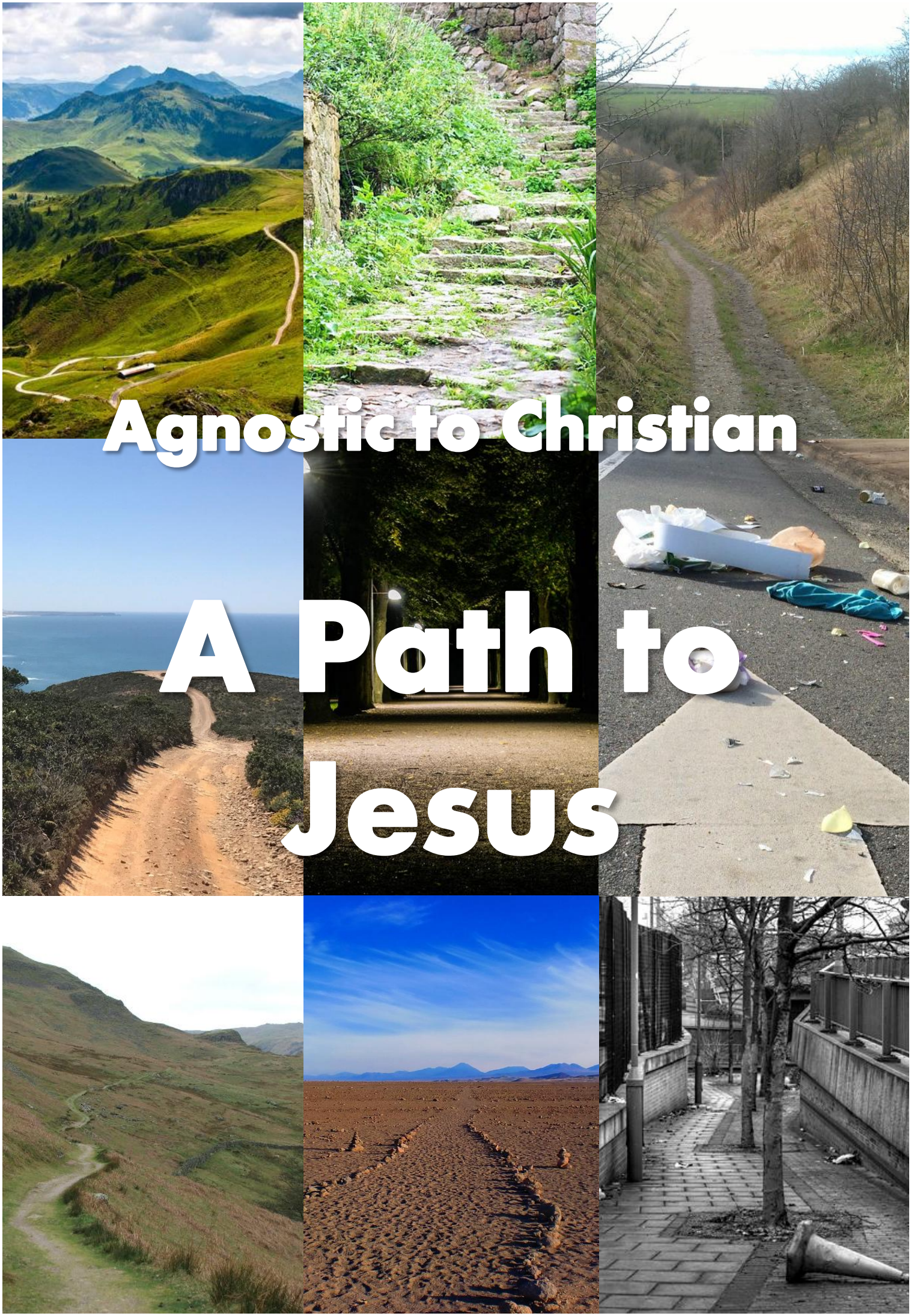


Agnostic to Christian

A Path to Jesus

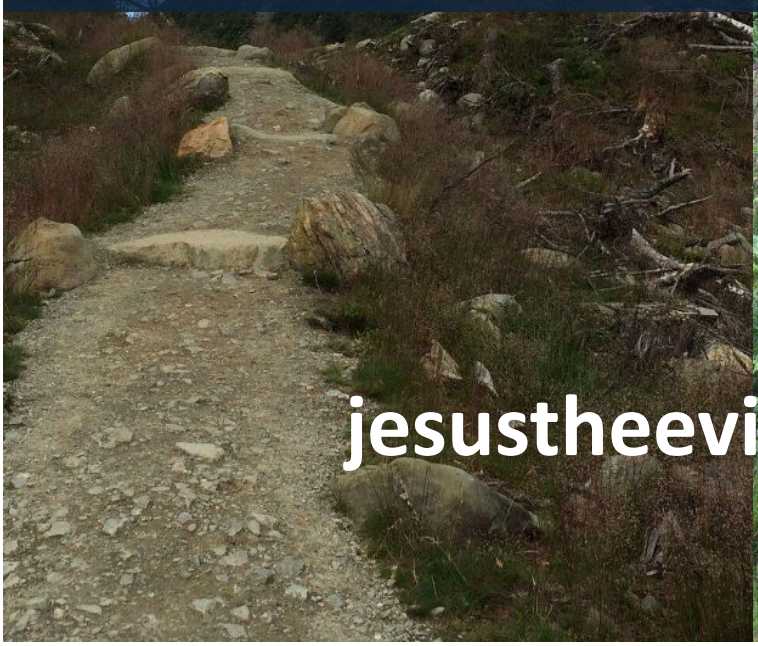


Agnostic to Christian: A Path to Jesus

This companion booklet to "Jesus: The Evidence" tackles some of the big questions and obstacles many people have about God and Jesus.

To reach a relationship with Jesus, each person's questions and issues need to be either answered (or sufficiently dealt with). The first part of the booklet describes how this happened with one former agnostic on his own path to Jesus.

The second part describes what awaits someone who says "yes" to Jesus. Is wrestling with these questions and obstacles worth the effort?





jesustheevidence.com

Agnostic to Christian: A Path to Jesus

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Introduction

I don't know why you're reading this.

I've really no idea why you picked this up (or downloaded it) and started reading.

I can have a guess though:

Perhaps you downloaded it from www.jesustheevidence.com because you looked at the title and thought it might answer some of the questions you have on following Jesus.

Perhaps you were given it by a Christian friend, family member or work colleague, and now feel obliged to read it.

Perhaps you're considering flicking through it to see what half-baked, poorly argued tosh some poor deluded fool feels you need to know - so your life can be transformed.

Perhaps you've read the Jesus: The Evidence booklet or attended a Jesus: The Evidence evening and are thinking: "all very interesting – but what about all the other stuff that makes me think: This is really not for me?"

It might be one or more of the above. It might be something completely different. I really don't know.

Whatever your reason is, you've managed to get half-way down page 2. I would dearly love you to continue. I worked on this off and on for about a year, so it would be nice if someone read even a bit of it...

The other reason I hope you continue is that some of the stuff in here might resonate with you.

If you're not a Christian, then how I grappled with some of the questions in the chapter headings when I wasn't a Christian might have relevance to you.

If you already follow Jesus, then some of the content might provide a different perspective on some of the big questions people ask.

If you wonder whether there's any point in actually engaging with this God and Jesus stuff because you can't see it having any relevance to the life you live, can I suggest you read Part 2 first – then read Part 1?

Either way, I'd be really delighted if you carried on for a bit. I hope you enjoy it and (more importantly) get something out of it.

Part 1: Agnostic to Follower of Jesus

Chapter 1: Don't Know? Can't Know? (Or: Cats Can't Comprehend Calculus)

Back when I was an agnostic, I always felt that agnosticism was the only intellectually "honest" position you could take regarding matters of belief or non-belief in God. However, I know that's not a view held by many atheists or believers in God.

Many resolute atheists regard being agnostic (taking the position that you don't know whether there is or is not a God) as a bit of a cop-out. I've read plenty of atheistic writing where agnostics are viewed as shallow thinkers who just haven't engaged with the evidence for the non-existence of God. The atheistic line of thought is: The evidence is there, so why sit on the fence?

Believers on the other hand might suggest that there's enough evidence within us, in the world around us and in the universe pointing to a creator God who takes a personal interest in His creation. So again - why sit on the fence?

There's been plenty written and debated regarding the arguments for and against the existence of God. I'm not planning to go over these here. There are plenty of books, online videos, articles, recorded debates etc you can access which go through these in detail. Whether you're an atheist, agnostic or believer it's certainly worth acquainting yourself with these with an open mind and try to draw your own conclusions.

When I was an agnostic I did this very thing, and the conclusion I came to was that the arguments for and against kind of cancelled each other out. I got to a position where I could see both sides of the argument – but both arguments were incomplete. Having done what I thought was a reasonable amount of research, I was far more informed on the arguments on both sides of the debate – but still didn't know which side to be on. In short, I was still agnostic.

So there I was, stuck in the middle with not enough to push me one way or the other. And there I remained until my late-30's – getting on with my life and not really thinking much about God or Jesus. I'd been brought up in a non-believing family, so I'd never really engaged with Christianity, worship, God, going to church and so on. Frankly it was all a bit of a non-issue. I couldn't call myself an atheist though. That just seemed to me a very extreme position to take. How could anyone be so certain that God didn't exist? We don't know everything. Perhaps some new evidence might appear

in the future pointing definitively to the existence of God. That couldn't be discounted as impossible. Indeed, given my science background, I knew it's a perfectly acceptable thing to say "I don't know" if there's an absence of definitive evidence available to draw a conclusion.

As you can see, this wasn't going anywhere. I was in much the same position as I think many people are today. Ultimately not sure about God one way or another and either going round in circles or just not thinking about it at all.

However, when I started looking at this again in my late 30's my starting point was that there are many, many respected, intelligent, capable people today (and in the past) who profess a deep faith in God and Jesus. Many of the militant atheists of today portray those with this type of deep faith as weak-minded, deluded fools. This, to me, was clearly nonsense. How you could say that people like: Francis Collins (Head of the US National Genome Research Institute); Gerhard Etrl (Winner of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry 2007); William D Phillips (Winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics 1997); Norman Schwarzkopf (US General and overall Commander of allied forces in the first Gulf War); Richard Dannatt (UK General and former Chief of the General Staff); Barack Obama (former US President) and Tony Blair (former UK Prime Minister) were stupid and deluded? Frankly it just seemed a silly position to take.

So, my starting point was: "If these people have a deep faith in God, why?" However, my first problem when I thought about this was that these people were working with the same information I had. They ended up with deep faith, I ended up saying: "I don't know!" Why?

As I said, I was hoping to find some conclusive evidence to help push me one way or the other. And, if you've read or heard the "Jesus: The Evidence" materials, I did find that evidence.

However, before I could meaningfully engage with the evidence I did find, I needed to be out of the agnostic cul-de-sac I was currently in. I say this with the benefit of hindsight. At the time, all I was interested in doing was understanding how some intelligent, capable people had a deep faith in God and Jesus – while I didn't. At that time, my aim was not to come to faith. My aim was just to be out of the intellectual dead-end I was in regarding God.

As I was ruminating about all this at that time, some thoughts developed on the whole subject of "not knowing" that greatly helped me get out of that agnostic cul-de-sac.

Now what follows might seem to some as totally obvious. To others, it might seem pretty irrelevant. If so, you can always bale out and skip to the next chapter. However, if you too are stuck in a position where you go round in circles regarding our ability to know if God does or doesn't exist, then this might help.

My thinking went as follows:

- If there is a God who created the universe, the Earth and all the life in it, then He* clearly must be more intelligent and powerful than any human being. Indeed believers say that God is omniscient (possessing unlimited knowledge or intelligence), omnipotent (possessing unlimited power) and omnipresent (being present everywhere at the same time – and at any time in the past, present or future). Seemed to me like pretty essential attributes if you're going to create the universe – including the creation of the time and space the universe occupies and the physical laws that make it work. Human beings, by contrast have finite intelligence, finite power and can only exist in the present.

*When I describe God as "He" in this booklet, I'm using a convenient shorthand – rather than assigning any specific gender to God.

- So, if we have finite intelligence, power and can exist only in the present, can we fully know or understand God? The obvious answer to this has to be "no". If that's the case, what are the implications we can draw from this?

- If we can't fully understand God, then logically there will be things He does that we won't fully understand. There will be some things He does that we will be incapable of understanding. In other words, there are bound to be things we don't know about God and there will be things we just can't know about God – no matter how hard we try.

- **However, (and this is the key point) that won't stop us trying to understand –** based upon the limited intelligence we have. That won't stop us drawing potentially false conclusions based upon our limited perceptions.

The alternative title for this chapter is: "Cats Can't Comprehend Calculus". Perhaps this trivial analogy might help tease out the implications of the bullet points above.

You're 16 and you're at school. You're revising calculus for your Maths Higher or GCSE (or whatever exams you take if you're reading this from outside the UK). You've written out your revision notes on the subject and

are feeling quite comfortable that you understand the origins and purpose of calculus. You know what it's for, how to logically develop differentiation and integration from first principles and how to manipulate these principles to solve the problems set by the examination board and your teacher.

Your pile of revision notes sits at the side of your desk. Your cat enters your bedroom and jumps onto your desk. She looks at the pile of revision notes and then does what any cat does when they see a pile of paper. She sits on the revision notes then looks appealingly at you in the hope of being either stroked, tickled or fed.

Your cat can clearly see the paper and the ink marks on the paper. Indeed, with cat eyesight, the cat can probably see the paper and ink marks better than you can. You know those ink marks are your calculus revision notes. You have a full understanding of what those ink marks mean. However, your cat ***doesn't know*** *what calculus is. Indeed your cat* ***can't know*** *what calculus is. Your cat can* ***never understand*** *what calculus is. So, what does your cat think the papers with the marks on them are for? Well, I don't suppose any of us can say for certain – us not being cats. However,* ***she will think something about the calculus*** *as she can see the calculus and has made the conscious decision to sit on the calculus. As a guess, most probably she thinks you've been very kind in placing these bits of paper on your desk so she can sit on them. To her, that's the purpose of the bits of paper with the marks on them.*

The cat sees the calculus. The cat sits on the calculus. The cat probably even hears you say: "Get off the calculus". The cat will even have some thoughts on the calculus. But the cat can never understand the calculus.

A trivial analogy. However, as I said, this analogy helped me reverse out of that agnostic cul-de-sac. If this is the way we are with God, then there will be things about God that we **don't know**; things we **can't know** and things we can **never understand**. If that's the case, hoping for some definitive proof for God may then be futile. The definitive proof might already be right in front of our noses, but we can't see it for what it is. Equally, we might think we've found irrefutable evidence for the non-existence of God – but actually we think this because we can only understand this proof partially – if at all. And the reason for this is that we can only understand God partially.

This line of thinking also helped with putting on hold some of the "hard" questions I had (and every human has) regarding belief in God. Questions like: Why do bad things happen to good people? Is there one right way to follow God? Why does God allow natural disasters? Why do people keep fighting each other in the name of God? I'll explore these questions in more

detail in later chapters, however my thinking was that there may be elements of these questions we can't know the answer to – or that we might come to the wrong conclusions given our inability to fully understand God.

Thinking this way freed up my mind to accept that there's stuff about God I will be able to know; stuff I won't be able to know; stuff I can't know and stuff I'll never understand. This allowed me to stop looking for definitive proof of God's existence or non-existence and instead look at the evidence already out there and try to come to some conclusions on a "balance of probabilities" basis.

And that conveniently happened to be at the same time as I encountered the evidence for Jesus for the first time...



One final thought to end this chapter. Imagine you are God for a minute. You're the creator of the universe. You also take a personal interest in your special creation – men and women on planet Earth. You want a loving, personal relationship with each person – but you're omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent. These people can, at best, have a limited understanding of you. Not an ideal situation for the development of a loving relationship. So, as God, what might you do? Well one thing you could do is to show humankind what you might be like if you were a human being like them. God and a man at the same time. They might find that person easier to relate to. They might find that person easier to understand. They might find His teaching easier to follow. They might find Him easier to follow. They might be able to have a relationship with You via Him.

I'm sure you can see where I'm going with this...

Chapter 2: Jesus- It's not all Made Up

I wrote this booklet as a follow-on from the "Jesus: The Evidence" (JtE) materials I compiled a few years ago. The purpose of the JtE material was to provide a succinct summary of the historical and rational evidence for Jesus being the Son of God. The main hope in doing this was to allow people to quickly and easily engage with this historical and rational evidence and encourage them to explore further.

As I said in the previous chapter, I'd been going round in circles with the arguments for and against God for some time and wasn't getting anywhere. The historical and rational evidence I then encountered for Jesus being the Son of God was, for me, far more tangible, easier to relate to and more rigorous.

The purpose of this chapter is not to go back over what this evidence is. If you're interested, try looking at the "Jesus: The Evidence" booklet as a start. It's downloadable for free on **jesustheevidence.com** or we'll send you a hard copy for free (email support@jesustheevidence.com). There are also some book suggestions at the end of this chapter.

Instead, what I'm aiming to do in this chapter is to recount some of the thoughts I had as I was working my way through this process. I hope some of these thoughts resonate with you – if you too are curious about who Jesus was (and is).

The Start of Christianity is a Historical Event: As I was doing my own research and reading, I came upon what seemed to me a blindingly obvious starting point for assessing the truth (or otherwise) of who Jesus is. Well, it was blindingly obvious once I'd thought of it...

What occurred to me was this: Christianity has existed on this planet for a very long time. Christianity has more followers today than any other religion on Earth. However, we know that there was a time when there were no Christians on this planet. So, why are there Christians today? Rational cause and effect tells us that at some point in the past, something must have happened (some **cause**) which had the **effect** of compelling some people who weren't Christians to become Christians.

Now that might sound like stating the obvious (and I did say it was blindingly obvious above…), but for all of us – atheists, agnostics, Christians, those of other faiths - this provides a direct challenge. **Cause and effect** tells us that the start of Christianity is a historical event. As a result, when and why Christianity started can be studied like any other historical event.

Historians of all faiths and no faith have been doing this very thing for around 150 years. The key point we shouldn't lose sight of is that **"something happened"** to cause all the Christianity we see all around us today. Something happened to start it all in the first place – and given all the historical research that's been directed towards finding out "what happened", all of us have the opportunity to come to our own, **informed** view of what we think happened.

Jesus Really Existed: What surprised me early on in my search was that there really is no doubt that Jesus actually existed. This is the informed view of virtually all today's scholars – non-Christian and Christian - who specialise in the study of first century, near eastern history. There are one or two reasonably high profile dissenters to this view, but what struck me was that, in general, these people were not historians specialising in this period of history. For example, if you complete an internet search on the non-existence of Jesus, you're likely to bump into the names Earl Doherty and GA Wells. Earl Doherty has an undergraduate degree in Ancient History and Classical Languages but no post-graduate qualifications. His profession is that of "writer" - according to his Wikipedia article. GA Wells was an academic – but in German language (Professor of German, Birkbeck University of London).

Of course it would be completely wrong to dismiss the ideas put forward by both Earl Doherty and GA Wells on the basis of academic qualifications (or lack thereof). However, when I compared their credentials to today's respected historians who specialise in this field and are sure there is sufficient historical evidence to demonstrate that Jesus existed (the late Geza Vermes, EP Sanders, Dale Allison, Maurice Casey, Luke Timothy Johnston to name a few), it looked like a pretty safe bet to go with the overwhelming majority view.

The Gospels and New Testament Letters can be used for Historical Research: When I was an Agnostic, I thought that the four Gospels in the Bible were theological texts written hundreds of years after the time Jesus was supposed to have lived and that the Gospels we read today were substantially revised and doctored versions of what had probably been written in the first place. In short, they couldn't be used as a basis for historical research on Jesus.

What I quickly found out was that this is not the view amongst historians who specialise in this field.

Firstly, all the Gospels in the bible were written between 30 to 50 years after Jesus' death. Paul's letters were written even earlier than this – the earliest probably written around 50 AD (1 Thessalonians – just under 20 years after Jesus' death). The letter attributed to Jesus' brother James may be even earlier than this – possibly the mid to late 40's AD.

Secondly, using a process known as Textual Analysis, historians are pretty certain that the Gospels and letters of Paul we read today are largely identical to what was originally written.

When reading books and articles on the historical Jesus, what struck me was that the debate and variant views was around interpretation of the content of the Gospels and New Testament letters – rather than debate around their authenticity.

There is undoubtedly debate among scholars about the accuracy of some of the events in the Gospels and some of the words supposed to have been spoken by Jesus. However, this is a focus on the detail – rather than the consensus view that the Gospels provide a generally accurate picture of Jesus' ministry.

The historical sources present a picture of Jesus consistent with Him thinking He is the Son of God: It has been suggested that the "real" Jesus didn't see Himself as the Son of God. Instead, He saw himself as a healer, prophet, charismatic preacher and exorcist. The Son of God element was therefore something tacked on later to Jesus by early Christians – most notably by the apostle Paul.

It's fair to say, there is clear evidence in the historical sources suggesting Jesus saw Himself as a healer, prophet, charismatic preacher and exorcist. However, there is also plenty of clear evidence demonstrating Jesus thinking and acting as if He was the Son of God too. Of course, thinking you're the Son of God doesn't necessarily mean you are. However, what seemed pretty clear was that the idea of Jesus being the Son of God came from Jesus himself – not from His later followers.

The Physical Resurrection of Jesus Looked Like the "Least Unlikely" Explanation for What Happened after His Death: There are a number of alternative explanations to explain what happened after Jesus' death. When I examined each closely, what struck me was that these looked even more improbable than the biblical explanation that the disciples saw, talked to and ate with the physically resurrected Jesus.*

*A detailed review of this can be found in Chapter 3 of the "Jesus: The Evidence" booklet – available to download from the jesustheevidence.com website or posted to you free by emailing support@jesustheevidence.com.

There is a Profound Lack of Evidence for Alternative Explanations for the Resurrection: Once I'd digested the evidence for the Resurrection, I went on a search for the atheistic counter-arguments. My starting point was: "Surely there will be some atheistic stuff out there that will blow all this out the water". I'd found something similar with the arguments for and against God. As I said earlier, these arguments seemed to cancel each other out. My natural assumption was that it would be the same for the Resurrection of Jesus.

However, I discovered that this just wasn't the case. I tended to find that the counter-arguments relied on largely discredited alternative explanations; or were poorly thought through and lacked substantive supporting evidence; or they just dismissed the Resurrection as impossible without even trying to provide some supporting evidence.

When I stacked the evidence for the Resurrection beside the evidence against, what became clear was a major disparity. Of course, this didn't "prove" the historicity of the Resurrection, but it certainly bolstered the view that the physical resurrection of Jesus was the least unlikely explanation for what actually happened.

Having done all this reading and digesting, the conclusion I came to was: "You know, there just might be something in this God and Jesus stuff". I certainly wasn't a follower of Jesus yet. There were still too many other questions and obstacles in the way. However, I was now in the position where I had found enough evidence for Jesus being who He said He was for it to be worthwhile trying to tackle these questions and obstacles and try and resolve them.

In the next few chapters, I'll cover the thoughts and conclusions I came to regarding some of these questions.

It's OK to Doubt

To end this chapter, I'd like to have a brief look at doubt. The physical resurrection of Jesus is a hard concept to get your head around. I know I've said it looks like the least unlikely explanation for what happened – but it's still something that doesn't fit with our everyday experience of living. You'd therefore be forgiven for having your doubts and being a bit skeptical.

If that's how you're thinking about the Resurrection, then you're in good company. Some of the disciples closest to Jesus doubted the Resurrection – even though they saw it with their own eyes! To quote from the New

International Version (NIV) of the Bible - Matthew Chapter 28, verses 16 to 19:

*16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; **but some doubted.** 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

These eleven disciples had been with Jesus from the start of His three year mission. This was Jesus' inner circle of disciples (ie those who followed Jesus throughout His mission on Earth). They'd heard Him teach and heard Him predict His death and Resurrection. They all saw the physically resurrected Jesus on the mountain – yet some still doubted! **If they doubted then how much more likely is it for you and I who didn't witness the Resurrection to doubt**.

Or take another example from Luke's Gospel (Luke Chapter 24 verses 36 to 48):

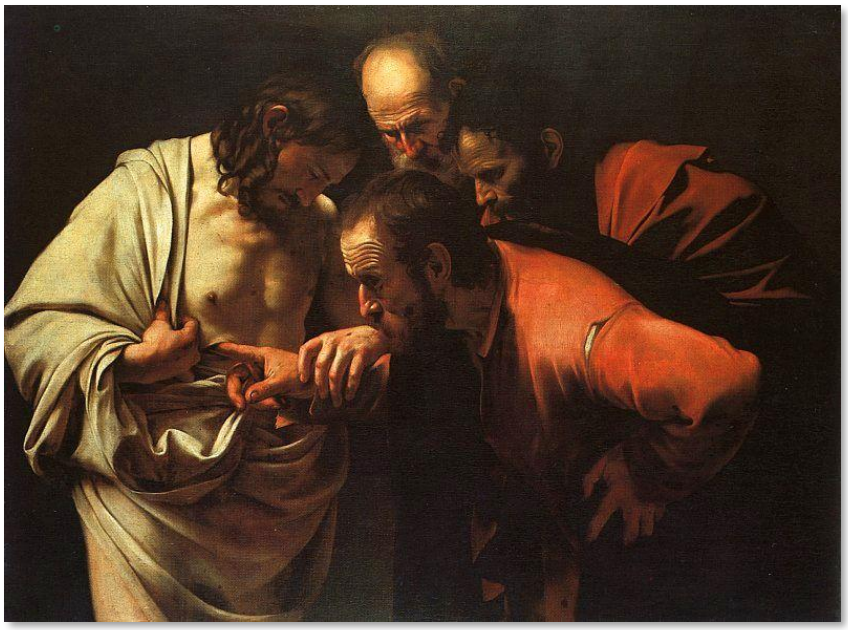
36 While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."
*37 **They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost**. 38 He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and **why do doubts rise in your minds**? 39 Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."*
*40 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. 41 **And while they still did not believe it** because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate it in their presence.*
44 He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."
*45 **Then he opened their minds** so they could understand the Scriptures. 46 He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, 47 and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things.*

What comes across clearly is how difficult it was for the disciples to accept that what was in front of them was their master – back from the dead. These weren't weak-minded, credulous individuals – ready to believe anything they

were told or that was put in front of them. No, they were like you and me, doubting what they saw and trying to come up with alternative and (to them) more plausible explanations for what they were seeing.

And of course, there's the well known episode in John's Gospel relating to "doubting" Thomas (John Chapter 20, verses 24 to 29:

[24] Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. [25] So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"
But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."
[26] A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" [27] Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."
[28] Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"
[29] Then Jesus told him, ***"Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."***



Thomas was one of Jesus twelve, inner-circle disciples. He'd been with Jesus from the start of His ministry. He'd also been with the other eleven disciples for three years. Yet Thomas wouldn't believe the testimony of his trusted fellow disciples. He had to see for himself. He had to physically test that Jesus was real by putting his fingers in Jesus' wounds.

What also strikes me about this passage is Jesus' understanding of doubt. Jesus knows it's going to be hard for people to believe the Resurrection has actually happened – particularly for those who didn't witness it.

As I said, if you have doubts about the Resurrection, you're in good company. You're in the company of the people who actually witnessed it!

Also, Jesus clearly understands your doubt and accepts it. All He asks is that you continue to ask, seek and knock and **you will** get beyond your doubts – one way or another.

Suggested Reading on the Historical Jesus:

- EP Sanders "The Historical Figure of Jesus" (1995 Penguin Books)
- Geza Vermes: "The Changing Faces of Jersus (2001 Penguin Books)
- Geza Vermes: "The Passion" (2005 Penguin Books)
- Geza Vermes: "The Resurrection" (2008 Penguin Books)
- Dale Allison Jr: "Constructing Jesus" (2010 SPCK)
- Maurice Casey: Jesus of Nazareth (2010 T&T Clark International)
- Luke Timothy Johnston: "The New Testament – A Very Short Introduction" (2010 Oxford University Press)
- James Beilby (Editor): The Historical Jesus: Five Views (2010 SPCK)

Chapter 3: The Old Testament – An Atheist "Aunt Sally"?

For everyone seeking to reach a conclusion on the reality (or otherwise) of God and Jesus, there will be big questions and obstacles which need answers or which will need reconciling in some way. One big obstacle for me – and I think for many others – was the Old Testament.

When I looked at the Old Testament when I was an agnostic, I saw a capricious, vengeful, cruel, schizophrenic God – completely at odds with the picture of a constant, loving God put forward by Christians. I saw God's Chosen People behaving in a blood-thirsty, brutal and merciless way to those they conquered and to each other. I read of bizarre laws about not mixing different textiles; not cooking young goats in their mother's milk and not eating shellfish. I read of barbaric punishments for transgressing other laws. I saw stories of creation that seemed completely at odds with current scientific thinking. I also saw Christians today trying desperately to reconcile these things in the Old Testament with their picture of God and Jesus - in the face of anything from polite disbelief to outright mocking from the rest of the world.

The Old Testament is usually where atheists start when they want to have a go at Christianity. And of course, it's such an easy target. Richard Dawkins gleefully gives the Old Testament a thorough kicking in Chapter 7 of "The God Delusion" (2006 Bantam Press). "The Portable Atheist" (2007 Da Capo Press) is a compendium of atheist writing complied by Christopher Hitchins. Most of the selections focus on the narrow-mindedness, bigotry, hatred, violence and wars seemingly encouraged by organised religion (more on this in the next chapter). However, a significant number of these articles also focus on all those apparent absurdities and downright shocking, blood-thirsty events in the Old Testament.

I think it's also fair to say that most atheists and agnostics, if asked to justify their position, will have something negative to say about the Old Testament in their response to you.

As I said in the chapter title, The Old Testament is a bit of an atheist "Aunt Sally" – almost designed to be mocked and ridiculed by non-believers. An easy reason that's been used to dismiss belief in God and Jesus.

And yet, there it is in the Christian Bible. The Old Testament constitutes about 75% of the Bible. It's referred to frequently in the New Testament. Jesus regularly quotes directly from it in the Gospels. Paul and the other

letter writers in the New Testament regularly quote the Old Testament directly. Christians are supposed to believe that:

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.
(2 Timothy Chapter 3, verses 16 and 17)

The New Testament didn't exist when Paul's second letter to his friend and fellow apostle Timothy was written. So, when Paul wrote: "All Scripture", he meant the Old Testament.

If I was going to progress on my path to Jesus, then I'd have to reconcile the issues I had with the Old Testament. The purpose of this Chapter is to share the conclusions I came to. Hopefully these conclusions will be of use if you too have difficulties with the Old Testament.

What is the Old Testament?
The Old Testament is essentially identical to the Hebrew Tanakh (or Bible if you prefer). The Tanakh is an anthology of religious writings, brought together around 450 BC to become the authoritative Scripture of the Jewish faith. Some of these writings were already hundreds of years old when they were brought together. Tanakh is actually a Hebrew abbreviation of its three main sections: **T**orah, **N**evi'im and **K**etuvim (**T**a**n**a**k**h).

The table below lists out the books in the Tanakh – with the books of the Old Testament cross-referred. As you can see, the content of the Tanakh is identical to the Old Testament.

Tanakh		Bible
Torah (also known as "The Law)	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Genesis Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy
Nevi'im (also known as "The Prophets)	Joshua Judges Samuel Kings Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel *The 12 Minor Prophets:* Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah	Joshua Judges 1 Samuel and 2 Samuel (1 book in Nevi'im) 1 Kings and 2 Kings (1 book in Nevi'im) Isaiah Jeremiah Ezekiel Hosea Joel Amos Obadiah Jonah Micah Nahum Habakkuk Zephaniah Haggai Zechariah

	Malachi	Malachi
Ketuvim (also known as The Writings)	*The Poetic Books:* Psalms Proverbs Job *The Five Scrolls:* Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther *Other Books:* Daniel Ezra – Nehemiah Chronicles	 Psalms Proverbs Job Song of Songs Ruth Lamentations Ecclesiastes Esther Daniel Ezra and Nehemiah (1 book in Ketuvim) 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles (1 book in Ketuvim)

If historians tell us that the writings in the Tanakh were brought together around 450 BC, can they say anything about whether the Tanakh / Old Testament we read today is the same as the original all those years ago? Has the text been deliberately or accidentally modified and developed in the last 2,500 years?



Amazingly, this doesn't look to be the case. Using the Textual Analysis method described in Chapter 2, historians are confident that the Old Testament we read today is virtually identical to the Tanakh - put together around 450 BC. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1948 also demonstrated this consistency. The Dead Sea Scrolls are parts of the Tanakh which were stored in clay jars and hidden in caves near the Dead Sea in modern day Israel. The picture above is a reconstruction of a Dead Sea Scroll. These scrolls have been carbon dated to around 2,000 to 2,200 years ago (0 to 200 BC). Analysis of the Dead Sea Scrolls texts shows these are identical to the Tanakh / Old Testament we read today.

The main theme of the Old Testament / Tanakh is the developing relationship between God and the early Jewish people – from somewhere around 2,000 BC (or BCE if you prefer), to around 500 BC. The Old Testament / Tanakh contains different types of writing: Myths, historical narratives, prophecies, fiction, laws, instructions for rituals, proverbs and hymns*

**For a more detailed exploration of the formation, themes and interpretation of the Old Testament, Michael Coogan's: "The Old Testament: A Very Short Introduction" (2008 Oxford University Press) would be a good place to start.*

One particularly striking theme in the Tanakh is the developing understanding by the Jewish people of who God is. In the early books, there is the clear impression that the then nomadic Jewish people saw their God (called at different times Yahweh or El Shaddai) as the "one best God" – compared to the other gods of those other peoples they lived amongst. In the later books, this had developed into an understanding that there was only one God; that He had a special relationship with the Jewish people and that through the Jewish people He would make himself known to the rest of humanity.

Why is the Jewish Tanakh in the Christian Bible?
A reasonable question to ask. Judaism and Christianity had definitively separated by the time the books of the Christian Bible were finally settled upon (4th Century AD). Why include another religion's sacred Scripture in Christian Scripture?

We've already touched upon the answer. Jesus regularly quoted directly from the Tanakh in the Gospels. Many of the events in Jesus' life were prophesied in the Tanakh. Paul and the other letter writers in the New Testament regularly quoted the Tanakh directly. The first Christians also regarded the Tanakh as sacred Scripture. In summary, the New Testament makes more sense and is more easily understandable by the inclusion of the Tanakh (Old Testament) in the Bible.

Can and Should the Old Testament be Interpreted Literally?
There's a strand of Christian thinking today which suggests that because the Old Testament is "God breathed", then it should be read and understood literally. The irony of this line of thought is that it is impossible to do this in practice. For example, if you are a 21st Century Christian woman living in the midwest of the USA and are trying to read the Old Testament literally, you will inevitably be understanding what you're reading from the perspective of your gender and the social and cultural influences that make you, you. A female perspective on what's being read can be different from a male perspective. This can affect your interpretation of what you are reading. Your interpretation of what you are reading will also be inevitably coloured by (in this example) your 21st Century, mid-western, American cultural background.

This goes for anyone – not just women living in the Midwest of the USA. The point is equally valid for a middle-aged, middle-class Scottish male; a male, teenage manual worker from Malawi; a female university professor in France; a retired male policeman from Australia etc etc.

Let me repeat: It's impossible to read and understand the Old Testament literally. You will inevitably read it through your own social and cultural lens –

unless you deliberately try to read it through the social and cultural lens prevailing at the time of its writing. My guess is that you will never be 100% successful in doing this, but at least this approach is likely to provide a fuller understanding of the text you're reading.

However, when reading the Old Testament, this attempt to understand it in context isn't something that has to be done all of the time. Many of the Old Testament themes are timeless – as relevant today as they were when written over 2,500 years ago. However, when we hit something that seems profoundly odd or absurd to our 21st Century eyes, then understanding the context in which it was written can sometimes clarify and render it more understandable.

Also, it was recognised long ago by the Jewish people that explanations / interpretations / analysis of what was in the Tanakh were helpful in gaining a deeper understanding of the text. The various Jewish Midrash are collections of Jewish writing that provide this analysis. This long tradition of analysis clearly points to the potential inadequacy of fully understanding Scripture by trying to read it literally.

What About the Creation Stories and the Flood?
For some, these descriptions of the creation of the universe, the earth, the plants and animals of earth and finally human beings are a major sticking point. The story of God wiping nearly all living things from the Earth in a flood can be equally difficult to accept.

What I've found with the Old Testament is not to dismiss what's in it too quickly. The contents of Genesis (where we find the creation and the flood) could have been written as long as 3,000 years ago. Without today's scientific knowledge, it's inevitable that a description of creation would look different from the way we might describe it today.

Although we can pick holes in the creation story, it's interesting to note that what's in Genesis looks closer to our scientific understanding today than (say) 150 years ago. For example:

- Our understanding today is that the universe was created out of nothing (the Big Bang about 13.7 billion years ago). Genesis also has the universe being created out of nothing (Genesis "Day 1" and "Day 4"). 150 years ago, the prevailing scientific view was that the universe had always existed and would continue to exist (the "steady state" theory).

- Our understanding today is that the Earth was formed from cosmic collisions of matter circling the sun in its early form. Water was provided by comet impacts. Movements in the Earth's crust (plate tectonics) "lubricated" by the presence of water caused mountain / continent building (plate tectonics). Without this geological activity, there is enough water on Earth to completely cover the surface to a depth of around 2.6 kilometers. In short one can imagine an early Earth covered by water - with continents steadily developing and "emerging" from the waters as a result of plate tectonics (Genesis "Day 3"). 150 years ago, the concept and "mechanics" of plate tectonics had yet to be discovered.

- Our understanding of evolution has living creatures developing in the sea, followed by living creatures developing on land. In broad terms this is the pattern described in Genesis "Day 5" and "Day 6". 150 years ago Darwin's: "Origin of Species had just been published and was far from the accepted scientific view to explain the variety of species on Earth.

- Our understanding of evolution places the development of human beings as relatively recent – much like humans being the last thing God created in Genesis Day 6. 150 years ago the late development of human beings was unknown.

- Evolutionary anthropologists currently believe that around 35,000 to 50,000 years ago a variant of human beings emerged who were capable of far greater creative thinking than those other hominids existing at the time. These new humans were essentially us – but also looked pretty much like the other hominids of the time who lacked this creative thinking ability (same size, same shape and same brain size). This creative thinking can be seen in an explosion of sophisticated tool making, cave painting representing abstract thought and hints that these people were beginning to think about the big questions we think about (Why are we here? What happens after death? What / who created all this? Etc etc). It's almost as if something was "switched on" in the brains of these people to make them start to think in this way. Adam and Eve's awareness of themselves after eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge (Genesis Chapter 3) has some interesting parallels with this relatively recent discovery.

- The current genetic view of human history suggests that all human beings alive today are descended from one female human (sometimes called "Mitochondrial Eve") – living some 100,000 to 200,000 years ago. Most of the literature on this discovery is at pains to point out that

this is not some kind of “vindication of Genesis”. However, it is fair to say that this discovery is closer to the idea of a “first” man and woman than previous scientific views on human evolution.

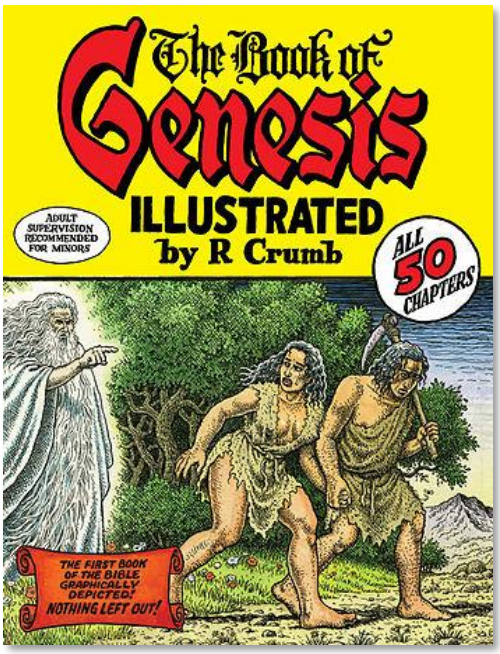
For more on the reconciliation of: “Science. Religion. Darwin. Genesis” Charles Foster’s book “The Selfless Gene” (2009 Hodder and Stoughton) makes an interesting and enlightening read.

As for the flood in the Bible, this clearly has parallels with the flood story in the Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh. Early Jewish nomadic herdsmen lived among the Mesopotamians (as well as other ethnic groups). A recurring theme of the early chapters of the Old Testament is the difficulty these early Jews had in resisting the worship of the gods of other cultures. Hardly surprising then that elements of other cultures might filter their way into the Bible.

There are also other flood stories from cultures that existed in the Middle and Near East. A possibility is that they were all tapping into some actual flood event from pre-history remembered and orally transmitted before the invention of writing. We do know that the Persian Gulf and Black Sea filled with water as a result of rising sea levels after the last Ice Age. There is some evidence that this filling (at least partially) occurred as flood events. These flood events have been estimated to have occurred around 5,600 BC for the Black Sea and around 6,000 BC for the Persian Gulf. Whether the flood stories are race memories of these events is not known – but it is an intriguing possibility.

As I said, it’s easy to pick holes in the creation and flood events in the Bible. However, they might not be quite as wide of the mark as people once thought. Who knows whether they might further converge (or diverge) with our developing understanding of astrophysics, geology, evolutionary biology, evolutionary anthropology and plate tectonics in the future?

Why is God so Vengeful, Capricious and Bloodthirsty (literally and metaphorically) in the Old Testament?



As I said at the start of this chapter, God does appear to be vengeful, capricious and bloodthirsty in the Old Testament. These are the parts of the Old Testament latched on to by atheists, agnostics (and me - back in my agnostic days).

The stereotypical picture we have of the God of the Old Testament is as the stern, unyielding figure. The type of God Robert

Crumb drew in his illustrated version of Genesis he published a few years ago.

However, God also appears as kind, merciful, forgiving, loving and loyal in the Old Testament too.

The way I've come to understand why God appears this way is that He revealed Himself to the first Israelites in a way they could get their "heads around" and relate to – given the social and cultural norms prevailing at that time. As I've said already, the first Israelites were nomadic herdsmen, living among other peoples in the Middle-East. The Gods of these other peoples were vengeful, capricious and bloodthirsty. A recurring theme in the Old Testament is the first Israelites falling away from worshipping God and worshipping these other deities. The impression you get is that God behaving as He does in the Old Testament is what's required to keep the first Israelites on the "straight and narrow" in a way they can understand. Perhaps to the mind of someone living 3,000 years ago in the Middle East, God (YHWH - Yahweh) may not have seemed like a "proper" god if He didn't behave the way He does in the Old Testament.

Another way I've sometimes seen how God appears in the Old Testament, is a bit like being a parent. As a parent, you love your children – whatever their age or stage of development. However, as a parent, you have to behave differently to your children when they're toddlers compared to when they're teenagers. Some of the ways you parent toddlers would be wholly inappropriate for teenagers (and vice versa). As a loving parent, you have to be the right type of parent for each stage of your child's development.

It's a bit like this in the Old Testament. God loves His children with whom He has made a covenant. God reveals Himself as He does to "parent" the first Israelites so they remain faithful to Him and so He can consequently nurture and develop them. In "developing" them, He can reveal more of Himself and so they can more fully grasp His full nature.

As I've suggested in earlier chapters, the clearest and easiest way for God to reveal Himself to humanity was by becoming a man. Look at the thoughts, actions and teachings of Jesus and you see God. It's so much easier to relate to Jesus – on the one hand a human being like you and me, on the other hand the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent creator of the universe.

See Jesus, see God.

That's why God became man. At least some of the people Jesus lived among were ready for His message – ready for the development of the

relationship between God and man that Jesus taught. Why were some of the people ready for Jesus' message? Because God had been carefully nurturing His relationship with His people and some could see Jesus as the natural development of this relationship.

Of course, even among His chosen people there were many who weren't ready for His message – but there were enough for faith in Jesus to take root, grow and flourish in the years following His Resurrection.

So, God appearing as He does in the Old Testament is, as far as I can see, the way He had to be for the people to whom he was revealing Himself. However, for the fullest and easiest to understand representation of God, all we have to do is look at Jesus.

What Does Jesus Say About the Old Testament?

Understanding what Jesus had to say about the Old Testament was the key to overcoming my difficulties with it. The key text is in Matthew Chapter 5. Jesus is conducting what has become known as "The Sermon on the Mount" to an audience of Jewish followers and sceptical Jewish religious leaders. Jesus says (Matthew Chapter 5 verses 17 to 20):

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them ***but to fulfill them****. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. 19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.*

By "the Law and the Prophets", Jesus is referring to the books contained in the Torah and the Nevi'im (and of course, those same books in the Old Testament - see table above). Jesus is clearly saying that He has not come to sweep away these books of the Bible – **but to fulfil them.**

In other words, Jesus teachings take what's in the Law and the Prophets and takes them to the next level – a level that has not been and cannot be attained by the pinnacle of Jewish religious observance (the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law).

To underline this point, Jesus goes on to cite some specific examples of the Law and how His interpretation fulfils these by taking them on to the next

level. Each section starts with Jesus saying: “You have heard that it was said”. He then quotes directly from The Law and then takes the teaching from the Law to another level – preceding each with: “But I tell you...”

To quote directly from Matthew Chapter 5, verses 21 to 47:

Murder

21 “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder,[1] and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ 22 But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.
23 “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.
25 “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way, or your adversary may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. 26 Truly I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.

Adultery

27 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’[2] 28 But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. 29 If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Divorce

31 “It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.’[3] 32 But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, makes her the victim of adultery, and anyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Oaths

33 “Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not break your oath, but fulfill to the Lord the vows you have made.’ 34 But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; 35 or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. 36 And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even

one hair white or black. [37] All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.

Eye for Eye

[38] "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'[4] [39] But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. [40] And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. [41] If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. [42] Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

[43] "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour[5] and hate your enemy.' [44] But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. [46] If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? [47] And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

1. *Exodus 20: 13*
2. *Exodus 20: 14*
3. *Deuteronomy 24: 1*
4. *Exodus 21: 24; Leviticus 24: 20; Deuteronomy 19: 21*
5. *Leviticus 19: 18*

As you read Jesus' developments of the Law above, you may have been struck by how difficult it would be to keep these in practice. That's the whole point. These teachings are the ideal that followers of Jesus should be aiming to attain. But in reality, nobody can keep these "laws" 100%. That's why we need Jesus as our atoning sacrifice to be "right" with God. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll go into why Jesus had to die for our inability to keep these laws 100% (our "sins" if you prefer) in more detail in Chapter 9.

Jesus regularly defines himself as the fulfilment of the Old Testament – or provides His summary of the Old Testament. For example,

Matthew Chapter 7, verse 12:
[12] So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, ***for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.***

Mathew Chapter 22, verses 37 to 40:
[37] Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'[1] [38] This is the first and greatest commandment. [39] And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as

yourself.'[2] [40] ***All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments****."*

1. *Deuteronomy 6: 5*
2. *Leviticus 19: 18*

Luke Chapter 24, verse 44:
[44] *He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms."*

Mark Chapter 7, verse 19
[19] *For it doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean.)**

**In other words, Jesus swept away all the dietary laws (ie. the laws prohibiting Jews from eating certain animals) in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.*

The Hierarchy of Documents
In my day job, I'm regularly involved with Terms and Conditions of Contracts relating the supply of equipment for large capital projects. Often in these equipment supply contracts there are more than one set of Terms and Conditions. For example there might be a Main Terms and Conditions of Contract for the overall project; The Special Terms and Conditions of Contract (relating to the supply of the equipment) and the Customer Terms and Conditions of Contract (relating to the equipment my company is sub-supplying). In these situations all three sets of Terms and Conditions are legally binding – but there are often contradicting or conflicting clauses when they are compared. So, which clause takes precedence? To resolve this, a **Hierarchy of Documents** is sometimes defined. This is usually stated as follows: Where there conflict between the Terms and Conditions of Contract, the Special Terms and Conditions will take precedence, followed by the General Terms and Conditions, followed by the Customer Terms and Conditions.

This is a bit like how I see the Old and New Testament. As Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, where there is apparent conflict or contradiction between what Jesus said or taught and what's in the Old Testament, then **Jesus takes precedence**. What Jesus said and taught is always at the top of the hierarchy of documents. Any conflict or contradiction is either down to our lack of understanding of what was written in the Old Testament - or that Jesus' teaching supersedes what was written.

Summary
Those difficulties I had with the Old Testament as an agnostic (and if I'm honest, when I was a new follower of Jesus), have been largely overcome by the points I've just described. I still find passages in the Old Testament baffling and "challenging". However, my starting position these days is to step through the following:

- Do I fully understand the cultural, social and religious conditions prevailing at the time of writing? Does the passage make any more sense as a result?

- Are my 21st Century, white middle-class male perceptions getting in the way of a correct interpretation of the passage? If I try to strip this away, does the passage make any more sense?

- If the passage still baffles and challenges, I ask myself what would Jesus say or teach regarding what I'm reading. Does Jesus need to take precedence here?

What I've also found as I've studied the Old Testament is its value to "teach, rebuke, correct and train". Also, let me be clear that I don't see anything above as incompatible with Scripture being "the inspired Word of God" - channelled through the many different people who wrote the passages that make up the Bible.

I'm slightly embarrassed to say I kind of ignored the Old Testament when I was a new follower of Jesus. As time goes on, I'm increasingly seeing its value; its insights into the human condition and our relationship with God. Even more valuable is that it sets the whole New Testament in context and assists its understanding. And I guess that's the main reason the Tanakh (Old Testament) is in the Christian Bible in the first place.

Chapter 4: If He's All Good, Why Do People Keep Killing Other People in Jesus' Name?

Some people cite the violence committed over the last 2,000 years in the name of God and Jesus as a major reason why they can't accept there is a God and / or that Jesus is worthy to be followed.

The reasoning goes something like: If He's all good, why would God allow people to commit terrible acts in His name? Would a good God not stop this? Some would also say: Belief in God and Jesus has encouraged people to act in abominable ways in the past and present. Surely then, if there was no belief in God and Jesus, these people would not have acted in this way and these terrible things wouldn't have happened?

In the preface to "The God Delusion" Richard Dawkins invites us to imagine a world with no religion: *"Imagine* [he writes] *no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Christ-killers, no Northern Ireland "troubles", no "honour killings,...* [and so on]"

So, with all this terrible stuff that has happened in the name of God and Jesus, wouldn't it be better if we just put all this behind us, became atheists and lived in a bright and peaceful world – free from religious fighting and killing.

I don't know how compelling this line of thought is to you. From the quote above, it's clearly compelling to Richard Dawkins.

If this is something you struggle with, I hope this chapter is of use. Personally, this was never one of the key reasons I had for being an agnostic and not wanting to engage with belief in God or following Jesus. Then, as now, all I could see was that human beings have an innate capacity for coming up with ingenious reasons for fighting one another. You name it, and most likely someone's fought over it at one time or another.

Disputes over land, the acquisition of power or wealth, political differences, ethnic differences, wars of liberation, wars of oppression etc etc. People can find all kinds of reasons for fighting one another. Then there are the downright bizarre reasons. For example. Britain going to war with Spain in 1738 over a decomposed ear belonging to Robert Jenkins (The War of Jenkins' Ear). Or how about the war between El Salvador and Honduras after a 1970 World Cup qualifier (The Football War)?

Of course there were other, more deep-seated reasons for Britain declaring war on Spain in the 18th Century. The presentation of Robert Jenkins' ear to parliament (supposedly cut off by some dastardly Spaniard) was just the flash-point. Ditto El Salvador and Honduras in 1969. The World Cup qualifier just brought to a head the already simmering tensions between the two countries relating to migration and land ownership.



To me, religion or religious belief was just another of the many, many reasons humans find for fighting other humans. It seemed to me odd to reject God and Jesus due to the sub-optimal behaviour of human beings. It also seemed unrealistically optimistic to think that abandoning belief in God would somehow reduce the amount of conflict in the world. Wouldn't humans just find other reasons for fighting each other?

Conflicts in the Present

Wikipedia listed 55 wars / armed conflicts currently underway in the world at the time of writing this chapter (July 2016). Of these, 4 had caused more than 10,000 deaths in the previous 12 months, 10 had caused 1,000 to 9,999 deaths, 28 had caused 100 to 999 deaths and 13 had caused less than 100 deaths.

Undoubtedly some of these wars had a religious element. Take the four largest wars currently underway at the time of writing this chapter for example. The conflict between Sunni and Shia in Iraq and Syria and the presence of [so called] Islamic State (IS) in this atrocious mess clearly has a religious dimension. The same goes for the Boko Haram insurgency in Africa. The Taliban insurgency and presence of IS in Afghanistan makes up the fourth major conflict.

However, to brand these as "religious wars" is a bit simplistic – as simplistic as branding the war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969 as "the football war". The conflicts in Syria and Iraq are as much about tensions between different communities as they are about religious differences. The IS, Boko Haram and Taliban elements to the top 4 conflicts are as much

ideological as they are religious. Groups of people thinking that the world should be a particular way and being prepared to use force to make it happen. However, the reasons people are drawn to these groups can be wide, varied and not particularly ideological. Disaffection, financial gain, a sense of belonging, oppression and lack of opportunity all have played their part in recruitment to IS, Boko Haram and the Taliban.

What do human beings fight about? We're tribal animals and we will fight for the rights and honour of our tribe. If our tribe is being oppressed by another tribe, we'll fight. And what is our tribe? This can be our country, our social class, our ethnic group, our town, our football team, our political party, our extended family – or our religion.

Human beings also fight for what they believe in passionately. If we feel strongly enough about something then we will fight to protect this if we think it's under threat. This can be what we believe politically, ethnically - and religiously.

Religion can undoubtedly be a start-point for conflict – but then so can a whole host of other things. As far as I can see, religious wars are more to do with our make-up as humans than the religious belief in itself. To suggest that the removal of religious belief would prevent conflict is naive at best and downright dangerous at worst.

The removal of oppression, poverty, injustice (and boredom) might be better targets to aim at. At least these factors are a common thread in many of today's conflicts – and those of the past. However, if we lived in a utopian world where oppression, poverty and injustice had in some way been eradicated, would we also live in a world without war and conflict? I can't say for certain, but I somehow doubt it. People would still feel passionately about other things and, as I said, would be prepared to fight if they thought these things were under threat.

But What About all that Killing in Jesus Name in the Past?

So much for wars in the present, but what about all that killing in Jesus name in the past? What about the Crusades? The massacre of the Cathars? The protestant / catholic conflicts in Europe in the 16th and 17th Century? What about the Spanish Inquisition? Burning heretics at the stake? The maiming, the torture, the persecution and the death – all because one group had a different take on how to worship God from another group?

As I've said, even when I was an agnostic, my view was that there were more than just religious reasons for many of these atrocities. Also, given our propensity for fighting each other, I seriously doubted then whether the

absence of religion in the past would have made any appreciable difference to the amount of conflict in the past – and the degree of savagery involved. I have a slightly different take on this today, but I'll come to this later.

If this is a topic that bothers you, my one-paragraph response is hardly likely to have you altering your view on this. Apologies then if it seems a bit superficial and glib. For a more substantial review of all the historical conflicts and atrocities associated with Christianity, the book: *"Atheist Delusions – The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Detractors" (Yale University Press 2009)* by the theologian David Bentley Hart is an excellent place to start. I appreciate that if you are reading this chapter as an atheist, you might baulk at picking up and reading a book with the words "Atheist Delusions" on the front. You might also think that David Bentley Hart has an axe to grind. In fairness, there is some chopping tool sharpening in the text. However, the book also provides a well-reasoned counter-argument to this topic of Christian conflict. Amongst other things, he takes a number of historical "religious" conflicts and atrocities and teases out the substantive non-religious reasons for their occurrence.

So Why does God Allow all this to Happen?

A question sometimes asked is: "If God exists, why does He allow all these wars in the first place?" You'd think He'd at least stop the religious wars, conflicts and atrocities so belief in God didn't get a bad name. That's a bit of a cynical thing to say or think. You'd like to think God would have nobler reasons for stopping conflict than negative PR. However, it does beg the question: "Why does God allow all this stuff to happen?"

I'll come to this in more detail in Chapter 8: Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?" However, for now, let me use an example to provide a possible explanation.

I'm a Street Pastor in Glasgow. For those who don't know what Street Pastors are, we walk the streets of UK towns and cities on a Friday and Saturday night helping people. I belong to the Street Pastors doing this in Glasgow.

Helping people might be making sure a woman separated from her friends gets home safely in a taxi. It might be helping someone who's had too much to drink sober up and get home safely. It might be listening to someone whose problems have been thrown into sharp relief after a few drinks – rather than being forgotten about. We're there to listen, to care, to pray (if the person wants prayer) and to provide practical help to those who need it. And we also carry bags of flip-flops for women walking home barefoot because they can't endure their high heels any more.



Another thing we're called to do is prevent fights breaking out. I've been involved in calming a fair few fights in my eight years as a Street Pastor. One thing I've noticed is that we can usually prevent a fight if we can get in early. People can usually see sense if they're not too fired up. People can usually see the consequences of their actions if we direct their gaze to the CCTV camera pointing at them. However, if people are too far down the anger road, fired-up for a fight and are "in the zone", nothing we can say or do will stop them. They can neither hear us nor see us. All they can see is the object of their hate and anger in front of them. All they are thinking about is punching and kicking the living daylights out of the object of their hate and anger.

This is how I see wars, conflicts and atrocities. Individuals, organisations, tribes, nations so fired up for a fight that they just can't see or hear reason. They can't and won't pay any attention to anyone trying to stop them. God might be shouting at them to stop, **but they're just not listening**. God might be trying to stop them, **but they're wilfully ignoring Him** – full of righteous rage to start and continue the fight.

It's interesting that humans can resolve seemingly intractable conflicts. Conflicts where you'd think there were too many atrocities, too much hurt, too much hatred, too much history for them ever to be resolved. For example: Lebanon in the 70's; Northern Ireland and South Africa in the 90's; Colombia in 2016. Who'd have thought these conflicts could ever be resolved? However, in all these cases, people grew weary of fighting. People realised the conflict was unwinnable. People started listening to those advocating peace. People started following those who advocated peace.

The way I see it is that God does try to stop conflict. However, He can't stop a conflict where nobody is listening or paying attention to Him. As I said, I'll cover this in more detail in Chapter 8. However, when people become weary of conflict and are prepared to listen, then great things can happen.

As in all aspects of life, God won't impose Himself on us. God wants a loving, personal relationship with us. For us to have a loving, personal relationship with God we have to be able to **choose** to have this relationship. If we didn't have choice, then it would be a coercive relationship. God doesn't want to force us to have a relationship with Him. That's not the type of relationship He wants with us. I might deeply love someone, but I can't make the other person love me. They have to choose to love me. If I try to force the other person to love me, then it's not a loving relationship. Instead, it's something dark and manipulative.

Similarly with war and conflict we have to be able to choose to listen to God or not. God's not going to force the issue. If He did, any possibility of a free-will relationship with God would be lost. It would be a bit like the love for Big Brother Winston Smith feels at the end of "1984". It would be a bit like the "love" North Koreans feel towards Kim Jong-Un.

So rather than force the issue, the way God seeks to stop conflict is by changing the hearts and minds of people – but only if they are prepared to listen.

One way God can change our hearts and minds is through the words and deeds of Jesus.

Jesus: The Antidote to War and Conflict?

I'm not here to argue the merits or demerits of other belief systems (more of this in Chapter 5) in relation to war and conflict. I'll leave it to others better qualified than me to do this. I'll leave it to the followers of these other faiths to make their case.

Instead, I'm a follower of Jesus. This booklet is called "A Path to Jesus". So, you'd probably expect me to focus on what Jesus says about war and conflict. And indeed, that's what I'm about to do.

I believe that God sent Jesus to live among us and provide us a model of what He is like – from a human perspective. If God was a human being, Jesus is how He would think, talk and act.

So, what does Jesus say about war and conflict? What did Jesus do, when faced with conflict?

There are two key passages in the Gospels which encapsulate Jesus' teaching on war and conflict.

In Luke Chapter 6 verses 27 to 31, Jesus says:

27 "But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. 29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. 30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

And in Matthew Chapter 5, verses 43 to 47, Jesus says something similar (but also very different):

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour[a] and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?
[a] Exodus 20:13

And finally in Matthew Chapter 7, verse 12, Jesus says:

12 So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Love your enemies? Bless those that curse you? Do good to those who hate you?

These are hard teachings. Some might say these are impossible teachings. How do you love your enemies? How can you bless someone who curses you? How can you bring yourself to do good to those who hate you?

But... if you're a follower of Jesus, then you have to take what He said seriously. You have to do your best to put His teachings into practice. You might not do a very good job of it. You might fall woefully short. But you need to try – and keep on trying.

Seems to me that these teachings from Jesus are the **antidote** to war and conflict.

But what about the other things Jesus said about conflict?
Some reading the above might say: OK. All well and good. But what about the other things Jesus said about war and conflict reported in the Gospels? For example:

Matthew Chapter 10, verses 34 to 36:

34 "[To the disciples] Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn:
"'a man against his father,

a daughter against her mother,

a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—

36 a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'[1]

1. **Michah 7:6**

Luke Chapter 22, verses 35 to 38:

35 Then Jesus asked them [the disciples], "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?"
"Nothing," they answered.
36 He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. 37 It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'[1]*; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfilment."*
38 The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords."
"That's enough!" he replied.

1. **Isaiah 53:12**

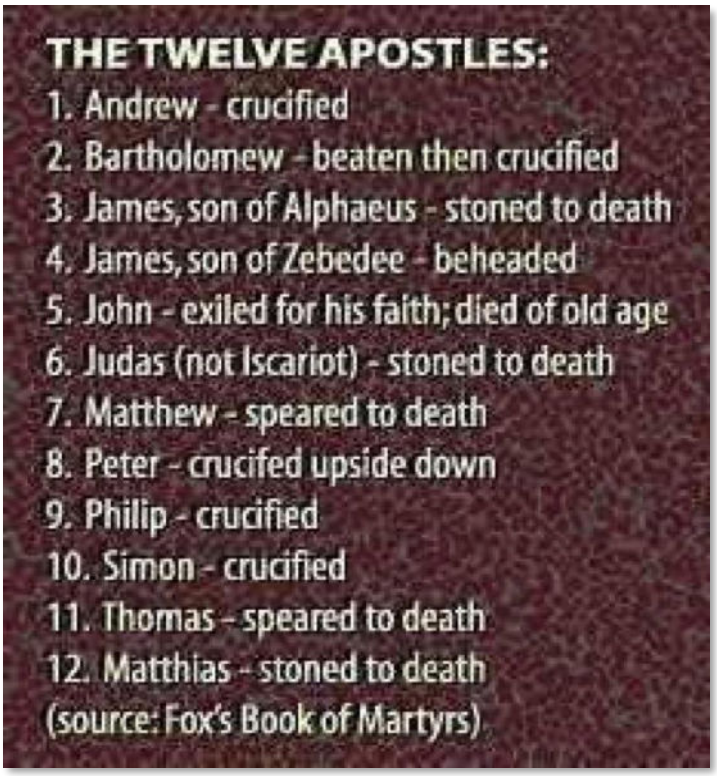
These don't sound particularly like the antidote to war and conflict, do they? Looks like Jesus was advocating war and conflict in these passages.

So, what was Jesus getting at?

As I see it, in the Matthew passage, Jesus is just stating the inevitable. The message Jesus preached would inevitably bring His followers into conflict with those they lived among – the Jewish Authorities, the Pharisees, the Greeks, the Romans. And that's exactly what happened in the years following Jesus' death (and Resurrection).

Inevitably, if you became a follower of Jesus, it would put strains on the relationships you had with your family if they remained attached to their life and religious practices.

What I think Jesus is getting at when he talks to the disciples in this way is to prepare them for the inevitable conflict they will face in their lives as a follower of Him. And so it turned out to be. Tradition has it that 11 of the 12 disciples met violent deaths as a direct consequence of following Jesus (see panel opposite – Judas Iscariot not included).



The early Christians faced around 350 years of persecution, conflict and violence as a result of following Jesus. We know of some of the "official" persecution from the Romans. What we know less of is the conflict existing within families when someone became a follower of Jesus. We may not know the details of this, but it's pretty easy to imagine. We only have to look at situations today when someone rejects the religion of their family and ethnic group and the conflict and danger this can cause.

So, Jesus message caused conflict – despite it being a message of love. Given the nature of humanity, it's hard to imagine it being any other way. Jesus knew this and was therefore preparing his disciples for the conflict to come.

The Luke passage is harder to explain away. However, read in context, it's perhaps more consistent with the Jesus we see elsewhere in the Gospels. Jesus says the words in Luke 22 to the disciples in the Upper Room where they've just had the Last Supper on the night of Jesus' arrest. Jesus has explained that he will be betrayed and arrested. The master they'd left everything to follow is telling them the journey with Him is drawing to a violent conclusion. What are the disciples thinking and feeling about all this? Worried? Fearful for their own lives? Massively disappointed? Grief-stricken? Probably all of these. To underline to the disciples the reality of what was about to happen, Jesus draws a parallel with the time he sent the disciples out on their own with nothing (see Luke Chapter 9). That was then, this is now. It's going to be dangerous for the disciples so they need to be prepared. If having a sword with them provides reassurance, then buy a sword.

The disciples have clearly already been thinking along these lines as they have two swords with them. Jesus says: “That is enough”. Enough for what? Possibly enough for the instruction Jesus is about to give the disciples a few verses later in Luke (Chapter 22, Verses 47 to 51) when Jesus is arrested:

47 While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, 48 but Jesus asked him, “Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?”
49 When Jesus’ followers saw what was going to happen, they said, “Lord, should we strike with our swords?” 50 And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear.
51 But Jesus answered, “No more of this!” And he touched the man’s ear and healed him.

Matthew’s gospel provides a bit more detail on this incident (Chapter 26, Verses 51 to 54):

51 With that, one of Jesus’ companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear.
52 “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. 53 Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

John’s gospel identifies the companion who attacks the servant of the high priest as Peter.

In the Gospels of Luke, Matthew and John, Jesus commands his companions to put their swords away. Having a sword in the face of the opposition and danger they were about to face was, in reality, no reassurance at all – for all who “live by the sword will die by the sword” (as Jesus said). They might have thought that arming themselves might provide some protection for the danger ahead – but really it would be no protection at all.

This was an important instruction to the disciples and one which needed to be made dramatically to have the maximum impact. They would all remember the high priest’s servant’s ear being sliced of – and Jesus dramatically putting it back on. It would look like Jesus’ tactic worked. The servant’s ear detail appears in all four gospels.

Jesus rebuking his friends for acting violently then healing an “enemy” would have made a dramatic impression on the disciples. But, of course, the disciples needed to have a couple of swords so the whole episode could play out the way Jesus wanted – hence two swords being “enough”.*

*You might ask yourself at this point: The dramatic healing of the servant’s ear may have made a lasting impression on the disciples. However, why didn’t it make an equally dramatic impression on the crowd coming to arrest Jesus? Once they saw Jesus’ power, why didn’t they all become followers of Jesus? Why didn’t that stop the Jewish Authorities prosecuting Jesus and handing Him over to Pontius Pilate for crucifixion?

To respond fully, would take an extensive description of the relationship between the Jewish people in Judaea, the Jewish Authorities and the Romans at the time of Jesus. If this is of interest, it’s definitely worth understanding. It helps explain a significant amount of what happens in the New Testament – and provides further evidence as to the authenticity of the Gospels. A great place to find out about this would be three books: “The Longest Week” by Nick Page, “The Historical Figure of Jesus” by E.P. Sanders and “Who’s Who in the Age of Jesus” by Geza Vermes. A briefer response for this book would be:

- We don’t know what effect Jesus’ healing of the servant’s ear had on the mob coming to arrest Jesus. It’s perfectly possible that some of them became followers of Jesus as a result. However, we’ve no way of knowing – as we’ve no evidence one way or another.

- Why this dramatic healing didn’t save Jesus from crucifixion is well illustrated by reading the events following Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead – an even more dramatic demonstration of Jesus’ power compared to sticking someone’s ear back on. This can be found in John’s Gospel. Read John Chapter 11, verses 45 to 53. Incidentally, what Caiaphas says in this passage wasn’t an empty threat. 37 years later, the unrest Caiaphas is so concerned about did happen and the Jewish nation was “taken away” by the Romans.

Was This Chapter Any Help?

At the start of this chapter I said that I hoped it would be of some use for those who find all the violence committed in Jesus’ name something they struggle with. I also said that this was never one of the key reasons I had for being an agnostic and not wanting to engage with belief in God or following Jesus. I think we’d all agree that human beings have an innate capacity for coming up with ingenious reasons for fighting one another. To me, Christianity was just another one of those reasons.

However, I can fully understand why some people reading this would struggle with the whole issue of the terrible things done in the name of Jesus. I can fully understand why this might be a major hurdle for some people.

In this chapter, I hope it’s clear that in no way do I condone any of the hideous things done in Jesus’ name in the last 2,000 years. I’m not planning to start defending the indefensible. However, I hope I’ve provided some introductory thoughts on why God might allow this type of violence to happen in the first place.

However, as I’ve indicated, God doesn’t just sit idly watching the mayhem. God does speak to us in times of conflict – the question is whether we’re listening. And when we do finally start to listen, amazing things can happen.

As I said earlier, one way God talks to us at times of conflict is through His Son Jesus. Jesus offers some radical guidance on the way through conflict.

Loving enemies? Blessing those who curse us? Doing to others as you'd have them do to you? The clear teaching that all human life is of equal value to God. Teaching on mercy. Teaching on compassion. These are just some of Jesus' teachings which have influenced His followers through the centuries. Influenced those involved in conflict. Influenced those considering conflict.

I suggested that these teachings were (and are) the antidote to conflict. It's difficult to quantify this, but I see evidence of Jesus' teachings averting some of the worst behaviour humans are capable of in both the past and present. I see evidence of Jesus' teachings in international human rights laws, truth and justice commissions, The Geneva Convention and so much else put in place by humans to avert the worst of our behaviour.

I would say that the world would potentially be a far more violent place were it not for God and Jesus. Do you agree?

Chapter 5: Can All the Other Religions Be Wrong?

(Jesus says to Nicodemus) *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."* **(John Chapter 3, verses 16 to 18)**

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." **(John Chapter 14, verse 6)**

(The Resurrected Jesus speaks to the disciples) *Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day,* ***47*** *and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."* **(Luke Chapter 24, verses 45 to 47)**

The above passages in the Bible – and how they've been interpreted by some Christians for the last 2,000 years were a major obstacle for me in moving from agnosticism to faith in Jesus Christ.

Could faith in Jesus be the only way to God? Could faith in Jesus Christ be the only way to be saved? What about everyone else? What about all those people who devoutly follow other religions? What about all those other people who have never heard Jesus message? What about all those people who will never hear Jesus message? What about those who have heard Jesus message - but it's been poorly communicated or they haven't understood it? What about those who had been brought up in another faith and can never effectively engage with Jesus' message in the first place? What about those who lived before Jesus came to Earth?

There are a lot of Christians in the world (2.2 billion estimated in 2010) – but that's only 31% of the total world population (estimated at 6.9 billion in 2010). If we take Jesus' words in John Chapter 3, then that's 4.7 billion people who were alive in 2010 who appeared to stand condemned because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son.

If God really loves His creation – if God really loves us, then why is He consigning around 69% of the world population to apparent damnation?

This is a question that both baffled and troubled me. It also didn't help when I asked Christians about this. Rather than providing some straightforward explanation showing how I'd massively misinterpreted the passages quoted above, they pretty much confirmed that my understanding was their understanding too! When I said that this seemed massively unfair and unjust, I never received a really satisfactory answer.

I also did a fair bit of reading on this too – it is, after all an issue that troubles atheists, agnostics and Christians. Again, the answers I received were far from satisfactory (from my perspective).

If I'm honest, I parked this question when I became a follower of Jesus. Where I got to with it was: *"I'm still not clear on how to reconcile Jesus' claims of exclusivity with the apparent unfairness of it. However, there are plenty of other reasons and evidence for me to start following Jesus. Let's get on with it and hope that clarity and understanding on this point follows at some point in the future."*

I know some people reading this will regard my approach to this issue as a bit of a cop out. However, I took the view that there are lots of other things in this world / life / universe that I accept / believe in - but don't fully understand. Gravity for example...

I know from direct experience that I remain stuck to the Earth and don't float around due to a thing called gravity. I know gravity appears in equations (usually as "g") to explain and predict how gravity works. I know that:

"At the atomic level, where masses are very small, the force of gravity is very small. But for objects that have very large masses such as planets, stars and galaxies, gravity is the predominant force, and it plays an important role in theories of the structure of the universe. Gravity is believed to be mediated by the graviton, although the graviton has yet to be isolated by experiment. Gravity is weaker than the strong force, the electromagnetic force and the weak force." (http://www.dictionary.com/browse/gravity)

So, what is gravity? I've no idea – and frankly neither does anyone else. It is "believed" to be caused by a thing called the "graviton" - but nobody has ever isolated a graviton. Further, nobody is really certain that gravitons actually exist. Even if a graviton was isolated, would we know why it exerted a gravitational force?

So, as a species, we don't know what gravity is. However, I don't think anyone is suggesting that, as a result, we should be rejecting all atomic

physics until we have a clear understanding of what gravity is. What we do instead is say something like: *"I'm still not clear on what gravity is. However, there are plenty of other reasons and evidence for me to still believe in the worth, validity and usefulness of atomic physics. Let's carry on thinking this and hope that clarity and understanding on gravity follows at some point in the future."**

*At the risk of labouring a point, please compare the above paragraph with paragraph three on the previous page. I've even put both of them in italics...

So, as I said, I parked the "what about other religions" question when I became a Christian – a bit like the way I (and everyone else) tends to park the question of what gravity is.

Since then, I think I've gained some greater understanding, but it would be wrong to say I have it completely resolved in my head. Indeed, I'm looking forward to writing this chapter as it will force me to articulate what I now know / don't know on the whole subject of other religions. A good way to find out if what runs around your head makes sense is to try and write it down and see if it still makes sense when you read it back in black and white.

Could One Religion be the Right Way to God?

One thing I've found out since I became a Christian is that all the other religions make exclusive claims too. Most accept that there is value and worth in the other religions – but that "the truth" lies with them. Indeed, even atheism (as it's currently promoted) has its exclusive claims. Perhaps moderate atheism might articulate its exclusive claim this way: "There is no God (or are no gods). Other religions can have value and worth, but ultimately they are incorrect in that they require the existence of God or gods. Only atheism can provide a path to a truthful view of the universe and our lives in it."

Christianity is therefore not unique in making exclusive claims. That said, I'm not planning to go through all the other religions and assess their claims of exclusivity relative to Christianity. I'm not here to argue the pros and cons of other religions. It's neither helpful nor constructive.

When I started my career in sales a long time ago, the first thing I was taught was to "never knock the competition when talking to a customer". Instead, focus on the strengths of the goods or services you are selling and let the customer decide whether your offering has greater value than the competition.

This seemed like good advice. I'm sure we've all come across a salesperson who seems obsessed by what his or her competitors do or don't do – and

then spends time bad-mouthing them in front of you. It all comes across as petty and vindictive. It's uncomfortable to listen to. It usually has the opposite effect to what the salesperson is hoping for.

So, I'm not planning to do that kind of thing with religions other than Christianity. My suggestion would be to do what I did and find out about the other religions (and other faith positions - atheism included) and make your own mind up.

When I did this, here are the elements of Christianity which made me commit to Jesus – rather than Mohammed, Buddha, Shiva, no-God etc.

- I was struck by the historical and rational evidence for Jesus being the Son of God.

- I was struck by the relative weakness of the counter-arguments to this evidence.

- When I read about Jesus and talked to Christians about Him, I was struck by the good sense of His teaching. Some of it was difficult to reconcile with the way the world works. Some of it was counter-intuitive. However, the more I studied, reflected and tried to put these teachings into practice, the more sense these teachings made.

- I was impressed by the way Jesus' teachings had been such a positive influence on the political system, legal system, the treatment of prisoners, warfare and welfare system of the country I lived in.

- I was impressed by the way Jesus' teachings had such a positive, transformational effect on His followers on such matters as forgiveness, love, understanding / empathy, charity, other-centredness, guilt, the value of other human beings etc.

- I was particularly impressed by Christianity not being a "works based" religion. Salvation didn't depend upon "being good" or "doing good works". There was a clear understanding that one could never be good enough or do enough to be perfect enough to earn salvation. Instead, salvation was a free gift from God – available to everyone who chose to accept it. This was the point at which this transformation in others started. They started being "better" people as a result of receiving this free gift.

- I was surprised to see how Jesus' teachings also started to have a positive, transformational effect on me too – once I too accepted this free gift.

There were undoubtedly things I struggled with regarding following Jesus. Indeed, this whole booklet is about the stuff I struggled (and struggle) with. Also, there were plenty of things in other religions I read about which were admirable and made sense to me. However, there was enough in the bullet points above to allow me to place my faith in Jesus.

A key point I should make here is that my "struggle" before being a Christian was between belief in God and unbelief in God. It wasn't between the comparative claims of various religions.

I should also say that I live in a western, liberal democracy. Therefore, choosing to follow a religion didn't bring with it danger of state persecution or open hostility from my family, friends and work colleagues.

Finally, I'm ethnically white British. If you're from this ethnic group and you have a faith, then it's likely to be either Christianity or atheism / agnosticism. Had I chosen, for example, the path of Islam, Hinduism or Sikhism, then there would perhaps have been more of a change to my lifestyle and perhaps more obvious concern from family, friends and work colleagues.

Given the above, I'd say that my decision was relatively low risk from a personal safety perspective. I wasn't going to be put in prison for making this decision. I'd also say it was a relatively low-impact decision in terms of the life I lived. In some aspects, following Jesus is a "high-impact" decision which requires major changes to your life (see more of this in Part 2). However, what I mean by a "low-impact" decision is that I wasn't ostracised by my family; I didn't have to give up my job; I didn't have to move house; I didn't lose my friends. Sure, there were a few "raised eyebrows" from those I knew when it happened – but I was never shunned.

Earlier this year, I read a book by Nabeel Qureshi* called "Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus". Nabeel Qureshi was an American Muslim who became a Christian. He described in heart-breaking detail how this created a seemingly insurmountable rift between him and the family he clearly loved.

Bad enough for Nabeel Qureshi – but imagine if he'd lived in Iraq or Afghanistan and made the same decision? He would have clearly feared for his life, unless he'd left the country.

* Nabeel Qureshi sadly died of cancer in September 2017

And what of those Christians in China or North Korea? The persecution of those following Jesus (rather than the state-approved atheism) has reduced in China in recent years – but it's still there. Being a Christian in these countries still brings with it the very real threat to your life and your liberty.

I became a follower of Jesus for the reasons I gave in the previous pages. However, if I'm honest, it was a relatively straightforward decision to make. Sure I had to go digging for the evidence, but it was readily available for someone who looked. Sure, there have been some significant changes to my life – but there have been no threats to my life. In comparison to others now, or in the past, my decision was an easy one. What I don't know, indeed can't know is if I would have made the same decision had these barriers been in place.

I headed this section: "Could one Religion be the Right Way to God?" I've given my reasons for following Jesus as my way to God. I've also tried to be honest in saying that choosing this path was relatively straightforward – given where I live and my ethnic background.

What I haven't provided is a simple "yes or no" answer to the question: Is following Jesus the one right way to God? I also haven't provided a simple "yes or no" answer to the question: Are all the other religions the wrong way to God?

I haven't provided a simple "yes or no" response, because I don't think there is a simple "yes or no" response to these questions. Perhaps I can't know the answers to these questions for the reasons I outlined in Chapter 1:"Don't Know? Can't Know? (Or: Cats Can't Comprehend Calculus)"

Although, I don't have a definitive "yes or no" answer to this, that doesn't mean I know nothing. There's stuff I know and there's stuff I don't know. Let me end this chapter by returning to the questions I posed at the start and do my best to say what I do and don't know about each.

Q: Is following Jesus the only way to God?

A: I really don't know for certain. However what I do know is:

- Following Jesus is definitely **a** way to God. In all four gospels, Jesus spells it out clearly that if you follow Him, you are on the right path to a relationship with God – a relationship that lasts for eternity.

- There's strong evidence of transformation in my life and the lives of others resulting from following Jesus. This looks like and feels like a loving relationship with God.

Q: Are all the other religions on the wrong path to God?

A: Again, I really don't know. To know for certain, I'd have to know the mind of God. I've no idea how God views the other religions – how could I? However what I do know is:

- The God Jesus talks about in the Gospels is loving, fair and just. This is the God I follow. I can't see Him condemning those who have never had the opportunity to hear Jesus' message or who have heard it partially or who have heard it through the filter of other religious teaching or who lived before Jesus' came to Earth to deliver His message. How this works out in practice I don't know, but it would be terribly unjust if it were the case. That just doesn't look like the God that Jesus describes in His teaching and who He talks about.

Q: What about those who have heard Jesus' message, understand it – but reject it?

A: Again, I don't know for definite. However I've read and heard one possible explanation for what may happen. It goes like this:

God wants a loving relationship with all of us. God wants to spend this life and the next life with us in this loving relationship. But any loving relationship needs to be a two-way thing. As a result, God won't force Himself on us. We must want to engage in this loving relationship.

If we don't want to do this, if we reject God, then God says in effect: "OK, your choice. I'll leave you alone. However, if you change your mind in this life, I'll be waiting to welcome you with open arms"

As far as I'm aware, this offer only lasts in this life though. If you don't change your mind in this life, then it may be too late. In the next life God promises to continue the loving relationship He has with those in this life. For those who wilfully reject him, then they may well get their wish and be destined to spend this life and eternity apart from God.

As I said, I follow a God who is loving, fair and just. I can't imagine God allowing someone to spend eternity apart from Him unless they have wilfully and knowingly rejected Him. And if this happens, it's not punishment – it's just God allowing exactly what the person wanted in the first place.

And what would an eternity being alone and apart from God be like? Sounds a bit like Hell to me.

No Definite Answers?

To conclude, if you were hoping for some black and white answers in this chapter, I'm sorry. As I've indicated earlier, I still don't have definite answers to the questions raised. I've also come to the conclusion that perhaps none of us can have definite answers to these questions. As I've said, to do so would be to know fully the mind of God.

However, the thoughts and reflections I've shared above have helped me partially reconcile these questions in my own mind. I hope they are of some help to you too.

The evidence of transformed lives (now and in the past) resulting from finding a relationship with Jesus was a strong motivator in me becoming a follower. I have never regretted the choice I made. Indeed, I've never heard anyone ever regret choosing to follow Jesus. I've never heard anyone say: "Oh I wish I'd never become a follower of Jesus. It's so rubbish."

As for other religions – other paths to God? I can't ultimately say. However, I trust in the God of Jesus. A God who is kind, loving, fair and just. I therefore believe that God will deal with everyone kindly, fairly, lovingly and justly – whatever their religion.

Chapter 6: Alternative Lifestyles

An increasingly contentious issue for many people in "The West" is how Christians are increasingly seen as out of step with developing 21st Century attitudes to homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, transgenderism and so on. LGBTQIA for "short"* This is an area of life today where there's a lot of shrill denunciation, personal attacks and name calling – without a lot of understanding of the basis of why someone else might hold a different view.

*At the time of original writing (2017) the shorter LGBT was being used. An indication that this topic is rapidly evolving in Western society.

To the Western, non-Christian world, the debate within Christianity seems to be a mixture of well-meaning, liberal hand-wringing or strident opposition and reaction to all things "gay". **"What it says in the Bible"** is regularly cited as the basis for this anti-LGBTQIA stance, with those taking this position sometimes sounding decidedly un-Christian towards their "back-sliding, liberal" fellow Christians and the morally corrupt, Western, secular attitude towards the whole issue.

Equally shrill and reactionary are some of the things said by non-Christians on this subject. I've heard so-called tolerant, liberal non-Christians verbally tear into Christians on this subject, calling them homophobes, bigots and worse in a decidedly intolerant, illiberal fashion. The irony of this seems completely lost on them. The "intolerance of the tolerant" it's sometimes been called.

Between these opposing positions are those other Christians who are trying to sound terribly understanding of all opinions but are really confused by the whole issue or just hoping it will go away. As for the rest of the world? They're wondering what all the fuss is about – if they've even engaged with the arguments at all.

OK. My descriptions above are fairly stereotypical and don't represent some of the nuanced debate on this matter. However, it's also true to say there's been a fair bit of rabble-rousing, looking for trouble and general, pig headed, bloody-minded awkwardness from all sides too.

This is what I saw when I looked at the Christian faith as an agnostic. From the outside, Christian attitudes to "LGBTQIA issues" (not that it was called that 25 years ago) looked decidedly suspect to my Western, liberal, "tolerant" (wishy-washy?) eyes. I also didn't get much reassurance from the Christians I spoke to. Nobody could give me a clear, rational basis for their views on homosexuality, other than to vaguely cite a Scriptural basis for them.

The whole thing was decidedly unsatisfactory and was developing into a bit of an obstacle for moving forward on my path to Jesus. The purpose of this Chapter is therefore to share some of the work I did looking objectively at Scripture (ie **"What it says in the Bible"**) and subjecting the passages on homosexuality to the type of analysis I described in Chapter 3. In other words:

- Did I fully understand the cultural, social and religious conditions prevailing at the time of writing these passages? Did the passages make any more sense as a result?

- Were my 21st Century, white, middle-class, male perceptions getting in the way of a correct interpretation of the passage? If I attempted to strip these away, did the passages make any more sense?

I started with something I knew a little about...

(Note: In the following, I'm focusing on homosexuality. This is simply because this is the type of non-heterosexual behaviour we know most about in the ancient world. Lesbianism, bisexualism, and transgenderism no doubt existed in the ancient world too. To what extent it existed seems difficult to say as there is little surviving material to work with and comment upon.)

Homosexuality Was Different Back Then

In the 21st Century in the "West", the prevailing non-Christian view of homosexuality is that you're born that way and there's nothing that can be done to change the way you are. Indeed, the **non-Christian** view is increasingly that it's positively harmful to even try to change the way you are.

In that respect, the non-Christian view today is that homosexuality is the same as heterosexuality. The argument goes, nobody would question that heterosexuals are born that way or suggest that heterosexuals could somehow be changed from being heterosexual – so why suggest it's any different for those who aren't heterosexual?

The "scientific" view is a bit more nuanced – there can be other social, familial and cultural reasons which also can have an effect on sexual behaviour. However, in broad terms, the current non-Christian view on sexual preferences is that you are what you are and to try and deny this at a personal or societal level is unhelpful at best and deeply damaging at worst.

However, when we look at the ancient world in the Near East 2,000 to 3,000 years ago, it all looks a bit different. Matthew Parris (the openly gay, ex-Conservative MP) put it succinctly when he said: "Today, homosexuality is

something **you are**. In the ancient world, homosexuality was something **you did**."

So, which is it?

How could homosexuality **apparently** seem to be so different 2,000 to 3,000 years ago to the prevailing non-Christian view in the West?

Indeed, why does homosexuality exist at all? If you are looking for a definitive answer from "science" good luck. There are plenty of theories kicking about, but there's no **settled** scientific view. Indeed most of what I've read on this subject is either coloured by the writers pre-conceived attitudes towards this subject or being very careful what they say or write so they don't get pilloried or "cancelled".

So, what do we know about homosexuality 2,000 to 3,000 years ago from the Bible?

The ancient Jews were nomadic herdsmen living among other, more sedentary agricultural peoples like the Canaanites. In Canaanite culture, homosexual acts had a religious element in that these were practiced by priests as part of the religious rites associated with being right with the Canaanite gods. Temple prostitution and child sacrifice also formed part of these religious rites in Canaan.

Moving forward to the time of Jesus, Judaea formed part of the eastern Roman Empire. As a result, the Jews of this time lived among Greek and Roman settlers and were therefore in close contact with both Greek and Roman culture. Those Jews who lived elsewhere in the Roman Empire were in even closer contact with Roman and Greek culture.

To Greeks and Romans, homosexual acts were a normal part of life – something one might do within the confines of an all-male group of friends, the army or other all-male environments. The focus was on the homosexual act. As Matthew Parris said, homosexuality was something you did – depending upon circumstance. At other times, these same people would and could behave heterosexually.



What is also interesting is who the homosexual behaviour was practiced with. There was a clear preference for older men to have sex with young boys or slaves – two groups of people who would have little if any choice in being selected for sex. In Neil McGregor's book "A History of the World in 100 Objects", he describes what is known as the Warren Cup (see opposite) – a silver drinking vessel dating from around 5 to 15 AD, found at Bittir, near Jerusalem and now in the British Museum. The outside of the vessel is decorated with pictures of older bearded men involved in sexual acts with young, beardless adolescent boys. This is the typical picture of homosexuality that comes from the Greek and Roman sources we have for this period.

Whether these sexual acts were consensual is difficult to say. However, we do know that Roman and Greek society was run on slavery – the owning of human beings and their treatment as "property". As an owner of slaves you could do pretty much what you wanted with your own property. If that included the sexual abuse of young male slaves, then the slaves would have to comply or face the consequences of disobeying the person who owned them.

In summary, much **(but not all)** of what we see of homosexuality in ancient Greek and Roman society would look to 21st Century eyes as the sexual abuse of children and rape.

Seen in this way, the objection to homosexual behaviour in some passages in both the Old and New Testaments in the Bible becomes a bit more understandable. If homosexual behaviour in the ancient world was typified by the sexual abuse of children and rape (or a ritualised, non-consensual act as was seen in sexualised Canaanite religious rites), then most people from the 21st Century would regard this as unacceptable – just as the Bible regards it to be unacceptable.

To use the Warren Cup as an example again, where it was found is of interest. This cup was found in Judaea – near Jerusalem. In other words, the Greeks who would indulge and celebrate the acts depicted on the Warren Cup were most likely living among Jewish people in the conquered Jewish homeland. In short, the acts and culture depicted on the cup were "in the

face" of the Jewish inhabitants of Judaea. They weren't something abstract that happened somewhere else in the Roman Empire. Consequently, they were far more likely to be commented upon.

What's also interesting to note is that this type of sexual behaviour was, as Matthew Parris says, "something one did" – it was a part of many heterosexual males' sexual life. It was something one did some of the time (or at a particular time in your life). It didn't define you as a person. As I've said, this is very different to the 21st Century where homosexuality is regarded as "something one is" – it's less of a preference and more of a definition of who one is.

So, if homosexuality is the way you are and there's nothing you can do to change this, then how could homosexuality be so different 2,000 years ago? I'm neither competent nor qualified to provide an answer to this, **but what it does suggest is that prevailing culture can play a large part in how people view certain behaviours.**

To use an example on which I can perhaps talk with more confidence. I've been present at the birth of all three of my children. The feelings of love and bonding I've immediately felt to each new born baby are perhaps the most powerful emotions I've ever felt in my life. I also know that, as a father, the strength of my emotions are as nothing in comparison to what the mother feels towards her newborn child. The emotions I felt were, to me, completely natural and I cannot imagine any father, any human being feeling any differently. How could you not be immediately emotionally bonded to your own, new born child? Yet we know that in the ancient Greek and Roman world, it was an acceptable practice for unwanted babies to be abandoned on rubbish tips or in wild, lonely places and left to die. This practice was known as "Exposure".

I think it would be hard for anyone today to imagine how something like this could have been acceptable practice! To us, this goes against every "natural" instinct we have. Yet we know it happened and was acceptable in the Greek and Roman world. We have to conclude that those ancient Greek and Roman people didn't have what we would call the same "natural instincts" we have. We also have to conclude that what we think are our "natural instincts" to protect and love our new-born children may be more culturally-based than we think (however shocking we may find this).

For a more detailed overview of sexual behaviour and infanticide in the Greek and Roman World "The Cambridge Dictionary of Classical Civilisation": Edited by Graham Shipley, John Venderspoel, David Mattingly and Lin Foxhall (2006 Cambridge University Press) is an ideal source.

What are the Scriptural Passages Where Homosexuality is Mentioned – and How Should they be Interpreted?

Having found that the reasons for same sex attraction were far less clear than the prevailing view of non-Christian culture – and that much of what was in the Bible regarding Homosexuality **might** be influenced by the factors described above, I decided on the following course of action.

I decided to look at each and every Scriptural passage where homosexuality is mentioned - and those passages sometimes used to justify biblical opposition to homosexuality. I then applied the two criteria I mentioned earlier:

- Did I fully understand the cultural, social and religious conditions prevailing at the time of writing these passages? Did the passages make any more sense as a result?

- Were my 21st Century, white, middle-class male perceptions getting in the way of a correct interpretation of the passage? If I attempted to strip these away, did the passages make any more sense?

Here are the passages, and an interpretation of them. I've divided these into two sections:

- The most mentioned Scriptural Passages (Major Scriptural Passages) used when Homosexual behaviour is condemned.

- The less-used Scriptural Passages (Minor Scriptural Passages) for condemnation of homosexual behaviour.

Major Scriptural Passages

Genesis Chapter 19, Verses 1 to 9

This is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham has just "negotiated" with God (Chapter 18) not to destroy Sodom if twenty righteous men can be found in the city. God then sends two angels (in human form) to Sodom to see if these righteous men can be found. The angels meet with Lot (Abraham's nephew) in Sodom.

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them and bowed down with his face to the ground. [2] *"My lords," he said, "please turn aside to your servant's house. You can wash your feet and spend the night and then go on your way early in the morning."*
"No," they answered, "we will spend the night in the square."

3 But he insisted so strongly that they did go with him and entered his house. He prepared a meal for them, baking bread without yeast, and they ate. 4 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. 5 They called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."
6 Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him 7 and said, "No, my friends. Don't do this wicked thing. 8 Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof."
9 "Get out of our way," they replied. "This fellow came here as a foreigner, and now he wants to play the judge! We'll treat you worse than them." They kept bringing pressure on Lot and moved forward to break down the door.

I don't know about you, but this reads like homosexual rape – the use of sex to subjugate and humiliate two "strangers". I think it's fair to say, this behaviour would hopefully be condemned by anyone (non-Christian or Christians) in the 21st Century. Also, the offer of Lot to give the mob his daughters to be raped is clearly morally repugnant on today's terms. **Quite obviously a morality very different to that which operates in 21st Century Western culture was in play at the time and place of Sodom's destruction.**

Leviticus Chapter 18, Verse 22
22 "'Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.

This verse is preceded by sixteen other verses – fifteen forbidding various types of sexual relationships and one forbidding child sacrifice. It is followed by one verse forbidding bestiality.

If we read all eighteen verses, from a 21st Century perspective Christians and non-Christians would agree with seventeen of them (Leviticus 18, verses 6 to 23 - read them and you'll see what I mean), but there might be some debate today about verse 22 between Christians and non-Christians.

Why are these behaviours being condemned? It certainly reads like these are part of the religious and ritual lives of the nations about to be driven out of Canaan to make way for the children of Israel. The Lord says in verses 24 to 28:

24 "'Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. 25 Even the

land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. [26] *But you must keep my decrees and my laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things,* [27] *for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled.* [28] *And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you.*

This touches on a consistent theme in the Old Testament. That the Children of Israel (ie The Jews) were to be distinctly different from the peoples that surrounded them. To adopt their lifestyles and religious beliefs and practices would spell disaster for them – and did repeatedly when it happened.

Some people have a tendency to pick and choose what's applicable today from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. It's a flippant comparison but it does say in Leviticus Chapter 17, verse 10:

[10] *"'I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood, and I will cut them off from the people.*



I can't remember any Christian condemning the manufacture or consumption of black pudding... (manufactured from pig's blood for those unfamiliar with black pudding) Indeed black pudding is a bit of a "double strike" according to Leviticus – where pigs are also forbidden to be eaten!

The decrees in Leviticus were made for a specific people at a specific time and for specific reasons. Some of these are still applicable today (for example, having sexual relations with your son's daughter or child sacrifice). Some aren't (for example, the eating of food made from blood). So, which ones are and which ones aren't applicable?

The answer is, I think, to look to Jesus. Which of these decrees are in accordance with Jesus' teachings (either generally or specifically) and which **seemingly** aren't? As I wrote in Chapter 3: Jesus is the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Where there is **apparent** conflict or contradiction between what Jesus said or taught and what's in the Old Testament, then **Jesus takes precedence**. Any conflict or contradiction is either down to our lack of understanding of what was written in the Old Testament or that Jesus' teaching supersedes this.

Leviticus Chapter 20, Verse 13
13 "'If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.

See my comments above for Leviticus 18: 22...

Romans Chapter 1, Verses 18 to 32
The next passage is from the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul was a Jew from the Greek city of Tarsus. He was therefore brought up living in the midst of Greek and Roman society. Indeed, Paul had the status of being a "Roman Citizen". In his early life, Paul was also an orthodox Jew – "zealous for the Law" as he puts it. He moved to Jerusalem and studied under the great Jewish teachers of his time. Paul was actively involved in the persecution of the first Jewish Christians after Jesus' death – people he saw as broadcasting a blasphemous message and a perversion of the correct way to be right with God. All this changed when he met with the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus. At this point he changed from being a persecutor to a follower of Jesus. He was eventually reconciled with the early Jewish Christian leadership in Jerusalem and took on the mission of spreading the Good News of Jesus to Gentiles (ie non-Jewish people) throughout the Roman Empire. Paul's letters in the Bible are just that – letters to early Christian communities in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire and Rome itself. Some of these communities were founded by Paul himself. Others were funded by other Christian missionaries such as Apollos and Barnabas.

These early Christian communities (including the community in Rome to whom he wrote "Romans") would have consisted of: ex-believers in the Greek and Roman gods (Gentiles); ex-"God-Fearers" (ie Gentiles who had been attracted to and practiced Judaism but were not Jews) and ex-Jews. All were attempting to move on from their previous beliefs and follow Jesus instead. Paul's letter to this community lays out what Jesus' life, death and resurrection means and provides practical guidance on living out a faith in Jesus.

The passage below lays out the condition of humanity in Paul's time – and in times gone by. In the next chapter, Paul is clear that the people he is writing to are no better than this and so should not in some way feel morally superior. In God's eyes we are all "sinners" like this – it is only through the grace of God (through faith in Jesus) that we can be forgiven for our sins. I'll try to provide a more detailed explanation of this frankly difficult-to-understand theology in Chapter 9.

I've provided the whole section in which the comment on homosexual behaviour sits. This should help to set it in context:

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.
21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.
24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.
26 Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.
28 Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul was a Jew who knew the Tanakh (Old Testament) in detail - and could probably recite it word-for-word from memory. He therefore knew the Laws in Deuteronomy and Leviticus relating to keeping separate from the idolatorous, sexually oppressive, morally depraved and manipulative religious practices of the peoples the early Jews lived among. He also knew the Greek and Roman culture he lived in and consequently would understand most **(but not all)** homosexual behaviour for what it was in those days – child abuse and rape.

If this is how he understood homosexual behaviour – either bound up in the morally bankrupt practices of primitive, idolatrous religions or as a predatory activity performed by the more powerful on the less powerful (children and slaves), then it's no wonder homosexual behaviour is lumped in with those other "unacceptable" (in our eyes) behaviours he describes. As I've said previously, if we too were faced with homosexual behaviour in these contexts, then anyone today would take the same position as Paul and condemn it.

That said Paul, does write: *In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another* clearly doesn't read like coercion. That reads like a consensual act.

1 Corinthians Chapter 6, Verses 9 to 11

The Greek city of Corinth was an important and wealthy port in Paul's time. It was also a centre for the worship of Aphrodite – the Greek goddess of love. Corinth's temple to Aphrodite employed around a thousand temple prostitutes (in Greek: hetairas). The city was well known for these temple prostitutes, who provided their services to the general population (who could afford it) and visitors to the city. Add to this my previous comments on the nature of homosexuality and the impression one has of Corinth is that, from a sexual perspective, it was a bit "debauched".

Paul established a Christian community in Corinth comprising mainly of Gentile converts (see Acts Chapter 18). These would have mainly been Greeks who had been brought up in Corinth and so had been steeped in the social, religious and sexual practices of their culture. Paul nurtured this group for around a year and a half, then moved on to establish and bolster other Christian communities elsewhere.

Once Paul had left Corinth, confusion developed on how to follow Jesus. Some of the Christian community in Corinth were distorting Paul's message by trying to reconcile this with some of the social, religious and sexual practices of the culture they had come from. This doesn't look to have been done maliciously – rather this was an understandable "culture clash" between their past and their new life in Christ. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians was written largely to correct these distortions and to provide guidance on how to follow Jesus. Chapter 6 contains the following passage:

9 Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men[1] 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were

sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Footnote:

1. *1 Corinthians 6:9: The words "men who have sex with men" translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts [New International Version Bible Footnote – not mine].*

This is Paul directly appealing to the Corinthians not to slip back into their old ways of behaving. The comment on homosexuality could be read in this context. The homosexual acts Paul is thinking of could be the Greek and Roman concept of homosexual acts. That said, the two words referred to in the NIV footnote are the Greek words "arsenokoitai" and "malakoi". They indicate that Paul is writing of men willingly participating in homosexual "acts" – not coercion.

1 Timothy Verses 8 to 11

1 Timothy is another of Paul's letters – this time to one of his fellow-workers called Timothy. Having previously established above what Paul would have understood to be homosexuality in the Greek and Roman world, his comments on homosexual behaviour here are understandable in that context:

[8] We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. [9] We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, [10] for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine [11] that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.

Jude Chapter 1 Verse 7

Jude was one of Jesus' brothers and, along with another of Jesus' brothers (James), was one of the leaders of the early Jewish Christian church in Jerusalem. In his letter in the Bible, Jude makes reference to Sodom and Gomorrah:

In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.

Jude's source for his understanding of what went on in Sodom and Gomorrah would be the same as ours - Genesis 19: Verses 1 to 9. As I've said above, what is described in this passage looks like homosexual rape.

Minor Scriptural Passages

There are also a number of other passages where condemnation of homosexual behaviour is more oblique and inferred (if indeed it is even obliquely referred to in some of these) – rather than being mentioned explicitly as in the passages above. Rather than providing a detailed analysis of each, I think I can say that the comments I've made on the passages noted above, would also apply to these passages too. The passages are:

- **Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 28.** Although not condemning homosexual behaviour, it has been suggested that this passage indicates what God regards as "natural" human behaviour – relations between and man and a woman in order to have children and "increase in number". As a result, it's been suggested by some that other forms of relationship are, by implication, un-natural.

- **Genesis Chapter 2, Verse 18; Verses 23 to 24.** See comment on Genesis 1: 28 above.

- **Genesis Chapter 9, Verses 20 to 29.** Noah's son Ham sees his father naked and is condemned for this. Some have viewed this as an oblique condemnation of homosexual behaviour. However, the reason Ham is condemned is far from clear from the passage.

- **Deuteronomy Chapter 23, Verse 17.** The issue with this passage is apparently the mistranslation of the Hebrew word "Qadesh" as "sodomite" in the King James Version of the bible. Qadesh is more correctly translated as "Temple Prostitute".

- **1 Kings Chapter 14, Verse 24; Chapter 15, Verse 12; Chapter 22, Verse 46.** As above, the issue with these passages is the mistranslation of the Hebrew word "Qadesh" as "sodomite" in the King James Version of the bible. Qadesh is more correctly translated as "Temple Prostitute".

- **2 Kings Chapter 23, Verse 7.** Another mistranslation of the word Qadesh.

- **Judges Chapter 19, Verses 14 to 29**. This passage looks like a retelling of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. See my comments for Genesis 19: Verses 1 to 9 above.

- **Matthew Chapter 8, Verses 5 to 13.** Some have suggested that the "servant" of the Centurion that Jesus heals could have been a sex

slave. However, there is neither a direct nor indirect reference to this in the passage.

- **Matthew Chapter 19, Verses 10 to 12.** Some have suggested that Jesus' reference to "Eunuchs" in this passage might also refer to homosexuals. However, there is neither a direct nor indirect reference to this in the passage.

These then, as far as I'm aware, are the scriptural passages used to define the "biblical" view of homosexuality (and by implication all the other "alternative lifestyles" as they're referred to today). I think you can see that, once the context of each passage is explored, we have a far more nuanced picture of same sex attraction.

Summary

God wants to see us living a physically and mentally healthy life. God wants us to live a life where we don't hurt ourselves or other people – emotionally or physically. God wants us to live a life where we don't oppress or exploit other people.

God also wants a relationship with us. Worship is our way of providing an expression of that relationship with God. However, there are some worship practices that God finds abhorrent. Worship of idols, human sacrifice and ritual sexual practices are three things that should have no place in worship of God.

As far as I can see, the type of homosexuality condemned in the Bible is predominantly bound up in ritual sexual practices associated with worship or the exploitative abuse of slaves and children common and accepted in the Greek and Roman world. These are behaviours nearly all of us in the 21st century would also condemn.

I say predominantly – but not all.

A consistent theme in the Bible is don't allow the "norms" of prevailing culture influence the following of the teachings in the Bible. The Bible covers all the good and bad of human behaviour. In every time and place there is always something in the popular culture challenging what is being taught in the Bible.

I've heard it said: Jesus doesn't condemn monogamous, consensual, loving, same-sex relationships in the Bible. Well, yes - but He makes **no mention of these types of relationships in the Bible either.** Jesus makes no mention of alternative lifestyles – positively or negatively.

However, Jesus does make reference to God's plan for our marriage relationships in **Matthew Chapter 19. Verses 4 to 6:**

4*"Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'* ***5****and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?* ***6****So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."*

I think the above is pretty clear on Jesus' teaching on marriage (and divorce).

In comparison to the type of homosexual activity described previously, there's relatively little surviving evidence of monogamous, consensual, loving, same sex relationships in non-Biblical Greek and Roman writing from this time either. Why would this be? Is it because it didn't exist? I don't suppose we can say for certain. However, one thing we can say is that it wasn't due to cultural squeamishness. The reason we know so much about ancient Roman and Greek homosexual practice is due to the surviving writing and artefacts which graphically describe it. If there was some form of cultural taboo to discuss or write about loving, same-sex relationships, one would imagine this would extend to other types of homosexual activity as well. This is clearly not the case.

Although Jesus doesn't say anything about alternative lifestyles in the gospels, He has plenty to say about how we should treat others. We are called to: *"Love your neighbour as yourself"* (Luke 10: 27). When asked: *"who is my neighbour?"* (Luke 10: 29) Jesus makes clear this can be anyone – including strangers, enemies, or people whose lifestyle you might find difficult to accept (*"The Parable of the Good Samaritan"* – Luke 10: 25 to 37).

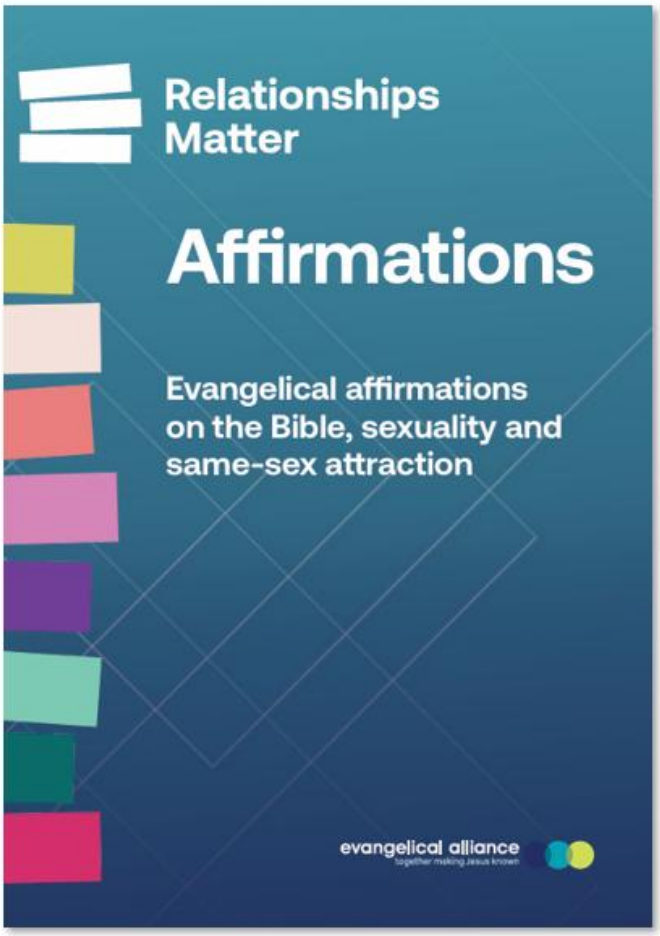
Jesus also tells us to: *"Do to others as you would have them do to you"* (Luke 6:31). Jesus isn't specific on who these "others" are. However, as this verse follows Jesus' instructions on loving your enemies, doing good to those who hate you and blessing those who curse you, it's reasonable to assume that the "others" Jesus refers to means **anyone** – irrespective of their lifestyle or whether they are a friend or an enemy.

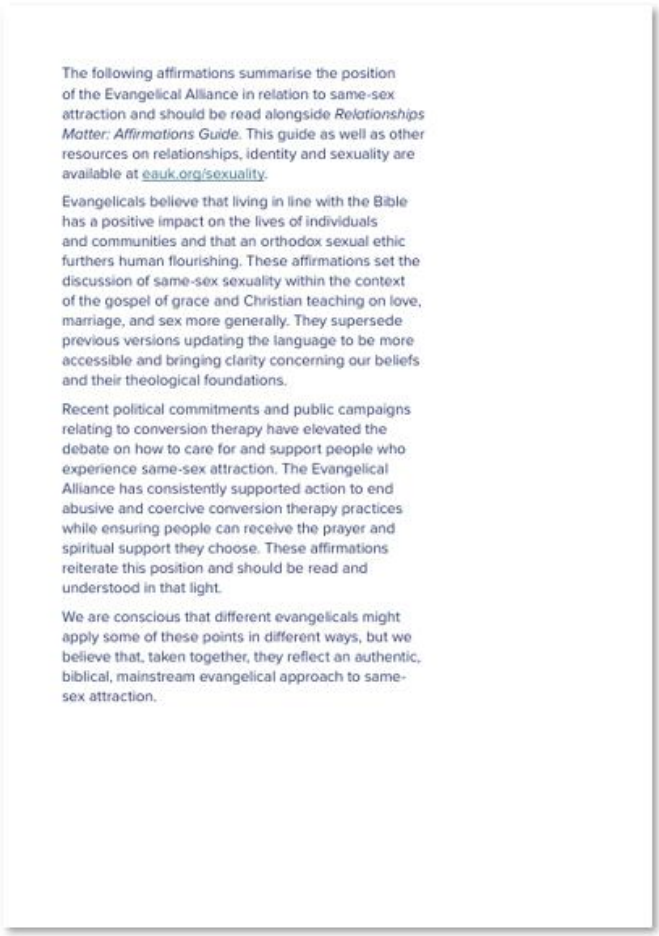
I said earlier in this chapter, the whole issue of the Christian response to homosexuality and other "alternative lifestyles" became a bit of an obstacle in my path to Jesus. The reasoning I've provided above helped me **eventually** get round this obstacle.

I think I should say that I've got round the obstacle, **but the obstacle is still there.** There's a lot I don't know on this topic. There's a lot of half-formed thoughts on this subject floating round my head – and when I try to take them from half-formed to fully formed, a lot of what's "out there" is tainted with opinion – and the prevailing Western, non-Christian, cultural zeitgeist of the time and place I live in.

You might ask: **"All very interesting but what do you think now Derek?"**

As I've said above this is a difficult subject. But I have found a pamphlet produced by the Evangelical Alliance in the UK has been a very big help to me.
I've reproduced it below. The original can be found at:
https://www.eauk.org/assets/files/downloads/Relationships-Matter-Affirmations.pdf)





The following affirmations summarise the position of the Evangelical Alliance in relation to same-sex attraction and should be read alongside *Relationships Matter: Affirmations Guide*. This guide as well as other resources on relationships, identity and sexuality are available at eauk.org/sexuality.

Evangelicals believe that living in line with the Bible has a positive impact on the lives of individuals and communities and that an orthodox sexual ethic furthers human flourishing. These affirmations set the discussion of same-sex sexuality within the context of the gospel of grace and Christian teaching on love, marriage, and sex more generally. They supersede previous versions updating the language to be more accessible and bringing clarity concerning our beliefs and their theological foundations.

Recent political commitments and public campaigns relating to conversion therapy have elevated the debate on how to care for and support people who experience same-sex attraction. The Evangelical Alliance has consistently supported action to end abusive and coercive conversion therapy practices while ensuring people can receive the prayer and spiritual support they choose. These affirmations reiterate this position and should be read and understood in that light.

We are conscious that different evangelicals might apply some of these points in different ways, but we believe that, taken together, they reflect an authentic, biblical, mainstream evangelical approach to same-sex attraction.



The 10 affirmations

1

We affirm the goodness of creation, and the dignity of all people as those made in God's image. We recognise that all of us are sinners, and that the only true hope for sinful people – whatever our sexuality – is in Jesus Christ. Our prayer is that His love, truth and grace would always characterise evangelical responses to debates on sexuality.

2

We affirm God's love and concern for all human beings, whatever their sexuality, and so reject and condemn all attitudes and actions which victimise or vilify those whose affections are directed towards people of the same sex. We are encouraged that many Christians now recognise and deeply regret the hurt caused by past and present failures in their responses to those who experience same-sex attraction.

We affirm that marriage is an institution created by God in which one man and one woman enter into an exclusive relationship for life, and is the only form of partnership approved by God for sexual relations. Holding these theological and ethical views on biblical grounds is in itself neither harmful nor homophobic. Rather, they are views to be held and expressed with Christ-like love and grace, since they reflect the teaching of Jesus Himself.

3

4

We encourage evangelical congregations to be communities of grace in which those who experience same-sex attraction and seek to live faithfully in accordance with biblical teaching are welcomed and affirmed. Such Christians need churches which are healthy communities where they are able to share and explore their stories with fellow believers for mutual encouragement and support as we help each other grow together into maturity in Christ.

We believe that the acceptance by certain churches of same-sex marriage and other forms of sexual relationships outside monogamous heterosexual marriage, and permitting the ordination to ministry of those in such relationships, is incompatible with biblical teaching. We stand prayerfully with those in such churches who are seeking to resist these moves on biblical grounds.

5



We believe church services that institute or bless same-sex marriages, same-sex civil partnerships and any other forms of sexual relationship outside monogamous heterosexual marriage are unbiblical. We believe that no church leader or congregation should be compelled to perform or participate in such services.

6

7

We commend and encourage all those who experience same-sex attraction and have committed themselves to chastity by refraining from same-sex sexual practice. We believe they should be eligible for ordination and leadership within the church, recognising that they can bring invaluable insights and experience to the sphere of Christian pastoral ministry.

We affirm the work of those helping Christians who experience same-sex attraction and who want to live in accordance with biblical teaching. Such pastoral support may involve prayer and counselling and must be done in a responsible, consensual, and non-coercive way. We acknowledge that some people have experienced changes in their sexual attractions, with or without such support, though this outcome is not necessary for Christian faithfulness and should not be promised.

8

9

We believe that sexual relations outside marriage without repentance, and public promotion of such activity, are inconsistent with faithful church membership. While processes of membership and discipline differ from one church context to another, we affirm that churches should be free to follow these processes in relation to those who engage in, or promote, sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage.

We encourage evangelical congregations to love and welcome all people, whatever their pattern of sexual behaviour. We are called to be communities of gentleness, patience and ongoing pastoral care in which all of us who are living outside God's purposes, will come in due course to see the need to be transformed and live in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox church teaching.

10

Chapter 7: Science and God. Why All the Fuss?

A few years ago, I invited a work colleague along to a “Jesus: The Evidence” presentation I was taking that night. He declined the offer, so I asked him why. His response was that he didn’t believe in God and that it wasn’t really his “thing”. When I asked him why he didn’t believe in God, his one-word answer was: “Science”. He clearly didn’t feel the need to say anything else. To him, it was obvious that “science” had disproved the existence of God. To him, it was so obvious that science had disproved the existence of God, further explanation as to why this was the case would be unnecessary.

As I’m sure you know, my work colleague isn’t alone in thinking this. Many people find science and God incompatible. For them, it’s either one or the other.

I guess I had an inkling of how this line of thought went when I was an agnostic. I thought that people with faith in God had different thought processes to me. Outwardly they functioned like normal human beings, but inwardly I thought they must see the world very differently from me. I thought that to hold on to their beliefs regarding God, they would have to either ignore or deny certain scientific facts about the universe, the solar system, life on earth etc etc.

(Interestingly, I discovered that people with faith in God do see the world very differently from my old agnostic self – but not in the way I thought they did when I was an agnostic. I’ll come back to this in Part 2).

I may have had an inkling of this line of thought when I was an agnostic. However, I never went the whole way – as some atheists do – in thinking that believers in God must be suspending some or all of their rational intellect in order to sustain their beliefs in the face of the scientific evidence pitted against them. I also never held the view that those with faith were: stupid, weak-minded, easily led or massively deluded (as some of the more over-heated opinions on atheist internet discussion forums suggest).

When I was an agnostic, it seemed to me to be rationally unsupportable to **say definitively** that there could be no spiritual dimension to life. That the only explanation for anything was one defined in scientific terms. That those things in life and in the universe currently not understood could (and would) only be understood in scientific terms. That trying to explain things in any way other than scientific terms was pure bunk.

That is the way many people think. However, to me as an agnostic this seemed just as much of a declaration of faith as those who would profess a

belief in God. Let me give an example. In “The God Delusion”, Richard Dawkins writes the following in relation to the origin of life on earth (Page 137 of the hardback version):

“The origin of life is a flourishing, if speculative, subject for research. The expertise required for it is chemistry and it is not mine. I watch from the sidelines with engaged curiosity, and I shall not be surprised if, within the next few years, chemists report that they successfully midwife a new origin of life in the laboratory. Nevertheless it hasn’t happened yet, and it is still possible to maintain that the probability of its happening is, and always was, exceedingly low – although it did happen once!”

Understanding the origin of life on earth is one of the “big questions” of science. As Richard Dawkins indicates, a lot of scientists are spending a lot of time and money trying to answer this fundamental question – and have been for the last 60 years or so. Ever since the Miller-Urey experiment in 1953 (where amino acids were created from a mixture of ammonia, methane and oxygen – suggesting a possible mechanism for their creation in the early earth), there has been continued and extensive research to try and understand a scientific basis for the origin of life.

And what is the result of all this research? We are no closer to understanding the origin of life today than we were over 60 years ago – despite all the time and effort devoted to this. There are some speculative theories (as Richard Dawkins indicates), but theories are all we have.

Now Richard Dawkins may be right. In the next few years chemists may report that they have successfully midwifed a new origin of life in the laboratory – although this didn’t happen in the “few years” after “The God Delusion” was written (2006). However, for Richard Dawkins to have the confidence that science will find the answer to this question – despite the evidence of over 60 years of trying and failing – kind of flies in the face of the evidence. This suggests that Richard Dawkins has faith in science - faith being defined as: complete trust or confidence in someone or something.

Richard Dawkins, my work colleague and many others have complete trust / confidence in science. In their view, science has and will provide all the answers. As I’ve said, that is as much a faith position as any other “religious” faith position.

As I indicated back in Chapter 1, when I was an agnostic, I couldn’t just dismiss the spiritual experiences and faith of millions of people past and present. They couldn’t all be weak minded, impressionable, deluded people. I looked at many intelligent and rational people past and present who

professed a faith in God. This couldn't be squared with an idea that they were all stupid or deluded.

Even as an agnostic, this: "either science or religion" argument seemed just plain wrong. Surely the two were looking at different things? If this were so, then why all the fuss?

If it wasn't "either / or", then what made more sense? One way I heard this expressed seemed to help a bit. Someone wrote that science asks the "how" questions whereas religion asks the "why" questions. Now I know this is a bit overly simplistic, but it did hint at how belief in God and science could co-exist.

I know that there are some things in the Old Testament which, at first blush, don't sit neatly with current scientific thinking on cosmology and the propagation of life on earth. Indeed, I touched on some of this in Chapter 3.

I also know that virgin births, miracles and bodily resurrection also don't fit with current scientific thinking or have scientific explanations. OK, but does that mean they couldn't have happened? If you are the creator of the universe and are therefore the creator of all the laws of physics, chemistry and biology that operate in the universe, it's a pretty small matter to modify those laws a bit to allow for a virgin birth, miracles and your bodily resurrection after your human body dies.

As Jesus says: *"With God all things are possible"* (Matthew 19:26). Of course, if you're certain that God doesn't exist, then to you a virgin birth, miracles and bodily resurrection are impossible. But, if there's just a possibility that God exists, then the supernatural events described in the New Testament are equally possible. Why wouldn't they be?

I called this Chapter: "Science and God. Why All the Fuss?" The reason I called it this is that I really don't understand what all the fuss is about. I really can't see why an understanding of science and belief in God can't cohabit happily in anyone's brain. I didn't see the issue when I was an agnostic. I don't see the issue today when I am a Christian. Let me summarise:

- Science is defined as: *"a systematic enterprise that creates, builds and organises knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe."* (Source: Wikipedia).

- Scientific research has not disproved the existence of a God who created the universe and everything in it.

- Furthermore, science can't disprove the existence of God. If God is the creator of the universe then, by definition, God is beyond the universe (as well as being in the universe). Science therefore has no way of developing **testable** explanations and predictions about God - as God would exist outside that which is observable (ie the universe).

- To 100% deny the existence of God (in the absence of 100% definite proof) is an unscientific position to take – if your understanding of science is: *"a systematic enterprise that creates, builds and organises knowledge in the form of testable explanations and predictions about the universe."* You may come to the position that the existence of God is improbable (depending upon how you read the evidence), but to say that the existence of God is impossible cannot be proved from scientific evidence.

- Given the previous bullet point, to 100% deny the existence of God is therefore a faith position – you can't prove it definitively, but you believe it anyway.

- To suggest that science (either now or in the future) has all the answers is also a faith position – as was shown above.

- A more reasonable scientific position to take is therefore to accept the possibility that God might exist and to then look for evidence for and against this possibility and see where this evidence takes you.

- Wherever this evidence takes you, it won't take you to a position where you can 100% prove or 100% disprove the existence of God. However, it could take you to a position where science and God could co-exist in your mind – if you saw enough evidence to suggest that on balance of probabilities it was more likely that God existed than didn't exist.

- If you come to the conclusion that, on balance, it's more likely that God doesn't exist, then science for you is about humans gaining a greater understanding of creation and the laws governing this creation. If however, you come to the conclusion that, on balance, it's more likely God does exist, then science for you is about humans gaining a greater understanding of **God's** creation and the laws governing this creation.

- In both conditions above, science and God are not mutually exclusive. With this approach, science can easily sit side-by-side with faith in God.

If all that seems fine to you, but you still struggle with the concept of supernatural events because they don't sit with scientific understanding of physics, chemistry and biology, then the following might help:

- If there is a God who created the universe, then He created the laws of physics, chemistry and biology that make the universe operate the way it does.

- If this God is powerful enough to create the universe and the laws governing its operation, then logically He is powerful enough to modify these laws to allow what seem to us to be supernatural or miraculous events.

So, to conclude, I never did understand what the fuss was about. Even as an agnostic I could see how belief in God and science could happily co-exist. My task, as I saw it, was to examine the evidence for and against the existence of God and see where it took me. As I described in Chapter 1 this wasn't getting me anywhere – until I looked at the evidence for and against Jesus being the Son of God.

During the time I spent doing this, I was reminded of the passage in John's Gospel (14.6) where Jesus says: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me".* As we know, to the shame of Christians and Christianity, this one statement has been used in the last 1,700 years as the justification for all kinds of religious persecution, forced conversions, racism and genocide. However, I then thought that for humans in the 21st century, we could perhaps view the meaning of Jesus' statement as something closer to the following:

- As discussed earlier, it is difficult (if not impossible) to intellectually prove or disprove the existence of God.

- However, with Jesus, we're on firmer ground. There is hard evidence – evidence that we are capable of understanding - indicating that He is the Son of God.

- Clearly, if Jesus is the Son of God, then there has to be a God He is the son of.

- So, viewed in this way, does Jesus therefore provide us with a route to God (or, to paraphrase John 14.6. a way to the Father)?





Chapter 8: Why do Bad Things Happen to Good People?

Gay Byrne is the long-time presenter of “The Late Late Show” on RTE (the Irish broadcasting company). More recently, he has presented a programme in Ireland on Sunday evenings called: “The Meaning of Life”. The format is pretty straightforward. Gay Byrne interviews people in the public eye and asks questions on their life, their views on life in general and other topics.



On the 1st February 2015, Gay Byrne interviewed Stephen Fry. At the end of the programme, the questioning turned to God...

Gay Byrne (GB): ... suppose it’s all true and you walk up to the pearly gates and you are confronted by God. What would Stephen Fry say to him, her... or it?

Stephen Fry (SF): *I will basically (it’s known as theodicy I think) I’ll say:* [angrily and indignantly] *“Bone cancer in children. What’s that all about? How dare you! How dare you create a world where there is such misery that is not our fault! It’s not right. It is utterly, utterly evil. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded, stupid god who creates a world that is so full of injustice and pain. That’s what I’d say.*

GB: And you think you’re going to get in?

SF: *Oh, but I wouldn’t want to. I wouldn’t want to get in on his terms. They’re wrong.*

Now if I died and it was Pluto, Hades and if it were the twelve Greek gods, then I’d have more truck with it because the Greeks [gods] *didn’t pretend not to be human in their appetites, and in their capriciousness and their unreasonableness. They didn’t present themselves as being all-seeing, all-wise, all kind, all-munificent – because the god who created this universe (if it was created by God) is, quite clearly, a maniac. Utter maniac – totally selfish.*

We have to spend our life on our knees thanking him? What kind of god would do that?

Yes, this world is very splendid – but is also has insects whose whole life-cycle is to burrow into the eyes of children and make them blind. They eat outwards from the eyes. Why did you do that? Why? Why did you do that to us? You could easily have made a creation where that didn't exist. It is simply not acceptable.

So, you know, atheism is not just about not believing there's a god - but, on the assumption there is one, what kind of god is it? It's perfectly apparent that he is monstrous, utterly monstrous, and deserves no respect whatsoever. The moment you banish him your life becomes simpler, purer, cleaner - more worth living in my opinion.

GB: That sure is the longest answer to that question I've had in this entire series Thank you so much Stephen.

When I last looked, the YouTube clip of the above interview had over seven million views.

Stephen Fry succinctly and graphically articulated what many atheists, agnostics and Christians find really difficult to reconcile. If God is good, why does He allow bad things to happen? And particularly, why does He allow bad things to happen to good people?

For the atheist, it can be (as it is for Stephen Fry) clear evidence for the non-existence of God. For the agnostic, it can be a real question-mark on whether God does or doesn't exist. And for the Christian it can really shake your faith – really make you question whether God is really there taking an interest in the lives of His creation.

Stephen Fry's examples come from nature – hideous illnesses and equally hideous life-forms. However, he could have also mentioned natural disasters heaping death, destruction and misery on the good and the bad, the young and the old. Surely God could prevent these things happening? And what about how some really terrible things happen to people who really don't deserve it, while appalling people who do appalling things sometimes seem to get away with it. The bad guys usually have their come-uppance in Hollywood films in the end. Not so often in real life. What's all that about?

As Stephen Fry says, this world is very splendid. But there is so much in this world which just seems – unfair. Surely if God was in control, it wouldn't be like this?

People have been asking this question and trying to find answers to it for thousands of years. As Stephen Fry indicates, in the ancient world, one way of answering this question was to believe in a pantheon of Gods who behaved like humans with all their good and bad traits and who treated humans like “flies to wanton boys”.

The purpose of this chapter isn’t to try and provide some neat and simple answer to explain why bad things happen to good people. Philosophers, theologians and scientists have been wrestling with this for a very long time. We’re no nearer now to having a nice, tidy answer to this question – let alone a nice, tidy answer that everyone can agree upon. Instead, I’d like to share a few thoughts on this question – thoughts which helped me on my journey from agnosticism to following Jesus.

What Does Jesus Say on the Subject?

The first thing I’d like to share was my surprise to find that this question was directly addressed by Jesus. When I read the gospels for the first time as an agnostic, I wasn’t expecting Jesus to directly confront the whole issue of bad things happening to good people on a number of occasions.

For example, Luke Chapter 13, verses 1 to 9.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ***2*** *Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?* ***3*** *I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.* ***4*** *Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?* ***5*** *I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*

6 *Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any.* ***7*** *So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’*

8 *“‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.* ***9*** *If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”*

There were a fair amount of teaching points Jesus was trying to get across to His followers here. Looking at these is perhaps for another time. The fig tree parable takes a bit of explaining - but is linked to the passage preceding the above in Luke’s gospel. However, what I do want to highlight is that Jesus clearly states that people will suffer terrible things as a result of the

evil of other men - and as a result of accidents and natural disasters. Further, those to whom these things happen are just the same as the rest of us. The good and the bad.

Jesus, doesn't ask "why" these things happened – or provide an answer as to why they happened. Instead, there's an implicit acceptance that things like this have happened in the past, do happen and will happen again.

Another example from Matthew chapter 5, verses 43 to 48:

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour[a] and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

If this passage was being used as the starting point for a sermon, the focus would probably be on the loving of enemies and the praying for those who persecute you. Indeed, this is one of the key teachings of Jesus. A teaching that has repeatedly transformed individuals and situations over the years - if actually applied in real life.

However, for our purposes, I'd like to focus on verse 45. Jesus says that God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain (a good thing in the Middle East) on the righteous and unrighteous. Jesus doesn't question why this happens. Instead, He accepts that this is just the way it is. The good things of the world (sunshine, light, rain) are provided by God to everyone on Earth – irrespective of whether you're good or bad.

In the passage above, there's an explicit acceptance that God is in control of His creation. In this instance the ultimate control of the sunshine and rain. And if He created the laws of physics that govern the universe, why wouldn't God have ultimate control of the sunshine and rain on one of His planets?

In both passages, why the world is this way is not questioned. What Jesus focuses on is how we should **respond** to the world as it is – a world with injustice, unfairness and where good things sometimes happen to bad people and bad things sometimes happen to good people.

When I reflected on this as an agnostic, it took me down a different line of thought.

To me, it was **easier** to explain why the world is the way it is without the presence of God. Injustice, oppression, persecution, war, illness, hunger, murder, rape, natural disasters, man-made disasters. All easier to understand if you take God out of the mix. No need to try and reconcile these things with a God who created the conditions for these things to happen. Instead, where to look for explanations would be in evolutionary science, plate tectonics, medicine, anthropology, civil engineering, physics, chemistry, meteorology etc. And, as we all know, a better understanding of these sciences has gone a long way understand (and sometimes to alleviate) the terrible things that can happen to us all.

It might be easier to explain the way the world is without God, but that of course, doesn't necessarily make it the right explanation.

When I considered this – running against these purely naturalistic explanations was evidence for God's existence and (more importantly for me) the evidence for Jesus being the Son of God (see Chapter 2). If this evidence was true, then additional explanation was required for all the bad things listed above. What was God's part in all these things?

There are Christian explanations for all this – which I'll touch on in a bit later in this chapter. However, as an agnostic, some of those Christian explanations (for example, the concept of sin causing all the terrible things in the world) seemed a bit far-fetched. Instead, I took the path which I described in Chapter 1 on this question. Maybe I **couldn't** know the answer to why the world is how it is – because to know the answer might require knowing more than I as a mere human being was capable of understanding. Maybe I was like the cat I described in Chapter 1 - looking at the calculus. I see the world as it is. I respond to the world as it is. I have an understanding of the world as it is. But do I truly and fully understand **why** it is the way it is? **Am I intellectually capable of truly and fully understanding why it is the way it is?**

If that was the case, then perhaps the way forward was to follow Jesus on this one. Jesus' focus in the two passages above is on **how you respond** to the world as it is – rather than fretting about **why** it is as it is.

So, how do you respond when faced with injustice, oppression, persecution, war, illness, murder, rape, natural disasters, man-made disasters? There are clear answers in Jesus' teachings in the Gospels. Answers which provide some real help – individually and collectively.

To use just one example: consider the passage from Matthew's gospel above. Reflect upon it. Imagine what the world would be like if people loved their enemies. If people blessed those who cursed them. Consider what the world is like when this happens. This counter-intuitive behaviour has been at the root of so many resolutions of conflict – at the level of nations down to the level of two family members reconciling after years of bitterness and hate.

Imagine what you would be like if **you** loved your enemies. Would that release you from a corrosive and depressing cycle of hate and resentment? I read a great quote the other day that's been attributed to Malachy McCourt and Nelson Mandela:

"Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies"

Nelson Mandela avoided resentment – although he had every reason to be bitter, resentful and vengeful on those who imprisoned him and persecuted his people. Instead, he put Jesus' teachings into practice. He forgave those who persecuted him and he encouraged others to do likewise. In doing so, he created the conditions for a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. He, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, were also instrumental in the "truth and reconciliation" project in South Africa. Jesus' teaching on forgiveness was at the root of Nelson Mandela's largely peaceful way out of apartheid. In doing this, he avoided the bloody mess South Africa could have become and many had predicted. Nelson Mandela put loving enemies and forgiveness into practice. Actually lived it. And as a result, Nelson Mandela is rightly revered as one of the greatest leaders of the 20th Century.

So, what about you? What would your life look like if you put loving your enemies and forgiveness into practice? Really lived it like Nelson Mandela.

I don't know what you've been through in your life – and it might be pretty awful. You might think it's very easy for me to say to you to love your enemies and forgive. I've no idea what they've done. However, I can say with confidence your life will be better if you take this path – rather than the path of bitterness, resentment, revenge and holding on to the hurt. Bad things will happen to all of us in this life – good people and bad people. For some, these bad things will be really bad. How we respond can make it even worse – or perhaps make it a bit better. Jesus understood this, as He understood so many things about our lives.

What Would the World be Like if Nothing Bad Happened?
So, Jesus' teaching focuses on **how** we should respond to the bad things in our world. However, as we saw, Jesus doesn't address the **why** question – why these things happen in the first place.

As I've said, there really is no neat and tidy answer to this why question. However, the following thoughts helped me at least partially come to terms with it.

The first question we might consider is this: Bad things happen in this world. What would the world be like if bad things just didn't happen? What if there was nothing bad in the world to respond to?

What if there were no adversities to overcome? Nothing we had to be brave about? Nothing happened we ever needed to feel compassionate about? What if we didn't need to think about anything bad happening in our lives (having a bad accident, marriage break up, losing your job, not getting your qualifications, the consequences of our own selfishness etc etc). No need to work hard at your studies, your job and your relationships – everything would be fine irrespective of whether you put in the effort or not. No need to think about others – your selfishness and indifference wouldn't hurt them.

We often see the best of people at times of crisis. I'm writing this just after three horrific terror attacks in the UK. The response from the public has been inspiring - people helping others, offering shelter for the night, raising money for the victims and their families, providing public support and solidarity with those affected. If nothing bad happened, people would never have the opportunity to display these positive traits.

I could go on describing the various ways bad things can bring out the best in people, develop their characters, make them more compassionate, make them more loving. I'm sure you can think of all kinds of examples where something positive has come out of a bad event in your own life - or on a larger societal or national scale.

Please don't think I'm suggesting that all these bad things happen so that our character is developed and we "grow" as people. If you have terminal bone cancer – but are heroically also raising thousands of pounds for medical research via social media at the same time and are inspiring millions as a result, you don't need me telling you it's all happening so God can further develop your character. I think you'd be perfectly justified to say to me: given the choice of being heroic and getting better, could I just get better please?

What I am suggesting though is that the world would be a very different place if no bad things happened. We would be very different creatures if no bad things happened. Would it be a "better" world? You know, I don't know if it would. Would we be "better" people? Again, I'm not so sure.

Now you might be thinking: He's taking this to ridiculous extremes. Clearly the world would be better if fewer bad things happened. If you are thinking this, then my response would be: So, which are the bad things which shouldn't happen? Imagine for a minute that we (as the whole of humanity), were able to choose to have 50% fewer bad things happening in the world. Would we all agree collectively which would be the 50% bad things that didn't happen? Is one poor woman's miscarriage more worthy of being avoided than eight poor people dying in a mud slide in Ecuador? Is someone dying in a car accident more worthy of being avoided than some poor soul dying of malaria?

Frankly, who are we to judge? Frankly, we're in no position to judge.

I think it's fair to say, if there were 50% fewer bad things happening in the world, **our perception of the world would be exactly the same.** Our perception of the world would still be that bad things happen to good people and it all seems very unfair.

I guess where I'm going with this is right back to Jesus. As I've said, it's debatable that a world without bad things would somehow be "better" than the world as it is. Also, a world with fewer bad things happening would still have a lot of bad things happening.

Jesus takes a different response. Rather than fret and rail about why the world is the way it is, Jesus' teaching on all this is that it's how we respond to how the world as it is that's the most important thing.

So, Why is the World the Way It Is?

Stephen Fry doesn't believe there's a God. As he said to Gay Byrne, part of his reasoning for this is seeing a world "so full of injustice and pain". If God did exist, then He would have to be (as Stephen Fry said) "capricious, mean-minded and stupid" to have created such a world.

For many people, that's where things end: The world's full of injustice, unfairness and pain, therefore there's no God. No further thought on the matter required.

However, if you take this view, you also have to reject out of hand any possibility for the existence of God – and reject all the evidence which might

point to the existence of God. Before this evidence can be dismissed, you really should have sound, well evidenced, naturalistic counter-arguments for those things which could be used as evidence for God.

For example, what about the evidence of the personal spiritual experiences of people now and in the past? Could they really **all** be deluded or honestly mistaken? Could they really all be victims of wishful thinking? If you dismiss all this personal experience in this way, you really have to say it was all (is all) delusion and wishful-thinking. And if you do this, do you have hard, well-reasoned, **conclusive** evidence to back this up.

What about the cosmological evidence? Why are the laws of physics and chemistry so conducive for the development of life on Earth? These laws don't have to be what they are. Theoretical physicists recognise this with their speculation on multiple universes. However, there's no actual evidence for multiple universes though – only theoretical speculation. Alternatively, could a creator God have created these laws to facilitate life in His creation? Before you dismiss this notion out of hand, do you have the evidence to **conclusively** dismiss it?

What about the origin of the universe? The creation of something out of nothing. Well reasoned scientific models have been developed to describe the early universe from the first nanoseconds of its existence. But we only have speculative theories as to why it came into existence in the first place. A creator God is just as plausible an explanation for the origin of the universe. Do you have hard evidence to **conclusively** dismiss this possibility?

In Chapter 6, I talked about the mystery of how inanimate chemicals became life. We're no closer to understanding how this happened. Is there any hard evidence to **conclusively** dismiss the possibility that a creator God set the whole thing in motion?

If you're reading the above as a resolute atheist, then you may dismiss some of this as "God of the Gaps" thinking. Let me be clear. I'm not arguing for God's existence on the basis of the above. All I'm saying is that the existence of God cannot be conclusively dismissed without hard evidence – and that this conclusive, hard evidence is just not there.

Which brings me on to Jesus. What about the historical and rational evidence for Jesus being the Son of God? As I've described previously, I looked particularly at the evidence for Jesus and was amazed at how strong it was. I was also amazed at how much stronger the arguments for Jesus

were – compared to the counter-arguments. Weighing things up, the evidence pointed to Jesus being who He said He was.

If you accept my point above - that God's existence cannot be rejected as a possibility on the strength of the pain and injustice in the world, then we're back to reconciling God with the way the world is – and Stephen Fry's contention that God would be capricious, mean-minded and stupid to have created it this way.

Perhaps one way of approaching this question on the character of God is to look at the character of Jesus. If Jesus is the Son of God, then He must reflect the nature of God. That's what the New Testament says about Jesus. That's what Jesus says about Himself in the Gospels.

What I found when I read about Jesus in the New Testament was love, compassion and forgiveness. What I found was a deep empathy with human beings and humanity. What I saw was the behaviour of someone displaying all the best traits of humanity: love, compassion, empathy, forgiveness, generosity, grace – but with none of the bad human traits. There was no evidence of capriciousness, mean-mindedness and stupidity. I had to conclude that if Jesus was real, then God too was a God of love, compassion, forgiveness and empathy – not the God Stephen Fry describes.

So, why is the world the way it is? As I said above, a world with no bad things happening might not be a better place after all. A world with fewer bad things happening would still be perceived by us as unjust and unfair. If truth be known, I suppose I can't say for certain why the world is as it is. Perhaps I'm incapable of saying for certain. However, here are a few thoughts:

- God wants a loving, one-to-one relationship with you, me and the rest of humanity. As we all know, you can't be coerced into loving someone. It has to be a free-will choice. A loving relationship can't be a loving relationship if you have no choice in the matter. If there was irrefutable evidence for an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God and that God wanted a loving relationship with you, it would be pretty difficult to say: "I don't want this, I'll go ahead and live this life and eternity apart from my creator". But equally it would be difficult to make yourself love your creator – just because He was your creator. We've been born with free-will. Perhaps the world has to be the way it is - with all its imperfections and injustices to allow us the free-will space to either embrace God, or to reject the possibility of God's existence on the basis of all the pain and injustice in the world.

- Human beings respond to challenges. As I've already pointed out, we are refined and developed as a result of the challenges and adversities in life. If the world were a perfect place, there would be no adversities to overcome. No opportunities for refinement and development. Perhaps the world is the way it is develop and refine us. To build us up. To better understand and cherish our relationship with God during times of adversity.

- We say the world is full of injustice and pain. But the world is also full of good things – justice, joy, beauty, love. Perhaps the world would be a lot worse without God. What have we got to compare the world as it is with? Some kind of half thought-through vision of Utopia? Perhaps God is intervening in all kinds of ways to make the world a better place. Perhaps He's making those judgement calls I suggested we are in no position to make. Intervening in the lives of individuals. Motivating them to do kind and loving things. Plenty of people say it's their faith in God that compels them to do the kind and loving things they do.

- Perhaps God does intervene in nature to stave off the worst of natural disasters. Saving countless lives as a result. The truth is we've nothing to compare this world with. Perhaps it would be far, far worse without God's hand upon it.

- Human beings are strong-willed, independent, self-reliant creatures. When times are good, we tend to be more strong-willed, independent and self-reliant. Less aware of our need for a relationship with God. It's well-known that people often sense God's presence supporting them and comforting them at times of adversity. They often have a greater need of God and the relationship strengthens as a result. It's interesting to note that faith in God is strongest in those parts of the world (the US excepted) where there is the greatest hardship, war and oppression – while in comfortable, wealthy Western Europe, it's in decline. Perhaps the world needs to be the way it is, so we are aware of the need for a relationship with God.

- If, as Jesus clearly indicates, there is life after this life then perhaps the injustice of premature death and injustice is softened somewhat. If life on earth really is a brief interlude before an eternity spent with your loving creator, then perhaps some of the cruelties and injustices some people face seem less unfair if they are now enjoying a joyous eternity with their creator. Does perhaps soften the apparent cruelty of violent death, painful death through illness and the death of children?

- Finally, human beings are pretty imperfect creatures. Christians would call this our sinful nature. Sin's a pretty unfashionable word these days. Perhaps a more palatable way of expressing this is to say "nobody's perfect". I think we'd all agree that none of us are perfect. We all have our faults. It's fair to say that much of the unfairness and injustice in the world is self-inflicted. Pride, Envy, Anger, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth and Greed all cause a fair amount of the misery in this world. Add to this an unhealthy dollop of hate and unforgiveness and even more misery results. One that rarely gets a mention is indifference. To my mind, this is probably the greatest of all the sins. To be indifferent to the suffering of others. Indifference probably causes more misery than anything else - if you think about it. The irony is that, if we were passionately concerned and truly felt the misery of all other humans, we couldn't actually function as human beings. Perhaps much of the world is the way it is due to our imperfect nature. The terrible things we do to ourselves and others. The things our indifference prevents us doing that results in even more terrible things happening.

If you've gone through some truly appalling things in your life – or have directly witnessed this in others, I really, really don't want to be providing trite, simplistic reasons for the pain you've experienced. The points above are not meant to try and rationalise and compartmentalise what you're experiencing or have experienced in the past. You don't need some pat explanation / justification for what you face. "Oh brilliant. This nightmare I'm going through can be explained away as something that's building my character. Fantastic..." or "Oh great. Life couldn't get any worse – but it's all my fault because of my sinful nature. Thanks..."

You clearly don't need someone like me suggesting anything like this. What you need is love, support, compassion and understanding. Frankly what you need are all the things Jesus offers those that come to him. Jesus says in Matthew Chapter 11, verses 28 to 30:

28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

If you're going through terrible times, this is what you need – and this is what Jesus (and God) offers you.

Christians believe that God became a man in the form of Jesus. One of the purposes of this was to help us better understand and relate to God. If God

was human, Jesus would be how God thought, acted and taught. However, it's clear from the historical records that Jesus was also a real man – fully human in every respect. Jesus behaved like a man. He was not some kind of serene, other-worldly figure. In the gospels, Jesus is happy, sad, frustrated, exasperated, weeps, enjoys a meal and takes a drink - just like any other human being.

Another thing Jesus could do was experience pain and suffering – just like any other human being. Jesus could also truly die – just like any other human being.

God experienced all these human things, through Jesus.

If terrible things have happened to you, God understands because He has experienced equally terrible things through Jesus.

Excruciating pain? God experienced this on the Cross.

A victim of extreme violence? God was flogged, mocked and beaten before being crucified.

Searing loss? God watched is only Son die a violent death. God also directly experienced that death through Jesus

Victim of a major injustice? God was falsely accused at His trial and executed on trumped up charges to appease a violent mob.

Rejected by spouse, friends or family? God was left to suffer and die, abandoned by those He loved.

Facing death? God experienced all the human emotions we would have facing death through Jesus.

Read the Gospels for yourself – particularly the passages on the trial and execution of Jesus. Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" was a hard and gruesome watch – but accurately portrays just what God went through.

God knows your pain through His own personal experience. God understands what you're going though. God can therefore truly empathise and comfort you. God can stand with you. Countless people though history have experienced the support, love and empathy of God at their worst times.

Any Help?

Whether the points I've tried to make in the chapter have any relevance to why the world is as it is, I can't say for certain. Whether they've helped you if this is key point you struggle with – again I can't say.

Before I became a Christian, I really struggled with this question of reconciling the world with the concept of a loving God. What's more, I didn't resolve it in my mind. I actually took the conscious decision to park it and hope that I might gain greater understanding in my future walk with Jesus. And so it has proven to be. This issue is still not neatly resolved in my head – but it's a lot more resolved than it was.

So what about you? Has any of this chapter been of use? Has it helped, at least partially, reconcile an imperfect world with a loving, compassionate, forgiving creator God?

Chapter 9: Can Someone Explain to Me Why Jesus Had to Die For My Sins?

I live on the South Side of Glasgow in Scotland in the UK, and have done so for nearly all of my life. It's maybe not everyone's taste, but I like it. It's where I was brought up. It's where my parents live. My wife's parents moved here to be closer to us. It's near where my grown up children live. My wife can walk to her work. I have a 12 minute commute to my work (15 minutes if it's busy). OK, the weather can be a bit "dreich" (look it up), but it never gets ridiculously hot or mind-numbingly cold.

Not a lot has changed where I live in the last 50 years or so. Sure, some buildings have been knocked down and replaced with flats. Some buildings have been remodelled into flats. The odd pockets of rough ground have slowly but surely disappeared to make way for flats. The industry that was here has tended to move to more suitable premises in industrial estates or business parks elsewhere. The spaces remaining have tended to be filled with flats.

Aside from a seemingly insatiable demand for flats, where I live is pretty much as I remember it as a boy. The street patterns are the same, the tenements are the same, the houses are the same, the landmarks are the same. It's a leafy, semi-urban, semi-suburban place to live.



One of those landmarks that has been here for as long as I can remember is a large neon sign in Victoria Road. It's outside Crosshill Evangelical Church and faces on to one of Glasgow's main arterial routes to and from the city centre. It's almost unnoticeable in the daylight, but as dusk descends it becomes more visible. By night time, it's pretty hard to ignore.

As I said, this sign has been there for as long as I can remember. I have a particularly strong memory of seeing it when I was coming home from university on the top deck of the bus. There it was, at eye level, boldly declaring that "Christ Died for Our Sins". And I remember thinking: "What

does that mean?" I also remember thinking: "Why did Christ have to die for our sins?" As a non-believer, it made no sense to me.



I also remember asking people I knew who were Christians to explain what Christ dying for our sins meant. I thought this would be relatively straightforward. I might not have been a believer, but I knew this statement expressed a fundamental principal of the Christian faith. Surely any Christian would be able to give me a simple and understandable explanation. Unfortunately not. When I asked, the responses were either vague and hesitant or boldly expressed using language and concepts completely alien to me.

As you can imagine, this kind of surprised me. If Christians didn't seem to know what Christ Died for Our Sins meant (or if they did, they seemed to have to explain it in [what seemed to me] bizarre theology), how could I possibly know what it meant?

This was one of those questions I parked in my 20's, with a view to coming back to it later – but never did. However, when I started to look again at the whole God and Jesus thing in my 40's, inevitably I had to come back to this question and get a sensible understanding of what it meant.

I've devoted a whole chapter to this question, because I'm certain I'm not alone in having difficulty understanding the whole concept of Christ dying for my sins. Also, if many Christians have difficulty explaining or understanding what it means, then it might be worth spending time trying to grasp a better understanding.

The "Official Explanation"

I should say at this point, I've heard many times what I'm calling the "Official Explanation". If you're interested in what this is, type "Christ Died for Our Sins" in YouTube. You should get a few well-explained versions of the "Official Explanation". The problem I had with this when I was an agnostic was that it just sounded downright bizarre.

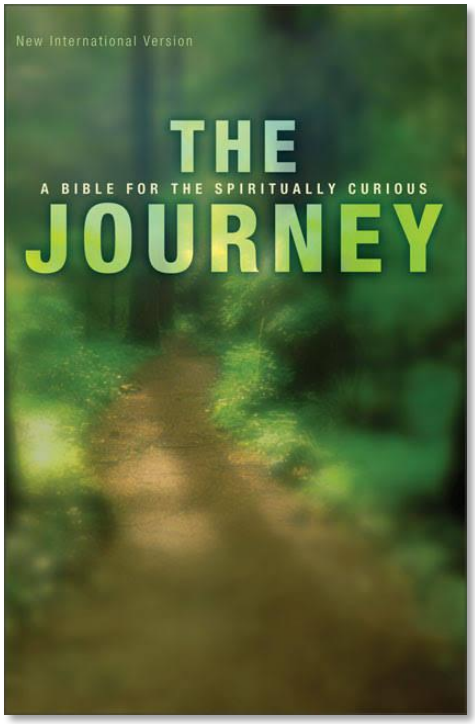
I should also say it doesn't sound downright bizarre these days – but then I've been a follower of Jesus for over 10 years and I'm more used to the language of Christianity. I also have a greater familiarity with and understanding of the theology.

However, the point I'm making is that it sounded downright bizarre then. And if it sounded downright bizarre to me then, it would very likely sound downright bizarre (and unbelievable) to many other non-believers as well.

This is probably the reason I never received a satisfactory answer to my question: "Why did Jesus have to die for my sins?" when I asked Christians. They'd been steeped in the language of Christianity for years. So, when they tried to answer me, it just sounded odd.

So, I'm not going to regurgitate the "Official Explanation" here. However, I think (I hope) what follows does not in any way contradict or conflict with the "Official Explanation".

When the Penny Dropped



One of my most treasured possessions is my bible. This was sent to me by an American work colleague who took the time to try and answer some of the questions I had back in my agnostic days. It's a New International Version of the bible called "The Journey".

The great thing about this bible is that it is peppered with little boxes of text explaining what certain bible passages mean and what their significance is. When I was reading the book of Romans (the apostle Paul's letter to the early Christians living in Rome) for the first time, one such box hinted at an explanation as to why Jesus had to die for our sins.

When I read this little box of text, a penny seemed to drop in my mind and all of a sudden, the whole concept of Jesus dying on the Cross and its linkage with sin started to make sense.

So, I'm deeply grateful to the people who put this version of the bible together. You wrote the explanatory boxes to help "spiritual seekers" like me. I'm delighted to say that this helped me overcome one of the major

stumbling blocks I had to fully understand the connection between sin and Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross.

Why (and How) Jesus died for our sins

In the time of Jesus, an elaborate system of sacrifice was required for Jewish people to be right with God. Any wrongdoing on the part of the Jews (collectively and individually) was recognised as the cause of separation between them and God. To remove this separation, a sacrifice was required. The type of sacrifice (a dove, a lamb, an ox, grain etc etc) depended upon what the wrongdoing was.

All the wrongdoing and the relevant sacrifice penalties are listed out in the book of Leviticus in the bible. Leviticus provides a detailed description of the various sacrifices required to remove wrongdoing (sin) collectively and individually from the Israelites. Once the sacrifice was made, then you were back "right" with God. As an example of this, read Leviticus Chapter 4, verses 32 to 35 below:

32 "'If someone brings a lamb as their sin offering, they are to bring a female without defect. 33 They are to lay their hand on its head and slaughter it for a sin offering at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered. 34 Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. 35 They shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the lamb of the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar on top of the food offerings presented to the LORD. In this way the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven.

Of course, the effects of this sacrifice only lasted as long as you didn't repeat the wrongdoing or do something else wrong. When that happened, you weren't right with God anymore and another sacrifice was required.

So, in order to be right with God, you had to provide an ongoing series of sacrifices to God every time you fell short of the laws laid out in the Old Testament.

This had been the situation for the Jews for over a thousand of years before Jesus. The rituals and practices associated with these sacrifices had developed and changed over the years. By the time of Jesus, it was accepted that the "best" place to perform your sacrifices was at the Temple in Jerusalem. There, the whole process was performed by "professional" priests, right next to God's home on earth. For a Jewish person, this was the ideal.

One of the key times of the year to make amends (atonement) for your wrongdoing (your sins) was the festival of Passover. At this time, Jews from all over Judaea, Galilee and further afield would descend on Jerusalem with the aim of having a lamb sacrificed at the Temple to atone for their sins. They would then cook and eat the lamb and remember how God was with the Jewish people as they escaped from Egypt many hundreds of years previously.

At Passover, the population of Jerusalem swelled from around 70,000 to over 250,000 – all of whom were desperate to have their lamb sacrificed at the altar in the Temple.

It must have been mayhem. Thousands of lambs being slaughtered in a small space. The smell of blood, guts and faeces. One giant abbatoir. Herds of frightened animals. The desperate crowds, all jostling and trying to have their lambs slaughtered before Passover started.

And into this pandemonium stepped Jesus...

What is very clear from a close reading of the Gospels is that Jesus' was in complete control of events in the final week leading up to His crucifixion. Jesus could have chosen for things to work out differently. He didn't need to ride into Jerusalem on the back of donkey – thus implying His kingship and alerting the authorities to His potential threat to the established order*. He didn't need to create that fracas in the Temple – spooking the Sanhedrin in the process. He didn't need to allow Himself to be arrested. He could have melted away, returned to Galilee and lived out the rest of His natural life. Even in front of Pontius Pilate, it wasn't too late to turn back and escape.

*Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey the Sunday before Passover was clearly designed by Jesus as the fulfilment of a prophesy in the Old Testament book of Zechariah (**Zechariah Chapter 9, Verse 9**):

Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The crowd watching this knew their Scripture, so immediately got the connection.

However, Jesus chose to go through with it all – and to end up on the Cross as a result. This looked like (and was) self-sacrifice. This self-sacrifice also happened at exactly the same time as the Passover sacrifices.

For the followers of Jesus – used as they were to the concept of sacrifice to be right with God, it wasn't a major intellectual leap to see Jesus' crucifixion

as the **ultimate** sacrifice for everyone who followed Jesus to be right with God – **permanently**.

They didn't see it this way immediately. The gospels are clear that most of the disciples ran way after Jesus' arrest – thinking possibly that their leader had turned out to be just another in a long line of failed messiahs. Another deluded teacher and rabble-rouser, quickly dealt with by the Jewish and Roman authorities.

However, what changed everything was the disciples seeing and being with Jesus alive after His death. This clearly demonstrated that their leader really was the Son of God – for who else other than the Son of God could triumph over death in this way?

So, if Jesus was the Son of God, why did He have to go through the excruciatingly painful and humiliating death by crucifixion? What made sense then (and what makes sense today) is that Jesus allowed Himself to be crucified. Allowed Himself to be ritually killed. Ritually killed at the same time as those Passover lambs. What were the Passover lambs being killed for? The atonement of the sins of those who brought the lambs to the Temple altar. What was Jesus being killed for? The permanent atonement of the sins of those who followed Him (and who follow Him today).

Today, the concept of animal sacrifice to appease God seems an alien and slightly barbaric practice. Back in Jesus' day, it was a normal and everyday part of life. To us today, we might think: "Couldn't there have been some other way for Jesus to get this crucial point cross to His followers?" The answer, I think, is "no". Jesus' crucifixion was the most direct and understandable way for Him to allow His followers to fully understand why He had come to Earth and what following Jesus actually meant.

Explained this way, the idea of Jesus dying for my sins started to make sense to me. We all sin ("fall short" if you prefer). Sometimes it's knowingly. Sometimes it's unintentional. Sometimes it's big stuff. Sometimes it's small stuff. But it's all sin. Followers of Jesus have the assurance that whatever the sin, it will be forgiven if they truly repent these sins. Jesus has made the ultimate, once-and-for-all sacrifice to ensure that this is the case.

I don't know if the above makes Jesus dying for our sins any more understandable for you. It certainly opened a door for me (and allowed me to **progressively** understand the full significance of this). I hope it helps you too.

I still regularly drive past that neon sign in Victoria Road. It's as bright and noticeable as it was when I looked at it from the bus in my student days all those years ago.

It made no sense then. It makes perfect sense now. Then I had no idea how far short of God's ideal I fell. Now, I'm only too aware of how far short I fall. Then, I stopped noticing it after a while. Now, I seek it out when I'm driving towards it – relieved to see those words confirming that my saviour and Lord has paid the penalty for all my shortcomings.

Chapter 10: I Like Your Jesus. It's Your Christians I Have a Problem With

In some ways, this chapter is probably the hardest, most embarrassing one to write in this booklet. Hard, because I'll have to write about some of the prejudices and preconceptions of Christians I had before I became a Christian. Prejudices and preconceptions which, I discovered turned out to be largely unfair. Embarrassing, because these prejudices and preconceptions were held on limited actual evidence. Embarrassing, because these prejudices and preconceptions were probably the biggest barrier to me becoming a follower of Jesus.

I'd love to say that, once I understood the rational and historical evidence for Jesus and worked through some of the rational / intellectual obstacles to belief, it was a simple decision to become a follower of Jesus. I'd love to be able to say it, but it wouldn't be true.

In another way, I think this is probably the most important chapter in this booklet. I can't say for certain, but I think the stuff I'm about to describe is a major barrier for many people in even considering the possibility of following Jesus. If you look at Christians and think they're a bit weird, a bit nutty, a bit hypocritical, a bit...different from you, then some of the stuff below might resonate with you.

My Lazy, Clichéd View of Christians

Probably the biggest barrier I faced to becoming a follower of Jesus wasn't all the rational stuff. Wasn't all the "big questions". Actually what it was that finally held me back was, well, being a Christian just wasn't me. I had an image of Christians that didn't fit with how I saw myself. I'd had around 40 years to develop a view of who I was. I'd also had around 40 years to develop a picture of what Christians were like. And in my head, these two pictures were very different.

I didn't think Christians were bad, just – different from me. I wasn't part of their tribe and couldn't see myself being part of their tribe. My background and personality meant that it would be impossible. I saw this much the same way as I saw other "tribes" I'd bumped into over the years – and with whom I couldn't see myself being a part. For example: The British Public School Educated Tribe. The Radical Socialist Tribe. The Conspicuous Consumption Tribe. The Smoker Tribe. And so on.

I didn't dislike people from any of these tribes. I knew and had "got on with" plenty of people from these other tribes over the years. Indeed, it was all

these different tribes that made life interesting. If we all thought and behaved in the same way, life would be pretty dull wouldn't it? However, they were them and I was me.

And so it was in my mind with Christians. Another tribe.

So why were Christians another tribe?

When I was a boy, I remember going round to friends whose parents were church-goers. Their houses seemed a bit musty and old-fashioned. Things were a bit "buttoned up". Different from the shag-pile carpets and leatherette scoop-out chairs favoured by my parents.

I remember as a boy being accosted in Glasgow city centre by wide-eyed enthusiastic teenagers wanting to hand me a leaflet and talking enthusiastically about how only Jesus could save me. It all seemed a bit weird and cultish.

When I was at school I remember one of my friends turned out to be a Christian and feeling profoundly uncomfortable when he invited me along to a Christian youth group. Again, it all felt a bit cultish and brainwashy.

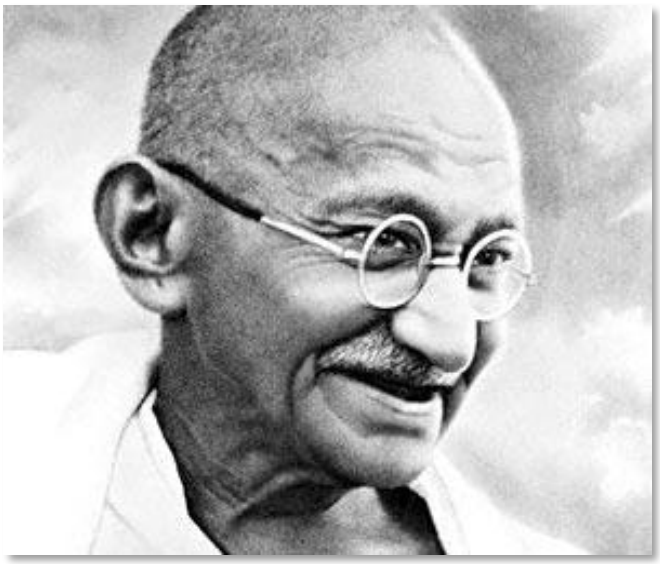
I'd see footage of church services from the more "charismatic" end of Christian worship and I'd just think – weird.

On the TV, I never saw a positive image of a Christian. If it was the news, they were always against something – clinging on a set of values from some golden age in the past – a golden age that didn't look so golden if you had an interest in history. If it was a drama, then if a Christian was present then they'd be some psychotic preacher, or an ineffectual wimp, or a stony faced zealot, or some twee middle-class hypocrite. I mean, have you ever seen a vicar on TV and he or she wasn't a figure of fun?

All the old clichés about Christians ran around my head. Judgementalism, hypocrisy, old-fashioned ideas, no fun etc etc.

I know this was all rather unfair and not particularly well-thought-through on my part. However, this kind of stuff has an effect on you. And if we're honest, some Christians – well meaning though they are – aren't necessarily the best adverts to the rest of the world for following Jesus.

If there are clichés about how Christians are then, like all clichés, there is usually some basis in fact.



Wasn't it Mahatma Ghandi who said:

"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

I could go on. As I said, this is all rather unfair and very superficial on my part. However, at the same time if I think back to before I was a Christian, I can't think of one example (not one example!) of someone I knew or met who was a positive example of what following Jesus could do to someone. I had plenty of negative examples – albeit one sided, one dimensional examples. I also had some neutral examples. Christians I knew who were decent people – but were no more decent than the many other non-Christians I knew.

Maybe I wasn't looking hard enough (actually, I definitely wasn't looking hard enough), but that's the way it was.

So, What Changed?

Unsurprisingly, what I've described above is not what I think now. So, how did things change?

The first change was a preparedness on my part to have another look at whether God and Jesus were real. I'm not sure exactly why it happened though. In part it was a response to the unanswered and unresolved questions I'd left back in my early 20's. I thought it worthwhile to try and come to some definite conclusions on these.

In doing this, what I was focusing on was the truth or otherwise of God and Jesus – not on the pros or cons of their followers or the organised religions operating in their name. I recognised then (as now) that these were two different things. I also recognised that often these two things are erroneously connected in the minds of atheists. You can't blame God or Jesus for the sub-optimal behaviour of their followers. It's a bit like football – you can't blame the sport of football for football hooligans. Plenty of people play and watch football without getting arrested. However, there are some who just want a ruck. You might argue that the football authorities and football clubs

can do things to reduce hooliganism – but that's different from saying there's something fundamental in the sport of football that causes tribal thuggery. The reality is that people who think like tribal thugs will seek out things to be tribal and thuggish about. Football is one of these things. As discussed in Chapter 4, religion is another of these things.

This preparedness to consider the possibility of the reality of God and Jesus was the critical first step. My preparedness to separate this from the behaviour of their followers was also critical.

I discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 what happened next. What I didn't discuss in these chapters is how important a few Christians were at this time answering the questions I had in a calm, kind, patient, non-judgemental, loving(?) fashion. They weren't offended by my questions. They didn't provide superficial, glib answers. If they didn't know something, they said so.

They behaved exactly as you'd hope if you asked someone sincere but probing questions. In short, they did their best to respond like the Person they followed. They also responded in a manner at variance to my pre-conceived ideas of how a Christian might respond to these questions (thin skinned, judgemental, intolerant, superficial).

When I was a bit further down the road, one good Christian friend suggested that I join him at a bible study his church was running. I'd never imagined myself attending something like this, but I agreed to come along. The night I went along the study was on forgiveness. I turned up at the house of the person running the bible study with my friend. We were joined by a group that consisted mainly of respectable, church-going, middle-aged ladies. What happened next amazed me. The person leading the study started by going round the room asking why each person was there. One by one, these stalwarts of the local church revealed their innermost struggles with forgiveness. Some explained how they struggled with forgiving others – they knew this was wrong and they were hoping the study would help them be more forgiving. Others explained that they were hoping that the study might help them forgive themselves for things in their own lives. Yet more were just hoping to be forgiven. What impressed me was the honesty of the people there. There were no "holier than thou" attitudes. There was no hint of hypocrisy. Instead there was an acute awareness from everybody that they were flawed, imperfect people in need of help with forgiveness. Help from their Saviour. These people were ordinary, normal people – but with a far more acute sense of their own failings and inadequacies than many non-Christians I'd met. Also, they were far more willing to share these failings in the presence of other people – some of whom they hardly knew. Their honesty was very affecting.

Once again my preconceived ideas of how middle-class British Christians behaved received another knock.

Another time, the same friend suggested we attend an evening service at the local Baptist Church. I think he suggested going there because he felt his own church might be a bit “stuffy” for me. The Baptist Church would be a bit livelier.

Indeed it was. As we sang the hymns I looked around and saw various people (most people) clearly connecting with something. Some with eyes closed and hands thrust in the air. Others were dancing where they stood. Yet more were belting out the songs for all they were worth with ecstatic expressions on their faces. At the end some went down to the front and collapsed or prayed fervently in small groups. I just stood there with a mixture of incredulity and embarrassment – completely disconnected from whatever it was they were connected to. I’d seen film and TV footage of this kind of thing from the more (how can I put this?) “torrid” regions of the world. But this was the south side of Glasgow, Scotland! I didn’t think we did this kind of thing in Scotland!

However, another thought also struck me: They can’t all be “at it”. I could imagine some people with over-heated imaginations or exuberant personalities behaving like this. I could imagine some people kidding themselves they were connecting with something that made them act this way. However, nearly everyone was doing it. They were perfectly normal looking Scottish people behaving in a decidedly un-Scottish way. And I thought: there’s too many people behaving like this to explain it away as Christian nutters behaving in a nutty way. Maybe some of the people here are actually connecting to something spiritual. I certainly wasn’t, but then I wasn’t open to the possibility that I could connect to something spiritual at that stage.

Afterwards, I was introduced to some people my friend knew. Again, they were perfectly normal, conventional people who, 10 minutes or so previously, had been behaving in a decidedly unconventional fashion.

I came away from that evening thinking: Maybe you could connect to something spiritual – even if you were a white, middle-aged Scotsman. Maybe that bizarre Christian behaviour wasn’t so bizarre after all.

These examples were memorable incidents which typified a general and slow chipping away of my lazy, clichéd preconceived notions of what kind of person was a Christian. Where I ended up was coming to the less than earth

shattering conclusion that Christians were pretty much like non-Christians – in the sense that everyone has their own positive and negative traits and foibles, Christians and non-Christians alike.

However, the one big difference I did detect was that the Christians I met were very much more aware of their failings than the non-Christians I knew. The simple reason for this was that they followed Jesus. And if you try your best to emulate the behaviour of Jesus, you very quickly become aware of your failings. As I later discovered, if you're a church-going Christian then at least once a week at Sunday worship you're forced to take a long, hard look at your behaviour. This isn't because there's some minister, priest, vicar or pastor up the front trying to make you feel guilty about yourself. Instead, it's the inevitable consequence of the minister, priest, vicar or pastor trying to make connections between Jesus' teachings and how to apply these to your life. Where else in 21st century life (outside of Therapy) are people required to conduct this degree of self-analysis and assessment on a weekly basis?

The other thing I noticed was that the Christians I met were more likely to do something about their failings – compared to the non-Christians I knew. Again, if you believe that God will support you and positively transform you, then you have hope for change. As a Christian, you realise you're unlikely to be able to this on your own. For the non-Christian your choices are:

- Trying your hardest to be better (very hard to sustain indefinitely)
- Self-help books (of limited use, I think you'll agree)
- Sitting about feeling guilty about your failings (not much use either)
- A stubborn, defiant acceptance that "this is just the way I am". A view that, like a leopard, you can't change your spots (where most people are I think).

For the Christian, you know if you bring your failings and inadequacies to God, then He will forgive you, guide you and transform you. More on this in Part 2.

What I've just described were a few of the things that slowly changed my perception of Christians. What these things did was reduce the barriers I had to becoming a Christian. Eventually, I could see myself being part of this tribe. Eventually, I could see that being part of this tribe didn't mean I had to leave many of the other tribes to which I was a member.

What about That Mahatma Ghandi Quote?

The title of this chapter is: I Like Your Jesus. It's Your Christians I Have a Problem With

This paraphrases the quotation from Mahatma Ghandi mentioned above:

"I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

I'm sure there were many good reasons why Ghandi said this. I'm sure there were many, many incidents in his life where his interactions with people who called themselves Christians were in stark contrast to the way Jesus might have behaved in these interactions.

Perhaps he was looking at Christians as an amorphous body – a group of people (a Tribe), who were holding his people in subjugation in India. If they really took the teachings of Jesus seriously, why were they behaving in this way?

Perhaps he was also thinking of personal one-to-one interactions where people talked, acted and thought in ways very different from the Jesus they purported to follow.

For the "corporate" behaviour of Christians, I'm not planning to go over the ground already covered in Chapter 4.

For the personal interactions, I'd like to focus on the: *"Your Christians are so unlike your Christ"* part of his quote.

If you are a follower of Jesus, if you really take Jesus' teaching seriously, then you are all too aware of how unlike Jesus you are. Every Christian falls well short of Jesus. Jesus is the ideal. Jesus is perfect. All humans (Christians included) are imperfect.

If Ghandi picked this up in his personal interactions with Christians – then he picked up a fundamental truth of Christianity.

I recognise I am so unlike Christ.

The ladies at the forgiveness bible study recognised they were so unlike Christ.

The millions of people who follow Jesus around the world also know they are so unlike Christ.

Jesus repeatedly said to people: "Follow me". Jesus continues to say to people: "Follow me"

Millions of people around the world have accepted that invitation. They know they will never be like Jesus – but they're following Him. In their own, inadequate way they're putting into practice Jesus' teachings. They recognise this, but that's all part of following Jesus.

We Christians recognise only too clearly how much we are unlike Christ. But with Jesus' help, we might just get a bit closer to being like Jesus. That's our hope. That's our prayer.

Chapter 11: Time for a Decision

In the preceding 10 chapters, I've tried to articulate some of my thoughts and discoveries along the route I took towards a relationship with Jesus. As I said at the start of this, my hope is that some of this has been useful to you too. Perhaps some of it has challenged your understanding and perceptions on certain aspects of Christianity. Perhaps some of it is new information to you. What I hope above all else is that it has encouraged you to reflect upon the possibility of having a relationship with Jesus and to do your own investigation into the topics that act as barriers for you saying "yes" to that relationship.

I can say definitely that your barriers will be different from my barriers – and that the way you think about these barriers will be different from me. Some of what's in the previous chapters will have chimed with you. However, my guess is that there are other areas where you will feel I've skimmed over certain topics. I'm sure there are other topics I haven't even touched on which act as a barrier for you to have a relationship with Jesus. That's one of the great things about being human – we're all subtly different from each other. We all see things a bit differently from each other. It's the variety that makes life interesting.

So, on those topics you felt I didn't provide as comprehensive response as you would have liked, do your own investigative work. Do the reading, do the asking. And if there are other topics you have difficulties with – topics I just didn't cover – again do the reading and do the asking. It is definitely worth the effort. I'll say again, it's definitely worth the effort! This is something I'll explore in the final part of this booklet.

I've spent the last 10 chapters describing the roadblocks, detours, cul de sacs, diversions (and the occasional bits of straight, traffic-free road) on my Path to Jesus. However, there came a point on this path where I had to say to myself: "You've been travelling this path for a few years now. You've become increasingly sure that Jesus is real. You've at least partially resolved the issues that prevented you becoming a follower of Jesus. Isn't it now time you got off the fence and made a decision? Do you decide to follow Jesus – or what?"

That point came towards the end of the Alpha Course I took in the autumn and early winter of 2004. For those who don't know, the Alpha Course aims to introduce non-Christians to the basics of Christianity in a clear, easy to understand, low pressure manner. Hundreds of thousands of people

around the world have become Christians after attending an Alpha Course over the last 25 years or so. To find out more about Alpha, go to alpha.org.

Back in my agnostic days, I thought making a decision to follow Jesus would come as a result of some major spiritual experience. A bit like Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus. And for some people, that is what happens. I've heard people talk about a great calm descending upon them and an almost instant conviction that Jesus is real. Others have been violently shaken or seen visions. For others, they've heard Jesus speaking directly to them. For yet more, they've prayed in desperation at some crisis point in their lives and their prayer has been answered.

For me, none of these things happened. Instead, it was a simple, rational question to myself: "Time to stop faffing about and make a decision Derek"

If my process of getting to a decision point was decidedly unspectacular, my decision was equally unspectacular. For some, there's a real sense that this is the right thing to do and they can feel a real sense of calm or a sense of release or a sense of relief or a sense of intense joy. For me, none of these things happened. My decision was basically: "Oh well. It all looks pretty likely. Let's give it a go."

So, in an unspectacular, low key, undramatic way I decided to become a follower of Jesus sometime towards the end of November 2004.

Why I'm mentioning all this is that, for every follower of Jesus, at some point they have to decide to become a follower. Christianity is not a religion you are born into. Your parents might be Christian. You might be brought up as a Christian. You might go to church as a child. And you might continue to do that as an adult. But let me be clear – that doesn't make you a Christian. To be a Christian – to be a follower of Jesus, you need to decide for yourself. Nobody else can make that decision for you. Someone once said: *"God has children – but He doesn't have grandchildren"* So true. To be a child of God, you need to make that decision yourself.

So, what about you? Are you ready to make a decision? Do you need to do more investigation? Fine. Please do what you need to do. Do you need to think it through more? Again fine.

If you're expecting a decision to be made for you, not fine. It won't happen. If you feel you're being pushed into a decision, again not fine. You have to decide for yourself. It's got to be a complete, free-will decision. You can't have a loving relationship if you've been coerced, pressured or bullied into it.

If you're expecting some kind of dramatic spiritual experience to help you make that decision – it might never happen. I'm a classic example of making "The Decision" without the dramatic event.

You might need more time to think about it – but don't put it aside and forget about it. As Lee Strobel says in: "The Case for Christ" make this a "front-burner issue". It took me to my mid-40's to become a follower of Jesus. It's a decision I've never regretted. However, the one regret I do have is that I didn't decide earlier. It's something I've heard many Christians say over the years. So, please don't dilly dally. Do the research if you need to. Come to a conclusion. Make a decision. And I sincerely hope and pray that the decision you do make, is one for Jesus.

May God richly bless you.

Part Two: What It's Like on "The Other Side"

If you've managed to read to here, well done! If you've skipped over the previous pages and are reading this – also, well done!

I've written this last part because I know that all the fine arguments, evidence and deliberation only get us so far in making a decision to follow Jesus. What people really want to know is: will following Jesus have any relevance in my life? Why would I do it, if it made no positive difference to my life? Why would I do it if it made my life worse?

I know many Christians would "have a canary" if they heard me saying this but: **Following Jesus: What's in it for me?**

In response to those Christians, let me say: Please don't have a canary. I know very well there's a lot more to following Jesus than "what's in it for me" – or anyone else for that matter. However, that's for another book at another time. What I'm trying to do is let those other readers know there's a real and vital relevance to following Jesus in their lives. As followers of Jesus, we're blessed to know how relevant and vital this is. However, we can't just assume it will be obvious to those who aren't quite there yet.

So, turning to those other readers, let me try and provide one perspective on why following Jesus is relevant and vital to you today – what's in it for you if you like.

5 FREE GIFTS

At my church (Cathcart Church, Glasgow) have developed something called 5 FREE GIFTS. What this tries to do is briefly summarise the relevance of following Jesus in your life today. What we say is that, when you decide to follow Jesus, you are given 5 FREE GIFTS. These are:



To expand upon this:

GIFT No 1: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT - NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU. If you face difficult times in your life, you can be sure in the knowledge that God will draw close to you and support you through these difficult times.

GIFT No 2: YOUR GUILT AND REGRETS REMOVED. If you struggle with guilt and regrets, you can be sure that if you follow Jesus you will be forgiven.

GIFT No 3: UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. You may have strong bonds of love with those you are close to. However, only God loves you wholly unconditionally. No matter, what you say or do or think, you can be sure that God will always love you – with no conditions.

GIFT No 4: A NEW, BETTER YOU. If you look closely at people who have started to follow Jesus, you will see the transforming effect it has on their lives. If you truly follow Jesus, this is always a positive transformation. This is as true today as it has been in the past

GIFT No 5: A LIFE AFTER THIS LIFE – GUARANTEED. You can be sure that there is a life beyond this life by following Jesus. You can be sure of this as it was fundamental to Jesus' teaching.

These 5 free gifts directly address the relevance question. I can't imagine anyone would think that:

- The sure knowledge that God will provide you genuine support in this life.
- The sure knowledge that no matter what you have done, you are not beyond salvation and forgiveness.
- A sure knowledge that, even if nobody else does, God will always love you.
- The sure knowledge that your life will be transformed for the better.
- A sure knowledge that there is life after this life.

Was irrelevant!

These 5 FREE GIFTS are clearly relevant to you – and everyone else for that matter. They are available to you if you decide to follow Jesus.

As a follower of Jesus, I've received these 5 FREE GIFTS. All followers of Jesus have received these 5 FREE GIFTS. No wonder we're keen for as many people as possible to follow Jesus too. We want everyone to receive these 5 FREE GIFTS.

- I see people having to cope with terrible things in their lives. When I wrote this, I'd just found out that one person I knew from work had an inoperable brain tumour, another had just lost a baby due to a developmental problem in the womb and a third had bowel cancer. I know that God can and will draw close to these people and support them through these difficult times – just as He did for me when I was undergoing chemotherapy last year.

- I see people weighed down with guilt and regrets for the things they've done or not done. Weighed down with things they think they can never be forgiven for. Bad things. I see others weighed down with feelings of self hate and loathing – unable to forgive themselves for what they've thought or done. Looking back at their lives and deeply regretting the choices they made or drifted into. I know that these things can be forgiven immediately if they follow Jesus. No other conditions apply. What a release that must be!

- Romantic songs, books and poetry might suggest otherwise, but we all know, deep down, that all human love is conditional. There are also so many people in the world who don't experience any human love. What a contrast with God's unconditional love for anyone who chooses to have a loving relationship with Him.

- I only have to look to myself to see the transforming effect following Jesus has had on me - and continues to have on me. I'll say a bit more about this in a few pages. Although important for me, my transformation is pretty unspectacular. In the last 12 years I've seen and heard hundreds of transformation testimonies far more dramatic than mine.

- I see so many people with addictions, relationship problems, anxiety, stress and so on. I know that a relationship with Jesus can help to transform these things in their lives. I've seen it happen many times in the short time I've been a Christian.

- I look around the country I live in and I see a nation in denial about the reality of death. Scratch the surface and many people are terrified by death – their own or the death of a loved one. Wouldn't it be great to

know that death wasn't the end and you too could be with Jesus in paradise after you died? He promised this to one of the criminals being crucified next to Him. He promises this to you too, if you choose to follow Him.

5 FREE GIFTS – What they mean to me.

Ok. So I've talked about the 5 FREE GIFTS and how relevant they might be. However, rather than writing about this in the abstract, let me use myself as an example of how these gifts have affected my life – and continue to affect my life. How they affect you will, no doubt, be very different – but we'll come to you in a few pages.

I didn't know I needed 5 FREE GIFTS. This is probably the most important point to make. When I was an agnostic, I felt no need to have a relationship with Jesus. I've heard and read of people who say that there was something missing in their lives before they said "yes" to Jesus. This is sometimes expressed as a "God shaped hole" in the lives of people who don't know God. I can honestly say this didn't apply to me. I never asked the question: Is there more to life than this? I never felt my life lacked meaning. I never felt there was something missing in my life. I was bumping along perfectly happily. Yes, bad things had happened in my life (for example: my brother died suddenly when he was 29, a divorce which ripped my life apart), but I didn't feel I somehow needed God to come to terms with these bad things.

I was living a perfectly comfortable, relatively successful life before embarking on my "Path to Jesus". I had children I loved, I'd avoided an acrimonious divorce, I had good friends, I enjoyed my work. As I said, I didn't think I needed a relationship with God and Jesus.

I'm saying all this because you might be in a similar position. You might think (as I thought) that a relationship with God and Jesus is for other people – but neither relevant nor necessary for you. Fair enough. Here's how things changed for me:

GIFT No 1: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT - NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS TO YOU.

I mentioned chemotherapy on the last page. In 2014 I discovered a lump on one of my testicles. This was diagnosed as testicular cancer. After I'd had the testicle removed, it was decided by the cancer specialists that some radiotherapy was required to clear up any remaining cancer. I went through this treatment in the early part of 2015. So far, so good. However, in October 2015 I noticed a small lump in my groin. When biopsied, this turned out to be

cancerous. As a result, I had three rounds of chemotherapy in November and December 2015.

I'm writing this in July 2017. I have had a check up every 3 months since the chemotherapy and there has been no further cancer detected.

Cancer is often described as a bit of a roller coaster. As you can see, I've had a few ups and downs on my own "cancer journey". My wife, children and parents have been wonderful throughout. In many ways it's harder for them because they don't know how I was feeling moment by moment. All they could do was helplessly watch their husband/father/son get the stuffing kicked out of him by the treatment and hope for a cure.

What I can also say is that, in addition to the love and care provided by my family, I had a real and palpable sense of God being with me throughout the whole process. I witnessed real, tangible signs of His presence. My sense of positivity and good humour was bolstered by His presence. I had a real sense that I was in God's care – as well as in the care of the incredible, professional doctors and nurses at the Beatson Cancer Care Centre in Glasgow.

How would all of this panned out if I was still an agnostic? I can't say for certain, but I think I'd have been a lot more frightened. Testicular cancer has a pretty good prognosis these days – but it can still kill you. I met some very frightened people when I was in hospital.

A number of people told me how amazed they were by my positivity and hope throughout the treatment. This undoubtedly helped my recovery. This positivity and hope came from my relationship with God and Jesus. Goodness knows how I'd have been without this.

Was all this wishful thinking on my part? Was all this an emotional crutch to get me through? All I can say is it didn't feel like that.

As for the future, I've no idea what will happen next. I'm sitting here cheerfully writing about my cancer. I could be apprehensive, frightened, negative, angry about the future – but I'm not. Instead, I'm confident that God is still with me and will be with me whatever the future throws at me.

GIFT No 2: YOUR GUILT AND REGRETS REMOVED.

This one's less of an issue for me. I really don't have any major regrets in my life. I really don't have anything I feel really guilty about. Maybe I'm not looking hard enough...

At the time, I regretted my first marriage failing. It wasn't what I wanted. I thought I was happily married. However, it takes two to make a marriage, so I have to take my share of responsibility for it failing. However, I remarried, so any residual regret is now more than counter-balanced by having a wife and daughter who I dearly love. My daughter wouldn't exist had my first marriage not failed.

Ok, so guilt and regrets are not a big issue for me at the moment. However, in the last 10 years, with the voluntary work I do, I've met many people who are crippled with guilt and regrets. They lug these things about with them. They loathe themselves because of them. Some people self-medicate with drink and drugs to try and forget them for a time.

I also know people who have had the burden of guilt and regret lifted from them by having a relationship with Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew Chapter 11, verses 28 to 30:

28 *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.* ***29*** *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* ***30*** *For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

All the things they felt guilty about or regretted were forgiven by Jesus. As a result, they could start to live a full life, free from the life-sapping effect of dragging guilt and regret around with them. What a release!

Although guilt and regrets might not be a big issue for me, one thing I can say is that I have a far more acute awareness of my failings today – compared to my agnostic days. I said earlier in the booklet that if you try your best to emulate the behaviour of Jesus, you very quickly become aware of your failings. Also, if you're a church-going Christian then at least once a week at Sunday worship you're forced to take a long, hard look at your behaviour. This is simply the inevitable consequence of the person leading the service trying to make connections between Jesus' teachings and how to apply these to our lives. As I said in Part 1, where else in 21st century life (outside of Therapy) are people required to conduct this degree of self-analysis and assessment on a weekly basis?

I think this is a great thing. The more aware I am of my failings, the more opportunity I have to do something about them – not least asking for God's support in overcoming them. This is all part of the refining and transformation process that occurs in a relationship with Jesus (see also Gift 4 below).

GIFT No 3: UNCONDITIONAL LOVE.
A hard lesson I learned in my 30's was the conditionality of human love. I had thought that the love my wife and I had was super-strong and could withstand anything. When I found out this wasn't the case, it was a hard one to come to terms with. This is the kind of thing that can make you bitter, cynical and a bit hard hearted. It also helps you write great Country and Western songs.

People don't like to talk about it, but all human love is conditional. The great thing I know is the love God and Jesus has for me is unconditional. This acts as the antidote to the bitterness, cynicism and hard heartedness which could easily overwhelm me. Jesus' love for me also leaves me more open to love others and for that love to be stronger. I strongly believe that this has made me more loving and more capable of expressing that love than I was ever able to do before I became a Christian.

From time to time, I've noticed a bit of hard-heartedness creeping back into my life. It's something I have to guard against. However, when it happens I pray for Jesus to soften my heart and my prayers are answered. All my human relationships benefit as a result.

GIFT No 4: A NEW, BETTER YOU.
As I said earlier, I only have to look to myself to see the transforming effect following Jesus has had on me - and continues to have on me. Before I became a follower of Jesus, I was an angry workaholic. I still work hard – but not to the detriment of my family. I still see glimpses of the old, angry me but they're fewer and more under control. My relationships with others are better. I'm a better boss at my work. I'm a better parent. I have a greater interest in caring for those who are more vulnerable and in need.

Jesus' teaching helps me with this. Taking issues to Jesus in prayer helps me with this. Jesus' teaching on forgiveness helps me to forgive. Jesus teaching on loving your enemies helps me with the difficult relationships we all encounter in our work and personal lives. Jesus teaching on doing to others what you'd have them do to you has spurred me into action many times – rather than taking the path of least resistance. Jesus' relationships with those on the margins of society have acted as an inspiration for me to try and emulate this.

I could write pages and pages on how my relationship with Jesus has transformed me and continues to transform my life for the better. What's important to say though is that I'm not the finished article. There's no pride

or superiority in this transformation. I've still a long way to go. As I said earlier, I'm only too aware of my failings. However, with God's help my transformation continues.

GIFT No 5: A LIFE AFTER THIS LIFE – GUARANTEED.

Before I followed Jesus I was aware that, some day, I would die. However, this didn't loom large in my life nor was I frightened by the prospect. Whether this was because I saw death as something a long way off and so not worth worrying about, I don't know. Whether I was in "death denial" – blotting out the thoughts on it so I didn't have to confront them, I also don't know.

I'm now in my 60's and my eventual death is a lot closer than it was. However, I'm still not worried about death. The reason for this now is that I have hope that there is life beyond the life I'm currently living. It's difficult to know how I'd feel about death if I didn't follow Jesus. My guess is that I'd still be in denial – or that I would have experienced some form of mid-life crisis. The type of mid-life crisis a few of my non-Christian friends and work colleagues have experienced of late. So (thankfully for me) no dating younger women, no enormous motor bike in the garage, no cosmetic surgery, no fancy hair restoration, no "[living] a life of quiet desperation"*

*From "Walden" by Henry David Thoreau

Knowing there is life after this life allows me to enjoy this life all the more. I don't have to worry about the future. I can put into practice what Jesus says in Matthew Chapter 6, verses 25 to 34:

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life[a]?
28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father

knows that you need them. [33] But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. [34] Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

5 FREE GIFTS – What would they mean to you?

I've given you a very brief outline of how a relationship with God and Jesus continues to transform my life. How would receiving the 5 FREE GIFTS I've just described affect your life?

Can I suggest you take some time to reflect upon each of these 5 FREE GIFTS and imagine how they would affect your life?

My guess is that some will be more relevant than others – but none of them are irrelevant!

Maybe, you're like me when I was an agnostic. Maybe you don't think you need a relationship with Jesus. Maybe you think you're getting on just fine on your own. If that's what you think then please re-read the last few pages on how my life has been transformed by my relationship with Jesus. I thought I didn't need it when I was an agnostic. I can't begin to describe how wrong I was.

Following Jesus is the most relevant and vital thing anyone can do in their life. Following Jesus is the most relevant and vital thing YOU can do in YOUR life.

It's a decision I've never heard anyone regretting. Nobody ever says: I wish I'd never become a follower of Jesus, it's so rubbish! But don't believe me, ask any of the Christians you know and see what they say.

It took me to my mid-40's to discover all this. I truly hope and pray you discover this too.

I concluded Part 1 with the words "May God richly bless you". I'll say it again with all sincerity: **May God richly bless you.**