

The Christian's Faith

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God

The unseen ‘something’

From earliest times people have recognized that there is more to life than what they see in the material world. Sacred rituals of various kinds were part of the life of primitive bush people and cave-dwellers. In every era of the world’s history, people have been religious.

Today, throughout the many nations, races, languages and cultures of the world, most people have a religion of some sort. They show a belief in a spiritual aspect of human life that is independent of any progress that the human race has made in civilization, knowledge and prosperity. Such a belief seems to be part of human nature.

This is true even of people who appear to have no religion and no belief in God. Their attitudes and actions indicate that there is within them an awareness of some unseen power that can influence their lives.

For example, people often feel the need for some religion in relation to life’s great turning points, such as birth, marriage and death. Some people, of course, remain totally opposed to religion whatever its form. Yet even things that have nothing to do with religion show people’s concern for that unseen ‘something’ that influences events and that they cannot control. Such things might include the superstitious fear of the number thirteen, the reading of the astrology section of the newspaper, or even the well-meaning wish for good luck. These all indicate people’s acknowledgment that something outside themselves influences the course of events.

Christianity’s explanation of all this is that there is a supreme power who is living and intelligent and who is above all things. Christians call him God.

Seeking after God

The reason people are concerned for more than just the physical aspects of life is that they are more than just physical beings. They have something in their make-up that makes them different from all other animals. They have a spiritual capacity, something that makes them seek after more than the physical world can provide. All human beings are, in a sense, like God; or, as the Bible says, they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). They long for a meaning to life, and this longing can be satisfied ultimately only by God.

Unlike other animals, human beings are not content simply to have food, shelter and the opportunity for reproduction. Because they have a capacity to know God, they have a capacity for the unlimited. That is why, throughout human history, people have consistently tried for greater achievement (even if not always with the best motives), whereas animals are content to remain much as they always were. People have within them a spiritual element that causes them to reach forward for something outside themselves.

Paul, one of the early Christian missionaries, referred to this when he was preaching to some Greeks in Athens. He saw that they were very religious, having many gods and many altars. Among their altars was one that they had built in honour of the 'unknown God'. Paul pointed out how this indicated that, since humankind was made in God's image, people would 'look for God and perhaps find him as they felt about for him' (Acts 17:27). Paul then introduced them to the God whom they were seeking.

Faith that God exists

In another place Paul spoke further of things that point clearly to the existence of God. People everywhere, regardless of their degree of civilization, have always known that certain things are wrong – murder, for example – even though no one may have taught them any particular religion or moral code. The

law of God is, as it were, written on their hearts (Romans 2:15). The fact that their consciences make them feel guilty shows that they still have an awareness of God's law within them. They still exist in God's image, though, because of wrongdoing or ignorance, they may reflect that image very poorly.

Not only does the nature of people point to the existence of a God who is over them, but the natural world points to the existence of a God who made it. Paul summarized this well when he wrote, 'Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly seen; they are perceived in the things that God has made' (Romans 1:20).

We look at a work of art, a machine, or a building, and we conclude that somebody must have designed it and somebody must have made it. We may even learn from it something of the character and ability of its designer and maker. Likewise we look at the natural world, where everything fits together in an orderly arrangement, and we conclude that someone must have designed it and brought it into being. We may even learn from it something of his character; for example, that he is a person of wisdom, power and love.

None of these examples is an absolute proof of the existence of God. The Bible nowhere attempts such a proof, because no one can give material proof of the existence of a person who is invisible. The Bible refers to people's sense of right and wrong as evidence of a moral God; it refers to the wonders of the physical universe as evidence of an intelligent and powerful God; but it realizes that ultimately a person acknowledges God by faith. 'Whoever comes to God must have faith that God exists and rewards those who seek him' (Hebrews 11:6).

Rather than try to prove the existence of God by argument, the Bible starts from the assumption that people already have some sense of God. It then urges them to acknowledge him. It gives meaning to life by pointing people to him.

The creator at work

Sometimes people are puzzled about the creation of the world, because when they read about it in the Bible and compare the biblical account with the statements of scientists, there seems to be some conflict. Much of the misunderstanding occurs when Bible readers try to make the Bible teach what it was never intended to teach, or when scientists claim proof for things that cannot scientifically be proved.

The Bible was never intended to be a scientific textbook. It is not concerned with the kind of investigation that modern science is concerned with. If it had been written in the language of modern science, people in former ages would not have understood it, and people in future ages would find it out of date. The purpose of the Bible's account of creation was not to teach scientific theories. Rather it was to give a short, simple account of the beginning of the world, as an introduction to the story of those who live in the world. It was concerned with God's dealings with the human race that he created.

As in everyday speech today, the Bible uses popular rather than technical language. It speaks of the world as ordinary people see it, where the sun is a 'great light' in the sky, and 'rises' and 'sets' over the earth. Such language is pictorial, and is neither concerned with science nor in conflict with science. It is a kind of language that people in any country or era use and understand.

Science may tell us much about God's creation, but its viewpoint is different from the Bible's. The Bible tells us that God is the one who did these things, and scientists offer explanations that suggest how he might have done them. The Bible tells us, for instance, that God sends the rain and God makes the grass grow. When scientists explain how rain falls and how grass grows, they are not in conflict with the Bible. In explaining the 'laws of nature', they are describing the way God normally works in nature. The 'laws of nature' are God's laws.

If, however, scientists try to use scientific data to prove the non-existence of God, they are trying to do something that science is not capable of doing. Science may be able to suggest how something was done, but it is not capable of saying who did it.

Once again we come to the point where things cannot be proved or disproved, either by rational argument or by scientific investigation. 'It is by faith that we understand that the universe was created by God's word' (Hebrews 11:3). Although we accept these things by faith, such faith is neither irrational nor unscientific. On the contrary, both rational argument and scientific investigation confirm that such faith is reasonable.

Sin

Pulled in opposite directions

The creative activity of God reached its grand climax with the arrival of the first man and the first woman. But these two people, and the human race descended from them, were uniquely different from even the highest animals; for they alone were made in God's image.

God created the world morally good and intended the human race to live with him in a happy relationship. But as we look at the world we see that people are not at ease with God. Although something in them causes them to seek after God, something else in them causes them to rebel against him. This rebellion is what the Bible calls sin.

People in general do not like the word 'sin', and often give it restricted or special meanings so that it does not sound offensive. The Bible uses the word to refer to all human rebellion against God, whether in its source or in the wrong acts that flow from that source.

The problem of evil

In view of the tension people experience between good and evil, a question arises. If God wanted the world to be good, why is evil present in the world? If God is a perfect creator, why are human beings, the highest of his earthly creatures, sinful?

God is not the originator of evil, and he has never had any desire that people be sinful. But because he made them as intelligent and responsible beings with a freedom to make their own decisions, the possibility existed that they might misuse their freedom. God's purpose was not to create robots. He wanted the people he had made to obey him and live in harmony with him, but he wanted them to do this by their own choice. His

desire was to live with them in a relationship of mutual love, but people could not love if they were not free. Machines cannot love.

The sad fact, today as in the past, is that people have chosen not to obey God, and the evils of sin, conflict and suffering are the result. The fault lies with people, not with God. If an irresponsible driver causes a motor car to crash, we blame the driver, not the inventor or maker of the car.

Human nature

Because of sin, nothing in the world is as God intended it. Instead of enjoying the life God intended for them, people have conflict on every side. They are in a state of conflict with their environment, with other people, within themselves and with God. They have brought sin not only into the world but also into human nature, so that all people are born with a tendency to sin. No one needs to teach a child to do wrong. Wrongdoing comes to it naturally.

Wrong actions and wrong words are only the outward signs of a deeper problem – a sinful mind, heart and will. Jesus once said, ‘From the inside, from a person’s heart, come the evil ideas which lead him to do immoral things, to rob, kill, commit adultery, be greedy, and do all sorts of evil things; deceit, indecency, jealousy, slander, pride and folly – all these evil things come from inside a person and make him unclean’ (Mark 7:21-23).

Notice that the things Jesus calls evil are not just obvious sins such as robbery and murder. Even bad thoughts, deceit and jealousy, things hidden within where the closest friends may not see them are sin.

When we consider the cruelty, corruption and immorality in the world, we may at times feel satisfied with ourselves. But at the same time we deceive ourselves, for we too are imperfect and our standards imperfect. The only perfect one is God, and his standards are perfect. That is why the Bible says that sin is

the falling short of God's standards, the breaking of God's law (1 John 3:4).

All are answerable to God

Although the Bible gives people a fuller understanding of God's character and standards, even those who have never read the Bible have a basic knowledge of right and wrong. We have seen how God has placed this knowledge within human nature. He has given people a conscience, which, in spite of sometimes being dull or hardened, is still some sort of guide. People may know what they should do, but not do it. Something within them shows them the way that is right, but they refuse to go that way. They refuse God; they break God's law.

Being morally responsible, people are answerable for their actions. If they were no more than very clever animals or skilfully programmed computers, they would not be responsible. Neither animals nor computers are taken to court for breaking the law.

People are answerable for their behaviour; in particular, they are answerable to God, because he is their creator, ruler and judge. And since they have broken his law, they are subject to his punishment. They may do right on some occasions, but that does not excuse them for doing wrong on others. We are accountable to God for all our actions, and the good we do does not cancel out the wrong we do. A person may do good by helping a neighbour in need, but that will not help him escape justice if a police officer catches him driving through a red light.

Sin and death

God warned from the beginning that the penalty for disobeying him was death, and this warning is repeated in various ways throughout the Bible. Paul expressed this pictorially when he said, 'Sin pays its wages – death' (Romans 6:23).

But what is meant by death? Clearly, people do not die physically the moment they sin, though physical death is one of

the results of sin. Human beings are more than mere physical creatures. If physical death meant no more than bringing earthly life to an end, people would have no need to fear death. If death was as simple as switching off the electricity, there would be no reason to fear it. The reason people fear death is that they know that when they die they are not escaping the consequences of their previous behaviour, but going to face them.

People have always sensed that there is some sort of life after death, and this feeling again results from their existence in the image of God. But how can this personal existence in the afterlife be called 'death'?

The answer has to do with the Christian view of human life. God has given people both physical and spiritual capacities, so that they might enjoy life in full harmony with him. Through sin, however, they are cut off from God. We might say that when a thing is cut off from its source of life it is dead. In that sense, sinners are spiritually dead. Their sin has taken them out of a condition where life dominates into one where death dominates. Spiritually they are cut off from God, and physically they are doomed to die.

Whatever separation from God in the afterlife might mean, we know it is a punishment that people instinctively fear. Jesus repeatedly warned that it would mean suffering and despair worse than anything people could at present imagine.

God as judge

Immediately we begin to wonder how a God of love could punish so severely. Perhaps that is because guilty people never like the thought of punishment. Love, however, does not mean an absence of punishment, as every parent knows. Neither does love mean that justice can be overlooked. God has no pleasure in punishment, and the message of Christianity is that he has provided a way for people to escape it. At the same time he must maintain a consistency in his character and actions. No one wants a fickle God.

God is holy, perfect in purity and goodness. He loves what is good more than we can know or understand, and therefore he is angry when he sees what is not good. His anger at sin arises from his holiness.

Though angry at sin, God still loves his rebellious creatures. He wants people to come back to him so that he can give them new life, life that they can begin to enjoy now and will enjoy to the full in the hereafter. But as usual, God does not force people. They have the freedom of responsible beings and a whole lifetime of opportunity to turn to him. With death, that opportunity ends. 'Everyone must die once, and after that be judged by God' (Hebrews 9:27).

Salvation

Why people need salvation

From the beginning, people have been aware that sin has its consequences, and they have looked for ways of escaping those consequences. The many religions and philosophies in the world are evidence of that. Men and women want to be saved from the suffering and punishment that evil brings, whether in this life or the next. In other words, they want salvation.

Some will say that education will correct sin, others that better social conditions or a healthier environment will eliminate wrongdoing. There are many countries where citizens have already received the benefits of improved living standards, but they themselves have not changed for the better. In fact, they seem at times to have become worse. Quarrelling, dishonesty, lying, hate and other evils are just as common as they ever were.

Human nature is sinful, and outward improvements will not change that nature. A leopard cannot change its spots. A pig may be washed and dressed in beautiful clothes, but it will go and lie in the mud as before. The problem of human sin is so deep that no reforms can correct it. Not even keeping religious rules or carrying out religious ceremonies will remove the disease of sin from the human heart.

In short, the human position is hopeless. People are cut off from God and can do nothing that will bring them back to God. Their sinful nature has caused them to do things that have placed them under God's judgment; but, try as they may, they cannot get rid of that sinful nature.

What people need is someone to help them. They need someone who can save them, because they cannot save themselves. They are like a drowning person who cannot swim. They do not need someone to tell them how to swim, but

someone to jump into the water to save them. And that, so to speak, is what God has done.

God's love

Love is so much a characteristic of God that the Bible can say that God is love (1 John 4:16). God wants to help sinners and save them from the penalty of their sin, but he must do so justly. Love that is pure does not ignore wrongdoing, but acts honourably, even in the most unpleasant affairs. God may want to forgive sinners, but he cannot ignore their sin. He cannot treat sin as if it does not matter. Being the supreme judge, God has the right to punish or forgive sin as he sees fit, but being a God of love he will do only what is honourable, just and pure.

Suppose, for example, that a judge has before him a criminal who has been found guilty, and perhaps even confessed to his crime. The judge places a heavy fine on the man, assuring him that if he does not pay he will be sent to jail. The man may tell the judge he has no money to pay the fine, yet plead also that he not be sent to jail. The judge, feeling sorry for the man and declaring himself a loving person, therefore forgives him. He tells the guilty criminal that he need not pay the fine or go to jail. He can go free.

What the judge understands by love is not love at all. It is an irrational emotion that is easily influenced by pity, regardless of what is right and just. It is not strong, but weak. God's love is not like that.

Suppose, however, that the judge has a love that is genuine. He places the same heavy fine on the guilty man and insists that it be paid. He feels sorry for the man, but he knows that genuine love always does what is right, even when it is costly to do so. The judge therefore goes to the man privately and, out of his own personal funds, gives the man the money to pay the fine. The judge has laid down the penalty, but he has also paid the penalty on the man's behalf. This is only an illustration, but it pictures what God has done for guilty sinners.

What God has done

Being a God of love, God wants to help guilty sinners. But because he is a God of love, he will do only what is pure and honourable, even though it may be costly to him.

All people have broken God's law and fallen under his judgment. They have been found guilty and the penalty is death. God, however, has given them a way of salvation, a way to be saved from the consequences of their sin. He himself became a human being in the person of Jesus Christ, and lived in this world with all its temptations and difficulties. Through it all he lived the perfect life, never breaking God's law and therefore never falling under God's judgment. Yet he willingly paid sin's penalty on behalf of the guilty. He died in their place so that they might go free. 'When we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked' (Romans 5:6).

God is the judge and the one who has been sinned against, yet he is also the one who bears the penalty of sin. In his love he forgives sinners, but only at great cost to himself. God is the source and the means of people's salvation.

Normally, people love only those who are attractive to them, but God loves those who are unattractive, even those who have rebelled against him and broken his law. 'God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were sinners that Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8). In this God demonstrates what the Bible calls his grace – that characteristic which causes him to give his favour freely to those who do not deserve it.

More than pardon

The story of the judge who pays the penalty on behalf of the guilty is only an illustration. It pictures one aspect of God's help for sinners, but it does not picture everything. God does far more for people than can be contained in any single illustration. When Jesus takes the place of sinners, he does so totally. God, in his amazing grace, accepts the repentant sinner as he accepts Jesus. Jesus is in a right relationship with God, and therefore through

him the sinner also comes into a right relationship with God. God does more than merely forgive people's sin. He declares that they are now legally in the right, because Jesus Christ is in the right.

'All this is done by God, who through Christ changed us from enemies into his friends.' 'Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:18,21). God declares people righteous (or, as the Bible says, he justifies them) because of what Jesus Christ has done, not because of anything they have done.

New life

Although Jesus' death is central in God's plan of salvation, that death is linked inseparably with his resurrection. Jesus was unique and his death for sin was unique. Ordinary people do not come back to life three days after they have died, for death is one of the consequences of their sin. But Jesus did come back to life. His death was not a consequence of his sin, for he had no sin. He died for the sin of others, and his resurrection showed that neither sin nor death had any power over him. They had not conquered him; he had conquered them.

Jesus' resurrection demonstrated God's supreme power and his complete satisfaction with all Jesus had done. Sin had been dealt with decisively and people now had new hope. This was seen clearly in the changed lives of Jesus' followers. Before his death they were downhearted, fearful and confused, but now they went everywhere preaching the good news of salvation with boldness and certainty. The Christian church was born out of the great historical events of Jesus' death and resurrection, and nothing has been able to stop its progress.

The reason for this is that Christianity is motivated by a living power within it. The resurrection of Jesus was not simply the resuscitation of a corpse, but the entrance into a new kind of life, one that death can no longer affect. 'Christ has been raised

from death and will never die again – death will no longer rule over him’ (Romans 6:9).

Jesus is still alive and always will be. He is no longer physically present in the world (though he has said that one day he will return), but he lives in the lives of his people. Just as repentant sinners are united with Jesus in his death for sin, so they are united with him in his victorious life. The Christians’ saviour is not dead, but living. But he will be saviour only to those who want him to be.

Faith

Accepting an offered gift

No matter how much we may wish that all people receive the salvation Jesus has achieved, God as usual treats people as responsible beings. They are not robots. They can either accept or reject what God offers them. And what God offers them is a gift. It costs them nothing, though it cost God much, even the life of Jesus Christ.

What people must do is accept the gift that God offers them, and they do this by faith. They cannot buy salvation. There is nothing they can do to earn salvation as a reward. Some of the early Christians were reassured of this with the words, 'It is by God's grace that you have been saved, through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift' (Ephesians 2:8-9).

What faith is

It is important that we understand what the Bible means when it talks about faith, for the word has a variety of meanings in everyday usage. Faith is not blind acceptance of something which people secretly feel may not be true but which they think they ought to believe nevertheless. Nor is it some sort of unexplained inner strength that helps people through difficulties. The chief characteristic of faith is trust, or reliance, and it is always trust in something or someone.

Often the word 'belief' is used instead of the word 'faith'. To believe the Christian teaching means more than simply to understand it or to acknowledge the story of the Bible as true. To believe in God means more than simply to believe he exists. Certainly, people must understand the teaching and accept that God exists, but to 'believe in' God means to put their trust in him, to rely upon him.

When travellers buy their airline tickets, they have faith in the airline. They have given it their money in advance because they believe in it; they trust it. They go to the airport on the appointed day, believing an aeroplane will be there to take them to their destination. Likewise to believe in God is to believe his promises and act upon them.

Having arrived at the airport, the travellers further show their faith, this time in the aeroplane. They believe it will fly, and some may even understand how it flies, but they exercise their faith when they walk on to it. They trust it, rely upon it and commit themselves to it, believing it will carry them to their destination. That is what the Bible means by faith. People not only understand facts about God and his salvation for them through Jesus Christ, but they trust in him, rely upon him and commit themselves to him. They trust in what Christ has done for them, not in anything they do themselves.

The object of faith

We must not think, however, that faith is in any way a quality within people that God rewards by giving them his salvation. Faith itself does not save. God is the one who saves. Faith is only the means by which sinners receive his salvation.

In the illustration it is the aeroplane that has the capability of carrying the travellers to their destination; the travellers can do no more than walk on to it in faith. They have nothing to boast about in doing that, and likewise repentant sinners have nothing to boast about in exercising their faith. The importance lies in the object of their faith, which is Jesus Christ.

Jesus died to pay the penalty for sin, and people are saved from that penalty by trusting in what Jesus has done. They do not achieve salvation by anything they themselves do, but they recognize that Jesus has already achieved it by death.

People must claim the benefits of Jesus' death for themselves individually if they are to be forgiven and brought back to God. No one else can do it for them. When they have

taken that step of faith, each individual can then say, as Paul once said, that this salvation is 'through faith in Jesus Christ, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

No other way

Some people reject the idea that they must depend on what someone else has done for them. But in ordinary life all have to depend constantly on what they themselves did not do. No one could read this book unless others had first printed it; and they could not have printed it unless others had made the paper; and they could not have made the paper unless there were trees; and so it goes on.

There is another reason why people reject the idea of depending on Jesus for their salvation, and that is the natural pride of the human heart. People find it humbling to admit their helplessness. They find it even more humbling to admit their guilt and ask for forgiveness. But there is nothing else that guilty sinners can do – except bear the punishment.

If people insist that they depend on themselves for salvation, they are only condemning themselves to certain punishment. God does not want this, and that is why he has made a way of salvation available. 'God does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants all to turn away from their sins' (2 Peter 3:9). But if they refuse to, there is no way of salvation for them.

A change of direction

Since faith means trusting in Jesus Christ's death for the forgiveness of sin, faith involves turning away from sin. People cannot cling to their sin and love Jesus at the same time, because their sin caused Jesus to die. People must not only be sorry for their sin, but also be willing to turn from it, to change direction. They must have a complete change of mind, attitude and behaviour. The word for this turn-around is 'repentance'.

Faith and repentance go together. Jesus said, 'Turn away from your sins and believe the good news' (that is, the good

news of the salvation he brought) (Mark 1:15). Those who spread this good news likewise urged people to 'turn from their sins to God and believe in the Lord Jesus' (Acts 20:21). Such repentance is more than merely deciding to be a better person. It is turning from sin to Christ. Faith in Christ means complete dependence on him and total commitment to him. Believers in Christ become true followers of Christ, true Christians.

Sooner or later, those who recognize their need of Christ must come to a point where they personally accept the salvation that God offers. The Bible gives no special procedure to follow and no special prayer to recite. No church ceremony or church official is necessary. God knows the attitude of people's hearts, even when words cannot properly express it.

Nevertheless, if people are genuine believers, they should naturally want to talk to God. They will want to acknowledge their sin, ask God's forgiveness, thank Jesus for dying for them, and commit themselves in faith to him as their Saviour and Lord. And they have the assurance of Jesus' promise, 'I will never turn away from anyone who comes to me' (John 6:37).

Those who come to Christ may not experience any immediate great change in their feelings. Salvation, however, does not depend on their feelings; it depends on God's promises. When God works in people's lives, it is not usually by spectacular or unnatural happenings. He does not usually strike people dead when they curse him, or give them heavenly visions when they praise him. But when he comes into people's lives, he works to change those lives, so that there is a constant growth in all the truly good qualities. People are not saved by their good deeds, but once they are saved, their lives will progressively become full of good deeds.