

CHRISTIANITY
—
EXPLODING THE MYTHS

Introduction

"The greatest question of our time is not communism versus individualism; not Europe versus America; not even East versus West. It is whether men can live without God"

Will Durant

We don't have to. In Jesus Christ, God has given us an answer - but it's an answer that over the years has become shrouded in mystery and myth. Today, few people believe that Christianity can provide real answers to the questions that all of us ask about life. Yet it can - as we hope you'll discover in the following pages.

The writer GK Chesterton once correctly remarked that the problem with Christianity was not that it has been tried and found wanting but that it has been found difficult and left untried.

So try it. You don't need to read this whole thing from start to finish - unless you want to. Just pick out the questions and issues that bother you most. If the answers make any kind of sense, find a Bible, read one of the Gospels (Mathew, Mark, Luke or John) and simply say "God, I need to change the way I've been living - I want to know you. If you're there, speak to me through this". He won't disappoint you.

CHRISTIANITY – EXPLODING THE MYTHS

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1. God Doesn't Exist

"God is like the sun; you cannot look at it but without it, you cannot look at anything else"

GK Chesterton

Not many people believe this one – and it's easy to see why. To prove that God exists, you've only to look around you. Evolution doesn't disprove His existence: the very first animal had to come from somewhere. The 'Big Bang' theory is similarly flawed: the physical matter in the 'Big Bang' also had to come from somewhere.

Which is why the equation for the existence of God (somebody x something = everything) makes so much more sense than the same equation formulated without Him (nobody x nothing = everything).

The argument is even more compelling when you take into account the arguments that God *does* exist. There are the inherent standards of right and wrong that we're all born with. Then there's the infinite complexity of everything in Creation: we don't look at something as complex as a wrist watch and assume that it just fell together. Yet that's exactly the same argument people use in the 'Big Bang' theory: it's akin to a hurricane entering a junk yard and leaving a jumbo jet standing in its wake.

But if God does exist, then how can we know Him? Well before we even try, there's one fairly obvious point worth bearing in mind. If we know better than God, the Creator of the Universe and all the galaxies, then He's not worth knowing. If we could understand everything about God and what He does, then He wouldn't be worth understanding.

The story is told of a cynic, sitting under a nut tree, carrying on a rather jesting and gibing monologue with God. His grounds for complaint lay in what He considered to be an obvious failure on the part of God to go by the book on structural design. "Lord", he said, "how is it that you made such a large and sturdy tree to hold such tint, almost weightless nuts? And yet you made small, tender plants to hold such large and weighty watermelons!"

As he chuckled away at the folly of such disproportion in God's mindless universe, a nut suddenly fell on his head. After a pause, he muttered, "Thank God that wasn't a watermelon!"

It's one thing to ask questions. It's another to sit in judgement of God. Those who do are the least likely to ever really know Him.

2. Science Has Disproved Christianity

"At this moment, it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. As scientists, we have scaled the mountains of ignorance, yet at the highest peak, pull ourselves over the final rock to be greeted by a band of theologians who've been sitting there for centuries"

Robert Jastrow - former Director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies

Most people today believe in God – but not in a personal God. They can't believe that something so vast and unimaginable would be able to know them personally. In a way, they're right. How could the God who scientists now think created over a hundred billion stars and a hundred million galaxies know them personally? By sending Himself in human form to show us what He is like - in the form of Jesus Christ. How rational is that?

Every aspect of the God we can know through Jesus is supremely rational – especially when it comes to the things He has created. Perhaps it's when we come to look at science that we most clearly discover how rational the Christian faith really is.

Does Science Disprove Christianity?

The truth in fact is exactly the opposite: the Bible is constantly disproving science

The Bible stands alone amongst all the world's books for one simple reason: there is not a factually inaccurate statement in it. No scientist has ever factually disproved anything in the Bible. Evolution has never been proved and no factually proved alternative has ever been given to replace the creation story.

In contrast, the Bible is constantly disproving science. It said the world was round when science said it was flat. It talked of the universe and space when science said there was nothing but this. It talks of stars astronomers didn't know existed until quite recently and it said the stars were without number when scientists were still trying to count them.

Science is constantly changing and correcting itself: for example, early this century, scientists thought the whole human endocrine system (pituitary, thyroid and all other such glands) were totally useless, the remains of some previous ancestry. Today, we know that they run the entire chemical process of the body.

In contrast, the Bible never changes its mind, never corrects itself and is as reliable today as it was when scientists first started using it to correctly read God's book of nature. If they were still doing so today, we would probably have never had chemical pollution, atom bombs and nuclear warheads.

Christianity Undergirds Science

Even secular scientists agree that they have Christianity to thank for developing science. The reason that scientific thought only properly began to develop after Jesus was very simple: none of the other population groups in the ancient world were in a position to be able to do it.

The development of science could not have come from the Greeks, who believed the world was not to be changed or used but simply to be understood. It could not have come from the Arabs, who believe that since things are fatalistically determined, there's no point in trying to change anything because things are unchangeable. It could not have come from the African or tribal nations who would never have begun to experiment on the natural world, since they believed that everything contained within it spirits of various gods or ancestors. And it could not have come from the Hindus in India or the Buddhists in China since both teach the physical world to be unreal, the only reality being in one's soul.

All of which explains why nothing really significant happened in science until Christianity came along, based around a rational God who is the source of all truth in a rational world.

Indeed, far from being at odds with the Genesis story of the Garden of Eden – which is no more fantastical than the 'Big Bang' theory – early scientists based their fundamental outlook on its foundational truth: that man should have dominion over all things [Gen 1v.26]. The Genesis story directed man to take them, shape them and use them for his own well-being, the well-being of his neighbour and the glory of God.

The world, it seemed, was not here simply to be understood, as the Greeks thought, nor merely to be accepted, as the Arabs thought, nor to be worshipped, as the tribal nations thought, nor to be denied in its existence, as the Hindus and Buddhists thought. It was here as a creation of a great Creator, made for His glory and for our good.

What the Bible calls 'sin' (man's selfishness, pride and arrogance) also kick-started science, which had previously been dictated exclusively by opinions and could be twisted to whatever anyone wanted it to be – hence continuous scientific dead-ends. At last, scientists realised that because man's unreliability and own agenda, opinion had to be backed up with experimentation and proof.

With this kind of background, it should come as no surprise to find that some of the greatest pioneers of science were committed Christians. There was Louis Pasteur, Michael Faraday (who discovered electricity) and, most famously, Sir Isaac Newton who wrote: "Atheism is so senseless. When I look at the solar system, I see the earth at the right distance from the sun to receive the proper amounts of heat and light. This did not happen by chance."

Science & Christianity Address Fundamentally Different Questions

Some estimate that up to 50% of scientists today are Christians. Science's Christian background isn't the only reason why the many of them see no conflict between their work and their faith. They recognise that science and Christianity are asking two fundamentally different sets of questions.

Science is exclusively concerned with the 'how' and 'what' but it cannot, unlike Christianity, answer the 'who' and 'why'. Science can tell us how things in creation have been put together and what they're made up of but it cannot tell us who assembled the pieces and why it was done.

3. Evolution Has Disproved What The Bible Teaches

"Science has 'explained' nothing; the more we know, the more fantastic the world becomes, and the profounder the surrounding darkness"

Aldous Huxley

Science's major attack on Christianity comes in the form of the theory of evolution. As has already been said (and contrary to what many assume), evolution doesn't disprove the existence of God. Nor (again, contrary to what many assume) has evolution been 'proved': that's why there's still fierce debate going on on both sides of the argument.

You could get very deep into this issue but it's simplest just to ask a single question: 'What is a human being?' There are only two options – you have to choose one or the other:

Either –

He or she is a human being, created by God with a God-ordained purpose for his or her life and a mission to fulfil with the opportunity to be together forever with the Creator in paradise

Or –

He or she is a complex animal, related to the anthropoids, which has emerged from the primeval ooze, entering existence through the chance concatenation of molecules and amino acids, squirming out of the ancient sea, climbing up into the trees from which it descended again and voila – here we are! First cousins of the chimpanzee, distantly related to monkeys and mice

Just as we can look at creation, see its complexity and agree how impossible it would have been for it all to come together by chance, so we can look at man. We can see his complexity (far above that of any other animal) and wonder how all of this extra development just 'happened' – where it came from. To say it happened over thousands of years doesn't answer the question: it still happened. Where did it come from?

The creation story in the Bible is no more fantastic than believing that everything came together in some cosmic explosion or believing that man developed from primeval ooze. Neither of these explanations can be scientifically proved but only one fits with the way man actually is: God says in the Bible that man was created to "take dominion" over the earth [Gen 1v.26]. The evolutionist can't believe that was always so, nor can he explain where this spirit of 'dominion' or the ability to implement it came from.

A final word about evolution: if man is essentially just another animal, he should be treated just like another animal. If you have an animal on your land or your farm that is causing widespread harm to the environment and other animals, you should

exterminate it – all of it. This is where Darwin's thinking eventually takes us – and has taken many.

If you doubt that, read this recent extract from the environmentalist magazine 'Wild Earth':

"If you haven't given voluntary human extinction much thought before, the idea of a world with no people in it may seem strange. But if you give it a chance, I think you might agree that the extinction of Homo Sapiens would mean survival for millions, if not billions, of earth-dwelling species..... Phasing out the human race will solve every problem on earth, social and environmental"

Darwin himself foresaw the ultimate consequences of his theory - but too late. On his deathbed, recognising how wrong his theory had been, he confessed that Jesus Christ showed the one true way.

4. Christianity Has No Relevance To Modern day Society

"Young people are free to conquer the world - and they don't want it. Material prosperity has not made life meaningful. The hunger for love and real meaning are the forces behind the psychedelic revolution"

Allan Cohen

We can deal with this one very easily by looking at our watch or getting out a calendar. But to talk about Jesus' death being the point from which all modern society measures time is simply to touch the surface of the way Christianity has shaped just about every aspect of modern society.

A hundred years ago, no one doubted this. Only in the Twentieth Century has man increasingly begun to feel proud and self-sufficient, putting himself above God's word. It's no coincidence that he has killed more of his own in the Twentieth Century than during all the others combined.

But back to the issue at hand. Let's look at just a few of the things that Christianity has brought about in our world. Jesus' death is the point from which even secular historians begin to trace the growing importance of:

The Sanctity of Human Life – with a realisation of the evils of child killing and cruelty to women, the elderly and slaves

The Abolition of Slavery – brought about mainly through the efforts of Christians like William Wilberforce

Charitable Institutions – there is no historical record of any organised charitable effort before Christ. The early church began charitable institutions and developed them, today culminating in the modern work of Christians like Mother Theresa and welfare systems like that in America which simply wouldn't exist without church giving.

Education For The Masses – has its very roots in Christianity. Before Christ, education was only for the elite. Virtually all universities were started by Christians.

Printing & Books – the first mass printing press was primarily developed to print the Bible.

The Development of Language – many of the world's languages were first set to writing by Christian missionaries – Russian Cyrillic for example

Economics - why is it that the countries who enjoy the highest standard of living in the world are fundamentally Christian ones? Compare predominantly Christian Western

countries with the standard of living suffered by most of those in Arab Muslim countries or Hindu India or Buddhist China.

Private Property, the foundation of the capitalism on which our Western economies are based, is also the foundation of Biblical economics: “Thou shalt not steal” presupposes private property.

Even accounting has a Christian foundation. It was an Italian monk Father Luca Pacioli who invented double-entry book-keeping and spread sheets, the basis of all modern accounting.

Medicine – why do you think so many hospitals have Christian-sounding names (St. Thomas’s etc)? Because most were originally started by Christians to help the poor and sick. The oldest hospital still functioning in the world today is the Hotel Dieu (‘God’) in Paris, established in AD600.

Originally, hospitals were only for the poor: the rich feared (rightly) that they’d catch something there. Then, in the 19th Century, two Christians, Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister, used their respective developments in bacteriology and antiseptic surgery to open up hospitals to everybody.

Take away Christ and we would not have hospitals as we know them: or nurses as we know them, come to that. Nursing started with Florence Nightingale, a devout Christian who felt herself called into The Lord’s service for this purpose. Then there was the international Red Cross – also started by a Christian, Henry Dunant.

How many agnostics have built hospitals – or homes for the homeless? In contrast, Christian people have constructed tens of thousands of hospitals all over the world. Christian missionaries have brought medical relief to the most forgotten parts of the world. Christian men of science like Louis Pasteur – in the face of extreme opposition from evolutionists – developed sterilisation and pasteurisation, as well as vaccines against deadly diseases like diphtheria, rabies and anthrax. As a result of all this, where the average human lifespan at the time of Jesus’ death was 28, in 1990, it was 62.

Faithful Christian living is undeniably healthy too, given that it can shield you from the dangers of smoking, excessive drinking or promiscuous sex. A thousand people a day die in the USA alone of smoking-related diseases: going to church is undeniably good for you!

The Arts – Modern Western music is founded on the work of Christians. An 11th Century monk Guido of Arezzo, developed the notation of modern music. This then made it possible to compose and paved the way for later Christian composers like Bach, Handel and Vivaldi, who dedicated every note they wrote to the service of Jesus Christ.

Without the influence of Christianity, the church and Christian-inspired composers, our music today would probably be similar to that you hear in the Middle or Far East (or failing that your local Indian restaurant) where there were no such influences.

It's much the same story when it comes to literature. Modern writing is founded on the work of Christians like Shakespeare and Dickens, Tennyson, Hans Christian Andersen, Leo Tolstoy, TS Elliot and CS Lewis. Even art itself has strong Christian influences, bought about through committed Christians throughout the ages.

"If tonight, with one sweep of the arm, you brush from literature the Christ, the scenes and suggestions from His life, the spirit which He exhibited, the principles for which He stood, you would have a world made colourless in a night"

Joseph Nelson Greene

5. Christians Are Hypocrites

What Is A Real Christian?

Before we can answer this, we have to define what a 'Christian' really is. After all, there are 'Christian' terrorist groups in the Middle East. In South Africa and America, the majority of the white population claim to be 'Christian'. If we turn our hypocritical spotlight on all these people, we'll have plenty to go on.

So let's get real: somebody isn't a 'Christian' because they go to church. Nor are they a 'Christian' because they read the Bible, go to the right meetings or use the right jargon. Doing lots of good works doesn't make you a Christian either. If good things are something you do instead of believing in Jesus, the Bible calls them "filthy rags" and says that God hates them. Imagine how you'd feel if one of your parents only did things *for* you instead of actually loving you. Ask the child whose mother works many hours to pay the bills but never actually spends time with her how she feels. That's why God hates good works from people who use them as an excuse not to really know Him.

As we'll see later, being a real 'Christian' (some use the term 'Born Again Christian') has nothing to do with good works alone or anything you can do which looks and sounds religious. Being a real Christian involves repenting (turning from your way and going God's way), believing in His son Jesus Christ and what He has done on the cross, then giving him control in your life. It's a big deal. Before you judge a 'Christian', make sure the person really is.

Even Real Christians Aren't Perfect

Christian belief is in Jesus Christ, not in Christians. Whatever your decision about Jesus, base it on Him, not on those around you. Being a Christian doesn't make you perfect: look at anyone long enough, Christian or non-Christian and they will let you down, so if that's your attitude, you're always going to be disappointed.

Of course some Christians are hypocrites – but you'll find many more of them in the world around you. For the majority of those who try and base their lives around Jesus, however, the words of the Gospel song apply: "I'm not all I ought to be: I'm not what I'm going to be: but thank God, I'm not what I used to be".

Which is better. To be someone who lives for themselves or to be someone who tries, however poorly, to live for God?

6. Christians Live By An Outdated Set Of Morals – I Just Want To Have Fun

"None of us can help the things life has done to us. They are done before you realise it - and once they are done, they make you do other things until at last, everything comes between you and what you'd like to be, and you've lost your true self forever"

Eugene O'Neill

Whatever you think about Christianity, you have to accept that it has done more to elevate world morality than any other single thing. Christian missionaries were the first in the remote jungles where many of the most degrading pagan perversions would otherwise be still going on. Christianity has been the force behind modern education, modern welfare – the list goes on.

Everywhere, the Christian faith provides what man has always sought – a standard of right and wrong. We set standards for our children. They don't always live up to them but the fact that those standards are there pushes up the standard of their behaviour. So it has been in the world since Jesus Christ.

A Standard Of Right & Wrong

If you decide to live apart from God, you also decide by implication to set your own standards of right and wrong. Those standards change: you don't do things now that you wouldn't have given a second thought to ten years ago – and vice versa. In fact, whether you want to admit it or not, your standards will change day by day. And that's a problem.

It means you never have anything to go back to: what carpenters call a spirit-level – a defined point of 'rightness' that you can start from. If you're a decent person, every time you go wrong, you try and get back on the right course – but exactly what and where is that? It's like driving somewhere and getting progressively lost. You take a wrong turn and go back to where you think is right: except that it isn't. So you go wrong again – and go back and find yourself even further out. Eventually, you find yourself going round in circles.

At face value, we might not like God's standards of right and wrong but at least they're there and we can't argue with them. And at least they provide that 'spirit level' to which we can return again and again.

Christian Morals: Outdated Or Simply Downright Sensible?

We live right now in a world where we pay the price for 'modern morality' – sometimes quite literally. The US Chamber of Commerce says that because of employee theft in America, across-the-board consumer goods cost as much as 15% more than they would otherwise – a 15% sin tax!

Christian morals may sound outdated, but when you look closely, they begin to make a lot more sense than the alternatives on offer. Let's take a good example here: the Bible's attitude to sex and the family. Outdated? Or is it simply downright sensible?

Not to sleep with someone until you're married so you don't end up with all kinds of diseases and emotional screw-ups.

To keep the family unit together so that we care for each other and don't leave it all to the government?

To properly discipline our children so they don't turn into the kind of monsters that rape when they feel the urge to rape or molest when they feel like it?

Society's 'free' thinking has left our society ravaged by sexual disease, broken families and crime. So whose approach is *really* boring and outdated? Sure, the Bible is strict on its teachings on sex and the family. But so has every great empire been at the height of its prosperity and power. Studies have shown time and time again that couples co-habiting in so-called 'trial marriages' end up having a much higher incidence of divorce. Whereas the average married man lives to be 74, the average homosexual dies at 43.

So maybe, just maybe, God isn't so much of an ogre after all. And maybe every good and perfect gift *does* come down from above – and not up from below with a hook in it and Satan at the other end of the line. The basic lie of Satan underlying all of his deceptions is that the laws of God will restrict, narrow and diminish your life. Ask anyone who practices 'free sex' if that is true (and look at their life), then ask a happily married strong Christian couple and do the same.

An American sex magazine ('Red Book') recently did a survey amongst 100,000 women. Those for whom sex was 'free' turned out to be dissatisfied and repressed. Those who allowed their religious faith to play a part in their lives turned out to be the most orgasmic women in the country.

I Just Want To Have Fun

In John 10v.10, Jesus makes it very clear how He feels about this: "I have come that you may have life – and life to the full". 'Life to the full' isn't going down the pub every night or staring at the TV for sixty hours a week. 'Life to the full' is something you live when the future's taken care of. When your life has meaning. And when you don't just live for yourself. It also includes some of the most exciting things you can imagine. Worshipping God isn't just something you do in church or on your knees: it's also something you can do on a jet-ski or in a Formula One racing car if you do it in the right way – former F1 World Champion Ayrton Senna was a Christian. Some Christians might be boring (so are some non-Christians!) but the faith they live by certainly isn't. If you know God, you also know how to have fun.

7. Jesus Was Just A 'Good Man'

Many people today say that they 'believe' in Jesus. What they really mean is that they believe He existed and they believe some of His teaching. Look up the dictionary definition of the word 'belief' and you'll find that that isn't it. You can believe a chair will hold you up but unless you sit on it, your 'belief' isn't worth much, nor is it real belief.

So if real belief means putting your trust in something, what should we really believe about Jesus? Well one thing is certain: the one thing you *can't* believe about Him is that he was a 'good man'.

It was CS Lewis who once said that when we look at the facts about Jesus, there are only three beliefs we can honestly hold: that He was mad, that He was bad or that He was God. With all the good things He did, it's impossible to believe that He was bad. Similarly, with all the good sense He taught, it's impossible to believe that He could have been mad.

But these aren't the crucial issues: the main reason we know He was God is that His teaching leaves us no other option. He clearly stated over and over again that He was God. If He lied about this, then He must have been either bad (ie pretending to be something that He wasn't) or mad (ie pretending to be something that He wasn't because He was off His head).

Sorry: you can't sit on the fence on this one.

And if you conclude that Jesus Christ was God? Well, it means a great deal. Responding will require a radical change from within your heart, to turn from your ways and fully embrace God's.

8. God Doesn't Care About Suffering

It's interesting that this is always a criticism levelled at Christianity – never at any of the other faiths. In fact, it's a question every faith must answer.

The writers of scripture do not avoid the problem of suffering – even if we as Christians are often tempted to. They deal most profoundly with life's deepest hurts – with pain, starvation, death, bereavement, crime, exploitation, prejudice, hopelessness and so on.

What Man Has Done

In Causing Suffering Directly: How much of the suffering that man so easily attributes to God is caused by man himself? Perhaps we will never know. The famines caused through unequal distribution of food. The earthquake disasters made immeasurably worse by poor construction and inadequate hygiene. The wars. We could go on.

One of the most hauntingly-titled books about the Nazi Holocaust was entitled 'Ordinary Men'. It explains that it was not a few brutes but many good and ordinary men who committed murder for Hitler. One of those responsible at the Nuremberg trials said pathetically: "I never intended it to go so far". He could have been speaking for all mankind.

In Causing Suffering Through His Rebellion Against God:

"Man is not at peace with his fellow man because he is not at peace with himself. He is not at peace with himself because he is not at peace with God"

Thomas Merton

Recently, Forbes magazine in America invited several scholars from around the world to contribute to the question "Why are we so unhappy?". All approached the topic from their various backgrounds and perspectives and in a memorable collection of articles from so diverse a group, all agreed on one point: we are a troubled civilisation because of the loss of a moral and spiritual centre.

Interesting isn't it that even those outside Christianity can see that the world has been thrown off course because man has rejected God and therefore has no 'moral or spiritual centre'? In a nutshell, that's what the Bible says about sin and suffering. Because mankind has chosen to reject God, the world God created for man cannot be as He intended it to be. Which has created the consequences we see around us in the world today.

What God Can Do

Why Doesn't He Intervene? But if God created the world in the first place, why doesn't He do something about it when man messes up. Why can't He correct disaster, wrong and evil in spite of us? Why doesn't He intervene? There are several answers to this question, but the first is to follow it to its logical conclusion.

God gave us free will – and free will is free. It isn't a will that can be set back on the right path every time it takes a wrong turn. Where should God draw the line at intervening? In wars, in political disputes, in civil disputes, in cutting yourself shaving? Who can draw that line? Wrong is wrong, sin is sin. God must intervene in the little things, for they become big things. And if He intervened in everything, we would become little more than robots. That is not free will.

Mankind has declared he doesn't want God – which in turn prevents God from also intervening in the things that apparently aren't caused by our free will: the premature births, crippled children, devastating hurricanes. Man can't have it both ways. He can't reject God one minute then ask for his help the next.

But Even So, Surely A God Of Love Couldn't Really Stand Idly By & See All That Suffering The American pilots who dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima have said that in the same situation, they would do the same thing again. Though this action caused tremendous suffering, most now agree that it shortened the war by several years and saved millions of lives. Few thought that when they saw the suffering it caused at the time. Now, with the bigger picture, with hindsight, we can see things differently. God has the bigger perspective: should we presume to know better?

Even if we accept that, it's still hard not to question apparently needless and meaningless suffering, even if we bring ourselves to admit that it has all ultimately been caused by man's rejection of God. Surely God can't be apparently ignoring it *all* as part of 'a bigger picture'? There's no easy answer here: you either decide to trust God on the basis of everything else you know about Him or you don't.

Say a policeman came to the door and told you that the person closest to you had committed a brutal murder. All the evidence pointed to them and, to the police, it was an open-and-shut case. Yet you would know that person. You would know them to be incapable of that act. On the basis of your knowledge of their character, you would not believe the allegation. You would know that it couldn't be. It's the same here.

We will never understand everything about what God does and what He permits – which, if you consider his status as Creator of a million galaxies, is absolutely as you would expect. Such an awesome Creator would not be worth believing in if we understood everything about Him.

It's tempting to put God in the dock when we ask questions like this: when we do so, we've made Him smaller than we are and we've made a mistake.

The Bible makes clear the response the writer GK Chesterton gave to an article in The Times entitled 'What's Wrong With The World?'. He replied "I am. Yours truly GK Chesterton." That is precisely Jesus' point – we are wrong with the world.

What God Has Done

God suffers when we suffer. Think of suffering. The mother who has just lost her son in a road accident. The parents who have lost their baby in cot death. The husband who has lost his wife in childbirth. Now think how much greater would be that grief, how much greater that suffering if each of those had *voluntarily* given up their loved one to death – had sent them to their death. And not just any death but to a desperate, horrible, painful, lonely death. How much greater would be the suffering?

Yet that's what God did. He gave up His only Son to the most horrible death imaginable to give us an opportunity for life. To pay the price for all the sins that we personally and collectively have committed. We can choose to take that lifeline – or we can choose to reject it. But either way, don't say that God knows nothing about suffering: He knows everything about it.

God shares our pain when we go through suffering in this world. He shares it in the deepest way imaginable. But He knows that such pain, for loved ones and for those left behind, can at least be short-lived for those who choose to know Him. He gives us a chance to start again every day: and He gives us a chance to start again even when our days are ended. Man may have messed up this world but at least he can't mess up the next: Jesus' death on that cross and His resurrection has opened up our path there – if we choose to take it.

This was written by an elementary school teacher:

*He came to my desk with a quivering lip, the lesson was done.
"Have you a new sheet for me, dear teacher? I've spoiled this one"
I took his sheet, all soiled and blotted and gave him a new one all unspotted.
And into his tired heart I cried, "Do better now, my child."*

*I went to the throne with a trembling heart, the day was done.
"Have you a new day for me, dear Master? I've spoiled this one."
He took my day, all soiled and blotted and gave me a new one all unspotted.
And into my tired heart He cried, "Do better now, my child."*

9. I've Got More Important Things To Do Than To Bother About God

"Despair does not lie in being weary of suffering, but in being weary of pleasure"

Ravi Zacharias

Have you? Most people spend their lives seeking success, but the downside, if and when it is ever reached, is one we rarely read about. How Boris Becker struggled with thoughts of suicide after winning his second Wimbledon. How lottery winners are normally in a worse state emotionally – and financially – ten years after their wins.

Jack Higgins, renowned author of 'The Eagle Has Landed', has said that the one thing he knows now, at this high point of his career, that he wished he had known as a small boy was this: "When you get to the top, there's nothing there." Entertainers, sportspeople, politicians and business tycoons everywhere echo that view.

Which is hardly surprising. Medical studies reveal that human beings who finally reach their 'goals' experience adrenaline-like chemicals released in their blood more potent than morphine. These generate a 'high' or euphoria at the time. However, when life does return to normality, the absence of that 'high' creates an equally sharp downward swing of depression. As a result, many successful people find life miserable – or even unmanageable.

There's nothing wrong with pursuing your rainbows in life, but whether successful or not, you won't find the fulfilment you're looking for at the end of them. The bottom line is that today, people seek their security, self-worth and significance in the wrong places: from achievements, peers, family and friends, materials possessions and so on. All of these either fade, let us down at times or simply do not satisfy. God alone can give us the deep down sense of fulfilment and security that all of us seek. Life is fragile. If you wait, it may be too late.

10. My Own Ideas On Life Make More Sense

"It's not that I'm afraid to die: I just don't want to be there when it happens...."

Woody Allen

But do they? The writer Albert Camus once said that death was philosophy's only problem. And whether you believe in philosophy, New Ageism, Materialism, Atheism or any of the supermarket selection of religions that are on offer today, death is always the problem. Most don't attempt to explain it, while others only offer strange, unsubstantiated ideas that no one can prove.

Death is natural, undeniable and unavoidable but, as Freud pointed out, we tend to go through life pretending exactly the opposite. We push it aside, eliminate it from our thinking, keep a deadly silence about it. We dare not think about dying: it's too painful. Which would be fair enough if there were no answer. But it's not a position you can reasonably take when there may be a solution to the eternal problem: something more. You don't have to instantly believe but you *do* have to check such a solution out. How stupid would it be not to?

Christianity alone has an answer for death through Jesus Christ rising from the dead. Did it really happen? Well, the evidence is overwhelming. No one ever produced his body. The disciples went through terrible suffering, torture and death without ever renouncing their belief in his resurrection. His resurrection changed them from a broken, disconsolate group into a band of people who changed the world. Then there was Jesus' own brother James who would have had little time for resurrectional lies: in fact, he came to belief *after* Jesus rose again on the strength of that very fact. And all this is without the recorded post-resurrection appearances of Jesus himself, sometimes to hundreds of people. Even the Muslim Koran credits Jesus with the unique power to rise from the dead.

One leading lawyer once said that Jesus' resurrection was one of the best attested facts of history and that he himself had secured convictions in the High Court on much flimsier evidence.

If you accept that He rose from the dead, you must also accept that He has the only answer for death: every other founding leader of every other religion still lies in the grave. And if He has the answer for death, opening the way for any who believe to follow Him, then He must also hold the answer for life. Your life.

The apostle Paul said "If...Christ has not been raised....[and] if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men" [1Cor 15v17,19] Without Christ's resurrection, there is no real Christianity. With it..... Well compare against your own philosophies: decide which makes more sense.

11. Christianity Won't Change My Life

"Man was born free: and everywhere, he is in chains"

Jean Jacques Rousseau

Are Christians different and if so, how? You decide – but here's a list of things you might want to take into account.

1. They need not be concerned about anxiety – *"Be anxious for nothing"* [Phil 4v.6] Much worry can be taken away through the reassurance that Jesus brings.
2. They have the aid and help of God who gives additional strength to do the things that need to be done.
3. They have new wisdom and ideas that come from God – hence the Christian foundation for modern day science. *"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all liberally"* [James 1v.5]
4. They are given the power to persevere and continue on when others may fall by the wayside.
5. They have a purpose in what they do. Their work is done for the glory of God.

GK Chesterton, the English writer and philosopher, argued that for the Christian, joy is the central feature of life and sorrow is peripheral because the fundamental questions of life are answered. For the non-Christian, sorrow is central and joy peripheral because only the peripheral questions are answered and the central ones remain unanswered.

In the 19th Century, Charles Bradlaugh, a prominent atheist, challenged a Christian, Hugh Price Hughes, to a debate on his faith. Hughes agreed on the condition that Bradlaugh should bring one person whose life had been improved by atheism (he himself would bring 100 people whose lives had been transformed by Christianity). Bradlaugh couldn't.

If Christ had not come, life would be meaningless. One of Shakespeare's characters said that life was "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." And without some point of reference, without a God who is eternal and gives significance and meaning to things, life itself has no meaning. If Christ had not come, there would be no forgiveness for sin and no true freedom from guilt.

How vain and empty are the attempts of psychiatrists who simply try and lower ethical standards to suit individuals and thus try and remove their guilt. Only Christ can wipe the slate clean and blot out that which is written against them. Only He can remove that heavy burden of guilt, which causes so many people to live under a grey cloud without the sunshine of joy.

Not only can Christ remove the guilt of the past, but only He can give us victory over mistakes and wrongdoing in the present and future days of our lives. Christ breaks the shackles of these sins. Christ sets the prisoner free.

"I am He who lives, was dead and behold, I am alive for evermore" [Rev 1v.18]

If Christ had not come, there would be no hope beyond the grave: you could look down into that six-foot hole and see all of your future. Beyond that, there would be nothing but speculations and vague hopes. Jesus brought us absolute certainty.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Because I live, you (who trust in Me) will also live"
[John 11v.25/ 14v.19]

Have you ever wished you could start your life over again? Have you ever felt like you made some wrong turn somewhere but you're not sure where, nor are you sure how to correct it? As the poem says:

*I wish that there were some wonderful place
Called the Land of Beginning Again
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches
And all of our poor selfish grief
Could be dropped like a shabby old coat at the door
And never be put on again*

You can find that wonderful place of Beginning Again by coming into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He took upon Himself your guilt, your sin and the punishment that it deserves. He paid the price entirely by dying on the cross. By His grace, unmerited and free, He offers you the gift of life and life to the full, abundant and eternal.

To grasp that gift, you have to do two crucial things: repent and believe. Both are big steps to take.....

12. I Don't Really Have Much To Repent About.....

"We do not want a religion that is right where we are right. What we want is a religion that is right where we are wrong"

GK Chesterton

Most of us think we don't have much to repent about. Sure, we make the odd mistake every now and then but we're not murderers, rapists, drug pushers or adulterers. Are we really as bad as the Bible makes us out to be?

Not Comparing Ourselves To Others

Compared to other people, we may be pretty good. The trouble is that God doesn't compare us to other people. Nor would doing that tell Him very much.

Take the story of two brothers, well known for their crooked business dealings. Eventually, one died and the other, in arranging the funeral, made the minister an offer of a large amount of money if, in his eulogy, he would call the brother 'a saint'. The minister, knowing the financial needs of many of the poor in his parish, agreed.

When the service began, the church was filled with important business associates, all of whom over the years had been swindled by the dead man and who were unaware of the deal that had been made. When the time for the eulogy arrived, the minister stood up. "The man you see in the coffin," he announced, "was a vile and debauched individual. He was a liar, a thief, a deceiver, a manipulator and a reprobate. He destroyed the fortunes, careers and lives of countless people in this city doing every dirty, rotten, unconscionable thing you can think of. But compared to his brother here, he was a saint."

Looking At Ourselves As We Really Are

Let's try and answer this issue by looking at ourselves as we really are. Take this powerful story on the nature of the human heart told by the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge.

Working in India, he left his residence one evening to go to a nearby river for a swim. As he entered the water, across the river, he saw an Indian woman from the nearby village who had come to have her bath. Muggeridge impulsively felt the allurements of the moment and temptation stormed into his mind. He had lived with this kind of struggle for years but had somehow fought it off in honour of his commitment to his wife Kitty. On this occasion however, he wondered if he could cross the line of marital fidelity.

He struggled for just a moment, then swam furiously towards the woman, literally trying to out-distance his conscience. His mind fed him the fantasy that stolen waters would be sweet and he swam harder for it. Now, he was just two or three feet away

from her and as he emerged from the water, any emotion that may have gripped him paled into insignificance compared with the devastation that shattered him as he looked at her. “She was old and hideous.... Her skin was wrinkled and worst of all, she was a leper. This creature grinned at me, showing a toothless mask”. The experience left Muggeridge trembling and muttering under his breath “what a dirty lecherous woman.” But then, the rude shock of it dawned upon him – it was not the woman who was lecherous: it was his own heart.

This is precisely the teaching of Christ’s message. If we honestly look into that heart, we can’t honestly like very much of what we often see there. We can tell ourselves over and over again that we don’t have much to be guilty about – but the reality is the guilt we carry around with us. Things we know we should have done. Things we know we shouldn’t have even thought.

Taking Responsibility For Who You Are

There’s a folk song that goes:

*At three, I had a feeling of ambivalence towards my brothers
And so it follows naturally I poisoned all my lovers
But now I’m happy I have learned, the lesson this has taught
That everything I do that’s wrong is someone else’s fault.*

There is a classic Old Testament passage in Genesis 32, the narrative describing Jacob’s return home after a long absence. Years before, he had fled from his home because he had stolen the blessing that belonged to his older brother Esau. While Esau was out on a hunt, Jacob, in a sinister move, impersonated Esau and, kneeling before his blind father Isaac, asked Isaac to bless him with the birthright that rightly belonged to Esau as the firstborn.

The father was thoroughly puzzled, for the voice sounded like Jacob’s and so he said “You are not Esau – how can I give you the blessing?” Jacob offered him some fresh game for food, saying he had just brought it from his hunt. Hesitantly, Isaac blessed Jacob, thinking him to be Esau and gave him the privilege of a birthright that wasn’t really his. Because of his brother’s resulting wrath, Jacob had had to flee and had been on the run for years. During the intervening years, his mother, who had conspired with him, had died and Jacob decided to return home, hoping his brother’s anger had subsided.

Now, the moment of confrontation had arrived. Their paths were closing in on each other and Jacob was to meet with Esau the next morning. Jacob feared for his life and did the only thing left to do – he fell on his face before God. The scriptures tell us that Jacob wrestled with God throughout the night, crying out “I will not let you go unless

you bless me". It was a cry of a desperate man, not knowing what ominous fate awaited him the next day.

God responded with an extraordinary challenge to Jacob "What is your name?" This is an incredible question for an omniscient being to ask. Why would God ask Jacob for his name? Think of all that God could have said by way of reprimand. Instead, He merely asked for Jacob's name. God's purpose in raising this question contains a lesson for all of us, too profound to ignore. In fact, it dramatically altered the Old Testament's history. In asking for the blessing from God, Jacob was compelled by God's question to relive the last time he has asked for a blessing, the one he had stolen from his brother.

The last time Jacob was asked for his name, the question had come from his earthly father Isaac. Jacob had lied on that occasion and said "I am Esau" and stolen the blessing. Now he found himself, after many wasted years of running through life looking over his shoulder, before an all-knowing, all-seeing heavenly Father once more seeking a blessing. Jacob fully understood the reason and indictment behind God's question and he answered "My name is Jacob." "You have spoken the truth," is basically how God responded, reminding Jacob of the significance of his name. Jacob had been a duplicitous man, deceiving everyone everywhere he went. But now he had acknowledged his real character, God could change him and create a great nation.

Today, God is asking you: "What is your name?." What answer will you give Him? Conviction of sin comes when we measure ourselves before God. Jesus knows our hearts – and deep down, we know them too. He alone can bring the kind of change we need.

Turning Round & Going God's Way

The word 'repentance' means literally 'turning around'. As all of us know, sin isn't just about what we do, it's also about what we don't do. And what most of the world doesn't do today is to accept God as controller of Creation and controller of their lives. Which is why the world is in a mess.

What is more rational? Putting your life in your own hands, with your own morals and your own standards of right and wrong that constantly change? Or putting your life in the hands of the one that created it in the first place. The person who knows the end from the beginning. The person who knows what's going to happen tomorrow, next week, next month or next year and can guide you through it? The person who knows the struggles you're facing right now and can guide you through them too. But if you put your life in His hands, you put control of your life in His hands too. Are you ready to do that?

13. You Get To Heaven By Being ‘Good’

You Can’t Earn Your Way Into Heaven

Heaven is something that comes out of knowing Jesus Christ. Because it’s a free gift, it can’t be earned or deserved. No one can work their way to heaven because no one’s good enough. God’s standard for heaven is perfection and no good deeds we might do can ever meet that standard.

As we’ve said earlier, if good things are something you do instead of believing in Jesus, the Bible calls them “filthy rags” and says that God hates them. Imagine how you’d feel if the one you loved always did things for you instead of actually loving you. Ask the wife whose husband earns thousands but never actually wants to spend time with her how she feels. That’s why God hates good works from people who use them as an excuse not to really know Him.

But If Good Works Won’t Get Us To Heaven, Then What Will?

It’s a reasonable question. Left on our own, we’re lost. Fortunately, God has solved the dilemma for us through Jesus Christ who is God in the flesh [John 1 v.1,14] and loved us so much that He left His glorious home in heaven to live in our sin-sick world. He took abuse, suffering and death in our place, paying God’s penalty for sin on the cross. As someone once put it:

“He paid a debt He didn’t owe so we could be released from a debt we couldn’t pay”

Our sin has a price tag attached: God would hardly be just if He simply wrote it off. Through dying on the cross, Jesus paid that price. It’s like you robbing a bank and me allowing myself to be arrested and serving the jail term in your place: the price of that sin would have been paid – but you wouldn’t have paid it.

That’s why Jesus had to die on the cross – but simply doing that wasn’t enough. He also had to prove that He had the keys to eternal life – and God had to show to everyone that the price paid had been sufficient. Hence the resurrection.

The resurrection – which as we’ve seen, is one of the best-attested facts of history - proved that Jesus *could* show us the way to heaven. Just as an explorer goes somewhere first and others follow, so it was with Him. There would have been no point in Jesus promising us the way to heaven if He himself had not been there and returned to show us the way. Other religious leaders have boasted that they hold the keys to eternal life but only Jesus has proved it by going there.

Moreover, He’s prepared to give those keys to any who truly choose to receive Him by repenting of their sins and trusting Him with their lives. He promises that when we do that, He will be with us now and forever.

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”[John 11 v.25]

Handing Over Control – Putting Yourself In His Hands

Many people think they're not good enough to be Christians. They think that if they make a commitment to God and then mess up, they'll be hypocrites. There's a simple answer to that: if God waited for us to be perfect before we could come to Him, then He'd wait forever. As we've already suggested, Christianity isn't about what you do, it's about where you put your faith and who controls your life.

Imagine a huge canyon. If you're not a real Christian right now, then you're on one side and God is way away on the other. There's no way you can span that gap: no way you can know Him. Now imagine a swaying rope bridge spanning the two sides of the canyon: it's not something you'd step onto easily. It's easier to avoid and walk on by with everybody else – but walk on by and go where? Somehow, you know there's no future in where they're going. The alternative is to step onto that bridge. You're going to have to trust it – and put your life on the line to walk over it. But it's the only link there is to the other side. If that's where you're at right now, then don't worry about being a hypocrite. You're not good enough for God now and you never will be – even if you give your life to Him. That's not the point. If you have children, you'll know that they're not perfect either – but that's not why you love them: you love them because they belong to you.

God's Guide – His Holy Spirit

What God *does* promise is the gift of His Holy Spirit to those who trust in Him. That's why the Bible shows us God is three distinct persons: God himself (the Creator), Jesus Christ (the form he has shown us and the mediator between us and the Creator) and the Holy Spirit (who comes to live within you - if you allow Him).

It's simply God saying "I'll guide you." Like the father who keeps a watchful eye over his children rather than leaving them to sink or swim. If you'll let Him, the Holy Spirit will be like a guide walking ahead of you with a lantern over a dark and difficult path. Through the Bible, through circumstances, through prayer and through a variety of other ways, He'll keep you from stumbling and help you deal with the problems you come across. As a result, though you may not be wealthy in the world's terms, you'll find true riches in your life, in your relationships and in all the things that He has given you. Are you ready to stand up to a life believing in Jesus?

So Where Next?

As we suggested earlier, there are two steps to knowing God: you need to repent and believe. Repent from the sin in your life and repent from rejecting Him. Then believe in what He has done for you and believe in your need for His controlling hand in your life.

You could put it like this: *Lord Jesus, I come to you right now. I come seeking You. I want to find you. Lord, son of God, Saviour of men, come into my heart right now: there is room in my heart for you. I turn from my sins and ask that you take your rightful place on the throne of my heart. Thank you that you have paid for my sin. Take me and make me your own. Please cleanse me from the sin in my life and make me new again. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

14. Knowing God Is Something I'll Sort Out Another Time

If you've got this far, then there's a good chance that this is what you're thinking – in which case you've missed something really important. Christianity and knowing God isn't just an issue of buying a ticket to heaven – it's about life – real life – now, as well as in the future.

The philosopher Pascal said he had learned to define life backwards and live it forwards. In other words, he first defined death, then lived his life accordingly. That makes perfect sense doesn't it? All journeys are planned with the destination in mind. For most people, all journeys except the most important one of all: the journey of life.

Somebody once defined 'hell' as the inability to love. And isn't that what we see when we look at other religions – and the world around us? In Buddhism, the very founder, Gautama Buddha, renounced his wife and family in search of inner peace. In Hinduism, the concept of love is more that of pity. In Islam, at best submission is demanded to what seems like a compassionate God who quickly becomes a demanding one. Only in the Christian faith is life with God always portrayed as a relationship of love.

And in that sense, 'hell' – the inability to love – has broken loose in our culture, for with all the talk of love, we witness more betrayal, more family break-ups, more evil. In a very real sense, the choice between heaven and 'hell' is not one to make when we die, it's one for now. It's a decision that will completely change the quality of life you have.

Putting that decision off not only means that you live in a perpetual world of going round in circles, it also means you might *never* get the chance to put things right. Elvis Presley was found dead with a Bible in his hand.

What you do about Jesus says more about you than it does about Him. To a question 'What do you wish for most in your life?' asked of Canadian teenagers during a survey conducted a few years ago, the number one answer was "Somebody we can trust."

Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father except by me" [John 14v6]. He is the one you can trust – right now.