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ARTICLE 7:

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IS HE RELEVANT TODAY?



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Why Jesus?

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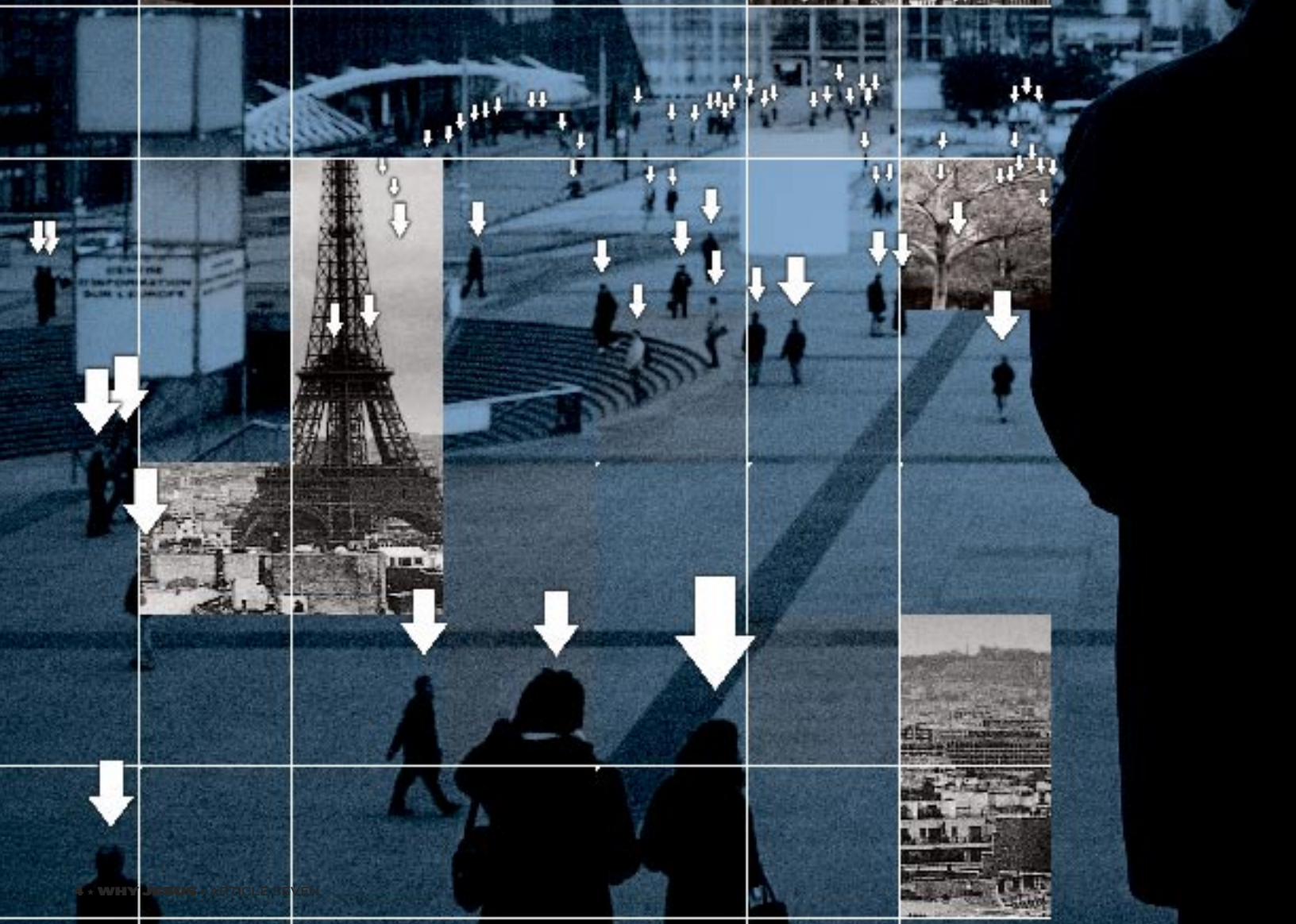
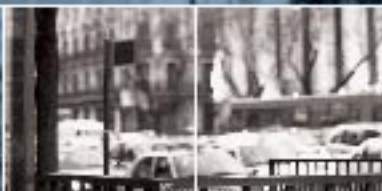
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Larry Chapman



WHY JESUS?

IS HE RELEVANT TODAY?





In the February, 2006 cover story, "The Passion of Kanye West," *Rolling Stone* magazine features Grammy award winner West with a crown of thorns on his head. The image is a parody of Jim Caviezel's portrayal of Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*.

Although West is known for his irreverence, having drawn fire for suggesting that he should be "a part of the Bible," a near fatal automobile accident in 2002 set him on a search for life's meaning. In his hit, "Jesus Walks," West reveals an inner struggle where he admits that the wrongs in his life have kept God distant, yet he still speaks of his need for Jesus. A few verses in the rap tune, "Jesus Walks," relate West's struggle:¹

I ain't here to argue about his facial features
Or here to convert atheists into believers
I'm just tryin to say the way school need teachers
The way Kathy Lee needed Regis that's the way yall need Jesus...

And I don't think there's nothing I can do to right my wrongs
Jesus Walks with me with me with me with me
I wanna talk to God but I'm afraid cause we ain't spoke in so long ...

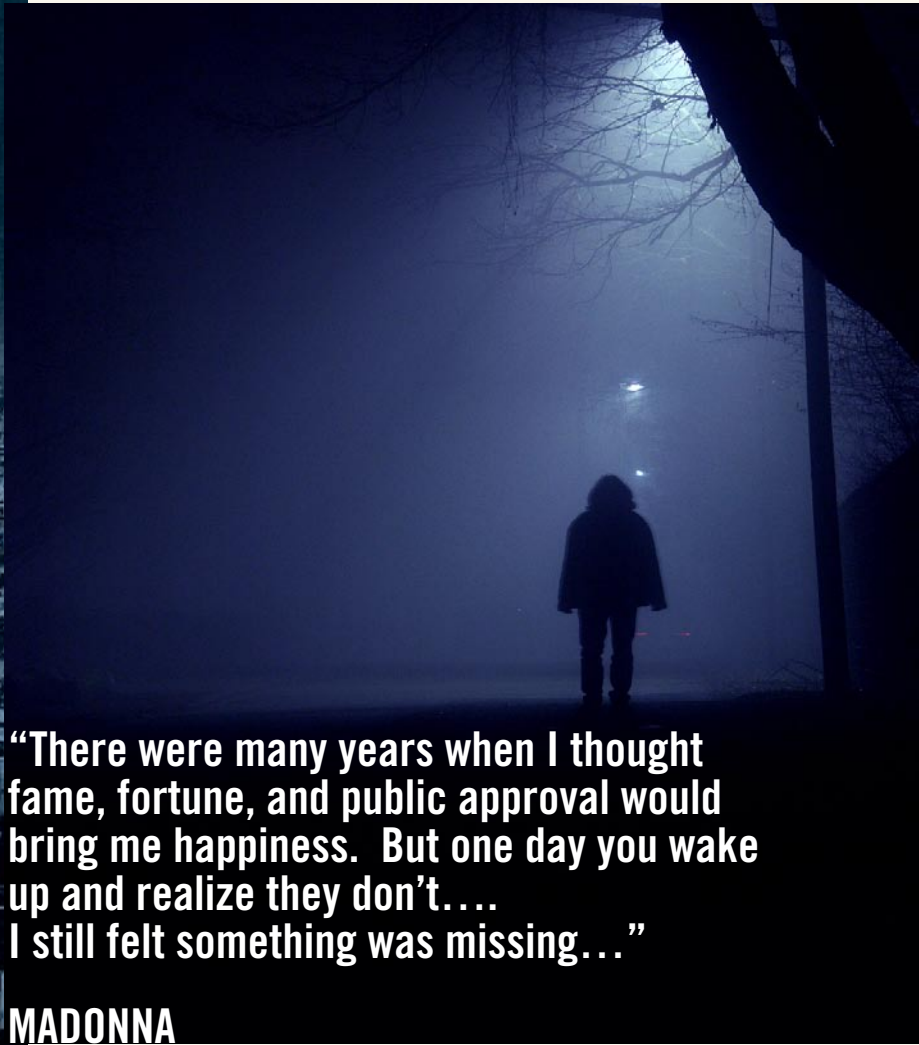
To Kanye West, Jesus is real, but irrelevant to his personal guilt and need to connect with God. If Jesus is who he claimed to be, the Creator of life, we would expect him to be relevant to our lives. In fact, Jesus said that he came to bring us a life beyond our wildest dreams. If that is true, we would expect him to provide answers to our innermost questions:

- "Who am I?"
- "Why am I here?"
- "Where am I going?"

"Who am I" is a question that shockingly confronted Academy Award winner Jack Nicholson. Abandoned by his father as an infant, Nicholson was led to believe that his grandmother was his mother and his mother was his older sister. He grew up believing their story until at the age of 37 a *Time* magazine researcher exposed the truth.

Left without a sense of his own roots, Nicholson sought his identity in pleasure---living for the moment. He states, "I resist all established beliefs. My religion basically is to be immediate, to live in the now... I envy people of faith....I pray to something...up there....It's part of being human, I guess."²

Madonna attempted to answer the question of, "Why am I here?" by becoming a diva, confessing, "There were many years when I thought fame, fortune, and public approval would bring me happiness. But one day you wake up and realize they don't....I still felt something was missing....I wanted to know the meaning of true and lasting happiness and how I could go about finding it."³



"There were many years when I thought fame, fortune, and public approval would bring me happiness. But one day you wake up and realize they don't.... I still felt something was missing..."

MADONNA

Others have given up on finding meaning. Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the Seattle grunge band Nirvana, despaired of life at age 27 and committed suicide. Jazz-age cartoonist Ralph Barton also found life to be meaningless, leaving the following suicide note: "I have had few difficulties, many friends, great successes; I have gone from wife to wife, and from house to house, visited countries of the world, but I am fed up with inventing devices to fill up 24 hours of the day."⁴

Pascal, the great French philosopher believed this inner void we all experience can only be filled by God. He states, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which only Jesus Christ can fill."⁵ If Pascal is right, then we would expect Jesus to not only answer the question of our identity and meaning in this life, but also to give us hope for life after we die.

Can there be meaning, without God? Not according to atheist Bertrand Russell, who wrote, "Unless you assume a god, the question of life's purpose is meaningless."⁶ Russell resigned himself to ultimately "rot" in the grave. In his book, *Why I am not a Christian*, Russell dismissed everything Jesus said about life's meaning, including his promise of eternal life.

But if Jesus actually defeated death as eyewitnesses claim, (see article 6) then he alone would be able to tell us what life is all about, and answer, "Where am I going?" In order to understand how Jesus' words, life, and death can establish our identities, give us meaning in life, and provide hope for the future, we need to understand what he said about God, about us, and about himself.

WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT GOD?

Relational

Jesus told us and showed us what God is like. Many think of God more as a force than a person who we can know and enjoy. The God of whom Jesus spoke is not like the impersonal Force in *Star Wars*, whose goodness is measured in voltage. On the contrary, He is relational like us, but even more so. He thinks, He hears. He communicates in language we can understand. And Jesus told us that God is loving.

Loving

God's love is radically different from ours in that it is not based upon attraction or performance. It is totally sacrificial and unselfish. Jesus compared God's love with the love of a perfect father. A good father wants the best for his children, sacrifices for them, and provides for them. But in their best interests, he also disciplines them.

Jesus illustrates God's heart of love with a story about a rebellious son who rejected his father's advice about life and what is important. Arrogant and self-willed, the son wanted to quit working and "live it up." Rather than waiting until his father was ready to give him his inheritance, he began insisting that his father give it to him early.

In Jesus' story, the father granted his son's request. But things went bad for the son. After squandering his money on

self-indulgence, the rebellious son had to go to work on a pig farm. Soon he was so hungry even the pig food looked good. Despondent and not sure his father would accept him back, he packed his bag and headed home.

Jesus tells us that not only did his father welcome him home, but he actually ran out to meet him. And then the father went totally radical with his love and threw a huge party celebrating his son's return.

It is interesting that even though the father greatly loved his son, he didn't chase after him. He let the son he loved feel pain and suffer the consequences of his rebellious choice. In a similar way, the Scriptures teach that God's love will never compromise what is best for us. It will allow us to suffer the consequences of our own wrong choices.

Jesus also taught that God will never compromise His character. Character is who we are down deep. It is our essence from which all our thoughts and actions stem. So what is God like—down deep?

Holy

Throughout the Scriptures (nearly 600 times), God is spoken of as "holy." Holy means that God's character is morally pure and perfect in every way. Unblemished. This means that He never entertains a thought that is impure or inconsistent with His moral excellence.

Furthermore, God's holiness means that He cannot be in the presence of evil. Since evil is the opposite of His nature, He hates it. It's like pollution to Him.

The Passion Of The Christ

Watching Jim Caviezel portray Jesus in Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is a gut-wrenching experience. Sadistic Roman guards take turns brutally beating the blindfolded Jesus, taunting him to identify which person did it. Then, after delivering a horrific beating with barbed whips, his executioners nail his hands and feet to a wooden cross. Hours later, Jesus dies, following hours of indescribable suffering. It's enough to make even the most calloused viewers wince. Many stunned viewers were left wondering what it was all about.

The movie never really answers that question, but fortunately the New Testament does. Paul told the Roman Christians that, "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners." Since that event nearly two thousand years ago, billions have accepted Jesus' gift and committed their lives to him. And from the first Christians on into the 21st century, Jesus has changed lives. One of those lives that changed dramatically came as a result of watching *The Passion of the Christ*.

On January 19, 2004, the Fort Bend County sheriff's office received a tragic call: Renee Coulter had discovered her 19-year-old daughter, Ashley Wilson, dead in her apartment. A pillowcase was over her head, and a cord was wrapped around her neck. All the evidence seemed to point to suicide.

In March 2004, less than six weeks after Ashley's death, *The Passion of the Christ* came to Richmond, Texas. Dan Leach purchased a ticket and went into the theater for an experience that would change his life forever. Almost immediately after watching the movie, twenty-one-year-old Leach, walked into the Fort Bend County sheriff's office and turned himself in for the murder of Ashley Wilson.

The police were stunned, thinking her death was a suicide. But Dan Leach convinced them otherwise. In an exclusive interview with KTRH radio in Houston, Leach revealed that in seeing and understanding Christ's death, he was led to confess. In a remarkable turn of events, Jesus had changed another life.



I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge....

Bono, U2

But if God is holy and abhors evil, why didn't He make our character like His? Why are there child molesters, murderers, rapists, and perverts? And why do we struggle so with our own moral choices? That brings us to the next part of our quest for meaning. What did Jesus say about *us*?

WHAT DID JESUS SAY ABOUT US?

Made for a Relationship with Him

If you were to read through the New Testament you would discover that Jesus continually spoke of our immense value to God, telling us that God created us to be His children.

Irish U2 rock star Bono remarked in an interview, "It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the Universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people...."⁷ In other words, before the universe was created, God planned to adopt us into His family. Not only that, but He has planned an incredible inheritance that is ours for the taking. Like the father's heart in Jesus' story, God wants to lavish on us an inheritance of unimaginable blessing and royal privilege. In His eyes, we are special.

Freedom to Choose

In the movie, *Stepford Wives*, weak, lying, greedy and murderous men have engineered submissive, obedient robots to replace their liberated wives who they considered threats. Although the men supposedly love their wives, they replaced them with *toys* in order to force their obedience.

God could have made us like that — robotic people (iPeople) hardwired to love and obey him, programming worship into us like a screensaver. But then our compulsory love would be meaningless. He wanted us to love Him freely. In real relationships, we want someone to love us for who we are, not out of compulsion — we'd prefer a soul mate over a mail-order bride. Søren Kierkegaard summarized the dilemma in this story.

Suppose there was a king who loved a humble maiden. The king was like no other king. Every statesman trembled before his power ... and yet this mighty king was melted by love for a humble maiden. How could he declare his love for her? In an odd sort of way, his kingliness tied his hands. If he brought her to the palace and crowned her head with jewels ... she would surely not resist—no one dared resist him. But would she love him? She would say she loved him of course, but would she truly?⁸

You see the problem. Less poetically put: How do you break up with an all-knowing boyfriend? ("It's just not working out between us, but I guess you already knew that.") But to make freely exchanged love possible, God created human beings with a unique capacity: free will.

Rebels

C.S. Lewis reasoned that even though we are internally programmed with a desire to know God, we rebel against it from the moment we are born.⁹ Lewis also began to examine his own motives, which led him to the discovery that he instinctively knew right from wrong. This recognition that we are programmed with an inner moral law led the former atheist to the conclusion there must be a moral "Lawgiver."

Indeed, according to both Jesus and the Scriptures, God has given us a moral law to obey. And not only have we turned our backs on a relationship with Him, we also have broken these moral laws that God established. Most of us know some of the Ten Commandments: "Don't lie, steal, murder, commit adultery," etc. Jesus summarized them by saying we should love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. Sin, therefore, is not only the wrong that we do in breaking the law, but also our failure to do what is right.

God made the universe with laws that govern everything in it. They are inviolable and unchangeable. When Einstein derived the formula $E=MC^2$ he unlocked the mystery of nuclear energy. Put the right ingredients together under exacting conditions and enormous power is unleashed. The Scriptures tell us that God's moral law is no less valid since it stems from His very character.

From the very first man and woman, we have disobeyed God's laws, even though they are for our best. And we have failed to do what is right. We have inherited this condition from the first man, Adam. The

Bible calls this disobedience, *sin*, which means “missing the mark,” like an archer missing his intended target. Thus our sins have broken His intended relationship with us. Using the archer’s example, we have missed the mark when it comes to the purpose we were created for.

Sin causes the severing of all relationships: the human race severed from its environment (alienation), individuals severed from themselves (guilt and shame), people severed from other people (war, murder), and people severed from God (spiritual death). Like links on a chain, once the first link between God and humanity was broken, all contingent links became uncoupled.

And we are broken. As Kayne West raps, “And I don’t think there’s nothing I can do to right my wrongs... I wanna talk to God but I’m afraid cause we ain’t spoke in so long” West’s lyrics speak of the separation that sin brings to our lives. And according to the Bible, this separation is more than just lyrics in a rap song. It has deadly consequences.

Our Sins have Separated us from God’s Love

Our rebellion (sin) has created a wall of separation between God and us (see Isaiah 59:2). In the Scriptures, “separation” means spiritual death. And spiritual death means being completely separated from the light and life of God.

“But wait a minute,” you might say. “Didn’t God know all of that before He made us?”



Why didn't He see that His plan was doomed for failure?" Of course, an all-knowing God would realize that we would rebel and sin. In fact, it is our failure that makes His plan so mind-blowing. This brings us to the reason that God came to Earth in human form. And even more incredible—the remarkable reason for his death.

WHAT JESUS SAID ABOUT HIMSELF?

God's Perfect Solution

Author Ray Stedman writes of God's promised Messiah: "From the very beginning of the Old Testament, there is a sense of hope and expectation, like the sound of approaching footsteps: *Someone is coming!*... That hope increases throughout the prophetic record as prophet after prophet declares yet another tantalizing hint: *Someone is coming!*"¹⁰

The ancient prophets had foretold that a Messiah would come and be God's perfect sin offering, satisfying his justice. This perfect man would qualify to die for us. According to the New Testament authors, the only reason Jesus was qualified to die for the rest of us is because, as God, he lived a morally perfect life and wasn't subject to sin's judgment.

It's difficult to understand how Jesus' death paid for our sins. Perhaps a judicial analogy might clarify how Jesus solves the dilemma of God's perfect love and justice.

Imagine entering a courtroom, guilty of murder (you have some serious issues). As you approach the bench, you realize that

the judge is your father. Knowing that he loves you, you immediately begin to plead, "Dad, just let me go!"

To which he responds, "I love you, son, but I'm a judge. I can't simply let you go."

He is torn. Eventually he bangs the gavel down and declares you guilty. Justice cannot be compromised, at least not by a judge. But because he loves you, he steps down from the bench, takes off the robe, and offers to pay the penalty for you. And in fact, he takes your place in the electric chair.

This is the picture painted by the New Testament. God stepped down into human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, and went to the electric chair (read: cross) instead of us, for us. Jesus is not a third-party whipping boy, taking our sins, but rather he is God himself. Put more bluntly, God had two choices: to judge sin in us or to assume the punishment himself. In Christ, He chose the latter.

Although U2's Bono doesn't pretend to be a theologian, he accurately states the reason for Jesus' death:

The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world, so that what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled. It's not our own good works that get us through the gates of Heaven.¹¹

Jesus didn't say he was a way to God. He said he was *the way*, and that his death was the only solution for our sins (John 14:6).

Those who believe all religions are the same deny we have a sin problem. They refuse to take Christ's words seriously. They say God's love will accept all of us, regardless what we have done. Perhaps Hitler is deserving of judgment, they reason, but not them or others who live "decent lives". It's like saying that God grades on the curve, and everybody who gets a D- or better will get in. But this presents a dilemma.

As we have seen, sin is the absolute opposite of God's holy character. Thus we have offended the one who created us, and loved us enough to sacrifice His very Son for us. In a sense our rebellion is like spitting in His face. Neither good deeds, religion, meditation, or Karma can pay the debt our sins have incurred.

According to theologian R. C. Sproul, Jesus alone is the one who can pay that debt. He writes,

Moses could mediate on the law;
Muhammad could brandish a sword;
Buddha could give personal counsel;
Confucius could offer wise sayings; but
none of these men was qualified to offer
an atonement for the sins of the world. ...
Christ alone is worthy of unlimited
devotion and service.¹²

A Gift Undeserved

The biblical term to describe God's free forgiveness through Christ's sacrificial death is grace. Whereas mercy saves us from what we deserve, the grace of God gives us what we don't deserve. Let's review for a minute how Christ has done for us what we could not do for ourselves:

A NEW COSMIC CHAPTER

The new life emerging from receiving Christ and his death for sin is described as “eternal life.” A forgiven and transformed life is something graspable; it is the story line of countless movies and biographies. But the idea of “eternal life” is temporally disorienting—a transformed life that goes on forever. While to think of living beyond death is both a powerful and freeing concept, it brings with it fears of the unknown.

Will we lose our identities and freedom? Will our dwelling be a cumulus cloudbank? Will we be bored?

C. S. Lewis noted that Jesus’ resurrection opens a radically new chapter in the cosmic scheme of the universe.¹³ Lewis also provides a helpful analogy in regard to the unknown of eternal life, stating that if a small child were told that the sexual act was the highest bodily pleasure, he would probably ask if you ate chocolate at the same time. If told no, the child would only think of sexuality in terms of negation, that it was “chocolateless.” He would see sexuality as less desirable than what he knows, when in fact it is abundantly more. So, said Lewis, are our concepts of heaven and eternal life; we will see them only as negations of earth rather than what they are, abundantly more.¹⁴

Dr. Randy Alcorn, who has spent 25 years researching Bible passages on heaven and has taught postgraduate courses on the subject, provides an insightful account of the afterlife in his book (appropriately titled)

Alcorn describes heaven as “a bright, vibrant, and physical New Earth, free from sin, suffering, and death, and brimming with Christ’s presence, wondrous natural beauty, and the richness of human culture as God intended it.”

Alcorn compares our experience in heaven to that of a child whose imagination is set loose. We will be “real people with real bodies enjoying close relationships with God and each other, eating, drinking, working, playing, traveling, worshipping, and discovering.”¹⁵

Although Alcorn bases his views on several scriptures, one verse sums it up:

No eye has seen, no ear has heard,
and no mind has imagined
what God has prepared
for those who love him.
(1 Corinthians 2:9. NLT)

- *God loves us and created us for a relationship with Himself*¹⁶
- *We have been given the freedom to accept or reject that relationship*¹⁷
- *Our sin and rebellion against God and His laws have created a wall of separation between us and Him*¹⁸
- *Though we are deserving of eternal judgment, God has paid our debt in full by Jesus' death in our place, making eternal life with Him possible*¹⁹

Bono gives us his perspective on grace. "Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff....I'd be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge.... It doesn't excuse my mistakes, but I'm holding out for Grace. I'm holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don't have to depend on my own religiosity."²⁰

We now have the picture of God's plan of the ages coming together. But there still is one missing ingredient. According to the New Testament, each of us individually must respond to the free gift Jesus offers us. He won't force us to take it.

YOU CHOOSE THE ENDING

Author and international lecturer, Ravi Zacharias states, "Jesus' message reveals that every individual, whether Jew or Greek or Roman or from any other civilization, comes to know God not by virtue of birth, but by a conscious choice to let Him have His rule in his or her individual life."²¹

Our choices are often influenced by others. The following true story illustrates how well-intended advice can sometimes result in tragic consequences.

One man who was on the 92nd floor of the south tower of the World Trade Center had just heard a jet crashing into the north tower. Stunned by the explosion, he called the police for instructions on what to do. "We need to know if we need to get out of here, because we know there's an explosion," he said urgently on the phone.

The voice on the other end advised him not to evacuate. "I would wait 'til further notice."

"All right," the caller said. "Don't evacuate." He then hung up.

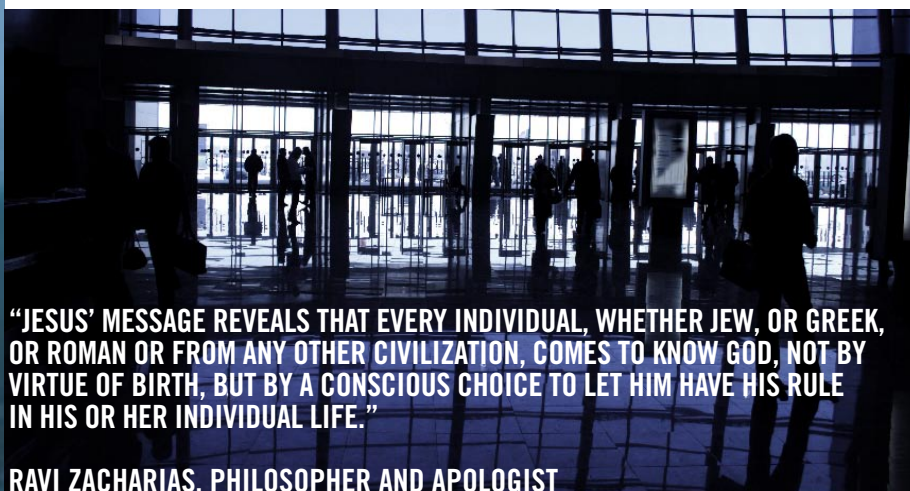
Shortly after 9:00 A.M., another jet crashed into the 80th floor of the south tower. Nearly all 600 people in the top floors of the south tower perished. The failure to evacuate the building was one of the day's great tragedies.²²

Those 600 people perished because they relied on the wrong information, even though it was given by a person who was trying to help. The tragedy would not have occurred had the 600 victims been given the right information.

Our conscious choice about Jesus is infinitely more important than the one facing the ill-informed 9/11 victims. Eternity is at stake. We can choose one of three different responses. We can ignore him. We can reject him. Or, we can accept him.

The reason many people go through life ignoring God is that they are too busy pushing their own agenda. Chuck Colson was like that. At age 39, Colson occupied the office next to the president of the United States. He was the "tough guy" of the Nixon White House, the "hatchet man" who could make the hard decisions. Yet, in 1972, the Watergate scandal ruined his reputation and his world became unglued. Later he writes,

"I had been concerned with myself. I had done this and that, I had achieved, I had succeeded and I had given God none of the credit, never once thanking Him for any of His gifts to me. I had never thought of anything being 'immeasurably superior' to myself, or if I had in fleeting moments thought about the infinite power of God, I had not related Him to my life."²³



"JESUS' MESSAGE REVEALS THAT EVERY INDIVIDUAL, WHETHER JEW, OR GREEK, OR ROMAN OR FROM ANY OTHER CIVILIZATION, COMES TO KNOW GOD, NOT BY VIRTUE OF BIRTH, BUT BY A CONSCIOUS CHOICE TO LET HIM HAVE HIS RULE IN HIS OR HER INDIVIDUAL LIFE."

RAVI ZACHARIAS, PHILOSOPHER AND APOLOGIST

Many can identify with Colson. It's easy to get caught in the fast pace of life and have little or no time for God. Yet ignoring God's gracious offer of forgiveness has the same dire consequences as outright rejection. Our sin debt would still remain unpaid.

In criminal cases, few ever turn down a full pardon. In 1915, George Burdick, city editor for the *New York Tribune*, had refused to reveal sources and broken the law. President Woodrow Wilson declared a full pardon to Burdick, which he surprisingly rejected. The Supreme Court ruled that for a pardon to be valid, it must be accepted. Thus Burdick's rejection held.

Rejection of Christ's full pardon occurs for several reasons. Some use intellectual reasons, but fail to investigate the evidence. Others refuse to look beyond some hypocritical Christians they know, pointing to unloving or inconsistent behavior as an excuse. Still others reject Christ because they blame God for some sad or tragic experience they have suffered. However, Zacharias, who has lectured on hundreds of college campuses has observed a deeper reason.

"A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God."²⁴

C. S. Lewis recognized that his own desire for moral freedom had put him at war with God, a war he couldn't win by simply changing his behavior. Lewis compares our acceptance of Christ with that of a

defeated enemy surrendering his arms:

Fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement: he is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Laying down your arms, surrendering, saying you are sorry, realizing that you have been on the wrong track and getting ready to start life over again... is what Christians call repentance.²⁵

Repentance is a word that means a dramatic turn-around in thinking. That's what happened to Nixon's former "hatchet man". After Watergate was exposed, Colson began thinking about life differently. Sensing his own lack of purpose, he began reading Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, given to him by a friend. Trained as a lawyer, Colson took out a yellow legal pad and began writing down Lewis's arguments. Colson recalled,

I knew the time had come for me. ... Was I to accept without reservations Jesus Christ as Lord of my life? It was like a gate before me. There was no way to walk around it. I would step through, or I would remain outside. A 'maybe' or 'I need more time' was kidding myself.

After an inner struggle, this former aide to the president of the United States finally realized that Jesus Christ was deserving of his full allegiance. He writes,

And so early Friday morning, while I sat alone staring at the sea I love, words I had not been certain I could understand or say fell naturally from my lips: 'Lord Jesus, I believe You. I accept You. Please come into my life. I commit it to You.'²⁶

Colson discovered that his questions, "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "Where am I going?" are all answered in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul writes, "It is in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for."

(Ephesians 1:11, The Message)

When we enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he fills our inner void, gives us peace, and satisfies our desire for meaning and hope. And we no longer need to resort to temporary stimuli for our fulfillment. When He enters into us, he also satisfies our deepest longings and needs for true, lasting love and security.

And the staggering thing is that God Himself came as a man to pay our entire debt. Therefore, no longer are we under the penalty of *sin*. Paul states this clearly to the Romans when he writes,

You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions, yet now he has brought you back as his friends. He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.

(Colossians 2:21b-22a NLT)

His gift of eternal life is absolutely free—and it is for the taking. The choice is yours.

End Notes

¹ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/kanyewest/jesuswalks.html>

² Jack Nicholson, interviewed by Mike Sager, *Esquire*, "The Meaning of Life," (January, 2004), 70, 71.

³ *O: The Oprah Magazine*, "Oprah talks to Madonna," (January, 2004), 120.

⁴ Quoted in Josh McDowell, *The Resurrection Factor* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publ., 1981), 1.

⁵ Quoted in William R. Bright, *Jesus and the Intellectual* (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publ., 1968), 33.

⁶ Quoted in Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 17.

⁷ Quoted in Michka Assayas, *Bono in Conversation* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), 203.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 26-28.

⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 160.

¹⁰ Ray C. Stedman, *God's Loving Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House, 1993), 50.

¹¹ Quoted in Assayas, 204.

¹² R. C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Lamplighter, 1982), 44.

¹³ C. S. Lewis, *The Best of C. S. Lewis* (Washington, DC: Canon, 1974), 343.

¹⁴ Lewis, 357.

¹⁵ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004).

¹⁶ John 3:16; Ephesians 1:3-11

¹⁷ Genesis 3:6,7; Romans 5:12; John 3:19

¹⁸ Romans 3:23; Isaiah 59:2

¹⁹ Romans 5:15-21; Romans 6:23; Titus 3:5-7

²⁰ Quoted in Assayas, 204.

²¹ Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus among Other Gods* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 158.

²² Martha T. Moore and Dennis Cauchon, "Delay Meant Death on 9/11," *USA Today*, Sept. 3, 2002, 1A.

²³ Charles W. Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Chosen, 1976), 114.

²⁴ Ravi Zacharias, *A Shattered Visage: The Real Face of Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 155.

²⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 56.

²⁶ Colson, 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

Return of the King

In J.R.R. Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, the mythical land of Gondor is overrun by the orcs of Mordor. Aragorn must realize his true identity and purpose as the King of Men, in order that the final battle against evil can be won.

The roots of Tolkien's plot of a returning king who destroys evil and restores peace to the world is taken from Jesus Christ's words spoken to his followers. On several occasions he had told them that he would return when the time was right. They expected it to be soon, but it has now been nearly 2,000 years since Jesus left the Earth. Jesus had a job for his followers to do before he returned.

Most Jews were bitterly disappointed by Jesus. The Messiah they wanted would conquer their enemies, and restore national prominence to Israel. The prophets had spoken of the Messiah as a coming king to rule over Israel's enemies. Five hundred years before Jesus was born the prophet Zechariah had written,

This is what the Lord Almighty says...I am returning to Mount Zion, and I will live in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the Faithful City; the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain. (Zechariah 8: 2a, 3, NLT)

After Jesus' resurrection, he spent 40 days with his disciples, teaching them what they would need to know to carry on his message in a hostile world. During this time he reiterated to them that he would someday return to set up his kingdom, just as the prophets had promised. What he didn't tell them was when. Jesus did say that although no man would know the day or the hour of his return, that there would be signs when that event was drawing near. One sign would be the return of the Jews to their homeland of Israel.

As Jesus left the Earth after those 40 days, he was lifted up into the clouds. As the disciples were gazing up at what must have been an incredible sight, some angels appeared and began speaking to them. They told the disciples,

Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring at the sky? Jesus has been taken away from you into heaven. And someday, just as you saw him go, he will return! (Acts 1:11, NLT)

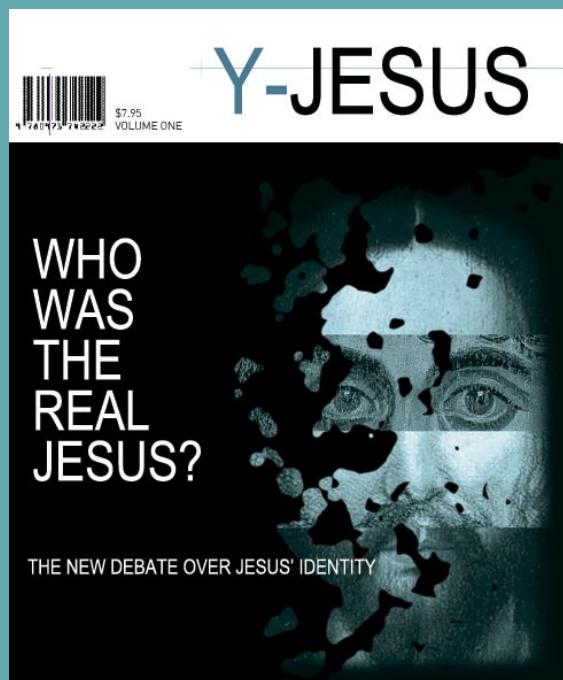
And, we are still waiting. Peter said that "in the last days" people would give up on the idea of Jesus returning. Yet, events in the world, particularly Jerusalem and the Middle East, seem to be moving towards a conclusion that only the Creator will be able to resolve. Scripture tells us that when the Jews see Jesus returning in the clouds, they will recognize their tragic mistake of rejecting him, and weep bitterly:

They will look on me whom they have pierced and mourn for him as for an only son. They will grieve bitterly for him as for a firstborn son who has died. (Zechariah 12:10, NLT)

In Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, the apostle John summarizes the cataclysmic events that will culminate in Jesus' return. Turmoil in Jerusalem will bring the world to the brink of destruction. The world will be hopeless without God's intervention.

Those who oppose Jesus at his return will be terrified. Those who have trusted in him will be looking for him with joy and anticipation. And, prior to his return, they will be taken up to meet him in the clouds. Are we nearing the day when the return of the real King will occur?

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