

**SOMETHING WORTH
SUFFERING FOR**



THE IDEAS THAT DRIVE
CROSSTREE MUSIC

CHAPTERS 1 & 2

Andrew Bibb

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Something Worth Suffering For: The Ideas That Drive Crosstree Music
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INTRODUCTION

Crosstree music is guitar-driven pop rock with an edge. This book is an explanation of what, or rather who, that “edge” is. It is the meaning behind the music. This book discusses explicitly what Crosstree music explores poetically. For free music and more information about Crosstree, visit crosstreemusic.com.

CHAPTER 1 – FAITH OF THE MARTYR

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. – Jesus¹

We are all destined to be martyrs because our destiny is not merely to experience joy while remaining the same person, not merely to fill our existing capacity for joy. Rather, it is to increase that capacity infinitely by a bursting of our seams, a shedding of our snakeskins, a transformation from caterpillars to butterflies. We are not just to imitate Christ but to “put on Christ,” to “be in Christ,” to “share in the divine nature.” – Dr. Peter Kreeft²

She stared death in the face and laughed.

Whips shredded her flesh. Sticks and fists pounded her skull and broke her bones. They attacked her violently from morning until evening without interruption. They did not have the energy to break her all at once, so they took turns. Even as the daylight began to fade, however, she had yet to give in.

This young, fragile slave girl had just undergone a series of tortures that would have broken many able-bodied warriors. She had run the gauntlet of pain and, so far, refused to be broken. But her assailants were only getting started.

Her name was Blandina. She was one of a group of believers in Jesus Christ who were oppressed for their faith in the second century A.D., in the part of the world that is now Lyons, France. She was physically the weakest of those chosen to suffer, so much so that her fellow believers feared that she would withdraw her public allegiance to Christ.³ As it turned out, she was the most resilient of them all. After her initial day of torture and a brief return to prison she was led alongside three other believers into an amphitheater.

As the others were savagely mutilated, Blandina was hung from a wooden stake as wild and starving lions were released into the arena. Instead of begging for mercy or cowering at her impending

¹ Matthew 5:10.

² Peter Kreeft, *Heaven: The Heart's Deepest Longing*, Kindle ed. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1989), 150.

³ John Behr, "Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom," in *The Role of Death in Life, A Multidisciplinary Examination of the Relationship between Life and Death* (James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2015), 80.

doom, Blandina asked God to strengthen her companions. Her only desire was that they remain faithful until the end, as she was committed to. Her display of uncommon courage fortified her fellow believers. They endured in their commitment to Christ until they were finally killed, proving that they possessed the purest kind of faith. Blandina, however, remained untouched by the lions. She was, for the second time and to the astonishment of her persecutors, returned to prison alive.

The following day Blandina was brought to the amphitheater again, this time alongside a fifteen-year-old boy named Ponticus. They were exposed, she for the third time, to a variety of sadistic tortures. They were repeatedly urged to renounce Christ by their assailants, who promised to end the suffering if they would only let him go.

One such torture was called the roasting seat. The victims were placed in an iron chair that was heated to extreme temperatures, scalding the flesh of its occupants. They faced many other tortures such as this, but yet again Blandina leveraged her strength of faith into encouragement for Ponticus, urging him to remain strong and embrace the end like a man. This he did, and Ponticus died clinging to Christ, whom he had come to love more than life itself.

The persecutors, frustrated that Blandina still lived, wrapped her in a net and threw her to a wild bull to be gorged and trampled to death. She was beaten and tossed mercilessly, but she survived even this. Finally giving up on death by torture, her disgruntled assailants were forced to end her life with the sword.⁴

Having spent some time as a combat arms soldier, I have had the opportunity to work and train with some very hard, tough men. Yet the feats of mental and physical endurance I have witnessed cannot compare to those of believers who epitomize toughness and tenacity under persecution. All of the trials and hardships that I have faced over the course of my entire life cannot compare to a moment of suffering that many of these believers have endured simply because of their reliance upon Christ.

Blandina and these other endurance athletes of the faith showed through their actions that they were convinced that Jesus is the savior he claimed to be. Outsiders could doubt the truth of their beliefs, but not their sincerity. Their faith was by no means perfect or complete. There were many theological and philosophical concepts they did not understand or even know about, but what they knew they practiced.

When it came down to it they knew what mattered. They had found something worth suffering for. But what was it? They had come to know someone worth dying for. But who is he? And what

⁴ John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. Harold J. Chadwick (Gainesville, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2001), 15.

about him made the suffering worth going through?

THE NATURE OF FAITH

To understand their faith, first we must understand that faith needs an object. Faith is, put simply, reliance on someone or something. Faith is depending on that someone or something in any or all aspects of our lives. To talk about faith apart from its object is nonsense, like leaning on thin air for support instead of a wall. That which we depend on is the object of our faith, so the quality of our faith is determined by the quality of the object in which it is placed.

Christ-centered faith, which is simply, “Reliance upon and trust in”⁵ him, is no different. It is dependence upon him in any and all aspects of our lives. Blandina and the others knew that Christ is absolutely reliable and so refused to disavow him.

But reliable for what? What was Jesus offering that these believers needed more than rescue from torture and death? What did they consider worth sacrificing everything else to gain? What did they really and truly desire? And is it what we desire too, maybe without even knowing it? To answer this, we must return to where it all started.⁶

When God created Adam and Eve, the first man and woman, he did not place them in a harsh environment, but a paradise. They had everything anyone could want: sustenance, companionship, purpose and peace. He did not deny them any of these, but gave them complete mastery over all they could see. Humankind was to be the executor of his will, the “steward-master of creation,”⁷ his image-bearing ambassadors, commissioned to expand his kingdom on earth. Most of all, Adam and Eve were to be the start of his human family, purposed to enjoy God and be enjoyed by him.⁸

God also planted two trees in the Garden: the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life, the physical representation of the “life-giving presence of God,”⁹ was not denied to them. They were free to enjoy life itself without limit. This is indicative of the very nature of God in that he held back no good thing for their pleasure. This truth shaped Adam and Eve’s entire consciousness at the beginning: God is our Father, he is good, he is the object and source of everything we desire. We need nothing else but what he provides and are free to enjoy his creation.

They did not gradually come to this conclusion but understood this truth from the beginning

⁵ Nijay K. Gupta, "Faith," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁶ Genesis 1-3.

⁷ Michael S. Heiser, “Image of God,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁸ Michael S. Heiser, *What Does God Want?*, Kindle ed. (Blind Spot Press, 2018), 9.

⁹ Enrique Baez, "Tree of Knowledge," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

because God's goodness was all they knew. They were capable of perfect obedience to their Father because they were entirely dependent on him. They did not view this dependency as a burden or imposition because they had no reason to distrust him. They were designed for that state of dependence and every good thing flowed from it. It allowed for uninterrupted intimacy with Love himself.¹⁰ What could be better?

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was, however, forbidden to the human couple. It seems that, as their reliance upon their Father seemed so natural and desirable, they initially felt no need for whatever knowledge this tree could bestow. It was not until Eve was presented with the idea of being her own god, independent of her Creator, that it caught her interest. She was promised insight and wisdom while at the same time the integrity and reliability of her Father were subtly called into question. She was being elevated in her own mind while her need for him became less and less significant.

Eve reached a point of decision to either reassert her inherent need for God or to rely instead on what she could control without him. She chose to pursue knowledge, which gave her the perception of independence. Adam, who was with her, made the same choice.

In eating of the tree Adam and Eve abandoned God as the object of their reliance and instead chose to depend on their own ingenuity. Rather than entrust their souls to their caring Father they, to paraphrase Dr. Louis Markos, selfishly chose to call their souls their own.¹¹ They "chose to cease being adjectives for the glory of God and to seek, instead, to be" their "own self-sufficient nouns."¹²

And thus, the fall of man was complete. Adam and Eve gained what was promised and became self-absorbed beings seemingly independent of God. Only then did they recognize the reality of their situation. The One they had just severed themselves from was the only thing they truly and deeply desired.

When they were fully dependent upon God there was no need to feel ashamed because his purity was theirs. There was no need to clothe themselves because they were clothed in his approval. There was no need for concern of any kind because they were provided for by the Creator.

This was no longer the case. There was nothing to rescue them from their self-imposed isolation from Love himself. And now "evil exists because people abuse God's wonderful gift of freedom and

¹⁰ "God is love," I John 4:8.

¹¹ Louis Markos, *Levi's Agonistes: How C.S. Lewis Can Train Us to Wrestle with the Modern and Post-Modern World*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2003), 102.

¹² Ibid.

use it for self-gratification, revenge, and the mirage of autonomy.”¹³

Dr. Markos explains the consequences of this decision:

Having rejected God’s higher laws, we immediately fell prey to the lower laws of nature originally created to control the animals. Our soul ceased to be the lord of our body and became its prisoner instead. As a result, our body fell sway to base and destructive appetites and to the suffering and pain that naturally ensue when our lusts are given the upper hand. Even our mind, once free of all phobias, fell sway to material, psychological forces. Without the soul to guide it, our body waxed rebellious and thus opened itself to natural decay. Our mind, on the other hand, unable to handle its own lusts and those of the body, began a long and tortured process of repression and denial which, in time, formed the unconscious mind.¹⁴

This is the state of man without a savior.

VANITY AND IDOLATRY

The capacity to enjoy God’s presence is the same capacity to feel the emptiness of his absence. Much like being away from someone you love, it is the memory of that lost connection that makes being apart miserable. It would be worse not to want their company at all. “Our best havings are wantings.”¹⁵ But, like a soldier who leaves his or her spouse to go to war, not knowing if there will be a reunion at the other end is the worst kind of separation.

Despite the passage of millennia since the incident in the Garden of Eden, we have not lost the craving to be with Love himself. We have been very creative at coming up with temporary distractions but these reprieves are short-lived and unsatisfactory at the deepest level. These distractions, whatever form they take, fail to deliver on their promises when it comes to satisfying our deepest yearnings. We were not made for them, and so they are inadequate. King Solomon discovered this the hard way:

I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces. I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, the delight of the sons of man. And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure... Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun.¹⁶

Many lives are spent dancing around and never discovering this universal truth. Our instincts have been corrupted to pursue these indulgences as necessities instead of what we really do need. Entire industries find their existence legitimized by providing apparent solutions to our problem of unfulfilled desire. That these solutions are always temporary works to their advantage because it keeps their clients

¹³ Heiser, 14.

¹⁴ Markos, 102.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis and Walter Hooper, Kindle ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017), 565.

¹⁶ Ecclesiastes 2:8, 10a, 11.

coming back for more.

Dr. Kreeft asserts “that our deepest failure” is:

...the failure to satisfy our deepest desire. To cover up our failure, we compensate with other successes: we feed the other animals. We have a wonderfully efficient animal-feeding machine: that prolific diversion factory, that endlessly self-perpetuating game we call our modern technological society. It keeps us too busy ever to hear our nightingale, for we hear that voice only in silence.¹⁷

This failure to recognize our Creator as the object of our desire is the true nature of idolatry, or idol-worship:

Idolatry in its larger meaning is properly understood as any substitution of what is created for the creator. People may worship nature, money, mankind, power, history, or social and political systems instead of the creator who created them all. The New Testament writers, in particular, recognized that the relationship need not be explicitly one of cultic worship; a man can place anyone or anything at the top of his pyramid of values, and that is ultimately what he serves.¹⁸

Whatever is at the top of one’s “pyramid of values” is what he or she relies upon for meaning, purpose, identity, and existential validation. This determines the whole direction of his or her life.

This substitution of cheap thrills for divine love as the object of our dependence is the essence of sin. The apostle Paul wrote that sin is “whatever does not proceed from faith.”¹⁹ The writer of Hebrews warns against having “an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God.”²⁰ Sin is not any singular, isolated act, but finds its origin in idolatry. It is the failure to entrust our deepest desires to the only one who can see them fulfilled.

This narcissistic tendency is the root of the problem of evil. Dr. Markos observes that:

...evil and suffering are not so much a punishment for disobedience as they are the natural outgrowth of our decision to call our souls our own. When we refused to live in direct communion with and full reliance upon the One who created us—when we chose to go our own way and to amass our own private happiness—we catapulted ourselves out of the eternal richness and harmony of the Garden and into a fragmented world of disharmony and decay in which time is always running down.²¹

Our inclination ever since declaring independence from the divine has been to replace fullness of happiness with lame excuses for pleasure.

¹⁷ Kreeft, 52.

¹⁸ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction: The Conflict of Christian Faith and American Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 6.

¹⁹ Romans 14:23.

²⁰ Hebrews 3:12.

²¹ Markos, 103.

FAITH AND WORSHIP

Jesus himself was tempted in the same way just before he began his teaching tour of Judea.²² The purpose for this was to prove whether he would make the same mistake as Adam and replace the Creator as the object of his dependence, or remain united with his Father despite what he would have to suffer if he did.

The author of I John writes that every desire that seeks to replace the pure desire of unity with God falls into one of three categories: desires of the flesh, desires of the eyes and pride of life.²³ It was with these same temptations that Jesus was confronted. But he did not consider union with his Father something to be bargained away. It was to be guarded at all costs. He succeeded where Adam failed and looked to his Father to be his source. He illustrated the truth that “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”²⁴

Despite his status as God-incarnate, Jesus had to resist the same self-destructive inclinations we experience and purposely guard his relationship with the Father. These inclinations, though when followed are completely unfulfilling in the long run, always seem necessary and logical at the time. Jesus, however, kept his true desire in mind rather than be distracted by fleeting ones. Not only was he fighting to protect his own relationship with the Father, he was safeguarding the only path for the rest of humanity to be reunited with him as well. Jesus continued to promote the Father’s will through suffering and death, until by his resurrection he became the way by which mankind may be reunited with the true object of our deepest desire, Love himself.

The difference between Jesus’ success and Adam’s failure was, in the end, a matter of reliance upon and trust in the will of the Father. Adam refused God’s guidance, and this led to separation from the only One able to offer true peace and satisfaction at the deepest levels. Jesus, despite temptations and trials, made his will subservient to God’s will and depended on the goodness of his Father to see him through.²⁵

In the same way, those like Blandina who suffer for Christ do so not out of conceit or stubbornness, but simply because they realize that anything worth having is found in him. They realize what Solomon did not until the end of his life, that nothing accomplished in this world means anything in the long run unless it is done through, for, and with him.²⁶

²² Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.

²³ I John 2:16.

²⁴ I John 2:17.

²⁵ John 8:28.

²⁶ Ecclesiastes 12:13.

In recognizing Christ as the only path to the satisfaction of our deepest longing, reunion with our loving Father, these believers give us a picture of the purest form of worship. Worship “expresses an awareness of God’s—and thus our—proper place in the order of things, and it also transforms us into what we were designed to be.”²⁷ The purest form of worship is to abandon oneself completely to his will, to rely on him utterly and without apology, and to present our “bodies as a living sacrifice.”²⁸ This gives him the opportunity to act as our provider and care for us as our Father. It is very easy to tell God how great, wonderful, loving, and powerful he is. It is a completely different matter to rely on those attributes.

Dr. Michael Heiser explains, “Worship is therefore not something that originates with us. We are *invited* to respond to God’s goodness and love.”²⁹ Love is who he is in his very essence, so to deny God the chance to come through for us, to rely instead on something or someone else to give purpose to our lives and define our identities, is the ultimate insult to him. When Adam and Eve lived in reliance on God’s goodness they worshiped him simply by recognizing their need for him and acting accordingly. Their worship ceased when they withdrew their trust.

THE DIGNITY OF CHOICE

So, why put the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden in the first place? It was the only way Adam and Eve could show their reliance on God.³⁰ In other words, if there were no Tree of Knowledge in the garden then man would have no choice but to fully rely on his Creator. The relationship would have been involuntary on man’s part, and thus imperfect. He would have no choice but to depend on God’s goodness. In allowing man to choose to trust him or not God created a mechanism by which the relationship could be voluntary for both parties. He gave man the dignity of choice.

Any fulfilling relationship is built on a foundation of trust, and the greater the trust the deeper the relationship. This is why people who have gone through difficult situations together, such as combat or shared loss, build a strong personal connection with one another. They have learned to depend upon each other. Realizing the other person’s reliability results in a deeper trust and, as a result, a deeper relationship. Depth of relationship is not a result of how much you know about someone, but

²⁷ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 30.

²⁸ Romans 12:1.

²⁹ Heiser, 84.

³⁰ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), 18.

how much you trust them and they you.

In putting the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden God posed a simple question to man: “Do you trust me?” It was a decision between man's reliance upon or independence from God. Mankind faces the same decision today.

When Adam and Eve replaced God as the object of their reliance mankind did not cease to desire him. “The fact is we still retain the knowledge that our proper good is to surrender to our Creator, even as we continue to refuse to offer that surrender.”³¹ The problem with the deep longing we feel to be reunited with divine love himself is that instances of its showing are sporadic, momentary, and not immediately identifiable. They are also unrepeatable, because they do not originate from us in the first place. Dr. Markos asks:

Have we not all experienced sudden moments of suspension during which our souls and minds are lifted up by a yearning for something other, something rich and strange, something (and this is the vital part) that our natural, merely human world cannot supply? What can possibly be the source of this yearning, this moment of joy? It certainly cannot be something from our own world since the very nature of the desire points the one experiencing it beyond the limits of the physical and the earthly. The desire must itself flow from a reality that transcends the physical, one that can act as a legitimate source and origin.³²

These deep-seated yearnings are referred to by the Psalmist as “desires of your heart.”³³ They are good because it is these deepest of desires that long for God. They are essential to our very being.

Self-destructive lusts, on the other hand, are God-given desires that have been twisted, perverted, and torn out of their proper contexts. These are “desires of the flesh.”³⁴ Everything that exists was created by God, which means that even things that are considered evil are perversions of things that God originally created as good. Our desires are no different, as “every desire we have has a legitimate satisfaction. God gave us no illegitimate desires. We make them illegitimate when we use them in the wrong ways.”³⁵

Whether we like it or not, desire is the driving force behind everything we do. Dr. Kreeft writes that “our deepest desires constitute ourselves, decide our identity. We are not only what we are but also what we want.”³⁶ Even those things we do not enjoy we do for the sake of our deeper desires. For example, no woman enjoys the process of childbirth but mothers are willing to endure it because

³¹ Markos, 104.

³² Ibid., 40.

³³ Psalm 37: 3, 4.

³⁴ I John 2:16.

³⁵ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 76.

³⁶ Kreeft, 44.

of their deeper desire for a child. A liberal arts major in college may not want to take that mandatory math class but does so for the sake of earning his or her diploma. So it is with the things we really want.

The problem of unfulfilled desire is at the center of every religious and philosophical system, and each one attempts to solve it differently. Josh and Sean McDowell observe:

Knowing that unfulfilled desire brings great misery, Eastern pantheistic religions see desire itself as evil. The essence of these religions is to get rid of all desire so that one no longer really wants anything. They hope to achieve a state in which they have absolutely no desire for anything at all, and only then can they step out of this evil existence and become one with their non-personal god and cease to exist as conscious individuals.³⁷

In contrast, the message of the gospel, or “the good news about salvation,”³⁸ is that through Christ we can return to the purity of these untainted desires and, through reliance on him, allow our Father to bring them to their fulfillment. Jesus “offers not merely a way to cope; he offers the real answers to our deepest longings.”³⁹ We are not expected to ignore our desires, but surrender them to the One who created them.

This is what the apostle Paul means when he asserts that “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”⁴⁰ To confess Jesus as Lord is to declare him “supreme master”⁴¹ over our entire being, including the desires we feel are impossible to satisfy. Paul was echoing Jesus who, when he was asked, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” replied, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.”⁴² Jesus summed up everything God wants from humanity into one idea: “Trust me.” Everything else flows from that.

Since evil desires are simply distortions of pure desires, the fulfillment of the pure desire kills the evil desire, as there is nothing left to pervert because the core desire is fulfilled. The more we come to understand ourselves the more we find that our absolute deepest desire, and the root of all others, is to be reunited with our Father. Even the heart of one who has not embraced faith yearns for the depth of affection that can only be offered by the Creator himself, even if he or she refuses to acknowledge it.

It is the willingness to embrace this reality that separates believers from those who reject Christ.

³⁷ McDowell and McDowell, 75.

³⁸ Heiser, 56.

³⁹ McDowell and McDowell, 114.

⁴⁰ Romans 10:9.

⁴¹ M.G. Easton, *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893), "Lord".

⁴² John 6:28-29.

It is through reliance on Christ that we become capable of reunion with God, and growth in faith leads to a more perfect ability to experience his love and share it with others. We grow in the realization that he, Love incarnate, was our desire all along. It is not impossible for anyone to receive God's goodness. We start out in the faith by relying on Christ. We grow in the faith by relying on him more.

It is the proper identification of this desire for reunion with God that produces a lifestyle of submission to him. If we realized just how much we want him we would not waste time with those things that we now, in our immature view of reality, think we want. This immature view leads to chasing things that we think fulfill our core desire but never do. The key is to identify and embrace this overwhelming need for intimacy with and approval by God. Through reliance on Jesus, we already have it. The more we grow in faith the more deeply we are aware of this truth and the more we begin to demonstrate it in the way we live.

POINTS OF CONNECTION

As a kid I loved anything that remotely resembled a sword or, even better, a Star Wars lightsaber. When I was four or five years old my dad and I were browsing the Wal-Mart toy section and we came across some cheap (but awesome) red, white and blue extendable plastic swords that looked like the candy-cane displays you see outside of barbershops. As a self-commissioned Jedi-in-training I had to have one. Our family was not financially well off at the time but Dad, seeing my excitement, bought two of them for us. When we got home we engaged in one of the most epic melee battles ever to take place on Fort Rucker, Alabama, and we met again on the field of battle on several occasions.

Dad could have seen those swords as objects of a little kid's petty greed or as a frivolous financial decision, but instead he saw my desire for them as a point of connection for us. It was a way for us to spend time together. In buying them for me he not only gave me what I wanted but also used them as a way to strengthen our relationship.

God, to an infinitely greater extent, sees our desires in the same way. Our deepest wants are the places where God can connect with us and we can come to know him experientially. It is where he can show how much he cares about us and where we can show our appreciation for him.

From that point of view it is easy to see why things such as pride, self-reliance, idolatry, fear and sin are so offensive to God. They rob him of the opportunity to show us how much he loves us. He wants to do this by fulfilling those desires that he put there in the first place, in his time and his way.

Since my experience with the barbershop-striped swords my desires have matured. At the time my focus was on the swords and the fighting. Now the swords are nowhere to be found but the

memory of time spent with my dad remains.

As we mature in faith we learn to stop getting hung up on the mundane goings-on of life, and instead we begin to approach all of life's happenings, whether good or bad, as opportunities to get to know our Father better. They become opportunities for us to rely on Christ and be surprised yet again by the intensity of his love. The desires of your heart are infinitely important to God. How important they are to you will determine how seriously you take your faith.

We should take care not confuse reliance with laziness. Even in the Garden of Eden Adam was commanded by God to develop and fill up the Earth. That was definitely work. The difference was in the desire to do it. God created Adam to want to do the things that God had in store for him to do. Adam probably worked as hard as any of us ever have but he enjoyed every second of it because he was doing what God had designed him to do, and he was doing it with his Father.

Because of Jesus this promise has been restored to us: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”⁴³ Dr. Heiser elaborates:

Our perspective is tainted by the flawed, damaged world we experience. But the Bible doesn't portray our final destiny as a boss-employee relationship. It's a father-child relationship. We, God's children, work with him alongside our siblings, whether human or divine. We image God together now the way we were intended to do. And the brother we all look up to most is Jesus. All of God's children have been made like him, the ultimate imager of our Father.⁴⁴

We have hard work to do as sons and daughters of God but it is fulfilling because it is what we were made to do.

What about the martyrs we discussed earlier? What about the desires of those who suffered and died for their faith? I am sure that most of them had no aspirations to die brutal deaths, yet that is where their commitment led them. Is this a blatant failure on God's part to provide for their desires?

I have no doubt that those who have died for their faith would rather be where they are now than anywhere on this earth. When a believer passes away only his body dies. His spirit goes to be with his Creator. Since pure desire is a thing of the spirit it does not die either. The desire goes with the spirit to him in whom all pure desires of the heart are fulfilled. King David, a man well acquainted with both the pleasures and pains of mortal life, confidently sang that in the Creator's presence “there is fullness of joy,” and at his “right hand are pleasures forevermore.”⁴⁵

C.S. Lewis echoes the psalmist in *The Great Divorce*, affirming, “I believe, to be sure, that any man

⁴³ Ephesians 2:10.

⁴⁴ Heiser, 49.

⁴⁵ Psalm 16:11.

who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned (even in plucking out his right eye) has not been lost: that the kernel of what he was really seeking even in his most depraved wishes will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for him in ‘the High Countries’.⁴⁶ I believe it is safe to say that desire-fulfillment is happening on a cosmic level for those believers who died depending on Christ.

Instead of seeing death as the end we should see it simply as a transition to a much sweeter state of life, a state where there is nothing opposing our intimacy with God and thus no impediment to the fulfillment of that deepest of desires. Like Paul, we should “consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”⁴⁷ True hope is found in viewing our lives here on earth through that lens.

ENDURANCE

Sociologist Rodney Stark recognizes, “The fundamental problem facing all religions is one of credibility. Ultimately, all religions require an act of faith—that adherents be willing to believe in a supernatural realm that is not directly observable.”⁴⁸ He also contends:

Of all the proofs and all of the testimonials, nothing approaches the credibility inherent in martyrdom. How could mere mortals remain defiant after being skinned and covered with salt? How could anyone keep the faith while being slowly roasted on a spit? Such performances seem virtually supernatural in and of themselves. And that was the effect they often had on the observers. Christian viewers could “see” that the hand of God was on the martyrs. Many pagans also were amazed: the distinguished physician Galen wrote of Christians that “their contempt of death...is patent to us every day.” Accounts of martyrdom make frequent mention of pagans having gained respect for the faith from having observed or even having taken part in, the torture of martyrs. The pagan onlookers knew full well that they would not endure such tribulations for their religion. Why would so many Christians do so? Were they missing something about this strange new faith? This sort of unease and wonderment often paved the way for new conversions.⁴⁹

Glenn Siniscalchi agrees:

Early [Christian] worship attracted outsiders because of the way in which it changed its adherents. Another reason why it spread so quickly had to do with the adversarial encounter of other religions which drove and shaped the movement. Martyrdom was ‘the most vivid form in which devotion to Jesus was expressed in the earliest centuries’. Dying for one’s beliefs indicated to the public on a large scale that some Christians were willing to go to any length of penalty to remain faithful

⁴⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 2002), 466.

⁴⁷ Romans 8:18.

⁴⁸ Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World’s Largest Religion*, Kindle ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2011), 150.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 151.

followers of Jesus. Of course, this made outsiders curious and attracted them to investigate the new Christian heresy.⁵⁰

This pattern of persecution resulting in the numerical growth of believers persists. Philosopher and theologian Dr. William Lane Craig observes, “A reading of a missions handbook such as Patrick Johnstone’s *Operation World* reveals that it is precisely in countries that have endured severe hardship that Christianity is growing at its greatest rates, while growth curves in the indulgent West are nearly flat.”⁵¹

No evidence of the truth of Christ’s divinity is more compelling than those believers who appear weak but endure hardship past the point of physical breaking. They believe and are evidence of the fact that Christ can be relied upon for strength, peace, and purpose, even in the darkest and most hopeless of circumstances. In fact, they are so convinced of his love that they embrace this suffering, knowing that only inexplicable joy awaits them on the other side of death. Even the most skeptical critic must admit that the conduct of these believers makes a convincing case for the truth they profess. As former U.S. Secretary of State Lewis Cass is credited with saying, “People may doubt what you say, but they will believe what you do.”

The key to understanding these believers’ actions is to recognize, as Dr. Craig explains, that “to know God, the locus of infinite goodness and love, is an incomparable good, the fulfillment of human existence. The sufferings of this life cannot even be compared to it. Thus, the person who knows God, no matter what he suffers, no matter how awful his pain, can still truly say, ‘God is good to me!’ simply by virtue of the fact that he knows God, an incommensurable good.”⁵²

This endurance is the quality that separates those who really believe from those who try to fake faith. Endurance comes through the deliberate practice of reliance on Christ. Jesus placed a much greater emphasis on the endurance of one’s faith than its sophistication and equated spiritual depth to one’s ability to endure. For example, in the parable of the sower Jesus makes a clear distinction between the stalk of wheat that sprouts immediately and the one that takes its time to grow its roots down deep before producing grain.⁵³ The one that springs up quickly dies quickly, but the one that takes its time produces exponentially and lasts long enough to be an asset.

Dr. Larry Arnn observes, “We know from the classic authors that the meaning and purpose of

⁵⁰ Glenn Siniscalchi, "Early Christian Worship and the Historical Argument for Jesus' Resurrection," *New Blackfriars* 93, no. 1048 (2012): 724-5, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2011.01447.x>.

⁵¹ William Lane Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, Kindle ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010), 163.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 167.

⁵³ Mark 4.

peoples,” such as those who call themselves followers of Jesus, “are revealed when they are in motion, under stress...We see what they value to the point of perishing...We do not learn the whole story until they come to the testing point.”⁵⁴ Establishing what we are willing to die for determines how we will live. It is also a great way of determining what really matters from what does not. Dr. Metzger shares that, for him, a “good way to separate essentials from nonessentials is to ask myself, ‘What hill am I willing to die on?’”⁵⁵

Most of us in the West are not planning on being killed for our beliefs. The harshest persecution most of us will probably ever face is criticism from people whose opinions do not even really matter all that much to begin with. But the question of whether our faith is sure enough to withstand hostility, physical or otherwise, is still relevant.

For many of us the answer is an honest “no,” and that is okay. It just means we are still growing to accept the reality of Christ, who he is, and what he has done. That being said, we need to develop past that, both individually and as a body of believers. If our faith is not solid enough to endure to the point of death then it is not yet solid enough to carry us through the life he wants us to live.

ROOM TO GROW

Stark points out that from “the earliest days through the present, accounts of the persecutions focus on the martyrs, on those who displayed extraordinary courage to stand firmly in their Christian commitment through the most abominable tortures.” However, we also know “that very substantial numbers of Christians denied or renounced their faith when faced with such ordeals.”⁵⁶

Even Jesus’ disciples started out as weak in faith. When Jesus was going through the most difficult time of his life they all ran away. Not a single one had enough confidence in him to stick with him through his trial and crucifixion. At one point or another all of them either hid in the crowd or left completely, with only John standing by him at the end.

By the end of their lives, however, they had become so convinced of the reliability of Christ that every one, except for Judas, was willing to die for him. Their persecutors were unsuccessful at breaking their fully established faith, so much so that “rather than destroy the church or even retard its growth, Roman persecutions probably sped the rise of Christianity as the fortitude of the martyrs amazed and

⁵⁴ Larry P. Arnn, *Churchill's Trial: Winston Churchill and the Salvation of Free Government*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2015), xx.

⁵⁵ Paul Louis Metzger, *Connecting Christ: How to Discuss Jesus in a World of Diverse Paths*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 13.

⁵⁶ Stark, 147.

deeply impressed many wavering pagans.”⁵⁷ Even of those who “had lacked the courage needed to stand firm, the overwhelming majority wanted to regain the kingdom and asked to be readmitted.”⁵⁸

What was the difference between the men those disciples once were, the men who tucked tail and ran at the first sign of danger, and the men they became, refusing to be broken by any amount of pain and suffering? The answer can be found in the writings of one of these men. The apostle Peter encourages his fellow believers that the trials they encounter are necessary “so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ The reality of Christ’s promise to return for them and the eternal perspective that it brings made all the difference to his disciples.

Even the most insignificant trial that we go through can be used as an opportunity to exercise our faith. Dr. Craig observes, “Innocent human suffering provides an occasion for deeper dependency and trust in God, either on the part of the sufferer or those around him. Of course, whether God’s purpose is achieved through our suffering will depend on our response. Do we respond with anger and bitterness toward God, or do we turn to Him in faith for strength to endure?”⁶⁰

Many believers throughout history failed before they succeeded. Faninus, a follower of Jesus in 14th century Italy, was brought to faith by reading “godly books” translated into his native Italian tongue. Eventually, Faninus was arrested and imprisoned for proclaiming Christ in a way that did not please the religious powers of the day. Due to repeated badgering from family and friends during his imprisonment he recanted his faith and was released. But his conscience would not let him rest and his own heart convicted him of his failure to rely on Christ.

He returned to what he knew to be the true faith, this time with increased dedication, and did everything he could to convince others of the reliability of Christ. As a result, he was again imprisoned. His captors expected him to break under pressure as he had before and they again pressured him to deny his faith.

This time, however, Faninus was ready. He refused to be broken again. When his accusers asked him who would take care of his family if he died, Faninus replied that they had been given to a trustee to take care of. When asked who this trustee was, he replied, “The Lord Jesus Christ...a faithful

⁵⁷ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁹ I Peter 1: 6, 7.

⁶⁰ Craig, 163.

keeper, and a conserver of all that is committed to him.”⁶¹

When the time for his execution came, Faninus appeared especially cheerful about his fate. One who noticed his positivity asked how he could be so relaxed when even Jesus sweat drops of blood before he died. Faninus replied that Christ “sustained in his body all the sorrows, and conflicts with hell and death, due unto us” and by his “suffering we are delivered from sorrow and fear of them all.”⁶² He then met his fate contentedly, being hung and then burned for his loyalty.

Faninus started out on his journey of faith the same way all of us do: weak, fragile, and unsure. When confronted with the test of pain and death his faith crumbled under the pressure. It was at this point that a decision had to be made: to continue on this path of indecisive weakness or to embrace his need for a Savior and determine whether or not he really believed what he said he did. He chose the latter, and when the second opportunity came for him to prove his faith he remained true to the end.

An important distinction needs to be made here: endurance does not produce faith. Faith produces endurance. All of us go through trials but not all of us rely on Christ. What trials do is show us where our faith is placed, whether in Christ or somewhere else, while at the same time providing perspective as to what matters and what does not. There is only one way to build faith: “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”⁶³

This is not difficult to understand. We build trust in Christ the same way we build trust in other people. When someone gives you a promise and you act as though they are going to do what they said, you have put your faith in them. Their word, supported by their reputation and your first-hand knowledge of them, is the source of your faith in them.

In the same way, the reports of believers who have gone before us and our own encounters with Christ act as the catalyst for our reliance on him as our savior. The starting point, though, are the accounts of those who actually saw, interacted with, and knew Jesus while he was on the earth. Levering writes, “The handing on of Christian tradition is always an interaction with those who saw, heard and touched Jesus, and thus with those whom Jesus specially chose, as his apostles, to communicate what they had seen, heard and touched.”⁶⁴ This first-person, eyewitness “testimony to Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels as the consummation of the whole of Israel’s Scriptures, means that

⁶¹ John Foxe, "Martyrs in Italy," accessed August 22, 2016. <http://www.exclassics.com/foxe/foxe161.htm>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Romans 10:17.

⁶⁴ Matthew Levering, "Historical Memory and the Resurrection of Jesus: Encountering the Risen Christ," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 20, no. 2 (2018): 160-1, accessed May 12, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/ijst.12273>.

we have access to him through his disciples and apostles, chosen from among the people of Israel.”⁶⁵

CHAPTER 2 - LIARS MAKE BAD MARTYRS

*Where messianic movements tried to carry on after the death of their would-be Messiah, their most important task was to find another Messiah. The fact that the early Christians did not do that, but continued, against all precedent, to regard Jesus himself as Messiah, despite outstanding alternative candidates...is evidence that demands an explanation. – N.T. Wright*⁶⁶

*I believe only the histories, whose witnesses got themselves killed. – Blaise Pascal*⁶⁷

The truth or falsehood of everything discussed to this point hinges upon the answer to this question: Is Jesus really the savior that Blandina, Faninus, and their fellow believers throughout history thought he was? If he is not, then he is simply one in a long line of failed messianic figures. If he is, however, then he is the very center and fulfillment of history itself.

Knowing the truth “allows us to cooperate with reality, whether spiritual or physical, and tap into its power.”⁶⁸ It is our responsibility as rational beings to search for this “truth that concurs with reality.”⁶⁹ Dr. Kreeft calls truth the “first of the human needs” because “the only good and honest reasons for faith in anything is the thing’s truth,”⁷⁰ or its “conformity to reality.”⁷¹ The McDowells rightly argue, “If we use reason and insist on evidence when we approach the daily decisions of our lives, why should we discard these tools when it comes to our religious convictions? We absolutely should not! In fact, given the stakes, we should be even more careful in making our religious decisions.”⁷²

Many competent scholars and thinkers over the last two millennia have undertaken to determine whether and how we can know the truth about Jesus’ identity and actions. Stark contends that “the major result of the many unrelenting scholarly attacks on the historical reliability of the New

⁶⁵ Ibid., 185.

⁶⁶ N. T. Wright, "Jesus' Resurrection and Christian Origins," *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 16, no. 1 (2008): 45, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://search-informit-com-au.ezproxy.liberty.edu/documentSummary;dn=308419608069881;res=IELHSS>.

⁶⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pascal's Pensées*, Kindle ed. (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1958), 141.

⁶⁸ McDowell and McDowell, 32.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁷⁰ Peter Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, Kindle ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), 99.

⁷¹ Ibid., 100.

⁷² McDowell and McDowell, 111.

Testament has been to frustrate the attackers because again and again scripture has stood up to their challenges.”⁷³ He concludes “that the Gospels are a quite reliable report of the Christ story *as it was believed and told* by the original eyewitnesses—members of what is now known as the Jesus Movement.”⁷⁴

When Jesus himself was asked to provide a sign that he was the prophesied savior of humanity, he replied “no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”⁷⁵ Jesus himself established his death, burial, and resurrection as the standard by which his divinity could be determined.

The apostle Paul also places the resurrection of Jesus at the center of the believer’s universe, emphasizing that “if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” If Jesus never rose, “your faith is futile and you are still in your sin,” and, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”⁷⁶ Without that one historical event Christianity is pointless. Paul goes as far as to advise that, if the resurrection never happened, we should just give up on finding any meaning in this life and to “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”⁷⁷

There has been a sustained attempt over the last few centuries to strip the Christian story of any of its supernatural elements. But just as faith without an object is nothing, so is Christianity without the deity of Christ, as confirmed by his resurrection. During the time of the first Christians, “That transcendence and distinctness of the deity which some Christians now want to remove from Christianity, was really the only reason why any one wanted to be a Christian.”⁷⁸

According to Paul, though, we do not live in a Christ-less, resurrection-less reality because “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.” This is the critical truth for the believer because, if Christ lives, then he is “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”⁷⁹

This is the vital issue. If Jesus’ resurrection occurred then he has shown himself to be the savior Blandina and Faninus believed him to be, and their sacrifices were well worth the reward. Even most

⁷³ Stark, 55.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁵ Matthew 12:39, 40; Luke 11:29.

⁷⁶ I Corinthians 1:14, 17, 19.

⁷⁷ I Corinthians 15:32.

⁷⁸ G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Kindle ed. (London: William Clowes and Sons, Ltd., 1908), 59.

⁷⁹ I Corinthians 15:20-22.

“critical scholars, whether conservative or liberal, agree that the resurrection is the key to the Christian faith.”⁸⁰ In fact, the “resurrection was the catalyst in the early recognition of Jesus’ deity.”⁸¹ So how can we know in the 21st century whether this 1st century resurrection in fact occurred?

First, we should define the term itself. To claim that Jesus was resurrected is not to say that he lived on in the hearts of his followers metaphorically, nor is it to say he escaped death entirely or became a ghost. According to New Testament scholar N.T. Wright, the term resurrection in paganism, Judaism, and early Christianity referred not to a disembodied existence, but “the reversal, the undoing, the conquest of death and its effects.”⁸² Bishop Robert Barron describes resurrection as “not a repudiation of the body but a justification, transformation, and elevation of the body to a new and higher pitch of existence.”⁸³ The claim is that Jesus was physically dead and then was raised to life in every sense of the term, including physically.

THE RESURRECTION CREED

Philosopher Dr. Gary Habermas has researched the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus since the 1970s. He experienced his own doubts, almost became a Buddhist, and concluded that if the resurrection of Christ proved to be the most plausible explanation of the historical evidence accepted by virtually all scholars in relevant fields of expertise then believers have good historical reason to believe in his divinity and identity as savior.⁸⁴ If not, then faith in Christ should be abandoned for a more accurate view of reality. The more he studied, however, the more Dr. Habermas was convinced that the resurrection did in fact occur, even based on only the data accepted by credentialed, even skeptical, scholars.

The primary, though far from only, text supporting the historicity of Christ’s resurrection is I Corinthians 15:3-8. According to Dr. Habermas, it “is taken to be the strongest evidence for the historicity of” Jesus’ bodily resurrection. Written by the apostle Paul in a letter to the church at Corinth, it reads:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then

⁸⁰ Gary R. Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), viii.

⁸¹ Gary R. Habermas, *Evidential Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 119.

⁸² Wright, 42.

⁸³ Robert Barron, *Did Jesus Really Rise from the Dead?*, 7, accessed April 8, 2018, <https://www.wordonfire.org/wof-site/media/did-jesus-really-rise-from-the-dead.pdf>.

⁸⁴ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 26-7.

he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Except for the last line, this material is not original to Paul. According to Dr. Habermas:

Virtually all scholars agree that 1 Corinthians 15:3ff. records an ancient oral tradition(s) that reports the Gospel data: Jesus Christ's atoning death, burial, resurrection, and appearances to many persons. Although the apostle Paul wrote the passage, it is not his material, but is actually much older than the book where it is recounted...Most scholars who provide a date think that Paul received this credal tradition between two and eight years after Jesus's death, or from approximately A.D. 32 to 38.⁸⁵

He concludes that this passage "presents the foundation for a discussion of Jesus's resurrection. This proclamation connects a clear presentation of the earliest Christian claims with those who were present and experienced these events."⁸⁶

Dr. Craig agrees that "the belief in Jesus' resurrection was universal in the early church. The tradition that Paul cites in 1 Corinthians 15:3-7...shows that this understanding of the Gospel goes all the way back to the very beginning of the church in Jerusalem."⁸⁷ The essential claims it makes "can be traced back so close to the time of Christ's death that legendary development is impossible."⁸⁸ In fact "the very origin of the Christian faith depends on the belief of the earliest disciples that God had raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead."⁸⁹

Dr. Larry Hurtado observes, "Perhaps within only a few days or weeks of his crucifixion, Jesus' followers were circulating the astonishing claim that God had raised him from death and had installed him in heavenly glory as Messiah and the appointed vehicle of redemption."⁹⁰ Jesus' burial, death, and resurrection are asserted so soon after the events themselves that they could not possibly be embellishments or mythologizing on the part of later Christians.

Dr. Hurtado affirms that "the origins of the worship of Jesus are so early that practically any evolutionary approach is rendered invalid as historical explanation." Instead, "What we have suggested in the evidence is a more explosively quick phenomenon, a religious development that was more like a volcanic eruption."⁹¹ The centrality of Jesus' resurrection to "early Christian belief" serves as "a helpful indicator of its truth. The resurrection being the pivotal doctrine led to increased amounts of

⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁸⁷ William Lane Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Kindle ed. (Pine Mountain, Georgia: Impact 360 Institute), 481.

⁸⁸ McDowell and McDowell, 173.

⁸⁹ Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 242.

⁹⁰ Larry W. Hurtado, *How on Earth Did Jesus Become a God?: Historical Questions About Earliest Devotion to Jesus*, Kindle ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), Loc. 94.

⁹¹ Ibid., Loc. 301.

attention, with investigations by the earliest witnesses increasing their faith rather than revealing any obstacles.”⁹²

The significance of the Resurrection Creed of I Corinthians lies in both its near historical proximity to the events it describes and the explicit, verifiable claims it makes. It invites, rather than avoids, skeptical inquiry. For example, “when the disciples were going around preaching the good news about Jesus’ resurrection, no one produced His dead body, which would have spelled the end of Christianity at its very inception.”⁹³

Dr. Craig notes, “One of the most remarkable facts about the early Christian belief in Jesus’ resurrection was that it flourished in the very city where Jesus had been publicly crucified. So long as the people of Jerusalem thought that Jesus’ body was in the tomb, few would have been prepared to believe such nonsense as that Jesus had been raised from the dead.”⁹⁴ Consequently, “The city of Jerusalem is the last place the disciples should have preached the gospel message”⁹⁵ if they had been lying or misinformed. On top of this, the “enemies of the Christian movement were prepared to challenge any over-zealous disciple who might have desired to exaggerate the story to make it sound more appealing.”⁹⁶

In broadcasting that most of the five hundred who had seen the risen Jesus were still alive at the time of his writing, Paul invites investigation. He “would not have said this if the event had not occurred. He wouldn’t have challenged people to talk to the eyewitnesses if the event had never taken place and there were no eyewitnesses. But evidently there were witnesses to this event, and Paul knew that some of them had died in the interim. Therefore, the event must have taken place.”⁹⁷

The inclusion of James, Jesus’ half-brother, in the list of those Jesus appeared to is especially important. “Critical scholars almost always acknowledge that James, the brother of Jesus, was also an unbeliever and perhaps even a skeptic during Jesus’s public ministry.” After Jesus’ death and alleged resurrection, however, “we find James as the leader of the Jerusalem church.” This radical change in James’ attitude towards Jesus’ message indicates that “a major event” occurred. Because of his radical transformation, Dr. Craig asserts that “James’ conversion is one of the surest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁹⁸

⁹² Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 111.

⁹³ Jeff Morrow, *Jesus’ Resurrection: A Jewish Convert Examines the Evidence*, Kindle ed. (2015), 424.

⁹⁴ Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 221.

⁹⁵ Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 111.

⁹⁶ McDowell and McDowell, 147.

⁹⁷ Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Loc. 314.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Loc. 348.

Finally, Paul himself saw the resurrected Jesus. This “is established beyond doubt by Paul’s references to it in his own letters.”⁹⁹ For Dr. Craig, “Paul’s testimony makes it historically certain that various individuals and groups of people experienced appearances of Jesus after His death and burial.”¹⁰⁰

A notable characteristic of eyewitness reports of Jesus’ resurrection is how coherent and unimaginative their accounts are. “James Charlesworth points out that, ‘The New Testament authors are under careful control when they describe Jesus’ resurrection. There is none of the unbridled speculation of the authors in’ later second and third-hand accounts.”¹⁰¹

These are only examples of the wealth of evidential knowledge scholars are able to glean from this passage and others like it. Because of these, Dr. Craig concludes, “The evidence firmly establishes that on separate occasions, different individuals and groups had experiences of seeing Jesus alive from the dead. Scarcely any historical scholar today disputes this conclusion.”¹⁰²

ACTIONS SPEAK

True belief is exemplified by what one does rather than says. What we practice, not what we preach, “is usually our great contribution to the conversion of others.”¹⁰³ We know about the resurrection of Christ primarily through the eyewitness testimony of those who were there at the time, and it was on this basis that they “could believe that Jesus was the Messiah.”¹⁰⁴ If we can determine that they acted in a way consistent with their assertion that Jesus died and rose again, thus certifying his messianic claims, then we can plausibly conclude that Jesus is who he said he was and can be relied upon for what he promised.

Dr. Sean McDowell shows that, while scholars can show with strong historical probability that at least some of the disciples died for their belief in the resurrection of Jesus, there is no doubt that they were all at least willing to.¹⁰⁵ He concedes that “there are many martyrs outside Christianity” and does not “claim that only Christians have martyrs.” But there “is a massive difference between willingly dying for the sake of the religious ideas accepted from the testimony of others” and “willingly dying

⁹⁹ Ibid., 356.

¹⁰⁰ Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 236.

¹⁰¹ Morrow, Loc. 328.

¹⁰² Craig, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*, Loc. 386.

¹⁰³ Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 571.

¹⁰⁴ Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 242.

¹⁰⁵ Sean McDowell, *The Fate of the Apostles: Examining the Martyrdom Accounts of the Closest Followers of Jesus* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2015).

for the proclamation of a faith based on one's own eyewitness account."¹⁰⁶

Modern "martyrs die for what they sincerely believe is true, but their knowledge comes second-hand."¹⁰⁷ In contrast, "The disciples went to the grave with the conviction that they had seen the risen Jesus." For that reason, "It is more than fair to conclude that we can trust their testimony."¹⁰⁸

Dr. Jeff Morrow agrees: "Jesus' apostles were executed for their belief in Jesus' resurrection. People die all the time for things that are not true, but no one dies for something they know is not true...Sometimes even when they believe something, they recant under torture and threat of death. But no one endures torture or willingly goes to the death for something they know is false."¹⁰⁹

This point is all the more relevant because, as we saw in the previous chapter, the disciples were not predisposed to acts of courage. When Jesus was arrested, they ran away. They "showed signs of craven cowardice and hid themselves. Peter even denied that he knew Christ."¹¹⁰ When Jesus died, they returned to their old lives and gave no thought to trying to carry on without him.¹¹¹ That all changed when they encountered him alive after he had been dead and buried.

Dr. Habermas explains:

The transformation of the witnesses, even to the point of being willing to die for their faith, is an additional indicator of the strength of their convictions that they had seen their risen Lord. It is true that people are often transformed for false causes that they also believe in, but there is a qualitative difference. Both the disciples and the others who are willing to die share a sincere belief. But very much unlike the others, the disciples were willing to suffer not just for their belief concerning who Jesus was, but precisely because they had seen him after his death. In brief, their transformation was not simply on beliefs about Jesus, like so many others, but on the knowledge that they had seen him alive after his resurrection.¹¹²

In short, their transformation "could only have occurred because of something like the resurrection."¹¹³

The apostles were not unaware of the dangers that proclaiming the resurrection message entailed. "Persecution against the first Christians...was sporadic and local," but "there is evidence that the public proclamation of the faith could be costly." Despite this, "The apostles publicly proclaimed the resurrection of a crucified criminal with full awareness of what their actions might cost them," even

¹⁰⁶ Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, Kindle ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 366.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 365.

¹⁰⁸ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Morrow, Loc. 415.

¹¹⁰ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 188.

¹¹¹ John 21.

¹¹² Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 111.

¹¹³ Morrow, Loc. 432.

before the “first statewide persecution of Christians” under Nero in A.D. 64.¹¹⁴

In addition to physical persecution, the disciples and early Christians suffered subtler forms of mistreatment. Dr. Hurtado observes, “It is fairly clear that a good many Christians did face the possibility of paying social costs for their faith, ranging from ridicule to much more painful opposition, whether from family members or wider social circles. And some Christians did find that their faith even led to trouble with the political authorities (usually local authorities).”¹¹⁵

Josh and Sean McDowell point out that the first generation of believers had everything to lose and nothing to gain by fabricating a false story about Jesus’ resurrection:

Had there been visible benefits accruing to them from their efforts—such as prestige, wealth, or increased social status—we might logically account for their actions. As a reward, however, for their wholehearted and total allegiance to the risen Christ, these early Christians were beaten, stoned to death, thrown to the lions, tortured, crucified and subjected to every conceivable method of stopping them from talking. Yet they were the most peaceful men and women, who continually demonstrated love and never forced their beliefs on anyone. Rather they laid down their very lives as the ultimate proof of their complete confidence in the truth of their message.¹¹⁶

This behavior only makes sense in light of the resurrection of Christ and his promise of the same resurrection for those who rely on him.

OBJECTIONS

Truth loves a competitor. It is the best way of showing itself to be true. The best way to tell whether a thing is authentic is to examine it side-by-side with a fake. Contrast and comparison, not isolation, emphasize the unique features of an object, idea, or hypothesis.

This holds true with the events surrounding Jesus’ resurrection. Those who insist on explaining the disciples’ behavior in some way that does not involve Jesus’ resurrection have yet to propose a coherent and feasible explanation. One of the alternate theories proposed supposes that the eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection were hallucinating and only thought they saw him. This is unlikely, as Dr. Morrow explains:

If you are having a hallucination...you are seeing something that is not actually there. This means that the hallucination is coming from your mind, i.e., is private and personal. No two people will see the exact same hallucination...[E]ven in instances where people are gathered together and all hallucinate because of a shared experience (e.g., from drugs or sleep deprivation, etc.), they will not see the exact same thing...But what we find in the Gospel accounts are visions of the risen Jesus where he appears to people who do not expect to see Him, and yet they all have the same

¹¹⁴ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*, 362.

¹¹⁵ Hurtado, Loc. 123.

¹¹⁶ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 232.

experiences when they are gathered together. The accounts do not read the way hallucination experiences would read.”¹¹⁷

Even if they had hallucinated, “Hallucinations simply do not cause new beliefs in sane, rational people.”¹¹⁸

Another theory supposes that Jesus did not actually die, but was only unconscious when he was brought down from the cross. He then escaped the tomb and showed himself to his disciples. The McDowells write of this theory, “To claim that Jesus survived the rigors of crucifixion and then convinced his disciples that he was Lord of life...would be a greater miracle than the resurrection itself.”¹¹⁹

Regarding this hypothesis, Dr. Habermas explains, “If he had shown himself to his followers a few days after the crucifixion, as the early sources indicate, he would have been in horrible physical condition: bruised, beaten, bloody, pale, limping, and in obvious need of medical assistance. But such a condition would have disallowed the view that he had been raised from the dead in a resurrected body.”¹²⁰

The disciples and their contemporaries were pre-scientific, but not pre-common sense. “They had eyes that saw, and they used them quite well.”¹²¹ They knew the difference between a hallucination, a suffering survivor of a botched crucifixion, and the supernaturally resurrected Christ.

As observant Jews, they were also raised never to “bear false witness.”¹²² This was especially important in the days before forensic science, fingerprinting, and DNA evidence. Honesty among witnesses, as well as the penalty for lying in such courts of law as the disciples were compelled to testify in, was essential in determining the truth of legal claims. The words and actions of the disciples under these conditions were those of honest, sane, and rational people who affirmed only what they knew to be true.

Most who discount the possibility of Jesus’ resurrection do so because they refuse to believe miracles that are possible at all. Dr. Markos points out, however, “Believing in miracles does *not* mean believing that $2 + 2 = 5$. It means believing that there is a supernatural being (or at least force) in the universe that is capable of intervening in human events, suspending the laws of nature, and

¹¹⁷ Morrow, Loc. 308, 17.

¹¹⁸ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 210.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹²⁰ Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 108.

¹²¹ Markos, 76.

¹²² Exodus 20:16.

consequently altering the natural flow of cause and effect.”¹²³

Because they are exceptions to usual natural processes, miracles exist outside of the realm of scientific investigation, but they are not irrational. Dr. Craig asserts, “Miracles are impossible only if it is assumed that God does not exist. Short of an absolute proof of atheism, one has to be open to the possibility that God has intervened directly in the world and thus also to evidence that he has done so.”¹²⁴

Given this, the McDowells determine, “Only one conclusion takes into account all the facts and does not adjust them to preconceived notions. It is the conclusion that Christ is in fact risen—a supernatural act of God in history.”¹²⁵ Dr. Craig also concludes, “Once you give up the prejudice against miracles, it’s hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts.”¹²⁶ Even though “the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are wondrous and awe-inspiring,” there is “no good reason to think them intrinsically improbable.”¹²⁷

Wright goes as far as to declare:

Were it not for the astounding, and world-view-challenging, claim that is thereby made, I think everyone would long since have concluded that [the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead] was the correct historical result. If some other account explained the rise of Christianity as naturally, completely, and satisfyingly as does the early Christians’ belief, while leaving normal worldviews intact, it would be accepted without demur.¹²⁸

The resurrection of Jesus, being the simplest, most cohesive, and most adequate explanation of the disciples’ behavior, “is to be preferred.”¹²⁹

The durability of the faith despite both external and internal challenges also serves as evidence of its truth. Soon after Jesus’ resurrection the apostles were arrested for spreading what the religious leaders saw as idolatrous claims of Jesus’ divinity. The apostles waited under guard while the Jewish ruling council, who “regarded this elevation of Jesus as completely inappropriate, even blasphemous,”¹³⁰ determined what do about them.

Gamaliel, a “prominent rabbi and leader of the Pharisees,”¹³¹ told his fellow councilmembers to

¹²³ Markos, 56.

¹²⁴ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 132.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹²⁶ Craig, *On Guard: Defending Your Faith with Reason and Precision*, 262.

¹²⁷ William Lane Craig, *A Classical Apologist’s Closing Remarks*, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 326.

¹²⁸ Wright, 49.

¹²⁹ Paul D. Feinberg, *Cumulative Case Apologetics*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry, Kindle ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000; repr., 2010), 155.

¹³⁰ Hurtado, Loc. 310.

¹³¹ John D. Barry et al., eds., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ac 5:34.

“take care what you are about to do with these men.” He recalled that other revolutionary figures had arisen in recent years, but once the leaders died so did the movements they started. He recommended that the council “keep away” from the apostles and “let them alone, for if this plan or this undertaking is of man, it will fail.”

Gamaliel also warned that if the message the apostles preached “was of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!”¹³² Obviously Gamaliel saw the circumstances surrounding the birth of Christianity as being so inhospitable that for it not to fail would constitute an absolute miracle. As we can clearly see two thousand years later, it did not fail.

It was the apostles’ willingness to suffer for what they knew to be true that set the example for future generations of believers:

From [an] ancient letter of Pliny the Younger, we learn that the Christians would rather die than worship and bow down to any of the multitude of gods in the Roman pantheon, or to an image of the emperor himself...Something powerfully attractive must have resonated with outsiders, making early Christianity attractive, enough to the point where thousands were willing to suffer the negative consequences and sometimes die for the cause of Jesus.¹³³

These future generations served only to strengthen the case for the resurrection because they affirmed the testimony of the apostles with their lives. A “few were beheaded, that being regarded as the humane sentence, but the rest were put through such an amazing array of tortures that it seems beyond credibility that anyone persisted—especially since most could have escaped at any point along the way simply by defecting. But again and again they bore it all.”¹³⁴ These martyrs “make sense only in light of the Resurrection.”¹³⁵

THE ETHICS OF MARTYRDOM

G.K. Chesterton examines the strange connection between Christianity and martyrdom:

Christianity has shown a wild encouragement of the martyr. Historic Christianity was accused, not entirely without reason, of carrying martyrdom and asceticism to a point, desolate and pessimistic. The early Christian martyrs talked of death with a horrible happiness. They blasphemed the beautiful duties of the body: they smelt the grave afar off like a field of flowers. All this has seemed to many the very poetry of pessimism.¹³⁶

The very strangeness of this relationship has proven both fascinating and revolting to non-believers.

Some have tried to write off the sacrifice of believing martyrs as the product of mental disorder

¹³² Acts 5:17-39.

¹³³ Siniscalchi, 725-6.

¹³⁴ Stark, 147.

¹³⁵ Barron, 13.

¹³⁶ Chesterton, 55.

or religious fanaticism. To be sure, there have been some unhealthy ideas about martyrdom that “did in some cases lead to excesses: confessors receiving an exalted, priestly type status; lapsed Christians seeking forgiveness through voluntary martyrdom; and the rise of a cult of martyrs.”¹³⁷ These are distortions of genuine martyrdom.

Edward Smither explains:

The word *martyr* (*martus*) literally means ‘a witness’ while the verbal form (*martureō*) refers to the action of witnessing. In much of the New Testament, the term is used to describe eyewitnesses of Christ; however, in Revelation 2:13, John begins to use it to distinguish those that have witnessed unto Christ by giving their lives...this was how the word was commonly used by the church before the end of the second century.¹³⁸

Martyrdom is best understood as witnessing, or showing what one believes to be true regardless of the circumstances. In no way is it the intention of martyrs, or witnesses, to add to or take away from the message of Christ, but simply to endorse that message in spite of opposition to it.

The tendency to whitewash martyrs as innately brave or exceptionally pure is harmful. It distracts from the reality that these were unremarkable, imperfect men and women who had all of the same flaws that the rest of us do, but because of their hope of reunion with Christ they did “not find it hard to die for the true God.”¹³⁹ They themselves explained as much. They recorded each other’s deeds “not because they wanted the glory of their martyr’s crown to be arrogantly broadcast, but rather that the ordinary men who constituted God’s people might be given strength in the test of their faith by the sufferings of those who had gone before.”¹⁴⁰ Augustine taught, “It’s easy enough to celebrate in honor of a martyr; the great thing is to imitate the martyr’s faith and patience.”¹⁴¹

Martyrs do not do what they do because they are exceptionally courageous. They do it because they realize their insufficiencies, leading them to embrace their need for a savior. They do it because they are convinced of the truth of what the apostles saw and reported. Their reliance on Christ, not innate perfection, is what sets them apart.

Another charge levied against martyrs is that they are suicidal. Chesterton explains, “Obviously a suicide is the opposite of a martyr. A martyr is a man who cares so much for something outside him, that he forgets his own personal life. A suicide is a man who cares so little for anything outside him, that he wants to see the last of everything.” The martyr “is noble” because “he confesses this ultimate

¹³⁷ Edward L. Smither, "Suffering," in *Mission in the Early Church*, Themes and Reflections (James Clarke & Co Ltd, 2014), 50-1.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁹ Apollonius, quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

¹⁴⁰ Martyrdom of Marian and James, quoted in *ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴¹ Augustine Sermon 311, quoted in *ibid.*, 71.

link with life; he sets his heart outside himself: he dies that something may live.”¹⁴²

He further explains, “The Christian feeling evidently was not merely that the suicide was carrying martyrdom too far. The Christian feeling was furiously for one and furiously against the other.” Although they “looked so much alike,” they “were at opposite ends of heaven and hell.”¹⁴³

John Behr explains that the believer does not embrace death “as an act of desperation, bringing about the end, or as passive submission to victimization, resigning oneself to one’s fate, but rather as the beginning of new life.”¹⁴⁴ Martyrdom is not the rejection of life, and it is not to be actively sought after. Martyrdom is simply, “having done all, to stand firm.”¹⁴⁵

FAITH AND REASON

The witness of the first and subsequent generations of Christians and martyrs ensured the transmission of the message of Jesus’ resurrection to us today. Some of us have a problem believing that message because it cannot be scientifically or mathematically proven beyond all doubt. But almost everything we know and believe to be true is based on somebody else’s word. Any time we ask for directions, use the internet for research, or take someone’s advice we are putting faith in their word. We tend to believe what people tell us even though we do not expect them to die for what they think is true. How much more can we believe those who are?

Few truths can be proven by a mathematical formula. There is a limit to what science can guarantee as true. Science is not a belief system. It is “a *method* utilized in *organized efforts* to formulate *explanations of nature*,”¹⁴⁶ and in its proper role does not propose to answer questions of meaning, value, and significance.

The aspects of reality that mean the most to us, such as the loyalty of a spouse, the fairness of an employer, or even the belief that living is better than not, are not grounded in science because they are far higher and more transcendental than what science can observe. Instead, we use the two criteria we discussed at the end of Chapter 1 to determine the answers to the most significant questions of life: reputation, or credibility, and first-hand knowledge.

Even the assumption that our reason allows us to understand reality accurately is based on presuppositions that cannot be proven. Chesterton points out, “It is idle to talk always of the

¹⁴² Chesterton, 55.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 88.

¹⁴⁵ Ephesians 6:13.

¹⁴⁶ Stark, 275.

alternative of reason and faith. Reason itself is a matter of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relations to reality at all.”¹⁴⁷

It takes some humility to recognize the role that the word of others plays in shaping our beliefs, but once we embrace it we can start to determine what constitutes a credible source, moving us closer to an accurate view of reality. Chesterton quips, “Thinking in isolation and with pride ends in being an idiot. Every man who will not have softening of the heart must at last have softening of the brain.”¹⁴⁸

For example, we start our lives, rightly, by assuming the veracity of the tradition we are brought up in. Children are designed to take their parents at their word because parents are supposed to be trustworthy. But as the child transitions to adulthood he or she assumes the responsibility of reasoning for him or herself. His or her increasing ability to reason corresponds with the responsibility to do so.

Tradition is not a guarantee for truth, but it is the best starting point we as finite beings have. Tradition “is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record.”¹⁴⁹ It “means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about” and it “objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.”¹⁵⁰

We take our traditions at face value at the beginning, but as we grow we compare those traditions to our experiences to see if those traditions correspond with reality. If not, we look at other traditions to see if they explain the human experience better. Whatever tradition or philosophy we adopt determines what we are able to believe about the nature of reality. For instance, “If a man believes in unalterable natural law, he cannot believe in any miracle in any age. If a man believes in a will behind a law, he can believe in any miracle in any age.”¹⁵¹

The great thing about the Christian tradition is that it can be traced back to its very inception. Its transmission involves an unbroken chain of witnesses who, while differing on many of the particulars, maintain the Resurrection Creed with unprecedented unity and consistency. Traced all the way back, this tradition originates from a single event in history, the resurrection of Jesus. The truth of this tradition is based on the verifiable accounts of witnesses to that event and its transmission guarded

¹⁴⁷ Chesterton, 21.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-4.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

through the sacrifice of believers so we could benefit from the knowledge of that event and its implications.

Reason is a tool we can, and should, use to pursue truth and “seek God, and perhaps feel” our “way toward him and find him.”¹⁵² Reason can remove the barriers to belief, but intellectual assent is not faith. Faith is relational. If reason is like carefully packing a parachute, making as certain as humanly possible that it will open and catch us when we need it, faith is jumping out of the airplane. At that point the previously intellectual process becomes experiential because we put ourselves in a state of complete reliance on the parachute.

In the same way, faith in Christ involves moving beyond the intellectual into the relational. This is not a one-sided relationship because when we trust in Christ his Spirit “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”¹⁵³ Dr. Habermas explains, “The Holy Spirit stands alongside the believer, going beyond the subject of evidences and providing direct testimony to Christians of their salvation.” While “the evidence shows that Christianity is true,” the “witness of the Holy Spirit marks those who belong to the truth.”¹⁵⁴ It is through him that, whenever we have a desire to know and live in accordance with the truth but are plagued by doubt, we can cry: “I believe; help my unbelief!”¹⁵⁵

LIFE OR DEATH: A CHOICE

The concept of death features prominently in the story of Christianity, which begins with the death of mankind through Adam and Eve, finds its culmination in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and sees his message spread through the deaths of believers. There is no denying the central role that death has to play. Even the Resurrection Creed begins with “Christ died.”

The reason is that death is the overarching problem, not only in the story of Christianity, but in the story of humanity. The authors of “The Christian Way” affirm, “In the affairs of men, death claims final authority. It lords over every magistrate and worldly power, over every culture and civilization...Viewed from a worldly perspective, the annihilating nothingness of death seems all-powerful.”¹⁵⁶

This problem is intensified in that none of us gets a choice in whether or not to exist, but are “thrown into an existence in which, whatever we do, we will die. Mortality, in fact, is the only thing

¹⁵² Acts 17:27.

¹⁵³ Romans 8:16.

¹⁵⁴ Habermas, *The Risen Jesus and Future Hope*, 209.

¹⁵⁵ Mark 9:24

¹⁵⁶ (EATC) Evangelicals and Catholics Together, “The Christian Way,” *First Things*, no. 278 (December 2017): 3, accessed May 12, 2018, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/12/the-christian-way>.

that is common to life on earth; and the ability to contemplate and to use our mortality is that which is distinctively human.”¹⁵⁷

For the first generations of believers, death was especially imminent. Smither observes that “the Christian movement was founded upon and birthed through suffering and persecution.”¹⁵⁸ They were forced by their circumstances to come to grips with the role death plays in God’s overall plan for the resurrection of humanity. They could not afford to trade the historical truth of Jesus’ resurrection for a metaphorical one because death is not metaphorical. Self-help books and inspirational catchphrases do not do any good when you are dead.

Of course, just as death is a universal problem so have been attempts to come to terms with it, or even solve it. Behr observes, “Despite our knowledge of our mortality, however, or rather because of it, we are tempted to hold on to this ‘life’ as we know it, to do whatever we can to secure it, to live it as mine for as long as I can perpetuate it.”¹⁵⁹ In any case, whether attempts to solve it be scientific or superstitious, death is the ultimate problem.

The central claim of Christianity is that this problem has been solved in the divine person of Jesus through his death and resurrection. The apostle Peter reminds believers that they have been “ransomed from the futile ways inherited from” their “forefathers.”¹⁶⁰ They been given the solution in the person of Jesus.

For Peter, this solution was not a reaction to the problem of death introduced by Adam and Eve, but “was foreknown before the foundation of the world.”¹⁶¹ He explains that “God’s redemption of sinners through the precious blood of His Son was always part of the divine plan of salvation” and “seeks to comfort them with the knowledge that Christ’s sacrifice unfolded as part of God’s eternal plan.”¹⁶² Likewise, Paul asserts that God “chose us” in Christ “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love.”¹⁶³

It would seem, then, that the introduction of death into the equation did not take God by surprise, and in fact was a key element in his plan of salvation even before creation. But why would death be necessary? The first reason we have already seen: God wanted man to be a voluntary participant in his plan. For man to have a choice in whether to live in harmony with the life of God he must also have

¹⁵⁷ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 87-8.

¹⁵⁸ Smither, in *Mission in the Early Church*, 50.

¹⁵⁹ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 87-8.

¹⁶⁰ I Peter 1:18.

¹⁶¹ I Peter 1:20.

¹⁶² Barry et al., 1 Pe 1:20.

¹⁶³ Ephesians 1:4.

the choice to reject that life and embrace death. Man chose death, which necessitated the death and resurrection of God in the person of Jesus to restore man to life, which was a restoration of man to himself.

Just as in the beginning, man is now free to embrace or reject God's life by embracing or rejecting Jesus, who is not only "the way," but also "the truth" and "the life" personified.¹⁶⁴ Dr. Habermas explains that one of the central claims Jesus made, and confirmed by his resurrection, was that "persons could enter the kingdom of God if they responded properly to Jesus and his message." The single "requirement is dependence on Jesus Christ, who is himself the way to such life. Only by such action can persons be properly related to God and others."¹⁶⁵

This is the first answer to the question of death in God's plan. Knowing that man would choose death instead of life, God already had a plan in place to restore humanity to his family even before he created them. But, in addition to this, some of the early church fathers ventured a second reason.

THE UTILITY OF DEATH

In "Life and Death in the Age of Martyrdom,"¹⁶⁶ John Behr examines the teachings of some of the earliest believers and their understanding of the role of death in God's plan of salvation. Their hostile circumstances forced them to come to terms with the fact that physical death still had a part to play in the life of the believer, despite their belief in the resurrection. They believed death was necessary for man to fully appreciate the life that is made available through reliance on Christ.

Behr begins with a study of Ignatius, a church leader who taught and was martyred within "living memory of Christ and the apostles."¹⁶⁷ Ignatius, while being taken to Rome to be killed, wrote to his fellow believers, "It is better for me to die in Christ Jesus than to be king over the ends of the earth. I seek him who died for our sake. I desire him who rose for us. Birth-pangs are upon me. Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die."¹⁶⁸

Behr shows that for Ignatius death was "a defining moment: not the end, but the beginning; not disappearance, but revelation."¹⁶⁹ Death for Ignatius was the way a believer is born into true life. He grasped Jesus' teaching that "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world

¹⁶⁴ John 14:6.

¹⁶⁵ Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," 105.

¹⁶⁶ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶⁸ Ignatius, quoted in *ibid.*, 80.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

will keep it for eternal life.”¹⁷⁰

Behr examines another early teacher, Irenaeus, who explains that the spirit of a man is infused with the life of Christ when he believes, but his body is still subject to death. But when a believer’s body dies because it is weak, the life of the spirit takes control and subsumes the flesh into itself. The weakness of the flesh is traded for the strength of the spirit, and only in this way does man become fully alive. Man becomes alive “because of the participation of the Spirit,” but remains also “human, because of the substance of the flesh.”¹⁷¹ For him, it is this integration of the flesh of man and the life of God that produces a complete human being.

For both Ignatius and Irenaeus, death is necessary for the believer to complete this process. The death of the flesh relinquishes control to the life of the spirit, which is the life of Christ’s resurrection. Behr calls the martyr the “paradigm of the living human being—flesh vivified by the Spirit.”¹⁷²

Behr also explains that the life of God and the death of man, which had never before mixed, were so combined in the person of Jesus. He was the life of God incarnate but also experienced the death of man, and having done so he can bring us through the process in reverse. We experience death, but death itself facilitates our passage into the life of God, “a life which can no longer be touched by death.”¹⁷³

In doing so, “Christ has changed the ‘use’ of death for all men and women throughout time.”¹⁷⁴ Instead of experiencing death as separation from God, which is the definition of death in its truest sense, Christ converted death into the tool for reunion with God. Behr observes that “mortality is not a property of God, creating life is not a property of humans, but Christ has brought both together, conquering death by his death and in this very act conferring life.”¹⁷⁵

For these early believers, death was not only essential to rebirth into the life of God as a complete human being, but is also instructive about the need for a source external to ourselves for life:

[Irenaeus] suggests it is only by our mortality, by the experience of death in our separation—apostasy—from God, that we come to value life, knowing that in ourselves we do not have life, but depend for it upon God. Our experience of death drives home this point in a way that we will never otherwise fully know. We need to know experientially what it is to be weak, if we are to know the strength of God, for as Christ both exemplified and affirms: “my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9).¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ John 12:24-25.

¹⁷¹ Irenaeus, quoted in Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 82.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 90.

Dr. Kreeft summarizes, “God lets man fall from Eden so that an even more glorious unity can be attained through Christ.”¹⁷⁷

Just as our ability to appreciate the presence of God is also what enables us to dread his absence, so the gut-wrenching experience of death enables us to appreciate his life in a way that Adam and Eve were unable to do before the Fall. Having never experienced death, they could not contrast it with life. But the human race, having wallowed for millennia in an endless cycle that always culminates in death, is now able to fully realize how superior life in God really is. There is a point of comparison now.

As mentioned before, we cannot choose not to exist. We are born into this world without being consulted. It is involuntary. As a result, we cannot choose not to die. It is also involuntary. But because of Christ’s resurrection we do not have to remain “passive and frustrated victims of death and of the givenness of our mortality.”¹⁷⁸ We can choose to die “to our involuntary created existence.”¹⁷⁹ We can begin to live the life of the Spirit of Christ, with whom he seals every believer as a “guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it”¹⁸⁰ through the death that facilitates our passage into limitless life.

In this process God takes “dust from the earth which I now am and” mixes “in his power, he now, finally, fashions a true, living, human being—'the glory of God.’”¹⁸¹ Even though death is still a reality, the “final say is that of God who uses our mortality to educate us of our finitude, our embodiedness, and our earthiness, and so enables us, finally, to receive that which we don’t have in or from ourselves, that is, life.”¹⁸² Behr concludes, “Christ is not Plan B, but rather the realization of God’s intention, stated at the beginning, and brought to completion by the arc that leads from Adam to Christ. The work of Christ in the passion is not simply a remedy, but the expression of the life, love, and being of God, which encompasses and transforms human deviation and death itself.”¹⁸³

Far from being a historical curiosity, Christ’s “resurrection is the prototype for our own. He blazed the trail through death to eternal life, and he tells us that we can follow in his footsteps with his hand leading us the entire way.”¹⁸⁴ Even now, when we only have the “down payment”¹⁸⁵ of being made

¹⁷⁷ Kreeft, *Catholics and Protestants: What Can We Learn from Each Other?*, 84.

¹⁷⁸ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 88.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ Ephesians 1:14.

¹⁸¹ Behr, in *The Role of Death in Life*, 91.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

¹⁸⁴ McDowell and McDowell, *Evidence for the Resurrection: What It Means for Your Relationship with God*, 13.

¹⁸⁵ Barry et al., Eph 1:14.

completely alive, we can begin the process of dying to the mortality that temporarily enslaves us and, in gratitude to God and care for others, live as conduits of the life that we still have yet to fully experience.

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