

## ***A Summary of Christianity . . .***

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I've attempted to make this summary void of my opinions – I have them, but they aren't worth much as they amount only to one person's view versus another. Instead, what follows is my best attempt at describing the Christian story embraced by many over thousands of years. As it unfolds, I hope you'll see why billions of people have found that in it, the deepest longings of the heart converge with the mind's demand of reason to produce a tremendously hopeful, peaceful and purposeful life...

The story is matter of fact about life's big questions: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" "Why am I here? Where did I come from and ultimately, What's the point – what happens after this life?"

To begin, it's best to address the obvious: something is wrong with our world. Hopes that modern man would eventually graduate from the barbaric societies of old were dashed when the 20<sup>th</sup> century became the bloodiest in human history. And today's arms race has cast a foreboding cloud of unease over all who are paying attention.

The Bible's perspective on a world gone badly wrong is unique and contrasts sharply with other explanations offered. The eastern religions, for example, believe evil and suffering to be an illusion. The atheist believes both good and evil ultimately will mean nothing and Islam presents Allah standing aside from human suffering. In contrast, Christians have been comforted over the centuries knowing that the suffering of God is at the heart of the Christian story and that it was somehow necessary to accomplish the eventual abolishment of evil.

Next to a hopeful outlook on evil, there is a second excellent reason to give Christianity a first look on life's ultimate questions: It distinguishes itself by honoring how we normally make decisions. Everyday decision-making blends faith and reason - whether we're hopping on an airplane or choosing an Oncologist. Ideally, reason plays the leading role. And when considering Christianity as a life path, it also insists reason play the leading role in our decision.

Not so with the world's religions. While they contain a variety of helpful life lessons, the emphasis is reversed. To embrace core beliefs, *faith needs to play the leading role*. The Hindu belief, for example, that hundreds of millions of deities exist must be taken entirely on faith. The same for a belief in reincarnation or the Buddhist idea that people are a like drop of water falling into the sea and after this life, we cease to exist.

Below is an overview of what Christians believe on these important questions:

The very first sentence of the Bible addresses life's most basic question previously stated: "Why is there something rather than nothing?": ***"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth."***

In the past 100 years, Genesis 1:1 has morphed from seen as laughable religious talk to depicting the current scientific understanding the universe suddenly came into existence from nothing. A remarkable turnaround. This has been an unsettling development for many as it upends the long-held view the universe has *always* existed and raises the question of who or what started everything.

We're left with two possibilities: Either something has come from nothing or there exists an uncaused, timeless, personal being behind the creation of the universe.

We're told God exists in an eternal loving community referred to as the Trinity. This community decided their relational delight should be shared and initiated bringing into existence beings created in their image.

Common to many people is the sense there is something special about themselves and that there is something more out there. That's because they are!, and there is! God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah, ***"Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you."*** If true, stunning!

Imbued with free will, rebellion against God first happens in the heavens and spreads to the 'good' environment God created for his cherished children on earth.

God's intended uninterrupted communion with people becomes no longer possible. Rebellion introduces evil into the universe which begins destroying God's creation and forces separation between fallen people and their Creator. Man's only way to approach God once again would be for his impurity to be covered by God's purity.

God's requirement to be separated from man can at first seem like unnecessary strictness on his part. But we're much more familiar with this concept than we would think. In modern medicine, for example, sterile fields are created prior to surgery to protect the life of the patient - only those who have been scrubbed and properly covered may enter the area. Similarly in law, the bench in a court room is deemed a sacred place and attorneys may approach only if first invited by the judge. Micro chips are manufactured in sterile environments and professional sound recordings are made in soundproof rooms - 'sterile' from outside noise.

To restore communion with man God decides to enter the human stage – earth. The word 'Immanuel' describes his initiated action which means, "God with us."

He first chooses to associate himself with a people group – Israel. He provides the framework for orderly, beautiful living so that other nations would notice and be drawn to the God of Israel.

He provides many 'signs' among them to reemphasize his authority over them as their rightful God. He begins to stress the desired endgame: a future endless communion with His people on a perfectly restored earth.

The 'signs' were to be shared with future generations to reinforce that their hope of a perfect environment in the future was firmly grounded on historical facts. Psalm 145, ***"One generation shall commend your (God's) works to another and shall declare your mighty acts."***

Despite all the evidence, the people ignore God and look instead to the gods of their pagan neighbors. The prophets repeatedly beg them to reconsider. Jeremiah uses a touch of humor to mock pagan gods: ***"Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field and cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk . . . But the Lord is the true God; he is the living God and everlasting king."***

As the Jews continue to rebel, God provides a way for forgiveness and restoration: He concocts the sacrificial system to show Israel He would allow His purity to act as a covering for the peoples' impurity. A perfect, unblemished offering (usually an animal) could cover a contrite Jew desiring to be forgiven by God and restored back into right relationship with Him. Once sacrificed, God would accept the offering as covering for the Jew. Though helpful in the immediate context, the system was designed to be only a set up for what was to come . . .

For centuries the spokespeople for God (prophets) pointed to a specific time in the future where an ultimate covering would be provided. God himself would become a sacrifice. The prophet Isaiah writes: ***"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."***

God steps out of eternity, takes on a human body by becoming a child in a manger and demonstrates his purity by living a perfect life. His close friend John wrote, ***"... in Him there is no sin."*** Quite remarkable for a Jewish man to say this about another Jewish man.

The Roman authorities who at that time occupied Jerusalem, yield to the Jews' request to have Jesus executed claiming he was a threat to social order (the reported 'signs' he performed brought out massive crowds). During Roman occupation thousands of Jews had been routinely executed by crucifixion and in weeks after Jesus' death, hundreds of Jews began claiming they had seen him alive.

The resurrection of Jesus is the fact of history which gave birth to Christianity. It is seen as the best explanation for the rapid growth of the new movement which occurred in a tremendously hostile environment – thousands of early followers of Jesus were martyred themselves for the belief Jesus had mocked Roman crucifixion by walking out of the grave.

God's intent to be forever in perfect communion with His people had been reestablished. Jesus enters a room and makes what would have been a stunning statement to a group of Jews: ***"You are clean."***

They would soon teach it was up to each one of us to ask for and ***trust*** Jesus' purity as the sufficient covering for our impurity. In turn Jesus promises, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

Physical death becomes the great dividing line . . . those who desire a restored relationship with God can have it without cost and will be welcomed into the originally planned environment, a restored earth, to commune with God and His children (and our family and friends!) *forever*. The prophet Isaiah writes, ***“For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain.”***

A new husband told us recently he wished his wedding day could have gone on for a month! He told us it was so wonderful all the people closest to them were in one place together! Jesus’ perspective: “I wish the same! But not just for a month – forever! It’s entirely up to you!”

We were not meant for this world where evil seems to have the upper hand. Instead, we were made for this world: ***“He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”***

This Biblical framework of God’s planned eternal home is far different from the commonly held view of an “endless church service.” USC philosopher Dallas Willard writes: “... *we should think of our destiny as being absorbed in a tremendously creative team effort, with unimaginably splendid leadership, on an inconceivably vast plane of activity, with ever more comprehensive cycles of productivity and enjoyment.*”

Christians have always understood themselves as people who have responded to the voice of God – they believe God is near to all ‘*speaking to us in our conscience, whispering to us in our pleasure and shouting to us in our pain.*’ (CS Lewis) Similarly, the Psalmist writes, ***“The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.”***

Jesus is presented as patiently waiting for an invitation to be our covering, to forgive us and begin living his life through us. And once invited, he does just that. We begin developing into the best, God intended versions of ourselves as we become part of a multi-ethnic global Church (community of believers) where we learn to follow Jesus together.

There are several dimensions to the “good news” Jesus told his followers to share with the world:

- **Peace** results when we come to trust our right standing before God is due to *his* provided covering *not* our attempts at being good people. As God begins to live his life through us, he assures us he’s real by giving *us* ‘signs’ in the form of gradual wonderful life change and spectacular wisdom-filled guidance
- **Hope** that the world of our deepest desires, one of beauty, love and perfect justice is a real world. This was the central message of Jesus’ teaching. Wishful thinking about positive outcomes after this brief life are replaced by a hope that is ***“firmly grounded.”*** (Paul’s words) CS Lewis would say, “Firmly grounded in *fact*.” The hope of the heart and demands of the mind uniquely converge, producing a tremendously stable life . . .

- And finally, ***purpose***. C.S. Lewis stresses the need to be careful selecting a life purpose: ‘*All that is not eternal is eternally out of date.*’ Once connected with God we learn he desires to accomplish his purposes in and through us. Our efforts begin to have *eternal* impact. People hunger for a cause bigger than themselves. This is it. Living out God’s intended purpose for us is life’s greatest good. As we enroll ourselves to help God build his kingdom, we experience joy and satisfaction beyond anything this life can offer

The importance of response: ***“Behold, I stand at the door and knock. Anyone who hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and dine with him and he with me.”*** (Jesus) A possible appropriate response:

*“Lord, there has been a part of me that has wondered if I died today, what would it be like to stand before you? I admit my heart is impure, and now to learn Jesus’ death and resurrection enables you to pronounce me forgiven and pure hearted is beyond good news! Thank you! I dedicate the rest of my life to learn from Jesus and to offer myself that through me you might bring light into a dark world.*

Important writings on purpose:

***“We have dared to hope that this heaven of our heart’s desire shall one day be our own. We have even dreamed that here on earth we might help to build that city’s walls.”*** (Orchard)

***“You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound.”*** (Psalm 4)

***“Thus says the Lord; ‘Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls.’”*** (Jeremiah 6)

***“ . . . bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”*** (1 Timothy 4:8)