

FREEDOM'S RING

"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev.25:10).

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Is Jesus The Only Route To Heaven?

Most of you, no doubt, without hesitation will answer "yes" to the question in the title above. Although you may wish in your heart that you could offer hope through other routes also, you remember that Jesus stated plainly, "No man can come to the Father except by me."

Will no one be in heaven who did not believe in Jesus and have a relationship with God through him? Well, yes! In fact, there will be at least three groups in this category. Are you open for a challenge to modify our traditional easy answer that is so exclusive? Then stay with me.

1. Most of you will probably concede that the largest part of those populating heaven will be the infants and children who died before they reached "the age of accountability." Don't ask me too much about that supposed line of demarcation for the Bible does not speak of such. And there are many other questions about immortality of infants that I cannot answer since they are not addressed.

Many have concluded that David looked forward to being with his dead child in heaven when he stated that he would go to his child but the child could not return to him (2 Sam. 12:25). It is more likely, however, that he was thinking more of death and the grave, for hope of immortality is very dim in the Old Testament history. There was no promise of eternal life offered the patriarchs, or in the covenant with Abraham, or in the Law of Moses.

Our hope for infant immortality has been based more on our reasoning than clear statements from the Scriptures. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" It would be unjust to exclude the innocent. Though a two-year-old may throw a temper tantrum and a five-year-old may lie or deceive, we think they are incapable of understanding right and wrong. So we have no anxieties about the welfare of one who dies in childhood though God has not drawn lines for us.

Granting that the baby is born with immortal soul, could that immortality be revoked by sin when majority is reached? If the child dies in innocence, is that innocence meritorious so that the child can be saved apart from Jesus?

I am not trying to create doubt, but I am intending to show that the answers are not all simplistic. When you get all the answers figured out, send me a copy! Well, on second thought, skip that, for I will not have time to read a discourse of that length!

2. Shall we expect to see Moses, Elijah, David, Daniel, and Isaiah in heaven? Surely! They did not believe in Jesus and had no relationship with him. How could they access the Father without being "in Christ", for "No one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6)?

Paul gives us an easy answer for that question: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of

woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:5-6). They were saved by the grace of God through the atonement of Christ. Was everyone who lived under the Law of Moses redeemed? Evidently Paul is referring to the salvation of Israel in general terms, not through law keeping, but through Christ, but not necessarily meaning that each one under the Law was redeemed. None were righteous by perfect law-keeping, yet God judged individual righteousness with some connection to one's efforts to live correctly. How correctly did one have to live in order to be redeemed by Christ? I do not know.

3. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18:22-33). Abraham appealed to the justice of God in his "bargaining" for Sodom. With his family, Abraham had been separated as a believer in the One God. Evidently, those of Sodom were not believers but were yet pagan, except for righteous Lot who lived there. Would God spare the city if there were fifty righteous persons there? Yes!

Was God answering a purely hypothetical question, or could they have been righteous while not knowing Abraham's God? If so, by what law or standard? The city was given over to sin. God was holding them responsible for their sin. What law, or laws, had they violated? There is no record of God having given them or anyone else a code of law, not even Enoch, Noah, or Abraham. By what code of law did God judge Nineveh when indicting its citizens as sinners many years later? Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Repeating the question, could they have been righteous while not knowing Abraham's God? Do you mean a God with a certain name, like *Yaweh*, or a functioning deity whom they might refer to as The Creator, The Eternal One, The Great Spirit, or The Father of All? If the specific name is of priority, then what is that name? Do you know it? *God* is a generic reference to deity, not a specific name.

If they deduced that "Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made" (Rom. 1:20), would not they have discovered the same God in whom Abraham believed? True, the people of Sodom, Nineveh, or wherever would not know all about the character of Deity. But neither do I! I won't speak for you.

Because the Bible deals mainly with redemptive history which involved the bringing of Jesus into the world through Abraham and Israel, we have tended to feel that God left the rest of mankind out with little, or no, concern and provision for them. Although the Bible focus is on one small called-out nation, God revealed himself to all peoples of all times and expected recognition and respect. Pagan and idolatrous concepts distorted and disparaged his true nature, power, and divinity. Paul expressed this forcefully in Romans 1:29-25:

“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.”

What Paul was stating applied to mankind in general. The separating of the descendants of Abraham through Jacob still left the rest of mankind in the category addressed by Paul. That would include Abel, Enoch, Noah, Ishmael, Cyrus, Ahasuerus, Nebuchadnezzar, and such. God sent some special revelations to certain individuals and nations before and after the call of Abraham and the giving of the Law of Moses. God expected right living of all of them.

How could the just Judge of all demand the reverence of them? The passage above indicates that they had enough revelation through nature to constrain their moral conduct and produce reverence toward the Creator. Without a code of definitive laws, how would they know any standard of morality? They had a law – not a code, but a principle of action which God has written in the hearts of all who were created in his image.

In Romans 1-2, Paul informs his Jewish readers about God’s dealing with the Gentiles. *“For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality”* (2:6-11).

Then Paul tells us the basis of judgment: *“When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus”* (2:14-16). Please read those two chapters. The Gentile was not condemned because of lack of circumcision or sabbath keeping, or lack of baptism or participation in the communion. He was a sinner because of his dishonoring Deity and his fellowman. Notice the listing that Paul makes of those sins.

Every sane person realizes there is a Creator. Each person realizes that he should respect his Creator and his fellowman. The two ageless principles on which all of God’s law is based are the **principles of action written on our hearts – the First and Second Commandments – to love God and man**. These govern our relation to God (spiritual) and to man (moral). No man can plead ignorance of God’s principles of action.

There could be righteous persons in Sodom and every other place on earth in any age if they did by nature what the law requires, that is to reverence God and man. Could any person keep those laws sufficiently to merit salvation? No. Neither

could one keep the Law of Moses so as to merit salvation. Can we claim perfection in keeping those two laws, or any other supposed code of laws? No. None can be sufficiently righteous but evidently God favors righteous intent. Because all lack perfection does not mean that no one in any of these settings could be saved by grace. Jesus assures, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”* (Matt. 5:6).

Beginning in Chapter 3, Paul tells the good news of grace through the atonement of Jesus through which we may receive the gift of righteousness. It could save the Jew who kept the Law of Moses imperfectly, the Gentile who kept the law written on the heart imperfectly, and present disciples who keep it imperfectly.

The child who did not live to believe in Jesus or God could reap the benefit of Jesus’ triumph over sin and death. The Israelite who never believed in Jesus but kept the law imperfectly could be a beneficiary. The Gentile who did not believe in Jesus but kept the law written in his heart even imperfectly could be redeemed also. And the persons since the coming of Christ, like the Aztecs or Australian natives, who have kept the law written on the heart, though they had no opportunity to know about Jesus, may benefit from the atonement. Thus, all came/come to the Father by Jesus Christ. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right, demanding nothing impossible of infants, erring Jewish law keepers, Gentiles in all ages reaching for God but limited in knowledge, and disciples who have no perfect record?

How can this be true when we know that Jesus declared, *“He who does not believe will be condemned.”*? Let us look at the Great Commission again, not looking for loopholes but looking for harmony. *“And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned’”* (Mark 16:15-16). The hope of any individual through the gospel was contingent upon his hearing it. Jesus placed proclamation and hearing as conditions for responsive faith. The gospel is good news, not bad news of condemnation. This announcement did not spell immediate condemnation for the Mayans or Australian natives.

A distinction must be made between unbelief (non-belief) due to lack of information and disbelief due to rejection of the information. The preaching came first, then the response of saving faith or of rejecting, condemning disbelief. The American native who worshipped the “Great Spirit” was not demonstrating rejecting disbelief for he heard no message of the gospel.

When Jesus warned, *“You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he”* (John 8:24), he was not addressing the Cherokee tribe. He was speaking to Jews who were not favoring the evidences that Jesus was the Messiah. The Cherokees were non-believers but the ones Jesus addressed were disbelievers. When Jesus would return in vengeance upon that rejecting generation, they would be among those *“who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus* (2 Thes. 1:5-12) because of rejection rather than lack of information.

Again, Jesus said, *“No one comes to the Father but by me”* (John 14:6). We must consider here that *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him; ... And they shall all be taught by God. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me.”* (John 6:44-45). One is not yet called if the message is unavailable. *“But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And*

how are they to hear without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14f). Man is not accountable to information beyond his reach.

The Athenians, through observation of nature, were like blind men groping after God in their search. They had an altar dedicated to the "unknown god." Paul offered no censure for that but proclaimed the nature of the deity they saw in the creation. Then he declared that they could no longer plead ignorance but must come to repentance (Acts 17:22-31). However, they had not been commanded to repent previous to Paul's speech, for they had not yet been called through hearing. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?

Someone is sure to ask, "Then why preach the gospel if persons may be saved without it?" It offers a revealed assurance of hope of eternal life. It offers motivation. It is God's call to encourage universal response. Without that message, those who endeavored to keep the law on the heart would be doing so purely on that principle of action without the motivation of the great promises of the gospel.

If the untaught can receive the benefit of the atonement without assemblies, rituals, forms, and quotas, then of what value are those things? None of those works have merit to take away sin or "to send bricks up to build our mansion." Those activities are for the propagation of the message, mutual maintenance of faith, and the upbuilding of spiritual strength. You can certainly elaborate on the values of "body life."

Other points relating to this subject may be read in Chapter 18 of *Free In Christ*. Your standing as a disciple is not affected by whether you agree or disagree with this treatise, however, the justice of God is made more evident by these truths. "*Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*"

Is Jesus the only route to heaven? Yes, for no other has conquered death and atoned for sin. []

HOOK'S POINTS

Although they might not have known I have been racing them to the **four score** mark, I am ahead of Leroy Garrett and Louie Welch by a few days! That, however, should not be surprising, for I have always been older than most people my age. My mark is Nov. 24, Louie's is Dec. 9, and Leroy comes in two days later, Dec. 11.

You could not fail to notice that this mailout is self-centered and that I drop names of famous people like Leroy and Louie when I can. You know Leroy as a professor of philosophy and history and a writer and publisher, and you know Louie as a five-term mayor of Houston and on the board of ACU. He and I have known each other 61 years.

Leroy and Ouida called about my piece about Lea, the girl in the front seat. I refrained from quoting Louie's touching note in the last issue but will share it here, for it reveals his loving spirit: "Beautiful!! You made this old friend cry. You and the girl in the front seat have enriched the lives of Lola Faye (from Gilliland) and Louie (from Slaton) and thousands more outside your professional pulpit than you can ever count. May God relieve Lea of her depression and give her the joy that your love assures." -Louie.

And that reminds me – it was the men, rather than the women, who mentioned their tears from reading my piece about Lea!

New! Vic Phares has set up an *Excite* "Online Community" named "*Free In Christ*." There you may join an interactive discussion group related to *Freedom's Ring* which is an improvement over the Message Board. It is a great place for people of different Christian backgrounds to find a common ground. Follow this link to view the community as a guest:

<<http://mycom.excite.com/mycomm/browse.asp/cid=3283>>. Click on "Request to Join" or "Join this Community" and follow instructions. If you have problems, contact Vic at <vic@freedomring.org>.

Peace between Israel and Palestine!! Don't hold your breath! Those peace talks give good "photo opportunities" for our presidents, but the age-old animosities between Arabs and Jews continue. For longer than the Jews occupied the land until God dispersed them in 70 AD, Arabs have claimed Palestine as their home. A modern Zionist movement, aided by Christians who believe that God is to restore national Israel and that Christ will return to Jerusalem to rule, working through politics and the UN, took a portion of the Palestinians' homeland and gave it to the Jews to form the State of Israel in 1948. The U.S. pours \$3-billion per year into this unjust effort. That would amount to more than \$1,000 per person for those living in states like Oregon, Oklahoma, or Colorado. Although Arafat does not impress me as the nicest guy, I cannot blame him for working to get their homeland back. He will even settle for 13% of it!

I have known Jack Exum for forty years. His heart of gold is full of love for all mankind. He has a unique ministry of spiritual motivation which he presents in seminars of "Three Unusual Days." Now Jack's unforgettable style of Bible teaching, faith building, and soul-searching motivational series which will keep you laughing and crying are available on video cassettes. Check it out! Exum Publications, Rt. 4, Box 215, Lake City, FL 32024; or call 1-800-787-5866, Ext. 01.

Being some of the richest material on the internet, Edward Fudge's "gracEmail" is both informing and inspirational as he answers questions sent by readers with rare insight and depth. Those brief and relevant messages may be accessed at our site or his at <<http://members.aol.com/edwfudge>>. You have read some of them in this mailout. They are worth keeping for permanent reference.

Now 150 of them are being made available in a book of almost 300 pages titled *Questions and Answers*. Bob Lewis has done the work of preparation without charge. The venture is non-profit with your tax-exempt payments going for further printing and distribution. Please include \$12.95 per copy (postpaid) and send your order to Diversity Press, P O Box 63, DeFuniak Springs, FL 32435.

Aren't you glad we are through the epidemic of distasteful political advertisements again? It is sad that candidates so blatantly undermine characters and deceive in order to win an election. The sadder fact, however, is that those tactics work in getting votes.

In the last issue I gave a wrong address for ordering books from Don Preston. It should be: 615 - 3rd NW, Ardmore, OK 73401.

I am in favor of simplified versions of the Bible, but how about this advertisement: "At last! A Bible so Easy-to-Read **everyone** can understand"! That should put preachers, teachers, and writers out of business! Just give them Bibles!

*"The days of our years are three-score and ten,
or even if by reason of strength*

FOURSCORE,

*yet is their pride only labor and sorrow;
for it is soon gone, and we fly away."*

Moses was melancholic about the sentence God had placed on Israel to wander so long in the wilderness for no apparent good cause. Life there seemed in vain (Psalm 90:9-10).

In a depressing review of man's activities on this earth, Solomon, in *Ecclesiastes*, also saw futility and lack of meaning. He was looking at earthly existence which must end in death, even if a person's life is extended to eighty years.

Although I have always taken for granted that I would reach the fourscore mark, I did not think it would happen so quickly! Now I see images of myself in the picture Solomon painted in the last chapter of *Ecclesiastes*. Here is my loose version of it.

"Remember also your Creator while you are still young before the dismal times come when you will say the things that gave pleasure offer no more enjoyment for you. Do that before your failing eyesight dims the sun and the light of the moon and the stars, and clouds of depression follow the rain of tears. Then the hands and arms, the keepers of the house will tremble and the strong men, the legs, will become bowed, and chewing will be difficult because of so many missing teeth, and the eyes that look out the window will be darkened.

Because you will become more reclusive, the doors to the street are shut. You will eat soft food because of bad teeth. In sleeplessness, you will be ready to get out of bed at the early crowing of the rooster. You shall have lost your voice and ear for music. You will no longer climb ladders for fear of falling, and even walking outside will present danger. Your head will be as white as an almond tree in bloom. Minor things will become burdensome. Favorite foods will no longer taste good. Because your time of departure to your everlasting home is so imminent, you see those persons about you who will be at your funeral. The silver cord of life will be snapped soon, perhaps by a stroke, a heart attack, or kidney failure. Then the flesh, being made of this earth, shall return to it, and the spirit shall return to God who gave it. Futility of futilities, says Solomon, the Preacher." (Ecc. 12:1-8)

As a teenager, I read *Ecclesiastes* several times and memorized portions of it. Solomon's dismal philosophy impressed my young mind, no doubt, because of the austerity of my childhood and youth. It helped give me perspective.

My Introduction To Life

Thirteen days after the armistice was signed ending World War I, on November 24, 1918, I landed on planet earth in Fort Worth, Texas. Shortly after my birth, the family moved back to Rochester, a town only twelve years old, 65 miles north of Abilene. Dad cleared the virgin soil of the rented farm of its mesquite trees. I remember seeing tracts of good land still untouched by the axe. There was no paved road in Haskell County or in the great surrounding area. The farmers were beginning to buy Model T Fords, all black in color, but some wagons and buggies were still used for transportation. Those cars had no battery, generator, or starter; the gas tank was under driver's seat, and flat tires were repaired by the roadside.

This was before farmers had telephones, radios, ice boxes, electricity, and indoor toilets, and few had piped water. This was before plastic, synthetic fibers, ball point pens, zippers, oleo, milk cartons, prepared foods, sliced bread or bacon or cheese, potato chips, prepackaged foods, frozen foods, antibiotics, detergents, anti-freeze, effective insect killers, trousers without cuffs, and slacks or shorts for women. The doctor came to your house with his assortment of drugs in his leather bag, and charged \$1.00. A letter was mailed for three cents and a postal card for one cent. The main reading material

in many homes was a King James Version of the Bible and the Sears-Roebuck mail order catalog.

Everybody in our family shared in both the house work and the farm work. School aged children worked, and pre-schoolers watched after the tiny ones while mother worked. Work was never-ending. Except for school time, the entire family always ate every meal together and the family was always together for work or play. In the fall children from the farms attended school mostly when it was too wet to gather cotton.

We two boys and our three sisters were raised in an unpainted, boxed house of three rooms 14' x 14' in size. No closets or porches. We were teenagers during the Great Depression and Dust Bowl days of the Southwest. Men would work from sunrise until sunset for \$1.00 per day – if they could find a job at all. We kids probably had two or three soft drinks each but never ate a hamburger or a meal in a café before we graduated from college. But we were not the only ones without money. The farmers survived by raising and preserving their own food, and they shared with those who had less. In their pride and integrity, farmers disdained government hand-out programs initiated by Roosevelt. Our houses were not locked. No, extreme poverty did not make preying criminals of my generation. It took the breakdown of the home and desertion of moral standards to produce that in this generation. The school teacher was respected. It was rather customary that, if a kid got a spanking at school, he had a worse one waiting when he got home. Homosexuality was not mentioned, divorce was a disgrace, and pregnancy out of wedlock was a shame for all the family.

In spite of despairing poverty, we lived in hope! In church we sang of heaven, a thing below our present sophistication. All five of us children went to Abilene Christian College with practically no help from home. Some gained advanced degrees. We and our spouses became preachers, missionaries, and school teachers. We owe so much to the selfless teachers at the college who worked with meager pay during that desperate time for the college. Garvin Beauchamp was a fellow-freshman in 1937, Don Morris taught us freshman speech classes, and John Stevens was a senior.

Spiritual Influences

Although Dad was a disciple and a man of highest integrity, his timidity never allowed him to lecture us, and the only prayers I ever heard him pray were when Mom sort of forced him sometimes to repeat his simple prayer of thanks for our meal. Mom was so restrained by "the silence of women" that she would not offer thanks. But she was our conscience with deep conviction, having been schooled in all the strictest scruples of our people. She instilled all those convictions in her children. Vulgarity and profanity, and even by-words, were never heard in our home. Sex was a gender, not an action, and there were no innuendoes about it in our speech.

Most of those convictions were reinforced by the "preacher boys" who came up from Abilene to fill the pulpit. They included Bill Price, Ben Newhouse, Otis Gatewood, Leroy Brownlow, Clifton Rogers, Louie Welch, Alvis Bryan, and others. Our course was further refined by teachers at ACC.

The first record player I ever saw belonged to our neighbors. It used the spool-type record. In my high school years, we got a radio, but playing time was very limited. Gospel singing groups like the Stamps Quartet and The Chuck Wagon Gang sang in prime time. Much preaching could be heard. Neighbors visited, and religion was often a favored topic. It was common for people to sing gospel songs while they worked. The school taught no music, so we depended upon the churches who taught us in shaped notes. Since there was no

other activity, revivals of the various churches were well-attended. The watchful eye of the neighbors in our small community helped everyone to live better!

Mom wanted her sons to be preachers, and the students from ACC helped to push George and me in that direction. So I became one of them, not because of communicative skills or speaking ability that I might have had, but more out of idealism. Due to the timidity that I inherited from my father which was never relieved satisfactorily, I never developed those aptitudes. Even to this day, I find it intrusive to approach a person or to call a person on the telephone. I have influenced more men to obey the gospel by playing volley ball with them than from "personal evangelism."

A Believing Skeptic

Would I have come to believe in God and Christ if I had not been raised in such a sincerely religious climate? Hypothetical questions cannot be answered. Surely, in being brought up in such a religious home and community, becoming a believer could have been little more than accepting my culture. On the other hand, my culture could have been the fertile soil in which spirituality could abound.

If you have read much of my writing, you know that I am always asking questions about accepted beliefs and practices. I have always thought of myself as a sort of *believing skeptic* or *accepting skeptic*. You may have a problem with that, but I don't. Truth and faith are refined by doubt. If we are afraid to question our faith, we are afraid of its weakness. There is more faith in honest doubt than in unquestioning acceptance of the time-worn creeds of men.

There is no facet of the teaching upon which our faith is built that can be proven factually. If you can know that Jesus died to atone for our sins, for example, then you have passed beyond faith into knowledge. However, our salvation is based on faith, not knowledge. We walk by faith, not by sight (that which is known by the senses). Faith is conviction based on evidences which fall short of proof. You may say you *know* you are saved because of logical deduction from Biblical teachings that you think you understand, but that is still inconclusive. And if you depend upon inner feelings for the "knowledge," that is certainly only subjective evidence at best.

It is disconcerting to most of us to discard some belief in which we trusted. As layer after layer of misconceptions are peeled away, we are afraid that, like peeling an onion one layer at the time, we may soon have nothing left. Yet, if it can be peeled away, it is not of value to retain. Peeling them all away would leave us with the futility of which Solomon wrote. That is not an acceptable option..

There is a caution to be exercised in peeling the onion. Subjective "proofs" are no more acceptable as criteria for discarding a layer than for accepting one.

We can believe in God or we can believe there is only a material universe. Which is the most acceptable belief? The evidences of an intelligent source and designer are everywhere in every minute facet of science. I suppose my belief in a Creator depends more on contemplating the universe than reading the Bible. To admit that there is a material universe but deny that it had an intelligent power behind it is to claim to have definite knowledge even about what is not seen. Human intelligence and consciousness, limited as they are, are evidence that there is something more than the matter which houses it.

Belief in God offers something. Disbelief offers nothing – nothing except the overshadowing fear that maybe God does exist and expects recognition. Intelligent beings see no

purpose, and only futility, without God. Even the noted American infidel, Robert Ingersol, conceded in his oration at his brother's grave, that in that night of death, hope sees a star, and listening ears hear the rustle of a wing.

Miracles In My Life

Although there is overwhelming evidence of the unlimited presence and power of the Creator in the universe, it may not be so evident in our individual lives. He is not seen and heard like the world he created. There is a silence, and the silence of God is deafening, as someone has observed. I can feel with Job when he cried out, "*Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat! ... Behold, I go forward, but he is not there; and backward, but I cannot perceive Him; on the left hand I seek Him, but I cannot behold Him; I turn to the right hand, but I cannot see Him. I am hemmed in by darkness, and a thick darkness covers my face*" (Job 23:3, 8-9).

There has been no time or incident in my experience where I could declare without question that God worked in a miraculous manner, that is, in a way contrary to the normal course and unquestionably free from coincidence or accident.

At the end of the spring semester in ACC, I had plans to leave in a few days with a group for a campaign in Utah. My plans for my future always looked westward. There were few available telephones on the campus but there was a pay phone at the corner business and post office across from the administration building. One day as I was passing within hearing distance, I heard someone call my name. Someone wanted to talk with me on the phone. With me? Who would it be, and how would they know to reach me there?

The call was from Harry Payne, of whom I had never heard, preacher for the South Park Church of Christ in Beaumont, Texas, of which I had never heard. Briefly, he explained that another ACC fellow was supposed to come as an assistant and to conduct his daily radio program while he was away in meetings that summer. The other fellow changed his plans. When asked if he knew someone to recommend, he mentioned my name. So, in less than a week I was in Beaumont because of one phone call from a stranger. It changed the whole course of my life, for I married there, and my ministry went to the southeast instead of the northwest.

Was that a miracle? I don't know, yet I am willing to give God the credit for it. I trust in the providence of God, though I cannot know if my decisions to act are always prompted by God or by temptation or misunderstanding. How can I know how many times He intervened when I was a child, or as a boy working teams in the field, riding steers and mules amidst the thorny mesquite trees and cactus and around barbed wire fences, or swimming in the tank which drained from our barnyard, or living amid uncontrollable flies? I cannot know how many times he might have saved me from a collision while driving.

If we could know these things, little faith would be needed. Demonstration would preclude faith. In praising God for his providence, I must be aware that I could be actually praising him for my perceptions and my decisions based on them!

Like Father, Like God

Will you be surprised or disturbed if I tell you that I have never felt affection toward God or Jesus, that I have never choked up or wept in thinking about them or their love for me? I have never had the affection toward them that I have toward my family and endeared friends. Is that a defect in me? If God demands feelings of affection, then I am a miserable failure.

In my childhood family we were, and still are, caring for one another. However, in our home life, I do not recall Dad ever telling one of us he loved us. Sometimes, in spite of chronic illness and emotional problems, Mom might express her love to us collectively. We kids never responded with expressions of love. As for us kids, there was no such expression between us though we were genuinely concerned for one another. We just were not the hugging and kissing kind. Though we rather feared some of Dad's rigidity of discipline, we all felt the security of our family relationship and never doubted his care. Our home was a safe haven.

Maybe the imprinted feelings toward my father and siblings were transferred to my feelings about God and my spiritual family. We each are imprinted by the world from which we came making it impossible for us all to react in the same manner.

Emotional love and fond affection cannot be brought about by command. However, we can each determine to hold good will toward God and fellow human beings. Those two things are commanded and are God's priority for us. He requires gracious interaction even with the people whose personalities hinder or prevent our affection. That is what practical religion is all about.

Unanswered Questions

Does one become an atheist because he can ask unanswerable questions? I can ask my share of them. All intelligent believers have to deal with those questions.

I wonder about many things. I wonder why God does not make himself known unquestionably to each person on earth. Why would he depend upon a written message to reveal himself and his will? Most of the people who have lived since Jesus came did not have a Bible, and could not have read it if they had one. Those who read the Bible have difficulty understanding it, and they certainly disagree in the understanding. Why would God not simply reveal himself and his desires to each person in every generation? Why should a person have to depend upon others to bring God's message with their explanation of it?

I wonder also why God did not make his revelation more understandable. Great thinkers who gave themselves to lifelong study like Augustine, Luther, and Calvin failed to reach harmonizing conclusions. Such matters as the relation of faith and works, security of the believer and caution against falling away, election and choice, and many other vital issues have never been clarified and made consistent -- for me, at least.

Because I cannot answer such questions does not disprove the existence of God or mean that there is no answer. We must allow for his infinite nature and recognize his divine sovereignty which is beyond human comprehension.

Paul, a man of both intelligence and Spiritual guidance, concludes a review of God's working among his people with this doxology: *"O the depth of the riches, the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond our tracing out! 'Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his adviser?' 'Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen"* (Romans 11:33-36). Must we not all add our 'Amen'?

In our search for systematic theology, we tend to overlook the simple answer that Paul gave us. In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul gives some answers that are generally discounted. He tells us that God has made his power and divinity known to each thinking person and has written his law on the heart of each person of good will. Every person on

earth can know he should revere the almighty Creator and do good will to his fellowman. Our problem has been in trying to make that into a system of detailed patterns, forms, rituals, and sacraments to be authorized, administered, specified, and supervised by a religious system.

Religion Is Its Own Worst Enemy!

Religions are based on the unseen. They involve the mysteries of spiritual beings and inexplicable happenings, all of which may be real or imaginary. There are the pagan concepts of controlling mystical forces like the sun, moon, stars, constellations, zodiac, horoscope, and scientific mysteries like thunder, lightning, and storms. These have been associated with high places, mountains, and the sky. This provides a fertile field for mystics, monastics, hermits, and persons with mental and emotional disorders to claim visions, revelations, seances, communication with the dead, memory of a previous existence, inspired oracles, and prophetic utterances. The effects on those who make such claims range from total debasement and privation to delusions of grandeur and power.

Much of religion is based upon fear, and its practice is an attempt to escape the wrath of an angry god by sacrifices of appeasement. Although this perverted concept was made a part of the Christian faith by the medieval church, Christianity reverses the pagan concept by depicting a benevolent God who offers a sacrifice for man in order to save and bless him.

Although religions have been inhibiting and oppressive generally, some have been licentious. There have been temple prostitutes, and pagan fertility rites have given license to sexual promiscuity. Sexual perversions have even been sponsored by Christian cults, and more accepted Christian groups which allow bigamy, promiscuity, and homosexual practices, or demand celibacy of others. Popular people like Oprah and Madonna become experts of theology upholding faith while living with men out of wedlock. Our President's disgraceful conduct is termed by many as a peccadillo, a slight offense.

Religions rule civil governments and civil governments persecute religions. Those supposedly crusading under the banner of God have felt divine approval and license to hate, slander, misrepresent, vanquish, rob, rape, torture, and kill those who oppose their religious views. "Holy wars" (what an oxymoron!) have been many, and they still plague our world. When one is *so right religiously* in his own estimation, it becomes easy for that person to feel that he can show love to God by misrepresenting, hating, and destroying others.

Much of Christianity as we see it is like Half-and-Half coffee creamer. It is neither cream nor milk and cannot be labeled as either. It is less cream and more milk. What is paraded as Christianity is a homogenized mixture of Biblical truth and paganism, tradition, and imagination, with the former being the least ingredient.

Theologians and preachers have added to the confusing and unappealing image. Without being too judgmental, we can detect pride, greed, grasping for power, ignorant zeal, hollow cheer leading, emotional imbalance, and flawed characters both on the local level and on the networks.

The shameful defacing of the image of Christ in his church makes Christianity distasteful for many people, but it does not prove Christianity to be invalid. Christ does rule in the hearts of many sensible and devout disciples in spite of their group affiliations. They claim no perfection except as it is accounted to them by the grace of God. They are the salt of the earth still influencing the world to make it a better place. They do this by daily living more than by impressive rituals, attention-gaining works, and being the loudest and most insistent of their

own correctness. Religion is a manner of life rather than a system of theology. It gives the only worthwhile and lasting meaning to life.

Even the cynic can find Micah's appraisal of the will of God appealing: *"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* (Micah 6:6-8).

Half Empty or Half Full?

We say the optimist sees the glass as half full while the pessimist sees it as half empty. Motivational people urge us to see the full part and always project the smiley face. That is good advice unless it is a denial of the emptiness that is there. The balanced life is realistic, seeing the good and the bad, the positive and the negative, life and death, happiness and unhappiness, etc. – the factors that we work through in life..

Solomon enumerated factors that we must consider in balancing our lives. *"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; a time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; a time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace"* (Ecc. 3:1-9).

In this generation many go to counselors because they do not know how to deal with the negatives, the half empty part of life. It becomes easy to turn to self-gratification in denial of the emptiness. Countless persons who live in the empty part of life seek escape through constant distraction and entertainment, alcohol, and other drugs. Humor and laughter are vital in dealing with the shortcomings of life but they must not be a denial of them. Being able to laugh at one's self is an asset.

Others live a life of quiet desperation. I have followed much of that route. Too much of life was spent in "temporary arrangement" while looking for better times which would surely come. It is like the struggling farmer who always thinks he will have a better crop next year or like the losing team thinking next year will be the winning season. We may live from paycheck to paycheck thinking easier times will come. That is the pitfall of credit cards, though I have avoided it. Instead of realizing that life is today, we tend to think it will begin after this or that happens.

A person is not happy because of his race, age, where he lives, how much money he has, or whether he has solved all problems. "Those who wish to sing always find a song" (Lue Jenkins). The heart must be tuned for happiness by adjusting to and dealing with the realities of life instead of living in denial. I have sat at the bedside with many disciples who were terminally ill. Almost all of them are in denial that death is near. Few make mention of what to expect on the other side. With one such elderly woman, I talked about what to look forward to soon. It must of shocked her, for she made dramatic recovery!

The possibilities of our dealing with the positives and negatives are beautifully expressed in Edna St. Vincent Millay's

Renascence:

*"The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky, --
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That can not keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat – the sky
Will cave in on him by and by."*

Happiness is not found in being pre-occupied constantly with increasingly exciting entertainment and the acquisition of the newest "toys." Those can become numbing, boring, and unfulfilling while producing spiritual couch potatoes. The simple joys of relationship with family and friends, the feeling of peace with God, the willingness to forgive and to say "I am sorry," the satisfaction of worthwhile service, the quiet of solitude and meditation, and communing with nature can best fill life's glass and enable us to deal with the remaining emptiness. Yet our present lifestyle gives little place for those things. Our attention is constantly bombarded on every hand by louder and more shocking demands for our minds.

On the farm my brother and I would move our bed outside for the summer and sleep under the stars. Due to the urban life of this generation, I suspect that few people are aware any more of the magnificence of the very sky above us. Although the farm life was not monetarily rewarding, it paid well in developing a love for, and closeness to, nature which can nurture meditation, awe, healing, and peace. William Wordsworth felt this and expressed it for us simply:

*"My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began;
So is it now, I am a man;
So be it when I grow old,
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."*

The insecure teenager wants to be different from the crowd -- by dressing and acting just like his/her peers! Snicker at that as we may, yet it takes many "grown-up teenagers" most of a lifetime to outgrow that vanity. It has been called *keeping up with the Joneses*. You may wonder why the older set seems not as interested in the latest styles of clothing, the current trend in automobiles, or the most impressive houses. At last, they see the vanity of pretensions. They are no longer competing. William James observed, "To give up our pretensions is as blessed a relief as to have them gratified." Early recognition of that is evidence of early maturity!

Having loved ones and engaging in helpful, rewarding activities make life worth living. As long as we have these, we have a will to live. My concern about dying lies mostly in thinking of leaving Lea dependent upon others and in thoughts of leaving unfinished work. In high school I also was impressed with Keats' sonnet expressing those feelings. I memorized it.

*"When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,*

*And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
O unreflecting love! -- then on the shore
Of the whole world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink."*

The octogenarian has enjoyed the freshness of morning and worked through the heat of the day. Being tired from the long day, the twilight brings few regrets but offers promise of rest. Again, it was while in high school that I memorized William Cullen Bryant's advice:

*"So live that when thy summons comes to join
The innumerable caravan that moves
To that mysterious realm where each shall take
His chamber in the silent halls of death,
Thou go not, like the quarry-slave at night,
Scourged to his dungeon, but, sustained and soothed
By an unfaltering trust, approach thy grave
Like one who wraps the drapery of his couch
About him, and lies down to pleasant dreams."*

Solomon's concluding exhortation offers little cheer:
"Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole

duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil" (Ecc. 12:13f). We who are privileged to access the grace of God by faith see beyond judgment and vanity and see the meaning of life fulfilled in eternity. And what could be more cheering?

I am still graciously blessed with a peaceful sense of well-being and an optimism for the present generation. My aim in this writing has been to help you understand why we older ones may seem like aliens in this generation. Recognizing cultural and spiritual roots in us may enable you to see a better path for yourself. I apologize for making it such a platitudinous rambling.

I can remember when Charles Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic in his single-engine *Spirit of St. Louis*. I have seen a shuttle that returned from space. I have been a guest in the home of Charles Duke who walked on the moon. Eighty years of constant change! You, too, may have to adjust to as many changes lest you also appear as an alien from another planet.

We tend to oppose what we do not understand, but all change is not for the worse. Each generation faces new issues demanding new thought. There are many good people in this world. Join them in making it better.

May God bless you with fourscore years of happiness in his service. []

Liberating Books!

Some of you may not know what books we handle, so here is a list. All these books I class as **liberating** in that they give some redirection from our traditional concepts. This is more a ministry than a business, yet Lea and I need to sell some books to supplement our Social Security. (Our monthly bill for medicine exceeds \$250.00!). We are trying to hold to our original nominal prices.

You may access these books at our web site, and we

still offer *Free In Christ* free for distribution if you wish to pass along more than you can afford to buy. Yet we must sell some books in order to continue.

We depend upon you to advertise and distribute the books. **Remember, books make excellent gifts.**

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Our Heritage of Unity and Fellowship, Writings of Carl Ketcherside & Leroy Garrett, (\$10.00)

The Death of the Custodian, Ketcherside, (\$5.00)

The Twisted Scriptures, Ketcherside, (\$6.00)

"I Permit Not A Woman" .. To Remain Shackled, Robert Rowland (\$9.95)

The Stone-Campbell Movement, Garrett (\$22.00)

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Beyond the Sacred Page, Edward Fudge (\$9.00)

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