

CONNECT

building future with God

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1 Gods that failed us

Gods that failed us:

#1 Lust

Touring Amsterdam, my wife Carla and I wandered through one of Europe's most famous red light districts, where girls of every race and body type were on display in windows like products for sale.

But what really surprised us was the nun walking down the street with her big white flyaway veil. Our guide said she was a real nun from an old church in the area that also ran welfare services for the prostitutes. I admired their kindness, and said, 'Right here are the two extremes our culture knows for sex and for women – the holy virgin and the sinful prostitute.'

'Right,' said Carla. 'But who said the pleasure of the body must be the sin of the soul? Who said spirituality had to be so un-sexy?'

Most people choose the 'sinful' option, laughing at religious rules as old-fashioned. Since the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, thou shalt do whatever turns you on, as long as you're consenting adults and hopefully condoms are involved. To many secular people, sex is seen as the greatest pleasure, and pretty close to the meaning of life. As one song put it:

'You 'n' me, babe, are nothing but mammals

So let's do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.'

Many people think Christianity is about repressing sexual pleasure and trying to control people's lives. Meanwhile, so many priests have been found guilty of child sexual abuse. And how many have gotten away with it due to cover-ups? This seriously damages the happiness and future life of children they were meant to care for, but it also seems to prove that no one can keep Christian rules – not even priests themselves. So religion looks hypocritical on the topic of sex.

Yet is the secular view really delivering what it promises? Take porn, for example. It used to be hard to find, but now it's two mouse-clicks away from anyone online, including children. It's a \$60 billion global industry making massive profits, but does anyone know what effect it is having? Some commentators say it's normal and healthy, but other researchers point to alarming trends. Studies have suggested that men who use porn tend to:

1. Compare their real-life partners to porn stars, and report being less satisfied with their partner's looks and love-making. (Pressure!)
2. Place more value on sex without emotional involvement. Some psychologists call this 'splitting', where the physical and emotional are split from each other. But isn't the best relationship one that is sexually exciting as well as emotionally deep and intimate?
3. Trust their partners less and care less about them and their feelings.¹ That's serious, if trust and caring are the basis of a good relationship!
4. Follow the addictive cycle. Men's counsellor Peter Baker writes that they can be deceived by 'the illusion of intimacy with another person', and really be 'caught in a vicious cycle of feeling lonely, using pornography in an attempt to make themselves feel better, finding it does not meet their needs'.²
5. Become bored and dissatisfied, and move on to harder, 'nastier' porn. This is often called the 'graduation effect'³. I won't spoil your day by going into details, but let's just say it can involve sexual aggression – slapping, gagging, hair-pulling, obstruction of breathing, being called names and worse, and one study found that 94% of the time it's women who suffer this aggression.⁴ This wasn't just a few weird people: the study was of mainstream films that sold or rented well. And child porn is becoming common.

What if porn was actually lessening people's chances of having a loving, sexy relationship in the real world? What if it was lowering the status of women, making them seem like objects? What if it was causing more loneliness, more selfishness, less understanding between people? What if this view of

love promised sexual freedom but actually hooked some people into addiction? That would be a sad irony.

Pastor Craig Gross of *XXXChurch.com*, who helps people with porn addictions, says that's what his clients tell him every day.

A psychiatrist friend recently suggested that the billion-dollar sales of Viagra may be partly because many men have watched so much porn they now find it difficult to become aroused by a real person (without silicone implants and so on), and to find them loveable.

Perhaps the problem is that most porn treats us as if we were just a body. It ignores the human spirit, the soul of a person.

Sometimes the church has made the opposite error: treating a person as if he or she were just a soul, without bodily needs. That has caused a lot of pain and unnecessary guilt. Yet when you look again at what the Bible actually says, the church should never have made that mistake. It has sometimes ignored the ancient wisdom it is meant to teach.

Most people don't know that the Bible contains a whole book of erotica, a collection of sexy love poems between a husband and wife. It's both sexy and intimate. For example, the woman writes about her man:

*My lover is bursting with life . . .
He has great golden arms like a statue's, decorated with jewels.
His horn is elephantine ivory, a sceptre studded with sapphires . . .
His mouth is sweetness itself.
He is totally desirable.
This is my lover and this is my friend. . . .*

Song of Solomon 5:10-16 (author's paraphrase)

See that? She loves his muscles and finds him fantastically well-endowed, and also enjoys their intimate friendship. He says similar things about her:

*Your smooth, golden thighs are ornaments shaped by a craftsman.
Your secret centre is a . . . source of pleasure. . . .
Your breasts are like twin deer, tender and sensuous to stroke
Your eyes are cool and calm like deep pools. . . .*

Song of Solomon 7:1-5 (author's paraphrase)

Their feelings and experience of love are important enough to be recorded in the Bible – which says something about how God values women and men. This would make sense if God created the human body and called it 'very good', not dirty and evil. And this woman has lover and friend all in one. That's pretty rare today. What on earth have we done to God's great gift of sex?

Back in Amsterdam, I got it. 'Forget the extremes of holy virginity or sinful sex,' I said to Carla. 'There is a balanced option. It's you!'

'What?' She gave me a funny look, but I was on a roll.

'No, it's you, a lover so superb I will always keep the details behind my smile, my deep friend, the person I pray with and our souls get naked without shame, intuitive mother, clever life partner. . . . Being in love with you is never boring; it just keeps getting better so that you're still my hot new girlfriend after sixteen years. Thank God for creating sexy, spiritual love. And thank God for you.'

Carla didn't say a word. She lightly kissed my cheek, grabbed my hand and pulled me forward into the night.

¹ Catherine Itzin (ed), *Pornography: Women, Violence and Civil Liberties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 290.

² Itzin, 1134.

³ Itzin, 260-262.

⁴ See the study by Ana Bridges and colleagues. See also Cordelia Fine, 'The Porn Ultimatum', *The Monthly*, September 2011, 16-21.

Gods that failed us:

#2 Greed

‘Greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures, the essence of the evolutionary spirit.’

Gordon Gekko, *Wall Street* (1987)

‘Someone reminded me I once said, "Greed is good". Now it seems it's legal. Because everyone is drinking the same Kool Aid.’

Gordon Gekko after the global financial crisis, *Wall Street II* (2010)

(This is designed to be layout-intensive, with very short snips of print, so that it's easy to read and draws the browsing reader in. It may actually spread across more pages than usual.)

As a recession spread financial gloom across the world, I decided it was time to check my attitudes to money. To be honest, I discovered I had some unhealthy ideas. After challenging them, I feel much better. See how you do.

- (pic of lottery) ‘If only I could win the lottery. . . .’

A psychological researcher studied twenty-two winners of a large US state lottery. He found their general happiness was no different from that of ordinary people, and in fact they reported *less* happiness in everyday events,¹ probably due to having higher expectations that were disappointed.

- (pic of global brands at a shop) ‘I need some retail therapy.’

There's the old saying, ‘Anyone who thinks money can't buy happiness doesn't know where to shop.’ But in fact ‘shopaholics’ or compulsive buyers have lower self-esteem, higher rates of depression, anxiety disorders, and substance use disorders. Maybe those new shoes or big boys' toys won't change your life.

- (pic of glamour brand billboard) ‘I saw the advertising. . . .’

Advertising entertains while it picks your pocket. It can be emotional manipulation. Ad executive Nancy Shalek said, ‘Advertising at its best is making people feel that without their product, you're a loser. Kids are very sensitive to that. . . . You open up emotional vulnerabilities and it's very easy to do with kids because they're the most emotionally vulnerable.’

Leave me alone to dream my own dreams and value what I value!

- (pic of family with all the brands) ‘I'm earning for the children.’

Providing is one way of showing love, and some people need to work long hours to feed, clothe and shelter their families. But some work long hours for the big new house and prestige cars, and this may well teach children that possessions are more important than family time.² These parents may give more gifts (often from guilt) and teach children to show love materially, forgetting about other love languages like quality time, words of affirmation, acts of service and physical touch. These children also see more TV, and more ads – which make them want more things.

By the way, being materialistic is not the same as being rich. You can have money-obsessed values even if you're poor – and that's unhealthy. And you can be rich and yet value relationships and other things more than money.

- (pic of target) ‘When we make it, I'll quit.’

Yet your target can keep moving. Take Jim Clark, computer entrepreneur. 'Before Silicon Graphics, Clark said a fortune of \$10 million would make him happy; before Netscape, \$100 million; before Healthon, a billion,' and eventually he said, 'Once I have more than Larry Ellison, I'll be satisfied.' (Ellison then had \$13 billion.)³ Most of us don't dream in those numbers, but it can be true that the more we get, the more we 'need'.

- **(model smiling with product)** 'It makes me happy. . . .'

Materialistic people like things that are socially impressive and expensive (like wanting a house that is better than your friend's) rather than for their own sake (like choosing a house that allows your children to pursue their interests, or because you enjoy a multi-ethnic, colourful suburb even if it's less prestigious) or for emotional significance (to live near your favourite people). This is part of the reason less materialistic people are happier. They're doing what *they* like just for fun, for its own sake and for interest and challenge, not for praise or reward. They have self-expression and *flow*. So they'll choose a hobby based on interest, not on whether it is fashionable, darling.

- **(man/ woman working late)** 'The price you pay. . . .'

The longer you work for money, fame and image, the more you may miss out on the non-material goals that really make you happy: personal growth, close relationships and community service.

- **(a model surrounded by photographers)** 'Because I'm worth it. . . .'

Why do you value yourself? Is it when you reach external standards like a level of wealth or income, an academic mark, a sporting score? Does it all hinge on compliments you get from people? A certain image or a partner of a certain look? If so, your investment is risky, because these things can be taken away. A shaky self-esteem can lead to emptiness which people may try to cover with a grandiose exterior, self-importance, vanity and the expectation of special treatment and admiration. This is called Narcissism. The strongest self-esteem comes from within and is based on you just being you. This can come from growing up with loving parents or role models, and from being loved for who you are. It can also come from spirituality: believing you are created and wanted by God. (A Christian would say God is dying to have you around forever.) That is immovable.

- **(a model playing chess)** 'A special kind of person.'

Rich people are smarter, more cultured and 'successful in everything' – at least that's what more materialistic people believe, in studies by Khanna and Kasser.⁴ But this is unrealistic. Some rich people do develop themselves highly (and so do some poor people), but Superman is a myth – people are people. Thinking otherwise can set you up for disappointment when you get rich, and make you feel inferior if you're not. The wise man wrote, 'Rich and poor have this in common: God made them all.' (Proverbs 22:2.)

- **(pollution/ natural scene)** 'Planet? What planet?'

More materialistic people are less interested in natural beauty and living simply. One study found they express negative attitudes to the environment, care little about living things and don't adapt their behaviour to ecology.

Professor Tim Kasser, in his excellent book *The High Cost of Materialism*, sums up: 'Our lovers, our children, our neighbours, our society and our planet are all affected when the desire for wealth, status, and image directs our behaviour.'⁵

Religions have always taught things like these, but we might have thought they were trying to control us and make life boring. Jesus said radical things like 'Watch out! Be on guard against greed of all kinds; a person's life is not made by how much they own.'⁶

What if God was trying to make us happy? Jesus again: 'I have told you this so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! I command you to love each other in the same way that I love you.'⁷

Aside from the good advice, this leaves me with a question. Madonna used to sing, 'I'm living in a material world/ And I am a material girl.' So why doesn't materialism satisfy? We are material, but could the spiritual part of ourselves be even more important in knowing who we are?

¹ Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002, 44.

² Kasser, 89.

³ Kurt Anderson, Kurt Anderson, 'Valley Guy', *New York Times*, 31 October 1999, 268.

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9407E7D91039F932A05753C1A96F958260&pagewanted=all>
New York Times, 31 October 1999.

⁴ Kasser, 53.

⁵ P. 87.

⁶ Luke 12:15 (author's paraphrase).

⁷ John 15:11-12 (author's paraphrase).

Gods that failed us:

#3 Fame

Wouldn't everyone like to be a Formula 1 star?

Sebastian Vettel's tyre changes take 4.2 seconds. No one tells him, 'Bring it in Thursday week, mate, and leave it for the day.'

I bet Lewis Hamilton never has his wife patting his knee and saying, 'Could you drive a bit more slowly, honey? You're not Lewis Hamilton.'

And Fernando Alonso never gets the dreaded envelope from some new speed camera.

I'd love to do it for a day or two. The excitement! Even one day of their salaries. But I'd still rather be me.

For one thing, I didn't pay \$240 million for a car with only one seat. And no cup-holders!

Would it be nice to have the crowd shouting your name after a hectic drive? Probably, but when my car comes to a stop, people shout, 'Daddy!' And they actually know me.

Would I trade my wife for a dozen bikini girls advertising spark plugs and spraying champagne on me? No way.

Fame is a poor substitute for love. A crowd may like their image of you, but to have someone know you intimately and love you is much deeper, and indescribably satisfying if you love them back. Fame can be a five-minute thing, but a good love relationship can last a lifetime.

How many times have we heard the story of the sad star? The actor or singer lives for the adulation of the crowd, feels unloved in his or her real-life relationships, becomes addicted, earns and spends lavishly but lives sadly, then dies young. You could probably easily name ten stars with some elements of that story: Michael Jackson, Princess Diana, Whitney Houston, Elvis, River Phoenix. . . . The list is long. And then there are the stars who joined the 27 Club, dying at that age because their lifestyles were so high-risk and self-destructive: Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix, Rolling Stone Brian Jones, Jim Morrison. . . . And the cliché story of the sports star who never quite feels alive without a stadium of voices singing his name, and hits the bottle/ drugs/ groupies.

Marilyn Monroe, probably the most desired woman in the world at the time, told a visitor who would listen: 'Have you ever been in a house with forty rooms? Well, multiply my loneliness by forty. That's how lonely I am.'

Even stars who survive seem to have huge struggles. Jenna Jameson, probably the most globally famous porn star, had a multi-squillion-dollar career but describes feeling fat and ugly, struggling with addictions and an eating disorder, and contemplating suicide: 'I still wasn't happy. . . . I needed someone. I couldn't do this alone. . . . [T]here were these moments - of being scared, of being sick, of being suicidal - where I needed to know that there was a warm, sentient human presence somewhere who would walk through my door . . . and reassure me that someone on this earth actually cared about me.'¹ How ironic that someone who 'makes love' for a living felt no love in her life.

What is that about?

Many stars had difficult family backgrounds, and perhaps that drove them to seek fame, but career success didn't seem to produce the happiness and balance they needed. Why?

These people are gods of popular culture. They are idolised, their pictures appear on our magazine, our walls, our phones. The public wants to know what they wear, whom they sleep with, what brand of toothpaste they use. They are an advertiser's dream, because people want to be them, or at least like them. People who meet them act as though they have just had a brush with a god.

And how many young people out there are desperate to get famous just like them? If they could just make it through the talent contest, *then* they'll be happy. *Then* they'll be loved. *Then* they'll be somebody, above us ordinary mortals who plod along off camera.

But will that actually work?

Not if fame is just a cheap imitation of love.

Journalist Philip Yancey has interviewed a lot of people, and thinks of them in two groups: servants and stars.

The 'stars' are usually models, sporting heroes, actors, musicians, billionaires, politicians. They are fawned over, and yet Yancey finds them much more self-doubting, neurotic, drug-addicted and screwed up than average. 'Most have troubled or broken marriages. Nearly all are hopelessly dependent on psychotherapy.'² So much for a self-centred lifestyle making anyone happy!

The 'servants' included a doctor who left a high-earning job to work for poor leprosy patients, aid workers in the saddest parts of Africa, people who volunteer, people who devote their time and money to causes, who truly believe that the best life is lived giving to others. Yancey came prepared to look up to these people as suffering saints who did good things but with gritted teeth. As it turned out, he found himself envying the happiness in their lives, their sense of calm, the strength in their inner selves. 'They work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, "wasting" their talent and skills among the poor and uneducated. But somehow in the process of losing their lives they have found them. They have received the "peace that is not of this world".'³

Obviously, not all stars of stage and screen fit this generalisation. Some stars seem to have the attitude of servants: I think of Bono using his public profile to lobby for the world's poorest people, and his lyrics to challenge values and beliefs. I'd like to think he's happier for it.

Yet some unknown people seem to act like stars. Perhaps they're taking Paris Hilton's advice: 'Put yourself on your own pedestal, and then everybody else will, too. Always act like you're on camera, and the spotlight's on you. Always behave like the centre of attention. Always act like you're wearing an invisible crown. I do. And it's always worked for me.'⁴ Whether it works for everyone or just irritates people could be a good question. And while we wish Paris all the best, has this behaviour produced stable, happy relationships in her life?

Why do we think it will work in ours?

Well, because our culture keeps promoting these people. When was the last time you saw a photo shoot in *Hello* magazine featuring a nurse who puts her heart into caring for little cancer patients? What about a teacher who works long hours to give opportunities and encouragement to children in a poor neighbourhood? What about a Dad who sits alongside piano practices and helps with maths and turns up to school concerts and *supports*?

Loving service is the secret of a happy life, according to Jesus of Nazareth.

(Not many people really took Him seriously on that. Not many do today.)

He worked in a poor, enemy-occupied country feeding struggling peasants, healing those too sick to work or live, teaching and inspiring people to give and overcome natural human selfishness, and to live with a great, broad vision that the human race was one big family, with God as a kind and generous parent.

He said, 'Whoever tries to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will find it.' (Luke 17:33, author's paraphrase.) That sound backwards to our culture, but the evidence is mounting that he was exactly right.

He famously said, 'The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' (Mark 10:45.)

His audience would have understood that the Son of Man is a very important king who will one day rule the whole world. Jesus is saying he is the Son of Man, and yet he is here to serve and – unthinkable – give His life like a battlefield hero to save others. (More on that later.)

What if His words were not just religious mumbo-jumbo?

What if He was trying to give us a major secret of happiness?

¹ Jenna Jameson, *How To Make Love Like A Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale*, 365.

² Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 59.

³ Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* 60.

⁴ Paris Hilton, with Merle Ginsberg, *Confessions of an Heiress*, p.7.

Gods that failed us:

#4 The occult.

When my friend took me to a spiritualist church, I didn't know what to expect.

At the front door, an old lady with a flower in her hat said to my friend, 'Hello, David. Did it take you long to get here from Springwood this morning?'

David looked shocked that she knew his name and home suburb when they had never met. He said, 'Do you know me?'

'No, my spirit guide told me to expect you,' she said, pointing up into the air.

I instantly started looking for the trick, staying analytical.

I introduced myself and another old lady said, 'A presence walked in with you – your grandfather.'

'Oh?' I said, trying to be polite. Everyone had two grandfathers, so that would be a safe guess – but then again, some are still alive.

'Yes, a tall man with a kind face.'

Big deal. I'm tall; strangers trust my face.

'And he's bald.'

No prizes for guessing that – I am, too.

'And he's a teacher, interested in education. And he loves boats. Rowing boats. Do you believe me now?'

Whoa! My Pop had been a teacher and education director, and a rowing champ. Some of my best times as a teenager were spent in a boat with that strong, smart man of faith, talking about what matters most in life. I had almost zero interest in God at that time, but he always gently encouraged me to consider Christianity, and in fact I found Christian faith for myself a few years after he died. But how did this woman know about Pop? I had never met her, and this was my first time visiting her city thousands of kilometres from my home.

Seeing that she really had my attention now, she said, 'Your grandfather has a message for you. He said keep searching and you will find the truth.' Then she walked away, her work done.

That seemed nice, and I fully intend to stay open and keep searching for more truth. But in fact I found two old lies at that church.

First, their motto was, 'There is no death. There are no dead.' They taught that people who died would pass straight into life 'on the other side', where they would watch over us. I had heard the same idea in the ancient biblical story of Adam and Eve, where the snake says, 'You will not die.' This directly contradicts what God has said: if you disobey God's will 'you will surely die'.¹ The Bible often repeats the important idea that humans are mortal, that death is the 'wages' or consequences of sin, and that eternal life comes only as a 'gift of God' through Jesus.²

Second, they said that after my body died, my soul would become part of God. All I had to do in this life was grow the little part of God in me. I was good! I was divine! I could be proud of who I was! That was flattering, but I know it's not true of me. I do have good points, but I can be selfish, unkind or unwise. I can accidentally hurt people I love. I struggle with faults in my own character. Christianity explains that, saying I'm made in God's image, but also fallen. I'm not a Do-It-Yourself-God. I know from the inside that I'm an imperfect person who needs grace, a sick man who needs the Doctor, a guilty person who needs forgiveness, a sinner who needs a Saviour. Then I remembered what else the snake had said to Eve: 'You will be like God, knowing good and evil.'³

The Bible is very clear that we shouldn't try to contact friends and relatives who have died. It warns against consulting anyone who 'practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, cast spells, or is a medium or spiritist or consults the dead'. It says these things are 'detestable to the Lord'. The way God says He will speak with us is through prophets, putting His words in their mouths.⁴ So God makes very clear what ways He will speak and what ways He won't. Occult spirituality is incredibly popular. It's promoted in entertainment like the Harry Potter series,

Charmed, The Ghost Whisperer, Medium, Supernatural, A Gifted Man and many more. Some bands are Satanists, too.

And real people believe it. One study found 88% of British teens have been involved in one or more occult practices. About 90% of Britain believes in some aspect of the paranormal; only 2% of readers of *The Times* were openly sceptical. About 40% of adult Americans believe they have had contact with someone who has died.

Why? Curiosity. Spiritual hunger. A wish for more personal power. One journalist said, 'Many attribute this increased interest to the spiritual needs of a materialist and power-obsessed age: rather than turn to a low-image religion, the spiritually hungry . . . turn to the occult which promises power and excitement.'⁵ The church may at times have pushed rules and traditions rather than showing people how to find a dynamic, life-changing faith in a living God, and so it has been eclipsed. One Christian leader said, 'I think we've got a great spiritual vacuum. The Church has largely lost its role in offering spiritual direction. Materialism has taken hold and many people have found that unsatisfying. . . . Other forms of spiritual experience are being investigated and the occult with all the excitement attached to it draws people into a growing interest in the dark side.'⁶

And a dark side is becoming more and more apparent. Social workers and psychologists are reporting that 'occulture' can be associated with depression, and young dabblers in spiritualism, tarot cards (which are meant to be guided by spirits) and black magic can feel miserable, vague, anxious and discouraged without really knowing why. In extreme cases it can go with a preoccupation with death and self-mutilation. Media reports keep coming: teenage members of a German Satanic cult strangle a 15-year-old classmate. Four Greek Satanists, including an 18-year-old woman, confess to murdering a 14-year-old girl and planning human sacrifices. A Health Department enquiry in Britain documents cases of ritual child abuse. These things sound extreme and unbelievable to people who have seen only the apparently innocent end of the occult, but as people read more and move towards the harder end of the occult, the dark side becomes more apparent, often resulting in fear and depression and a sense of being trapped.

Jesus warned people kindly but very frankly: 'Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. But you will recognise them by the fruits they bear.'⁷ He said they would 'deceive many people', partly because they are able to 'perform great signs and miracles'.⁸ So Jesus expected them to do supernatural things. Yet there are two sides to the supernatural.

Jesus took the dark side very seriously. He met people possessed by evil angels. Once He met two extreme cases – violently insane men, harming themselves and threatening others, unable to be restrained, screaming out their rage. Jesus spoke to the satanic spirits who controlled them, and one said, 'My name is Legion: there are many of us.' (Mark 5:9) In the Roman army, a legion could be up to 5,000 men. This suggests Satan has an army of fallen angels, who show their hatred for God by harming what God loves most – human beings. Jesus expelled the demons and the two men were left sane and happy – proof of God's power over the dark side and God's kindness and wish to heal and bring peace.

It's one thing to feel all spiritual, but the truth can be another matter. The Bible gives clear tests of which side a prophet is on: 'If a prophet does not acknowledge Jesus, that person is not from God.'⁹ 'If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light.'¹⁰ That is, real prophets will speak about who Jesus is and will agree with what the Bible says. I noticed that the spiritualist church said Jesus was a great man who taught what they believe, but they did not acknowledge Him as God in human form. Everyone wants to say Jesus agrees with them, but that is different from carefully studying and teaching the Bible.

I am no saint, but I can say my relationship with Jesus is a massive source of encouragement, guidance, challenge and simple joy and peace.

I did find out one truth at the spiritualist church. The truth is that lies can be attractively presented by nice people, but they're still lies. I know that wasn't my Pop speaking, for two reasons. He always drew my attention to Jesus and the truths of the Bible. And he's resting in God and

awaiting resurrection on the last day. I can't wait to see the smile on his face when he sees me resurrected.

¹ Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-5.

² E.g. Romans 6:23.

³ Genesis 3:5.

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:10-22.

⁵ Rachel Storm, *The Independent*.

⁶ Mike Morris of Evangelical Alliance.

⁷ Matthew 7:15-16.

⁸ Matthew 24:11-24.

⁹ 1 John 4:2-3.

¹⁰ Isaiah 8:20.

II The God that works

5. Can we know God?

I'm beginning to know God.

I hope that doesn't sound arrogant, because it's actually pretty humbling. It may even sound nutty to some people – but let me tell you one story and you decide.

Backing my Toyota out of the garage, I heard a baby's voice screaming and felt the crunch of little bones under my wheels. I braked too late and ran to the back of the car, and there was Marcus, our sixteen-month-old, crushed and dying in a pool of blood.

Then I woke in fright.

I looked around the dark bedroom at my calmly sleeping wife, the digital clock redly glowing 3:19 a.m. As the nightmare faded, reality had never looked better. Puffing as though I had run a 100m sprint, I started talking to God, just silently. I asked for care and protection for my family. Eventually my breathing slowed and I drifted off to sleep.

I woke up late and had a quick breakfast, thinking of the talk I had to give that morning at church. I was too focused even to remember my dream. My job was to load the children into the car while Carla prepared the bags of bottles and baby gear they needed for a day out. But the garage was small and crowded with books, so I always backed the car out before loading the children. Zoe was with her mother, and I locked Marcus into the dining room and headed for the car.

Sitting with the car in reverse and the handbrake off felt like a familiar scene - and I remembered my dream. But Marcus was safe – I had locked him into the dining room just twenty seconds before. Just in case, I checked all three mirrors, then turned my head and looked out the back window. Nothing. Hurry up!

Yet still I sat there arguing with myself, wanting to take my foot off the brake and hit the accelerator. Was my dream from God? Or was I just being an overly fearful parent? Aargh, I'd be late! I looked at my watch in frustration —then got out of the car anyway.

And there, behind the rear offside wheel, was my little boy. He was playing with Bear and his red car.

He saw me and shouted excitedly, 'Dadda! Car! Car!'

I scooped him up for a hug, though he wasn't the one who needed it. I'm not sure I was breathing.

How on earth did he get there? Through a closed internal door, across the lounge-room, out through the locked front door and screen door, across the stone front porch with its uneven surfaces and then down to a crawl to duck under the opening automatic garage door without my seeing him.

I didn't know he was even capable of that Houdini routine, let alone in less than half a minute.

What do you do next when you *haven't* killed your son? Er, you clip him into his seat and go on as though everything is normal, which it isn't. I was numb. I said a strangely mechanical thanks to God, got his sister and clipped her in.

When his mother joined us, some part of my brain told her what had nearly happened. I was emotionally numb – the classic male coping mechanism. Later that day I told people about it, but it still felt like someone else's story from a book.

I've heard so many claims of miracles. Some from people I find a bit nutty. Some from well-intentioned people who seem so high on faith they've let go of critical thinking. For example, 'God healed me from cancer *twice*.' Really? What does your doctor think? I don't want blind, irrational belief, and I tend to be careful about claims like these.

I don't see miracles every day. I don't pretend to. And I don't feel I need them. I want a faith that is rational, not the flipped-out 'God sends me messages in my tea leaves' variety. I do believe God can do miracles, or temporarily 'break' the natural laws He has set up. The Bible describes miracles. Sceptics say it's funny that all the miracles happened before there were cameras to record them, but even if miracles happened today, they could still say it was special effects. I believe that

God still acts and intervenes, but that most of God's gifts arrive quietly through natural systems the Creator originally set up. So I thank God for food, even though it doesn't fall from the sky like manna.

With Marcus, though, I couldn't find a natural explanation. Most people have crazy dreams that don't come true, and we probably only remember the ones that do. Psychologists tell us most people dream every night, but I don't usually remember mine, and I wouldn't really take them very seriously if I did: I think most dreams are just my subconscious mind cleaning house or tidying its filing system. My mind could have just popped up that dream, I guess, but it hadn't before. Why would it happen *that* night? What are the chances?

I can only conclude that God was communicating with me. I'd use the word miracle. Call it a minor suburban miracle if you like, but it shows me beyond reasonable doubt that there is a God who sees the future and loves my son. My mind was convinced, and that afternoon my heart finally caught up in a Kleenex moment of relief and gratitude.

Yet miracles are slippery things. They raise as many questions as they answer. Why us, in a world where so many children suffer? That week we visited praying friends in hospital where they had just lost a young child from a dreaded disease. Other friends have had children grow up to live destructive, tragic lives. How do I tell this story to them?

Why did we get the miracle? How did God choose when to intervene?

And what if God had not chosen to do a miracle that day? Would I still trust?

Miracles don't remove all doubt. Reading the Bible stories about miracles, you see people eating loaves and fishes or being healed – and yet still walking away from Jesus when he tries to teach them something a bit challenging. You see Israelite slaves freed from the greatest land army of their day, eating manna and enjoying shade from a cloud that followed over them day and night – and yet they rebelled against Moses, who was speaking to them for God. When people demanded miraculous signs before believing, Jesus refused, saying that the only sign they would see would be his teaching and his death (see Matthew 12:38–40; John 6:30–36).

Jesus' teaching? Jesus' death? This may not sound like much, but what if it's the very best way God can communicate with us? What if it's God saying, 'I'm *dying* to know you – literally. I'm *dying* to have you with me forever.' That would show amazing love.

God's greatest statement was the life and death of Jesus. The more I understand that, the more I see of God's justice and kindness. The early Christian preacher Paul observed that in his day 'Jews demand miraculous signs, and Greeks demand their "wisdom", but we preach about Christ crucified – a scandal to the Jews and nonsense to the Greeks; but to those who are called (both Jews and Greeks), the cross shows Christ as the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:22–24, paraphrased).

There are many things about God I can't explain. I can't always justify his actions or inactions in the universe, but I won't let my limited knowledge stop me from enjoying what I do know, or from trusting God's kindness behind the rough and tumble of life. After all, this God has topped any miracle by becoming human, living an exemplary life, and dying for the sins of the world.

I don't know everything about God, and I don't expect to, any more than I expect a butterfly to understand my thoughts and feelings. I could spend eternity getting to know such a fascinating, multi-layered personality, and I intend to: it will be infinitely intriguing. I may not even know 1% of 1% of God. But I know enough to trust that God is good, and to love God.

'The secret things belong to Yahweh our God
But the things which are revealed belong unto us and our children forever.'
(Deuteronomy 29:29, author's paraphrase.)

6. How does your story end?

Jacob Brodzky was a shy young man, the son of a Russian Jew who owned a bookstore.

Almost since he could remember, he had been totally in love with Lila, a French girl who was outgoing and funny and loud.

When his father died, he took over the bookstore and married his sweetheart, moving her into the flat upstairs. He loved the bookish life. He was happiest when he was alone with a new book and his thoughts, or quietly talking to a fellow book-lover.

Lila was beautiful, bubbly and adventurous. Life above the bookstore was killing her. She wanted to go out and see the world.

They tried to compromise. He would go with her to parties, but would end up standing in the corner feeling bored and wishing he were back in his study. She would stay home with him sometimes, but she could only read for so long before she had to talk, and she knew he would rather be quiet. She would sit there feeling foolish and longing for conversation. So they agreed that she would go to parties and he would stay home.

One night Brodzky found her packing her bags. She had met a man who told her she was beautiful and had a superb singing voice, and who had asked her to come with his vaudeville company to tour Europe. 'I'm sorry,' she said, gently kissing his cheek.

Brodzky was crushed. The love of his life was about to walk out of their home.

As she left, he handed her a key to the bookstore and said, 'You had better keep this. One day you will realise that your love is not so much less than mine and you cannot escape it. You will come back, and I will be waiting.'

As her taxi pulled away, he stood sadly looking out over the snow.

He withdrew emotionally into the tiny world of his shop. He took to reading as some people take to drinking. Perhaps he boarded up the door to his heart and lived totally in his head, trying to avoid the pain.

He was legendary for his amazing knowledge. Customers would only need to mumble some detail about the plot of a book and he would walk them to the shelf, reach down a book, and hand it to them with a courteous manner and sad eyes. Fifteen years passed like this, with him living (if that is the word for it) inside his own head.

Then one year at Christmas-time, Lila did return. As the beautiful middle-aged woman opened the door and came into the bookshop, Brodzky was in his own world and clearly did not recognise her. She was shocked, but controlled herself.

'Can I help you?' he asked, courteous but not really there.

'Ah, yes, I need a book, but I've forgotten the title,' she began. 'It's about childhood sweethearts who love only each other. They marry, and live in a flat above a bookstore. But the wife is ambitious and leaves to pursue her dream. She has a glittering career, but she always keeps the key he gave her, and knows that when she has satisfied her ambition, she will return to him. Of all the other men she has known, no one can love her like he did.'

His face was still blank. 'Hmmm,' he said faintly.

'You remember it,' she said. 'You must remember it, the story of Lila and Jacob.'

There was a long, awkward pause. 'It seems somehow familiar. I think it is something by Tolstoy.' And he turned and walked to the shelves.

Lila dropped the key and ran from the shop.

Jacob pulled a book down from the shelf, and was puzzled to see his customer had left.

Did you enjoy that dark story, or do you feel a bit cheated and angry? (If so, don't blame me. It's based on a 1931 story by Tennessee Williams called 'Something by Tolstoy'.)

Were you expecting a happy ending? Did you think love would conquer all? Do you think real life will be like that? For you? For the world?

Why?

Serious question. If you think justice prevails and love and goodness win in the end, it is hard to get to that without believing in God. (Or Fate, which might be God by another name.)

Stories tell us a lot about our deepest beliefs.

Traditionally, a film without a happy ending would probably fail at the American box office. Screen-writing trainer Robert McKee says, 'Hollywood filmmakers tend to be overly (some would say foolishly) optimistic about the capacity of life to change – especially for the better.' By contrast, many French art films 'tend to be overly (some would say chicly) pessimistic about change', trying to express the 'futility, meaninglessness, or destructiveness'. These two styles of storytelling are driven by 'two diametrically opposed visions of life'.¹ America's culture has been shaped by its large number of Christian and Jewish immigrants, with their religious vision of heaven at the end of life – the ultimate happy ending. Meanwhile France has had a much stronger current of atheism, in which a happy ending is not at all sure.

There's a cold, hard reality here. If there is a God and you have faith, then however tough life is, you will find your happy ending some day. If there is not, then there is no one to guarantee your happy ending. Your life may well be sad, meaningless and brief, and even if it is long and happy, it will end in death and eternal loss. You may eat, drink, be glamorous, enjoy your body and others', but tomorrow you die.

Yet recently, Hollywood has been staring into the darkness, making bleak films that focus on grim experiences. There are still plenty of feel-good romantic comedies written to formula, but many films are gritty and don't offer us the comforting Disney ending. Some critics say September 11 has changed America's fairy tale. Others say they're just trying to surprise and break the formula of the traditional happy ending. Or could it also be that fewer Americans now believe in God, and are realising that this means there are no guaranteed happy endings? Previously, audiences wanted the happy ending talked about by the Judaeo-Christian faith that shaped their countries. They loved the special effects of magical realism, which are basically miracles without God. Yet this is logically impossible, even with a pinch of pixie dust in the dream factory.

The happy ending is not at all guaranteed without God. And maybe films are waking up to that dark reality.

Stories are central to the way humans think.² Stories are the core of our news, entertainment, legal system and history, and may reveal narrative software on the human brain. We think of our own lives in stories – unless we have 'lost the plot' for a while.

One of the major appeals of believing in God is that it helps me make sense of my life story. It assures me that there is some point to the story. It guarantees that, no matter how depressing things may get in the third act, there will be a happy ending. And a sequel – a belief in eternal life means I'll my story will never end, and I'll never run out of adventures and fascinating characters to meet.

Without God, you chase your dreams, you find love, you learn useful things, you come to know yourself and grow as a person, developing your own character, and have so much to offer – and then you die. Full stop. It's a waste and it makes no sense. It seems to me something deep in a human being rebels against this.

And what about justice? Let me pitch you a film script. A young politician defeats his enemies, has them executed, kills millions of his own people in a civil war, and becomes leader of his country. He hides billions of their funds in secret bank accounts and lives like a prince as his people starve. He sends the army to kill anyone who complains. He hands power to his son and dies in his sleep. We could set the film in Romania, Africa, North Korea. . . . What do you think? Actually, I hate it. Wouldn't you want the dictator to face justice, rather than going to his grave laughing that he got away with it? If you hate that injustice, how wrong would it be if real life was like that? We are somehow wired up to know right and wrong and to expect justice to prevail. But the only thing that could make sense of that belief is the existence of God.

This doesn't absolutely prove there is a God, but belief in God certainly helps make sense of the great big story of life.

¹ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, structure, style and the principles of screenwriting* (London: Methuen, 1999), 59.

² See Helen Fulton, with Rosemary Huisman, Julian Murphet and Anne Dunn, *Narrative and Media*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

7. Reasons to believe?

Some people think faith is just an emotional thing, a superstition that goes against logic and evidence.

For me, faith involves reason. I can't *prove* God exists (and I wouldn't want to *force* anyone to believe anyway) but I think there are logical signposts pointing that way. Can I tell you two that impress me?

The Goldilocks Planet

Space is not friendly to human life. It has extreme temperatures, fatal radiation, no air, and gigantic planets that could crush us. But here we are enjoying our day on our little blue planet. The more astronomers look for life on other planets, the more they notice how many things had to go right to allow us to be here now.¹

First of all, we're the right distance from the sun. Venus is closer and is 460° Celsius! Mars is further and freezing. A 2% difference and we'd die.

And Earth spins at the right rate. Compare poor old Mercury, right near the sun but its dark side is -185° because it spins so slowly. Luckily, we get even temperatures and darkness for sleeping – at least on most parts of the planet. (Hello, Iceland!)

Many planets have long, skinny orbits, and they boil when they're near the star and freeze when they're far away. Our orbit is almost a perfect circle.

If our planet were five times as big, we'd weigh five times as much! Good luck getting out of bed, or pumping the blood from your legs back to your heart!

Earth's magnetic field is just right to protect us from dangerous radiation like the solar wind, a stream of electrically charged particles from that huge nuclear explosion we call the sun. Phew!

Jupiter is like a big rugby player blocking asteroids that could wipe us out.

We could list many more factors.

Astronomer Hugh Ross² describes 140 things that have to be just right for life to exist, and 922 things to let a planet support life. He found the chances of them all going right at once was 1 in 10³¹¹. That looks small, but it's the number of atoms in the known universe *times* the number of atoms in the known universe *times* the number of atoms in the known universe *times* one hundred million billion billion billion billion billion billion billion.

Do you feel lucky to be alive? Maybe blessed is a better word.

DNA

Our DNA uses chemical 'letters' to 'spell' out the plans for everything in our bodies. There are two main stories about how we got it.

One says it was random: mutations made it, and natural selection chose what to keep.

The other says God designed it.

Let's think about random writing.

Does your phone ever type bizarre SMS texts when it's in your pocket? Mine sometimes does. Let's imagine my wife Carla finds my phone and it has a sent message that says, 'I love you, Madeline!' I tell her that the phone accidentally typed it, but she starts working out the odds of that. There are 26 keys for the English letters, and let's add some basic punctuation and call it 30 keys to keep the numbers easy. So getting 'I' would be one chance in 30. 'I' followed by a space would be $1/30 \times 1/30 = 1$ in 900. 'I', then a space, then 'L' would be $1/30 \times 1/30 \times 1/30$. That's one chance in 27,000.

My chances of getting to the end of the word 'love' are 1/729 million! (Your chances of winning the UK National Lottery are estimated at 1/14 million.)³

Getting 'I love you' would be one in 590 million million. And 'I love you, Madeline' would be one in 349 thousand million million million.

³ The odds of winning the UK National Lottery have been estimated at about 1 in 14 million.

www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A2390032

⁴ Charles Kittel and Herbert Kroemer, *Thermal Physics (2nd ed.)*. (W. H. Freeman Company, 1980), p. 53.

⁵ See Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006). Dr Collins is no fan of recent creationism or intelligent design; he is a theistic evolutionist. See also *Belief: readings on the reason for faith* (New York: Harper One, 2010).

8. God, why do we suffer?

(pic of a smashed car)

David is only half-asleep because his son Michael is not home. Michael is a great kid, top of his school year, a football captain, a loving son and brother. There is no need to worry. Michael is a responsible boy, and he's with good friends celebrating the end of school.

The phone rings. It's a police sergeant. Does David own a silver sedan?

Later David is watching a machine breathe for his son, and the doctor says brain damage is indicated. Two of Michael's friends are also in intensive care. One got out without a scratch. He is distraught, but says Michael wasn't drinking heavily.

David sleepwalks through the following days, just trying to survive.

Michael's condition worsens, and he dies. There are no words. The sun will not get up tomorrow. Why would it bother?

The funeral happens in the church where Michael was christened. A young priest nervously reads words out of a book. The music touches something in David, and at least there is a long line of friends to hold him and share some warmth as the miserable little blue planet orbits further and further from the sun.

The hospital chaplain stays afterwards, and sits with David as he cries so hard he worries he'll dehydrate. He helps him make a list of practical things he needs to do.

In the weeks after the funeral, he drops in regularly.

In one of their conversations, David barks at the chaplain: 'Where was your God? Was He doing more important things? Or is the Old Man just not up to the job anymore?' Listening to himself, he's surprised how loud and rude he is being, but he doesn't give a damn.

The chaplain listens calmly, breathes, then says, 'Good questions.' But he doesn't try to answer them. Probably he has no answers. But he does ask David when he last ate a meal, and buys him a takeaway. David is confused. God takes my son but gives me Chinese food.

Weeks later, David is still dropping in to see the chaplain, just for a dose of kindness and listening, not religion. Yet he is desperate to understand *why*. He says, 'Come on, you never answered my question. How can you believe in God? You see tragedies every working day.'

The chaplain said, 'Why do you want to know about God?'

'Come again?' David said, 'I thought you'd want to tell me about God.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Well, so I can find comfort in faith and be able to talk to a kind Father in heaven, and all that stuff. Why, don't you believe? Have you seen too much suffering?'

The chaplain said, 'I love seeing people connect with God and dump all their pain and worry into those big hands. But I don't want to preach at you.'

'Oh, good, well, I'm asking. Preach away.'

'Well, can I ask a question? Do you think you're free?'

'What?'

'Are you free to do what you want with your life? To love whom you love, to find some people annoying and stupid? To love some music and hate certain paintings? To value what you value, vote how you vote? Can you think and feel what you want?'

'Ah, yes. I'm free. You're going to argue that God made us free and we cause our own problems.'

'Kind of. . . . Did you control Michael?'

'No, we didn't need to. He was a smart kid, made good choices, and he was going to have a fantastic life. OK, he did fight with his younger brother sometimes, and he was always running late and rushing around madly, but he was an awesome kid.'

'At what age did he become free?'

David thought for a bit. 'Um, he was probably always free. When he was first sitting up in his high chair, he was a good eater, though I had to push him to eat some things, but after his first bite

of peas he screwed up his face and refused ever to eat them again. I could get grumpy, I could try to hide them under potato, I could play games about the green aeroplane zooming into the hangar, I could punish him – he just would not eat peas. We were having World War Three about it one day because I felt it was my duty to Make Him Eat Peas. Then my wife said, “Don’t you love a man who knows what he wants? Mikie’s like someone else I know.” I just burst out laughing. He never ate peas after that. He ate beans, so who cares?’

‘So you respected his freedom.’

‘We encouraged it. Obviously we didn’t respect his freedom to play in the traffic: we drew clear boundaries on some non-negotiable issues, but even there we always explained why, and taught him to reason from cause and effect. We respectfully persuaded him. OK, sometimes I lost my temper and forced him to do things, but on a good day we never tried to control him. We loved the surprising things he would say and do. In high school, he’d try on crazy theories about Communism, and I’d argue with him, but usually in fun, because I’d be glad he was thinking for himself. Who wants a robot that you have to programme, a wheelbarrow that you have to push to do anything?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Right, OK, so now you’ll say God doesn’t want that either. Maybe. That could make sense. But all I can say is that this freedom has cost the human race a terrible price in suffering. Michael has paid it. I’m paying it.’

‘True,’ said the chaplain, sadly. ‘Very true.’

‘Is it worth it? Couldn’t God butt in sometimes and stop us doing really stupid things?’

‘Maybe. How would that work?’

‘I don’t know. Say a young kid wants to drink and drive. A big hand should come down and . . . No, he’d hate that. Absolutely resent that. That wouldn’t be living.’

‘An angel that gently stops the car starting?’

‘Maybe. . . .’

‘Let’s think that through. Should God stop dictators from starting wars? Sure, but how? By killing them? When? At birth, or when they first think about misleading their nation? Should He stop child abusers? By killing them? Paralysing them? Should He stop parents smoking in a car with their children? Should He stop us eating fatty food and damaging our arteries? Should He stop us eating ice-cream if we’re one kilo overweight? Where would it stop?’

‘Damn. You’re either free or you’re not, I guess.’

‘Right. And who would want God as a dictator? I believe that would be the opposite of who God is. I think He prizes our individuality.’

‘OK.’

‘And what if God found it almost impossible to make humans truly free and guarantee we would always do the sensible thing?’

‘I hear you. We’d do nothing bad, but we couldn’t choose anything good. If we fell in love and did great acts of kindness, it would all just be pre-programmed.’

‘Right’, said the chaplain. ‘I should go. I wish you well for your first day back at work tomorrow. Can I leave you with one more question?’

‘Why not? I need something to think about.’

‘You said suffering is the price we all pay for freedom. Do you think God could pay a price as well?’

A week later, David blows steam off his coffee. ‘If there is a God who loves us, then God pays a price just by watching us suffer. Any parent has been there.’

‘Agreed,’ says the chaplain.

‘And surely all that talk of God suffering on the cross is relevant here?’

‘That’s the greatest idea I know. God took our suffering, all of it for the entire human race. And our guilt for the way we’ve misused our free will. The whole lot. I think God wants to pay for it

all, and one day take it away from us. He taught us to pray that His will would be done on Earth, and to look forward to that.'

'Well, I've been talking to God. Nothing out of a prayer book, and not always nice. Actually I shouted at him at one point while I was driving in the car. Maybe I'm losing it. Maybe I've really ticked him off.'

'That's great.'

'What? I thought you'd be offended.'

'Jesus complained on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" '

'So complaining is good.'

'Honesty is good. Did it help?'

'Well . . . it felt right.'

See further

William A. Dembski, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009).

John Dickson, *If I were God, I'd end all the pain: struggling with evil, suffering and faith* (Sydney: Matthias Media, 2002).

William Lane Craig, *The Problem of Evil*, www.bethinking.org

9. What are good and evil anyway?

When she was five, Ayaan suffered genital cutting.

Her grandmother caught her and held her down, having paid a man to remove the young girl's clitoris using scissors. Ayaan was given gifts and a celebration, and taught to be proud of it.

Some 140 million girls have suffered similar treatment. Around 10% die soon after due to infections, shock or bleeding to death. Lifelong complications can include recurrent vaginal infections, chronic general pain, severe pain having sex (which is impossible in about 15% of cases), difficulty passing urine or menstrual blood, and childbirth complications – death rates for babies can be 55% higher when mothers have had the most severe type of mutilation.¹ There can also be severe psychological symptoms.

Ayaan feels genital cutting is often done by 'women trying to protect other women from pain', the 'pain of people being suspicious you are not a virgin. That is more traumatic, perhaps, than the physical pain. . . . So you cut off the clitoris of the woman, sew together what is left, you know she will not be seduced. It is a matter of control.'² It is not commanded by the Quran.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali sought asylum in Holland, got an education, and became a politician. She brought publicity to the fact that many immigrant girls and women suffer genital cutting in European cities or on family vacations in their home countries.

This caused huge controversy, and seriously challenged easy-going European liberalism, which would rather leave people free to do what they want. It is politically correct to be tolerant, especially of other cultures, and not to judge. Yet should we tolerate something that is intolerable? Don't we have a duty to judge crimes and evil practices? Is culture an excuse for brutality?

These are dangerous questions to ask. You may be bombed: Ayaan lives under twenty-four-hour guard. You may be called intolerant and judgmental.

It is fashionable to say there is no right and wrong, only what is right or wrong for you, or true for you, and you need to find out what that is. This is called moral relativism – the belief that morals are made up, not absolute.

Moral relativism sounds as though it makes a good neighbour in a multicultural city. But if you think about it, there are obvious problems. If you say there is no right and wrong, how can you claim you're right to say that? And if there's no right and wrong, how could you say hideous practices are wrong? You'd have to be tolerant of widow-burning, forced marriage, throwing acid in girls' faces for learning to read, and the punishment of girls for the 'crime' of being raped.³ Some cultures find these things right, and who are you to judge?

Who are you? You're a human being with a sense of right and wrong.

Yet there's no arrogance in that, because right and wrong is bigger than me, and it stays true whether I see it or not.

One strange thing I've noticed is that I sometimes know what I should do but I don't choose to do it. I should do more about the huge problems of people living in poverty, but sometimes I like a little luxury in my life, and I'm brilliant at making excuses for myself. Why is that? I see the right thing but don't choose to do it? What does that tell us about ourselves? Christianity would say I have a conscience but also moral weakness, that good and evil are at war *within me*. And it would offer the grace and forgiveness of God when I have chosen wrongly, and the help of God in choosing the good.

Where do we get right and wrong?

The young Ayaan got her morality from her family and her society, but then she found major problems with them. But what society can claim to have no moral blind spots? Ancient Rome, where men routinely had pre-teen boys as lovers? Western nations, which kept slaves and abused people in their colonies and made racist laws and sent their young men to pointless wars? Don't societies need people to challenge them and stand up against wrong? So our society can't be relied upon as our moral compass.

And remember, laws are made by politicians. Are they always moral? Really, our society can't provide strong enough motivation for us to be moral – only to *look* moral. How many times have you slowed down while passing a speed camera, then sped up again? Societies work on the principle of looking after each other, a social contract: I won't steal from you, partly because I don't want you to steal from me, and then we'll both be safer. But some people soon work out that if they can *look* like good neighbours and yet steal, then they get respect and protection from society – but also get other people's stuff for free. If you have the opportunity with little risk, why wouldn't you? It's not just some politicians who use cheating as policy. It's in biology. Animal behaviour is about protecting their selfish genes, not loving your neighbour as yourself.

We need to think for ourselves and find our own morals, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali came to do. But who can claim to be a moral guru? We all have so much to learn, and our moral thinking can too easily become selfish: I'm right, you're wrong.

Science can inform our moral choices, and medical science has a lot to say about the effects of female genital mutilation. Science is a huge blessing, encouraging us in logical thinking and showering us with useful technology, but it cannot give us morality. It can tell us how to build a nuclear bomb, but cannot tell us whether it is a good idea to have one, or to use one, or on whom.

Some people get their morality from a belief in God. Some people will say, 'What, fly a plane into a building and your reward will be living near God's throne with 72 doe-eyed virgins? Sounds wrong to me.' Fair comment. Many religions have been misused, dividing the world into 'us' and 'them' and encouraging 'us' to hate 'them'. Some religious communities have been anything but Good Samaritans. Some religious people are no more sophisticated in their moral thinking, no more motivated to care for the poor or the needy than atheists are. (Though, to be fair, many atheists grew in cultures influenced by religion, and attended schools which teach some of the ethics of religion, if not the faith.) As a believer, I have to admit these problems, but they are the usual problems with people anywhere: problems with human nature, not with God.

But I'm not talking about religion.

I'm talking about God.

If there are moral truths, then belief in God can explain how we got them. And it can certainly encourage us to follow them: you and I are children of God, so I had better treat you with respect, because God loves you. I am accountable to God for how I treat you. And I deserve respect and kindness too, because I am God's child. And God's law teach us how to be happiest by relating to God and to other people in the right way. It is a summary of wise living aimed to give people joy.

The important thing is to choose the right God.

At a recent press conference, I heard Ayaan Hirsi Ali say that she meets lots of Muslims who have rejected their religion but miss the idea of living forever, and feel sad about being alone and unguided without a Father in heaven. Ayaan herself is an atheist, but for people who are missing God she recommends that they try the Christian God, who is a God of love and much more 'user-friendly'. 'The modern Christian God is synonymous with love. His agents do not preach hatred, intolerance and discord; this God is merciful, does not seek state power, and sees no competition with science. . . . The Christianity of love and tolerance remains one of the West's most powerful antidotes to . . . hate and intolerance.' She also calls Jesus Christ a 'more attractive and humane figure'.⁴

I appreciate her generous honesty. And I think God wants to give love and truth and moral awareness to all his children, and to befriend them, whether we acknowledge Him now or not.

And God guarantees that good will win over evil in the end. This is not guaranteed in the jungle, where the fittest survive, not necessarily the kindest, and where might is right. Jesus said, 'The meek will inherit the earth.' (Matthew 5:5.) Not aggressive selfishness but gentle strength and kindness will have the last laugh.

¹ Banks, E; Meirik, O; Farley, T; Akande, O; Bathija, H; Ali, M (2006). 'Female genital mutilation and obstetric outcome: WHO collaborative prospective study in six African countries', *Lancet* 367 (9525): 1835-41.

² Alexander Linklater, 'Danger woman', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 17 May 2005.
www.guardian.co.uk/film/2005/may/17/religion.immigration

³ This list borrows from atheist neuroscientist Sam Harris, in *The Moral Landscape*, 42.

⁴ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad* (Free Press, 2010), xx.

10. The greatest story I know

I couldn't write a story as good.

Imagine you're God, with hundreds of billions of galaxies, each with hundreds of billions of stars and planets around them. One little planet rebels and becomes the base of your enemy. It goes toxic with a condition called sin, which will be fatal to all its inhabitants. So let it die and make another one? No, you go down there personally. You speak to people who will listen, tell them about yourself, and promise you'll be down at the right time to fix the problem.

And later, you become one of them, a puny earthling. You are born in a century before dental painkillers and mass communication. You don't want to scare them, so you go as one of them. You implant yourself as an embryo in a young peasant girl (with her permission), but it nearly ends in tears: no one asks her husband-to-be, and he knows it wasn't his child, so he leaves her. Then an angel tells him it's God's baby, so he marries her. How was he as a dad, by the way? Did he understand even one per cent of who you were?

You are born in a barn. (No pink maternity ward. No trained obstetrician on call.) There are dozens of relatives in that town, but they don't invite your mother to stay with them because they found her pre-marriage pregnancy scandalous, so you'll be called a bastard all your life. And so religion misjudges God himself.

You are born a Jew – now there's a risky move.

Almost no one realises you are the king of Israel, let alone of the universe, though a few foreign philosophers work it out and worship you, leaving rich gifts. But the local dictator hears about it and decides to wipe out all the children under 3. You nearly lose your life, but your mother and father-figure run as refugees to Egypt. So you obviously understand the displaced and homeless peoples of the world, and want to give them a home.

At 12, you go to the Jerusalem temple and ask a lot of questions of religious leaders and thinkers, trying to prepare them for your mission. But then you disappear into obscurity. Through your teens and 20s, you work a trade in a small village, supporting your family after the death of the father.

How did it feel to be God Himself, yet completely human? What went on in your mind? When you were chiselling wood, did you remember the day you created trees? Did it frustrate you to see people living so far below their potential, and nature in such a bad state? Did you itch to fix it all *now*?

At 30, you become a travelling teacher and healer, feeding poor peasants and smelly beggars, touching scabby lepers and leaving them with skin like a baby's. You let a woman touch you in public and she is healed of a long-term gynaecological problem. You are friends with raucous, depressive prostitutes, and call them to a good life. You are seen with taxmen who'd sold out to the invading army, heavily taxing their own people. You bring God close to the least likely people, and some of the least religious-looking people are open to you.

You argue a lot with religious leaders who think it's all about rules that exclude people, rather than love and justice. They call you a fool and a sinner. (How you must have laughed inside, as puny humans tried to teach religion to the All-knowing!) You keep trying to make them see how much God loves every person, however fallen, and how beautiful and life-enhancing God's laws could be. Eventually you annoy them so much they have you killed.

Yes, you died. The Life, as your best human friend, John, called you, thinking of you giving life and consciousness to everything that breathes. The Life went to his death, and a very human death at that. Your last words included a prayer that little kids prayed on going to bed: 'Father, keep my spirit in your hands.'¹

Did you know you'd be back? Would you have done it anyway?

When the soldiers grabbed you, you could have killed them all slowly, vaporised the planet, gone back to your throne. But you let them whip you, mock you. (One day they'll see you again, sitting on the throne of the world. You, who said, 'Whatever you do to the least of the human family

you do TO ME!²) You let them drive nails into the carpenter, kill the life-giver, be cruel to the kindest person ever, shout hate at embodied love.

For me, and people like me – rebels, people who try to be happy using foolish methods, cynics, doubters, self-important nobodies and try-hards and would-be-if-they-could-bes.

You died so I could live. (It's overwhelming!) You loved me and gave your life for mine.

Having killed you, they ran home to keep a religious feast.

You lay in a stone tomb, stone dead. How could heaven stand to watch this? Who was God the Trinity without you? (Perhaps that question is beyond me.)

Your enemy thought he had you then, thought he was the unchallenged prince of Earth.

After a day of rest, you simply got up, making death look stupid, taking the greatest fear of every human being and laughing in its face. You said, 'I AM the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, even though he may die, yet will he live.'³ You said you came to destroy all the works of the devil – death, pain, fear, sin, lies.

You spent forty days with your friends, encouraging them to tell your good news to the world. Then you went home.

Could it be that now, enthroned as Almighty God, you still identify with humans, and still remember what it is to be human, to be tired, to be discouraged, magnetically attracted to sin, weak, unsure? If so, I can come to your throne with confidence, expecting grace and help in my time of need.

With love like this, I can bin the guilt of yesterday, and can step up.

I can put my dirty linen in your great gospel washing machine, confident of deep cleansing in my soul.

I can love you whole-heartedly and whole-headedly, and keep your commandments willingly as a free person.

I can look forward to leadership without ego or any selfish motive, and a leader who this ex-rebel thinks is worthy to have all honour and power because he went to the cross.

I can even laugh at the Grim Reaper, because he was KO'ed by the heavyweight champion of the universe, who is in my corner.

I can spend eternity on tourist adventures in an endlessly fascinating universe and, above all, just be with you.

¹ Luke 23:46.

² Matthew 25:45.

³ John 11:25

11. Life after death. Really?

The story of Jesus' resurrection is a unique, inspiring narrative, and emotionally satisfying – and so is the story of Superman or the Tooth Fairy. But is it true? Or is it just a lovely myth?

Miracles?

Some people reject it immediately because there is no modern scientific evidence of anyone coming back to life after being brain dead for about forty hours. Yet the Jesus story does not claim there would be. It reports a unique event in the past.

Some people reject it because they do not think God really exists, and so there is no one who could do a miracle like that. Fair point. If there is no God, this story is impossible. Yet I think there is a lot of evidence for God's existence.¹ And once you have a God powerful enough to create the universe and at least one habitable planet and design the human body and brain, then re-creating a person after their death should not be too difficult.

If there is a God who wrote the laws of nature and created the reality they describe, then God lives outside these laws and could work around them or 'break' them from time to time. This does not mean that we would expect this every day, and would throw our science books away because the laws no longer apply. It would not make us expect to walk on the water in our swimming pools every day, because the laws of physics do not apply to us. So belief in miracles is compatible with respect for science.

Jesus in history?

Almost all historians believe someone called Jesus of Nazareth existed. There is so much evidence from people who were *not* his followers.

For example, the Roman historian Lucian of Samosata (born AD120) thought Christians were soft-heads. He joked with his readers that when you travelled, you should pretend you were a Christian so they'd give you free food and accommodation: if they found out, they would be gentle to you. Travel tips aside, he wrote about Christians:

'The poor wretches have convinced themselves . . . that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death and even willingly give themselves into custody. . . . Furthermore, their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another . . . by worshipping that crucified sophist himself and living under his laws.'²

He bags Christians, but he describes Jesus as a real person who was crucified. Calling Him a 'sophist', a trickster, may be a reference to stories of miracles.

Or how about Tacitus (born AD52), who has been called the greatest of the Roman historians? He describes how Emperor Nero tortured Christians, and then mentions how Christianity started:

'Christus, the founder of the name, was put to death by Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea in the reign of Tiberius.'³

Christus (a Roman way to say the name Christ) was killed by Pilate, which is exactly what the gospel writers record.

Other Roman writers mention Jesus, which is surprising when you think this is one teacher in one small, unimportant country of their Empire.

What about the Jerusalem authorities of the time? The *Talmud* says:

'On the eve of Passover they hanged Yeshu (of Nazareth) . . . in that he hath practised sorcery and beguiled and led astray Israel.'⁴

So we have His name (Yeshu or Yeshua in Hebrew is Joshua or Jesus in English) and His city, and He is hanged (on a cross) just before the Passover feast – this fits exactly what the gospel says. Jesus is also accused of sorcery: the gospel describes that His enemies use this description to place a negative spin on public miracles that they cannot deny.⁵

Dying for fiction

And what about his followers? Some people want to discount them as biased witnesses, or rusted-on believers who were beyond logic. But they did not at first believe Jesus would rise from the dead. They were convinced by what they saw.

And many of them were killed for telling this story. (How ironic. You say you have seen a man alive after his death, and they kill you for it!) If it were just a fiction, why did no one crack under that much pressure? Why couldn't Jesus' enemies point to one person who said, 'OK, I admit it, we made it all up. It was religious fiction.' No one did. They went to the ends of the earth telling their eyewitness stories, staking their lives on its truthfulness and accuracy.

Let's say you made up a story about a fairy at the bottom of your garden. Children loved it, adults found it a happy story, and you were paid well for the book and the film. But imagine a dictator comes to power and makes fairy stories illegal, invoking the death penalty. Will you admit it was pleasant fiction? Or will you stick to your story, travelling around telling everyone at risk to your life? What an easy question. So why would the disciples do that if they made the whole thing up? But they did not renounce the story, even under torture. Many went to their deaths for it.

Maybe they were gullible? Not when you read the quality of their writing. Luke, a medical doctor, was not an eyewitness to it all but thoroughly checked the accounts of others and compiled his book to the standards of Roman history. John tells us why he is writing his eyewitness account: 'We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make your joy complete.'⁶

Was the story changed?

OK, maybe someone called Jesus existed, but were the miraculous parts added later?

That could be possible if there was one official, original copy of the biographies of Jesus, say in a library in Rome controlled by the church. That could be fairly easily changed, and then all later copies would follow. But there *isn't* one central copy. There are old copies all over the place. The work of the gospel writers was copied by hand and carried to many different parts of the world. Scholars can now collect these and look at them side by side. Some small mistakes have crept in, but these are easily corrected by comparing various manuscripts. (This is called textual criticism, and some scholars specialise in this art and science.)

Biblical manuscripts work a bit like the Internet. During the Cold War, scientists wanted backup copies of important documents in case their university was hit by a missile, and so they found a way to send documents by telephone to other universities, a whole web of them. The gospels have been preserved by a similar process (though low-tech). So any attempt to add non-authentic stories would be easy to spot.

If you took away the resurrection, the healings, the miraculous feedings and other miracles that show Godlike control over nature, you'd be left with the story of some travelling teacher recycling great quotes from the Hebrew Bible, and you might not even bother to write that in the first place. A major part of the excitement was that this was obviously God in human form.

Disproven?

A number of hard-headed people have tried to debunk the Jesus story. Prize-winning journalist Lee Strobel was worried that his wife had started believing this, and spent a long time critically studying the story to find the holes. The result? He found the story true, and wrote the book *The Case For Christ*. Another sceptic, Josh McDowell, did the same thing. Journalist Frank Morison also thought it should be easy to point out the historical holes in the story of Jesus and tried to write an article that did that. That article never happened, because he became a believer and wrote a book called *Who Moved The Stone?*

Jesus said, 'Whoever believes in me, even though they may die, they will live.' (John 11:25, author's paraphrase.)

What if he was right? What could you lose by checking out the evidence with an open mind?

See further:

Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ* (book and DVD)

Josh McDowell, *More Than A Carpenter*

Frank Morison, *Who Moved The Stone?*

John Dickson, *The Christ Files* (book and DVD)

¹ See books like Lennox, Craig, etc.

² Lucian of Samosata, *The Passing of Perigrinus 11,13*. See also Robert E. Van Voorst, *Jesus outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 58-64; Wenhua Shi, *Paul's Message of the Cross As Body Language* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 38.

The Passing of Perigrinus, pp. 11, 13.

³ Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals*, XV, 44. Translated by Alfred John Church and William Jackson Brodribb, *The Internet Classics Archive*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Tacitus/annals.html>

⁴ Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Sanhedrin, Folio 43a, www.come-and-hear.com/sanhedrin/sanhedrin_43.html

⁵ See Matthew 9:34.

⁶ 1 John 1:1-4.

III God Provides Future

12. Why Should I Follow Jesus?

‘Listen, nigger . . . before next week, you’ll be sorry you ever came.’

The civil rights leader had been lying in bed beside his wife late at night when the phone rang. Another death threat. Martin Luther King hung up and walked into the kitchen. His nerves were tense. He had just been released from wrongful arrest and prison. He was being threatened for supporting Rosa Parks, a black woman who had been arrested for refusing to ride back in the ‘black section’ of a bus. African Americans in Alabama were refusing to use the bus unless the law was changed to support equality, and bus companies were losing money. King was pursuing his dream that all people were created equal. He called it ‘somebodiness’, the idea that every person was somebody, not a nobody.

But why was he down here campaigning for African Americans and for poor people? He had an elite education from Boston University and could have had a comfortable life pastoring a rich church. He felt like quitting, and prayed out loud:

‘I am here taking a stand for what I believe to be right. But now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. . . . I have nothing left. I’ve come to the point where I can’t face it alone.’¹

He felt a surge of energy and inner peace, and took it as God’s answer.

Next day he was away speaking at a church when his home was bombed. He rushed home and found his wife and young child were safe. More worrying now was the crowd outside, around 1,000 people armed with guns, knives, sticks, rocks, bottles – whatever they could find. They were ready to riot in revenge. He heard someone talk about ‘shooting it out with police’. King stood on his bombed front porch, and raised his hands to ask the crowd to listen. He said:

‘Don’t get panicky. Don’t do anything panicky at all. If you have weapons, take them home; if you do not have them, please do not seek to get them. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. . . . We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us. We must make them know we love them. Jesus still cries out in words that echo across the centuries, “Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you.” This is what we must live by. We must meet hate with love.’²

The crowd took his advice. King often led peaceful demonstrations for the rights of black people, and also for the rights of the poor of every race. He insisted that his marchers sign a pledge to ‘observe courtesies’ ‘with friend and foe’, and attend a three-day workshop on non-violence, where they would hear the teaching of Jesus and also of Mahatma Gandhi, who had used peaceful demonstrations to help bring political freedom to India. Sometimes police beat King’s marchers terribly, but the TV cameras caught this and built public sympathy for his cause.

Non-violence and ‘turning the other cheek’ may sound hopelessly saintly and other-worldly, but King showed it could be used more powerfully than a weapon.

King led a march on Washington and delivered his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, which is widely recognised as one of the greatest speeches of all time. ‘I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. . . .’

He won a Nobel Peace Prize for working to end racial discrimination and segregation.

Yet King was threatened by those who feared his dream. The FBI bugged his home and hotel rooms for years, accusing him of being a Communist, an adulterer, corrupt, a drunk.

Eventually he was gunned down.

The night before he died, he made a famous speech about all the threats on his life.

(Please put this speech segment in a box underneath a picture)

‘Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now. Because I’ve been to the mountaintop. And I don’t mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. . . . But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over and I’ve seen the promised

land. . . . So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'

What a way to face your own death!

If you know the Bible story of Moses leading slaves out of Egypt to their promised land but dying just before he got there, then you know King is drawing his faith from that.

At his funeral, parts of one of his sermons were played, asking that he be remembered not for his awards, but for trying to 'feed the hungry', to 'clothe those who were naked', to stop the Vietnam War and to 'love and serve humanity'. He had inspired others around the world, for example Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who worked against *apartheid* in South Africa, and came second (to Mother Teresa) on Gallup's list of most-admired people of the twentieth century.

Does your country need people like that? Mine does. Whether they work on a large, public scale or are quiet and unknown, they are heroes.

And one thing Jesus did for the world was to inspire people like this.

Why would you want to follow Him?

Certainly not for an easy life! Some TV preachers claim that having faith will make you healthy, wealthy, living on Cloud Nine, but let's not exaggerate. If you really copied Jesus, you'd care deeply for others. You'd value giving over getting, which may not make you rich in anything but character and relationships. Caring for the poor and needy might sometimes bring you into conflict with power. You'd be kind to enemies, which might not make you top dog. But you might actually end up making life better for other people. Even if you're never famous and you improve life for only a few people, that can still give life passion and purpose and satisfaction.

Jesus' teaching constantly challenges you towards generosity, kindness, forgiving mistakes, patience, caring for the poor, going out of your way for others. It can build your character in things like 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness . . . faithfulness, gentleness, self-control',³ and make you a better person than you would have been without it.

And that's just in this life. Christian faith allows you to laugh in the face of death. King had been stabbed in the chest and narrowly survived, and said he would look at death in the mirror every morning. He would joke about it, and start preaching funeral services for his friends, telling them how much he appreciated them when they were alive. He challenged people that if they hadn't found something worth dying for, they hadn't found anything worth living for.

Christian faith also lets you feel God is with you, encouraging, influencing your ideas and feelings, protecting you, planning for you. It is all about a genuine personal connection with God.

Sound like religious psycho-babble? Not to King. If you actually try following Jesus, the adventure begins now.

¹ William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr* (New York: Discus, 1968), 54.

² Miller, 57.

³ Galatians 5:22-23.

13. Sweet little lies

‘I have abandoned the search for truth and am looking for a good fantasy.’

Ashleigh Brilliant

‘You sharpen the human appetite to the point where it can split atoms with its desire, you build egos the size of cathedrals, fibre-optically connect the world to every eager impulse, grease even the dullest dreams with these dollar-green, gold-plated fantasies until every human becomes an aspiring emperor, becomes his own god, and where can you go from there? . . . the air thickens, the water sours, and even the bees’ honey takes on the metallic taste of radioactivity. And it just keeps coming, faster and faster.’

The devil (Al Pacino) in *The Devil’s Advocate*

A security guard in a city tower notices that one security camera in the penthouse is malfunctioning. It seems to show a board meeting. Each participant has remarkable powers and a cruel edge. The leader, who can only be called a super-being, is speaking:

‘So, having discussed our progress in wars, arms trading and epidemics and our campaigns promoting racism, economic chaos and social unrest, we now turn to a special enemy: Christians. The church is growing globally, *especially* where it is illegal or persecuted or underground, so we need to focus on what can be done.

‘If you find a minister who teaches the Bible, check what his topic is each week and make sure the people who need it most are busy on something else – business or pleasure will work fine. Or make them eat too much beforehand and just doze. Direct their attention to the faults of other people, or get them disagreeing with the preacher on some small issue. Get them doubting everything and feeling like intellectuals. It’s not as if God can reveal everything to a finite mind or remove all possible doubt, so get them focusing on the negative, and asking half-smart questions. Make doubt fashionable. Our great advantage is that the Bible cuts people – it challenges their selfishness and sin, alarms their consciences and asks them to do better. We can flatter them, tell them they have greatness within and don’t need to change, and cuddle their consciences to sleep.

‘Get people thinking that it doesn’t matter what they believe. Call this tolerance and respect for diversity. Remember the enemy said, ‘You will know the truth and the truth will make you free.’¹ The gospel truth can get into a person and change him or her, so get people questioning whether there even *is* a truth, whether we can know it.

‘Take parts of the Bible out of context – almost no one bothers to check or read it for themselves. If anyone teaches biblical truth, call them intolerant and narrow-minded. Encourage wildly different opinions about the Bible, and make sure the most fanciful ones are flattered as ‘brilliant’ and ‘original’, and that they get media publicity and book deals. That should create plenty of false trails for seekers. Distract them with ‘expert’ opinions rather than reading the enemy’s words for themselves.

‘Make people feel the Bible cannot be read without expert help. (Don’t mention how much of it was written by fishermen and carpenters, and can be understood by anyone who is humble and willing to do what it says.) Above all, show them that reading the Bible often calls for sacrifice – like giving money to the poor – and it will be much less popular. Remember Paul’s words: ‘they refused to love the truth and so be saved’, they would not believe the truth because they ‘delighted in wickedness’.² Let them do anything they want and still feel religious, then they will twist the Bible to say what they want.

‘Remember how Jesus responded when I tempted him face to face, disguised as an angel? Every time he said, “It is written . . .” and used the Bible like a weapon. That’s why we have to attack it.

'Make people hate the God of the Bible. When he intervenes, call him violent. When he doesn't intervene, call him uncaring. Tell them the Bible says Jesus will burn people forever in hell, an infinite punishment for a finite crime. This will make fair-minded people doubt God's justice and kindness, and hopefully abandon the Bible as an authority.

'Lump all religions together so the teaching of Jesus gets blamed for all the fanatics out there. Keep people so ignorant of religion that they'll believe it.

'Promote the idea that science contradicts the Bible, and so the Bible cannot be taken seriously. If anyone points out that the greatest scientists of history have believed in God, just act as though that was an old-fashioned, superstitious part of them. If anyone points out that a large number of top scientists today believe in God, get people to smile and shake their heads at this quirkiness in otherwise clever people. A mocking laugh works best to cover whenever you don't have a convincing reason. Get scientists in the media saying everything happened by chance natural processes, so there is no need for a Creator. There are gaps in this story of course – What caused the Big Bang? How did we get carbon? How did the first cell get started? - but most people won't notice the gaps if the scientists are prestigious enough. Repeat this story at every level from kids' cartoons to universities. If anyone argues against it, mock them. For most people a sneering laugh is more powerful than an argument.

'And tell them the universe is governed by fixed laws, so any god (if one existed) would be bound by those laws. So there is no point praying or expecting miracles, and Bible stories about miracles were written by gullible people in pre-scientific cultures. Then they won't expect God to intervene today.

'Say that Jesus was a great teacher, even a miracle worker, but not the eternal God, one with the Father. Make him a guru or faith healer like any other, and flatter people that they can be even wiser than he was by abandoning some of his most radical ideas.

'Above all, remember that we have no power over even the weakest person who humbly asks for grace and help from God. So distract them. Question the gospel. Push people to extremes. Make some feel they're good enough in themselves, that their good deeds will earn God's approval. Make others feel they're too sinful to have any hope, because God is not forgiving enough. Make some feel they've done nothing wrong: keep them too ignorant and insensitive to feel guilty. Make some question how one person could die for the sins of another. Say Jesus died just to show love, not to bear guilt, because what grumpy old God would want blood? Make God sound unfair in defending the eternal principles of his law.

'Focus especially on teachers and leaders. Tell some that they can't ever marry and increase the risk that their sexuality will break out in inappropriate ways, especially if they have power over children. If they have families, keep them poor, inspire people to criticise them and keep them discouraged. Or if they are popular and well off, encourage them to manipulate people for money so the grace of God seems expensive, not free. Make them prize their belongings above faithfulness, forgetting the costly sacrifice Jesus made for them. Either extreme will do. Make them busy with trivia and putting out political fires. Shrink their family time so their marriages weaken and they are more vulnerable to affairs, and bring attractive and emotionally needy people to them. Find their weaknesses and work them.

'Focus on rich people. Make them love money more than God's kingdom and we have them, no matter what they think they believe. (That trick can work on the poor as well, but don't waste too much time on them.)

'And, of course, deny my existence or yours. That's a basic cover story. Say I'm just a fictional figure who represents human desires. Make people think evil is natural, and will always be here. Make a world without it seem unthinkable.

'Remember why we are doing this. Every human being we control or destroy causes pain to Jesus, and this is our revenge. One day we will tear God from his throne and put a real leader in charge of the universe.'

At this the camera switches to static hiss, and the guard realises that the entire scene was just a dream.
Or not.

¹ Jesus in John 8:32.

² 2 Thess. 2:10-12.

14. Storm Warnings

Some people avoid the news because it's too stressful.

(graphic: a pastiche of pictures of the things described, plus (dummied) headlines)

On a random day, the front page of London's *The Times* has articles about the financial crisis and countries in debt, civil unrest as working people demonstrate against cuts, a corporate leader caught in corruption, a multiple murder, a war criminal sent to prison and a drug bust. Amsterdam's *De Telegraaf* describes the body count of a civil war, racist violence by an ultra-nationalist political group growing in poorer parts of the city, and fears of North Korea and other politically troubled states obtaining uranium to build a nuclear bomb. Warsaw's *Gazeta Wyborcza* talks about catching an international child abuse ring, and pictures the wreckage from an airliner crash. The *Los Angeles Times* reports crime figures, including the high and growing number of school children shot each year, and allegations of racism in employment.

That's a lot of human suffering. Lots of problems without easy solutions.

Of course there are more feel-good articles, and entertainment to keep us distracted, but lots of serious people are worried about the way the world seems to be going.

(pic: hi-tech soldier)

1. War

Nuclear mass-destruction is still a concern because of the tensions between the West and the Arab world, called by some the new crusade/jihad.

What if a bomb ended up in the wrong hands today? (And who can judge whose hands are the wrong hands?)

The Doomsday Clock is set by atomic scientists at 5 minutes to midnight.

(pic: polar bear swimming)

2. Global warming

Some predict spiralling temperatures will destroy all life on Earth. Milder scenarios are still drastic. A UN report considers an ice-melt in the Himalayas could dry up Asia's biggest rivers, including the Ganges, Mekong and Yellow, taking the water of three billion people – half the world's population – by 2350.

If rising sea levels flood large areas of land, mass migration could cause tensions and wars. And where would crops be grown?

Climate change is already causing problems, according to a UN agency which links it to disasters affecting some 2.4 billion people in the last decade.

(pic: person with a gas mask)

3. Pandemic

Some suggest that a serious virus like HIV may mutate so that it can be caught as easily as a cold. This could wipe out huge segments of Earth's population.

At the end of WWI, the 'Spanish flu' spread to one person in three worldwide. It lasted only eighteen months, but it killed fifty million or perhaps as many as 100 million people worldwide.

Some specialists fear that 'super-bugs', or antibiotic-resistant diseases, may evolve.

The World Health Organisation has led responses to SARS and Avian Flu (H5N1), and these have been severely limited by rapid action, but not wiped out.

There are many more Doomsday scenarios, including the worsening poverty of poor nations, combined with aggressive fundamentalism in world religions that could lead to large-scale terrorism. Or natural disasters like tsunamis damaging nuclear facilities, leading to larger radiation leaks. Or devastating earthquakes in large populations centres.

Where does it end? And what is God doing?

End of the world?

Destroying the earth must have sounded impossible 2,000 years ago, when there were no nuclear missiles, pesticides, cars, chainsaws or anything else capable of destroying the world. Yet the Christian prophet John wrote about people 'who are destroying the earth'. (Revelation 11:18.) His predictions got him locked up.

(pics: I'd love to see a clever montage of images of the Hiroshima plane and the mushroom cloud, Soviet missiles, Reagan, contemporary nuclear missiles, the map of earth, and angels tugging at winds.)

Yet fast forward twenty centuries to the nuclear age, and humans have a dozen ways in which we could delete our planet.

After bombing Hiroshima, the pilot said, 'What hath God wrought?' God was being blamed – again – for what humanity did.

The nuclear Doomsday clock moved to 11:59 in 1962 when Soviet nuclear missiles moved to Cuba, and we came hours from full-scale nuclear war. The world held its breath and prayed for mere survival. The 1970s and 80s saw a policy called MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction): if 'they' launched missiles, 'we' would fire back automatically, ending all life. US President Ronald Reagan spent trillions on the Star Wars defence system. In a famous speech he called Russia the 'evil empire' of Bible prophecy, and reportedly told a TV evangelist, 'We may be the generation which sees Armageddon.' And we came close! Once Reagan joked before a radio interview, 'We begin bombing in 5 minutes.' The Soviet missile system went onto red alert – only minutes from automatic launch. US missiles went to red alert hundreds of times.¹

You have to wonder how many times God directly intervened to save humanity from blowing itself up. What hath God wrought? Human survival!

John records a surprising vision about God holding back war, disaster and the strange destructiveness of human nature:

'I saw four angels standing in the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, and preventing any wind from blowing on the **land** or on the **sea** or on any **tree**.

Then I saw another angel. . . . He called out . . . to the four angels who had been given power to harm the land and the sea: "Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God." ' (Revelation 7:1-3.)

John's vision begins to make sense in an age when the damage to land and sea and trees (more than one football field of rainforest each *second*) are serious threats to our lives.

The vision has God's angels stopping human destruction until He 'seals' His people in their foreheads. A seal is an ancient badge of belonging,² something like a wedding ring today. The forehead symbolises human choice and commitment.³ So God is influencing people towards goodness through relationship with Him.

It's crucial that we're peace-loving. In a nuclear age, we need to choose between non-violence and non-existence, as Martin Luther King said. Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers.' And, 'Love your enemies.'

It's crucial that we care for the poor, especially as poor nations are most likely to trash their environments for money.

So as the world tries to destroy itself, God is working on the most important area of all – the few inches between your ears. Human nature is the central problem, and God is renewing people to live to their full potential.

I'm very encouraged by that view of God, holding back dark forces of cosmic evil and human destructiveness as long as He can, wanting to save as many people as possible, planning to take them into His kingdom.

What kingdom? See the next chapter.



INSERT BOX: which prints Jesus' Matthew 24 predictions as captions to pictures

Title: Sound like our times?

-pic of David Koresh; 'Many will come in my name, saying, "I am Christ."'

-pic of Syrian war dead; 'Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. . . .'

-pic of African child; 'There will be famines'

-pic of earthquake damage in Italy/ elsewhere; 'There will be . . . earthquakes in various places.'

-pic of tsunami

'All these are like the first labour pains.'

Jesus, Matthew 24:3-8

¹ One research report found 147 missile alerts *in just one 18-month period!* *Brigham Young University Studies* 1985 25(1):77-90.

² The sealing process involves God's Holy Spirit: 'When you believed, you were marked with God's seal, the promised Holy Spirit.' (Ephesians 1:13.) It takes place when a person begins to trust God and rest in His grace rather than work to earn and deserve being saved. This gospel rest is symbolised by the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13; Hebrews 4:9-10), and is part of the sealing process.

³ God's teaching and laws are meant to be kept there. See Deuteronomy 6:8.

15. 'I will come again': Jesus

The prisoner stands in the hall of justice in the palace, hands tied, bruises clearly visible. It is early morning and He has not slept all night. Or eaten or drunk.

The judge is backed by the iron and armies of Rome, but this prisoner unsettles him. That morning his own wife Claudia described a dream she had about the man, and said, 'Pilate, don't harm this just person.'

'Are you the king of the Jews?' Pilate wants to know.

'Is this what you think?' asks the prisoner. 'Or have others told you that?'

'What am I, a Jew?' spits Pilate, wanting to be the one to ask the questions. 'Your people and leaders handed you to me. What is it you have done?'

'My kingdom is not from this world, or else my followers would fight. . . . My kingdom is from another place.'

Pilate stares at him. He is obviously not a crook. Not a crazy. He is looking Pilate straight in the eye and telling him the simple truth. 'So you are a king, then?' asks Pilate.

'You're right,' says the prisoner. 'I came into the world to tell the truth. And everyone who loves the truth listens to me.'

'What is truth?' says Pilate - but he does not stay for an answer. He goes out to win over the crowd and further his career, leaving the Truth behind him, bound in chains.

Pilate thought the Roman Empire would last forever. Everyone wants to rule the world, but history shows another century, another empire. In a previous empire, a young slave named Daniel had been called in before a king whose nightmare was worrying him.

'What did you dream, your Majesty?' asked Daniel.

'I don't remember', snapped the king. 'If you're a prophet, you tell me.'

So Daniel did. 'You saw a statue of a man made of various metals . . .'

'Yes!' said the king.

'Its head of gold symbolises your kingdom of Babylon. But after you another kingdom will arise, the chest of silver. And another, the belly of bronze. Then another, the legs of iron.'

The king hated this idea so much that he built a 30 metre statue of gold from head to foot, making the statement that his kingdom would be forever. But we know from history that his kingdom would fall, replaced by the Persians, then the Greeks, then the iron empire of Rome.

Daniel continued. 'After the iron legs come the feet of iron and clay, symbolising a divided world ruled by no one power.' How could he have known in 550BC that no one would step into the power vacuum left by the Roman Empire? Many would try – Charlemagne, Charles V, Napoleon, Hitler – but all would fail.

But Daniel had more. 'Then a stone was cut out, though not by any human hand. It struck the feet of iron and clay, smashing the image and scattering its pieces away. And the stone became a great mountain, and filled the whole world.'

The king was on the edge of his throne. 'But what does that mean?'

'In those future days, the God of Heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed. It will stand forever.'

Daniel also spoke of 'one like a Son of Man' coming before God's throne and being given a kingdom which will stand forever.¹

Pilate heard the crowd screaming for the death of his prisoner. Their court had asked Him if He was the Messiah, the Son of God, and He had said, 'Yes, and in future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven.'²

They found Him guilty of blasphemy – a man calling himself God – but this did not deserve death under Roman law. Pilate had Him whipped, and the soldiers added some special touches: a crown made of thorns, a king's purple robe. Punches to the face.

Pilate went back to the crowd. 'I find no fault in Him,' he said. 'No reason to crucify Him.'

The crowd went wild, screaming that He must die because He had called Himself the Son of God. Pilate, now rattled, had the prisoner brought to his palace again. His back was raw meat, but He was standing with regal dignity.

'Where do you come from?' Pilate asked, though by now he already knew.

The prisoner did not need to state the obvious.

Pilate became alarmed and a little shrill. 'Do you refuse to answer me? Don't you realise the power to crucify you or free you is mine?'

'You have no power that you have not received from above', said the prisoner, calmly.³

But Pilate wanted more power, so he handed the Truth over to the mob, sending Him to the cross.

Some years later, Pilate went back to Rome, where he had come from, and is thought to have died there.

Some days later, Jesus went back to where He had come from, and will never die.

Before leaving, He told his few followers, 'I will come again.'

The Truth will come back, this time not as a humble Galilean teacher but as the Son of Man, seated on the right hand of God, coming on the clouds of heaven. This time He will be the judge. And this time Pilate will be on trial, as will everyone who has met the Truth but turned their back on it.

Setting up His perfect kingdom means judging those who would threaten it. This judge, who has suffered injustice Himself, will be absolutely fair. Breaking His law of love is fatal, and rebels will not live in His new kingdom. He will have no place for those who would disrespect Him or damage other people by murder, adultery, stealing, lying, coveting. Their sentence will be darkness and shame, absence and everlasting non-existence.

Then who will be in His kingdom?

One thief will be there. Jesus died next to two thieves, who taunted Him that if He was the Son of God He should get them all down. Jesus ignored the attack and just prayed for His enemies, even the soldiers who had nailed Him, and comforted His friends and His grieving mother who were there to comfort Him. Seeing how He behaved, one thief regretted his words, and apologised. He looked at Jesus and said, 'Lord, remember me when you come in your kingdom.'

Jesus saw instantly that the man really meant it. With hours to live, he was finally listening to God, finally sorry. Jesus said, 'I can tell you today, you will be with me in Paradise.'⁴

Jesus did not go to Paradise that day. He went to the tomb. The thief did not go to Paradise that day: in fact he suffered into the next day, maybe even more, before he died.

But he died with Jesus' promise that he would be in Paradise.

It seems important to ask why.

Because he asked for kindness from God which he did not deserve.

I can do that. I know that a just and perfect man was tried and executed, but not for His sins. For mine. I know that He died a death He did not deserve. Mine. So I can live a life I don't deserve. His. In the judgment, though I richly deserve the death penalty, I can receive the verdict of being a perfect man. His.

To people who trust His kindness, Jesus shows His kindness. He said, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust in me. In my father's house are many rooms. . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you. . . .' He was speaking like a bridegroom, leaving to build his bride a house and planning to come and collect her at the wedding. 'I will come back and take you to be with me, so that you will be where I am.'⁵ Being together is the greatest thing.

What will His kingdom be like? Well, what would the world be like if Jesus ran it?

In a world run by Jesus the healer, there will be no more sickness or pain. No one suffering with AIDS, no one dying young of cancer, no child born with leukaemia, no old person with achy knees. On his first visit, Jesus met a man who had been born blind.⁶ Jesus touched him and suddenly he knew what the word *red* means, and could see faces that he had only ever touched, looking at eyes that loved him. So I expect we'll all feel young and fit and fantastic, enjoying life in our superb body.

In a world run by Jesus the life-giver, funerals will be history. People who have slept in the dust of earth for thousands of years will bounce out of their graves like Jesus did on that Sunday morning.

In a world run by Jesus the peace-maker, there will be no more young men and women suffering wounds to their bodies and minds. No more children with one leg and a rifle for a crutch. No more hatred and revenge. The human brains working out new ways of killing people – the 6% of scientists working on weapons – could be making toys.

In a world run by Jesus the teacher, there would be no more ignorance and superstition. No one missing out on the fun of learning. Everyone developing their mind to a level they could not have imagined.

In a world run by Jesus the creator, there would be no more violence and suffering in nature. 'The lion will lie down with the lamb. . . . They will not hurt or destroy.' No more tsunamis, no more threat from wild animals, no more hunting.

And more, and still more.

And so I begin to understand why Jesus taught people to pray, 'May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'⁷

Make it soon please, Jesus. And remember me.

¹ Read Daniel 2 and 7:13-14.

² Matthew 26:64.

³ See John 19.

⁴ Luke 23:43.

⁵ John 14:1-3.

⁶ See John 9.

⁷ Matthew 6:10.

16. 'The great hope'

The would-be leader has a winning personality, a degree from an elite university, and carefully scripted slogans that touch our dreams. 'Forward, not backward.' 'Yes, we can.' 'Change we can believe in.' 'I'm asking you to believe.' We can change the world just by voting in the new secular Messiah.

Fast-forward some years into their term and the people perceive that their problems are not miraculously fixed. The leader can point to some achievements, but we still see social tensions, poverty, racism, substandard schools and hospitals, unjust wars, corruption, broken promises, good intentions unfulfilled.

It's human nature. What were we expecting – the Messiah?

Why do we place such hope in those who promise what they can't deliver, when God's chosen leader fulfils everything written about Him? Jesus appears and fulfils some 300 things the prophets predicted about Him, in incredible detail. He promises us a new world and, while we have not seen that yet, His record so far gives us reasons to trust that this, too, will be fulfilled.

I would like to be visiting a cemetery when it happens.

The ground splits open, headstones tilt, and out of the graves come people. They are whole people, not ghosts, and there is nothing spooky about them at all. They are strong, young, impossibly good looking and muscular people.

Imagine a big family vault cracking open and a dozen people looking at each other, children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, amazed to be alive at all, let alone *together*. They're all talking at once, embracing, pinching themselves to make sure this is not a dream, laughing, larger than life.

There is a headstone that reads, 'Sarah Blake, 1802-1803', alongside other names from her family. But it is cracked now, and a little girl, just a toddler, is being passed from mother to father to brother to sister. They cannot wait to see her grow up and live her life in a beautiful world.

A man in soldier's uniform smiles to see a big, strong son he never met.

A woman who went to teach in a needy, dangerous country and lost her baby in childbirth has him handed to her by an angel.

Some people are there alone, the only one from their family or whole town. They are soon in groups, looking as though they belong.

A girl who had Downs Syndrome now looks new, but still unmistakably herself. She is holding an intelligent conversation with her brother, and both of them are still so surprised they don't know where to look. 'Everything is clearer, and I feel so much more quick and alive in the brain,' she says.

'Me, too,' says her brother.

Maybe your great-grandmother is there, skipping and laughing like a young girl, and your great-grandfather hands her a rose.

Only seconds before, the sky has blazed with the presence of God. He has come 'down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel, with the trumpet of God'.¹ The powerful voice and the blast of brass have stopped every conversation, shut down every stock market and sports match and classroom. Every eye is looking.

The soldiers who drove the nails into Jesus now know who He was.²

Pilate cannot avoid the truth. He hangs his head and weeps with regret, while his wife looks up eagerly. She will miss him.

Crowds of people cry and wail. 'Why didn't I act on what I knew?' Their regret and grief are indescribable. An infinity of joy and they lost it. For what?

Then you notice that your feet are leaving the ground. You are being drawn upwards into the air, to meet God in the air.³ Personally. What will it be like to look into that big, kind face? He may not even need to say a word. He will just know you, and give you that secret smile as if you were the only one of His children.

As the world shrinks beneath you, you feel that every mistake you have ever made is forgotten and irrelevant. Every hurt you have ever suffered seems like a non-event, the pain gone. You will be back, but Earth will be changed and so will you.

You think of the words of Paul: 'Listen, I'm telling you a mystery . . . we will all be changed, in a moment – in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised immortal.'⁴

Below you, you notice that not everyone is coming. Some have ignored God, ignored love and truth, tried to pretend it didn't matter. They are screaming for the mountains to fall on them and hide them from the eyes of the King on the throne, 'and from the anger of the Lamb'.⁵ Anger is not normal for the Lamb, who was sacrificed to take the guilt and consequences of sin from us. But the Lamb's anger is necessary today to rid the world of evil, and those who have stubbornly held onto it.

Glittering corporate towers crumble in ruins. The houses and cars that some people have lived for are destroyed by fire.

Nobody is taking their wallet with them. Only people.

You look down and see fire. Quick, surgical, precise. Then it is over.

There are countless people rising with you into the air.

You can't stop looking at how beautiful they are. You try to guess where they are from by their clothes. Some are dressed in the style of 1650s' Europe, others from China in 2012, some from Ur of the Chaldees thousands of years BC. Smiling. Looking up. Knowing Who they're looking for. As though they've been expecting this. Today, dead in their graves, they heard His voice, the voice they had listened to in their lives.

'This is our God,' they say. 'We trusted Him and He saved us. We will be happy forever.'⁶

'Do not be surprised at this. . . . The hour is coming when those who are now in their graves will hear his voice, and will come out! Those that have done good will resurrect and live. Those who have done evil will resurrect only to be condemned.'

Jesus⁷

¹ 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

² Revelation 1:7.

³ 1 Thessalonians 4:17.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:51-52.

⁵ Revelation 6:16.

⁶ Isaiah 25:9.

⁷ John 5:28-29.

17. You in eternity

A tribal chief from New Guinea was invited to a UN meeting in New York. When he came home, he went to a tiny mountain village where people had never travelled, and tried to tell them about it.

'I walked to the city, then got into a large canoe that flies like a bird,' he said. 'There was water wider than 1,000 rivers, but we crossed in one day without paddling. We came to a village of a million huts, where many people are pink, some yellow, and some of the normal colour. There I rode in a hut that runs along paths of black rock. We came to a very large hut, like 100 huts stacked on top of each other. Another small hut climbed like a lizard up the wall of the very large hut, and it carried us up. At the top, I could see above the mountains. There I sat among the clouds with the elders of many countries. . . .'

The people said he was lying or crazy, and they beat him up. It was too different from anything they had ever experienced.

Prophets in the Bible have a similar problem. They tell people what the afterlife looked like in visions they say came from God, and most can't imagine it. 'Look, I'm telling you a mystery,' writes one. 'No eyes or ears have seen or heard and no one could fully imagine the things God had prepared.'¹

So what do they say?

They say our bodies will be vastly better.²

They say we won't suffer. Ever.³

They say no-one will die.⁴

They say nature on Earth will be perfect, without violence or threat.⁵

Perhaps hardest to imagine, they say people will treat each other with love and respect, always. Imagine a civilisation that never had a divorce, a war, a punch-up in the playground, a racist comment.

And people will connect with each other in deep honesty and kindness. Imagine being unafraid to be who you really are, showing the world your true, inmost self, not fearing rejection or judgment.⁶ Imagine being able to love other people effortlessly, and treasure their individuality and differences. Imagine a relationship that never disappoints or accidentally hurts.

So what would you do?

Just take in the beauty? All your senses are now working at full resolution, so your first impression is that everything is louder, tastier, more colourful, more fragrant than you've ever experienced. It's almost overwhelming but you don't want it to stop because you now realise you were only half-alive before this moment.

You might want to live with elephants and watch their lives, learning to understand their communication.

You could celebrate your 1,200th birthday by kite-surfing across a bay.

You could hear J. S. Bach performing his latest composition.

You might learn the words and moves to African songs in a style and language you've never heard before.

Let's walk on a stormy day along a beach with no pollution, where each ordinary breath feels better than the most pleasurable experience you remember from this life.

We'll never be bored. If we have to wait five minutes for a friend, we'll get looking at the grass and realise every blade is an artistically shaped, technically perfect oxygen factory. Or we'll look up and boggle that the largest galaxy moves in an elegant ballet, partly to keep us alive and partly just to blow us away with how beautiful it all is, and help us feel the love of our heavenly Father who built us the greatest playground ever – the universe.

Tennis, anyone? The first serve kicks towards you at 400km/h, your legs get you into the perfect position and your arm swings with staggering power, driving the ball with pinpoint accuracy into the backhand corner. You hope your friend will get to it and she does, but only just, the soles of

her shoes smoking slightly. She cannons it back down the line and you are ready but it brushes the net tape and kicks a metre higher. Even as your mind notices this, your body is leaping into the air, feeling pleasure in every muscle, under complete control. This point will continue for hours and no one cares who wins, because in this world it's always love all.

Build a stone house above a misty lake and plant yourself a garden, inviting friends around to sample fruits of every kind.⁷

Talk with some of the most fascinating people from history. I want to throw a dinner party with William Wilberforce, who helped free slaves, and the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, who worked for equal rights for African-Americans and poor people. Imagine trading life stories with someone who lived in a different century.

Meet a couple who worked in a sweat shop making shoes for Westerners. They say they always wanted an education but could never afford it. Today God gave them a science lesson about bees, making them tiny and letting them watch pollen being sucked from a flower. They can't wait for what's next.

Be alone whenever you want, but never be lonely again.

Never get tired. We're told there will be no night.⁸ Imagine having enough energy to go and go without sleep.

There will be infinitely more fun, more satisfaction than we can now imagine.

And the greatest pleasure of all? Knowing God, the most magnetic and fascinating being there could ever be. The Bible says we shall 'see His face'.⁹ (I think I might stare a bit at first, unable to take my eyes away, wanting to *know*.)

Probably crowds of people will have difficult questions for Him, most beginning with the word 'Why?' Why didn't you stop my mother dying so young? Why did you let war ravage my country? I can't wait to hear what God will answer, as He traces the detailed history of every human life and explains how He was trying to bring each person to love and truth and happiness, even as we were ignoring God and blundering along in our own sweet ways, misusing our free will. It will be a complicated answer, tracing the details of our history and even showing us what *could* have happened. It might take hundreds of years, but then we have unlimited time, and the prophets tell us God will take the time to give answers that satisfy even the most critical thinker that God did the absolute kindest and best thing possible in every life. One prophet depicts a whole crowd of free, thinking people telling God they have found him fair and kind in his treatment of people, and that they are happy that he has control of the universe.¹⁰

You and I might just want to say thank you to the One who made everything for His pleasure and ours, and who wants nothing more than our love and happiness. Forever.

'No human eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind can even imagine what God has prepared for those who love him -- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.' (1 Corinthians 2:9-10, author's paraphrase.)

'The angel said to me, "These words are trustworthy and true. The LORD, the God who inspired the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants the things that will take place soon. And look, I am coming soon!" ' (Revelation 22:6-7, author's paraphrase.)

¹ St Paul, 1 Corinthians 15:51; 2:9.

² See Philippians 3:20-21.

³ Isaiah 25:8; Revelation 7:17; 21:4.

⁴ Revelation 21:4.

⁵ Isaiah 11:9; 65:25.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 13:12.

⁷ Isaiah 65:21-22; Amos 9:14.

⁸ Revelation 21:25; 22:5.

⁹ Revelation 22:4.

¹⁰ Revelation 15:3-4.