



The Nature of God

A small glimpse of the Eternal

[This document is a combined version of a series of 13 blog posts on the same topic. It has been modified only to make it more suitable to “book” form, with redundancies removed.]

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Introduction

Oh no! Look at that title! Not a post about *religion*! Not another gag-inducing diatribe from somebody trying to shove their beliefs down my throat! I'm not gonna read it!

Relax. You don't have to. You're free to stop right here and go on your merry way. It's called "free will", and I'm all for it.

But why would I even bother posting on the [Strolling Amok](#) blog a series about my personal beliefs, when the topic itself has selectively become a pariah in our culture, and merely sharing one's faith is often now viewed the same as force-feeding? Even Dr. Francis Schaeffer, an influential 20th century theologian, noted, "Non-Christians *don't care* what you believe." I suspect that he's right. After all, people come to that blog merely to find out how just one more ordinary guy is exploring a somewhat unconventional mobile lifestyle, and to find out what he's seeing or discovering or thinking about along the way: information, quasi-adventures, mishaps, outlooks, and little victories. Why louse up a good thing?

The answer to that is easy. First, I won't actually be rummaging through my beliefs as such, the doctrine and dogma of some denomination within the Christian church. That's not what this series is for. What I personally find interesting are people's stories - the *why and what* that happened in their lives to put them where they are now. When they share, I don't necessarily want them to do nothing but recite the pithy points of their current outlook to me, but instead to describe the *why* of that outlook - what they observed and felt as each event unfolded and how their reaction to it shaped them. What were their thoughts, and what did they walk away with? Different people react differently to the same circumstantial blessings and hardships. It's only then that I can properly understand any outlook that someone may present. What you'll get in this series is as close to the "what happened" as I can muster, with my takeaways from those experiences - brilliant or faulty.

Second, the story that is behind what I believe has been shaped by my experiences, and my blog has from the start included those as well as my own reflections upon them. Just like the rest of it, this is part of what I've discovered along the way. After all, *Strolling Amok* hasn't really been a single-track travel blog, has it? Have the entries all been limited to "Day 1,044 - Urea Nevada...photoshopped sunset and plant photos... and buy my e-book"? One of *Strolling Amok's* several post categories is the catch-all "Navel Gazing" and, as you have seen, I'm not afraid to use it. Whether a reasonably wide range of my experiences and thoughts should or should not be posted here is hardly an issue. Like bad axle bearings and magnificent, Big Sky views, it is part of my life, so up it goes on my blog. What you do with it is your business, your decision.

Third, I'm as surprised and as challenged as anyone would be in my position. The story *behind* my beliefs is not at all what I would have expected, and it continues as such each week. It's just possible that you might find it interesting, the same as you might

react to hearing anyone share any part of their life story. Think of it as the old-timer at the campfire, recalling a few of the events of his life - in this case tales that sound anywhere from pretty unlikely to medication-is-indicated unlikely - but he swears by them. For that reason, if nothing else, you can perhaps at least enjoy the process of gauging my mental competency.

Lastly, I'm posting this series because each element of it tends to contradict mainstream perceptions and assumptions about God's basic nature. We tend to gather these from men and women who have inserted their own natures into the mix, and when translated into action, the resulting products have steered away from what God recognizes as being His own. They have wound up recreating God in their own images, then reflecting *that* to those around them. For example, a hater casting insults from underneath the banner of Christ (or any other banner) remains just a hater furiously waving what he feels gives him the authority and justification to do what he does best: hate and insult. I believe that this kind of warpage, as well as our own individual tendencies to form expectations built upon mere popular thought, has led to great personal disappointment and rejection of the whole topic. We observe and then rightly decide "Well, if that's who God is and what He's like, I don't want any part of it!"

But is that really who God is? We seem to be relegated to taking our own ideas and needs, and projecting them into the heavens, forming beliefs as best we can and piecing together a worldview that seems to make sense of it all. Even Science does this, hard as it may try to distance itself from other religions and philosophies. Then naturally, we work to make those the most popular or prevalent belief systems. After all, what else can we do?

What you may find in this series is occasional obnoxious enthusiasm, and for that I apologize, sort of. It's hard not to get enthusiastic about something which has proven to be a literal lifesaver. What you'll find a minimum of is proselytizing, as in "You are a sinner; Christ died for you; repent and believe in Him," because it makes little sense without its context. It sounds condemning, a mysterious and unasked for favor is implied, and something sounding rather mystical is demanded, seems like. Well, like you, I'm no Hitler either, but I have found the hard way that there actually is a God, that He is not silent, that He does not conform to our expectations about what such a God should be like, and that He yearns for us to understand both Him and our place with Him in this world. But, unlike many believe, He is *not like us*, and those differences in essence or "character" are to the good, much as we may try to paint otherwise. He wants us to understand the reality of our situation within this world gone awry. The worldview that God has revealed to us is *not intended to be a popular social or political movement*. It is intended to be a One-on-one spiritual relationship that restores and remolds individuals into better reflecting His true nature in this world. In a sense, it is intended to be subversive, yet in a positive way. When it becomes the status quo, it tends to wear only the shiny nameplate of Christianity without Christ, without the relationship or any of the operating basics, and without reflecting His true nature. It becomes a mere "religion" and in some cases, an excuse. Then, well, you know how *that goes*.

So, my purpose in writing this series of chapters is simply to relay to you the assortment of glimpses into His nature which He has demonstrated to me. You may see that what I assert here as events are not my subconscious projections of the God I wanted or expected, but to illustrate the core of what He is like, a core from which everything else about Him flows. How you yourself inwardly respond to my descriptions of those events is entirely up to you. I'll present only what happened in my life, how I reacted, and what I considered. Much of that is unlikely to match your expectations, and that's enough. It might not match what a lot of people who consider themselves to be Christians would expect either, but there you go. Or, you may instead find that you are busy disbelieving a very different God than the one that I have encountered. Perhaps you may discover that God is not an intellectual exercise, a construction of how and what we logically consider to fit neatly together.

The only thing you can count on in regards to it is that whatever I write will accurately reflect my thoughts, and not be a mere manipulation edited to sucker in the most people and offend the least. I'm not fishing for a specific reaction from you. There's no sign-up clipboard here. Actually, I have not wanted to write this series at all. Being a pronounced introvert that lacks basic social skills doesn't motivate me to write posts that go against the cultural current. But, if you had a debilitating, incurable ailment and gradually discovered something that got you through it and back on your feet, it would be a pretty sad thing to keep it to yourself. If you had any empathy at all, you'd want to present your situation and what got you healed and/or out of it, offering it as something that a few others in the same situation might wish to consider for themselves. It's that simple.

You have already read the title, and can hardly help but make assumptions. Let me knock one down now: this isn't a pat apologetic for mainstream Christianity as it has been and seems to be practiced today, since I have long ago stumbled over the same issues that most do when they look for something that they can place their faith or hope in. We all rest our lives on *something*. My own beliefs much more resemble meeting someone and discovering through interaction over the years - the good times and the bad times - what he or she is really like. This series is merely fodder for you to consider what I've lived through, come across, and reflected upon as you try to make your own ongoing sense of this world's ways. In that way, I agree with the late American astronomer, cosmologist, astrophysicist, astrobiologist and author Carl Sagan when he said, "It is far better to grasp the Universe as it really is than to persist in delusion, however satisfying and reassuring." It's just that, unlike Carl, I believe that this little sword of insight has two edges.

The Wake-Up Call

Ask any honest witness to an event what he or she saw, and it's unlikely to perfectly match the actual event in every detail. He or she may miss things, read into actions, inject their own emotions and biases, and basically twist it a bit. And it gets worse as time passes. Without microphones and cameras, it can be hard to know what actually happened. And even with those, there's creative editing.

I'm aware of this whenever I consider the several weird occurrences in my life, of becoming convinced that there actually *is* a God, and of discovering what He is like. I don't doubt these occurrences myself, because I easily recall my mindset and expectations of the time, and their failure to match what resulted. These events aren't exactly something that a camera can capture. But you'll have to make up your own mind, and perhaps recall strange or unexpected occurrences in your own life. You can review and accept them, or play Scrooge and assign it to "perhaps a bit of bad beef". I've never been much of a fan of the metaphysical, which is pretty peculiar, considering my spiritual faith. But, there you go.

I figure that if I first present some of the events that have influenced my faith, then you'll be better equipped to mull over any other statements that I make, or at least have a handle on why I present what I might in any someday future posts. You can decide to either let them on through, or to engage your shit filters. That's up to you. My difficulty has always been that when Christians meet together in a small group for the first time, it's a common thing to go around the circle and summarize "how you came to Christ". Most often, these are single-issue things that people are able to gather up into a few sentences, and they have a ring of authenticity that is unmistakable. Unfortunately, I've never found a way to *succinctly* summarize how God steered me to Himself, since the process was a bit of a marathon. Or like a pinball game, actually. That was because of me. When my turn comes in such a group, my response tends to be, "Uh...uh...how much time do you have?" So it is here that I at last have the time and space to cover what actually happened, and can avoid giving short-shrift to meaningful events. So it begins:

When I was a kid, my parents both attended a local Methodist church, and dragged me along. I initially sat in the hard wooden pews with them, and after awhile they dropped me into Sunday School. I felt very uncomfortable attending Sunday School with all these kids I didn't know, and who somehow popped up answers and names I hadn't ever heard of. They all knew Bible stories, and coughed up ancient events as if they were relevant to anything today. It made me very uneasy, I complained, and so my mother once again allowed me to sit beside her in the pew during each service.

Still, that in itself was excruciating enough, because all they did was to go through a preset routine of the minister praying generically, and responsive readings, and having to sing hymn #153 or #78 from the book, which I also didn't like to do. They sang *all* the verses. That was the price to be able to stay out of Sunday School, however. I quietly

stood and mumbled through each hymn, and pretended that I was devotedly reading the words in deference to my mother, who made a point of holding the thing so I could read it. Stand up, sit down, stand up, sit down. And the long and boring sermons, oh my. I quickly learned to fall sound asleep during these, leaning against my mother's arm. Even for all that's happened since, 95% of the time, I still to this day involuntarily yawn whenever I sing a hymn, willing or otherwise. Like Pavlov's dogs, it's a conditioned response.

At any rate, I used to get tonsillitis on a regular basis. It would get pretty bad, and not just to a kid's way of thinking. I'd miss school and drop behind, and the fever, throat pain and swelling was always there while it raged on. Swallowing, with or without food or drink, felt like swallowing razor blades, and would make me shudder, groan, and at the peak bring tears to my eyes. Then it would slowly get better, to where it just hurt all the time. Once the worst was over, my mother would drag me back to church with them, because it wasn't like I was going to give anyone else tonsillitis. But the pain was weathering, and I slept well there.

On one occasion, after the sermon was over, the sudden silence and rustling of hymnals woke me. That was the signal that they were going to stand up again. Man, I was tired of this. As you can imagine, I had no real interest in any deity who seriously enjoyed things that were as excruciatingly boring as this, or memorizing the names of people who'd been dead for centuries. It was a common-ground issue. Who were they praying to, anyway? It wasn't like you could *see* anything, or hear a voice. It seemed like Santa Claus for adults, but without the presents. It was something you just had to go along with as a kid, to keep the peace. However, my throat hurt, and I was tired of it. What the heck? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I groggily thought the words, "If you exist, if you'll heal my throat, then I'll sing this hymn for you real loud." I was serious about it, mind you, but come on - I was throwing it out there into a black void. I stood up with everyone else, planning to keep my head down and lip-sync the words. No voice today, folks, not with this. I just want to finish up this thing and go home, bored and worn. Let's just get through this.

We all stood up, me included. As the organ wailed up and my mother held the hymnal open for me and began singing along with the rest, something odd got my attention, and fast. I froze. This was *weird* - I could definitely feel the constrictive swelling under and around my throat rapidly going down. It wasn't, "Hmm, I wonder if it's getting a little better, maybe." It was more the sudden whack of a velvet sledge, with a startling realization that this thing was suddenly and inexplicably going normal in the span of a few seconds. Not just sort of okay, but wide open and, in a second more, pain-free. Truth to tell, I was astonished. What just happened? It wasn't "better". It was situation normal in perhaps ten seconds instead of half a week or more. It took awhile for the realization to sink in. What are you supposed to do with that? These things can't happen. I had no frame of reference for this. I had expected nothing, in perfect continuity with all I'd seen before.

While the hymn was ongoing, it took me several long moments to register what had just completed. I engaged my vocal chords, clearing my throat as a test. A-okay. No hint of pain or that choking swelling. More wondering. This thing was really...*normal*. Then I realized that I had apparently discovered three things for sure: there really is a God of some kind or other, he apparently hears us - even our thoughts, and he can clearly do things that cannot be done.

What did I do with this healing? I didn't understand it. How was it even possible? But I was thankful for it. I did the only thing I could do: I held up my end. I sang, and I sang *loud*. I sang so loudly that I could see my mother looking down at me, obviously wondering, "*What is going on with you?*" Hey, I was astonished and happy to have the wearing pain gone. A deal is a deal. I'm pretty sure that she'd never heard me singing before. Oh, it may not have been pretty, but it was *loud*.

Afterward, with something special like that, I'd like to say that I was changed forever, and went on to an enduring, intimate faith that transformed my life. Ummm, not really. I walked away with what I had learned: there is a mysterious, imperceptible being who apparently has an unexplainable tolerance for boring things. This invisible being at least occasionally listens to us, and it can do things that can't possibly occur. That was my take at the time. In adult-speak: It exists as a conscious, selectively responsive and powerful being, unseen and undetectable - often frustratingly so. After that episode, I went on to kick my way through life as best I could, knowing the above but not doing anything about it. After all, I didn't like being bored in the kinds of places I associated this unseen being with hanging out in.

Did I psyche myself out? If I did, it was one *very* good mind trick. I was honest in my request, but had expected nothing. I had no preconditioning/training, other than having the drone of adult sermons cure insomnia. There was no secret, sparkly little hope that *something was there*, other than simply hoping to employ whatever the point of these weekend adult ceremonies were about. There was little hope that something would happen, or even that all of this church ceremony stuff meant anything at all. Like going to work or fixing up the house, church was just a routine that some grown-ups seemed to do for some reason. All I had been doing, as always, was trying to endure the church service, so that I could escape and go home.

Besides, in miracle cures that aren't miracles, reality soon trumps psych jobs, doesn't it? The physical problem or illness returns once the adrenaline wears off, and often with a vengeance. I didn't realize it until I was in my late twenties, but I never had a simple raw throat, let alone tonsillitis, even once after that little encounter - even up to today, in my sixties. Pretty weird, huh? That would be quite a self-delusion for an exasperated young kid who halfheartedly took a chance on the unlikely, and then forgot about it. Sure, other common ailments have come and gone, or come and stayed, but my throat has remained out of the mix from that day on without my realizing it until decades later. It's pretty easy to get used to having a recurring illness stop recurring.

So, as of that unexpected interaction, God existed after all. Hidden and secretive maybe, but this being existed and chose to call my bluff that day. And it sure caught me by surprise.

I don't present this as a path that you should try to mimic, especially since the Bible cautions people not to try to make God jump through hoops, i.e.: "If you do this, I'll believe in you," which, considering the realities of the situation, is not all that far from, "Come over here and do what I want. Prove yourself, or that's it for you." Making deals is not His bag. He's not there for entertainment value or a magic show. There's a very different dynamic operating here. I was a kid. Why He chose to acquiesce to my request was a mystery to me for many, many years. Also, I don't present this as a proof that puts me one leg up on anyone else, faith-wise. I didn't have any. It just happened, and it happened to me. As Jesus said to His follower Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have *not* seen and yet have believed." He was talking about the past expectant prophets and others who had waited for His coming long before he was born, but my extrapolation from this is that a faith based upon experiencing miracles is not on a par with a faith that *hasn't needed them*.

The true significance of this unexpected and persistent healing is really that it's a first small revealing of *God's true nature*. Think of it what you will, but get ready for more.

Unexpected Boundaries

I've always tended to go along on my merry way, oblivious to what's going on around me. Just call me One-Track Charlie. I made it to high school without any more incursions into the ethereal realm. On the whole, I didn't really like high school much. It had its good points here and there, but with my people skills ranking in the single digits, a lot of it was confusing and frustrating. It was disturbingly similar to church. All I was trying to do was to get through it. That is, until one day. I didn't think about it as some kind of encounter revealing the basic nature of the Supreme Being, but did learn a valuable lesson that stuck with me.

I can't recall the details of why I was so upset one particular day, but I do remember that I was very resentful of some teacher whom I felt was arbitrary and unfair. Naturally, I was powerless to do anything about it, and as I angrily obsessed about it on the way home, I took a precious moment to mentally call down whatever powers there might be to rain down accursed calamities on this usurper of justice and right. Since God existed and was powerful, some kind of unseen spiritual realm existed, and it could do this kind of thing, no? I'd seen TV shows and movies. There were other, darker powers too, according to those, but I knew God existed for sure. I'd never read the Bible, but suspected that this kind of thing could be right up his alley, and I let fly. I appealed to the God of Vengeance I'd heard about.

From that point on, my angry curse took full effect, and one thing after another began to go seriously wrong... for me! I was surprised, and the barrage of calamity was so weirdly consistent and intense that it didn't take me very long at all to realize something in alarm. Backfire! All I knew was that God existed, and God apparently did not want me to call down punishment on people and wish them ill. He had steered my curse right around and back at me before it ever got anywhere. There was no collateral damage, either. The sensation that I felt was that I was intruding into his authority - yet somehow a space contrary to Him. The destructive force of hatred was not just off limits, but was not of Him. It was to be foreign to me. He would have no part of it, and for some reason singled me out as not being able to have any part of it, either. Shaken, I gracefully acquiesced, apologizing and taking back that curse, pronto. End of calamities, similar to turning off a faucet. Totally weird, and sobering.

As I say, I didn't analyze this at the time and consciously assign it to a description of God's character. All I knew was that it was not for me, because it seemed to be not of Him, either. Maybe others could get away with it, but not me. I didn't know why not, but that seemed like a moot point. This is about where I started capitalizing the "H" in "He" and "Him". I began to get just an inkling of His power and authority, as well as His unexpected values. It's a respect thing. All I wanted was justice, but something about my desire for it was horribly askew. What I got was justice, but not as I'd envisioned it.

It's probably a handy detail that I still hadn't read the Bible, and wouldn't until many years later. After all, the Old Testament might have appeared to contradict what I'd just

experienced, wouldn't it? I knew of a few of the salient parts - after all, I *had* seen the Hollywood movie *The Ten Commandments* - which had motivated my own little pronouncement of fire and brimstone. All that anger and annihilation and mayhem was pretty confusing in terms of who I thought was choosing to interact with me here, and I was far too immature to sort that kind of thing out. All I knew was what I knew so far, with one addition: God exists, can hear us, can take action - and is distinctly unlike us in our human foibles and ways of thinking. If nothing else, it made me wonder - who *is* this God?

The Unwanted Encounter

A lot of time passed since my teen years, or so it seemed. When I was about twenty-four, I was working on my hobby car project in the garage. I had always liked cars, and used my automotive hobby to console myself, since epic life disappointments had reached a peak, and I was deeply confused about what the right thing to do was.

Book-smart but not street-smart, the only response to obstacles that had seemed to work for me had been to keep going. Persist. Find a way over, around, under, or through. Or, wait for a passing opportunity, but never back down or give up, especially on a person. Sounds inspiring, but I had not yet discovered the concept of knowing when to quit, either. Never have since, actually. In the right circumstances, that can cause a heap of pain and, carried to extremes, a lot of unintended fallout, even with the best of intentions. The main challenge for me is not to do “the right thing” and persist in it, but to correctly discern what the *real* right thing to do is in the first place. Sometimes, it’s not that simple to figure out. Had I the presence of mind, I could have invented the later term called “blowback”.

The old car was my escape valve. I had taken its carburetor apart for rebuilding one Saturday, and I was sitting at the garage worktable dissecting it. I was trying to interpret the instructions on how to use a float height measuring gauge on this model of carb when I felt, well, a surrounding *presence*. Not a metaphysical, spooky flashlight-in-the-face ghost hunt thing, but a quiet, calm, immensely powerful presence. This was no small surprise, because it was out of the blue and I was concentrating on the stinking float height instructions that combined vagueness with contradiction. Couldn’t see it, touch it, or hear it, but someone - not something - was silently there with me. It wasn’t alarming or creepy in the least - no hairs standing on the back of your neck or anything like that. It was more surprising than anything else, and I felt confused as I tried to understand what was going on and why. I had the very distinct feeling that God was there in some way, in some representation. It just *was*, and I somehow sensed it.

This was an absolute first for me, of course. The supernatural was never a point of interest for me. I was more of a science “that’s pretty neat” guy raised on steady doses of the *Watch Mr. Wizard* TV show. This presence seemed to just quietly *be* there, waiting for me to interact with it somehow. But what are you supposed to say? My fear was that this might somehow be related to going back to church services, and my feeling was that I already had enough problems, thank you. I just assumed that if you got involved with God, He’d break your legs and make you learn to play the flute. You’d have to do everything that was boring and of absolutely no interest to you. It wouldn’t be your life anymore. What a wretched existence! I’d have to give up everything I liked to do. That’s how I kept my head straight! Things were going badly enough as it was, and adding a behavioral straight jacket did not appeal. Boy, like that’s all I needed, spending more time in some church and feeling bored, ignorant, and ill at ease. No way! I said, quietly but audibly, “No. This is *my* life. This is all I have. Leave me alone.”

Instantly, the presence seemed to evaporate from around me, and was gone. How I sensed *that*, I don't know either, except that I felt very alone again, such that now there was a void, an absence where there was none before. Things were normal, except for that. I hadn't felt alone before. I was left to deal with things in my own muddling way, but that's the way I wanted it. I felt a pang of regret for a moment, and an "I wonder if I did the right thing" thought, but surely having to ladle what I knew of church on top of everything else I was dealing with would be just too much. Yes, for a logical person who was used to the observable, measurable and repeatable, this whole thing was pretty weird.

Some Christians that I relate this story to find it difficult to accept that I can validly claim to be a follower of Christ now, when what I appear to have done was to promptly reject the unusual and unmistakable presence of God's Spirit. They liken it to rejecting salvation, which I knew very little about. Oh sure, heard of it, and that's about it. You're a sinner, you need salvation, come to Christ, whatever that meant. To them, it's all the same, and your first reaction is also your last. The operating assumption is that God is in a hurry, so we get one shot at understanding what's going on and one chance for a permanent categorization, since God's main interest is in setting things up for the judgement to come, right? He's efficiency-oriented, they feel, and efficiency is always good. Thankfully, God does not limit His thoughts or actions by human perceptions, nor to the human degree of mercy, love or patience. Turns out, His interest is in a *relationship*, not a sign-up sheet, and while a walkaway is just that, He knows our hearts much better than we do.

Little did I suspect at the time that God can read through both the person and the situation, and is sometimes disinclined to accept a straightforward and sincere "no". Part of me suspects that it's in consideration of the mental competency of the individual responding in that way. More seriously, I *thought* I knew what I was saying no to at the time, but didn't really. I was operating from some wrong assumptions, and so I wanted no part of God, because I had no idea of what He was actually like. In fact, I had no idea what *I* was actually like, and I was deeply troubled by recent events. To me, God appeared to be a complication rather than a solution. Fortunately, God is even less of a quitter than I am when it comes to people, but I didn't know that then. I had no inkling that He would not sit helplessly in the wings, waiting for me to decide to change my mind.

The English poet Francis Thompson did not refer to God's Spirit as the "Hound of Heaven" for nothing. It's a long [poem](#), challenging to understand in detail because of the mix of Victorian style with deliberately archaic wording, but the core stands clear. Here's just the first and most applicable stanza to what followed:

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.*

*Up vistaed hopes I sped;
And shot, precipitated,
Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears,
From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat--and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet--
"All things betray thee, who betrayest Me."*

Come, Let Us Reason Together

Life continued while I kicked my way through it, thankfully without God. After all, that's the way I wanted it.

I'd just had my project car's engine rebuilt. I installed it, put on the cylinder heads, and bent a valve because I misadjusted one of the lifters during final setup. And that damaged the cylinder bore, too. *Damn*. Printed instructions aren't always enough. That and other things were starting to go wrong because of my utter inexperience, and one evening as I stopped work, I once again took a last look at the car from the doorway and tried to picture it done and ready to drive (to keep my motivation up). Envision success! And...done! As I began to close the door to go upstairs, a strange, intrusive thought seemed to pop into my head out of the blue, saying "What is it worth?" I hadn't thought about a hobby car in terms of dollar value, and the question sort of surprised me. The thought of selling it had never occurred to me. Why on earth did I think *that*? Where did that come from? But I considered it and answered, "Oh, about \$1,800 or so," and went upstairs, thinking no more about it. Whatever.

A few weeks later, same scenario except that the car was continuing to go more seriously wrong. I stopped and took my usual "picture success" gaze at it, and then that same quiet but intrusively foreign thought then asked, "What is it worth?" I was no less surprised than before, but I thought back, "Well, maybe about \$1,500." I was just beginning to get a little unsettled. This line of thought was ruining my "envision success" moments. I don't do this kind of thing to myself, ever. Too demotivating. You have to persist in the face of difficulty, one step at a time, and keep a positive mindset going, and what did its street value have to do with that? It's a hobby. Nonsensical. My thoughts went with the flow, and if thoughts could have a volume, they were at volume three. This intrusive thought was more like volume five, and interrupted the flow. It was annoying and disruptive to success.

Well, the re-rebuilt engine was soon audibly pounding a main bearing with a deep *boom*, and I realized I was out of luck, out of my league, and finally out of the money, energy and determination needed to keep going on it. It was time to give up and dump it. The foreign thought came to me yet again as I was about to close the door, this time without my usual motivating gaze. "What is it worth?" came through more quietly than before, though it was no less annoying. Kick a guy when he's down. I was trying to put together a realistic figure for this sudden junkheap when I realized that the question was not and had never been about *money*. It was about this car's real importance in my life, or the significance of the weight I could rest on it to get me through life. This sudden realization of the meaning of the question was not of my own brilliance. The nuances of the way in which the question was asked made the true meaning painfully clear. Even I couldn't miss it. I was using this work as an escape valve after having the hard truth driven home once more that my romanticized sense of loyalty and deep trust in the love of my life had been inappropriately placed. An isolated incident had emerged as a trend.

The car was an emotional fallback. I had just lost my second crutch, and down I went. I let the car become someone else's problem.

As time went on, I began to wonder what *was* significant in life, and what I *could* count on. I had observed that even a very comfortable stockpile of money could completely disappear with one illness, accident or other mishap. Concentrating my life around gathering money was useless. I thought of those local commercial buildings that had someone's name carved over the entrances. A proud accomplishment at one time, now they were impersonalized mysteries that no one gave a thought to. Hmmm, Stanton Building ...Whatever. Nothing more than a name carved in just ahead of the wrecking ball, with the person being long gone and as unremembered as a welshing drug dealer buried in the desert outside Vegas. How does one make one's life significant or meaningful? Why do we even seek significance, or justice, meaningfulness, purpose, or any of the other common values? Why do some give that up, and live with less depth of conscience than the family cat? Why do some seek the fleeting, hollow acknowledgement of fame? In what should I invest my life? What could I lean my weight on that would not weaken and collapse in the long run? I thought hard and long, but I could think of nothing.

About this time, some Mormon missionaries appeared, since my wife had had a Mormon upbringing. Aiming at me, they rattled off personal testimonies, strung Bible verses together in the confident, practiced patter of a Ginsu knife spokesman, and dumped the Mormon version of the Bible, Book of Mormon, Doctrine & Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price on me during weekly visits. No, I didn't see my way through everything, but what I did read seemed fascinating and truly bizarre. I tried to keep an open mind though, because who knew where God was? I read and read. When that moment of the missionary-led "is this the one?" prayer finally came, there was no inward blip of sensing an affirmation, and no "burning in my heart" which they expected as I mouthed the words they wanted me to. Nada. This surprised them, because I appeared to be open and seriously considering what they had to say - since I actually was seeking God by that time. They eventually gave up and left me in peace. No harm, no foul - except of course for their logical perception that I must be destined to be lost for all eternity. I was not to be one of the Chosen Ones. I kept reading the Mormon literature now and then after that just to make sure, and eventually hit teachings that I would be afraid to whisper on a golf course during a thunderstorm. I knew precious little of God, but I knew that wanting to earn eventual godhood oneself was "inappropriate behavior", however wonderfully virtuous a light to the world I might become. Besides, I knew I could never be a god myself, which would resemble giving a loaded pistol with a hair-trigger to a mischievous child suffering from muscle spasms. I dropped my interest in Mormonism as quickly as I had stopped laying curses on unfair high school teachers.

I eventually started to wonder about God Himself. Remember, desperate men do desperate things. I had largely forgotten that he had healed my throat earlier, one-on-one. I simply recalled in my gut that He existed, and with the more recent reminders in and around the garage, knew that He *still* existed. I was coming around to wanting something from Him. It felt like there was something missing or askew in me that

nothing could seem to fix. Like a warped picture frame, nothing seemed to fit properly, or seat fully.

Never one to take the simple approach, I bought a paperback book called *52 Religions*, which briefly described each one on its list. God, the unexpected Being that I had sporadically encountered, surely had to be in there *somewhere*. It was kind of a spiritual Russian roulette. Nothing really floated my boat or lit up brighter than any other. As I read, I kept asking God which one was my path to get to Him. There were so many interesting, defined options. What avenue did He work through? Which belief system? Which philosophy? Which church or organization? Couldn't tell. Oh, there was "Mormon" again. Prayed about that. Nothing. There was even "Christian" described too, of course. I figured that must be a slam-dunk, right? Prayed about that, though I was a bit afraid of winding up having to endure more Methodist church services. Nothing. Bummer. Maybe God had lost interest because I'd told Him to forget it before. Maybe none of these coolly-canned descriptions really represented the roadmap to find Him, at least for me. I had no idea what was wrong and was at a loss, but He had to be in there *somewhere*.

But, He wasn't. Not for me. I put my search on pause, then gave up and tried to hold my ground against the current of difficulties that swirled unrelentingly around me. It would be a long couple of years before I found what I needed, but wasn't looking for.

In retrospect, another selected segment from Francis Thompson's *The Hound of Heaven*:

*Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee,
Save Me, save only Me?
All which I took from thee I did but take,
Not for thy harms,
But just that thou might'st seek it in My arms.
All which thy child's mistake
Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:
Rise, clasp My hand, and come!
Halts by me that footfall:
Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?
'Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!*

The Faith Box of Reason

By the time I was entering my late-twenties, life began to resemble some kind of grim endurance contest. By cultural standards, I was doing just fine, thank you very much. Internally, something big was missing. Since my *52 Religions* paperback came up dry, I thought that perhaps I could look for some significance in Science, since it had earlier seemed competent in explaining things. I more deeply researched the theories and evidence behind evolution, and the deeper I looked past the confident and reassuring patter, the more disappointed I became with it. It felt kind of like a betrayal, after my former fandom. The series of complete human skulls fabricated from a few random shards had clearly been forced to show things that were imagined rather than indicated or justifiable. The defining shards did not support the speculated whole, yet I was being assured that they did.

They were presented as scientific fact instead of what they really were: more religious icons forcefully hammered into a new dogma of belief. Even the basic tenets of how biological creation and evolution worked began to present a long train of required logic miracles that wound up needing a lot more faith than I had available. I felt like Dorothy looking behind the curtain in Oz. The only thing that seemed to evolve over time was the direction its dogma took. Theories changed, and when they became referred to as facts, the facts changed. Truth was merely Truth du Jour, which is handy for scientific inquiry, but hardly something to lean your life's weight on. The Science I was familiar with, the one of logic, observability, measurability, and repeatability was clearly missing in this area. It was rife with speculation parading as something else. It became apparent to me that coolly logical, impartial and reasoned Science and its proofs were being controlled by pre-existing beliefs - by biases, and by emotion. It was supposed to be "examine all of the evidence with an open mind, and look for a theory that might explain it." Instead, it was more like, "take a personal belief, and then manipulate the evidence to back it up." The claimed disengaged objectivity simply wasn't there. Whatever was powering the incessant squabbles and turf battles based on the same shared evidence was not untainted reasoning, nor cool intellect. I had the feeling that someone was trying to string me along for their own ends, and I eventually abandoned that tack.

Then as today, scientific "thought" is openly hostile to all other faiths, dismissing all matters of the supernatural as ape-man superstitions, myths and legends that must be actively driven out of the thought and practice of any decent, thinking society. In the era I grew up in, if you asked where life came from, the answer you got was that it was the result of the combination of the energy and the chemicals needed, an inevitable event which could almost certainly be duplicated in the laboratory. They even gave it a few shots. More than a few, truth be told.

As they began to dissect the string of failures in order to fix the problem, still touting life as inevitable, Science found over the few next decades that the very long train of required event sequences in the specific order required to create life by chance was so impossibly unlikely that they went silent on the state of progress, though not the

insistence of inevitability as fact. In current times, one building block is mimicked and the whole process is still pronounced as inevitable, since only by usurping God's power to create life can Science have the full legitimacy to take His place in the hearts and minds of all, they feel. To them, there can no other origin for life other than *random chance*, rendering life's significance meaningless. If we exist, then it was inevitable that we would exist, eventually. The "superstitious myth" of an intelligent or guided creation was and still remains completely unacceptable of course, but the impossible odds of the scientific answer were too ridiculously embarrassing to continue on with as a highly public effort.

Not to mention the absurdly remote mathematical odds of any ball of rock forming with the unique and incredibly narrow combination of traits needed to support life as we know it. These odds, once touted in order to impress the unwashed with Science's prowess at explaining how our planet defied the incredible odds and came to be, were eventually downplayed because it became a weapon in the hands of the accursed creationist primitives hoping to regain legitimacy in the public arena. The numerical probabilities are now largely ignored, since it works against the funding needed to search for evidence of life on other planets. Adapt and prosper. Like the creation of life, other intelligent civilizations in other solar systems are simply painted with a coat or two of inevitability. If we exist, then others must. Seems sensible. All we lack is the confirmation in scientific evidence...so far. Sounds good.

So, the public question of "How did life begin?" has long ago been replaced with "How did life *on Earth* begin?" Despite the statistical impossibility of chance life, Science has now shifted to the assumption that since it *did* undeniably begin once, the universe must therefore be rife with it. The current speculation that scientific thinkers promote seems to be that life on Earth may possibly be the result of either benevolent alien visitation, or bacteria riding from planet to planet on meteorites, which evolved over time into every species present today. How *that* life got started is ignored, since Science is hard-pressed to repeat it or to explain it. The only real assurance is that the scientific, provable answer to the Big Questions will come in the future, given suitable funding.

And in the meantime, our Best Hope is to evolve into creatures better suited to our new surroundings, allowing the DNA of our distant descendants to eventually, randomly reprogram itself toward our new man-made environmental situations as the eons pass - or perhaps we can steer that reprogramming along ourselves via a combination of genetic engineering and, once again, eugenics. The problem for humanity's course is that natural selection hardly applies any more, as scientific advancements steer both ends. Medical Science saves millions that would otherwise perish, while at the same time we bathe ourselves in chemicals and radio waves, and wage wars for control that exterminate millions. There's a little random chance left in there, but not much natural selection to genetically trim off unsuited branches. In the short term, that Best Hope time frame poses some issues for me personally, regardless.

While scientific minds love to poke fun at the ridiculous "pie in the sky, by and by" hope of life after death, their hope in Science to turn Earth into a Utopia seems to me to

require no less faith, all evidence being to the contrary. After all, radioactive substances and DDT were once promoted as life-enhancing products of the “Miracle of Science” despite being little understood, and the consequences eventually proved disastrous. Today in the United States at least, we’re eating Genetically Modified Organisms without any prior notification and without full knowledge of the consequences of doing so. Exactly how genes work is not fully understood, and neither are the full consequences of transferring them from one form of life to another. The simple “one gene, one protein” Central Dogma that prompted the beginnings of genetic engineering has proven to be a falsity. Since scientists work at the behest of their benefactors (follow the money) who continually seek new ways to increase profits and control over markets, we’re eating GMO foods en masse. Utopia for *who*?

The foundational issue is that, to Modern Science, the “*miracle* of life” cannot exist because of the presupposition that God cannot exist - and in fact must not be permitted to exist - so they aggressively look for “rational” ways to explain away how such events might have occurred by a coincidence of chance natural events which primitives have afterward repainted as God-events. Since miracles tend to violate the laws of nature, the practitioners of Science limit themselves to two choices: either find an explanation which redefines the event as natural and repeatable, or denounce the event as a delusion, perhaps being based on legends, primitive superstitions, or deceptive intent. After all, some people are more prone to delusion, hysteria, mental disorders or lying than others. Fear and a sense of helplessness can alter our perceptions, too. When it comes to the beginnings of life itself, science obligates itself to play up the “wonder” aspect and drop the “miracle” part. Though done in the name of objectivity, it really isn’t. The possibility of a supernatural intelligent being is deeply offensive to Science, and there is a compulsion to counter that possibility wherever it may exist.

Everyone has to believe in *something*. Even today, evolutionists believe that new genetic information can arise from disorder by chance, which is a belief not convincingly backed by real science. Scientists agree that all living things exhibit evidence of design, but abhor the concept of a Creator in any way, shape or form. Dr. Richard Dawkins, a leading evolutionist, has admitted, “We have seen that living things are too improbable and too beautifully ‘designed’ to have come into existence by chance.” Design implies a Designer, but Dawkins instead says, “*All appearance to the contrary*, the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with future purpose in his mind’s eye. Natural selection, the blind, unconscious, automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the blind watchmaker.”

While recently reading through Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, I was surprised to find science referred to as “The Philosophy of Science”, “The Philosophy of Biology”,

“Natural Philosophy” and so on. Originally thinking of it as obsolete terminology, on reflection, I no longer consider it to be so.

While Dawkins concedes that, “the more statistically improbable a thing is, the less can we believe that it just happened by blind chance. Superficially the obvious alternative to chance is an Intelligent Designer.” To refute his own logic, he recites his dogma of faith, “The answer, Darwin’s answer, is by gradual, step-by-step transformations from simple beginnings, from primordial entities sufficiently simple to have come into existence by chance. Each successive change in the gradual evolutionary process was simple enough, relative to its predecessor, to have arisen by chance. But the whole sequence of cumulative steps constitutes anything but a chance process, when you consider the complexity of the final end product relative to the original starting point. The cumulative process is directed by nonrandom survival.” He credits evolution in the form of natural selection and gene mutations as the nonrandom designer.

There’s a problem with voicing this as The Scientific Approach, mainly because natural selection and mutation are observably limited to what is already in the DNA. You can sort, separate and rearrange, but are limited to working with what is already present. The imagined “hop” to a new species based on new genetic information has never been observed. If anything, mutations are the result of less genetic information, not new forms of it. That’s a problem that the faithful are diligently working to counter.

Dr. Lee Spetner cites, “All point mutations that have been studied on the molecular level turn out to reduce the genetic information and not to increase it. The NDT [neo-Darwinian theory] is supposed to explain how information of life has been built up by evolution. The essential biological difference between a human and a bacterium is in the information they contain. All other biological differences follow from that. The human genome has much more information than does the bacterial genome. Information cannot be built up by mutations that lose it. A business can’t make money by losing it a little at a time.” He goes on to say, “The neo-Darwinians would like us to believe that large evolutionary changes can result from a series of small events if there are enough of them. But if these events all lose information, they can’t be the steps in the kind of evolution the NDT is supposed to explain, no matter how many mutations there are. Whoever thinks macroevolution can be made by mutations that lose information is like the merchant who lost a little money on every sale but thought he could make it up in volume Not even one mutation has been observed that adds a little information to the genome. That surely shows that there are not the millions upon millions of potential mutations the theory demands. There may well not be any. The failure to observe even one mutation that adds information is more than just a failure to find support for the theory. It is evidence against the theory. We have here a serious challenge to neo-Darwinian theory.”

But hasn’t evolution been confidently pushed as a fact for many decades? Yes, but in the face of further scientific research, it takes more faith than objective reasoning to believe. You have to be willing to assert something as scientifically proven despite scientific evidence invalidating it. That may be why any evidence of fossil “linkage”, an

intermediate between two genetically distinct species, has never been found. Yet the progression is claimed as fact in spite of the contraindications and lack of evidence. That's not Science. That's a religion, one with its own tenets of faith and a belief in the supreme power of the human intellect. I'm fine with evolution as a scientific theory, but that isn't how it's being promoted. Cloaked as an immutable, evidence-based intellectual exercise, it's now the religion of the State, hiding its philosophical undergarments as best it can.

To the question "Can new information originate through mutations?" Dr. Werner Gitts, writes, "This idea is central in representations of evolution, but mutations can only cause changes in *existing* information. There can be no increase in information, and in general the results are injurious. New blueprints for new functions or new organs cannot arise; mutations cannot be the source of new (creative) information."

Likewise, the assumptions needed to create a lowly single-cell organism from the primordial ooze made the process a seeming cakewalk. Easy! Inevitable! Problem is, even the crappiest single-cell organism going has been found to be surprisingly complex, with the simplest functional abilities requiring complex internal systems requiring numerous compounds to be present, located in the right places at the right time and in the right concentrations, or the process can't possibly work. Certainly no friend of Creationists, Dr. Michael Behe, an Associate Professor of Biochemistry at Lehigh University in Pennsylvania who proposes intelligent design, writes of himself, "I am interested in the evolution of complex biochemical systems. Many molecular systems in the cell require multiple components in order to function. I have dubbed such systems "irreducibly complex." Irreducibly complex systems appear to me to be very difficult to explain within a traditional gradualistic Darwinian framework, because the function of the system only appears when the system is essentially complete."

Lehigh University and indeed his own biology department toes the Politically Correct line, and has declared him a blasphemer: "While we respect Prof. Behe's right to express his views, they are his alone and are in no way endorsed by the department. It is our collective position that intelligent design has no basis in science, has not been tested experimentally, and should not be regarded as scientific." Carefully worded, this. In practice, without these markers, nothing can be acknowledged to exist in the world of Science. Used to be, the goal of scientific research was to explore and define the laws of the universe. These days, the goal is to define both what the universe and reality itself are, to restrict all efforts within that framework, and to defend the faith. Very church-medieval. Ultimate Truth is defined and assigned value according to its conformity to current scientific thought. Fortunately for Behe, Science can't excommunicate someone who doesn't believe in every one of its tenets. All he can be as a professor is disowned.

But back to observed science, Behe considers these internal "biochemical machines" as examples of "irreducible complexity". In his 1996 book *Darwin's Black Box*, he wrote, "Now it's the turn of the fundamental science of life, modern biochemistry, to disturb. The simplicity that was once expected to be the foundation of life has proven to be a

phantom; instead, systems of horrendous, irreducible complexity inhabit the cell. The resulting realization that life was designed by an intelligence is a shock to us in the twentieth century who have gotten used to thinking of life as the result of simple natural laws. But other centuries have had their shocks, and there is no reason to suppose that we should escape them.” Of course, everybody’s refuting everybody else in the community, which boils down to what you care to believe and what you insist on pushing out of the equation. That’s most often a Creator.

Thus the defying-the-odds account of David and Goliath is explained away with possible medical conditions that Goliath may have had which would make a skinny young shepherd’s victory over an armored, confident, battle-hardened giant a predictable outcome. Thus the need to take the trouble to figure out how the parting of the Red Sea and loss of Pharaoh’s army by drowning might have occurred entirely by coincidence... if it occurred at all. The surface goal is to advance explainable coincidence (random chance) as the author of such events, and to dismiss the authenticity of those remaining events which cannot be so explained. The deeper goal is to destroy spiritual faith and the worldview which it fits into. Science is a jealous religion.

So, Science is another one of the tangents I explored, since I was already a fan. What kept nagging at the back of my mind was the considerable disparity between human beings and all other animals. It was a sizable gulf, made stark by humanity’s unique mix of physical frailty with a profoundly greater sense of consciousness and thought. This difference meant that something in me could not just quietly resign itself to an accidental and pointless existence in the cosmos, breathing air for a season just for the sake of biologically existing, and then extinguishing into oblivion. My world and the universe it populated somehow had more going for it than was observable, measurable and explainable. I have the feeling that today, this is a minority view in our culture. We work hard to convince each other that humankind is merely another species with nothing in particular going for it except its ability to understand and appreciate the Wonders of Science.

I am convinced that, try as he might, Man can never restrict the whole of reality to a framework that can be fully understood and explained. Like it or not, reality exists on its own, intact, whether we perceive or understand it or not. So-called primitive man, like us, sought to comprehend as much of the unfathomable whole as possible. This search continues today, but our greater reliance on pure intellect assumes that ours is a pristine, impartial intellect capable of both detecting and making sense of all that exists. Unfortunately, we are not beings of untainted intellect. There is more to us than that, just as there is more to all of existence than what we can observe and calculate. What we do today is to discard whatever does not fit within the box we use to build our understanding of reality, as if reality is somehow constrained by our ability to grasp it. How we as individuals approach the unknown void defines our philosophy or theology, or our lack of them. Denying the void might aid our philosophy or theology, but not our understanding. It merely hardens our biases.

But, trying to neatly fit reality into a box is a human trait, not just a scientific one. Once the faith of Christianity, the following of Christ, became co-opted into an increasingly powerful administrative bureaucracy, that bureaucracy sought to insert itself as a necessary intermediary between God and Man, giving itself the sole power to interpret the Scriptures (which were secreted away), save, forgive, condemn, expel and execute. Once the organized Church itself moved from tenets of faith among a few to the control of the thought and conduct of entire regions (largely due to the violent instability resulting from the collapse of the Roman Empire), it seemed to them a logical extension to also use the Scriptures to dictate the acceptable considerations about what we can observe around us in the physical world as well.

Now, Science today lacks the same depth of cudgel-based political clout that the old organized Church once had, but it has taken upon itself the same adversarial mantle to extend its own realm of control to law, education, morality/ethics, and thought. "This is where we came from, this is who we are, this is why we're here, this is your level of personal significance to the world at each stage of your existence, and these are the beliefs and ethics that you should hold." Not that much has really changed, including the degree of physical punishment for those deemed unworthy of life. The lab coat is the new vestment. Same game, different players. It's human nature.

As I have mentioned, in the distant past Science's goal was to research and explore the immutable laws of the universe which God had created. In time, the last phrase was left out as scientific research came to be an end in itself that anyone could participate in, including those who resented the censorship of religious authorities. While today, Science presents itself as a friendly evidence-based effort to expand our understanding of ourselves, our world and our universe, it has long since veered toward the ultimate goal of destroying any vestiges of faith in a Creator. In an approach varying between condescension, sneering and outright hostility, it feels that it can no longer tolerate the existence of faith in any form, and must make every effort to expunge it in order to replace it with faith in itself, Science. It is this artificial and intolerant boxing in of reality which made me doubt its sincerity and ultimately, its legitimacy. It's as though they are no longer trying to talk you into anything, so much as to talk you out of something. Look underneath the veneer of intellect, and you will find that we are beings driven by emotions that are powered by cravings. An objective intellect is a thing much claimed but seldom seen. It's more often used to rationalize or justify our biases.

Anyway, it seemed apparent to me that something else was going on in the world, something not observable and repeatable to the five senses, nor to more sensitive instruments based upon them. It had something to do with this undetectable, unobservable and unexplainable force of healing that I had encountered long before. This life force appeared to be entirely uninvolved with its creation, yet I knew from my past encounter as a child that this wasn't entirely true either. Leaving the tenets of Science behind, I also more or less gave up my hunt for the God I had encountered in my garage, and just floated along, not certain of what to do anymore. So I did what I could: wait. Not like the wait at a train station, but more like the shuffling around at the farthest edges of its parking lot. But after a considerable time, the train did indeed roll in.

Stepping Off the Curb

There came a time when I was encouraged to attend a church again, and I put it off for quite awhile. I finally agreed to go on the grounds that it was promised to avoid the sleep-inducing traditions I was used to. It turned out not to be so bad as I expected. The few songs were contemporary, and without hymnals to open. The sermons were brief, challenging, and to the point. The people there were just regular folks, thoughtful and friendly but not cloyingly so. I wasn't a target or potential signee, so it was okay. They called it "non-denominational Christian", which tended to free it from the debates over scriptural details. No robes. No choirs. No obsolete Middle English dialect that was purported to be the language that God spoke in. In the few visits I had made, there was no mention of classical sin, salvation, Heaven, or Hell. There was no mention of believing in something just for the sake of a someday, pie-in-the-sky future. No warbling Texas drawls, and no guilt trips about the offertory plate. No threats of a stern God eager to pounce on and punish disobedience. Only a calm voice and a consistent urging to *examine your life carefully*, and consider the unthinkable. The orientation was not for a future benefit, but one that waited to begin now, today. Left unsaid but painfully apparent: you wouldn't be there if it wasn't obvious to you that you had screwed things up, lacked a real solution and the ability to carry one out even if you had it, and that something critical was missing in your life. Want to see what God is truly like in the most direct and filter-free way possible? Look at the historical accounts of Jesus the Messiah. Examine what He does, and reflect upon what He says. That's about what I picked up.

One Sunday, the preacher painted a verbal picture that went something like this: "Imagine there's a parade going down the street where you are, and that it's a parade about Jesus. There are lots of people lining each curb, cheering and clapping and smiling, and there's Jesus too, in person, walking along. A few people are walking along with Him, around Him. He slowly passes by, and you hear Him inviting everyone to come and follow Him, to walk with Him. Everyone claps and cheers Him on of course, but that seems to be all. Once the parade has passed by them and the cheering has died away, the people along the sidewalks are turning to go back home. Jesus' eyes turn to you and He invites you to walk with Him as well, as He walks past you. What will you do? Will you too clap and cheer, and turn to go back to what you know? I urge you to consider. Step off that curb and follow Him. Walk with Him. Step off the curb."

I hadn't really listened too attentively to the rest of the message, but this last part hit my psyche like the blast from a 10-gauge shotgun. I sat and thought while the service finished up. If there was some kind of altar call that day, and there might have been, I sure don't remember it. Still, this mental picture weighed heavily on me. Returning to what I was familiar with was no bargain, and no safe haven. All I knew was what had failed. It had for a long time felt as though I was in an old four-engine bomber trying to return to base on only one engine and, despite chucking everything possible overboard, it had still been steadily losing altitude and wasn't going to make it over the cold ocean of life. I had little interest in returning to live within what I knew. But, I shy away from change or the unfamiliar, and I had no idea what "following Jesus" and "walking with

Him” through life really meant. It seemed abstract and unknown. Potentially disastrous. I wanted an abbreviated outline, at least. What lay ahead? What would it mean? This certainly hadn’t been described in that paperback review of 52 religions. Much to the great frustration of car salesmen however, I was not one to make an impulsive decision, especially right then and there in a rented movie theater.

The issue continued to weigh on me on the ride home. I found that my circumstances and emotional state provided a strong draw to step off that proverbial curb, but that wasn’t the heart of it. There was an odd, deep-down pull of both quiet desperation and absolute certainty that this was the only way out or through, for me. I had run out of options. I felt no Presence, no anointing, no discernible “calling”. There was only now, and an inward soul-deep pull of taking a step toward something that I didn’t know, and which had nothing to do with joining a particular denomination or a promised future. It had to do with a relationship, an asking, now, one on one, with the Presence who had once intruded to ask me what my hobby car was really worth. He had known its true value, while I was unaware. He knew me, while I was still unaware. This step-off into the unknown even made sense to me as the only reasonable option. Being at the end of my own resources, this was something I had to do - for me.

I knelt down in my former little temple of automotive worship, my garage, and laid out everything I had, which was nothing but my disastrously screwed-up life, such as it was, and my need for help to get through it, the kind of help that is not obtainable here. I was wide open for suggestions. I handed my life, my wreckage, over it to Christ and asked Him to make it His. I wanted to live it His way, whatever that would mean. My previous assumptions about God breaking my legs and making me learn to play the flute evaporated in desperation. My ailing bomber, losing altitude as it was trying to reach home, was as good as in the water, and I didn’t know what to do anymore. I wasn’t gonna make it. I had made critically vital commitments, but had no more energy to fulfill them. I handed it all over. I wanted to step off that curb and follow Him, come what may.

I felt nothing afterwards. No feeling that my prayer was heard, or that I was now changed in any way. No burden was removed, no comfort bestowed. No magical signs appeared. I got back up and sensed this, thought it notable, and didn’t care. I wasn’t going to continue on the way I had. I did what I could do for now. I was fully committed to something I couldn’t see or sense, no matter what came in the future. It felt crazy. It felt risky. It felt *right*. That would have to be enough.

I had no idea of what was coming, if anything. I had dug myself in pretty deep. What I would receive was not at all what I expected.

The Secret Miracle

I used to watch this guy on television who did miraculous cures right there on camera, in a big auditorium. People on crutches and in wheelchairs walked, cancers were cured, and all manner of illnesses and ailments were done away with. It was impressive. All he wanted was for me to send in a little money to support his ministry. Then after a while, he went off the air. I found out later that he was convicted and sent to prison for mail fraud. Sometimes, people who seek out a career in ministry do so for the wrong reasons.

I had my own minor ailments, none of which I cared to publicize, because they weren't anything to brag about or mention at a cocktail party when the whining about medical nuisances began. Still, they kept me sidelined for periods of time. Hemorrhoids are the subject of much humor, aren't they? Unless *you* get them. A really good case can transform an active person into a shuffling snail of a slow-motion character who's afraid to take a deep breath.

This nondenominational church I had started going to met in a rented movie theater, and both sound equipment and folding chairs had to be stuffed away at the end of each service into below-stage storage, or into a box truck waiting outside. I decided to help with this, and frequently did. One Sunday, I wanted to help pack up again, but had my "special" ailment going and could shuffle, but couldn't lift a thing. It has to do with abdominal pressure. So, what the heck. Stepping aside to a place I could be alone, I prayed about it, asking for healing right now so I could do something constructive for these guys. Pretty naive, huh? But I'd found out about about healings in the Bible, and encouragements to pray about needs, so what the heck. I made my request. Bang. problem gone. Done in a few seconds - frankly to my astonishment - and after a tentative cough and test lift to see if I was deluding myself, I happily went to work. Wow. Is this how it works? Ask, and you shall receive?

There were two things I didn't do. I didn't tell anyone - for obvious reasons. Would you? And, I didn't suspect that I was playing mind games with myself. I can tell ya, you can't buffalo yourself past the inflamed swelling and, shall we say, extreme and raw sensitivity in that delicate area. Am I right? With some things, you either have a problem, or you don't, and you know which is which. You can think all the happy thoughts you want, but when the time comes to lift 30 pounds, sit down or walk, you'll call your own bluff long before that. This was the real thing.

In retrospect now, this wasn't a once-for-all-time thing. But most later onsets were comparatively mild from that time on, and that has been much appreciated by me. Now that my lifestyle has finally chopped long-term stress off at the knees, it's all history. I'm thankful for the elimination of the basic causes.

So, to the question of, “How did you first discover that God listened to your prayer about inviting Christ into your life?”, I haven’t given it much press. Until now. Let it be our little secret, eh? It’s too embarrassing.

The Inconvenient Miracle

This is a short post along the same lines of healing as I described in Part 7, except it's less embarrassing. Headaches are highly preferable to talk about. Perhaps a couple of years later, I was pulling into a production facility for my new employer, and another migraine headache was signaling an impending strike. I'd frequently had them since high school. Fortunately, they weren't the cluster type, or accompanied by puking or curling into a fetal position. They were more ordinary migraines. You get flashing blind spots in your vision and can't see to read or drive safely. The only way to see straight ahead is to glance off to the side and use your peripheral vision as best you can. Then you lose your appetite, and a deep, attention-absorbing constant pain sets in, and brightly lit areas become hell to be in. No pain killer could dampen it back then. You needed to lie down in silence, with something over your eyes to completely block out the light for several hours. It was difficult to fake being normal, with half-closed eyes and a difficulty in walking straight. Some hours later, when it was finally gone, the echo of it would remain for a half-day or more, and shaking or moving your head quickly would ache something fierce, as if your brain had shrunk and was now rattling around in there, bruised and sore.

Since I was just arriving at this facility and had to meet with some people, I was in dismay. The blinding flashes were in full force, and the pain was just starting in. What to do? I was never one to say, "Oh, I have to go home, I have a migraine." It's a perception thing. People equated it with normal headaches, which are far different in nature. You take some pain killer and tough those out. I'd had only a couple of those in my life, and they were highly preferable. But desperate men do desperate things, and I sat in the car and prayed to God for healing, explaining why I wanted such a thing. I knew God had better things to do, but I had this problem, see.

When I'd finished my little prayer, I suddenly felt even less like toughing it out and heading on in. "Proceeding in faith" did not appear to be an option - you know, step boldly out and start walking, confident that the Almighty and the Power of Prayer will keep me upright. In fact, I started feeling really groggy, as if I were an antelope shot with a tranquilizer gun in the old TV show *Wild Kingdom*. I struggled even to stay awake, but couldn't seem to. I was even too groggy to panic. What if somebody came out and saw me sleeping in the car? Instant career/job disaster. Apprehensive as I was, I couldn't resist it. I slouched over across the seat, and out I went like a light. When I awoke, hopefully only a minute later, the flashing was gone, and I seemed to be shoved past the headache part and well into the don't-shake-your-head aftermath. I was thankful, but too preoccupied with wanting to be out of the car and looking like I was a productive employee to dwell on it. I may not have been tight with God, but apparently, He was still there, still listening, and still acting.

I had little idea that this would throttle-up in the future, but wouldn't involve healing any more. That isn't what I would need the most.

Slithering Off the Altar

The next long segment of my life was a couple of decades of turmoil, most of which was simply the playing out of my having made some very poor decisions early on, truth to tell. Well intentioned, but poor. Some mistakes create instant results that are quickly over and done with, while some slowly well and continue their payback for life.

My relationship with God was a weird mix of intimacy and distance. I just couldn't seem to get the hang of receiving the kind of daily inward guidance that the Bible seems to suggest, at least not as I pictured it. But as I read, some content would always stand out as if it were written especially for me, or I would begin to understand the hands-on applicable meaning of things which had been irrelevant stumbers before. Sure, sometimes I'd read and wonder, "Why is *this* in here?" Yet, the culture and attitudes of the people in those early times and places stood out as so different that I would then begin to wonder, "Why would they feel the need to *do* that?" They were a pretty rough crowd, always complaining and always angling for the take in some form or other. I couldn't help but look down on them at times, since they seemed locked in never-ending cycles of futile New Year's resolutions and grudging promises to abide by an agreement, leading to reneging on them and trying hard not to get caught while doing so. Lip service. Where was the sense of personal integrity here? It was much more like the fleshing out of "what's in it for me?"

I got pretty snooty about it, over time. I felt that I may have my faults, but at least I wasn't as bad as *them*. How they chose to live their lives had no relevance to *me*. Trouble was, I kept reading over time, letting it soak for a good long while. Eventually, I had first the suspicion and then the certainty that I wasn't actually standing on some kind of higher moral ground. I wasn't "modern" and they weren't "ancient" or irrelevant. I was a lot closer to them than I cared to consider, let alone admit. The only real difference was in the particulars of circumstance and opportunities to act out. Sure, the realm I operated in was very different, but deep down underneath that mannered veneer of Civilized Man, well, I no longer had much standing to condescendingly pity and point fingers at them.

I could sense that God was pointing this out not as a guilt trip or as a "feel bad about yourself" rally, but as a simple reality check. There was a mismatch between how I perceived myself and how I really was, deep down. My sense of moral superiority came from an ignorance that I found comfort in clinging to. Such noble knights of the round table sentiments as "keep your word" and "treat all persons with respect" and "live honorably" were admirable points to try to live by, but my circumstances had always been such that these values had been tested on a superficial level, but not cudgel-and-shield tested. It sunk in who I was, and how I could not simply "be a better person", try as I might. It hammered home that my life was the way it was because that cloaked inner self had done its thing and screwed it up, bit by bit. It also hammered home the certainty that I needed God in my life even more than I had first thought. I realized that my hope for change on a new course set by Him was set in something deeper and more

impossible - in human terms. Some resolutions, a patch job and some self-talk would simply not cut it, yet I still needed to be myself.

Lofty goals in living were great, and the incremental “how-to” was pretty much laid out for me, but as I kept bouncing up against my personal limitations, I realized that I would still leave a continual trail of damage, and still need forgiveness as much as I would need internal changes and a better awareness of the effects of my thoughts and behavior. You see, I began realizing that little actions and comments that I’d considered minor, inconsequential and forgettable were none of those, and that their impact on others was potentially much greater than I had thought. And my errors in judgement were worse. For better or worse, and despite good intentions, I was leaving an unseen wake behind me, too much of which was simply adding to the churning misery of the world, my world. Small scale? You bet - but not small scale to the lives of the people that my own actions and comments actually affected, for better and for worse. Applying external rules of behavior on myself would help, but not really cut it. I needed to accept responsibility. Then I needed an inside-out change.

We rate our degree of wrongdoing on a relative scale, hopefully somewhere between the best and worst throughout all of history. And/or we just say to ourselves, “Well, too bad, nobody’s perfect, so what?” Unfortunately, God’s scale measures in absolute terms, the wide-gap difference between the two being bridged by Christ - if we are willing to concede the gap. That absolute scale is not arbitrary. It leads right back to the beginning of the world, which was created just as God intended it to be, on many levels. We permanently changed that world and ourselves by acting against it, which also required acting against God’s explicit instruction for the only prohibition - the sole “shall not” in existence at that time. That rebellion, that sin, quickly resulted in a humanity that became so destructive and fell so far out of fellowship with Him that it needed both a near-complete start-over plus the Commandments to counter the worst behaviors having the greatest consequences. Then it needed many more rules to live by in order to fill in what we obviously weren’t seeing as inherently destructive - and all that for a people who swore to be His own. In essence, God was trying to lead them back toward Eden, but they wouldn’t have it. They wanted the end reward, but without the faith and without having to live in the way needed to get them there. Today, we call this an attitude of entitlement, with the goal of gaming the system. They had their own ideas of right, wrong, and improvisational obedience to a standard of conduct that often cramped their style. We now refer to that idyllic Eden-like state as Utopia, and are still trying to build it on our own today, trying to ignore the blowback and the erosion of the flawed foundations we lay. As for me, I was realizing that I was too often going against the flow myself. I recognized what Scripture refers to as “the weakness of my frame”. That bothered me.

So, I relied a lot on reading small amounts of Scripture as kind of an application guide for what to consider over the course of the day, for right now. Not as an explicit activity guide for that day, but as a permanent reference point that needed to soak in. But some other folks in the church talked about receiving “promptings” a lot, promptings being a sort of God-inspired urge to say or do something that would be consistent with the

character of God. Whenever I followed what seemed to be a sporadic prompting to take a course of action as an act of faith, it turned out in the end to just be my own lunging whim. Never turned out well, not at all. I even went to a workshop session about it, where much concern was expressed about this lack of the Holy Spirit's moment-by-moment guidance. They assumed that it was some hidden sin - some secret disobedience - in my life that was distancing and blocking me from God's direction. That's a fair assumption. But I couldn't think of anything specifically wrong, other than being a simple, deeply-flawed human being with an unintentional penchant for screwing up. I was up to my elbows in aftermath, and was sincerely doing my best.

For those who grate at the well-worn mention of "sin", perhaps a context may help. Sin can be defined as "deviating from a way, path or law; to fail to live up to a standard." In Christian terms, it is thinking or acting in rebellion against God and His ways. God's preoccupation with sin is because of its end products: misery, destruction, and all that comes with it. The cumulative harm of sin is how the world has come to its present state and ultimately, sin will consume even itself. Our own preoccupation with sin is because it allows us to live according to our own natures, which we usually applaud for ourselves and condemn in others. Our capacity for self-deception allows us to muffle our consciences and justify our choices and actions to ourselves, or at least to turn a blind eye to them. Some boast that they do not believe that such a thing as sin exists. By this, some of those simply mean that they do not believe that they will be held accountable by any force greater than themselves. Others mean that there is no such thing as right and wrong. They have run the logical course of reasoning that an impartial Universe knows no distinction between a compassionate person and a sadistic mass murderer, since "morality" and "conscience" in such a Universe are personal affectations which can carry no ultimate meaning and no significance.

There are certainly good men and women who follow their consciences and even act as an inspiration for the rest of us, but they tend to lean toward humility because they sense both the internal tug of war and at least a few of their own innate frailties. It's the ones who don't realize their own weaknesses that you have to watch out for. A sense of innate moral superiority signals self-deception, often on a grand scale and with grand pronouncements intended to gather followers. On the other end of the scale from myself are those who choose well, live a good, comfortable life without trauma and without God, and who as a result never see any need for Him. Why mess with a good thing? Why is because a consistently "pleasant" life tends to insulate against introspection and the perception of need, in much the same way that a consistently busy life does. We have the sense that some God out there wants to rescue us from something that we don't want to be rescued from - whatever that may be. But the decisions we make here and then live out as to whether we want God to be in our lives or have no part in them stick. Our future is simply a further playing out of the present that we have long since committed ourselves to. God "does not wish that any should perish" (since everything about sin finally consumes itself), while we object to what we picture as a cruel and unfair judgement. Yet it is a judgement that is little more than a confirmation of our own prior insistences. Not understanding or caring about the big picture, we pronounce our own judgements and slam the door. This is unfortunate.

Our individual sins - our wrongdoing - and our mistakes, slights and injuries to others have repercussions that can go well beyond ourselves and the moment, and extend to innocent others. The results of our offenses affect those closest to us, which is why we conceal our wrongdoings, deny them, or boast of them in narcissistic defiance. We often conceal or even fail to consciously recognize our true motivations to ourselves. None of these responses have much if any effect on the repercussions that radiate out, but they do have an effect on us internally. We resent God's commandments and His telling us what to do, because those things go against what we crave to do by our own natures. We picture God as a bossy, power-mad ogre ordering us to slavishly obey Him or else, when the reality is quite the reverse.

The power-mad ogre is *our own nature*, and the demand for slavish obedience is to its every whim. We rightly perceive a jail cell door held open for us, but confuse which side of the door we are standing on. The true freedom is found in a relationship with Him. He offers us a way out of destructive thought and behavior as well as the personal and cumulative train wrecks that we're speeding toward. Our own path feels like a comfortable fit, but so often results in disappointment or snowballing harm, while God's power and path ends the destruction and self-deception at its source: us. Through obedience to Him, we turn from reinforcing the world as it has become, to making contributions toward the world as it was intended to be. God persists according to His nature. We are not called to obey for the sake of slavish obedience, but to obey for our own sake and for our own welfare. Yet faith in God is not based upon obedience - obedience is merely an essential and recognizable marker of faith. Faith is based upon relationship, relationship with Him, and obedience is the living out of that faith. All along, I had the sense that God was not punishing me for acting according to my own nature, but that I was experiencing the natural results of my own errors in judgement and actions.

As for promptings, I came not to trust this type of close guidance anyway, in time. I obviously had no accurate discernment ability for my own promptings, and I began to notice that many people who claimed to be "acting in the Spirit" were most often either acting counter to Scripture, or were using it to publicly and prominently validate their relationship with God in front of others. It seemed to power personal image instead of highlighting God's purposes here. I did observe that the real thing just gets the job done quietly, one-on-one. In contrast, prophesy was often re-routed into the equivalent of fortune-telling, and never panned out. Those claiming the greatest intimacy were by far the furthest off base, some putting on a show and charging a fee for it, and some with psychopathic traits finding it as a fine way to manipulate others toward their own ends. Not good. Something was up, and I stopped pining for what I had assumed was standard equipment, for safety's sake. Possibly, I was misinterpreting Scripture to be what I expected it to be.

Possibly too, I and others had fallen prey to our own hearts. As Jeremiah lamented, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Who indeed? We delude ourselves with ease, often not seeing our true motivations in what

we think and do. We paint ourselves over to create an image in the mirror that we find acceptable, but the heart underneath is just better camouflaged, not changed. While there is no need to discard the popular “people are basically good” mantra, it is a positive hazard to ignore the fact that we are also deeply flawed - even the best of us.

But, I did have convictions or strong impressions rather than promptings. There were two very quiet personal impressions that turned out to actually be confirmed. One was that, as a follower of Christ, I had no interest in being a great crusader and miracle worker. I just wanted to salvage the wreck I had fashioned and get through this thing called life. I figured I’d be just as happy cleaning the spittoons in Heaven than being a high profile charger earning a big gold crown or something. Wasn’t my style. That’s for goal-oriented A-types. I was bereft of daydreams of great faith, great ministries, and putting my whomping stamp on advancing Christ’s Kingdom here on earth. Just to get through this life and get in was enough for me. I had enough problems to deal with here. I was working on the salvage end, dealing with collateral damage.

As the months and years progressed however, I began to have the uneasy feeling that I was not going to be able to get away with hiding in the corners and cleaning spittoons. It was good enough for *me*, but I was not the sole decision-maker in this thing. For the record, it was officially no longer *my* life. I had given that to Christ to do with as He willed. The impression I had was not so much, “You have to perform above the expected minimum and wear more flair,” as it was, “Nope, this is just Non-Applicable. Life isn’t that way, and you’ll never have a *clue* about accessing your true impact on the lives of others, anyway. Just be aware that the wake you leave behind you in life does have an effect, whether good or bad. Your wake is not your accomplishments list. It’s you, in the whole. You will not discern it accurately until the time that you stand before Me. Just forget about spittoons, or comparing yourself to others, and follow Me. That’s all you need do.” The wording is mine. The impression itself that produced it is His.

I saw once again that my faith was not a rulebook of do’s and don’ts, a perfectionistic controlling of behavior or an attempt to be a better person. It was a daily relationship with God through Christ, the literal “God with us”, and a willingness to let go and be transformed from within by His Spirit. Easy to say, hard to do. Like anything else, it requires an exercise of willpower, but comparatively little in the manner of New Year’s resolutions. A willingness to be changed is aimed more toward a desire to step back from the familiar, comforting self-direction of our old selves and allow God to transform us into unfamiliar territory. It’s a letting go. That requires an exercise of faith, which is a gift rather than an attainment.

Again, Christian faith is neither earned nor deserved, contrary to the belief of many who tout themselves as Christians. This foundational error is baggage carried into their convictions as a variant of the worldly “people are basically good” principle. They feel that when push comes to shove, that they deserved to be saved because their overall decency level made them more worthy of it than most others, and God noticed this. It was only fair, so in their minds the “gift of faith” is more like a reward earned, and Christ’s sacrificial atonement becomes a mere formality in the workings of real justice.

This breeds an air of prideful condescension and waters down the significance of Christ's life and sacrifice among us here. Such ideas are absent from and contradicted by Scripture, and yet one church has even built them into the foundations of their doctrine.

As recorded in the Old Testament, King David knew the implications of true justice, which was why he earnestly pleaded with God to *keep it away* from him. He instead implored God for His mercy. People who feel that they somehow pre-qualify for Christ's substitution often rally under the banner of Christ for various earthly reasons and purposes, but remain largely blind to their sins and thus their need for Christ. I think of this as Country Club Christianity and, spiritually speaking, this is very dangerous ground, with many references in Scripture. Faith is a gift given solely by God's grace. The internal battle to recognize the old self's ways and make room for the new can be difficult. A lament by a Godly woman I once knew described the challenge of the process well: "The only trouble with placing your life on the altar of God," she told me, "is that it keeps slithering back off again."

The derisive "crutch of Christianity" is instead a personal challenge to hold to the unique worldview which all of Scripture presents. It's a unique worldview that is also contrary to our own natures. To consider it to be a fallback for those who "are too weak to cope with the real world" is a very peculiar error that to me borders on being humorous. It is instead a pointed willingness to step away from the comforting trap of what does not work. It is vastly easier to adopt the world's viewpoints, manners of living, and value systems. After all, that's where I came from, and that's how I got the results that I did. It was easy, and it was disastrous. The real "real world" is much more expansive and dynamic than our physical senses, cravings or intellect can dictate or guide us through. We confidently think that we can see its boundaries and have a handle on it, but we can't and we don't. It isn't ours, we did not create it, and we do not have primacy in it.

Many people agree with this outlook in a generalized sense, content to assign a kind of vague personhood to the creation itself and rest their hope in that whenever it seems controllable, comfortable or consequence-free. Few people look past the creation to unconditionally seek out a Creator, the main problem being that we greatly prefer one that we can deal with on our own terms, which is just another way of expressing that we're not really interested after all. As Romans 19-21 puts the issue, "For what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and darkened in their foolish hearts."

As Jim Fleming, a veteran criminal defense lawyer likes to say, "You don't have to *like* reality, but you do have to face it." Whatever type of blinders we may now attach to ourselves to suit our fancies - for example a philosophy, a benevolent, caring universe, an uncaring, cruel one, an organized religion complete with traditions and rituals, an

improvised religion, or an outlook strictly limited to the scientific observation of physical phenomena - the full reality of our situation will one day reveal itself with an unavoidable starkness and clarity. No more blinders, no more glossing over. No more deception or self-deception. No more bullshitting ourselves or others. Whatever our personal belief system is, it will inexorably be put to the test, won't it?

A few adherents to at least a couple of the above examples may claim that, no, the absence of any perceivable existence of any kind after death is its own reality. But just like sincere faith in Christ or any other belief system in the world - including faith in a cruel universe or in an uncaring one where our intellectual candles simply sputter out forever - all will inherently be put to the test as to how they stack up against reality. After all, few will deny that reality will press its irresistible presence upon us at our last breath, one on one, when any delusions or facades that we may hold forcibly end. All we disagree on now is what that reality is, and we vary in our own levels of certainty, conviction and commitment to our various interpretations of it. That conviction determines who or what we shall value and live for in this life, right now. If we don't happen to have much conviction about our current belief system, then it's best to examine it further because, once we have expended our lives, our deathbed is no place to have second thoughts as we prepare to face a wholly uncontrollable reality. Any presumption that it will be a continuation of life as subject to our will and whim as this one has been is, as our rationalist colleagues delight in saying, "Not supported by any credible evidence." Neither is there any scientific evidence to support the popular "candle out" speculations.

Fun Fact: You may be surprised to hear that the Bible does teach a rough equivalent of "candle out". Thing is, it describes it as lasting until Christ's return, when all mortal souls are brought back into conscious existence. This is what rationalists deride as myth, while Christians hold it as a Hope instilled by the Creator. As far as you and I are concerned, we will perceive the long stretch between our deaths and resurrections as a mere blink of time. It is then that Christ will recognize and claim His own. What He does after that is best described by a reference I recommend at the end of this work.

At the conclusion of one of Conan Doyle's series of Sherlock Holmes, the great detective and his associate are forlornly gazing down at two bodies held in the ice of a frozen pond. Facing the confirming evidence of a tragic string formed of of love, simple error, selfishness, deceit, lust and hatred, Holmes opines, "What is the meaning of it, Watson? What is the object of this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must have a purpose, or our universe has no meaning, and that is unthinkable. But what purpose? That is Humanity's great problem, for which reason so far has no answer." The character was (and still is) a very popular icon for the Age of Reason. Since the time of publication at the beginning of the last century, Reason has still not come up with an answer, so it simply denies the Problem that Holmes poses to himself. It does not publicize it, but instead simply teaches it to our children in high school biology classes, "There is no object. There is no purpose. We are an accident of random chance, and your life has no more significance than the life of anything else in this world."

That is a romping 180-degree turn from not only God's Word but from the most fleeting observation, which is probably why I often hear it emphasized that we are just X tiny bits of DNA away from apes. Although the character Holmes has not a speck of room in his considerations for the existence of any Providence, I find myself asking, "What is the meaning of it, Watson? What is the object of this emphatic teaching that we come from nothing and are nothing before we descend back down into a dark oblivion? Why this methodical stripping away of the basis for any human moral standard, and the encouragement to be an animal in thought, conduct and empathy? Why this methodical tearing away of meaning and hope? That is Humanity's great problem, by which reason has so far sought such ends." Then we wonder why our culture is clearly more troubled by inhuman violence and pervasive moral failure than at any time in the past. Considering our past, that's really saying something. Nonetheless, if we really, truly want our world to be completely ours, free of the Creator and His ways, then we'd better buckle up, because living in this culture is going to continue to get much, much more interesting than it is now. There will be no reverse gear or quick swerving away either, because with the forces already being set in motion, it will be like trying to turn a supertanker around a buoy. As the saying goes, "Be careful what you wish for, because you just might get it". We know the goal well, but fail to comprehend all that inherently comes along with it.

All in all, if a god plays a part in any belief system held, it pays to examine just what the nature of that god is that we believe in. Why? Because it would be a shame to expend life energy flipping off a god who does not exist except in our own minds, or to pay obeisance to a god who reflects only our own nature. We should know whom we are addressing, not just by name but by character. After all, the God of Scripture knows us more intimately than we know ourselves, and yearns for us to truly know Him. That indicates something about His nature right there. Something good.

Exposure to God's True Nature

I was earlier describing my difficulties with Christian Spirit-led living. Does so-called Spirit-led living exist at all? Yes, I believe so. Besides, it's in print. It's just not defined in a formulaic way, which is a good thing. Besides, if it took several whacks of a 2x4 to the head to bring me to Christ, it makes sense that I'm not likely to be real sensitive to the quiet promptings of His Spirit. It involves disengaging from preoccupations and being open to God's Spirit, which is my own personal challenge. I do doubt that it's meant to garner attention, peer respect and acclaim. I suspect that the cultural influences in this country (and our basic natures) tend to screw it up. It's meant to achieve His quiet purposes, period. It ain't for show. It's for reflecting His nature, here and now - not the nature we take from ourselves and ascribe to Him.

I've since had sporadic promptings every great now and then. I've found that I can veto my way out of simple pangs of conscience, but not promptings. For me, promptings are simple and extremely specific drives for action, are always for someone else's direct benefit. They just hang on, disturbingly unrelenting, until they are accomplished. You can override your conscience, but good luck on overriding a prompting. The only way to get rid of it is to do it. It's like the mental equivalent of an overly full bladder, sorry to say. You can dance from foot to foot as long as you like, but there is only one solution: obey the prompting. Yes, it's an unfortunate comparison, but one not without merit. That's just my take, no more. In lesser things, I'm often too preoccupied and distracted to think of God, which is a ridiculous thing since He is at the heart of each day I have, whether I recognize it or not. As the Author of all life, He also sustains it, but it becomes easy to take my next breath and daily life for granted. Very fortunately for me, the good of Him is found in the quiet moments, and when those moments are lacking in me, He occasionally hits the override button to get through my din with a stark clarity that silences the mental noise. It is much like a connecting tunnel bored through layers of distraction, obfuscation and barriers, with a perception of both His presence and His nature cutting through the clutter to bring not just stillness, but a sudden awareness of an expanded reality and relationship, when compared to the vague haze we experience here and now. Being exposed to utter holiness in even a very limited way makes protective emotional barriers and every other form of "my reality" falsity and camouflage simply no longer exist, for as long as that exposure lasts. They don't fade; they're gone. That can be both alarming and healing at the same time. This brief and very throttled exposure to Reality - the Creator of all things - is as far from an intellectual exercise as is giving birth.

So, one day I was on a ladder patching a plaster ceiling on the enclosed front porch of my house. I was discovering that it took a lot more skill than I had, but that's another story. I was busy thinking both improper and impure thoughts at the time, as circumstances were unwinding in a way not to my liking, no sir. Out of the blue, I felt not a *presence* so much as an unexplainable and enveloping sense of being deeply loved. It seemed to go from the outside in, and I couldn't explain it because my thought patterns had not been exactly spiritual, repentant or helpful. But there it was anyway,

surrounding me like a three-foot thick blanket of warmth, and something in me was soaking it in as fast as it could. I had never felt anything like it before, not remotely. This was really, really strange. A welcome strange, but still strange. It was a new and distinctly unfamiliar feeling despite my very fortunate upbringing.

“Well, isn’t that nice,” you say, “What did you do after it passed?” That’s just it - it didn’t. No matter what I did, including sleep and those naughty bathroom essentials, it never wavered for a week. I couldn’t screw it up or break it. I wasn’t being either holy or nice, but there it was. There was no reason, and certainly no justification for it. It just *was*, and the source was unmistakable. Silent, unspectacular and unseeable, it changed the core of my perception of God for life. When the sensation finally ended a full week later, I had no need to wish for more. I was convinced. God doesn’t love based on prior performance assessments, check sheets, or conditions like “obey Me and I’ll love you”. What’s more, it doesn’t come to a halt on those factors, either. A deep, constant, almost overwhelming love is not just what He does. It’s who He *is*.

As I read it at that time, the Bible had seemed to say quite something else, especially in the Old Testament, and yet the steady insistence there is that God is unchanging. At the same time, He seemed there to flip-flop in reaction to what the Hebrews were doing at the moment. Apparently, based on this new experience, I had missed some reality there. I didn’t know how to resolve this seeming conflict, and wouldn’t know for quite some time. Besides, any Scriptural problems of understanding seemed secondary. I hadn’t tried to hunt Him down there. *He* had hunted *me* down, in the midst of my life. My understanding of Him was not one based on Bible scholar intellect, but rather on direct exposure, with His Spirit seeming to illuminate this passage for me, or that one. I now knew the core that powered this relationship, and I tried not to make typically poor human assumptions about what it meant in practical terms, the if/then inferences that we eventually do to find out what we can expect and not expect, or perhaps what we can get away with before running afoul of it. This was very different from anything I knew, and I was too busy soaking it in to even think about having it make sense, or analyzing it.

This is obviously an incredibly rare experience, and I’ve hesitated to tell anyone about it, especially other Christians. If I was hearing it, I’d think, “Boy, I wish that would happen to *me*. Why has he had that experience and I haven’t? What’s wrong with *me* that God hasn’t given me such a strong and prolonged feeling of being surrounded by His love?” Here is a bit of an insider explanation: it’s for the same reason that He hasn’t had to make your donkey talk to you, either. You haven’t needed that in order to know Him or understand Him. You’re not as thick-headed or so strangely wired that such a thing would become *necessary*. He’s able to get through to you without that. *Be thankful*. Again, *be thankful*. You don’t want the rest of what it takes for Him to have to do such a wonderful thing. You really don’t. It’s nothing to brag about, as if I had anything to do with it. I relate it because it happened, and also to help *illuminate His basic nature*.

For you regular folks just reading this, you’ll just have to think of it what you will. The only thought in your head that I’ll dispute is that His deep love might only be for people

like me who've already hesitantly stepped off the curb to follow Him in faith. Not so. If you can stand to keep reading this stuff, maybe I can eventually demonstrate otherwise to you, if you haven't already gotten a faint glimmer of that from Part 2 of this series.

See, the overused and under-explained "God loves you," and "God is love" actually has a basis that runs even deeper than "because Jesus died for your sins". We hear that and assign it as an indicator or a proof of something that we may not really understand. We may think, "Okay, but I didn't ask Him to do that. Now I'm supposed to owe Him, or what? Why'd He have to die at all, and why is that somehow *my* fault?" It may seem similar to having your neighbor tell you that he just went to extraordinary lengths to take care of something for you, but it doesn't seem to you that it should have been a significant problem, much less something to be addressed by ordeal. So, we don't think much of his or her apparent sacrifice. If you can't bring yourself to jump at summary soundbites and catchphrases, good for you. Neither does He, because He wants us to *truly understand* Him, and to understand our place with Him. If you don't warm to a God who's just looking for you to do nothing more than mindlessly follow a tradition and mouth the words while bowing, good for you. His interest is in *you*, and what you have to say to Him in your own thoughts and words, good or bad. Whatever it is, He can take it, if it's from your own heart. And, it won't alter His deep affection for you. Should you for some reason decide to do that, just be sure you're addressing the God who actually *is*, not the one of your own assumptions, preferences and past expectations - maybe not even the same one you were taught. Odds are, He's not the same One as those. He is beyond our definitions and surmises, including mine. You may sense that in the next post of this series.

The Best of Times, The Worst of Times

If you have read through this series of posts, you'd now think that presto, this guy got through whatever unexplained problems he had and now walks with God and stuff, right? Well, not exactly. I have to summarize and not explain things, because the details are not relevant to the topic, frequently involve other people, and this series of chapters would top out at 700 or more parts. You don't want *that*, trust me.

It turned out to be a very timely thing that God gave me such a bulletproof sense that his One-on-one affection was so deep and, when push comes to shove, unwavering. It was timely because I promptly and unknowingly headed into the swirling circumstances of what I considered to be Shitstorm #3. Without that utter convincing, I might not have made it through. Time passed, and I headed into Shitstorms #4 & #5. At some point still a decade short of the end, my very brief solace was a counselor who said, "The good news is that, obviously, this situation can't *possibly* get any worse than this!" Oh, yes it could, and did, oh my yes.

In general, I never felt that constant, close connection with God that I had hoped for through all this. It was more of a distant relationship, with us crossing paths every great now and then. He would give me something intimately meaningful and restorative to keep me going, and then seem to be off and away. Something made me suspect that it was *me* being off and away, but regardless, sooner or later He would swoop in and I'd feel that intimate connection when I prayed. There's little worse than always praying to the ceiling, more immersed in one's own difficulties than actually reaching out. Then, I would feel His hand on my life for a moment, and know that He was not just hearing me, but that I had His full and caring attention. Spill your heart out to God, and He tends to do that.

Once I began to pick up a pattern in this contact, it made me a bit gun-shy, truth to tell. I mean yes, it kept me going, but the stronger the sense of contact and the greater the comfort or assurance, then the higher a wave of trouble that would follow. The good news was that He was strengthening me for each round of incoming fire, so that I could withstand it without giving up or going nuts. The bad news was that each intervention on His part also became my signal that more undetected mortar fire was inbound. I almost came to dread it, but could not do without it. Such an intimacy with the Living God was like a brief, unexpected hospital stay, recovering in comfort, and building strength and motivation. But then the hospital discharge came all too soon, and I was back out in the field dodging fire. In later years, I came to refer to this seemingly endless segment of my personal life as the Living Nightmare, named for its circumstances. It isn't all that much of an exaggeration. I wasn't a helpless victim - I just didn't see any way out that would not violate my conscience.

What do I call "contact with God"? Some of it was pretty weird. Having a very strong sense that God is actively listening to my prayers, one-on-one, is unusual for me, but not weird. "Weird" is singing some kind of worship song as part of a regular church

service while actually being preoccupied with what to do about whatever, and feeling thoroughly confused. Then, while I'm gazing ahead mouthing the words, I'm suddenly seeing a brief flash of an image of a vast mob of people right ahead of me and around me, all of us surrounding a towering light so bright you couldn't see anything even close to it, except you knew that it was God's presence. As you may have discerned from my descriptions in Part 2, I really, really don't care to sing at all. Hear it, great. I like listening to music. Do it, no. For that brief moment, all I and that vast horde of people surrounding the Brilliant Light wanted to do was nothing more than to sing to our God, as if that was the most fulfilling and joy-filled pleasure that could ever possibly exist. They - and I - wanted it to go on forever. It was not out of duty, compulsion or fear, but simply motivated by who He is and what He is truly like. When this visual scene vanished, my spirits were lifted and I had a sense of assurance of my future as the prime and comforting message, but it was also an encouragement to focus more on what lay far ahead than on what was underfoot. I clearly saw, in abstract, where I would be one day, and how I would be fully me, and yet fully changed. I preferred the changed me. I wanted nothing more than what I'd seen, and nothing less. Didn't look like I was going to be hiding in corners and cleaning spittoons after all.

Remember those intrusive thoughts that weren't mine back when leaving my disaster-car garage so long ago, the "what is it worth" event? That kept on, after a fashion. Every great now and then, perhaps once in a year or less, I'd be at a total loss again. And it wasn't just me. Professionals were stumped on this stuff, if they accepted it at all, and they charged by the hour. I was often having to wing it on my own. Or, I'd just be worrying about things during the church service, or obsessing over them. I'm into that. I'd be blathering on to myself about how solution-less my circumstances appeared to be, and a clear, loud "thought" would interrupt my own babbling thought train, stopping it abruptly. It would always be a succinct encouragement or a profound truth that reflected something I'd heard in Scripture somewhere, but didn't fully "get". And the statement would be accompanied by a literal visual paragraph of context and surrounding meaning to fully illuminate it. I'm talking text, in print. How completely strange! I couldn't even skim over it all, but I'd take in all I could for the couple of seconds it lasted, like I'd take in water after a full day in the desert. The core thought stayed, while the context that illuminated it rapidly faded. Then, in another moment, it was just church again. It was wisdom like I'd never been exposed to, and I took each one to heart. That was weird, but inspiring, comforting, and directive. I was not in this alone, and the true solutions did not lie in everyday activities, circumstances or concerns. They lay in Him, my focus, and my faith lived out within the playing out of those circumstances. I didn't have the creativity or understanding to self-generate this stuff. All of it was new to me, and although they never related even remotely to my questions (to my way of thinking), they deftly addressed the bigger view of what I was facing, a capability which was beyond my abilities. And I knew where they came from.

How about waking up to face another day, and laying there for a few moments to try to motivate myself to face it once again because I just didn't know what might come next? Then I unexpectedly see an image that I'm looking into, one where I'm standing on the deck of a wooden sailing ship in the blackness of night. I have a lantern in my hand and

hold it up to see ahead, but the glare from it is so blinding that I can't see anything beyond it. I hear God's quiet voice tell me "Set it behind you," and perceive that the lamp I'm trying to see past the bow with what represents a lamp of fear. It doesn't light much in that blackness, but held in front to light the way, there's no way I could even see past its own blinding glare. *It* becomes the focus of attention, not lighting the potential pitfalls ahead to avoid. I couldn't see anything but it. So I pull it down and hold it to the rear, and there isn't much forward to see, but I can at least now see the deck, and a short distance ahead of the ship. Much better. *Set fear behind you.* I get it. I had to keep remembering that one a lot as life went onward. Weird? I'll take it.

We tend to take things symbolically, not thinking about the reality behind them. It's kind of natural to lose sight of the realism and the context, when we weren't there at actual events. We prefer things to be simple. Take the American Revolution. English troops. Unrest. Some ambushes, some running, some guys shot, and some killed. It becomes kind of an abstract summary. Same with the Holocaust. It happened as an event, and we go into mental overload because of the scope of the carnage, and so trim it down to its impersonal essentials, or even dismiss it as never having occurred. Symbology is also where the "Christ died for you" thing can come in. If He was God, then dying for our sake must have been comparatively easy, right? Why should it even be necessary? And why should death be a necessity in the first place? It seems crudely symbolic, and it's easy to lose sight of it as an actual, gritty event in living history, complete with all the human trauma that it would cause. There was no pass on any aspect of it, because Christ had laid aside the power of His deity to live fully as one of us. We don't really get the context, the whole. It's just a Fast Fact when we're busy trying to live our lives.

I didn't think that I had assumed the fix was in to make it easier for Him, and therefore less significant, but a dream I had one early morning seemed to break into whatever I had going, and got my attention. It started as a typical communion serving tray. You've seen 'em, and this one was silver. The outer edge of this visual image was oval vignette, surrounded by black void. The silver communion cups were full, the tray was very slowly drawing closer, and there suddenly appeared laying across their tops a straight-bladed dagger, business end pointed forward at a diagonal. Its clean, polished blade was double-edged, and each cutting edge was perfectly straight, so the blade looked like a long triangle. I noticed a lack of translucency and brightness of the juice in each cup. It became clear to me that what filled the cups was *not* grape juice, *not* red wine. I was shocked. Then a small amount of blood appeared near the edge of the tray, and on the dagger blade itself. This communion tray coming closer to me cost something very real. Of course, I knew Whose blood it took to fill them, and got an unwanted sense of the physical and emotional reality it would take to do so.

A common thought today is that surely an omnipotent God can easily appear in any form and then die for us, because he can simply pop back to life at will, right? It's God, after all! It's nothing we haven't seen in movies, so it becomes kind of a fairy tale in our minds. A magical legend of God-powered endurance and ultimate victory. After all, a wealthy man can "sacrifice" a large gift - even close to all he has - and we know he'll eventually bounce back. It's his way. An impoverished man who gives away the little he

has scrambled together means more to us, because it's clear that he isn't going to be bouncing back from such a loss. If he does, it's going to have to be because someone else intercedes for him. A belief that the fix is in tends to take some of the steam out of our appreciation. Our assumptions about God and Christ's death do us a great disservice. They also tend to derail an accurate perception of who we are in relation to God, and the depth of our need for Him.

Here, I was viewing a hard reality. Thankfully, it was a *representation* of suffering, but it was enough. There was pure humanity involved, complete with fear and dismay, and a sticky, smear-able cost for my ticket to ride. I awoke with a profound sadness, lamenting that it had been necessary at all. My own flawed nature helped make it so. And the price was neither easy nor abstract. There were no easy motions to go through. It was a reality I did not like or want, but it was the only way for me to have any tie to this God of healing and oddly persistent love. I felt more guilt than gratitude, since I was a part of what had made this act of suffering and sacrifice necessary. I wished that this strange reality of wrongdoing, separation and sacrifice just didn't have to operate this way, in much the same way that I wished that car accidents wouldn't have to happen, but that isn't the real situation. This picture before me then vanished, and I woke up sobered and sad. The "why was this necessary?" was bound up with faith in Him, since I had quite a few limitations going.

I also woke up knowing that I did not really understand this God who had barged into my life unwanted, persisting past my objections to heal and bolster me against the tragic hardships that would come to wash over me and those innocents I loved. I could not blame Him for my circumstances, because they had been unwittingly crafted by my own ignorance and arrogance, not just by the natural uncertainties of the world.

Arrogance may be a bit harsh as an assessment, but not that much. The problem was that by the time I'd turned 10 years of age, I finally started catching on that kids have pretty much taken a set character by that time. Lots of kids were open, honest, and just trying to make their way through as best they could. They were invariably the keepers. There'd also always be a bully, always someone who got pleasure from cruelty or using people, and later, always a cluster of kids who stopped acknowledging the existence of those who lacked their own perceived social status. For them, any sign of weakness or disability was disdained and mocked, which ruled out the majority of other kids in their world. I learned by then that you couldn't allow yourself to accept the corrosive judgements or destructive actions of others as having any valid basis, or it would destroy your sense of self-worth. Better to simply avoid 'em and their toxic effects, believe in yourself, and press on.

By the time I was a young man, I'd learned that if you have a dream that you are determined to pursue, especially if it stands alone, you may need lots of persistence. I never sensed what I wanted to do for a living. Career tests in high school were inconclusive, and a career needed to be chosen before graduating - and I was coming down to the wire. Since I preferred to doodle in a history class taught by a phys ed teacher, and a friend with a late 40's sedan with body removed had commissioned me

to come up with a fiberglass sports car body design that would somehow both fit and not look ridiculous, the measuring and problem-solving made me think that maybe product design might be something interesting to pursue. Nothing came of the car of course, but the ill-conceived project had been immensely challenging and rewarding.

That career was called Industrial Design, and required entry into the College of Art & Design at a state university. I managed to get in despite having had not a whit of art training (and a few eyebrows went up), but I figured I could learn that from classes, as well as how they used systematic problem-solving to come up with real, workable design solutions. My artistic handicap was a bit embarrassing throughout, but with perseverance, I progressed from pathetic scrawl to full-blown mediocre. The complexities of getting real solutions instead of merely pretty ones proved difficult but do-able. In my sophomore year, I was being advised to consider changing my major because of the feedback the college was getting from at least one art instructor in landscape drawing. But, I had been getting a lot out of the product design classes, and stuck with it. I had no fallback option, my creative writing instructor having given me a “D”, which as it turned out was a pity grade because he knew that I had earnestly given my all in each effort. Hemingway, I wasn’t. To be fair, he was looking for brooding, deft, artsy “looked into the shop window and saw a reflection of his life”, while I had cut my teeth on Tom “it went over like a keg of rum in a prison camp” McCahill, automotive tester for *Mechanix Illustrated Magazine*. And then there was *Mad Magazine*. Less than a year later, the college barred admission to any new student lacking any previous art instruction, closing the gate to others after me, for which I felt responsible. The inner turmoil created by choosing a single career path, do or die, sometimes interrupted my ability to progress, but there was also one art professor who validated me as a person, cutting me some slack in my need to do well in my studies. For this teacher, the person was more important than the accomplishing. Fortunately, my later ability to address complex technical problems proved to be far more valuable to me than any artistic skills. My takeaway was: If it’s do or die, don’t allow gatekeepers or naysayers to dissuade you from the course you feel you need to take.

I was still still fresh from the heat of battle when I made an ill-advised life decision, and this advice against was from trustworthy people who were in a much better position to objectively weigh things than I was. But I applied my “persist and pursue” mantra to that too, which turned out to be a serious misapplication in this type of personal situation. I assumed that I knew best what was right for me, and forged ahead. I refused to listen or ask questions. That proved to be a mistake with lasting consequences, and one which I was unusually ill-prepared to handle. But, well-intentioned arrogance is still arrogance.

So, my circumstances didn’t just happen, nor did God engineer them. Naiveté can blind us into getting *all* that we wish for, the unanticipated bad that so often accompanies the good. I did know that He is a saving God, but not just of souls. He is a God who also wishes to save us from ourselves, here and now, but we rarely allow that. This is a God who works *in context*. The dream/vision of the communion tray was a gritty reminder of that. His purposes will get accomplished, but not in a way that will violate who He is nor

go against His nature. My worldview needed some heavy adjustments, and understanding a little more about the nature of God was one of them.

After all, we have the freedom to rail against the very concept of any God who requires death as a penalty for wrongdoing. How barbaric is that? Who wants to follow a God like that? Yet, difficult as it is to accept, we do not have the power to see, pick or define what full reality is, nor what the true circumstances of our existence are. We can pretend to do so, certainly, and sit back and critique. But it may be better to become aware of more than we presently are, and perhaps trade judgement for appreciation. The reality of crossing a busy, wide highway on foot takes its own toll, and to reach our goal on the other side may require following someone who can get us across it safely and without causing mayhem to ourselves or others as we make our way across. To deviate from that helping hand has natural consequences, and to view that hand as instead seeking to push us into traffic is what keeps us at risk. Picking our own path across is “freedom” in one sense, but following Christ across becomes a freedom from living out and answering for the natural results of having followed our own lead before.

We have only the power to apply filters to what we observe in life, and to accept or reject what little makes it through them. This is intellect, with emotion - often fear or anger - as the engine. None of this has any effect at all on what the situation actually is, but it allows us to construct the particular framework we need to get through it, one which tends to reflect who we are and what we're like. Our musings and conclusions are ours alone. The fact that I would like something disagreeable to better resemble my concept of the way it should be, is like being born at the start of a bitter 30-year war. I can refuse to acknowledge that there is an ongoing war and try to take an apathetic outlook, or train and go fight, act as a change agent for peace, help those harmed by it, enrich myself from it, or whatever I like, if opportunity provides. In life, a few perceive God's true nature accurately early on, and respond in kind with love and gratitude. Most, like myself and the ancient Hebrews, respond only to hardship or the threat of it. There are just two responses that we all have to hardship. Hardship either drives us away from God, or it draws us toward Him. Our responses to hardship are up to us, and are shaped by our perceptions of what He is like. We either blame and resent Him, seeing ourselves as innocent victims and our hardship as some kind of unjust punishment, or we sense our contributions to our current state and see Him as our only hope. Too often, our response fits Proverbs 19:3, “People ruin their lives by their own foolishness and then are angry at the Lord.” Like the 30-year war, the reality of the circumstances existing at our births will remain intact, whether we perceive the actual situation correctly or not. Our common assumptions that God either has the world just the way He likes it, or is helpless and/or unwilling to change its many miseries, are both condemnations rooted in convenient thought and frustration. These are our interpretations of His basic nature, the problem being that we picture Him as being like us.

A closer path to understanding the core of a largely incomprehensible reality is not the slathering on of more flawed intellect. Often touted as the mark of superiority, and an unbiased and incorruptible arbiter as inerrant as mathematics, intellect is fueled and

directed by emotion. Emotion spans everything from a love of learning and discovery, joy and contentment, to resentment, pride, jealousy, insecurity, hatred and fear. Emotional makeup is the engine, and depending upon that, intellect is either its tool or its weapon. While men of science look for evidence which will support their biases, pure intellect demands a single answer, a single best solution to everything. Yet highly intellectual people seem to joust on a regular basis.

It is risky to rely exclusively on the perceived purity of something, when it is in fact highly tainted. Einstein once expressed that “Scientific research can reduce superstition by encouraging people to think and view things in terms of cause and effect. Certain it is that a conviction, akin to religious feeling, of the rationality and intelligibility of the world lies behind all scientific work of a higher order... This firm belief, a belief bound up with a deep feeling, in a superior mind that reveals itself in the world of experience, represents my conception of God. In common parlance this may be described as ‘pantheistic’ (Spinoza)”, and “I have always believed that Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God the small group scattered all through time of intellectually and ethically valuable people.”

This rather elitist view in the latter part of the quotation is a direct contradiction to the whole of the Bible and Jesus’ speech and actions. The Kingdom which Jesus repeatedly pointed to was not a gathering of intellectually and ethically valuable people. Although He circulated among the mix of those around Him, His attention leaned toward those who had little status, or were people that no “decent person” would be caught around. They were known to others as “sinners”, the others being those who considered themselves as righteous, or what Edison called the intellectually and ethically valuable people. It was such that sought to accuse Him by asking, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” In Luke 5:32, Jesus said, “I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent.” Oddly, it was those self-righteous complainers whom Jesus considered to be without the hope of ever seeing His Kingdom. God neither recognizes worldly status nor grades on a curve. The fact that “at least I’m not as bad as Hitler” makes no difference at all, and that’s what tends to frustrate us. As His own astonished disciples asked Him after He’d shot down their similar assumptions, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus replied by pointing out both a harsh reality and a true hope: “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” At the time He spoke, God’s work to create The Way had not yet been finished.

Not surprisingly, I feel that a closer path to understanding the core of a largely incomprehensible reality is *faith*, something abounding in Jesus, and it delighted Him when He found faith in others. Hebrews 11 defines faith as “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” According to Matthew 9:22 and other verses, faith carries power: “Jesus turned and saw her. ‘Take heart, daughter,’ He said, ‘your faith has healed you.’ And the woman was healed at that moment.” Where faith in God was present, His impossible works flowed effortlessly.

The New Testament specifically recounts that Jesus did few restorative or healing miracles where an opening toward faith was completely lacking, and He immediately left those areas, a note which should poke at the inquiring mind as to just how actual reality works, and what it encompasses. Matthew 13:58 notes, "And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith." God does not respond to demands to prove Himself, since there is no faith contained in it, only false pride or arrogance. Inventor Thomas Edison could not get much action on his end, either, concluding in 1911, "I have never seen the slightest *scientific proof* of the religious ideas of heaven and hell, of future life for individuals, or of a personal God. ... Not one of all the gods of all the various theologies has ever really been proved. We accept no ordinary scientific fact without the final proof; why should we, then, be satisfied in this most mighty of all matters, with a mere theory?" Edison's disdain of anything straying from the narrow confines of scientific thought is palpable, and this is an even more popular sentiment today than it was in his time. When we demand that God approach us on our terms, we experience only absence. We must approach the Creator on His terms, as an indicator of sincerity.

Edison was not open to "*things unseen*". God does not seek to win over those who will not have Him, but He responds to the smallest seed of faith in those who know that they are blinded by the limitations within themselves. Matthew 7:7 notes a very different response to sincerity and humility, quoting Jesus as saying, "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you." Is the universe really limited to Nature, celestial bodies, mathematical models, convenience, prestige and accumulated wealth? If you cannot touch it or Paypal money to it, does it exist? Is reality wider than we've been taught in school? The answer depends on you, and how big a view you want. Does it matter, for what kind of life you want to have? You bet it does. I can hardly explain away my experiences with God as either emotionally-driven aberrations of the mind, or as anomalies that await Science's explaining away such mysteries. God has proven Himself and His nature to me, but not by anything remotely resembling the scientific process, and not by the intellectual juggling of Scripture. Scripture has merely confirmed what He has already revealed of Himself to me, His Spirit interrupting my internal busyness, that I might have at least the faint start of understanding the One who sustains all things.

The Gift of All Gifts

Now I have to skip ahead to somewhat more current times in order to relate what I think of as the most recent great communication of God with me, information-wise. For me, it was a great truth, unanticipated, that tied together and answered a number of questions I had. It dispelled a lot of bad assumptions I'd carried. And, it revealed more of God's nature, but in a way that made Him even more distinctly unlike us, and me.

For many years, what began to weigh on me more and more was, "Why *me*?" I was the guy who, when healed of a recurring ailment at a young age, accepted it and then ignored Him. I was the guy who did not hesitate to say no when approached by the Spirit of the Living God for relationship! I refused, and that should have rightly been the end of it. I only came around much later because I had no other viable choices left to me. I was out of feasible alternatives. Even then, I was (and am) a tepid, hesitant follower. The only way He could get my attention all the while was with the spiritual equivalent of a bat to the head. I'm often considered a "nice guy" by others, but I came to know my core a little better, and then a lot better than I cared to. I found that my good intentions could still screw things up royally, and I often was at a complete loss for being able to discern what the right thing to do was, because the right thing to do varies so much with the person and the situation. I'm unable to discern those, since the full consequences are often beyond our ability to anticipate. It's so easy to "help" and make things even worse. With my past wreckage still plainly in sight, I became afraid to take any direction at all. What kind of "from victory to victory" Christian was that? What earthly good was I doing, and what possible purpose did I serve for Him? Why did He persist with *me*? I had no obvious guidance by His Spirit, no "Me and God are tight" assurance that some others seemed to have. In my own view, I was a washout, an unfortunate choice that apparently never really worked out well for Him. I could see no payback on His end. Yet the indelible impression left by His deep affection still remained, completely intact. So, what was up with that?

I began to ask Him, "Why me? Why did You choose *me*? Look at how I was, and look at me now. It's not like I was better than someone else, or kind of earned it more. I didn't deserve it, still don't, and I'm doing You no good at all even after all these years. You knew all this ahead of time, so what *possible reason* would You have to choose *me*?" He had gotten me through some very punishing times relatively intact, and I felt like I had been able to do Him no good at all in return over the years.

Over time, it simply boiled down to "Why me? Why did You choose *me*?" That must have been fun to listen to over months and then years, but all I could see was the decades of trying to salvage the wreckage behind, and I was honestly mystified. It made no sense. I may have not been a Hitler, but I was just as far away from being a Billy Graham or a Mother Teresa.

This went on for what I recall as three years. I was slowly and finally emerging free from the train wreck I had created three decades before, and the hindsight made the

question stand out even more to me. I did not expect an answer, because I had *never* received a direct answer in response to a question. My mind was always ruminating over unresolved problems, and He'd always intruded with something pithy, but it was an answer to a different question, an unasked one. It was closer to a verbal way to stop me from spinning helplessly around in circles. My direct questions had mainly been more like a desperate, "what do I do now?" or "should I do *this*, or *that* here?" No answer, ever. I'm sure that many people can relate to that silence, that lack of response, that seeming absence of God.

So that's why it was a surprise to me when He broke in unceremoniously while I was about to turn my car back into my driveway after a few errands. Left turn signal on, my mind was once again ruminating on this conundrum of *why*, while it surveyed the past and my place in it. What a train wreck, and I had been the shiny-faced engineer! Why, of all people, would you choose *me*?

I hadn't quite completely finished the same old question when that same strong, sure voice interrupted, "It pleases Me." There was no visual paragraph of context with it this time, simply the wallop of a firm, full understanding of what He meant by those three words. It had absolutely nothing to do with my earning, deserving a break, showing a promising future, being just a little better than, or trying never to say anything hurtful. And it was not past tense. It had everything to do with who He is - His very nature. He chose me because He wanted to. Because He loves so deeply that He will go to extraordinary lengths to express it, or to accomplish it. Because it would please Him to pull me through the results of what I had set in motion. It gave Him pleasure to persist past my objections and refusals, my internal distractions, discord and failings. While I unwittingly but willfully burned my house of life to the ground, He didn't just stand by, watching it burn and flair, but stood by me to get me through the experience. He chose me in spite of me, because it gave Him pleasure to do so. He wanted me more than I wanted Him, all along. And it had to do with that all-encompassing blanket of love that is His nature, an unreasoning and unreasonable love that is not unique to me, but includes me. The true answer to "why me" was not about me or what I am like. It was about Him and what *He* is like.

One might reasonably ask on hearing this, "But wouldn't a loving God have interceded and extinguished that fire in your life, whatever it was?" No, and for a reason that I will cover in the next paragraph. God is omnipotent, but does not and in fact will not act contrary to His own nature. The magic trick of everything suddenly stopping and being nice-nice would have been okay for *me*, but also would have blatantly violated something that God honors and respects: our free will. He has no desire to conduct a real-time 3-D puppet show. He deals in miracles, not magic shows. He wants real relationships, and He respects free will, whether it pleases or hurts Him deeply. Faith in Him is a gift from Him, and much like love, we can do with it as we choose: accept it, reject it, cling to it, let it be crowded out by other concerns, act upon it, or return to it.

There's an account in Scripture of a situation that we typically gloss over, but shouldn't. In it, Jesus was walking past a pool of water locally reputed to heal the infirmity or

illness of the first one in, after the water began to be periodically roiled. An invalid there complained to Him that he was too disabled by his affliction to ever make it into the water first. The man had recognized Jesus, knew of the street talk concerning Him, and asked for His help. Jesus knelt and asked the invalid, "Do you *want* to be healed?" We think of this question variously as either a slam-dunk formality or a silly question, given the man's condition. Who *wouldn't* want to be healed - and instantly, no less? The answer is: not everyone. Some refashion their affliction into their identity, and do not want to be separated from it, so it comes to rule them. Others involve a power to manipulate others in some way for their own benefit, and these, given an open and clear choice, typically refuse healing. One example would be compulsive lying, which in many people leads to believing their own lies to the extent that they lose their basic grip on truth and fact. So the question "Do you want to be healed?" is hardly as unnecessary as we may assume. God will not separate us from what we are unwilling to give to Him or be parted from. For better or worse, we get what we want, and God honors that in spite of the eventual consequences.

This is not a very satisfying answer when we make key assumptions about what a loving God should do in such a profoundly troubled world. We assume that if He created it and sustains it, then He is or should be *running* it, much like an improvised play where the audience participates in the presentation. When we picture Him running it, that is usually with the idea that He may be like a President, but we are the voters who can veto or influence laws and policies that affect us. We can say no. We can pick and choose, because we feel that we know what is best for us. And so that's what we do. We make mental constructs of what such a God should do if He were good and loving. That typically includes assuming our right to live in some variation of a consequence-free environment, and we feel betrayed when the misery seems to just roll on unchecked. "I will not believe in a God who allows children to be starved and abused," is a common if disingenuous theme of disappointment that I hear expressed. Its careful wording neatly removes us as people from the equation, leaving God as the perpetrator. "I will not believe in a God who kills people", is a dismissive surface perception more often derived from watching movies than by *carefully* reading through the Old and New Testaments with an inquiring mind. Both statements are more self-perceived justifications for a hasty rejection than they are puzzlers along a serious path of searching for God. Just as Political Correctness pretends to be a morally superior platform of acceptance and tolerance from which we can deride and judge others - often under a tissue-thin guise of compassion, education or enlightenment - then fabricating a position of moral superiority from which to make snap dismissals about the Creator of the Commandments is not sincerity at its best, since the Ten Commandments are a description of God's character. When apparent contradictions surface in our minds, we either rush to judge or, dissatisfied, inquire further in order to resolve them. Which is easiest?

If only we had a god's power to change the world, we think, it would be a very different place. Yet we as individuals have had the power to change the spheres of our world for thousands of years, and look at the result. Very few are those who have selflessly acted

to better it in concrete terms rather than simply adding to the misery, unwittingly or otherwise. Meaning well is an excuse, but it is not an outcome.

Today, loved ones suffer and/or die despite desperate prayers and offered bargains. Both man-made and natural calamities sweep over us seemingly unchecked. What good is a God who will not conform to our expectations, and who allows what is not good to be so pervasive? Whose fault is that? Clearly, there is a disjoint in expectations here, and a disjoint in our perceptions about which occurrences are of Him, or are of us. Either we are right in perceiving a distant, uninvolved and uncaring God passively watching things go awry, or our perceptions of the realities of our situation here are horribly askew. I have leaned toward the former with its attendant confusion, but time has brought me to reluctantly face the latter. Our penchant for gravitating toward the easy answers does not serve us well.

We assume that a good God would cut multiple, vague paths to Himself for us, with billboard signage, making it easy to get to Him. Thus the saying, "There are many paths to God." Would that not be the right thing to do? So we disapprove when there is provided but one path, with Jesus saying such things as, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me," and "I am the gate. If anyone enters through Me, he will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture," and "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies." We prefer to think that's too restrictive, and that there should be many paths to God, a preference that we approve of because it sounds so much more inclusive and collaborative and democratic. It allows us room for what we would call "personal style", enough room to carry our preferences, self-deceptions and set of filters in with us. We could then approach God on our own terms, our self-respect, pride and sense of honor intact. But Jesus painted a different reality: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it."

Our reaction tends to be that this is too narrow, too exclusive, or too regimented. An appreciation for diversity and nonconformity is our alleged style now. We associate "destruction" with arbitrary and unfair punishment in some afterlife by some Old Testament God of Vengeance that definitely does not appeal, and so we think it safest to keep this understanding, kind, healing, wise, rebellious and appealing Jesus guy at arm's length, thanks. Nice guy and all, and said some inspirational things, but we filter out the guts of what He said because they don't fit our preferences. The whole picture we draw is some variation on appeasing an ancient, angry god who is only satisfied by blood sacrifice, and whoever does not toe some arbitrary line gets it in the neck. Besides, we like to think that everything that's enjoyable seems to be prohibited! Since our priorities focus on "the way that leads to destruction" rather than "the way that leads to life", we see an unfair hand waiting to punish rather than a loving hand extended to preserve or rescue. In our minds, we separate the cruel and murderous God of the Old Testament from the wise prophet Jesus, missing entirely that Jesus *is* the Creator, Sustainer, and God of the Old Testament, come to dwell among us for a time, reveal the

character of His Father to us, and provide a way to be with Him now and forever - if that is what we yearn for. We figure that whatever happens after we finally die, we'll deal with it once we get there. Again, our penchant for gravitating toward the easy answers does not serve us well.

One might reasonably expect that since my last exceptional interaction with God, that such things would continue on. They have not. I view this not as a loss, but as a step up to where most other Christian believers are. He gives and equips us with what we each need and, having made truly extraordinary efforts to give me a firm footing of faith, my nature is such that more might make me think too much of myself and make me veer off course. So I don't have an extraordinary faith. What I have is an extraordinary God who will continue to see me through whatever lies ahead here.

My own personal experiences are what they are. Of necessity, I've related only a portion. You are entirely free to believe them skeptically as actual events, or to reject them outright as self-inflicted mind games or delusions. My strong tendency to be a cynic had not made it easy for me to resolve, because I pictured the rare followers of Christ who have such experiences as more than a few rungs up from where I am. As anyone who knows me can attest, I'm as fully human as the next person, not a saint. Having lived these experiences, however, makes my acceptance of them concrete. My various ways of deluding myself are subtle and unspectacular, fueled by a naive perception of the world that has many holes and exceptions in it. These events I've described are simply not my style, and not of my nature. They were each intrusive, not flowing out of who I am, or hope to be. I have never sat around, secretly hoping for the next miracle or the next vision, like some sort of metaphysical junkie. I groove, not. I have more immediate things to preoccupy me, for better or for worse.

And so do you, so let us step on to the present, and begin the future with a clearer understanding of just what God is really like outside of my own personal experiences. Where is there any confirmation of them? Why bother finding out? Because our beliefs concerning God are the single most important influence that molds who we are. Our thoughts and conduct are shaped by what we consider God to be like, good or bad. This impression of God covers the span, from the pacifist who refuses military combat, to the humanist, pantheist, agnostic or atheist who conducts his or her own life without any greater vision of what may exist beyond our senses or instruments. From the "good person" who does good simply because it seems to beget more good, to the zealot who thinks he does his god a favor by assaulting whomever he considers to be an enemy of the ideology he believes in. Believer or atheist, we are all shaped by our concept, our understanding, of God.

For that understanding to be an accurate one is thus crucial to our existence - not merely for a pie-in-the-sky someday future, but more importantly as we engage the world right here and now. Misunderstandings and uncertainties about God's nature and character can lead us to make very ill-informed decisions about what we want our lives to be about, and how we want to live. So it was long ago for me. I thought I knew just what I wanted, but my assumptions and conclusions sabotaged my approach to attain it.

I thought I knew what God was like, and wanted no part of that God in my life. My earnest desire for “freedom” was good, but my perceptions of what true freedom is were hopelessly contrary to it. As my life progressed, I found that it served me well to trade assumptions, guesses and misinformation for a more accurate knowledge, since the results are so profoundly influential.

This series of chapters has, to this point, served my responsibility to relate a portion of what God has done for me in my life. That is all that I am supposed to be willing to do, and I have done so. For a few, that is enough, since it reveals the core of God’s nature to those who yearn to seek Him out. After all, faith is a gift to be exercised, not an intellectual pursuit. Faith is an admission that we do not see it all and know it all. We have only to set ourselves aside and ask in earnest. That second part is easy, while the first is decidedly not.

Yet, at the same time, I consider that something might be helpful for those who are stuck with an honest “but what about...?” internal debate. I can point toward a very helpful resource which can resolve many of them. There is a vast gulf between the “God of Western Religions” and the God who is “I AM”. Mankind has long since subverted God’s ways and purposes for his own, seeking to redefine, control and administrate His True Church to better reflect his own fallen nature in place of God’s nature. One understanding of God led to a profoundly moving submission to gruesome forms of exterminations originally intended as entertainment, while another understanding has led to crusades to wrest control of “holy lands” and “holy relics” from the violent encroachments of a vast Muslim empire, as well as to wholesale slaughter in the New World by Conquistadors. The first transformed a hostile culture from within, person by person. The second redirected the restlessness created by continual warfare in order to ensure political stability at home, providing “a just cause” to aim that energy elsewhere. The third destroyed cultures and peoples in the quest for power and riches. Oh, and for God’s glory too, of course. That was the mechanism by which the natives, sometimes previously conquerors in their own right and sometimes not, were either enslaved or exterminated (or both) for centuries. In our minds, all are lumped together. Who wants a God who inspires the latter two, and maybe all three?

I hold that the solution is not to reject or promote “religion”, but to better understand God. So much evil has been and currently is being accomplished underneath the vigorous waving of God’s banner that it would be of benefit for me to point to a work that more fully reveals Him as He really is, by using the same Scripture that is so commonly used to condemn Him. He is there, and it testifies to His nature. Even what we call Nature testifies to His nature. We praise its beauty and wonder, as if it is an intelligent demigod in itself, yet at the same time blame God for its harsh realities toward us. We do not sense the intents behind how the world is, nor our responsibilities within it.

Even many Christians today have warped Christianity to better conform to their own natures rather than admit God’s supremacy into their lives, as if faith in and obedience to the Living God is a spice to be lightly sprinkled over current and more valuable cultural values, when convenient. While God has worked in context to prevailing

cultures, such people - many in leadership - bend God's plainly definitive viewpoints toward their own, claiming that those "ancient" viewpoints need modernizing to better reflect today's ever-shifting mainstream thoughts. In other words, we know better, and to adjust toward conformity in modern thought makes the Christian faith "more relevant". This is hardly a new phenomenon, as the Christian *tradition* itself has long pushed the concept that the human soul is inherently immortal, a comforting belief that is not supported in Scripture and works to cancel out the very basis of what it is that Christ saves us from: the Second Death. We instead picture something that fits in better with our assumption of an immortal soul, which is a comforting hand-me-down concept from ancient Greek philosophies.

Modifying or twisting Scripture to better conform to the world's ways is a risky proposition, because it dims the illuminating and guiding light that Christ is to those who seek to follow Him. John 8:12 quotes Jesus as saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life." Again, He says in Matthew 5:14 to His disciples, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a basket. Instead, they set it on a lampstand, and it gives light to everyone in the house." Those light beams only stand out when they do not conform to the darkness around them, so the lamp itself does no good when it is covered over by something that blocks off its difference in illumination level. Contrast is everything when it comes down to what matters.

This is not to say that we should reinstitute the traditions and outlooks of ancient cultures, and stand out in that way. God worked in context then, and does so now with what we consider to be our modern and vastly superior culture. Yet His core values stand just as distinctly from our enlightened values today as they did from that of the early Hebrews and their surrounding enemies, but in different ways. I believe that the best solution is not to parse commandments and rules in order to glean which might be readjusted to culture and which might carry over intact. It would be better to take a large step back, a very large one, and seek out God's nature. Even just considering what He says about Himself in Scripture and what He desires for us, it becomes much easier to discern His basic values and apply them directly instead of filtering them through the ever changing complexities of "unlike" cultures. We as a people are remarkably intolerant of other cultures anyway, so it does little good to try to impose their tenets on ourselves. It also does little good to assume that God speaks in Olde English, that angels are humans who have earned feathered wings, that God is an obsolete old fud who is stuck in the past, or that the world will keep going just fine because it's leaving Him in the dust back there somewhere anyway.

Homogenizing Christianity to make it less culturally objectionable and thus more appealing is hardly a solution, but instead works against both the true problem and Christ's solution for it. In Matthew 5:13, He declares, "You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot." Again, He says beginning in Luke 14:34, "In the same way, any one of you who does not give up everything he has

cannot be My disciple. Salt is good, but if the salt loses its savor, with what will it be seasoned? It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile, and it is thrown out. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” In other words, following Christ is about starting over, not readjusting course or blending. 2 Timothy 4:2 begins with Christ’s caution, “Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and encourage with every form of patient instruction. For the time will come when men will not tolerate sound doctrine, but with itching ears they will gather around themselves teachers to suit their own desires. So they will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.” I think that it is significant to note that the early Christian believers were not sacrificed to lions, crucified, eviscerated and burned at the stake because their beliefs blended in with acceptable mainstream thought. They didn’t stand out by organizing political strength in order to impose their values on the cultures they were immersed in, but by quietly acting out their faith in personal obedience to Christ. Had they instead acquiesced to the world’s ways, its ways of thinking, moral values and behaviors, they would have survived - in one sense, anyway.

The problem I have with both a Christian faith based on traditions and a modern, seemingly “updated” Christianity is that both have to varying degrees lost their savor and their Savior. This side of Eternity, we have the freedom to think and do precisely as we like, whether we ascribe to Christian traditions, avoid them like the plague, or follow Christ. There’s a line which, when crossed, may not become apparent to us until it is too late. Matthew 7:21 describes the outcome as Jesus states, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I *never knew you*; depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.” This is both stark and comprehensive, underscoring relationship. John 12: 16 begins, “If anyone serves Me, he must *follow Me*; and where I am, there will my servant be also.” No one can follow Him without an abiding relationship with Him, acting in unity with His will. Readjusting God’s will to seemingly advocate and endorse what God finds harmful, and thus supposedly easing the cost of entry into Christ’s Kingdom, acts to contradict “any one of you who does not give up *everything he has* cannot be My disciple.” To be sure, we all start from where we are, baggage and all. It is our willingness to chuck our baggage overboard that will ultimately separate freedom from continued enslavement.

Wherever we are, His Spirit takes it from there, and so it is not wise to teach each other that we can ignore select behavioral issues whenever His Word does not blend into the prevailing culture. God transcends cultural imperatives, and the goal is *not* to make the Christian worldview more acceptable to the prevailing winds. For any *Christian* to discount or bend the imperatives of Scripture with the purpose of conforming it to the surrounding culture is a dangerous game. At the same time, the United States of America is not a Christian nation and has not conducted itself as such, nor is it God’s chosen nation along the lines of ancient Israel. With the past brief and disastrous exception of Massachusetts, it is not a theocracy. To try to manipulate the country to be so is a pointless and counterproductive error.

It's oft said that "you can't legislate morality", the wording of which is confusing to me since that is the core purpose of nearly all law, good, bad, and practical necessity. The actual case is of course that you cannot legislate behavior based on a belief system that the majority of people consider to be personally unacceptable. When the natural and inherent friction between the Christian worldview and any secular or religious culture are "solved" by moving the former closer to the latter, then the Christian faith is made to be methodically abandoned, becoming indistinguishable from that which it is intended to stand distinctly apart. More than ever so in the past, God and His Way are relevant to today, as-is. God is not locked in time. He does not expect us to pray to Him in the archaic English of 1535 or 1611, nor to limit our praise within 18th and 19th century hymns derived from tavern songs. And yet He doesn't need our "help" to modernize who He is, in order to boost popularity and acceptability. He works in context, but who He is and what He wants of us does not change. Just as Isaiah 55:8 says, "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord," then Ezekiel 18:29 says "Yet the Israelites say, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' Are my ways unjust, people of Israel? Is it not your ways that are unjust?" Altering God to make His precepts more popularly acceptable is to say that His ways *are* unjust and are in need of correction toward our own ways of thinking, as if His authority is subject to modification by democratic principles. The world has become as it is through disobedience to His instruction, so legitimizing more disobedience may be popular, but is effectively telling Christ to keep up in following *us*.

For any follower of Christ, the point is not to erect a comforting banner for cultural heritage, or for New Age Christians to flock to, but to personally live out one's life in obedience and discernment in thankfulness, where personal integrity and the individuals we interact with matter more than pamphlets or legislative rallying points. There is no need for Christians to endorse or embrace the cultures that they find themselves in. There *is* a need to live true to that relationship with Jesus, that giving over of one's life, and by simply doing that, be a living witness to those few who have become disillusioned with the wide road. Not a one of us comes sinless to accept Christ, having cleaned up our act first. If someone has not yet recognized and let go of that which is destroying them, it does not help to act as God's Little Helper and make the narrow road narrower while the Spirit is calling them, just as it does not help to widen their road even further and teach them in contradiction to God's clear will for them.

The Living God is not an add-on to round out one's life as a basically good person, or to make us feel better about ourselves. Accepting Christ is much more akin to giving up on your life as you have been living it, heaving it over the transom, kit and caboodle, and by asking Christ to provide something better no matter what it takes on your part - or His. By "kit and caboodle" I mean the thought expressed in Psalm 139: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, And lead me in the everlasting way." This acknowledges three essentials: we're pervasively blind to our faults, require His guidance to avoid expressing those faults, and need the power of His change from within. It also assumes that we trust Him enough to be led by Him.

We are born spiritually separated from God, and this separation only widens as we live our lives according to our own values and behaviors. Well-intentioned as our efforts may be, this separation cannot be narrowed by us. His Spirit's fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control are like a signpost leading away from human nature and toward God's. Our human nature predisposes us to thoughts, words and actions which, as the Psalm above relates, displeases God, can be offensive, and can be injurious to both others and ourselves. It contributes to how the world got to be the way it is today. When we cannot admit this, then we carry on as we always have, and get the same results.

In Psalm 51, King David wrote after his adultery and conspiracy to murder:
"Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness;
According to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight,
So that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge...
Behold, You desire truth in the innermost being, and in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom.
Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow...
Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit...
For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; you are not pleased with burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise."

This prayer is a display of a worldview that is as foreign to us today as it ever has been, the only difference being that an additional percentage of us brag of our exploits instead of reconsidering the true effects of what we do. In this Psalm, David prays for spiritual life: a restoration of his prior close relationship with God which has been shattered by his sins. His separation feels to him like suffocation, and it wants to lead him where he does not want to go, even further away from God. But, he knows that he cannot cleanse and renew himself in the slightest, and pleads for God to do what only He can do. That idea can be a very difficult thing to accept, because we like to think that we in some way will or have already earned faith, and thus that we will or have earned our rescue from separation because we weren't separated all that far to begin with. In some way, we *deserve* faith as a reward for being basically pretty nice people, and have never really required a full-on spiritual rebirth from scratch. We are close, we just need an attitude tune-up, and we can keep our baggage with us.

At the time Jesus lived on earth, tax collectors were viewed as collaborators with the occupying Roman army. Luke 18:9 begins: "To some who trusted in their own righteousness and viewed others with contempt, He also told this parable: 'Two men

went up to the temple to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed, “God, I thank You that I am not like the other men—swindlers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and pay tithes of all that I receive.” But the tax collector stood at a distance, unwilling even to lift up his eyes to heaven. Instead, he beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” I tell you, this man, rather than the Pharisee, went home justified. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.’ ”

The closer you get to the idea of Christianity being a modest tune-up for deserving people to earn a someday future reward, the closer you get to people congregating under a banner, with a suffocating religious ideology and an axe to grind. Some call that Christianity, but the real question is: does Christ? It is worth noting that while He lived among us, Jesus reserved His anger *not* for those sinners who sought for Him, *not* for those who ignored Him or even took up stones against Him, but for those who claimed their own righteousness and piety, and yet were worse than the other sinners because of their duplicity. The religious hierarchy had expanded His laws to exaggerate God’s will for us to an impossibly lofty and complex level, inserting themselves as essential go-betweens to boost their own personal power and prestige, and so making faith impossible wherever they went. Jesus specifically avoided the militaristic solution that had been expected of the coming Messiah, the Deliverer.

And that was the core of the problem. The Hebrews had long before denied God’s stated will to protect them from hostile armies solely by His power - without even their involvement - and had instead waged battle after battle in the same manner that nations today do, as “God’s instrument of justice”. There was to be no conventional king among them but God, yet they wanted to be like other nations, to the point of absorbing other nations’ beliefs and practices as well, thanks to their having conducted their own warfare. So by the time the Messiah, the Deliverer, was expected, what was expected was a warlike God of Vengeance who would lead them into battle, just like the Old Testament had recorded. But the Old Testament was largely a record of what happens when you rely on God to back you up, rather than relying on God to lead you forward in faith.

To them, the apparent disjoint in character and intent between this guy who claimed to be the Messiah and the “real” Messiah promised in the Old Testament was, well, it was like night and day. As far as the Hebrews were concerned, this person wasn’t going to be leading any drawn-sword charges anytime soon, and between His accusing the religious hierarchy of gross misconduct and the growing notoriety He was achieving by His authoritative teaching and miracles, He became a threat that needed to be disposed of, and more quickly than all of the other prior claimants. When He claimed to reflect God’s character and wishes for their conduct and thought in God’s will, the disjoint made them incensed. Of the two possibilities before them, the second possibility never occurred to them: that they had, since the beginning, never understood God, had had no real faith or trust in Him, and had lived in near-constant disobedience. What they put stock in was what human hands had recorded about past *events*, not in what God had

instructed them with, or told them about Himself. If those who lived out the Old Testament had understood God, why did He need to keep urging them to? Jesus was there to correct the record, so to speak, and clear up the misunderstandings they had held all along, and provide a chance to get back on board the covenant.

Like them, we look at the Old Testament and see a brutal God, but since Christians accept the validity of Christ the Savior as God incarnate, we're left with a God having two opposing personalities. It never occurs to *us* that Jesus might have also come to demonstrate (and declare) that we have not understood God. Like the Hebrews, we still do not understand Him even to this day. Unlike the Hebrews, we apologetically profess Jesus as the kindly side of a Jekyll/Hyde whole, even while He assures us that He accurately reflects the whole. We preach a very confusing God - one who does not Himself practice what He teaches us to do and to be like, yet says He is otherwise.

I believe that Jesus accurately represents the character of the Father and the Holy Spirit. That sounds good and kindly, but what about that Judgement thing, with fire and sulphur, and eternal burning? Jesus, as He said, will preside over a Judgement, the harsh end of which will be neither a hand-slap nor a burning that never ends. We all want an end to the miseries, suffering and destruction on Earth, but want this in order to cling to sin, and refuse to acknowledge sin's part in it or our part in it. The only real way to end this cause is to purge every single vestige of it, and this it will do by itself, if God ceases to restrain it. So the misery and suffering of this earth will end - but it will end completely. To those who irrevocably preferred the wide gate, He will do just as He did on Earth when He withdrew from those who refused His presence and instruction. He will withdraw, but this time withdraw completely, and allow sin to secure its natural state: to consume and destroy itself. Within that process will be the Second Death, which Jesus pleaded with us not to destine ourselves toward, but instead to step away and follow Him in an individual life lived in faithful obedience to His Father, come what may. His example was a life of purpose and priority in fulfilling God's will: a rescue from our spiritual separation from our Creator. He will welcome to Himself those who sought Him out and were obedient to His express will.

So with that in mind, I complete this series with a recommendation for you continue on for much greater reward by reading a PDF e-book called *Light Through the Darkness: a Vindication of God* by Marilyn M. Campbell, a work which deftly uses Scripture itself to reveal a God very different than resides in the more traditional interpretations. It is entirely consistent with the personal experiences I've outlined in this series, and uses Scripture to be so. At the very least, it offers key, foundational things to consider. If you are one who has waded through all I've written and are still open to understanding the true nature of "I AM" with much, much greater clarity, you will find that work much more illuminating, understandable and gratifying than this series of posts. In that work, the more objections, confusion and unanswered questions you have about who God is and what He is like, the more gratifying will be your reading of it. In it, you may well discover that the God you have wished existed, in fact does.

Light Through the Darkness: a Vindication of God, is available from the [author's website](#). Links have been posted by the author and she states there that the book is available free for Kindle readers or inexpensively in paperback (less than \$9) from Amazon. She appears to believe that Amazon is offering a free Kindle download version for her, as well as their own monthly fee Kindle program to access it online. Predictably, Amazon has since decided to jettison the free download version entirely, and to charge for access. You stop paying, and you lose access. Fortunately, a newer, updated PDF e-book version is [available online](#) for both reading and downloading to your digital device at no cost. Any PDF reader can display it. Whatever e-book program or app you have onboard, you can import it into your library, if you like. Theological works are traditionally, well, tedious at best. They're arduous to saw through. You'll find *Light Through the Darkness* to be compelling, challenging and rewarding, while free of dreamy vagaries and inspirational fluff. Hardly dry, its brand of inspiration comes from Scriptural references that traditional dogma has ignored or overlooked, distorting our most basic perceptions of God's nature and character. It's actually most interesting for the doubter, the skeptic, and the one who sees Christianity as presenting one rather unlikable if not monstrous God. Yet it's hardly less so to the sincere believer with questions. It speaks to both the heart and the mind. Enjoy.