



THE HUMAN CONDITION



The Reality
of God

The Bible

The Human
Condition

Jesus
Christ

Christian
Faith

BC booklets are a series of brief studies by Dr. Glenn Parkinson examining the essentials of Biblical Christianity. These pamphlets are a series, meaning that each one builds upon the content of earlier ones. They do not have to read as a series, however. The reader should feel free to dip into the progression of thought at any point of interest.

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” What does man gain from all his labor at which he toils under the sun? Ecclesiastes 1:2-3

We began this small study of Biblical Christianity with the simple observation that God must be objectively real. Our own observations about the world and about our own personhood are proof positive of an infinite and personal Creator.¹ I suggested at the time, however, that while the existence of God underlies our experience of the real world, it also seems to fly in the face of the darker and more tragic side of the human condition. The great fact of a Creator creates the possibility of true meaning. How is it, then, that so much of life seems so... meaningless?

In looking squarely at the dark side of human experience, I do not mean to overlook the glory, joy and thrill of being human. From the self sacrifice of parents to the tender self giving of awakened passion, to the simple bond of true friendship, we instinctively know that people are important. From homemade bread to classic novels to space satellites, we instinctively know that human beings can accomplish things of remarkable and lasting value. All this and much, much more testifies to a good God's design and plan.

There appears to be, however, a serious problem with the concept of a real, personal God. It is the oppressive weight of human anguish which seems inconsistent with any benevolent creative design. If God did not exist, then life would not have to make sense, because nothing would have any ultimate meaning. But if God does exist, then this world and life as we know it ought to make sense. At least three hefty problems stand in the way: the problem of pain, the problem of evil and the problem of silence.

THE PROBLEM OF PAIN

First, there is the problem of human suffering and futility. Life is full of disappointment, agony and death. While there is the blessing of parenthood, there is also the frustration of infertility and the horror of birth defects. While classic novels demonstrate human brilliance, they often do so by exploring the tragedy that haunts mankind in a thousand forms, lurking even in the shadows of our greatest achievements.

Life is exasperating for the most privileged and wracked with misery for everyone else. On the day I write these words I am numbed yet again by pictures of the latest trauma of refugees—sickening living conditions, nameless corpses, dying children. I need not tell you which political situation this was, since you no doubt have later and more recent examples to contemplate. Modern journalism barely touches on the sweeping natural and social plagues that afflict humanity like open sores. Exposure to even the smallest fraction of all this tragedy reduces all but the most hardy of us to depression.

Even for those who find life generally exciting and rewarding, it remains confusing—a roller coaster ride that is over just before you can get your bearings. You face the end before you can adequately formulate the questions, let alone get any answers.

And that is the worst part of all; it is over too soon. Death seems to deny any possibility of the meaning we sense we must have. All but the famous few are forgotten almost immediately. The idea that “people live on in the memories of others” is a myth told to quiet the frightened child inside us; there is not enough truth in it to fill a yellowed obituary. (How much do you really know about your own great grandparents? Do you even know their full names? Do you think that two generations from now anyone will know yours?)

*As a man comes, so he departs,
and what does he gain,
since he toils for the wind?*

*All his days he eats in darkness,
with great frustration, affliction and anger.* Ecclesiastes 5:16-17

Why is life so painful and futile if God is real?

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Second, there is the problem of human nastiness. It is not as if we are innocent guests trapped against our will in some frightful haunted house. Human beings have gone bad.

This is not to contradict the fact that we are truly wonderful creatures of unparalleled significance. Actually, it is *because* we are so wondrous that we can be evil. Only beings capable of good are capable of moral corruption. Rocks aren't evil, neither are ferns or crickets or zebras. Only people. Only us.

We humans are the ones who invented both the idea and reality of evil. While there is the tender self giving of awakened passion, there is also the heart-stabbing cruelty of betrayal, abuse or icy indifference. The same space satellites that probe the stars also stand ready to guide the flight of horrible death from halfway around the world. Those refugees I recently saw pictured did not get where they were because of a volcano or tornado; they were driven there by neighbors just like themselves who wish them woe.

We are very good at pointing the finger toward others whom we deem worse than ourselves, but none of us with any self awareness can say that we are unaffected by this moral disease. Not everyone practices evil equally, of course. But every race, every class of people, every nationality and each sex is demonstrably guilty of every sort of crime and moral lapse imaginable. In fact, the most high minded and sensitive thinkers of any culture tend to be those who not only perceive humanity's flaws, but sense them in their own souls.

While the Bible defines many sins quite specifically, it lowers the working definition to those things which we condemn in ourselves.² Which of us would be comfortable to have our private lives and inner motives thoroughly publicized with brutal objectivity? No one is completely at ease with what he or she sees when taking an honest look inside.

There is not a righteous man on earth who does what is right and never sins.
Ecclesiastes 7:20

Much of our suffering comes not from natural disasters or birth defects but from a defect deeper still, less tangible but no less real. It is most telling that when we are caught in a moral failure, we tend to excuse ourselves with, “Well, I’m only human.” Why? Why is humanity so morally defective, even by its own standards? Why are we condemned by our own consciences if we were made by a good God?

THE PROBLEM OF SILENCE

Finally, there is the absence of divine communication. If our humanity is real, if our personhood is more than an illusion, then our Creator must be a Person himself. Why, then, is there silence? Why does he not speak to us—any and all of us, all the time?

This point is at the same time the most difficult and the most easy to document. Many people report religious experiences, but how many actually hear God literally speak to them? Accurate data is unavailable. But it is also unnecessary. Does God speak to you? I am not referring to comfortable religious sensations that make it feel as if God has spoken. We would not be satisfied with such *almost* encounters with other significant people. Persons communicate best in language; if God is a real person, why is he so silent?

He has also set eternity in the hearts of men, yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. Ecclesiastes 3:11

As the above quotes from just one book of the Bible demonstrate, the Scriptures are not afraid to deal with all these questions. The answers we find there are uncomplicated and direct, but they are not flattering or easy to deal with.³ While other religions tend to suggest philosophic perspectives designed to cope with the dark side of life, the Bible lays out a cogent, consistent world view that actually explains the human condition as we experience it, and does so claiming to be revelation from God.⁴

The Bible traces the origin of the human condition to the experiences of the first human beings on Planet Earth. Now, the notion of an historical record of our first ancestors may seem far fetched, but remember that this is revelation, not journalism. Moses did not discover

these events from previous sources or observe any of it first hand. In some fashion, God communicated this account to Moses. Moses related it as stylized history,⁵ an epic narrative capturing the truth of the situation. Put aside the battle between evolution and creationism long enough to consider the message of this account—and remember that there had to be some pair, sometime, that began the species we know as humanity. The Bible distills the essence of their story.

GENESIS 1-3

God created the universe was created with a purpose: to glorify himself,⁶ that is, to express himself tangibly.⁷

Adam (meaning man) and Eve (meaning mother) were special creations, in that they had the unique distinction of being created in God's "image." The Bible first describes the image of God in terms of human dominion over the earth.⁸ Adam and Eve were to rule this planet in a way that paralleled God's rule over all things. Our first parents were like the plants and animals in that they were created and not divinely self-existent. What uniquely set them apart was their charge to *image* God's dominion over this planet. They and their children were to reflect God's character and purpose, treasuring each created thing and helping it find its best expression.

Being equipped for their dominion involved much that makes our species distinctly human: rational and self-conscious thought, ethical awareness, speech, tool-making ability, social skills and so on. In order to instruct us in the art of ordering the earth, God designed and built their first home, Eden, as a garden-prototype of the beautiful and productive place they were to make of the whole planet.⁹

Created to represent the Person of God on Planet Earth, humanity was designed to exercise dominion—but only as creatures who are themselves under the authority of God. In other words, our dominion was to be a small embodiment of God's personal perfections: creativity, grace, power, wisdom, patience, joy, love and all the rest. This was, and is, our purpose in God's creation.

This “creation order” was symbolically represented in two ways. First, it was inscribed upon our conscience through the seven day week.¹⁰ Six days commemorate the creation over which we rule (defining our work). The seventh day highlights God’s reflective enjoyment over all creation, including mankind (defining our worship). This order commemorated how Adam and Eve could glorify and enjoy their Creator.

Second, this relationship of authority-under-authority was symbolized by two trees in Eden.¹¹ One was called the Tree of Life, for in God’s design there was no human mortality, only unending blessing. The other was called the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Adam was charged not to eat of the second tree, on pain of death. Since Adam must have understood God’s prohibition, we cannot think of this tree as conferring the *comprehension* of good and evil. Rather, it represented the *definition* of good and evil. Who defines what is right and wrong? Who defines mankind’s purpose and proper character?

The tree was not poison. The only reason Adam could not eat it was because God said he should not. By not eating from this tree simply because God forbade it, Adam could affirm the authority of God over mankind, which in turn defines human authority over the earth. By eating the fruit, Adam would ignore God’s design, rejecting his authority and undermining our own.

People who have heard any stories at all from the Bible probably know what Adam and Eve chose to do.¹² The Apostle Paul later generalized their choice in his description of all mankind ...

Although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised.

Romans 1:21-25

This is what the Bible calls “sin,” and it is crucial to understand what it is. It is common to think of sin as some detestable or degrading act. Murder comes readily to mind, as well as rape, genocide and other heinous crimes. While the Bible recognizes these things as examples of sin—they are not the essence of sin, itself. Sin is the determination of

a created being to define its own purpose. Sin is the determination of mankind to define our own dominion over this world irrespective of God's dominion over us.

Sin is so basic to human nature, so universal an aspect of what we have become, that it is nearly impossible to distinguish it as something bad. Like the air we breathe, it is so much a part of our being that we no longer notice it for what it is. Defining our own purpose and values does not seem like a bad thing at all. In fact, we hail it as an achievement. It is very difficult for us to appreciate the essence of sin; we are left only with a notion of specific crimes which offend our own sensibilities.

But focusing only on our own sensibilities is exactly the point. Sin is exactly that tendency to assume the prerogative of our Creator in defining how we are to live and exercise our rule. Only our Creator has that right. By assuming it for ourselves we insult him and inevitably wreck the order he intended.

This means that murder and sexual abuse, for example, are indeed sins—but not for the reason we think; not because they offend *our* sensibilities. They are sins because God says they offend *his* sensibilities. They are not an accurate image of who he is.

The next implication may come as more of a shock, but it flows just as surely from the Genesis account: that all of the *good* things that we do also offend God, every one of them—not because they are evil in themselves, but because we choose them in an offensively independent spirit. As an Old Testament prophet put it, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.”¹³

An unlawful, petty dictator is repulsive in his abuse of power. This is especially true with respect to his atrocities, but it is also true even when his bullying does some incidental good. Everyone is happy to see good accomplished, but a self-centered bully is simply offensive—period.

We are illegal bullies on this planet, consecrated servants who have chosen to “take over,” reducing Eden to a banana republic. We were given real authority, the power to choose and act, so that we could consciously and joyfully embrace God's design. We were not given

dominion so we could pretend we created ourselves and are responsible to no one but us for what we do in this world.

Adam's choice resulted in the punishment he had been warned about: death. God had warned Adam that should he eat the forbidden fruit, he would die on that very day.

We might be confused to notice that Adam went on to live 930 years! But actually, on the day Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he *did* die. Since he did not keel over right away, we begin to realize that death must be a broader concept in the Bible than the one we commonly have in mind. The common notion of death is the cessation crucial bodily functions. The Bible, however, would consider this more an evidence of death than death, itself. The Bible defines death as the judgment of God against human sin, and is understood in two parts.

The first and temporal part of death did begin with the immediate curse in Eden.¹⁴ Not only did Adam and Eve become estranged from each other, but God pronounced significant changes in the way men and women would relate to one other and with the world around them. Since humanity had rejected God's authority, he deactivated his design. Things would no longer work as God had designed them to work. God's judgment began, therefore, not with aggressive punishment, but with a passive suspension of the creation order which human beings rejected.¹⁵ Earth would now resist our attempts at dominion. Nature would become our enemy as much as our friend. Indeed, we would now find it difficult to establish order even in our own homes.

This first part of God's judgment resulted in the progressive deterioration of each human being spiritually, emotionally and physically. Therefore, human society was also destabilized. Our ability to care for one another and for this planet took a major hit when God condemned our decision to be our own masters. Everything about us began to deteriorate. Finally, this deterioration in each human being eventually disconnects body from soul—the body keels over and stops breathing as the soul loses its interface with the physical world. Neither body nor soul ceases to exist; they simply deteriorate to the point that they can no longer remain intact.

The second and eternal part of God's judgment has to do with the tearing of our personal relationship with him. Not only did Adam and Eve hide from God, but for his part, God also drove them out of his sight.¹⁶ You might say that, biblically, death is separation from God,¹⁷ the source of all life. We caused the problem when we rejected God as our rightful Lord, but death was a response initiated by God, not us. Human death is understood in the Bible not as "natural" or "a part of life" but as the result of God's righteous wrath against human sin, His curse to send us away from his sight. Indeed the most common theme in the Bible describing God's judgment has to do with being sent away, forsaken and condemned to isolation forever. God is light, and those condemned to live without him dwell alone in darkness.

The Bible would go on to describe Hell as where people are consigned when God is justly displeased with their attitudes and actions. When Hell is described, it is usually described as a place of isolation, darkness and lonely despair, a place to experience the unending torment of never knowing God or attaining one's proper purpose.¹⁸ This does not discount the fact that Hell is a punishment, but it reflects upon the nature of that punishment. How ironic that God's final judgment consists in giving mankind what it foolishly wants: life without him.¹⁹

Think how foolish such a desire is. Even in this limping world, evidence of God's grace abounds on every hand. What would life be like if mankind were left totally to its own devices, free to create a world of its own design from top to bottom without God? Dreamers call such a place, Utopia. The Bible calls it Hell, and comparing Eden to what we have made of the planet so far, it is not hard to see why. Hell is the much deserved destiny of every ruined child of Adam.

Such is the essence of the Bible's story of mankind's beginning.

TWO DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

The biblical revelation of Adam and Eve presents a radically different picture of humanity than the one cherished by the secular mind set.

The secular belief is that mankind is a freakishly lucky child of chance, a glorious accident which could just as well never have

happened. According to this point of view, the only meaning we have is whatever we create for ourselves. This implies, of course, that we are essentially good beings (since we conveniently define “good” to suit ourselves).

In contrast, the Bible says that mankind was created as the offspring of God.²⁰ We are a unique, valuable and thoroughly purposeful creation, designed to reflect the personal characteristics of our Creator. According to this point of view, the initial human decision to define right and wrong for ourselves was criminal. Furthermore, this initial decision shaped our nature like an ugly footprint in wet cement.²¹ This means that the entire human race is essentially “fallen,” sinful and spiritually broken—not necessarily as bad as we could be, but seriously corrupted in every part of life.

In short, the secular point of view asserts that we are essentially good but hopelessly insignificant, while the biblical point of view maintains that we are corrupted with evil to the core but immensely significant. How do these reversed perspectives affect one’s response to the very real problems of suffering, evil and the silence of God mentioned earlier?

DEALING WITH THE HUMAN CONDITION

The secularist has a real intellectual and emotional problem with the suffering of humanity. It feels like an indignity and insult, unfair because it is so undeserved by beings who are essentially good. The secular mind despises the classic notion of God, since he would have to be either unable or unwilling to stop all this unfair pain. But at the same time, on a larger philosophical level the secularist must view all this anguish as having no lasting significance because human animals are merely a small part of a great, mindless ocean of existence.

The Bible presents quite a different perspective. From a biblical point of view, human suffering is not unfair at all. It is the tragic but just and understandable result of human sin. This is not to say that the load of adversity carried by each individual directly corresponds to his or her personal sins, but rather that the messy side of human existence is rooted in the sinful, God-dishonoring nature we all share. The fact

that some of us suffer considerably more than others is just another example of the disorder introduced by our alienation from the Creator. God is both all good and all powerful. He has consigned us to the perfectly just consequences of the independent course we have chosen. There is nothing unfair about that, just as there is nothing unjust about the final, eternal isolation of Hell, where God finally chooses to give us up to our own devices.

However, while the biblical point of view does not see human suffering as unjust, it does see the ruin of humanity as tremendously significant, something truly worthy of tears, even from God, himself. We are not two legged blobs of protoplasm with no past or future. We are creatures designed for the highest glory, whose temporal and eternal ruin is tragic beyond words. This is true not only on the large scale but also on the small, from the social decline of nations to the personal deterioration of multiple sclerosis or drug addiction. The immense significance of humanity makes every grave a place of genuine mourning.

Biblically, the pains of human life are not surprising, and neither is the silence of God. The reason we don't hear God is because he is not speaking to us, at least not in a casual way that would ignore the tremendous insult which our lives represent to Him.

Our lives an insult to God?! These are hard things to contemplate about ourselves, but if we would find any meaning to our desperate human condition, we must try to see ourselves the way God does.

The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. Genesis 6:5-6

Either disease, depression and death have no real significance (making life a joke) or they do have significance. They have significance because God is real. Therefore, either something is wrong with God or something is wrong with us. Those who want to pout and charge that God is to blame had better check their logic or be prepared to carry that bitter spirit for a long and lonely eternity.

From the Bible's perspective, the tragedy of the human condition is not surprising. The Genesis text quoted above directly introduces the account of the Flood, "So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth ... for I am grieved that I have made them.'"²² That is not a surprising response from a God who truly cares about the love and compassion and honor and integrity that we have traded for greed and smugness and violence and unending pettiness. From such a point of view, human pain and evil are not surprising. The silence of God is not surprising. Only one thing is surprising, and it is the next verse of the Genesis text ...

But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. Genesis 6:8

The word "favor" in this context has the meaning of "grace," undeserved merit. Noah's deliverance was undeserved. Noah may have been a nice guy, but the Bible reveals him to be a man with serious faults like the rest of us. Nevertheless, Noah received the grace of God by faith.²³

This is the one thing that is surprising in the Bible. Not divorce, not famine, not child abuse, not terminal cancer. Only one thing is truly surprising. What is surprising is not the Flood, but the Ark. What is surprising is not God's wrath and anger and judgment, but his persistent love, mercy and grace. What is surprising is not the human condition. What is surprising is a *deliverance* from the human condition provided by the very God whom we have offended, a deliverance which the Bible calls "salvation."

Isn't it time to see just exactly what this surprising salvation is all about?

(Endnotes)

- 1 See the first booklet in this series, *The Reality of God*, to explore this idea.
- 2 Romans 2:12-16.
- 3 In fact, the answers are threatening in the extreme, and perhaps I should caution the reader that our current study will only deal with the human condition, not its remedy (to be discussed in the next booklet).
- 4 The idea of revelation, that God has spoken to us in a limited and demonstrable way, is explored in the second pamphlet in the BC series, *The Bible*.
- 5 Stylized history is factual, but broad in theme and selective in detail, relating only enough to make its point.
- 6 In this sense, “glorify” means to manifest or make visible. The Creator is not part of the physical creation and hence is literally invisible (cf. John 1:18; 1 Tim 6:15-16).
- 7 Psalm 19:1-4, Romans 1:20.
- 8 Genesis 1:26.
- 9 Genesis 2:8-9.
- 10 The other two common measures of time, the year and the month, are readily defined by the movements of the sun or moon. Where did the week come from, which is common even in cultures unshaped by the Bible?
- 11 Genesis 2:9,15-17.
- 12 Genesis 3:1-7.
- 13 Isaiah 64:6.
- 14 Genesis 3:8-19.
- 15 Romans 8:19-25.
- 16 Genesis 3:22-24.
- 17 Compare the statement of Jesus concerning the true nature of life in John 17:3.
- 18 Jesus’ favorite way of describing Hell was “Gehenna”, a hill outside of Jerusalem that may have been the location of the city dump, where refuse was frequently burned.
- 19 Note the repetitive language of Romans 1:18-32. Twice, God is said to have “given us over” to the very sin we have chosen.
- 20 Acts 17:29.
- 21 Adam’s choices apparently passed spiritual tendencies on to his children. While Adam was created in God’s image, the Bible is careful to state that Adam’s children were created in his image (Genesis 5:1-3) after he embraced sin.
- 22 Genesis 6:7.
- 23 Hebrews 11:7.



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