

MATTERS of FAITH

Carl Jacob

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Cataloguing Data

Jacob, Carl, 1948-
Matters of Faith

1. Christianity
2. Religion
3. Philosophy
- I. Title

DDC number 200

ISBN 0 9752457 2 4

This is an Internet Edition. To assist the reader in locating topics of interest, the sequential Table of Contents has been expanded to include more detail.

This book is dedicated to Sandra

Preface

In Western society we live in an increasingly secular age where attitudes to religion vary from outright ridicule to firmly advising us to separate our personal beliefs from our public activities. It has come to worship reasoning, evidence and the methods of science above all else. Nevertheless, secularism has failed to offer human beings any meaningful substitute for religion in their hunger for answers to the deepest and most far reaching questions of life. The purpose of this short book is to reconsider a few topics related to the Christian way of thinking.

In chapter one, we start with a focus on the basics of the Christian way of life, namely the greatest commandments.

The second chapter looks at the origin and role of adversities.

In the third chapter, we move on to some relevant questions dealing with life and death.

The fourth chapter examines the subject of salvation and place the conflict between belief systems into a different perspective.

My aim is not to preach to the converted or pamper to the feelings of those who like to immerse themselves in religious literature skilfully crafted to indulge their emotions. I am acutely aware that firm convictions are not built on 'warm fuzzies'. Real comfort and consolation come from a deeper perception of truth, and if anything I have written here is in some way conducive to that end, then the effort will have been worthwhile.

As always, I am much indebted to those whose constructive criticism has helped to refine the material in this book.

CEJ

November 2007

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Chapter 1

THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS

When Christ was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, he quoted two from the Old Testament. The first is ***to love God with your whole heart, your whole soul, with all your strength and all your mind, and the second is to love your neighbour as yourself.*** All other commandments, he said, are dependent on these. (*Mark 12:30-31*)

Love

There are two important usages of the word 'love' in the Scriptures: The first meaning is the pursuit of a person's good or happiness. This focuses on the well being of the person who is loved, and also implies that we consciously seek a harmonious relationship with them. In this sense the object of love can be anyone, including ourselves. The second denotes a strong liking or attachment, but here we are concerned essentially with our own well being rather than the welfare of the object. The two usages are different, but not incompatible: In a close relationship, the words, 'I love you', can convey both meanings at the same time. However, it is predominantly the former interpretation of 'love' that is intended in the commandments, as the latter is essentially involuntary.

Centering on God

- To ***love God with the whole heart***, it is first necessary to believe that He is the ultimate good for us and hold our relationship with Him as the greatest of treasures and highest of all our values. This is consistent with Christ's teaching that 'where your treasure is, your heart will be also.' It reasonably follows that all of our other values need to be in harmony with God, and that we should give priority to the universal and eternal over all short term, limited and more superficial considerations.
- Loving with the soul is less well defined, as it is not entirely clear how the 'soul' was understood in the Scriptures. However, the following view appears to be consistent: The soul might be regarded as the core of human life and sensitivity, encompassing the spiritual or non-material part of oneself, one's motives and moral nature. ***Loving God with the whole soul*** suggests seeking the deepest possible relationship with Him and bringing our will into harmony with His. It would mean that we allow His will to override ours whenever there is a conflict. By implication, we should be consciously aware of His presence at all times, tune in to Him as fully as we can and be open to His influence.

- To ***love God with all our strength***, is to seek harmony with Him and serve Him with all the power, resources, talents and freedom we have to the limits of our endurance. It is not sufficient if we use some of these in ways that are consistent with His interests and others in conflict with them.
- To ***love God with all our mind*** implies that we endeavour to know and understand Him and learn to think His way. We ought to pursue the truth in all things and make Him the fixed centre of our ideas and our reasoning processes.

It is clear from the pre-eminence of this commandment that our desire for consistency and harmony with God must be complete. It must dominate every aspect of our being and take the highest priority in all areas of life. It cannot be part-time or to a limited extent with reservations and divided loyalties contrary to His ideals. The purpose of the commandment is not to remove our freedom, but to create the kind of order at our core that leads to lasting freedom and productiveness. There is extensive scope within the boundaries that allows us to serve ourselves and other people, but we should never let the concerns of the world crowd out or override our relationship with God.

So how does one love God? Some of the indications in the Scriptures convey that we must avoid the worship of other deities, treat His name with respect, not 'make craven images of God', which in a broader interpretation is more likely to mean that we should think of Him as spiritual rather than material, and that we should not develop fixed ideas of a limited kind. We should set aside special time, such as the Sabbath, oriented towards His affairs. Loving God is also expressed in the way we relate to other people and the sense of responsibility we take for the rest of His creation that has been entrusted to us. We love Him by the integrity with which we live our lives, our devotion to truth, wisdom, justice and the avoidance of deliberate deception. We love God by learning to think His way and aspiring to His ideals, particularly as demonstrated by the life and teachings of Christ, his disciples and the earlier prophets. We express our love by working towards becoming the kinds of people He wants us to be: people who live by faith and trust Him despite the seemingly overwhelming problems that sometimes confront us; people who appreciate and try to cultivate humility, generosity and forgiveness rather than greed, perversion and over-indulgence. We use our lives for learning and doing good things that generate the kind of happiness that is also deeper, broader and longer lasting. We invite Him into our lives and spend time with Him.

Loving Our Neighbours

A person's 'neighbour' is commonly defined as anyone who could be affected by his behaviour. This practical view encompasses the extent of our basic responsibility in relation to other people, and is consistent with most legal usages of the term. According to established principles of justice we must carry out our lawful obligations to these 'neighbours' to the same standard as would be acceptable to us if we were in their position. For example, we

should not engage in noisy activity late at night when others nearby are trying to sleep, and we ought to work in a manner that does not endanger or unnecessarily inconvenience others. While this orientation is consistent with peaceful coexistence, it is basically a passive, superficial and minimal interpretation of the Second Great Commandment.

Christ, however, was more concerned with a deeper level. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (*Luke 10:29-37*), he indicated that being a true neighbour involves internal awareness and empathy. The parable implies that we ought to expand our consciousness and *become* neighbour at heart, that is, develop compassion beyond our narrow field of immediate concern, take an interest in those we encounter and then love them actively.

Perhaps the Second Great Commandment is the most frequently misquoted and often misunderstood, for the predominant way it is stated both on the pulpit and in moral discussions is 'love your neighbour', omitting one of the most important subtleties in the central guiding principle of all human relationships. It can reasonably be assumed that the original author included the words, 'as yourself', for a vital purpose, and judging by the effects of all the misguided forms of self-sacrifice that have pervaded thinking since the middle ages, the dangers of a convenient 'half truth' are again brought to light.

So what are the words 'as yourself' intended to convey? To assume that another person's less obvious needs and desires were the same as ours, would often be wrong, and could result in highly inappropriate actions. To avoid this we should endeavour to tune in to their reality so that we can be true neighbours at a deeper level. We need to extend our 'selves' and expand our awareness of their specific needs so that we can do what is really best for *them* in *their* position, and thereby love them most effectively. So the words 'as yourself' mean inclusively as part of your extended self, as if you were in their circumstances and with as much concern for their good as for your own.

Being 'neighbour' is also a matter of degree and real friendship is perhaps the closest and deepest form. Closeness places a person in a very privileged position where anything he does or fails to do could have a greater impact on the well being of the other. As people become 'closer', the potential rewards and risks increase, which makes love and responsibility even more vital.

The parable of 'the Good Samaritan' clearly implies that the obligation to *love our neighbours as ourselves* applies across all of our relationships, not only within our own religious, ethnic, organisational or kinship groups. Competitors, adversaries and even enemies can be our 'neighbours' to the extent that we become aware of what is important to them. In this respect, Christ's controversial teaching, 'love your enemies', is completely consistent with the second great commandment.

Loving Ourselves

In ordinary terms, loving ourselves does not imply endless self indulgence, narcissism and pampering, but learning to know ourselves, developing our abilities, taking care of our basic needs and avoiding gross abuses of our health, listening to the signals from our physical nature and working constructively with them, but not being completely ruled or enslaved by them. It includes nurturing our sensitivity, allowing ourselves to appreciate the beauty around us and generally enhancing the quality of our lives.

Unfortunately, the notion of 'loving oneself' often develops connotations of complete selfishness such that the opposite extreme of 'selfless love' becomes idealised. However, espousing a total disregard for our own welfare for the sake of others, suggests that we can aspire to even higher ideals than God has prescribed. This is self-deception. If God expected us to make sacrifices for no reward whatsoever, then we would be regarded as expendable and His love for us would be meaningless. While in many circumstances it is appropriate and honourable to put the deeper well being of others ahead of our own immediate superficial interests and postpone our reward, chronic self-neglect is counter productive and is as serious as failing to love one's neighbour. Even Christ who was totally committed to his mission also ate, drank, rested and enjoyed the company of people.

Compassion for others less fortunate than ourselves does not consist of the refusal to enjoy ourselves or appreciate the beauty around us. That is an insult to the creator of that beauty whether it be natural or of human origin. All parties lose: The creator's work is rendered meaningless, the receiver deprives himself of its enjoyment and there is still no improvement in anyone else's well-being. The message of love is to share what we can and thereby elevate the other person's quality of life wherever possible, not to pander to personal feelings of guilt.

We have a moral obligation to know and love ourselves – to seek what is really good for us. When we apply the same orientation to others we contribute to a better world. To love our neighbours *as ourselves*, we must adopt an inclusive frame of mind and give the same consideration to their happiness as to our own. In this way, the well being of everyone is increased, which is consistent with God's love for each of us.

A Matter of Priorities

Love presents the individual with decisions as to where his efforts should be focused and how his love should be put into practice. The order of the greatest two Commandments indicates that love of God takes priority over both the neighbour and the self, and this order of importance is necessary to expand our effectiveness in the latter areas. In almost every occupation, a higher loyalty to the sound practice of one's profession actually increases the ability to serve oneself and other people. The most effective and successful

way to care for a person is not necessarily to put them *first*. Loving God above all else actually works better in everyone's interests.

Whether we ought to put our neighbour ahead of ourselves in any given instance depends on the circumstances. Sometimes we must attend to our own welfare before that of others, not because we love them less, but so as not to diminish our ability to care for both. However, the overall emphasis should be similar.

The greatest two commandments are not devoid of self-interest, but capture its most enlightened form. They provide the most consequent, expedient and effective criteria for orienting ourselves in relation to the most important objective – everyone's lasting happiness, including our own.

The Ten Commandments and Other Rules

The original 'Ten Commandments' that were given to Moses by God still form the essential basis of social order and peaceful co-existence, and continue to apply to the extent that they are not in conflict with the greatest two commandments. For example, the rule 'Thou shalt not steal' enforces respect for private property and all the social benefits that it brings. However, it might not apply where a person is starving and does not have the means to purchase food from another who has it in abundance. To adhere rigidly to the law against stealing in such a situation, would be to place the value of his neighbour's property above his own life, which is inconsistent with the Second Great Commandment. Likewise, a person may kill an assailant in self-defence if necessary when under malicious attack that could cost him his life. Nonetheless, one never has an automatic licence to disregard the Ten Commandments or other important laws except as a last resort when all reasonable attempts to comply with them have been exhausted or they are clearly incompatible with the greatest two commandments.

The overriding principle in any system of rules is that no law is greater than the purpose it serves. The higher the law, the more general is its purpose, the wider its application, and the fewer the exceptions. It could be argued that the greatest two commandments are universal.

In most communities, the hierarchy of rules consists of laws, regulations and customs in decreasing levels of importance. The Ten Commandments can be regarded as being in the first category. As discussed earlier, situations can be encountered where some of the 'Ten Commandments' may be inapplicable. The person has a measure of discretion but carries the burden of demonstrating that it would have been wrong to comply in the given circumstances. At the level of 'regulations', the applicability becomes even more limited: The likelihood of exceptions expands even further, and the importance of individual judgement increases. When any are disregarded, the burden shifts increasingly towards the moral critic having to demonstrate that compliance was in fact necessary or desirable in that instance. At the level of customs and traditions there is very little authority and almost complete

individual consideration. It is also notable that as we move lower down any hierarchy of rules, there is an increasing possibility that rigid compliance without proper discernment may violate the spirit of a higher law.

Implications and Interpretations

Most of the Ten Commandments were originally stated in a very short cryptic form. Taken literally, they tend to cover only the most serious matters. A good example is the eighth: 'Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.' Certainly this would be one of the most damaging and serious forms of lying, but is that the limit of our obligations in relation to falsity? No. The teachings of Christ indicate that every deliberate violation of the truth in our communications is essentially evil. However, to hold that even the smallest lie is an equal violation of the law is unreasonable and conducive to exaggerated feelings of guilt in much less important matters. It is clear that some of these may warrant no more than a reprimand and certainly not eternal damnation. Thus although the Eighth Commandment is probably most completely expressed as 'You should not tell lies', and this is the spirit of the law supported by the New Testament (*Matt 5:37*), it is important to recognise that there can be varying degrees of non-compliance.

Likewise, the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill', is really concerned with the avoidance of anything that can lead to harming a person. In a similar way, 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', is the most extreme expression of a principle that addresses the healthy, safe and respectful conduct of intimate relationships, although this has at times been taken to excess with puritanical interpretations.

Overall, it is clear from the teachings of Christ that the 'spirit' of the Ten Commandments is much broader and deeper than the 'letter' of their simple form, although historically, this may well have been the most effective initial step in turning an unruly society progressively towards an appreciation of order without having unreasonable expectations at that stage of their development. However, the appropriate interpretation of any commandment must be governed by its real purpose in the context of the situation. One way of minimising the risk of misguided legalism or the incorrect application of a moral rule, is to ask ourselves in any doubtful instance whether we are honestly obeying the *greatest two commandments*. If we are, then there should be no reason for guilt.

As I Have Loved You

"A new commandment I give to you: Love one another as I have loved you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Greater love than this has no man, than that he lays down his life for his friends." (*John 15:12*)

Over the course of history, countless people have died for their beliefs, and it is true that if necessary a Christian should be prepared to do the same. That

is nothing unusual, for every soldier, police officer and many other professionals might have to die in the line of duty under special circumstances. However, that kind of death is not the destiny we must actively seek. In the context of this new commandment, the Father did not die for the Son, so physical death was not the intended interpretation of 'laying down one's life'. It is not the way our physical lives end that is the issue, but the way we choose to live. Although Christ did die on the cross and surrendering his physical life in that way at the early age of 33 was part of his special mission, laying down his life began much earlier and involved far more.

Christ set his own life and his relationship with his disciples as an example. He was inclusive and treated even the least person in society, including the outcasts, as special. He taught them about the important things in life, healed them, forgave them their failings, spent time with them and was gentle and patient. He never refused to help just because the victim might have brought his condition onto himself. He was accepting of people without compromising the standards he taught and although he was often critical of behaviour, he did not condemn the person. He understood their deeper needs and cared about their sensitivities. He served them rather than expecting to be served, and no service was considered too low or demeaning.

Christ was concerned with every level of existence from the innermost and deepest to the most universal and eternal. As individuals, our lives are usually dominated by comparatively superficial immediate concerns, with an awareness that is severely restricted in time, place and people. The 'life' that we cherish is a very narrow and limited one that tends to be focused on the survival and comfort of a very small, temporary and exclusive concept of our 'selves'. Christ wanted us to expand the notion of who we are to include others. It is for good reason that He taught us to pray to "*Our Father*", with emphasis on the plural rather than the singular, and warned us that those who want to save their 'lives' will lose them, but who loses his life for his sake shall have it. He came so that we could 'have life in abundance'. To achieve this we have to give up our preoccupation with our tiny personal 'territory' and think more in terms of 'us'. As this grows to include the universal and eternal, we find our lives again, far better and richer. Like the seed that is to become a tree, it is the attachment to the small, restricted, self-contained life that must 'die' to enable the expanded life to start growing and develop (*John 12:24*).

This 'new' commandment takes its place alongside the older ones and is still subject to the greatest two. Where it differs is that it focuses on the 'how' rather than the 'what'. Christ did not philosophise from a remote and comfortable position. He put the commandments into practice in his own life in their proper order and set an example for his disciples to follow. Of primary importance to him was always his Father's will, and within that orientation he dedicated his life to his mission of serving people and rescuing humanity from the slavery of evil.

Chapter 2

ENDURANCE

An Adventuring Sailor

Imagine that far beyond the shores of Civilisation in a remote part of the deep ocean there are two islands. One, called Paradise, has safe harbours and an idyllic natural beauty. To preserve the environment, commercial tourism has been discouraged and in keeping with this objective, the island's only radio station is low powered and the signal fades rapidly with increasing distance from its shores. Nevertheless, genuine seafaring adventurers are respected and treated well. The other island, called Hades, is very inhospitable, surrounded by jagged rocks and poor holding ground. Its inhabitants continue to practice piracy like their ancestors and sometimes use a more powerful radio transmitter that mimics Paradise Radio to lure ships to their shores so that the wrecks can be plundered. For political reasons, its existence is not officially recognised, its position is not shown on the authorised marine charts, and unofficial maps give conflicting information as to its whereabouts.

Think of being on this ocean in a sailing yacht headed for Paradise. At sea the more comfortable course is with the wind. The movement of the ship can be gentle even when the wind is strong. The more unpleasant passages entail working against the forces of nature, and in rough weather the motion can be violent, dangerous, very tiring and a real exercise in endurance. We prefer to find fair winds over safe waters, but there are no reliable forecasts for more remote areas.

Many of us set forth on the adventure of a lifetime relatively unprepared, often unsure of our own skills and the seaworthiness of our ship, not knowing with certainty which map to trust and whom to listen to. Complacency, impatience, gullibility and conflicting priorities can make us choose the wrong time to set sail, and even with the greatest diligence, we can still be blown hundreds of miles off course by a storm.

We encounter very bad weather that continues for days and, except for a simple radio receiver, our electronic navigation aids are disabled. As the waves moderate we re-establish our position as accurately as possible with the more primitive equipment that has survived the recent turmoil and find ourselves in unfamiliar waters. We restore some order and set course for Paradise again, but we have a serious predicament: We do not know the whereabouts of that other hazardous island.

The direction of the wind can change the nature of the situation. For example, the new course to Paradise might require beating against the wind all the way. We are ready to do this, for the reward would be worth it, but the problem is that we could still get wrecked if those dangerous uncharted rocks lay on our track. Provided we spotted the hazard in time, the retreat would be simple, but it is a lot more difficult to see ahead in the dark on a pitching yacht with

the wind and spray blowing in your face. On the other hand, if Paradise is down-wind, we could reach it in comparative comfort, but our pleasant ride could just as easily end in tragedy if Hades lies nearer to us in the same direction. Even if we saw the rocks before we were wrecked, we could face a desperate struggle to turn our ship against the wind and claw our way back to safety.

We are fatigued and disinclined to pay much attention to navigation and keeping watch. It is very tempting to steer blindly towards the radio signal assuming it to come from Paradise, but this might be a big mistake. The wise sailor would stop and take the opportunity to rest. If the wind is against him, he waits for a while in the hope that it will turn in his favour. He does not fight against the elements unless he must. But even with the wind behind him he exercises great caution to lessen his chances of a critical situation developing.

Suffering is like the endurance of sailing against the wind. Without wisdom, caution and enlightenment, it is not a reliable course to Paradise. Sometimes sailing against the wind is pointless or even detrimental and at other times it is the only way to succeed. It can become necessary and meaningful when we find ourselves close to a rocky shore, or if it is the only way to Paradise.

Some Philosophical Questions

A useful definition of suffering is to endure what we would prefer not to. In practical terms it is a continuum ranging from mild discomfort to intolerable agony that can be voluntary or imposed by forces beyond our control. Its existence has given rise to several philosophical questions such as: Why should good people have to suffer? What have they done to deserve it? Why should some people have easier lives than others?

I believe these are the wrong questions for they assume that suffering is necessarily a form of punishment, and the connotations of the word 'deserve' suggest that retribution is the primary motive for its existence. However, the paramount law of the universe is love, and even justice must be guided by this overriding principle, namely the good of all concerned, including the perpetrator of crime. The notion of suffering as a form of punishment is misplaced partly because the concept of punishment is dominated by the mentality of retribution. We tend to forget that the reason why breaking the law must have enforceable consequences is that crime must be controlled, harmful character needs to be reformed and victims should be compensated. All of these motives involve love, but 'evening the score' is only revenge, and serves no real purpose in improving anything.

People who harbour simplistic notions of causality often jump to the conclusion that the victim must somehow have brought their suffering onto themselves, but this is true only in a proportion of cases. The teachings of Christ indicate that the reasons often lie outside their own behaviour, even in some deeper purpose known only to the Almighty (*John 9:1-3*). Overall, the broader meaning of involuntary suffering can never be understood while the

concepts of 'deserving' and punishment cloud the picture, for they are fixated on accounting for the present rather than developing the future. The most important thing about enforced suffering is that with a positive attitude it can nearly always be treated as an opportunity to learn and grow in ways that might not have been possible otherwise. Where suffering is voluntary, of course, personal goodness, deserving and fairness are never an issue.

Why Should We Have To Suffer At All?

There are many theories. The Hindus believe in reincarnation, where a person who lives a good life will be reborn into a higher caste and an evildoer into a lower caste. To the Jews, suffering is a consequence of sin. To the Buddhists, it is the consequence of craving. Muslims may regard it simply as the will of Allah and seek no further explanation. Some Christian theologians offer esoteric explanations such as 'suffering purifies the soul'. Those with more secular views may see it as a result of chance or choice – self inflicted or the product of circumstances beyond one's control. There is possibly an element of truth in all of them.

According to the Scriptural legend, the original plan was for human beings to develop happily towards eternal life. Originally, we were not intended to be 'lost on the ocean' or to 'have to sail endlessly against the wind'. It is we who were deceived by the rumours, asserted our freedom and insisted on 'sailing off ill-prepared and ignorant of geography', in search of the ultimate experience. It is we who chose to learn the hard way and inflicted the same on our descendants.

This may well be symbolic of the historical origin of suffering, but for a deeper understanding, I prefer to anchor on the concepts of freedom, sensitivity and knowledge, where suffering is one of the possible outcomes of their existence, limitations and interaction.

- The concept of moral responsibility, the foundations of democracy and the fabric of the legal system all depend on the presumption of freedom, and our own experience suggests that we do have choices and make decisions. Thus it seems reasonable to assume that freedom exists. Freedom has no meaning unless we can assert it whenever we wish.
- Sensitivity is also an inherent feature of human nature, and it is arguable that in its absence, there could be no such thing as happiness or meaning, and of course, unpleasant experiences such as suffering could not exist either. Many of our desires, much of our human potential and our spirit of adventure are born largely from the union of freedom and sensitivity.
- A third factor enters the picture at this point, namely knowledge. Again, a deep philosophical analysis is unimportant, but it is elementary that for any individual their knowledge is limited. Some degree of ignorance is not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Without ignorance we could never experience the delights of a pleasant surprise or enjoy the process of discovery. Adventure would have no meaning. We could never indulge in a mystery novel or fully enjoy a joke for we would already know the punch line. Our development process from ignorance to knowledge, namely

learning, can be tremendously enjoyable in itself. Ignorance, however, is very dangerous where it leads to unwelcome irreversible changes or jeopardises life itself.

When we mix a measure of freedom, sensitivity and limited knowledge there is an ever present possibility that we may end up having to endure unpleasant experiences.

Regardless of the natural or historical explanation, if we consider suffering only in terms of material and social values, then the inescapable reality is that its distribution seems unfair. Many are faced with a struggle from the start while others are born with undeniable advantages. Some have to work against greater adversities just to survive. The same applies to making progress: Given our starting point and chosen objective, it takes what it takes whether we like the process or not, and there is no guarantee that the way to our goal will not be harder than for someone else.

In terms of character building and deeper spiritual values, it is arguable that people are on a much more equal footing. The principle that 'from him to whom much is given, much is expected', suggests that *relative* improvement is the more important criterion of success, at least from the eternal perspective. Furthermore, the progress actually made is not always the tangible kind consciously being sought. Even where a person's suffering accomplishes no more than maintenance in the material or social sense, it can be making a significant contribution to progress at a deeper level provided this is not negated by resentment and bitterness.

Voluntary Suffering as an Investment

Why would we voluntarily endure something unpleasant? It could be that we fear the alternative even more. Perhaps the expected gain outweighs the price. Or possibly we believe it will permanently elevate us to a new level of existence. The first two reasons are obvious and self-explanatory, so we shall focus only on the third.

What constitutes comfort versus suffering is influenced by many factors including personal sensitivity, fitness and values. It varies widely between people and even within the same person in different circumstances. However, it is probably valid to say that human beings generally prefer to operate within their individual comfort zones in any given area of their lives, whether occupational, social, intellectual, recreational or other.

One's comfort zone in a particular area may be at any of three levels:

1. At the lowest level, comfort entails a continuous decline until the person has used up all of their limited resources. Ensuring any level of sustainability is an unwelcome effort.
2. At the next level, comfort is in a sustainable state of equilibrium, but any movement to a position of greater comfort involves suffering.

3. The most productive level is where the person thrives on the challenge and process of development and feels at ease with change. They no longer have to suffer to improve themselves for this dynamic state is their sustainable comfort zone. This level also has dangers, particularly when it is out of control, but these problems are beyond the scope of our discussion.

To a limited extent, most people can choose the amount and type of suffering they take on. The useful varieties are those undertaken pro-actively to move us to a better quality of life where the prospect of further suffering is greatly diminished. Often a little suffering of the right kind in the beginning, like learning to sail to windward more skilfully, increases our deeper abilities and fitness, and makes the rest of the process more pleasant. In this way the suffering can be a profitable investment.

However, the most valuable form of suffering is likely to be the kind that moves us from a lower comfort zone to a higher level. For example, many students dislike studying, find their courses an uphill battle and would like to get them out of the way. Sometimes the underlying cause is a lack of skill in comprehension, reasoning and writing. Developing these might involve hard work, but once a desirable standard is achieved, a new comfort zone is established whereby further learning and intellectual improvement are no longer a chore, but may even become an endless source of pleasure.

Does this mean that voluntary suffering is a virtue? It can be, but only in pursuit of a worthwhile goal, when the total benefit outweighs the cost and there is no better way. Only a foolish person battles for long periods unless it is necessary. It is only where there is sound reason to believe that unpleasant processes are essential for good outcomes that voluntary suffering can be justified.

Conclusion

Given the present realities of the human condition in relation to our yearnings, the endurance of suffering is both largely inevitable and potentially useful. The benefits of involuntary suffering depend to a great extent on the person's willingness to look beyond the explanations for its existence that are rooted in the past and use it as an opportunity for personal growth. In contrast, the value of voluntary suffering relates more to the wisdom and rationality with which it is undertaken.

Chapter 3

LIFE, DEATH AND CONTINUITY

Some Christian denominations teach that a person is spiritually immortal, while others assert that when he dies he completely ceases to exist but will be 'resurrected on the last day'. Nearly every variation between these extremes is taught by one or other group that professes to be Christian. My purpose is to examine some of the evidence from the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, regarding the meaning of death and the question of what happens immediately after the physical death of a person. The beliefs of the non-Christian religions are beyond the scope of this discussion, but there is no suggestion that they should be dismissed, for they can offer solutions to some of the riddles not addressed within the Christian framework.

The Concept of Death

In the Scriptures, 'death' clearly has multiple meanings. First there is the notion of physical death where the tangible body ceases to function or respond to stimuli. The decay process sets in, eventually returning it to basic raw materials that are recycled by nature on a continuous basis. The occurrence of this kind of death is beyond rational dispute. However, the word 'death' is also used in the non-physical sense as seen in the following examples:

- In the parable of the invited guests (*Luke 9:60*), Christ's response to those who gave excuses why they were not ready to come was, '*Let the dead bury their own dead.*' Obviously those responsible for conducting the burial could only be dead in a non-physical way.
- Saint Paul taught the early Christian community that they must be '*dead to sin and alive in Christ*' (*Rom 6:2*), using the word 'dead' in the sense of detachment and separation.
- In the parable of the Prodigal Son (*Luke 15:24*), the father celebrated that his returning son '*was dead and has come back to life; was lost and is found.*' Again, 'death' must mean alienation or separation, for the prodigal son was never physically dead.

Resurrection

The argument that 'when a person dies he ceases to exist', has no biblical foundation. This follows from the promise of the '*resurrection* on the last day'. If the person completely ceased to exist, then it could be argued that the resurrection would necessarily have to be a *re-creation*. That is not what the Scriptures teach.

- When the daughter of Jairus died, Jesus referred to her state as sleep (*Mark 5:39*). The sleeping person does not cease to exist, and the condition of sleep is often very rich in experiences in the form of dreams. What appears to be true of sleep is that the person's consciousness is largely cut off from the external realities.
- An interesting question arises regarding the death of Christ. Did he also cease to exist during the interval between his death and resurrection? The evidence is strongly to the contrary, for in one discourse with the Pharisees he states, '*Destroy this temple and in three days I will build it up again*' (*John 2:19-21*). The writer of the gospel makes it clear that Jesus was referring to the temple of his own body. If Christ ceased to exist upon his death, he could not rebuild anything.
- When Christ was discussing the resurrection in the gospel according to Luke, he quoted from the Old Testament, "*I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob*". He continued with the explanation that God is not the God of the dead but of the living "...for to Him all men are alive." (*Luke 20:38*). This again would be little more than a meaningless play on words if in fact they had ceased to exist.

Some theorise that at the resurrection the original materials of the body would simply be re-united. However this is implausible. Despite the continuity of the person's basic identity from birth to (physical) death, the cells of the body are continuously reproducing, being broken down and eliminated, so that by the time the average body finally dies it is made up of very different materials. The question then arises: Which materials would be reunited to form the resurrected body, and would that be of any importance?

Altogether, the evidence suggests that if there is to be a resurrection rather than a re-creation, there must be some form of continuity of identity and it could not be a physical one. Reason also supports the need for continuity if eternal reward or punishment is to have any meaning: It would seem rather absurd to re-create someone solely for the purpose of punishing him for the evil he did before he ceased to exist!

Immortality

The teaching that a person has an 'immortal soul' is consistent with the usage of the word 'soul' in the New Testament. It refers to that indestructible 'continuity' which endures through to the resurrection. Christ recognised the distinction between body and soul when he said, '*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul*' (*Matt 10:28*). Once again, if the entire person ceased to exist when the body is killed such a statement would be irrational, and the clear implications are that there is a continuity of personal existence after physical death. Saint Paul also distinguishes between 'spirit, soul and body', suggesting that the fate of the body is not necessarily the immediate destiny of the person.

Life and Death

To examine the concept of death meaningfully, it is necessary to consider the use of the word 'life', as the terms are complementary. Physical life is clearly a matter of degree, for the body may be partially paralysed or the senses impaired. The same argument could be applied within the mental, emotional and spiritual contexts. From this perspective, death must also be a matter of kind and degree, and this is consistent with the parable of the Good Samaritan where the robbers are said to have left the victim 'half dead' (*Luke 10:30*).

What all forms of death appear to have in common is a degree of paralysis, powerlessness and insensitivity. The quote that *'the dead know nothing'* (*Eccl 9:5*) is particularly plausible in terms of kind and degree. For example, the emotionally dead know nothing emotional. In the spiritual sense, death can be seen as separation from God who is ultimately the source of all truth and life. The Biblical statement that *'the wages of sin is death'* (*Rom 6:23*), harmonises with this reasoning, for sin causes alienation that can lead to separation from the one we offend.

After Physical Death

Much debate has taken place over what happens to a person when he dies physically, and interpretations of the Scriptures vary. If we accept that the person does not simply cease to exist, then at one extreme we find the belief that the person is 'at rest', experiencing nothing, or he could be in some other state. If the biblical analogy between sleep and death is accepted, then the position of 'experiencing nothing' would be hard to defend. However, the teaching that the dead go to some loosely defined 'heaven' or 'hell' has some biblical support. In the parable of *The Rich Man and Lazarus* (*Luke 16:20*), both die and the latter is taken to 'the bosom of Abraham', clearly a place of comfort while the rich man is taken to a place of torment. However, it is noteworthy that the parable does not say Lazarus was taken into the presence of God, for the communication that takes place in the story is only between the rich man and Abraham. The context is also set prior to the death and resurrection of Christ and certainly well before His second coming on 'the last day', for the rich man wants to warn his brothers who are still living. Thus it was clearly not referring to the final resurrection but to the intervening period.

One may be accused of taking the words of the parable too literally in preference to a more symbolic interpretation, but I find it significant that Christ chose such a parable. Either it was unintentionally misleading as to what happens immediately after physical death, which is unlikely with Christ, or he was clarifying something that had not been properly understood.

Another debate focuses on the words of Christ to the 'good thief' as they were dying on the cross: *'I say to you this day you will be with me in paradise'* (*Luke*

23:43). Should it be read as 'I say to you, this day you will be with me in paradise' [very soon] or 'I say to you this day, you will be with me in paradise' [at some future time]. Note the different interpretations according to the placement of the coma. The main argument offered in support of the latter interpretation is that evidently Christ did not go to paradise that day, for he said to Mary Magdalene just after his resurrection, *'Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.'* Nevertheless this argument is flawed as it assumes that paradise is necessarily in the full presence of God. The expression 'this day' would also be logically redundant and would appear to be the only place in the Gospels where that style of expression was used. The former interpretation, on the other hand, is much more direct and consistent with other evidence.

Christ's Promise

According to the New Testament, Christ is the renewed link to the only real source of truth and life. He said, *'I am the way, the truth and the life'* (John 14:6), *'I am the bread of life'* (John 6:35), *'I have come that they may have life and have it in abundance.'* Christ assured his followers that *'Who lives and believes in me will never die'* (John 11:25), and Saint Paul encouraged the early Christians to live in Jesus Christ. Those who died physically but had followed this teaching should therefore still have life in another sense. Although it is sometimes argued that before the second coming of Christ, the word *never* cannot be taken literally, for obviously everyone does die, if one accepts that Christ did not mislead his disciples, 'never' should mean *never*. The apparent inconsistency disappears immediately when physical death is not taken to imply that the person has completely ceased to exist in any form.

The anecdotal evidence of 'near death experiences' tends to support the notion of the continuity of personal existence, and those who have had these experiences almost invariably lose their fear of (physical) death and live better lives as a result. Some even remark that this earthly existence is a mere shadow of the reality they had experienced. Naturally, it is impossible to prove that these people were actually dead, as science recognises death only in final physically irreversible terms, and similar experiences can also be induced with drugs and other means without the usual signs of physical death.

Out-of-body experiences are, however, much harder to explain away, particularly when the person reports having seen provable events during his 'out of body' state that would have been impossible to see had he been 'within' his body at the time. This further supports the duality of human nature and may contribute to a deeper insight into life and death than was common in Old Testament times.

The Last Day

What, then, is the significance of the physical resurrection on the 'last day'? We have no clear indication of what it is like to be dead, but If sleep is a

suitable analogy then we might be happy but not at our fullest potential. In such a state we cannot control material things or build as a community. For those who were faithful to God's word, perhaps the time between physical death and the promised resurrection may be like a worker deprived of his tools but endowed with comforts, which is consistent with the parable of *The Rich Man and Lazarus*. The Scriptures foretell that on the 'last day' there will be great changes. Some of these are conveyed only in very general terms, as they would probably have been harder to describe to the people of the time than a picture of life in the twenty-first century. The indications are that we would 'rise again' and presumably our ability to interact with people and things would be restored, and we would be judged according to the way we had lived. Beyond that, little has been revealed.

Philosophy and Science

While all the major religions teach continuity of life after death in some form, the majority of philosophers and many scientists are more sceptical. By scientific criteria, the existence of life after death remains unproven, and those who are inclined to place all their confidence in evidence-based reasoning often dismiss the possibility. To them, religion is prone to superstition and tends to stubbornly retain dogmas that appear at odds with confirmed observation. Historically, this view is partly justified, and explains much of the decline of religion and the growing supremacy of science in the modern world. However, despite its remarkable contributions to society, science also has a number of serious limitations. Among these -

- It is necessarily reliant on observation, which by its nature can only take place in the past or present. The future is not observable and all scientific predictions are mere projections based on what is already known.
- It is also curtailed by our current ability to observe, namely the limitations of the human senses and existing technology.

The scientific approach has demonstrated its superiority in explaining much of what '*is*' and '*has been*', but appears largely powerless to reveal what '*can be*', '*will be*', or indeed, '*should be*'. These continue to lie more in the province of speculation and religion. Thus, science and religion remain complementary, and trespass in each other's domain at the risk of some embarrassment.

Nevertheless, hard evidence regarding the continuity of personal life is scarce and the notion of life after death remains mostly a question of faith and hope. Some dismiss the concept as merely wishful thinking, but the existence of the wish is not evidence against the possibility. With anything related to the future, it pays to keep an open mind. As history has repeatedly demonstrated, we can be confident that possibilities exist far beyond our imagination.

Chapter 4

WHO CAN BE SAVED?

Over the past decade, a major part of my work at the university has been devoted to assisting higher degree research students towards their doctorates. The outward objective of their three-year program is to make a substantial original contribution to some field of knowledge. However, the more significant underlying aim is to develop their abilities to think like scientists and become trustworthy competent researchers in depth through all phases of the research process.

Naturally, every researcher would like to make some revolutionary discovery or uncover evidence that proves an important theory, but the reality is that while some of their hypotheses will be supported, others will be refuted by substantial evidence to the contrary and many of them will remain unproven. Do the latter situations constitute failure? No. Even the famous inventor, Thomas Edison, when asked how he felt about a seemingly endless series of unsuccessful experiments, took the positive view that he had discovered several thousand things that *wouldn't* work, and was therefore much further along the path to making sustainable light from electricity. Every experiment was methodically conducted and recorded, and something new had been learnt with each attempt. The eventual outcome of his persistence is now history, but the message to research students is that the matter of paramount importance is not whether their theories turn out to be correct or mistaken but whether they have attained the necessary skills to do credible competent research.

So what does this have to do with religion?

Islam, Judaism and Christianity each claim to be the only means to salvation and some of their internal denominations make even more bold and exclusive assertions. While they have argued vehemently throughout history and often oppressed, persecuted and terrorised one another over their disagreements, God has paradoxically remained apparently silent and allowed this state of affairs to continue without stepping in and showering the world with conclusive evidence that would presumably lay the problem to rest for once and for all, and everyone would convert to the 'real truth' in much the same way as they now believe that the earth is round. To this day, every religion remains only a theory without conclusive universally convincing evidence. Each is a *belief system*, not a proven entity.

Perhaps the riddle of which one holds the truth is not even the crucial issue. Could it be that the real objective of the Almighty at this stage is to develop our ability to live by faith, that is, the willingness to believe in and pursue something beyond the obvious evidence of our senses, engage in an honest personal search for truth and learn the skills and habits of love? From this viewpoint, the absence of proof begins to make more sense. Perhaps

qualifying for the Kingdom of Heaven may be like the research degree – not awarded on whether the theory was correct, but on the kind of person we have become. If this is indeed the case, then the absence of conclusive proof is not a hindrance but rather a necessity, for the value of faith cannot be learnt in an environment of certainty any more than true research skills can be mastered by working on what has already been established.

However plausible this perspective may be, one still needs to explain the conflicting claims of the various religions that unless one accepts their path, one is doomed. My first response is that such assertions are part of their individual *theories* and fortunately for the remaining majority, none of them is empowered to make the final judgement. Secondly, religions overlap to a considerable degree and very few people fully understand let alone perfectly practice their own religion. Thirdly, the interpretation of scripture is an on-going study in *every* religion and never a closed issue.

I cannot speak with any authority for Islam or Judaism, but a few of the teachings of Christ may be worth discussing:

“Who believes and is baptised will be saved and who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). “Unless a person is born again of water and the Holy Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom Of Heaven” (John 3:5)

- First, being ‘baptised’ is the establishment of a personal relationship with God rather than a certificate of denominational membership.
- Second, the significance of baptism is the desire to be ‘washed’ of whatever makes us unfit for the presence of God and signifies a desire to turn our lives around and seek what is more inclusive of others, deeper and longer lasting rather than only immediate, superficial, totally self-indulgent values.
- Thirdly, to be born again of the Holy Spirit suggests that we voluntarily accept the influence of God in our lives.
- Finally, the warning, “who does not believe will be condemned” does not precisely specify the beliefs. The overwhelming evidence from the teachings of Christ is that God does not condemn on the basis of dogmatic technicalities but on the way people choose to live, suggesting that the most crucial belief is to turn away from evil and make a fresh start. This is embedded in all the major religions.

Interpreted this way, it would seem that ‘baptism’ would be no less than a logical necessity for unity with God and the inheritance of eternal life. However, it is arguable that many Muslims, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus also do this in *fact* through their own conscientious pursuit of truth while for many ‘Christians’ their formal baptism was really no more than an empty ritual never supported by an appropriate way of life.

“No-one can come to the Father except by me” (John 14:6)

- Although it is basic Christian teaching that Christ was the person who reopened the doors to the Kingdom of God and without his sacrifice no

one would be able to enter, the Bible does not say that only Christians can enter.

*“Come blessed of my Father, for when I was hungry you gave me to eat.
Depart from me ...for when I was [in need] you never [took care of me].
As long as you did it to one of these the least of my brethren, you did it to me.”
(Matt 25:34-46)*

- Here Christ was referring to the final judgement, and specified the ultimate criteria for eternal life with God. It is clearly implicit that *anyone* who acts these ways qualifies for the prescribed outcome regardless of his or her religion. There can be little doubt regarding one highly relevant requirement, and that is our willingness to learn to love beyond our immediate superficial selves. In relation to this, no person whatever their beliefs has any excuse, for even the most committed atheist is capable of sensitivity, compassion and the elementary ability to discern what is good or harmful.

One more question begs for consideration: Could people who are seen as perverts, mass murderers and suicidal terrorists qualify for the Kingdom of Heaven? Convictions vary according to which side is responding, but the truth is that we do not know and it will not be our decision. Naturally, society must protect itself from such people, but that is an entirely separate issue from personal salvation. Several other cases, such as the insane and people who die in their infancy, also fall into the unknown category. Perhaps they get another opportunity?

Like entry into a professional research career, salvation must have its criteria, but eternal life is unlikely to be the automatic or exclusive privilege of a particular religious group. It is almost certain that it will be based on deeper personal realities rather than the unproven but incidental correctness of dogma. By analogy, the conscientious sailor who believes that the earth is flat is more likely to succeed in his adventure than the negligent one who thinks he knows geography better. Of course, like competing theories confronting a researcher, it is almost inevitable that some formal religion will eventually emerge as more accurate than the others, but that will probably not be the crucial issue in determining who will be saved.

Beyond salvation, it is entirely possible that each person's role in the Kingdom of God could be influenced by every aspect of their lives, including the specific nature of their beliefs. Every difference could make a difference. To use a more familiar analogy, a person may be rescued from unemployment and offered secure work, but their exact role in the organisation would depend on where they can best contribute, and the prior pathway of their development is naturally relevant. In the eternal context, our religion can have a major influence, and perhaps Muslims, Jews, Christians and people of other faiths who are judged worthy to enter the Kingdom may be destined for different roles and relationships according to the way their characters have been shaped. However, in view of our vague ideas and limited evidence, strong predictions are somewhat premature.