



*clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half  
happened to be going down the same road, and who  
he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Jew  
the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.  
as he traveled, came where the man was, and*

GOD'S ALTERNATIVE  
to LEGALISM AND MORALISM

DELIGHTING  
in the LAW of the LORD

JERRAM BARRS



30  
*Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers a beggar  
clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half  
happened to be going down the same road, and who  
he passed by on the other side. 32 So too, a Jew  
the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.  
as he traveled, came where the man was, and*



“In simple, eloquent, and compelling prose, Jerram Barrs has given us a gripping account of how God’s law, understood through the grace released in Jesus Christ, is the best guide we could find. Barrs shows us the biblical path to a sane and balanced worldview, avoiding the pitfalls of utopian theocracy, libertarian naïveté, and cultural indifference. More than a guide, this book is an invitation to see God as our only comfort in life and in death. *Delighting in the Law of the Lord* is simply delightful!”

**William Edgar**, Professor of Apologetics, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia

“We live in morally confusing times—confusing for the culture, confusing for the church. We’ve lost the compass, and, truth be told, when it comes to personal or societal issues, most of us Christians simply don’t think of the law of God as providing much guidance. ‘Think again!’ says Jerram Barrs. In his winsome across-the-kitchen-table style, Barrs explains why we need to retrieve afresh one of God’s greatest gifts. Churches will love this resource!”

**Nicholas Perrin**, Dean, Wheaton College Graduate School

“Jerram characteristically begins with a relevant piece of cultural analysis, honed from his decades of outreach to unbelievers, in which he traces the declension in Western culture from deism to postmodernism. But God has not delivered his people from the hopelessness of secularism and relativism to have them render the joyless obedience of moralism and legalism. Jerram expounds the true nature and purpose of God’s law from the Psalms, which extol God’s law in light of the Bible story of creation and redemption, and he draws primarily on the Gospels for stories to illustrate how this perspective on God’s law works out in practice. All will find this book challenging and helpful, but I recommend it especially to those engaged in communication of the truth that is in Jesus, particularly preachers, Bible study groups, parents, and Christian schools.”

**David Clyde Jones**, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Ethics, Covenant Theological Seminary; author, *Biblical Christian Ethics*

“Equally committed to the graciousness of God, the goodness of his law, and the calling of human beings to embody God’s moral character in all that we do, Jerram Barrs gently but decisively charts a course that falls into neither the ditch of meaningless moral relativism nor the choking grip of Christian legalism. He convincingly shows the biblical importance of the law as an essential guide to Christian discipleship, service, and happiness, both personally and within the larger realities of the church and society. Immersed in Scripture, theologically sound, and pastorally driven, Barrs writes from a lifetime of ministry that is both insightful and pastorally engaging. This catechesis of the way of the Lord should be in every ministry toolbox and is an absolute must-read by every Christian who wants to find greater integrity of life and deeper relationship with Christ, our fellow human beings, and God’s good creation.”

**Michael D. Williams**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary

*Delighting in the Law of the Lord: God's Alternative to Legalism and Moralism*

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# THE GOOD LIFE (1)

## Do We Need God's Laws Today?

How do you think about the law of God? Many of God's commandments were written down around thirty-five hundred years ago during the life of Moses; others come from the time of Jesus and his apostles, almost two thousand years ago. Do you sometimes think, "I personally don't need laws written thousands of years ago to direct my life; I am quite capable of reflecting on the challenges I face each day and making up my own mind about what is right for me"? Or do you perhaps assume that the culture in which we live today knows better about how we should live than people from such distant times and different cultures? After all, we might reason, our scientific knowledge has advanced so much in terms of our understanding of the individual and society that it is no longer necessary for us to obey a moral code written in a time of comparative ignorance about human life.

In this first chapter, my plan is to begin to challenge such views. Our first challenge will be to set before us a brief passage from one of the psalms of David, for in this psalm we see David setting out his passionate belief that he needs God to teach him through God's laws how he, David, ought to live. I suggest that the reader consider making these words of David a personal prayer, both for the reading of this book and, more importantly, for daily life.

## 12 DELIGHTING IN THE LAW OF THE LORD

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all the day long.

Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

For your name's sake, O LORD,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great.<sup>1</sup>

There are many beautiful things in this excerpt from Psalm 25. A repeated refrain is David's longing to be taught by "the LORD." Notice how, in the above text and in your Bible, capital letters are used for the name "LORD" to remind us that David is using God's personal name, *Yahweh*, the name that refers to God's everlasting faithfulness to his promises. David knows that he needs "the LORD" to show him how to live, for he understands that he is a sinner and that, therefore, he cannot be trusted to know what is right; so he humbles himself to ask the Lord to teach him. The Word of God teaches us that humility before the Lord is essential for each one of us as we come to reflect on how we are to live today, and tomorrow, and every other day of life in this world. Do I trust myself? Do I think I am wise enough to know how I should live? Or am I prepared to humble myself and ask my heavenly Father to teach me?

Notice, too, how David describes what he wants to learn about the right way to live: the right way to live is the way of the Lord. David

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<sup>1</sup>Psalm 25:4–11.

desires to understand the paths in which the Lord walks, for David knows that there is no one else in the universe whose life is fully characterized by moral goodness. No one, except the Lord himself, lives the truly good life. David wants to be like God, to follow in the steps of love, mercy, and faithfulness that describe the way the Lord lives.

A third point to note here is that as soon as David reflects on the character of God, he cannot help but think about his own failure to be like God, his inability to walk steadfastly in the ways of the Lord. Because he realizes this inability and failure, David confesses his guilt. The more clearly he thinks about the character and pattern of the life of the Lord, the greater David's sin seems to him. For us today, just as with David, any careful study of the law of God is going to have this uncomfortable element of revealing our sin and humbling us. The more we reflect on the ways of the Lord, the more our sins are exposed. So be prepared to see yourself in new and discomfiting ways!

We should also observe that the aspects of God's character that David focuses on here are the love and gracious mercy of God, for these are central to any meditation on the ways of the Lord. As David says, "All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness" toward us. Another way to express this is to think about the great commandments as Jesus summarizes them for us: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets."<sup>2</sup>

Just as with us, so it is with the Lord. The summary of all the law for us, of all the teaching of God's Word, is that we are to love God and our neighbor. The reason for this is that all the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness. He desires that we be like him. David desires that he be like the Lord; he desires that all his thoughts, words, and actions be filled with steadfast love and faithfulness. The apostle Paul expresses the same idea this way: "Love is the fulfilling of the law."<sup>3</sup>

Do we agree with David's prayer? Do we believe that we need to humble ourselves before God and to ask him to teach us the way he

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<sup>2</sup>Matthew 22:37–40.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 13:10.

walks, that we ought to desire to know God's law so well that we will be convicted of our sins and led to confession? Before we try to answer these questions, perhaps it would be helpful for us to think about just why we might be tempted to believe that we know better as to how we should live than the laws in the Bible do, why we might feel that our culture today possesses greater knowledge of human behavior than the writers of God's Word could possibly have had. To understand our own reactions, we need to think about our cultural setting. This is necessary, for all of us are deeply shaped by the society in which we live. Hear Paul's words:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers [and sisters], by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.<sup>4</sup>

If we desire to understand what God's good and acceptable and perfect will is for us, that is, his law, then we first need to reflect on the culture in which we live and on the ways it shapes us. Only then will our minds be renewed and our lives transformed. Without this cultural awareness we will be unconscious imitators of the patterns of life around us rather than people who walk in the ways of the Lord. And we will doubt that we need moral instruction from the distant past and from such different cultural settings.

Consider some examples from the recent past. First, I am sure that many readers of this book were aware of the riots happening in August 2011 in London, and in many other parts of the United Kingdom. What was most troubling about the wanton damage and theft that accompanied these riots was the apparent absence of moral guilt or shame among many of the perpetrators of these crimes. I read interviews in which young people spoke proudly and defiantly about the destruction they had caused and the goods they had stolen from the stores that were broken into and looted. These young people came across as having no conscience about the people who were hurt, or even killed,

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<sup>4</sup>Romans 12:1–2 (see ESV footnote 1).

or about the personal and financial damage done to those who had property stolen or ruined.

Or, for a different kind of example, consider typical court cases on matters of obscenity, like the prosecution arising from the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs in Cincinnati, Ohio, some years ago:

Mapplethorpe's X Portfolio series sparked national attention in the early 1990s when it was included in *The Perfect Moment*, a traveling exhibition funded by National Endowment for the Arts. The portfolio includes some of Mapplethorpe's most explicit imagery, including a self-portrait with a bullwhip inserted in his anus. Though his work had been regularly displayed in publicly funded exhibitions, conservative and religious organizations, such as the American Family Association, seized on this exhibition to vocally oppose government support for what they called "nothing more than the sensational presentation of potentially obscene material." As a result, Mapplethorpe became something of a cause célèbre for both sides of the American culture war. The installation of *The Perfect Moment* in Cincinnati resulted in the unsuccessful prosecution of the Contemporary Arts Center of Cincinnati and its director, Dennis Barrie, on charges of "pandering obscenity."<sup>5</sup>

Another example is the various prosecutions and acquittals arising from the music and lyrics of the group 2 Live Crew:

In 1989, the group released their album, *As Nasty As They Wanna Be*, which also became the group's most successful album. A large part of its success was due to the single "Me So Horny," which was popular despite little radio rotation. The American Family Association (AFA) did not think the presence of a "Parental Advisory" sticker was enough to adequately warn listeners of what was inside the case. Jack Thompson, a lawyer affiliated with the AFA, met with Florida Governor Bob Martinez and convinced him to look into the album to see if it met the legal classification of obscenity. In 1990 action was taken at the local level and Nick Navarro, Broward County sheriff, received a

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<sup>5</sup>"Robert Mapplethorpe," accessed May 21, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert\\_Mapplethorpe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Mapplethorpe). I would not usually quote a Wikipedia article, unless it had extensive and authoritative referencing (which the article on Mapplethorpe does have). In addition, in this case, the Wikipedia article simply summarizes what was widely reported at the time in the media.

ruling from County Circuit Court judge Mel Grossman that probable cause for obscenity violations existed. In response, Luther Campbell maintained that people should focus on issues relating to hunger and poverty rather than on the lyrical content of their music.

Navarro warned record store owners that selling the album might be prosecutable. The 2 Live Crew then filed a suit against Navarro. That June, U.S. district court Judge Jose Gonzalez ruled the album obscene and illegal to sell. Charles Freeman, a local retailer, was arrested two days later, after selling a copy to an undercover police officer. This was followed by the arrest of three members of The 2 Live Crew after they performed some material from the album at a nightclub. They were acquitted soon after, as professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. testified at their trial in defense of their lyrics. Freeman's conviction was overturned on appeal as well.<sup>6</sup>

In both of these cases jury members were interviewed after the acquittals. Many of them said something like this: "I think that these photographs (or these lyrics) are obscene. I do not want to see them (hear them); and I do not want my children to see them (hear them). But who am I to say that no one else should be able to see them (hear them) if they so wish? This is only my personal opinion. It is not my place to declare these photos (or these lyrics) objectively obscene."

A fourth example comes from the visit of Pope John Paul II to St. Louis, Missouri, in January 1999. Those who live in the St. Louis area especially will remember how rapturously he was received in this city. His visit was the biggest event in the history of St. Louis, with up to a hundred thousand people turning out to hear him speak. He spoke with great passion about two moral issues in particular: sexual chastity and fidelity, and the sacredness of human life and the great moral evil of abortion. These talks were received with lengthy standing ovations.

However, one has to note with sadness that many of those who applauded him so fervently appear to have had no serious intention of putting his words into practice in their own personal lives. I do not say this to attack Roman Catholics in particular, for the same problems exist among the members of almost all churches.

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<sup>6</sup>"2 Live Crew," accessed May 21, 2013, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2\\_Live\\_Crew](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2_Live_Crew). Again, the Wikipedia article is both well footnoted and a clear and helpful summary of what was commonly reported at the time.

I serve as the pastor officiating the ceremony in several weddings each year, and I am afraid I have come to assume that it is a rare couple who are not already having sexual intercourse before marriage. In the 1970s, when I was first ordained and began to take wedding services, I could be confident that eight out of ten couples who had grown up in Christian homes would be sexually chaste, though it was already rare at that time to find a young man or woman from a non-Christian home who had not been sexually active. Today, my sorrowful estimate is that it will only be one or two out of ten young couples, of whatever background, who have remained chaste until marriage.

A fifth example comes from a Christian student I heard interviewed on public radio about abortion. The student, clearly an evangelical believer, said, "I believe that abortion is the murder of an innocent human life." She went on to say, "I also believe that abortion is a matter of personal choice and that, therefore, we ought not to have laws against abortion." I hear many Christians who think and speak in a similar manner about abortion, and about many other moral issues, concerning which the historical church has taken an unequivocal stand, not only for the individual Christian's life, but also for the life of society.

A sixth example comes from my own conversations with young people about Hitler and the Holocaust. Many are not prepared to condemn as absolute evil the slaughter of six million Jews and of many Gypsies, Christians, and mentally and physically disabled people, and countless others in the death camps of Nazi Germany. It is the same with the murders by Islamic terrorists. I hear many people expressing themselves with views like this: "I personally think the terrorist killings are wicked. But I have to recognize that, from their perspective, these are not crimes, but rather legitimate acts of protest against corrupt and evil regimes. So it all depends on one's perspective as to whether one decides their acts are evil."

How have we come to this, that people around us, including our fellow Christians, find it so difficult to make objective or absolute moral judgments? We need to go back some distance in time to understand our path to this present dilemma. We will begin with some brief reflections on what is often referred to as modernism, looking first at deism, then at secular humanism. Then we will turn to postmodernism.

## MODERNISM (1):

## DEISM OR NATURAL RELIGION, A NEW PATH

In Psalm 25 David wrote about the path of the Lord. Deism may be described as a new path in religion that some began to take during the early 1600s. Deism arose in the context of an understandable reaction to the religious wars and the persecutions that followed the period of the Reformation. Many, both inside and outside the church, reacted to these shocking departures from the gospel of Christ (such as taking up arms against fellow Christians or putting them on trial and burning them to death as heretics). Others went much further and also rejected the institutional churches, their claims to authority, and their doctrines.

One of the leaders of this rejection of the Christian churches was Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who is known as the “father of deism.” He argued that churches are always fighting over beliefs and practices, and that, therefore, it is necessary for all people of sense and good will to get back to the basics of true Christianity. He declared that all beliefs about God, and all the ways of life that arise from those belief systems, are the same at their roots. Therefore, he argued, it is right for us to find the common notions that are present in all religious beliefs, and to discern what we consider to be true in the religions and churches that we find around us. He rejected the authority of churches and Scriptures and argued, instead, that in ourselves we have two means of judging that are perfectly adequate to enable us to come to notions of truth and goodness, and to live the good life.

1. Our reason: we will evaluate religious claims for ourselves.
2. Our conscience: we can ask what seems right about God to us.

Herbert came up with a kind of common-denominator religion, one he thought all people of good will would believe and follow. He removed all the distinctive doctrines of Christianity (the Trinity, the divinity of Christ, Jesus’s incarnation, his substitutionary death) and taught that the true religion, which every person of sense and moral virtue could acknowledge, consists of honor for God and moral behavior to our fellow humans.

Herbert's ideas were very influential, and over the following 150 years there was a flourishing of deist thought and writing. One very significant example is Matthew Tindal, who wrote *Christianity as Old as Creation*, published in 1730 in England. Its subtitle is *The Gospel, a Republication of the Religion of Nature*. He was called "the great apostle of deism," and his book, "the Bible of deism." He made the following basic points:

1. God is fair, so all peoples must know the truth about God, and all religions must lead to God.
2. All religions teach us to honor God.
3. All religions teach us to do what is right—God's moral commandments are self-evidently good.
4. There will be an afterlife with rewards and punishments.
5. Our personal calling is the pursuit of our individual happiness.
6. It is obvious that we should all work for the common good.

Many deists in Tindal's day, in the eighteenth century, continued to attend church. The same is true in our day. And like today, many pastors and churches became deist rather than genuinely Christian in any biblical sense, though they continued to call themselves Christian. "Our religion," they said, "is the true Christianity." What was once thought of as Christian came to be considered narrow, rigid, doctrinaire, harsh, intolerant, and unloving, far removed from the true spirit of Jesus.

In deist settings, then as today, the Bible was still respected as containing much that is good and true, and there remained some sense of accountability to God. However, the final authority became the individual's conscience and reason; and the final goal of life became the pursuit of personal happiness, the pursuit of one's own definition of the good life.

For churchgoers and for some outside the church (though in declining numbers) the Bible was still seen as a source to be considered for moral direction. However, in our day the individual has become increasingly the final source of moral authority over such questions as sexual fidelity, homosexuality, human life issues like abortion and euthanasia, truth telling, theft, and so forth. This is so for present-day deists in a way that would have been unthinkable for the eighteenth-

century deist, who regarded such moral issues as crystal clear. One might say that in the eighteenth century, deists simply assumed that what the Bible taught was self-evident moral truth. This is no longer the case for deists today; and often it is no longer the case even for those who think of themselves as Bible-believing Christians.

### MODERNISM (2): SECULAR HUMANISM, THE NEXT STEP

The next step along the path away from Christianity was the declaration that it is not just the churches that are the problem, but religions in general and the Christian religion in particular. The secular humanists developed a more consistent modernism and proclaimed: “We do not need any traditional religion. Why should we humans bother with God at all?” For the secular humanist this world is simply material. There is only the natural world, and we humans are a part of this natural world. Time and chance, and the process of evolution working on matter and energy, are a sufficient source and explanation of everything that exists.

Humanism’s basic thrust is deep optimism about reason and human nature. What will be our guide along the path of life? Secular humanists set out their answer in the following beliefs:

1. We must put our trust in reason. There is no need for revelation (the Bible) at all. In place of revelation from some imagined god, human reason will lead us into all the truth and answer all our questions.
2. The application of the scientific method as we use our reason in the scientific endeavor will enable us to understand the world around us and to control the forces of nature, thereby creating a better world. Science will also enable us to understand and to control the human person and to solve our problems. This later application of reason and science in order to understand and solve the problems of individuals and societies began to develop in new and powerful ways at the beginning of the twentieth century.
3. Human nature is basically good. We just need education and the right laws and social structures to create a new world order, an enduring citadel of peace, prosperity, and happiness here on earth.
4. We as humans can figure out what is good for ourselves. Ethics does not need religion or God. The enlightened individual knows what is best for himself or herself and is able to live a moral,

happy, and productive life without any need for divine revelation or intervention.

Most ordinary Americans would not identify themselves with these basic beliefs of secular humanism. Most have not completely lost some kind of belief in God or some sense of the afterlife. But in truth, all of us, whether we have ever thought about it or not, whether we recognize it or not, are impacted by these convictions of deism and secular humanism.

Modernism has had the effect of seriously undermining any claims to religious, doctrinal, or moral authority, whether of God, of Christ, of creeds, of churches, or of church leaders. The deep conviction of people around us, and of each one of us, is this: "I can think things through for myself and come to my own conclusions about God, doctrine, and morals." Modernism also undermines all our sense of accountability to God. We create a god in our own image, a god who will not hold us accountable and who would never dream of judging us.

### POSTMODERNISM: EXISTENTIALISM, A DEAD END

With existentialism or postmodernism, the new road taken by modernism loses its way, and has, perhaps, come to a dead end.<sup>7</sup> The path to the good life peters out, disappearing in the woods of skepticism and irrationality. Existentialism is simply a consistent atheism. The existentialist recognizes that without God, everything changes. In Europe, the way people thought was deeply influenced by the World Wars. In the United States, the Vietnam War had something of the same effect. Postmodernism comes to several bleak conclusions:

1. Reason is inadequate to find objective or absolute truth. Because we are finite, truth is forever beyond us.
2. Science is not our savior, for technology produces not only good but evil. Scientific research has created weapons of mass destruction for modern warfare: nuclear arsenals and biological and chemical weapons with unimaginable consequences. Our technological society has had such an impact on the world of nature that, rather

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<sup>7</sup>No one yet knows what will follow postmodernism. The prayer of the Christian must be that the Lord will have mercy on us and that he will grant to us, to our churches, and to our cultures a renewal, restoration, and reformation of faith and life.

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than bringing about a glorious future, it offers instead environmental disasters that could threaten and destroy human life. Technology controls and dehumanizes us even in the ways it reaches into our homes through television and the Internet.

3. There are a deep loss of optimism about human nature and a growing recognition that humans can do terrible evil.
4. There are no sure grounds for hope about the future. We are alone in the universe, with nothing to cling to or to trust in.
5. There is no sure and certain morality, for everything is ultimately relative.

For most ordinary Americans, and for a much smaller number of Europeans, such a vision is too stark and too bleak. Especially in the United States, there is still a strong strain of modernist optimism among people. However, the postmodern skeptical way of seeing human life has a deep impact on the alienation of many young people. We see this in movies like *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Blade Runner*, many of the films of Woody Allen, *American Beauty*, or the sci-fi series *The Matrix*. The first *Matrix* movie was hailed by many Christians because it appeared to have a glimpse of possible redemption. Later, however, deep pessimism about the human condition became evident. We also see this bleakness in many television shows and in much music listened to by younger generations.

This postmodern way of thinking impacts everyone by increasing our doubts about finding truth, by causing us to question the value of reason, and by making us cynical about respect for authority; at odds with truth, reason, and authority is postmodernism's passionate emphasis on the centrality of the individual. What is the effect of this skepticism on ordinary people? We may summarize the consequences with the following simple though desperately destructive statements:

1. There is no objective truth.
2. There is no absolute truth.
3. There is only personal truth.
4. You have your truth; I have mine.

Adding to this uncertainty about knowing truth is the fact that we live in an increasingly pluralistic society. We have, in the United

States today, the most religiously diverse society the world has ever seen. What does this pluralism of belief have to do with the growth of cynicism? Postmodernism teaches that this pluralism of belief is the way it ought to be, for it insists that there is no one truth which describes reality; that our finite grasp on reality is so tenuous that there can be nothing but the belief systems of individuals or cultural groups; and that none of these can claim either the status of *truth* or even superiority over any of the others. Anyone who claims to speak truth is greeted with skepticism. Sometimes this skepticism is polite, but frequently it is bitter, mocking, and abusive.

In addition, postmodernism stresses that in knowing, I am never free. I always come to every issue with prejudices, with beliefs, with a background—and these “glasses” determine what I see. Some postmodernists emphasize the “shared knowledge” (or prejudices) of various communities, while others stress the isolation of the individual knower. But whichever of these approaches is espoused, the overall result is an increasing skepticism about any kind of truth claim.

So reason is a weak tool and can never lead us to true knowledge, for it is constrained by our prejudices. Reason and the claim to possess knowledge are weapons used by the powerful to maintain their power and interests at the expense of the powerless. Knowledge becomes a weapon in the culture wars for various groups to reinforce their already held positions, and to use against each other. This recognition that knowledge is sometimes used as a weapon to suppress others and their views feeds the drift to cynicism and the questioning of people’s motives.

The consequence of this loss of confidence in reason, and the accompanying loss of confidence in there being truth, is that Western societies have raised a generation of skeptics and cynics. Consider the dwarves in C. S. Lewis’s *Last Battle*. Lewis writes that they were so reluctant to be taken in, they could no longer be taken out of their skeptical and cynical attitude. Hope was now impossible for them. In Europe this problem is far more advanced; the cynicism of Lewis’s dwarves is almost universal in France, Britain, and in most European countries.

Young people, in particular, are deeply pessimistic and cynical

about what life holds for them. The deeper philosophical skepticism that is at the heart of our culture is made worse by the social and familial settings in which great numbers of young people spend their early years. Many grow up in homes where they receive no moral direction from their parents; and if no teacher, church member, or friend reaches out to lead them to the Lord and his paths, we find a generation without any moral compass. Some grow up in settings with little practical hope of escaping problems of poverty, unemployment, poor education, and social deprivation of every kind. Many more, from every social class, have the added burden of being raised in families where there are such betrayal of trust, such failure of commitment and parenting, such wounding of hope and love, that deep alienation and a suspicious attitude toward all people are no surprise.

So, what are the consequences of our intellectual and social climate for vast numbers of people?

1. *Loss of belief in truth.* There is nothing that can make sense of the human condition, so the conclusion is, “meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.”
2. *Loss of hope, both for this world and for one’s own life.* There is no story that gives us ground for hope for our solar system, our planet, the human race, or my own future, so there is no alternative but cynicism and apathy.
3. *Loss of respect for authority.* There is no one and no thing that deserves my trust or obedience, so there is no one to whom I may turn with the confidence that they will give me answers or meaning.
4. *Loss of respect for everything sacred.* Religions, like all other claims to truth, are simply power games, and anything or anyone that any group has held to be sacred or precious should be scorned and held up for ridicule; consequently there is a delight in shocking the viewer or listener. (I hardly need to give you examples here, for we see them repeatedly in our cultural setting.)
5. *Loss of moral certainty.* There are no transcendent moral commandments; there is no “you shall” or “you shall not.” There are no commandments that come from above for this generation. No one individual, no group, no authority, no religion, no sacred book, no god, has the right to tell anyone else how they ought to live. In such a society there is inevitably cynicism about claims to moral certainty.

You may reply, “This does not affect me, or many of the people I know.” I want to challenge that claim. Cynicism is corrosive—it works like a cancer, taking over all that is healthy and hopeful, and we are all affected by it.

Now that we see something of what has shaped the attitudes of our hearts and minds, perhaps we can turn back to Psalm 25 and pray that the Lord would enable us to make the words of David our own heartfelt cry, our own prayer that the Lord will be gracious to us, and that he will teach us his paths, in order that we may walk in the ways of the Lord, and so may live his good life.

Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth and teach me,  
for you are the God of my salvation;  
for you I wait all the day long.

Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,  
for they have been from of old.

Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me,  
for the sake of your goodness, O LORD!

Good and upright is the LORD;  
therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.

All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness,  
for those who keep his covenant and his testimonies.

For your name’s sake, O LORD,  
pardon my guilt, for it is great.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

1. Read Psalm 25:4–11 and set down for yourself what in particular you pray for as you ask the Lord to teach you to walk in his paths.
2. Do you see any aspects of our postmodern culture that you consider to be helpful to us as Christian believers, aspects for which we ought to be thankful? This may seem a strange question after the challenging things that I have

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written about the loss of truth and of moral certainty in our postmodern setting. However, Scripture charges us always to be ready to discern what is good and helpful in any human setting. If you reflect on this question with care, you will soon see that there are many very lovely aspects of our postmodern cultural context.

3. What are some aspects of our postmodern culture that you consider to be most challenging for Christians? Which two make teaching a difficult calling? Almost all of us teach in some setting, whether it is one-on-one with a friend or a more formal situation teaching children, teenagers, or adults in a school, in a Sunday school class, or in a Bible study. What makes people reluctant to hear you and to accept any challenges you might bring to their lives?
4. What are two aspects of our postmodern culture that create problems for you in your own personal life as someone seeking to be faithful to the Lord?
5. What two aspects of our postmodern culture bring pressures on you as a parent as you commit yourself to raising godly children in our contemporary setting? (Or if you do not have children, try to imagine the challenges of being a parent in our postmodern times.)

## THE GOOD LIFE (2)

### Found in Christianity or Postmodernism?

In the first chapter we followed in the steps of deism, secular humanism, and postmodernism to find where these schools of thinking might lead us, and to see whether they would fulfill their initial promise of the good life, a life of moral beauty without any input from the Christian faith or the Christian God. Should we draw from that brief and discouraging survey the conclusion that all our neighbors are thoroughly postmodern in their thinking and lifestyle, that they are all committed atheists, or that they have no solid moral convictions and no sense of guilt or shame when they do wrong? That is not the conclusion I wish to draw, for it would not be accurate.

This past century witnessed a loss of biblical content to people's views of God, of truth, and of moral convictions. As we have seen, this loss is far more advanced in Europe than in the United States. However, there are no people who are thoroughly consistent in holding to postmodern skepticism about truth or about moral law. No one is a moral relativist all the time. Indeed, anyone who does have complete doubt about the possibility of knowing anything truly will go rapidly insane. Extreme skepticism rarely happens (thank God!), though occasionally uncertainty about finding truth can have devastating consequences. I have met people who have become mentally and

emotionally paralyzed by their deep doubts and their suspicion that life is ultimately absurd.<sup>1</sup>

In such situations the three great needs are: first, prayer for the work of God in the person's heart; second, believers living a life that is characterized by meaning and hope; and third, a strong, committed love for the individual who has become trapped in the pit of despair. Only when such a person is deeply loved and is able to observe a meaningful and hopeful life firsthand can he or she begin to think clearly again about questions of truth and moral order. The Lord can and does deliver people who come to such desperate places. That is the theme of Psalm 107, a psalm that describes God's unfailing love for those who lose their way in life.

Some wandered in desert wastes,  
 finding no way to a city to dwell in;  
 hungry and thirsty,  
 their soul fainted within them.  
 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
 and he delivered them from their distress.  
 He led them by a straight way  
 till they reached a city to dwell in.

Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
 prisoners in affliction and irons,  
 for they had rebelled against the words of God,  
 and spurned the counsel of the Most High.  
 So he bowed their hearts down with hard labor;  
 they fell down, with none to help.  
 Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
 and he delivered them from their distress.  
 He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death,  
 and burst their bonds apart.

Some were fools through their sinful ways,  
 and because of their iniquities suffered affliction;  
 they loathed any kind of food,  
 and they drew near to the gates of death.

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<sup>1</sup>This was my own situation. I became suicidal from doubt that life had any ultimate meaning. See chapter 3 for an account of my experience, and of the Lord's delivering me from the pit of despair.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he delivered them from their distress.  
He sent out his word and healed them,  
and delivered them from their destruction.<sup>2</sup>

Scripture encourages us never to give up on the Lord, no matter how desperate a person's life seems; and never to give up on praying for people, on living faithfully, and on being full of hope before them and loving them. Psalm 107 finishes:

Whoever is wise, let him attend to these things;  
let them consider the steadfast love of the LORD.<sup>3</sup>

Thankfully, of course, most people do not come to this extremity of distress as they strive to live in our postmodern setting—a setting that undermines truth and meaning, hope and moral order. Instead, both within and outside the churches, most people are in two minds, living in a state of confusion about whether certainty of truth and certainty of objective moral standards are possible.

In big questions of truth, questions concerning God and ultimate meaning, people are deeply in doubt. In poll after poll, George Barna has found that approximately two-thirds of Americans agree with statements such as the following: “There is no such thing as absolute truth. People can define truth in different ways and still be correct.” Among people under thirty, the numbers rise to around 80 percent. Many opinion polls confirm this widespread skepticism as to whether truth is possible. Our personal observations also confirm this trend when we watch television, listen to the radio, read the press, or have conversations with neighbors, coworkers, or classmates.

And yet, when it comes to matters of truth with regard to everyday life, everybody operates as if truth can be known with complete confidence. Everyone knows which side of the road to drive on, and all are aware of the necessity of stopping at red lights—except when they are ill, drunk, or being criminally foolish. Everyone knows that the sun will rise each morning and that the universe has a rational

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<sup>2</sup>Psalm 107:4–20.

<sup>3</sup>Verse 43.

and trustworthy order to it—unless they are insane or, in very rare cases, become so troubled by postmodern skepticism that they can no longer function. Everyone knows that all human relationships depend on truthfulness in what is communicated, and on trusting the truthfulness of others—except, again, when people are mentally impaired through illness or through drink or drugs, or they are being hypocritical or purposefully misleading. We live, and we have to live each day, in the confidence that truth can be known. There is honor even among thieves; they have to be able to know when truth is being spoken in order to carry out a robbery or to dispose of stolen goods.

The same situation holds when we think about matters of moral order, or moral law. We have to know that some things are right and others are wrong. Just as with issues of truth, we find that people are pulled in two directions. They express doubt about ultimate moral certainty and about particular moral choices. All around us we find two views struggling with each other: the one we might label traditional or, more properly, Christian; the other, skeptical, relative, or postmodern. People do not think clearly, and this is true of almost all, whether claiming to be Christian or non-Christian. If we listen to people, even to ourselves, we find expressions of now one, now the other of these two ways of seeing our world.

This confusion and lack of clarity are revealed in the ways people respond to different questions. If asked regarding absolute truth or absolute moral standards—unalterable laws of right and wrong in human behavior—most people will answer in ways that show their commitment to relativism. The same is true if they are asked concerning a woman's right to choose regarding abortion, or about people's sexual freedom. As we saw in several of our examples in the first chapter, people may have strong views themselves against abortion, or pornography, or lyrics encouraging sexual violence against women, or unfaithfulness in marriage; but when they are asked whether everyone should have the same views, they claim no right to make such statements or "impose" their personal views on others; in other words, they express moral relativism.

However, if asked about the rise in crime or about lawlessness in

their cities related to drugs and gang warfare, most people, though not all, will insist that we need stronger laws, harsher sentences, more police enforcement, and the like. If we ask about the sexual molestation of children,<sup>4</sup> or about those who prey on the elderly to steal their money, or about other such acts against the defenseless, almost everyone will declare such behavior wicked and abominable. People respond passionately about such matters, believing with complete confidence that there is objective (nonrelative) evil done, that there is true guilt, and that there must be punishment.

To help us understand these confused responses, we will look more carefully at the two views that vie for our allegiance.

### A CHRISTIAN (TRADITIONAL) VIEW

In a Christian or traditional view, morality and law are fixed and eternal. This firm belief in a universal moral law carries with it several other convictions that bear on the moral consciousness of all people.

First, there is a belief that all people are accountable to God, or to objective standards or principles of truth, justice, equity, and goodness. At the time of the founding of our nation, the views of almost everyone were shaped by a Judeo-Christian understanding, even among those who were not Christians. This was true of deists like Jefferson, and even of rationalists like Benjamin Franklin, as well as of people who professed Christian faith, such as John Witherspoon or George Washington. Today it is rather different. While over 90 percent of Americans say, "I believe in God," there is not much content to that belief, and for many of us there is only a hazy relationship between the existence of God and ultimate moral law in the universe. Yet, when pushed on issues like child molestation, almost all Americans will affirm absolute notions of moral law.

Second, there is a widely held belief that morality and good laws express people's responsibilities to one another. People recognize that

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<sup>4</sup>In the St. Louis area there was a particularly shocking example of this. An eleven-year-old boy disappeared on his way home from school on his bicycle. Thankfully, an observant friend of the boy, who is very knowledgeable about automobiles, noticed a white pickup in the area that he had not seen before. A few days later a neighbor who was talking to a policeman noticed a pickup that matched the friend's description, and a warrant was used to enter the apartment of the owner of the vehicle. Inside were found the missing boy and another who had been missing for five years, all that time a prisoner of the man who had taken him. I doubt that anyone in the whole St. Louis area would have spoken in a morally relativistic manner about this crime.

we live in community and that, therefore, objective moral standards, and also society's laws, must be applied to our relationships with our neighbors. Most Americans live this way and are deeply offended when individuals, businesses, or political figures act against these laws and responsibilities.

I cannot imagine anyone defending dairy producers who watered down their milk, then added melamine to it to increase the levels of protein, and then marketed this mixture as dried milk powder for babies. People are sickened by such appalling greed, and by the accompanying failure to reflect on the damage to the health of the babies who were given this milk to drink: malnutrition, kidney stones, kidney failure, severe illness, and in several cases, infant death. What is more horrifying is that those who perpetrated such wickedness did so in full awareness that great numbers of cats and dogs had become sick and died a year earlier when melamine was added to pet food for the same purpose of increasing measurable levels of protein.

Even those who espouse relativism in principle and who teach that morals are relative will take a passionately "traditional" view in actual cases, and they will do this without realizing the inconsistency and contradiction in what they are communicating. An example is my wife's teacher at a university in the St. Louis area, where Vicki was taking courses toward a Master of Arts in French and education. One of the professors teaching an education course was a passionate relativist. One evening, he spent four hours of lecture time insisting that his class of present and would-be teachers should never impose their own moral values on their students in school—whether they were teaching at the primary, secondary, or tertiary level. He used examples about sexuality, homosexuality, pornography, human life, and other issues of personal moral choice.

The very next week he spent much of the four hours inveighing against the loss of truthfulness among students, the growing disrespect for authority, the widespread cheating on exams, and the casual practice of plagiarism when pupils download material from the Internet and paste it into their papers without attribution. It never seemed to occur to him that he was being grossly inconsistent. When it came to issues that mattered to him as a teacher, he had a firm set of objective

moral standards and laws, and a strong sense of the moral responsibility of his students.

Third, despite what many have been taught (that humans are born basically good), there is still a widespread recognition that human beings are sinful from the heart and that we all need to be restrained by moral teaching in schools and churches, and by laws and law officers. Benjamin Franklin insisted that people need to be taught morality and law—even though he appears to have had no Christian belief himself. He thought such instruction was necessary to train people in what is right and to help restrain the human tendency to selfishness and evil. About a month before his death Franklin wrote to a friend, Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale University, in reply to Stiles's inquiry about Franklin's views on religion:

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the system of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the Truth with less trouble.<sup>5</sup>

Today, even though many people would not state the issues in the same manner as Franklin did, yet most of our neighbors realize that children need discipline and instruction. Even those who do not provide moral instruction and discipline for their own children somehow believe that it is the responsibility of the schools or the government to do something about these matters. That was my mother's experience as a teacher of first- through third-grade children in a small country school in the south of England. The parents expected that she would teach their children reading, writing, and math; but they also expected her to teach them manners and morals.

We should note here that this is one of the areas where people become open to the gospel of Christ, because God's image and God's

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<sup>5</sup>Benjamin Franklin, letter to Ezra Stiles, quoted in Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking, 1938), 777–78.

moral wisdom—both present in all human beings—act as a goad on their consciences when they find themselves in positions of responsibility for their children. Many people become open to attending church and thinking about the Christian faith when they start their families. They recognize that their sons and daughters are not morally perfect, that they have struggles with self-centeredness, pride, resistance to authority, and many other issues. New parents look out at the surrounding culture and realize that it is not giving much moral direction to their sons and daughters. They feel inadequately prepared to instruct their children themselves, and so they send (if not bring) them to church in the hope that they will get assistance in this task.

This sense of responsibility in parents is a wonderful quality, for it is one of those areas where the Holy Spirit brings his testimony to bear on people's hearts and draws them toward the truth. Such areas of the Spirit's witness are always present in people's lives, as Paul declares to the pagans in Lystra: "He has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy."<sup>6</sup>

One of the most powerful means of witness is the need for moral order and for mutual moral obligation between people, what some call natural law. While such an expression is, in a sense, appropriate because this is a constant human reality, the Bible does not refer to this reality as natural law, but rather it credits God as the author of these laws known by all peoples on the earth. He is the true source of this moral wisdom and the law on the human heart; and he gives both of these generously to all people.<sup>7</sup>

This universal reality of moral wisdom and law is one of the primary reasons that C. S. Lewis's books *Mere Christianity*, *The Abolition of Man*, and the Narnia stories and science fiction trilogy have been so greatly used by God to draw people to faith in Christ. This is also true of the apologetic work of Francis Schaeffer,<sup>8</sup> and of the preaching and books of Tim Keller, such as *The Reason for God*.

<sup>6</sup> Acts 14:17, NIV.

<sup>7</sup> See Proverbs 8:1–4, 15–16; Romans 2:14–15.

<sup>8</sup> See, as examples of Francis Schaeffer's writing on these issues, *The God Who Is There*, *Escape from Reason*, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, *Death in the City*, *How Should We Then Live?*, and *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?*

Our task is to pray for wisdom in order to be sensitive to these areas of the Spirit's testimony in a person's heart or in a particular human culture, and then cooperate with God's work by sharing the good news of who the true God is, and that he is the author and giver of moral law. In such a case, where we experience a sense of our obligation to others, we may pray (to adapt Psalm 119:18),

Open my [their] eyes, that I [they] may behold  
wondrous things out of your law.

Fourth, there is also the general recognition that there is objective guilt when this moral order and the obligations between people inscribed in law are broken. Very few people will deny such objective guilt in cases like the capture of children for molestation, or the selling of children and women into slavery. One of the primary areas of slavery in the United States today, and also in western Europe, is prostitution slavery. Women from Asia, South America, and eastern Europe are captured directly by slavers, or are sold by their parents to slavers, or are induced by false promises of marriage or of good employment by slavers. These women, and even young girls, are then brought to the United States (or to western Europe), their passports are stolen, and they are forced into prostitution for the enrichment of their slavers. Almost all Americans will insist that there is true guilt in such cases and that there needs to be just and severe punishment. It is difficult to imagine even the most committed moral relativist insisting that such enslavement of women is simply a matter of personal choice or of varying cultural norms about the treatment of women, or that there should be no punishment for such practices.<sup>9</sup>

Fifth, it was once universally believed, both in the United States and in western Europe, that much of the law given by God and upheld by the state in our societies exists to provide protection for the ordinary man and woman from those who are powerful and ruthless. This is a major theme of Old Testament law, as we shall see later in our studies. This was one of the fundamental convictions behind the development of what is called common law in Britain in the Middle Ages.

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<sup>9</sup>One of the most powerful attacks on prostitution slavery that I have found is the outstanding Jack Reacher novel by Lee Child, *Worth Dying For*.

This heritage of common law to protect vulnerable citizens against those with status, money, and power is the source of many of our laws here in the United States.

This common-law element of what I am calling a Christian or traditional understanding of law is forgotten by many today, so much so that large numbers of evangelicals are suspicious of attempts to restrain the abuse of power by business executives and others with money and social clout, fearing that such attempts at restraint arise from a socialist or Marxist understanding of economics, or are unwarranted restrictions on the freedom of the market. But such a response neglects our own history and is a profound misunderstanding of the teaching of Scripture.

Sixth, it was also almost universally believed that there is a sacred framework for the life of society. Responsibility to one's neighbors, upholding God's law, and respect for the laws of the land were, and should be, fostered by home, by church, and by schools teaching young people love for God and love for neighbor. This sixth element of a Christian or traditional view of law has now been radically undermined and is almost totally neglected in the upbringing and education of most children.

However, despite this loss of these last two parts, the fifth and sixth convictions of a traditional approach to moral law, it is evident that almost everyone around us is still deeply shaped by a Christian approach to moral practice and to the laws of the land.

## A POSTMODERN VIEW

At the same time, postmodernism vies for our allegiance. According to this view, morality and law are constantly open to change. We may also call this view moral relativism, or moral skepticism. Like the traditional or Christian view, this view comes with several other convictions about the nature of reality and of human societies.

First, law is not based on objective standards, but is simply the expression of a culture's habits and customs. Morality changes from generation to generation and from culture to culture. Such an approach reigns in many university anthropology and sociology departments, and also in much popular entertainment. Think of examples you have heard in school or seen in a movie or television show.

Second, law and objective morality are opposed to freedom. Traditional values, law enforcement, and society's laws all hinder personal liberty. There is a constant pressure for law to be pushed back to give more freedom to individuals and to corporations. Where individual freedom is concerned, this is true for much of the political left in our nation and for many liberal judges. We should note that this is also true for the far right of our political spectrum where a thinker such as Ayn Rand and her ideas continue to have a strong influence. She believed that all true human achievement comes from individual effort, genius, and accomplishment, and she was passionately opposed to Judeo-Christian moral laws as an unnecessary restraint on personal freedom; she also opposed any government interference with the free choices of the individual. Here are two brief quotes from her work:

A government is the most dangerous threat to man's rights: it holds a legal monopoly on the use of physical force against legally disarmed victims.<sup>10</sup>

Civilization is the progress toward a society of privacy. The savage's whole existence is public, ruled by the laws of his tribe. Civilization is the process of setting man free from men.<sup>11</sup>

Because of these convictions about complete freedom, Rand also believed that total laissez-faire capitalism is the only good way for a society to function well economically and to grow. In her thinking, selfishness and self-interest are virtues, and altruism, is a weakness. She attacked all forms of meekness, service, altruism, and self-sacrifice as unworthy of the dignity of human beings. Nietzsche had similar views and considered Jesus to be the one who, above all others, emasculated the human race by his emphasis on living for others to the point of laying down one's life. A precursor to Nietzsche's thought, the English poet Swinburne, expressed such hatred of Jesus this way: "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath."<sup>12</sup>

Such a philosophy of life is a very far cry from what was taught and lived by the Lord Jesus Christ, and from what the faithful church

<sup>10</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism* (New York: New American Library, 1964), 103.

<sup>11</sup> Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (New York: Dutton, 1996), 669. To explore her views, see also *Atlas Shrugged*.

<sup>12</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Hymn to Proserpine," 1866.

has espoused throughout its history. However, if you listen to some of our politicians, it is not difficult to hear ideas that are very similar to those of Ayn Rand. What is most troubling about this development is the way in which many Christians have taken on board a similar view of freedom, of the virtue of self-interest, of rejecting the need for laws in our society (especially with regard to business); they have at the same time ignored what God's law has to say about the need for restraints on freedom, about the centrality of moral obligation to one's neighbors in business practice and in all economic—indeed, in all human—activity. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn had some very helpful words about this shift in thinking away from a Christian understanding. And, as he said so forcefully at Harvard University, no one could accuse him of sympathizing with socialism.

However, in early democracies, as in American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted because man is God's creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility. Such was the heritage of the preceding thousand years. Two hundred or even fifty years ago, it would have seemed quite impossible, in America, that an individual could be granted boundless freedom simply for the satisfaction of his instincts or whims. Subsequently, however, all such limitations were discarded everywhere in the West; a total liberation occurred from the moral heritage of Christian centuries with their great reserves of mercy and sacrifice.<sup>13</sup>

Third, law is understood in the postmodern view to be simply about rights rather than responsibilities. People ask, "What can I get out of the law?" or, "How can I use the law for my advantage?" rather than, "Where should my way of life be governed by the law?" Consequently there is constant litigation, for the law is seen as a tool for the individual's benefit. Our courts are choked with cases that reveal this kind of approach to the law. One very personal example is of a friend of mine who was recently divorced. Her husband was greedy and fought vigorously to avoid sharing his wealth (*their* wealth) and to minimize his financial responsibility for his wife or his children. He lied to the

<sup>13</sup> Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "A World Split Apart" (commencement address delivered at Harvard University, June 8, 1978).

court repeatedly, slandered his wife's character, hid his own assets, and exaggerated her situation and her resources. It became a terrible burden to keep trying to fight for what was right. I am confident that every person reading this has his or her own examples of such misuse of the law to lament and share.

Fourth, all that matters is legalistic righteousness, being right according to the letter of the law. The law is pushed to its limits. Who is concerned for the spirit of the law? Solzhenitsyn spoke to this problem in his wonderful address at Harvard:

The defense of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenseless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.

Destructive and irresponsible freedom has been granted boundless space. Society appears to have little defense against the abyss of human decadence, such as, for example, misuse of liberty for moral violence against young people, motion pictures full of pornography, crime and horror. It is considered to be part of freedom and theoretically counter-balanced by the young people's right not to look or not to accept. Life organized legalistically has thus shown its inability to defend itself against the corrosion of evil.<sup>14</sup>

Fifth, law is open to manipulation by pressure groups that see the legal system as a means of getting their will inscribed in law, regardless of morality or the public good. I hardly need to give examples of this problem as all senators and congressional representatives are constantly lobbied by powerful interest groups and are subject to the temptation of bribery in the form of financial support in exchange for their serving the interests of the lobbyist rather than the people they represent. This problem exists on college campuses as well. For example, one of my sons applied to be a dorm monitor at his university. One of the requirements for the position was that he sit and watch a video of gay sex and not be offended. He refused and, because of this, had to find other work.

Sixth, there is a reluctance to talk about guilt, except in the most obvious cases of clear evil that offends almost everyone. Even in these

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

cases, we see a drift away from the notion that evil behavior is an offense against objective moral standards. I will never forget reading an article by a British columnist about the subject of pedophilia, in which she at first expressed her abhorrence and then said something like this: “I have no doubt, that within ten years time, I and my liberal friends may well come to accept that sex with children is not abominable but rather an appropriate expression of personal freedom.”<sup>15</sup>

Seventh, punishment becomes rehabilitation or education, rather than the retribution of society against crime. I would commend for your reading on this subject C. S. Lewis’s excellent essay “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” published in the volume *God in the Dock* and in other collections of his writings.

Eighth, there is a loss of the Judeo-Christian framework for moral reflection and for teaching moral order, law, and responsibility to our children. Moral education becomes simply helping a child to come to his or her own notions about what he or she thinks is right and wrong, rather than teaching children a set of objective moral standards that arise within a sacred canopy, a universe created and governed by the giver of the law.

All of us are impacted personally as well as surrounded by others who are shaped by both of these ways of thinking: the Christian or traditional view and the postmodern, relativist view. Most of us are confused. We all resonate with the idea that law restricts liberty and that everything should be a matter of personal choice. Yet, at the same time, we all feel that much that is legal is an offense against common decency and good sense.

In our next chapter we will begin to build a biblical response to this dilemma. My prayer is that these first two chapters will create in us all a hunger for seeing “wonderful things” in God’s law.

### **Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

1. I quoted a Barna poll that found two-thirds of Americans agreeing with the following: “There is no such thing as absolute truth. People can define truth in different ways and still be correct.” What examples can you think of

<sup>15</sup>I will refrain from mentioning the name of the columnist, in the hope and prayer that she might have changed her views.

that reveal how this relativism with regard to truth affects peoples' views of morality and law?

2. Many schools have taught values clarification to children rather than objective and clear moral standards. Have you had experience of this, and what do you think are the consequences of such an approach to moral education on the children who are taught this?

3. The vast majority of Americans believe that human beings are basically good. What do you think about this belief, and what do you see to be some of its consequences?

4. Jean-Paul Sartre, the French existentialist philosopher, wrote: "Man is condemned to be free."<sup>16</sup> What do you think he meant by this?

5. Why do you think that the society in which we live is so litigious, that people are willing to sue one another so readily? Do you know of local examples of this?

6. Once God as the source of law and the notion of the universe as a "sacred canopy" are lost, the only real alternative is that humanity becomes the sole source of moral values and law. If we put ourselves in the position of those who hold such a view, then what are the possible ways we might create values and laws for our society?

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<sup>16</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 23.

# THE SOURCE OF LAW

## Humanity or God?

In our second chapter we thought about the confusion there is in the United States, and indeed all over the Western world, about the nature of morality and law, a confusion that infects both Christian believers and unbelievers. I suggested that there are two views vying for our allegiance:

1. The Christian or traditional view: morality and law are fixed and eternal.
2. The postmodern or relativist view: morality and law are constantly open to change.

The first view, a Judeo-Christian worldview, declares that there is a universal moral law arising from the character of the Creator. Along with this belief come several other convictions:

- accountability to God, or at least to objective standards or principles of truth, justice, equity, and goodness;
- belief that morality and good laws express people's responsibilities to one another;
- a widespread recognition that human beings are sinful from the heart and that we all need to be restrained by moral teaching in schools and churches, and by laws and law officers;
- the recognition that there is objective guilt when this moral order and legal obligations between people are broken;

- the realization that laws exist to provide protection for the ordinary man and woman from those who are powerful and ruthless—the common law tradition;
- the almost universal conviction that there is a sacred framework for the life of society.

The second, fundamentally relativistic, worldview also carries with it several convictions about the nature of reality and human societies:

- law is not based on objective standards, but is simply the expression of a culture's habits and customs;
- law and objective morality are opposed to personal freedom;
- law is simply about my rights, rather than my responsibilities;
- all that matters is legalistic righteousness, being right according to the letter of the law;
- law is open to manipulation by pressure groups that see the legal system as a means of getting their will inscribed in law;
- there is a reluctance to talk about objective guilt, except in the most obvious cases of clear evil that offend almost everyone;
- punishment becomes rehabilitation or education, rather than retribution;
- we do not need a Judeo-Christian framework for moral reflection and for teaching moral order, law, and responsibility to ourselves, our children, and society.

Obviously, this picture of our situation is something of an oversimplification to give us a handle on understanding what is happening around us and in our own lives. But there can be no doubt that at the heart of our culture there is a steady drift from seeing law and morality as God's gifts to us. Instead, law and morality are seen as having their origins here on earth, as arising from human reflection about the nature of our lives and about how we should live. To the passionate secularist this is a cause for rejoicing, as can be seen in this excerpt from a secular humanist perspective:

Ethics is an autonomous field of inquiry, . . . ethical judgments can be formulated independently of revealed religion, . . . human beings can cultivate practical reason and wisdom and, by its application, achieve lives of virtue and excellence. . . . For secular humanists,

ethical conduct is, or should be, judged by critical reason, and their goal is to develop autonomous and responsible individuals, capable of making their own choices in life based upon an understanding of human behavior.<sup>1</sup>

### TURNING FROM GOD: WHAT OPTIONS REMAIN?

When humans turn from God as the source of moral order and law and see themselves as the source, there are, in the end, only four options available to a society. We can see all four of these options constantly at work in the world around us.

#### *Option 1: The Individual Decides for Himself or Herself*

The French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre expressed his insistence that the individual stands alone to make his or her own personal moral choices in a dramatic way:

The existentialist, on the contrary, thinks it very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him; there can no longer be an *a priori* Good, since there is no infinite and perfect consciousness to think it. Nowhere is it written that the Good exists, that we must be honest, that we must not lie; because the fact is we are on a plane where there are only men. . . . Man is condemned to be free. . . . to invent man.<sup>2</sup>

This might be fine if people were completely good and if there were no corruption in our human nature. However, that is not the reality with which we all live. I was not born in innocence. I am not, nor have I been for a single day of my life, completely good. I do not do the good things I wish to do; and there are many bad things that I do not want to think or do or say, but find myself thinking, saying, and doing every day of my life.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, despite our knowledge of our imperfections, there has been a passionate embracing of the notion that we are free to choose our own values. The widespread emphasis on the freedom of the individual

<sup>1</sup>"A Secular Humanist Declaration," the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, 1980, accessed at <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?page=declaration&section=main>.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 22–23.

<sup>3</sup>See the apostle Paul on this issue of our inability to do what we know to be right, Romans 7:14–24.

has created a situation in our society much like that in the day of the Judges, where “everyone did as he saw fit.”<sup>4</sup> Consider what evil may be done in the name of free choice!

We might think of human life issues, like abortion, where the emphasis on personal choice leads every day to the killing of thousands of little babies (approximately one million a year within the United States). Just recently a senior judge ruled that a state cannot require a woman considering abortion to be shown images of the baby developing in her womb, or to listen to an account of the stage of life and growth her child has reached, or to read material that will give her this information. The judge ruled that requiring a woman to be given such true knowledge would interfere with her personal freedom.

Or we might consider matters of sexuality. Some 80 percent of high school students are engaged in sexual relationships, and the figures for college students are well over 90 percent. Even at the junior high level the figures for sexual activity appear to be around 50 percent. Many aspects of these figures are tragic: sexual involvement without personal or even physical maturity; the increase of sexually transmitted diseases among young people; the hardening of the conscience; the damage that young men and women do to themselves and each other emotionally and psychologically; the filling of the mind with images and memories of sexual encounters that cannot be erased when the person does eventually commit himself or herself to another person in marriage; and above all, the separation of sexual involvement from deep personal commitment.

In addition, all of us know people whose spouses have abandoned them and their children because of the refusal to say no to sexual temptation and desire. Similarly, readers will remember the politician who abandoned his sacred vows and his wife and children with the statement, “My truth is that I am a gay American.” That expression “my truth is” captures the very heart of the issue of the freedom to define life for myself and to make whatever choices I wish when it comes to matters of personal morality.

Of course, it is impossible to keep this “freedom of choice” bound

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<sup>4</sup>Judges 21:25, NIV.

only to matters of sexuality and human life. The past thirty years have seen many examples of this demand for freedom invading financial and business issues. Famous financial institutions and business leaders, both male and female, have been found to be making choices to enrich themselves at the expense of others without respect for the laws of the land or ethical considerations. Indeed, after such perpetrators of financial crimes have served their prison sentences, they are invited, for enormous fees, to give lectures in which they teach others how to make money by insider trading, or by bending the laws, or by finding loopholes in the laws. Several years ago the Harvard Business School felt constrained to add a new course in business ethics because of the widespread flouting of the laws and of traditional moral standards in contemporary business practice. The problem was this: why should a man or woman in the financial world obey the law or observe traditional business ethics if he or she proved to be clever enough to get away with illegal or unethical behavior?

For a final example of self-made standards, consider the lyrics of songs that encourage brutal violence toward women. Under current laws there can be no successful prosecutions of songwriters and singers for such lyrics because of what is considered the absolute right of freedom of expression. As we saw earlier, juries are reluctant to convict people in such cases because no matter how much they are appalled by the words of a song, they find themselves unable to set any limitation on someone else's freedom either to sing such songs or to listen to them.

The personal autonomy of the individual to do whatever he or she wishes—this is the greatest idol of our culture, and our most serious problem. We are only at the beginning of seeing the devastating consequences of the view that people are free to do whatever makes them happy. Consider again the young people who rioted in Britain in August 2011. They are a generation whose only moral education has been, “Do whatever you wish.”

*Option 2: The Majority Decides for Us All*

The novelist William Golding is said to have commented, “If God is dead and man is the highest, is his own creator, then good and evil

is decided by majority vote.”<sup>5</sup> These words capture the problem with what we may call sociological law, that is, society making its own laws. Or we may refer to this simply as democracy—the rule of the people. Sadly, this is how many Americans do understand democracy. Even judges on the Supreme Court look to the opinion of the majority when they rule on laws. The consequence of this is that the law in the United States, as well as other Western societies, increasingly follows the popular consensus. We see this expressed in the way many states have referenda on such matters as euthanasia or embryo experimentation. We will have many more referenda on moral issues as this view becomes more dominant in our society. We see this also when politicians or judges abandon their own moral convictions and change them to reflect the views of the majority. But the majority can never tell us what is right and good.

Consider what evil may be done in the name of the majority! Think of the wickedness of the slave trade, or of the setting aside of almost every treaty ever made by our national and state governments with Native Americans. This ignoring of solemn treaties arose simply because of pressures from the majority population. Think of ethnic cleansing in Bosnia or Kosovo, where hundreds of thousands of people had their homes and property stolen, women were raped, and great numbers of people murdered, all at the will of politicians serving the majority. Think, again, of abortion, another kind of ethnic cleansing, but not acknowledged as such, because the victims are unseen and have no voice to raise a protest or to make their case.

No majority can turn brutality and wickedness into ethical behavior, but such evil is the consequence of our postmodern rejection of moral order and our refusal to submit to a transcendent source of law.

### *Option 3: Those in Power Decide, or “Might Makes Right”*

Some believe that those in power have the right to determine what is moral. The powerful may be dictators with guns. In Uganda, Idi Amin had his Christian chief justice gunned down in his courtroom because

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<sup>5</sup>Many years ago, in the early 1970s, I came across this remarkable statement attributed to Golding. I apologize if he was not responsible for these words. They express very powerfully an implication of sociological law.

he was resisting Amin's tyrannical rule. Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime decided that Jews, Gypsies, the physically and mentally disabled, and anyone who resisted the Third Reich should be put to death.<sup>6</sup> Or think of Saddam Hussein and his brutal reign with the killing of the Marsh Arabs, the chemical ruining of their home region in the marshlands, and the despoliation of that extraordinary environment, with its vast numbers of waterbirds and other creatures. The abominable decision to spray poisonous chemicals over the marshes there in southern Iraq ended a millennia-old civilization.

But it is not only violent dictators who illustrate this third option of those in power deciding what the law will be. In the United States, powerful elites impose their views on the many through the courts, through the congress, through the media, through wealthy business interests, or even through the executive office. Consider how our culture has become subject to powerful groups with money to give to our political representatives; then think of the access to power and decision making that comes along with that money. Such powerful groups sometimes do evil to the majority in the name of their own cause, often to further their own self-interest.

For example, agricultural subsidies become a means of bankrolling the most wealthy landowners at the taxpayers' expense. This happens because these landowners have bought political support from both Democrat and Republican senators and congressional representatives. Lest you think this is an exaggeration, let me tell a personal story. My wife and I were invited to dinner at the home of a friend. Also invited was one of the biggest landowners in Missouri, who farmed millions of acres. In the early part of our dinner he complained bitterly about the "lazy poor" who demand unemployment benefits and who insist on their healthcare being subsidized at the cost of hardworking taxpayers, like himself.

A little later in the meal the subject turned to farming subsidies. He boasted of how he was receiving millions of dollars every year not to farm great tracts of land, thereby preventing overproduction of rice and other crops and keeping the price of those crops higher. Farm subsidies were originally designed to help small farmers, but today

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<sup>6</sup>If you have not seen the film *Sophie Scholl: The Final Days*, I would encourage you to buy or rent it.

they have become the means of subsidizing some of the wealthiest members of our society—at the taxpayers' expense.

*Option 4: Someone's Ideology Decides*

If there is no respect for the individual or for the majority, then an ideology will become the means of bringing people to power, an ideology that imposes its vision for the world on the populace of a land. Marxism or radical Islam are the obvious examples of such ideologies. Both radical Islam and Marxism promise to create the ideal society. Committed Marxists and radical Muslims have one thing in common. Both of them believe that they know what is best for everyone. They have a vision in their minds of how society ought to function. They alone know how everyone else should live, how everything should be organized. In addition, both of these political ideologies have no doctrine of original sin. They have no room in their worldview for the conviction that they might be wrong, that they might be fallible once they come to power. Because of this, there is an utterly unrealistic idealism about their vision of the world, about how society should function, and, above all, about their own use and abuse of power. The consequence is very great evil, done in the name of their supposed good.

Consider the words of David Aikman in a *Time* magazine article written about Kampuchea (Cambodia). Aikman was reporting on the terrible atrocities that had happened under the Khmer Rouge, the army of committed Marxists under the leadership of Pol Pot that took power in Cambodia. They killed over one third of the population of 7.5 million. Cities were destroyed to end the old corrupt society and make a completely new beginning. What happened in Cambodia were some of the greatest acts of wickedness by any government anywhere in the history of our world—and all for an ideology. Aikman commented:

Where the insane reversal of values lies is in the belief that notions like “purity” or “corruption” can have any meaning outside an absolute system of values: one that is resistant to the tinkering at will by governments or revolutionary groups. The Cambodian revolution, in its own degraded “purity,” has demonstrated what happens when the Marxian denial of moral absolutes is taken with total seriousness by

its adherents. Pol Pot and his friends decide what good is, what bad is, and how many corpses must pile up before the rapacious demon of “purity” is appeased.

In the West today, there is a pervasive consent to the notion of moral relativism, a reluctance to admit that absolute evil can and does exist. This makes it especially difficult for some to accept the fact that the Cambodian experience is something far worse than a revolutionary aberration. Rather, it is the deadly logical consequence of an atheistic, man-centered system of values, enforced by fallible human beings with total power, who believe, with Marx, that morality is whatever the powerful define it to be and, with Mao, that power grows from gun barrels.<sup>7</sup>

The more confident one is that humanity is the only source of law and of the knowledge of good and evil, then the more readily evil will be done. This is true even when a group claims to be instituting the will of God but uses that claim as a cloak and cover for its own ideology.

### TURNING TO GOD: RESTORING ORDER AND BEAUTY

What will we as Christians put forward against these options? We have to heed Jeremiah’s warning:

My people have committed two evils:  
 they have forsaken me,  
     the fountain of living waters,  
 and hewed out cisterns for themselves,  
     broken cisterns that can hold no waters.<sup>8</sup>

We can only find a true fountain for the good life for ourselves and our societies if we turn back to God himself. He is the fountain of order and beauty in both the physical and moral senses. He is the Creator of this ordered physical universe—a universe that reflects his own character of consistency and trustworthiness. God the Son is the same yesterday, today, and forever.<sup>9</sup> His character never changes, for he, his Father, and the Spirit are pure and filled with integrity. James writes of the “Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow

<sup>7</sup>David Aikman, “Cambodia: An Experiment in Genocide,” *Time*, July 31, 1978, 39–40.

<sup>8</sup>Jeremiah 2:13.

<sup>9</sup>Hebrews 13:8.

due to change.”<sup>10</sup> Through God the Son “all things were created . . . . And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”<sup>11</sup> He “upholds the universe by the word of his power.”<sup>12</sup>

We take the rational and ordered structure of the physical universe for granted—but this is only because we live in a culture that has its view of the nature of reality rooted in a Judeo-Christian worldview.<sup>13</sup> Animist and Hindu societies have no such confidence in the orderly nature of the universe. Instead, for the animist, the world is an abode of spirits who rule in unpredictable and even malevolent ways. For the Hindu, this physical world is ultimately *Maya*, illusory, and such a worldview will never lead to science or to technology.<sup>14</sup> But we know that the universe was made by the God who is faithful and consistent, who holds to his word, and who never is capricious or malevolent. So we gladly join in with the psalmist who praises God as the Creator in Psalm 148:

Praise him, sun and moon,  
praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens,  
and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD!  
For he commanded and they were created.  
And he established them forever and ever;  
he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.<sup>15</sup>

For a fuller exposition of this recognition of the wonderful structures of this universe, read Psalm 104 or Job 38–41. Psalm 19, which C. S. Lewis described as “the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world,”<sup>16</sup> exults in this beautiful order of creation and declares that, because it is so lovely and so consistent, it reveals very clearly the nature of its Creator:

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<sup>10</sup>James 1:17.

<sup>11</sup>Colossians 1:16–17.

<sup>12</sup>Hebrews 1:3.

<sup>13</sup>For a careful reflection on this, see Charles B. Thaxton and Nancy R. Pearcey, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994).

<sup>14</sup>See Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011).

<sup>15</sup>Psalm 148:3–6.

<sup>16</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 63.

## 52 DELIGHTING IN THE LAW OF THE LORD

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.<sup>17</sup>

Notice here how the psalmist refers to the speech and knowledge revealed by the creation. No random world could possibly reveal knowledge and speech, but only a world with consistent and trustworthy order. It is indeed on this foundation of the universe reflecting the integrity and trustworthiness of God himself that all the laws of science are built. We might even say that the discovery of any physical law is simply a discovery of the rational and trustworthy manner in which God has created the universe, and the way he governs the universe as one who is utterly faithful. Nature is not chaotic, but predictable. Without this, science would be impossible; and human life, or any other life, would not exist.

Just as the character of God is the foundation for physical laws, so his character is the foundation of moral law. The one true God defines in his own being what is holy, good, just, merciful, and right. Behind the laws that God gives to the human race stands the character of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. How does Scripture speak about the character of God? God is presented to us as the Holy One, the one who is perfect in righteousness. In his presence the cherubim and seraphim cry continually,

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory!<sup>18</sup>

The Lord who gives us his commandments is the righteous, awesome, and transcendent God. At the time that the law is made known at Sinai, God reveals himself in terrifying majesty and holiness. The people are warned to consecrate themselves in preparation for the Lord's coming

<sup>17</sup>Psalm 19:1–4 (see ESV footnote 2).

<sup>18</sup>Isaiah 6:3.

down on Mount Sinai “in the sight of all the people.” When he comes there is a storm theophany (an appearance of God) that is seen in the rest of Scripture as foundational to the knowledge of God:

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. . . . Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. . . . The sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.<sup>19</sup>

The writer of Hebrews refers back to this revelation and to its terrifying nature. But he does not do this to teach us that there was law at Sinai, and in contrast there is now grace in Christ.<sup>20</sup> Instead, he teaches us that the words given to us by Christ come with an even greater obligation to listen and to obey because Christ is the one who has come from heaven to speak, whereas the law was given at a mountain here on this earth.<sup>21</sup> Hebrews warns that we will not escape judgment if we fail to listen, and then the writer finishes with these words: “Let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”<sup>22</sup>

This description of the revelation of God’s holiness from Exodus 19 also appears repeatedly at the very end of the Bible, in the book of Revelation. Indeed, John alludes more frequently to this Exodus passage than to any other Old Testament text; so the Mount Sinai revelation with its thunder, lightning, smoke, fire, trumpet sounds, and loud voice returns again and again. Elements of the Sinai theophany appear in John’s vision of the heavenly throne<sup>23</sup> and at the climax of each series of judgments: the seals,<sup>24</sup> the trumpets,<sup>25</sup> and the bowls.<sup>26</sup>

The deeply significant issue here is that the holiness and fearful majesty of God revealed at Sinai are a true representation of what John

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<sup>19</sup>Exodus 19:16–19; see also 20:18.

<sup>20</sup>Many people have understood the Hebrews text in this way: “At Sinai there was law and judgment and fear; now in Jesus there is grace and mercy and love.” But this is not the point the writer is making, as should be clear above.

<sup>21</sup>Hebrews 12:18–29; see also John 3:13.

<sup>22</sup>Hebrews 12:28–29.

<sup>23</sup>Revelation 4:5.

<sup>24</sup>Revelation 8:5.

<sup>25</sup>Revelation 11:19.

<sup>26</sup>Revelation 16:17–18.

sees in heaven, and a true representation of what will be displayed on this earth in a far greater way at the end of this age; for then “the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire.”<sup>27</sup> Awesome holiness and terrifying justice are not some aspects of God’s revelation of himself that have been left behind at Sinai—they are eternally constant realities of who God is, realities that will never change.

We might respond, “But such perfect holiness is a problem, a terrifying problem for us!” Indeed it is; and that of course is why Jesus has come to save us from the judgment that should justly be ours. However, lest we flee to wishing that God were somehow less than perfect, so that we would not need to fear him, we need to think about the beauty of such holiness. Moral perfection is God’s nature, and so his character is the basis for affirming that this is a moral universe, a universe in which there is a distinction between good and evil, kindness and cruelty, justice and injustice. Without this doctrine of the perfect holiness of God, I would not be a Christian today.

## WHAT TURNED ME TO GOD

There were three big questions with which I wrestled as an unbeliever.

1. What does it mean to be human? Am I just a part of the physical universe, related ultimately to the molecule, the amoeba, the tree rat, and the whale, or is there some solid foundation for all the aspects of our human life that seem so different from other creatures in this world? How can I affirm the significance of the joys that I, and all others, experience? Is there any ultimate foundation to assure me that my life has any meaning, or am I simply an accident of time and chance in an ultimately meaningless universe?

2. Is there a foundation for distinguishing between good and evil? Does it really make any final difference whether one lives one’s life seeking to do what seems right, or are such distinctions meaningless because chance and death happen to everyone, to the good as well as the evil?

3. Is there an explanation for, and resolution to, suffering? Is there any meaningful account of the sorrows, the troubles, the evils of life

<sup>27</sup>2 Thessalonians 1:7–8.

in this world: or, again, is this all ultimately absurd? Will there ever be any overcoming of the suffering endured, any resolution to our sorrows, any wiping away of the tears that sometimes overwhelm us?

I came to the conclusion that there were no answers to these questions and became suicidal. Why bother to live if life is indeed absurd; if there is no foundation for human uniqueness; if there is no reason to distinguish right from wrong, so that it does not matter what I do; if there is no satisfactory explanation for suffering that will justify our tears; if there is no final victory over grief and death?

I had read much literature which told me that life without meaning was indeed the human condition: books by Thomas Hardy, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Ernest Hemingway; plays by Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, and Eugène Ionesco. I listened to music that gave me the same message: Richard Strauss's opera *Elektra*; music by Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, and many other singers and groups. In the mid-sixties a whole series of movies came out that insisted that there are no answers to these questions, and, to my undoing, I watched many of those movies: films by Bergman, Antonioni, Fellini, and Roman Polanski. (*The Silence*, *Wild Strawberries*, *Blow-Up*, *Juliet of the Spirits*, and *Repulsion* are some of the films I saw at that time.) Already in the 1960s in Britain and in all of Europe much of both intellectual and popular culture had a deep vein of despair and nihilism running through it. There seemed to be no answers to my questions—and in particular the second of these questions began to haunt me.

I read enough of Hindu scriptures to discover that no answer could be found there. In the Bhagavad-Gita there is a discussion between Lord Krishna and the man Arjuna. Arjuna asks the god whether he should fight for what is good and against the evil. The god replies that in the end there is no difference between the two, but that here in this world it might be needful for humans to strive for what appears good. This was not a satisfactory answer to my burning question. It affirmed my conviction that religion would not help my search for meaning. I did not at that time know the difference that the existence of the personal and infinite God would make.

What I had found was that in Hindu pantheism there is no ultimate distinction between light and darkness, good and evil, kindness

and cruelty, justice and injustice. Joseph Campbell, a passionate exponent of such views, said this:

“God” is an ambiguous word in our language because it appears to refer to something that is known. But the transcendent is unknowable and unknown. God is transcendent, finally, of anything like the name “God.” God is beyond names and forms. Meister Eckhart said that the ultimate and highest leave-taking is leaving God for God, leaving your notion of God for an experience of that which transcends all notions.

The mystery of life is beyond all human conception. Everything we know is within the terminology of the concepts of being and not being, many and single, true and untrue. We always think in terms of opposites. But God, the ultimate, is beyond the pairs of opposites, that is all there is to it. . . .

Heraclitus said that for God all things are good and right and just, but for man some things are right and others are not. When you are a man, you are in the field of time and decisions. One of the problems of life is to live with the realization of both terms, to say, “I know the center, and I know that good and evil are simply temporal aberrations and that, in God’s view, there is no difference.”

. . . Since in Hindu thinking everything in the universe is a manifestation of divinity itself, how should we say no to anything in the world? How should we say no to brutality, to stupidity, to vulgarity, to thoughtlessness?

. . . For you and for me—the way is to say yes.<sup>28</sup>

My conclusion was not to say yes to brutality, thoughtlessness, and evil, but to end my life. If this was indeed the nature of reality, then I no longer wished to be part of it. I left the university one day with the intention of throwing myself over a cliff. There, one step from eternity, I was held back by the order and beauty of the natural world around me. It was January, cold and with a harsh wind, but it was sunny and the skies were clear and blue. The trees were bare, but they still had beauty; there were no flowers, but the grass was green and alive. Titmice and nuthatches flitted through the dark branches or patrolled the trunks for insect larva. Though it was midwinter, it was glorious; and above all, it was not chaotic but, rather, full of patterns and consistency.

<sup>28</sup>Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Random House, 1991), 56–57, 82, 84.

This ordered structure of the natural world gave me the hope that I must keep on searching. If there could be such beauty, such order, even in winter, surely there had to be some other answer than meaninglessness to my questions. I walked back to the bus stop and returned to the university determined to keep looking. Though I did not know it at the time, I had experienced what David describes in Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech,  
and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words,  
whose voice is not heard.  
Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world.<sup>29</sup>

A few days later I was introduced to a Christian named Michael, who was prepared to take my questions and sense of absurdity as issues that needed addressing and answering with compassion, love, and careful reflection. I had met other Christians, but this was the first time one had taken my questions seriously and given the time to show that there were answers. My first serious introduction to the Bible was a study Michael did on the book of Ecclesiastes. He began by reading the first two chapters, which includes:

Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher,  
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.<sup>30</sup>

He went on to show how the book of Ecclesiastes says that if there is no holy God, if there is no judgment that separates good from evil, then life is absurd and one might as well despair of living. This was very shortly after I met Michael. He did not, at that time, know that I was struggling with the very question he addressed that evening. It was the first time in my life that I thought, “Maybe, there is a God, if he can lead one of his followers to speak about the very issue that had almost driven me to kill myself.”

<sup>29</sup>Psalm 19:1–4 (see ESV footnote 2).

<sup>30</sup>Ecclesiastes 1:2, RSV.

Ecclesiastes points to the answer to the question about good and evil that so haunted me. There is indeed a personal and infinite God with a character of perfect holiness who will call all of us to account for our actions, our words, and our thoughts. On the judgment day it will be revealed, despite all protests, that good is good and that evil is evil, for “there is no variation or shadow due to change” in God.<sup>31</sup>

His law, revealed in Scripture, and to the human conscience, is an expression of his holy character and demonstrates to us the ultimate reality of a moral universe. Just as there are physical laws that we can trust, and on the basis of which we can live our daily lives without fear of chaos, so there are moral laws that are just as fixed, just as inviolable. We live in a world where there is a constant accountability to the unchangeable character of God. This is beautiful, for without this, life would be impossible. This fixed moral reality gives us the confidence to face each day knowing that our lives have eternal significance. In every moral choice we make, we are casting stones into a pool and making ripples that go on forever.<sup>32</sup>

### **Questions for Personal Reflection and Group Discussion**

1. If humanity is the only source of moral values and law, can you think of any possible ways we might create values and laws for our society other than the four mentioned in this chapter: the individual, the majority, the powerful, or some ideology? We might take an opinion poll or vote in a referendum to get the majority view. Or we might ask Congress or the Supreme Court to decide for us. Do you see any problems with these various options?
2. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, “Man is condemned to be free. . . . condemned every moment to invent man.”<sup>33</sup> What do you think he meant by this? Would you be comfortable with having to invent what it means to be human each moment of your life?
3. Would it make you uncomfortable if you believed that you had to take the whole weight on your own back of deciding what is good and what is evil, not only for yourself, but also for everyone else? How well do you think you might do?

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<sup>31</sup>James 1:17.

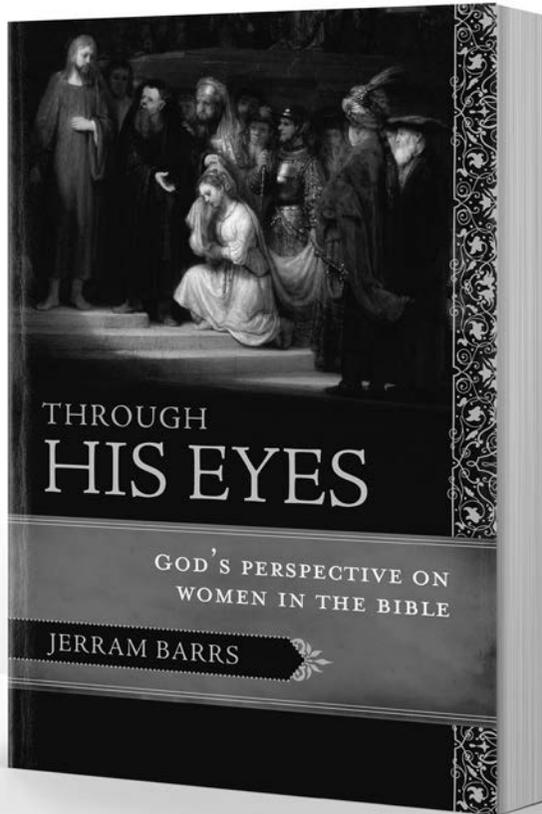
<sup>32</sup>This image of casting stones into a pool and making eternal ripples is one that Francis Schaeffer used repeatedly in his teaching.

<sup>33</sup>Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, 23.

4. What is your response to the emphasis of this chapter on God's character standing behind the physical laws of this world? Is this a new way of thinking for you? Do you find this comforting?
5. Have you understood the connection between God's law and God's character? Or have you sometimes thought of God's law as arbitrary and as simply an expression of his urge to tell us what to do? Have you ever been afraid that God might be a sort of heavenly tyrant, imposing arbitrary and despotic rules on us?
6. Have you, at any point in your life, struggled with the thought that life is absurd and that it ultimately makes no difference what we do? What caused you to wrestle with this issue? What has comforted you if you have had such thoughts?
7. Do you find God's perfect holiness only fearful because of the prospect of judgment that awaits us? Or do you find it wonderful that this aspect of God's character makes a sure foundation for affirming the significance of human choices and actions?



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