

# The Journey to Life

## *Christianity and Life*

The most important thing in life is...well, finding *life*. But where are we to find a life that is really worth living?

We have different answers to that question, of course. Some find meaning in “having a good time,” while others find it in the pursuit of wealth. Some want to find meaningful work; others hope to find a meaningful relationship. Some answers are rather, well, shallow. And some are deeper—at the level of our hearts—for our hearts need to be *engaged* in the pursuit of life if we’re going to find it.

Our hearts are the deepest most true part of us. There is nothing peripheral about our hearts. They are the real us. And if we divorce our hearts from the pursuit of life then we’ll end up with a *heartless* life!

This is critical, because Christianity is about *life*. It’s not primarily about religion, or social reform, or morality. Christianity is about uniting our deep hearts with the One who truly loves us and who wants to give us real, deep, *satisfying* life. For Christ said, “I’ve come that you may have life *abundantly!*” (John 10:10)

I find that a lot of people think they know what Christianity is, and they think it is religion. And they think this because, well, frankly, this is how Christians often appear to portray it. Christianity seems to be presented as being about moral behavior—religion. And to the extent that the church has declined into religion, it’s become weak and ineffective—because the church is not supposed to be primarily about religion or morality (or politics), but about love and truth—and life. No, true Christianity is the farthest thing from religion!

All religions teach a “Way.” Zoroaster, Buddha, Mohammad (meaning no disrespect; we all deserve respect), all pointed out what they believed was the “Way” to God. Buddha had his “Noble Eightfold Path,” and Mohammad taught the “Five Pillars,” all pointing to God through *religious* effort.

The curious thing is that, while other religious leaders taught about God, Jesus taught about *himself*. They all pointed out “the Way;” Jesus said *he* was the Way. He said, “*I am* the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). (Curious words from someone supposedly so humble.)

Whatever Christianity is, it’s about Christ, it’s about who *he* is and what *he* taught. It’s not what I think it might be, or what your experience of “Christians” might be, or even what “the church” says it is. We all have preconceived ideas. Let me ask you to lay them aside for a while and let’s see if we can find out what Christianity *is* all about and how it impacts our lives.

So, let’s take a journey, a journey of discovery—a journey that begins in our hearts. We’ll take a close look at the world around us and even some things that are beyond this world. We’re going to use the acronym G-R-A-C-E to help us along the way.

## *Beginning*

Socrates once remarked that, “philosophy begins in wonder.” We wonder why something is true, or why things work the way they do. Indeed, we see that all real inquiry about the world we live in begins with “wondering” questions.

When we were kids we asked lots of them. “Why does the sun come up everyday?” “Where do babies come from?” “How does an airplane fly?” And now as adults we continue to ask questions. One of the most important that we ask, and continue to ask, is “Who am I?” And it’s near cousin, “Where can I find a life that is truly satisfying?”

We have been in a kind of conversation with our hearts and with our world searching for the life we truly want to live. Some of us may have thought we could find life in athletics; for others, real fulfillment was in scholastic endeavor. Maybe for you it was fitting in with the right crowd, or maybe in some individual achievement. But, whatever it was, we all desire, long for, something—something that is *deep* in our hearts. What is it?

Our answers to this question usually begin on the borders of our lives. We want certain *things*—a nice car, some cool clothes, and lots of money. When we look deeper, however, we find that we long for pleasant, comfortable *circumstances*—good health, a successful career, a loving family, maybe a bit of fame.

But when we really search deep in our hearts we find that they really long for two things—first, *intimacy* or *belonging*, and second, *a life that has value* or *meaning*. Our poets call the first one *love*, and they describe the second as *glory*. And they wrap them both up into a *story*.

From the time that humanity could scratch upon a rock or gather around a camp fire we’ve been telling stories of love and glory. The epics of Homer, the tragedies of Shakespeare, the love stories of Austen, even our movies like *Star Wars*, *The Hunger Games*, and the recently released *Hidden Figures*, are all telling the same Story—our search for love and glory.

First, and perhaps most important, we long for *intimacy*. We long for a deep, intimate relationship with *someone*. Whoever it is, we want to be loved—truly, deeply loved. We want them to care for *us* and not for someone they want us to be. We want to be the key figure in a love story!

But love stories are in books and movies. Our lives are a lot more prosaic. *Our* loves just don’t seem to measure up to our dreams. They may start off fine, but they often end in disappointment and hurt. Sometimes deep hurt.

Then, secondly, we long for *glory*. We long to be noticed, to be recognized. We want others to appreciate what we do. It may not be something great, but we want others to see that it’s *significant*.

And there’s more to glory—it’s something outside our hearts but our hearts resonate with it. Think of watching a sunset on the beach with friends. Think about how calming it is to get out of the city and drive through quiet farmland or walk along a peaceful stream. Contemplate the sense of completion when justice is finally done for someone long neglected. It’s a feeling of connection, of completion, of...something truly satisfying.

We long to capture it, hold on to it *forever*. But it never lasts. It's gone the next morning when we get up and go to a job that has become a grind; or we have to deal with an uncooperative spouse. Life just doesn't measure up to our *deepest* longings.

What's happening here? Why is life often so *hard*?

Perhaps it's because we are looking for *deep* satisfaction in things that, while they are good, are not the deepest thing of all. Perhaps there is something at play here that we're missing—a Voice that speaks to us in all of this but we often miss it, because it's so *subtle*, so *beyond* our normal lives. Perhaps what we truly deeply long for is something *transcendent*.

Perhaps we long for God.

## G - God

I know that that might be somewhat startling to some of you. Most of us are used to thinking about God in a *religious* context. We often think that what God wants from us is blind obedience. But we need to think deeper for all clear thinking about the world we live in grounds itself in God and an accurate understanding of who he has revealed himself to be.

Our conceptions of God are often...fuzzy, and these fuzzy conceptions color our thoughts and attitudes, and, thereby, our relationship with him.

But who is he, really? There is probably no word in our vocabulary that is so ill-defined. He is everything from a spirit that animates life (like "The Force"), to a white-haired kindly old man living in the clouds. Well, the first thing we can do is ditch all of the immature, folk-religion stuff we often pass off about God. What we are interested in is mature, serious thinking, because, frankly, nothing is more important.

And, if it is important for us to know God, you would expect that God would give us some kind of help in finding him. And he has. As the Bible puts it, "He has not left himself without witness" (Acts 14:17). In fact, he has given us two Witnesses—an Outer Witness which comes to us from the world around us, and an Inner Witness which speaks to us from within our own hearts.

Take a look around. Take a *good* look. It's pretty clear that the universe is an awesome and amazing place. When we climb up to the stars we observe a heavenly dance that is both amazing in it's complexity, yet orderly in it's regularity. And when we descend into the micro-cell we see an intricacy that would blow-away a Swiss watch maker! It's as if the world was designed by a great Engineer. Everywhere we look the power of God—his incredible wisdom and might—is on display! This is part of the Outer Witness.

But the Inner Witness is something more *personal*, for we find that our Engineer can feel. There is more behind this world than design; there is creativity, personality; there is relationship. At the Heart of it all we find a Person, but not just any person. This is the Real Person. This is the One the Bible describes as the Three-in-One, the divine Person whose eternal love and glory radiates through the entire galaxy and beyond.

This Eternal Relationship between the Three-in-One God is the only basis for all *real* love and glory—for intimacy, kindness, justice, beauty, belonging, peace. Everything we long for is caught up in God, caught up in sharing in that Eternal Relationship. *This is the life that we were created for.*

And so, we come out at the same place the Bible begins—with creation. The Bible presents us with an incredibly powerful *Creator*, and yet a loving and gracious *Person*. One we can know; One who is present; One with whom we can have a relationship.

## *R - Relationship*

We find that we long for Something that is beyond the ordinary, Something that is beyond this world.

Indeed, this longing for transcendence is deep in the human heart. Ever since human history began we've been grasping for an answer. Every culture has some sort of Story, some sort of "meta-narrative." We have been searching for a story from the beginning, some sort of Big Story that would give our Little Stories some kind of meaning, some kind of context.

God is calling us. As the Bible puts it, "He has put eternity into man's heart,"—a longing for something beyond this world. We cannot hope to find life, any meaningful life, apart from our heart's deepest longings, and the deepest longings of our heart can find meaning only in the deepest Heart of all.

In all the world there is no creature that has the potential for real, deep, meaningful relationships as humanity. Why? Because we are created in the Image of God, that Image of interdependent Persons whose love and glory fills all of creation. The members of the Trinity are not independent Persons, but are intricately tied in a loving, interdependent relationship, sharing the glory of their love for One Another.

We were created for relationship as well. We were *not* created to be independent creatures, finding life merely in ourselves, but in *relationship* with each other, and especially with God. We are designed to be *immortal* creatures, not on our own, but reflecting back to God the love and glory he longs to share with us. The glory of humanity is to be filled with the love and glory of God, and then, in the way we live and love, sharing God's love and glory with the rest of creation.

Think of a mirror. When you stand in front of a mirror, the mirror reflects back to you the image that you give to it. It doesn't produce the image; it's just a reflection of it. And so it is with us. Only, the Image isn't external. It is an Image that fills our hearts on the inside, and reflects that Image toward the outside. Life, inside out.

We were created to share together with God the love and glory that is shared in the Trinity, and then to reflect that love and glory back into all of our relationships, human to human, and human to our world. This is our only hope of true love and glory.

In other words, our glory is our *dependence*. If we are to find any real meaningful life, we must receive it from God. We are dependent upon him for it; it only comes through a close fellowship with him.

Oh, but that's getting a little too close for comfort, isn't it? We grow uneasy. Let's be honest, we're not really sure we like this idea of being dependent upon God. And why? Because, frankly, we don't trust his heart. We're really not too sure about him. In the words of one of our poets, "we have all known enough pain to raise serious doubts about the world we live in."

Pain, hurt—we've all known our share, and it makes us wonder about the world we live in and the God who created it. If he is so good why does evil exist? Why is there so much injustice? Good questions.

And so, distrustful of God's heart, we move our hearts away from him. Perhaps it's safer to live life agnostically, keep the question of his existence in suspension, not get too close. Maybe it's best to find what life we can on our own.

And so we alienate ourselves from him—and from life.

## *A - Alienation*

In our pain, in our confusion, even in our anger and rebellion, we decide it is better to find what life we can have apart from God. So we distance ourselves from him, marginalize him, ignore him, perhaps even deny his existence altogether. It is better to live alone, pursue a life of independence, freedom! We look for some way to satisfy our longings without God.

And so we replace him; we exchange him for another god. We look for life in other kinds of relationships—careers, marriage, fashion, or drugs of some kind, whether booze, or TV, or sports—little gods we can control.

But the trouble with little gods is that they are little. They aren't big enough to fulfill our deepest desires. God tries to tell us that those things will never provide the kind of lasting satisfaction and joy we long for, and that in the end they will kill us. But we'd rather not listen. We think he is just being a mean-spirited spoilsport.

And so we slowly die.

Others are more outspoken in their rebellion. Chafing against God's love, they curse and often deny his existence altogether. "Forget him! We don't need him anyway!"

There are many of us, however, who cannot ignore or deny him. He is all too real. But he is still scary! But...perhaps we can placate him with good deeds, morality, or some other religious work. We fast, pray, perform, and sweat, all the time hoping that if we can just even out the scales of justice a little, maybe even earn a few points in our favor, then he'll be OK with us and leave us alone. (And all the time we have little gods, idols, that we worship on the side. And what a comfort they are to our hearts!)

But we're only fooling ourselves. Like children asking for money from their father so they can buy him a gift, we have nothing to offer him that isn't already his. With children it's cute; with adults it's, frankly, pathetic. Our efforts fall far short. What God wants is our absolute trust, to *surrender to his love*. But that would mean giving up our independence.

Marginalize, ignore, deny, placate. This is all evidence of what the Bible calls sin. (Oh, ugly word! Our culture objects! But it is a true word, nonetheless.) Sin is not just things we do, but it's living life on our own, alienating ourselves from the life of God, separating ourselves from him. Remember, we can't find life apart from the longings of our deep hearts, and our deep hearts find their home only in God. We can't find life apart from him. But, oh, we try!

But sin has consequences. For if we remove ourselves from the life of God, we end up alone, without life—dead. Like a TV set without a signal, life becomes just so much white noise—static!

It all begins in our hearts, for it is from our hearts that we are designed to live. We are to draw life from the deep well of God's life, and then filled with his love and glory, we reflect it back in all of our relationships. But we don't trust his heart. So we withdraw, move away from him. That distrust and rebellion is sin. It starts in our hearts and ends up in our behavior, for you can not separate the two.

And so worry, frustration, and anxiety turn into selfishness, greed, and lying—and theft, murder, and war. We construct a world without God. Like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, we've created a Monster, and now it's turned upon its creators and is devouring us!

We know that we are responsible for our behavior, and for our hearts that direct it. But we'd like for God to let us off. After all, when we lie, or cheat, or steal, well...we've got good reasons. "They stole from us first, and we wouldn't have cheated except we needed to pass that test." Good excuses.

And that is exactly what they are—excuses. Like grasping water with our hands, our words slip through our fingers as soon as they leave our lips. We know they hold no water with God.

Deep in our hearts we know that God is just. He deals with us all in the blinding light of truth, and we are exposed. He won't let us off. He takes the Monster seriously, and so should we.

So, we find ourselves caught between justice and grace—we deserve justice, yet we long for grace.

And it's just here, at the climax, like the cliff-hanger of an amazing love story, when we're sure that there is no way the lovers can ever come together...it's here that God pulls off the Great Surprise. He gives us justice *and* grace!

What? How can that be? How can God give us both?

By giving us Christ.



## C - Christ

To repeat, we're in trouble. Serious trouble.

The Small Story we're living in is killing us and every one we love. We've ended up creating a whole system of little gods to whom we've become enslaved. We've got to get back to the Big Story—we've got to restore our relationship with God.

But we're responsible for the wrong we've done toward him. We've got to face up to this and accept the just consequences of our indifference and/or our outright rebellion. We've chosen to live life apart from him; God honors that choice. To do so means eternity alone, forever by ourselves. And it's killing us. So we must face the music.

But, now comes the surprise.

When we face up to our sin, return to God and confess it—he removes it! He takes it all away.

How in the world?

God is no fool. He requires justice, yet he understands our dilemma, and, because he loves us, moves to do something about it. He comes to take our place.

God comes to earth. In the midst of our Great Dilemma, God shows up, takes care of the problem, and leaves us stunned. But wait, there is more to the Story.

God doesn't just take care of the payment for our sin, but he also takes care of our need for life. For after Jesus dies in our place, he rises out of the grave, conquering death—for us! For by his new life we now have life, through him.

And now we can see why Jesus is different than any other religious leader. He is not merely a "good teacher" come to show us the Way to life. He *is* the Life. We could not deal with our sin problem by religious works. It is not an issue of "balancing the scales of justice," for justice calls not for our efforts (which are puny anyway) but for our heads!

No, God deals with the Monster (and with us) by slaying it! He takes the whole bloody mess upon himself. Death to satisfy justice; resurrection to give us new life. Like Gandalf dying in the Balrog's grasp, Jesus defeats the Monster in his own death. Then, in the bittersweet silence that follows—and we assume that it's all over—Gandalf returns and leads his people into the Golden Age! (That part of the Story is yet to come, and what an ending it will be!) All great stories are just echoes of the Real Story.

And now we can see why Christianity is different, too. Religious efforts will not succeed in dealing with sin, and, more importantly, will not create life. And mere "faith" is no real help either! No, faith must have an object, and the object of true faith is Jesus—in his completed work for sin and for new life. We do not have to muster up good works or religious feelings. Think about it, a nervous person can fly just as easily as a confident one—resting in the seat of the airliner as it buzzes over the landscape!

Death for sin; resurrection for new life. It's available to us in Jesus.

So what's to be our choice? Face-up to our sin, repent and let God restore to us our heart's deepest desire—life in fellowship with him. Or turn away, continue in our isolation, and grasp what life we can eke out of our addictions. (Which is really no life at all.)

He provides the way. He has dealt with our sin problem. He now offers to give us new life. We can offer nothing in return—except to embrace him.

## *E - Embrace Jesus*

The rest of the Story is now up to you.

You can continue to marginalize and ignore him, finding what life you can in your addictions. (Although they are really killing you.) You can deny him, freak-out and scream that life is not fair. (You're right—it isn't fair that he should die for us. He did nothing wrong.)

Or you can embrace him.

How? Four steps—realize and repent, then believe and receive.

The first step is to wake up, to *realize* that you have fallen short of the kind of person that God created you to be—one who reflects his Image. You need to admit to God and to yourself that you have in fact greatly distrusted his heart, and that distrust has led you to move away from him and move into all sorts of false little gods. You need to repudiate them, and turn in humility to the One who really loves you. In other words, the realization of your sin should drive you to *repentance*.

That's an old word for a very valid attitude. Repentance means, "Stop! You're going the wrong direction!" So now turn back to the right one. If you're lost, the thing to do is stop, look at a map and consider your direction. And it doesn't demonstrate a lot of sense to then continue going the wrong way. The essence of wisdom is humility. You were wrong, now be right!

And the right thing to do is *believe*, to trust, that Jesus has already paid the penalty for sin and now offers to give you new life. You can't earn it; just *receive* it! When someone gives you a birthday gift, it's a slap in the face to offer to pay for it. They will appreciate it if you just say "thank you," and then enjoy the gift.

Enjoy the gift! Yes, rejoice in it, or rather him. That's what brings God great joy. Embrace the gift of Jesus. Let him become your very life and breath. Let him move into the deep places of your heart and fill you with his love. Then share him with a thirsty world.

The bottom-line—pray. Go ahead and talk to God. He'll understand you. He understands your heart.

You might say something like this (but use your own words, if you like):

*Father, I'm deeply aware of my true situation. I come to you in repentance, confessing that I am indeed a true sinner, confessing that, yes, I deserve to die, to spend eternity alone and separated from you. However, I now trust that Jesus has taken care of my sin, that it has all been paid for by him. Furthermore, I believe that he rose from the grave so that I might share new life with him. I repudiate all of the false life-givers I've tried to find life in, and I now embrace Jesus as my only hope. I invite you to come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. You be in charge now. You direct my heart into your good purposes. Not religion, but life—your life. Thank You!*

If that paragraph above expresses your heart, repeat it, in prayer, to the Father. Then, as you were once born into a life of addiction, now you will be born again into new life. Fresh life, every day. GraceLife.

## *Continuing*

*For those of you who want to dig deeper...*

The first thing you will want to do is to get to know more about Jesus and the Big Story. You will find him in basically two places. First, he lives in the hearts of those who love and trust him. You'll want to get around other Christians and fellowship with them. Let them help you with this new life. Of course, they are all still learning. They are not perfect. But the Bible is. So get into it, especially the New Testament. That is the collection of documents written by Jesus's disciples, the folks who knew him best. (I'd start with the Gospel of John.)

*And for those who still have questions...*

We all still have questions, none of us have arrived; so keep seeking, because there are answers.

I've tried to anticipate as many questions as I could in this little booklet. Perhaps what I've done is raise more questions than I've answered. Good! Honest questions are the gateway to truth.

Go to it! Dig deeper. The effort is really worth it!

Refuse simplistic answers, but don't overlook things that seem simple. Don't confuse impressive credentials with wisdom, and don't get drawn into the confusing comfort of a skeptic's pained heart. Look deeper. Things are not always what they seem.

Don't give up, for what is at the end of the search is worth all the toil.

Start with the Bible, especially the Gospels. You might want to start with the Gospel of John, from which much of this booklet was drawn.

And I'd look around for some good people to talk with. But avoid two kinds: scoffers, who reject all answers, and religious bigots, who claim to know all the answers. It's too easy to be one of those, and you don't want cheap, easy answers.

No, look for people who have struggled, people who have open hearts and informed minds, people who have walked the path of pain, yet have not soured on the hope of life.

You will recognize them in two ways. First, they will have a firm grasp on truth, which is the Word of God, the Bible. And yet, secondly, they will not be arrogant about it! You will be drawn by their love, curious about their perspective, and appreciate their humility. You'll be intrigued by the glory that surrounds them, though it doesn't come from them. They give all the glory to the One to whom it is due. They are just reflections of his Image. And how much the world desperately needs them, because the world desperately needs God! Become one of them.

Here are some good places to start digging:

*Mere Christianity*, by C.S. Lewis

*The Reason for God*, by Tim Keller

Also check out these websites:

[bethinking.org](http://bethinking.org)

[redeemer.com/learn/skeptics\\_welcome/how  
can\\_i\\_know\\_god/](http://redeemer.com/learn/skeptics_welcome/how_can_i_know_god/)

[satisfiedinjesus.org/](http://satisfiedinjesus.org/)

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