

I BELIEVE

by Greg Albrecht



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Introduction

The resurrection is the foundation of Christian faith. Without the resurrection, the crucifixion of Christ would merely be a martyrdom. Without the resurrection the Cross could only symbolize the victory of death over life.

But the resurrection of our Lord and Savior changes everything! The resurrection offers each of us a new identity. Because of our risen Lord, by his grace, God offers us new life!

Just before he resurrected Lazarus—just a few days before his own death and resurrection—Jesus said to Mary “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (John 1:25-26).

Happy Easter!



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The Cross of Christ

Have you ever considered how strange it is that the symbol of capital punishment in the Roman Empire has come to be worn around our necks and to adorn church steeples?

If the clerk at the market where we buy groceries started wearing a necklace with a gold symbol of an electric chair on it, I would probably assume he or she is a fan of a new suicidal alternative rock group. If I stop at a traffic light and the car in front of me sports a bumper sticker with a hangman's noose, I will definitely avoid eye contact with the driver.

But I wear a cross around my neck. An ugly instrument of cruelty and torture reminds me of the love of Jesus I once didn't know about, but now by God's grace I do. It reminds me that not only did Jesus die on the cross, but that I too have died, for Jesus comes to live his life only in men and women who have given up their lives to follow him.

The cross reminds me that time and eternity intersected 2,000 years ago. God, in the person of Jesus, was voluntarily born into humility and poverty in a stable in Bethlehem. As the Lamb of God, he voluntarily poured out his life on the cross that we might be forgiven of our sins. He rose from the tomb, just as he said he would, that we might live. The cross reminds me of his birth, his death and his resurrection.

Of these central events in Christ's life, the resurrection has priority. Without the resurrection, the cross is simply a reminder of the tragedy that God became one of us in order to save us, but in the end we rejected him. Without the resurrec-

tion, the nativity scene serves only to commemorate the birth of God in the flesh, who lived and died. The resurrection gives meaning, focus and vision to the crib and cross, as well as to our lives.

"If all the Resurrection means is that Jesus' spirit lives on like Abraham Lincoln's or Adolf Hitler's but that otherwise he is just as dead as anybody else who cashed in 2,000 years ago, then, as St. Paul puts it, 'our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain' (1 Corinthians 15:14). If the enemies of Jesus succeeded for all practical purposes in killing him permanently around A.D. 30, then like Socrates, Thomas More, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King and so on, he is simply another saintly victim of the wickedness and folly of men, and the cross is a symbol of ultimate defeat" (*Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner, page 32).

Jesus' disciples "didn't get it" until the resurrection. Neither do we. We don't know how to make sense of God coming into our world to live and die, unless and until we realize that he rose from the dead and that he lives today. The fact that God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die for our sins is wonderful. But if the Son simply died for our sins, we would have no victory celebration—we would simply experience remorse.

The resurrection event is the mystery of the ages (Colossians 1:26-27), because it sets the stage for Christ to give us new life, life eternal. The resurrection is a paradox, but not a contradiction. Jesus did not triumph over death by refusing to die. He died that we might live, and because he is risen we are given new life—his life—now and forever.

That's the reason the cross I wear is empty. Jesus was there once, but not anymore! Once he was in the tomb—buried—but not anymore! He is alive. He is risen. And so are all of those who believe in him and accept the new life that only he can give. (*Adapted—originally published March/April 1999*).

Grace Under Pressure

As I started reading the letter, the writer assured me that I should not take his comments too personally. But, as I continued reading, the letter seemed extremely personal. The writer was taking issue with my Christian beliefs. Each page was more hostile than the one before, until after eight pages the writer signed off with these words, “May you burn in hell—your brother in Christ.”

I stared out the window, wondering, *Should I respond? Was this letter simply a hate-filled diatribe, nothing more? Or, in spite of the negative emotions expressed, was there a message for me?*

My thoughts traveled back to the days of King David of Israel. It was a painful and bitter time in David’s life. David’s son, Absalom, was conspiring against him. David was traveling, accompanied by his special guards and soldiers, when a protester named Shimei started to throw rocks at King David and curse him.

One of David’s soldiers, Abishai, said: “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and cut off his head” (2 Samuel 16:9). But David felt that God may have sent Shimei with a message for David and allowed Shimei to continue cursing and throwing rocks. The Bible simply says, “So David and his men continued along the road while Shimei was going along the hillside opposite him, cursing as he went and throwing stones at him and showering him with dirt” (2 Samuel 16:13).

Christianity can involve being gracious enough to listen to what others have to say. No one likes to listen—especially if negative com-

ments are launched in our direction. But in spite of the fact that criticism may be delivered with anger and animosity it may actually include some truth worth considering. We should not necessarily write off the message just because the messenger is flawed!

Patient and wise listening is emotionally draining, especially if it includes a personal attack. When a personal attack is part of criticism, try not to respond by losing your cool. Reacting in kind may give us a momentary narcotic-like feeling like “well, I really showed him/her,” but the reality is that such reactions are almost always counterproductive.

Living with criticism is part of Christianity. During his ministry, Jesus experienced very few days when he was not being openly taken to task. Most of the great men and women of the Bible learned what it is like to live with harsh criticism; criticism that is usually unwarranted, sometimes containing grains of truth and is occasionally accurate and incisive.

Here are a few thoughts to keep in mind the next time you are the object of a verbal thermo-nuclear war: (1) Listen. (2) See if the shoe fits. (3) Wait long enough before responding so that you do not respond in kind. (4) Thank your critic. Thanks is appropriate for those who are honestly trying to be helpful while taking some of the wind out of the sails of those who are not. (5) Realize that not all criticism is equal. Ask God for thick skin as you listen to those who are unreasonable gossips, those who are projecting their own inadequacies and sin onto you and those who have a grossly distorted view of their own wisdom and insight.

During those times when bad news piles up faster than good news, I am often encouraged by considering a quote I have posted in my office. Someone sent it to me, presuming to speak for God. “Do not feel totally, personally, irrevocably responsible for everything. That’s my job. Love, God.” (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2000*).

Two Kinds of Christians

There are two kinds of Christians in the world: 1) Those who know they have been saved, and 2) those who want to be saved but are not sure if they have been or when they will be. Virtually all Christians believe that at the very least they have an outside chance of being saved—even if that chance is a snowball’s chance in a hot place.

The last thing Jesus said on the cross before he died was, “It is finished” (John 19:30). All that needed to be done for our salvation was finished. His work, in his life and on the cross, was over. Our debt of sin had been paid. The atonement was accomplished. Jesus came to give us life, and those who accept him, believe on him, trust in him and follow him are given eternal life. We are saved because of what Jesus did, not what we do or ever will do. Salvation is all about him—it’s not about us.

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he didn’t mean that he did his part, now it was up to us to do our part. Jesus didn’t mean that once we completed enough good deeds, combined with all of his righteousness, together we could just manage to tip the salvation scales in heaven in our favor.

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he was not talking about his work on our behalf as being a down payment and that our part would be to keep up the monthly payments until God would finally be satisfied that we are good enough.

Jesus meant what he said in terms of salvation and what it takes to be saved. “It is finished.” The debt is paid. He paid a debt that he did not owe because we owed a debt that we could not pay.

God is not obligated by anything we do, because nothing we can do will ever be enough to pay for the debt we have. Nothing we produce gives us any leverage or bargaining power with God.

The problem with thinking that we might not be saved, that we might not “make it,” that our salvation is based upon barely squeaking past the Pearly Gates when God isn’t looking or upon catching God on a good day when he’s feeling generous—the problem with this thinking is that it’s not about Jesus. It’s not about giving credit to the cross of Christ. It’s about calling attention to stuff we do and stuff we believe.

The idea that salvation is a combination of grace plus works is one of the reasons that churchianity is the competitive enterprise that it is—with denominations vying for the “only true” way to salvation. Of course, some churches and pastors are too clever to come out and say they are the “only way to salvation.” Instead, we hear talk about “distinctives,” “greater insight,” “higher calling” or “deeper conversion.”

What are they really saying? In case you missed it, here’s the translation. “You will have a better chance to be saved—perhaps the only chance to be saved—in our church—the other churches may be sincere and nice people, but they are sincerely deceived.”

In marketing, promotions and advertising it’s called an exaggerated truth claim. Make a claim about your product or service that is so compelling that people cannot bear to be without it. You may have to bend the truth “a little”—that’s why it’s called an exaggerated truth claim.

Jesus said that he did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. If you’re looking for salvation, the cross is where you will find it. You will not find it anywhere else. Don’t be fooled by performance religion that requires you to jump through legalistic hoops. The cross is the only piece of “real estate” worth enough to offer salvation to all who ask. The cross is the bedrock of truth, not some exaggerated truth claim. (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2001*).

Tough Times for Atheists

Immediately after the events of September 11, 2001, atheists triumphantly asked, “Where was God?” thinking that this tragedy dealt a lethal blow to faith. But within only a few days atheists stopped asking about God’s whereabouts and started complaining about his omnipresence.

There were public gatherings, memorial services and even events in sports stadiums which democratically elected public officials actually called “prayer meetings.”

Many of these gatherings, services, events and meetings were held in public stadiums, parks and buildings. Some, of course, were held in churches, synagogues and mosques—and those were not particularly a problem for atheists. But the use of public property for services dedicated to God funded with tax-payers’ money? A difficult pill to swallow if you are among the small percentage of Americans who profess to be atheists.

Then there were all the speeches, tributes and prayers themselves—constant references to God. After all, it is difficult to pray, “To whom it may concern.” Prayer, by its very nature, is an act on the part of created humanity in deference, respect and worship to the Creator.

Apart from the overt prayers themselves, the tributes and services included appeals to God, worship of God, acceptance of humanity as his special creation, requests for God’s comfort and thanksgiving for his love. President George W. Bush continually mentioned God, with many military leaders and other government officials doing the same.

Let’s not forget the songs. Atheists are not particularly worried about religious hymns that

invoke a Christian, Jewish or Muslim God, but there are those pesky American songs. Songs like “God bless America.” Songs like “America the Beautiful” suggesting that “God shed his grace on thee.”

Then there’s the education problem. You know, the public schools where prayer is not allowed. Those places where atheists thought that they had successfully pronounced God to be dead and prayer to him as therefore meaningless, obsolete and even illegal in this pluralistic society. Well, not only were prayers being offered in public schools, but some students made their profession of faith by folding dollar bills to show only the phrase, “In God We Trust” and pinning them to their shirts.

While we’re talking about schools, atheists are really upset about the Pledge of Allegiance being said in schools again. Even atheists remember that the Pledge includes the affirmation, “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” Not just a mention of God, but *under God*?

Atheists are upset. All this talk about God is making them uncomfortable. If my sources are accurate, some atheists are planning to employ high powered constitutional lawyers to argue that this nation should not speak of itself as trusting in God. Atheists say they will take their case to the Supreme Court if necessary.

These are tough times to be an atheist. But atheists may wish to consider the irony that Christian influences allow them freedom of expression. It may be tough to be an atheist in the United States, but few atheists are moving to Afghanistan.

Patrick Henry said it best: “It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religions, but on the gospel of Jesus Christ. For this very reason peoples of other faiths have been afforded asylum, prosperity and freedom of worship here.” (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2002*).

Breakfast at the Beach

Everything in the life of Jesus pointed to one brief moment in time that would change everything once and for all. The Gospels continually tell us that even though Jesus told his disciples that his death, burial and resurrection was the sign that he was who he said he was, they could not bring themselves to believe. They consistently denied the possibility that Christ would be crucified.

Because the disciples denied that Jesus would be crucified, they certainly did not believe that he would be resurrected. Even after they saw that the tomb was empty, they concluded that someone must have taken his body. The fact that Someone resurrected him and glorified his body did not immediately occur to them.

The disciples were disillusioned and defeated. They did what we all do when we have a setback—go back to the past, retreating to our comfort zone. Before Jesus called the disciples they were fishermen. So after their world crumbled, Peter announced, “I’m going out to fish” (John 21:3).

Peter and his friends returned to Galilee. Still in a state of denial they ran, trying to reclaim, restore and rescue their past. In those days much of the fishing on the Sea of Galilee was at night. The disciples, in spite of being professional fishermen, worked all night and caught nothing. Failure and frustration continued. Not only had they devoted three years of their lives to Jesus only to see the tragedy in Jerusalem shatter their hopes and dreams, but now they couldn’t even do what they used to do well.

Jesus appears. He tells them where to catch fish. They catch so many that they are unable to

haul in their net. Jesus starts a charcoal fire and prepares breakfast for his runaway disciples. Once again Jesus is with them, serving them, talking with them and sharing a meal with them. Everything was back to normal. It might have seemed to them that they would be able to go back to the way things were. But they couldn’t go home again. Everything was new. The cross and the empty tomb had changed everything.

Jesus was putting the exclamation point on the significance of his resurrection as he cooked for and ate with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. Jesus told his disciples that he wanted them to feed his sheep—he did not want them to return to fishing. His disciples had been practicing Jews who lived under the old covenant. Jesus did not want them to go back. He did not want them to put new wine into old wineskins.

Jesus wanted his disciples to serve as the foundation of his resurrected body—the church. The disciples would be transformed into apostles—Christians who lived under the new covenant. It was a fresh start. A new world was beginning.

Jesus welcomes them back even though they had denied him and run away. He finds them in Galilee and brings good news. What had seemed to be an apparent disaster in Jerusalem had been turned into overwhelming victory. Life wasn’t over for them, a new life was just beginning.

My wife and I have an Easter Sunday morning tradition. We attend sunrise services, then go to breakfast. The service we attend is not a black-tie affair, and because we leave our home early in the morning for services, we dress casually. It’s not a fancy meal—some eggs and pancakes. But it is a meal that Jesus cooks for us every year. Every year he calls us to a new start, a new life, a renewal of our lives in him. Every year he directs our focus to the cross and the empty tomb as the cornerstone of our faith. Every year he reminds us to move forward in him. He is risen. He is risen indeed! (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2003*).

Staying Alive

With all of our advances in technology and machinery, North Americans still find planting, growing, harvesting, shopping for, preparing and consuming food, a necessary, expensive and time consuming part of staying alive. We're just as dependent upon food today as Israel was upon God's daily provision of manna.

In a similar way, our spiritual lives are dependent upon the Bread of Life. The Bible tells us that we have no spiritual life without our Lord and Savior. He gives us new life and sustains that life. The Lord invites us to sit down at his table. He is our host, issuing an invitation to come and eat. He is also the entrée—the manna from heaven which we eat and drink (John 6:53-58).

Enter religion. The simple and profound eternal significance of Jesus, our Bread of Life, is not enough for religion. Legalistic religion always seeks to "improve" biblical Christianity. Religion insists that Jesus is not enough, and that we need more than the spiritual food he provides.

Religion convinces us that we must produce our own food, that we must enter God's spiritual kitchen and perform like a frenzied short-order cook, frantically mixing, blending, frying, baking and broiling. But God has not invited us into the kitchen. Our place is sitting down at the Lord's Table, not stewing in the kitchen.

Religion not only mandates that we have a hand in producing the spiritual food we need, it also gives strict lists and precise recipes that we must follow. Religion assures us that our compliance to its formulas and cookbooks will enable us to help manufacture our salvation.

Religion assures us that our performance as chief-cook-and-bottle-washer will produce a product that is pleasing to God. Ingredients vary, but they always focus on how often we must do specific things. In the end, all of this effort leads us to be slaves of religion. Religion effectively convinces us to cook our own spiritual goose!

Religion promises to produce righteousness and fix spiritual problems by adjusting and increasing physical performance. If we rely on religion's recipe for our salvation we will wind up like the man in one of Mark Twain's stories.

Mark Twain tells of a man who was terminally ill, but his doctor told him that he would recover if he would stop drinking, smoking and overeating. He followed the doctor's instructions and his sickness disappeared. Shortly thereafter, he was talking to a friend who was suffering from the same symptoms. The man who had recovered told his friend he should do exactly what his doctor had told him—stop drinking, smoking and overeating. His friend said, "But I've never done any of those things. I can't stop doing what I never did!" The man who had recovered after following his doctor's orders shook his head and said, "Well, I guess you're sunk then."

Religion will always sink us. We will always be left with some impossible treatment regimens. Something to stop doing that we may have never done in the first place. We can never satisfy all of the demands of religion because religion, and all of its potions and pills, is powerless to produce God's righteousness in our lives.

Jesus Christ has a different way to produce what he wants us to become. He tells us he is the Master Chef, and that there is room for only one cook in his kitchen. He is both the cook as well as being the perfect ingredient for the Bread of Life.

Jesus then invites us to his table, where *He* is being served. The end product of biblical Christianity is what God has done. For religion, the end product is what humans have done, are doing and will do. At whose table are you eating? (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2004*).

Our Victory Cry

It's one of two times in the year when churches have their highest attendance. It's without a doubt one of the most meaningful times of the year for Christians—but Easter lilies, Easter hams, bunny rabbits and painted or chocolate eggs can take our attention away from the vital life-giving significance of this spiritual victory we celebrate every spring.

Easter signals new life springing from what is seemingly dead and lifeless. Gray gives way to green. Light overcomes darkness. The light and life that comes bursting from an empty tomb triumphs over death on the cross—a stark, ugly instrument of torture and death.

Every spring we see a new creation story when God brings light into our reality, entering the darkness of our lives with the marvelous Light of his Son (Genesis 1:3-4; John 1:4-5). By the Light of the world we are “rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Colossians 1:13-14).

It was in the season of his earthly life when Jesus lived out his passion, making atonement for us on his cross, and triumphing over the grave by rising from the tomb. Christians celebrate Jesus' conquest over death with the victory cry, “He is risen!” It's our fight song, our rallying point, the center of our faith. Every year “He is risen” reconfirms the glory of Jesus' victory and reinforces the reality of the resurrection life he lives in those who believe in him and trust him implicitly (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20). He is not dead. He is alive—he is risen!

The Creator of the universe (Colossians 1:16) entered into the womb of the Virgin Mary, being born into the world just as we are. He became one of his creation, dwelling and residing among us (John 1:14).

Why did he come? 1) He came to rescue us because he loves us. 2) He came to die on the cross for you and me. 3) He came to fully reveal God so that we might know God and be given new and eternal life (John 17:3).

Jesus did not rescue us by refining or modifying religion. Jesus did not save us by founding another religion. Jesus did not die on the cross for a religious cause. It was religion that put him on that cross—*Jesus died to save us from religion.*

Religion, from the day of Jesus' birth to the day of his resurrection, was hostile to Jesus. Religion killed Jesus then, and it continues to war against Christianity today (John 15:18-19; 16:2). From the birth of the body of Christ, religion has attempted to eliminate Christianity by either killing believers or by misrepresenting and counterfeiting the teachings of Jesus Christ.

All religion, in any form (including religion that clothes itself with Christ's name but denies his power) asserts the fundamental importance of human deeds, works and performance. Religion is any system of belief and practice that assures us that our performance can gain us a higher standing with God than we would have otherwise enjoyed. That hypothesis is the polar opposite of the gospel and the enemy of Christ!

Religion is a pre-Christian innovation, a system of behaviors and practices that promises divine blessing in return for human obedience and fidelity. Religion existed long before the birth of our Lord and was in large part the reason why he came. He came to signal the end of religion and the beginning of new life, a life he brings to all of us, without cost. Christianity is thus not a religion at all, but a way of life that is opposed to religion and all of its potions and prescriptions.

The history of religion is filled with egocentric appeals persuading us that we are the center of

reality. Religion, at its core, is humanistic. Religion is attractive because it places humans in the driver's seat, seemingly able to control our destiny, able to determine what God will think of us.

Religion enslaves its followers, addicting them to the idea that what they do can please and appease God. Religion in the name of Jesus Christ offers to improve upon what Jesus has done, to modify and even counterfeit him, thereby offering a false gospel and a bogus salvation.

Religion that exists within Christendom diminishes the importance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, as opposed to authentic Christianity, which insists that Jesus Christ is the ground zero of our lives. Religion serves an intoxicating and heady brew that bewitches humans (Galatians 3:1) into believing that human effort, performance and works are in the spotlight—at the center stage of our relationship with God. True Christianity points to the work of Jesus Christ alone as the only source of our salvation. Jesus alone, the Light of the world, is worthy to occupy the spotlight. Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone. It's all about him, not about us!

Jesus rescues us from a world that is groaning under the heavy burden of oppressive religion. Jesus' glorious resurrection from the dead is also our glory, by God's grace. Jesus' victory is our own, by God's grace. By grace, Jesus' life is the life we now live. He is the center of our lives. We belong to him, not on the basis of *our* goodness, but on the basis of *God's* goodness.

That's why the passion of Jesus, culminating in Easter, is so important. That's why "He is risen" is our victory cry. Jesus' resurrection is a time for us to sharpen our eternal focus and wrap our minds around the Chief Cornerstone of our faith (Ephesians 2:20). Every spring, as "life springs eternal" God reminds us that eternal life does not come from any human source. We can think of Jerusalem, an old rugged cross and a tomb cut out of rock. They are both empty. He is alive—he is risen! (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2005*).

Why Does Bad Stuff Happen?

Hi. My name is Susie. I'm a teenager, and I'm just wondering—if there is a God, why are there wars, people starving and bad stuff like that? If there is a God, why are people who say they believe in him blowing themselves and others up all the time? God never gets hurt, but those who believe in him do. Why should I believe in him?

It's a question I have answered many times, but this time it hit me in a new and profound way. Maybe because it was from a young person. Maybe because of what seemed to be Susie's dilemma—that she wanted to believe in God, but she just couldn't.

Where is God when planes and buses and trains are blown up by suicide bombers? Where is God when people die every day because of hunger and malnutrition? Does our world of terror and violence and inhumanity disprove the very idea that God exists?

For the record, here's the short answer I gave to Susie:

Susie, this is a question we all struggle with. Many, instead of asking why God lets bad stuff happen, ask why he permits suffering and evil. But I think your term—"bad stuff" might be more descriptive.

The argument that God does not exist because bad stuff (evil) happens is an old one—and it's just as flawed today as it ever has been. If bad stuff only ever happened to humans and never to God, then we might have some reason to question God and if he really exists.

But the truth is that God, in the person of Jesus, came to our world and personally experienced lots of

“bad stuff.” Even though Jesus never did anything to hurt anyone, he was betrayed, hated and finally killed. He came to tell us that bad stuff won’t last forever. That’s why the ultimate meaning in life is found in him—his life, his death and his resurrection.

Susie’s question is not just her question—it’s a perplexing problem, maybe the biggest question that any one of us will ever encounter. I gave Susie a short answer—as much as I thought she could comprehend at the time. But what about you and me—how do we answer the question?

Why does God allow suffering, heartache, misery?

Why do senseless tragedies occur?

Why do “good people” suffer?

Why does God let little children die and suffer horrible pain?

Where is God when life hurts?

There are several possible logical answers:

1) *Bad stuff happens because God doesn’t exist.* There is no supreme, loving, moral authority. We’re on our own. It’s time and chance, it’s survival of the fittest.

2) *God exists, and bad stuff happens because he doesn’t care.* Our pain and suffering is not a priority with him.

3) *God exists, and he does care, but he is just not powerful enough to stop bad stuff from happening.* This option means that God is not God—for he lacks the power to stop evil.

As a person who believes in the God of the Bible, I can’t accept any of those first three logical possibilities. There must be another explanation.

4a) *God allows bad stuff to happen for the same reason he allows us to live.* If God were to remove sin and suffering from the universe overnight he would have to remove all human choice and decision making.

4b) *God allows bad stuff to happen because it’s part of the way we come to know him.* Our God is not emotionally removed from the world in which we live or the sufferings we endure. He knows our pain, because he has visited our planet and consequently knows our human predicament firsthand. Isaiah foretold a Savior who

would be “familiar with suffering” (Isaiah 53:3).

The Bible tells us that God loves us, that he is approachable and available, and that even though he knows all about us he still wants us to know him and enjoy an intimate relationship with him.

Why does God allow bad stuff to happen? Here’s a brief summary:

A) *Bad stuff is the necessary and unavoidable consequence of free will.* We humans are given the opportunity to choose, and in giving us options, God gives us freedom to make bad choices and decisions that can lead to bad stuff.

B) *Bad stuff happens because of the wrong choices men and women can and do make.* Selfishness, malice and hatred all have negative consequences. One of the lessons of history is, apart from God, bad stuff will continue to happen because of human lust, pride and greed.

C) *Bad stuff that happens is not meaningless for Christians—there is hope beyond bad stuff!* In the person of Jesus, God himself has suffered in the flesh. He has paid a price he did not owe because we owed a price we could not pay. He has paid the price for all the bad stuff of all time through his own suffering and death.

The ultimate answer to all the bad stuff that happens (and ever happened) is found in the sacrificial death of Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29; Revelation 13:8). We may not completely understand why bad stuff happens, but we do know that God not only allows it to happen to us, he didn’t declare himself immune to the suffering we endure.

But the story of our salvation and redemption does not end with the price Christ paid for us on his cross. The cross was not and is not the end. The good news continues—he was buried and he rose victoriously. The resurrection of our Lord is the good news we all so desperately need! Because of the life, death and resurrection of our Lord, all the bad stuff is overcome through the new life of Christ he offers to us (John 5:24). Discover the new life he can and will live in you! (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2006*).

Failure to Think

Aristotle is credited with saying that it is a mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it. That same attribute is one of the hallmarks of a Christian life. The idea of entertaining a thought before deciding to accept it presupposes careful thinking.

I'm sure that every generation laments that it seems its youth have lost the ability to think, and let me join the parade. But let's not just make this a rant about young people. Lack of critical thinking is not a deficiency restricted to our youth, but it seems like irrational actions abound in all age groups. For example, let's think and talk about a topic we can't talk about almost anywhere (even in church) for fear of offending someone. Let's talk about religion.

In the world of religion, thinking can land you in hot water. No doubt about it. So why should I encourage you to think about religious stuff? [Note: If you are unfamiliar with my take on religion, think about this: *Religion is the unbiblical idea that our performance earns us a higher standing with God than we would have otherwise enjoyed. Religion says that humans control their relationship with God on the basis of their attempts to be good and their abstinence from evil behavior.*]

Failing to think is what religion counts on to enslave us to its edicts, dogmas and traditions, as compared with the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Bad news religion" would be out of business if most religious folks started to think (that's something worth praying about).

The problem is that most people don't go to church to think; they go to church for answers.

Nothing wrong with answers, but have you carefully considered the ministry of Jesus? He raised far more questions than answers, and he often didn't directly answer questions he was asked.

Does Jesus want us to think—to carefully consider the claims of religion? You bet he does! Just read Matthew 23 sometime. Many otherwise sound-minded, rational people regularly check their brains at the door of their place of worship. At most other times, these same people balance their checkbooks, drive within the speed limit (almost anyway!) and are able to engage in normal conversations with others.

But when some enter into a place of worship, they willingly suspend critical thinking, and in effect seem to say, "Here I am. I am spiritual silly putty. Crank up the atmosphere, mesmerize me, place me in an altered state of consciousness, make me feel good—take me to any emotional destination you wish. I'm here to be entertained and escape the real world. I'm not going to think—I'm just going to emotionally react."

In the name of God, millions within the world of Christendom sit in cathedrals, sanctuaries and warehouse-like mega-churches and blindly allow the religious authorities to tell them what the Bible *really means*. You see, according to some religious authorities, the Bible doesn't mean what it appears to. That's assuming the Bible makes it into the sermon at all, for in some religious environments people are assured that their religious leader has transcended that silly old book, and under his or her leadership and teaching they, too, can leave the Bible behind.

Millions not only accept anything their religious authority tells them about the Bible, but then they allow that authority to tell them what to do and when to do it—and what kind of look to have on their face while they're doing it.

Just in case I haven't ruffled enough feathers already, let's discuss *one of the most illogical of all core religious beliefs. The average religious person assumes (because they have been deceived by religion) that they are better than other religious persons.*

There is, of course, no biblical rationale for such a silly conclusion. In fact, it's so arrogant and unbiblical that while many churches covertly teach such a thing (after all, it's one of the main ways to keep folks coming back) they have long-winded, carefully written statements to say that they don't really teach what they have indoctrinated their members to fervently believe.

How do you arrive at the conclusion that you are religiously superior by studying the Bible? You don't. How do you come to such a conclusion if Jesus is living his life within you? You don't. You need religious brainwashing to seduce you into accepting such a preposterous conviction.

We will always see ourselves as better than most folks, that's natural. But along comes religion and gives us a big boost—we are not just better, we are *superior*. So there we are, lined up in the religious drive-thru, waiting for our “God-fix” (remember, I'm talking about the idea that God is so impressed with all the religious rituals we perform that we can actually cause him to love us more), and when we get up to the window religion asks us if we want to supersize our natural pride. Of course we do! And when we are religiously supersized, we come away thinking we are better than others—we are the *chosen*, the *only*, the *called*, the *select*—the *best*.

All of this is a clever counterfeit, because God actually does supersize us. But when God makes us better he tells us that we can only be special to him because of his grace. He tells us that there is only One who is unique—Jesus (John 1:16). If Jesus lives his risen life within us, we become God's very own children. *How supersized is that?*

The message of the resurrection of our Lord is an invitation to think. He won the victory over death and the grave. He triumphs over all powers, principalities and religions. He alone is worthy of our worship. He invites us to come to him, to examine the promises he gives us and to live the life that he will lead within us.

He is risen! It's a fact—think about it. (*Adapted—originally published March/April 2007*).