

THE REASON FOR OUR HOPE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

CHRISTIANITY AND ITS CRITICS

“God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

MARTIN LUTHER said of John 3:16 that it is the Bible in miniature. For the very center and marrow of the Christian message is God’s love for a lost and unloving world. Perhaps what strikes you most forcefully is the sheer incredibility of it. God created the world? Yes! God governs the world? Yes! God keeps the world going? Yes! But God loves the world? No!

Out of all the millions of the inhabitants of the earth, only a handful of human beings are stupid enough to swallow the nonsense of atheism; and one must be stupid indeed to subscribe to its dogmas. Reason and common sense cry out with united voice, “There is a God!”

So overwhelming is the evidence for a Supreme Intelligence, a Sovereign Creator, that the Bible never stops to argue His existence. It simply assumes that God is and dismisses the skeptic with the stinging rebuke, **“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”**

Lieut. Col. Warren J. Clear relates how, while on Bataan, he and a tough sergeant took refuge together in a foxhole during a fierce Japanese attack. As the bullets sang out about them, both prayed aloud. When they emerged, Clear said to the sergeant, “You were praying, weren’t you?” “Yes sir,” came the answer, “I was. There are no atheists in foxholes.”

“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.”

If you want any additional corroboration of man’s instinctive faith in God when in the thick of danger and in the face of death, read the truly thrilling story by Lieut. James C. Whittaker, *We thought We Heard the Angels Sing*. And what of his confession?

“For me, our terrible twenty-one days on the Pacific represent the greatest adventure a man can have—finding his God. Before that adventure, I was an agnostic, an atheist, in other words. But there can be no atheist on rubber rafts any more than in the foxholes of Bataan.”

One reason for a person's difficulty in believing the love of God is the unimaginable immensity of the universe when you compare it with the littleness of our earth.

Many a serious skeptic cannot bring himself to believe that the God who presides over the immeasurable vastness of space should pay any attention to this comparatively microscopic planet on which we happen to find ourselves. Why should God care for this little speck of dust any more than a carpenter might care especially for some one nail which he had driven into a huge building?

To be sure, there is no point to denying that our earth is tiny when you consider it against the background of the whole universe. A few facts will illustrate this convincingly, I think. How much bigger than our earth do you suppose the sun is? Its diameter is 110 times larger than that of our planet, and its volume is 1,300,000 times as great. And yet, compared with other heavenly bodies, the sun is a tiny dot, a grain of sand. Take the star Betelgeuse which the astronomers have measured. Its diameter is about 240 million suns as large as the one which shines above us day after day. And you must remember that our whole solar system is but one countless solar systems scattered across space.

In view of all this, one severe critic of Christianity, Dr. Harry Elmer Barnes, has said that before we knew facts such as these it "seemed reasonable that God should send His only begotten Son to serve as a vicarious sacrifice . . . but that the cosmic God, if there be one, has ever taken special cognizance of Jesus Christ . . . an insignificant religious teacher, who lived in ancient Palestine some two thousand years ago, represents a conception which can be entertained only by a person severely circumscribed by ignorance or limited in intellectual power. That this same religious teacher could have been, in any literal way, the only begotten Son of the Administrator of the cosmos is nonsense too childish to receive even passing comment."

But is it? Do the findings of modern astronomy make absurd these words which have always been considered sublime, "**God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son**"? Actually the findings of modern astronomy do nothing of the sort; everybody who argues in that fashion is guilty of a strange blunder. He is confusing mere bigness with value. What he is really contending is this: If a thing is big, it is therefore valuable; and if a thing is not big, it is by necessity of little value. Yet how stupid that is! A ton of coal has much greater bulk than a diamond of 5 karats; but if you had your choice, which would you take? Size, you see, has nothing to do with the worth of a thing.

Let me illustrate in another way the stupidity of confusing mere bulk with value. In the home of a millionaire, there may be scores of rooms crowned with priceless articles collected from foreign countries; and, at the same time, in that home there may be an insignificant bundle of flesh and blood weighing only a few pounds, the millionaire's baby boy. A fire breaks out, and the flames begin to turn that home and all its treasures into smoke and ashes. Does the millionaire worry most about his pictures and furniture? Of course not! All he thinks about is his baby, and he would gladly have a dozen homes burn to the ground rather than have his baby hurt. That baby's small size is no criterion of his value. In the eyes of his father, he is worth more than a hundred homes which occupy thousands upon thousands of times more space than he does.

So it is with man and God. What are all the vast stretches of empty space to God? Are they valuable just because they are so big? Certainly not! One man with his capacity to love God, serve Him, worship and fellowship with Him is worth more than all the hugeness of empty space and senseless stars. Thus the Lord Jesus reduced things to their proper proportion when He said, **“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”**

There is another reason, however, why a large number of honest and sober-minded folk find the message of John 3:16 incredible; and this reason, I think, is the most telling argument which its critics can level against Christianity.

The critics want to know how you can possibly believe that God loves the world when you consider all the pain and suffering and misery abounding on every side. Can this world with its multiplied woes be the creation of a loving God? The brutal facts fling a challenge into the teeth of Christianity, do they not?

When once a man starts to examine our whole human situation, he comes upon facts which compel him to ask, whether he wants to or not, “Is the King of the universe really our Friend?” God loves the world. But in India each year 3,000 people are torn to pieces by wild beasts, 20,000 are poisoned by the bites of terrible reptiles and 1,500,000 are killed by disease-carrying insects. God loves the world. But in Central China, annually, 40 out of every 100 children born perish with cold or famine before they are a year old. God loves the world. But in 1908 and again in 1920 earthquakes in Sicily and China swallowed a half-million people in sixty seconds. God loves the world. But in Russia, during a few years of revolution, Lenin massacred 1,750,000 of his countrymen and allowed probably 18,000,000 to die of famine. God loves the world. But in the Soviet Republic, according to a report in *Life*, over 10,000,000 people died a violent death in 1942. God loves the world. But in World War II intelligent human beings, herded together in the gigantic armies, were bent upon destroying one another with the wonderful machinery which their intelligence had devised. God loves the world. In the face of all this, in the face of life’s pain and misery and, at times its stark insanity, can we believe that?

Yes, we can, provided we hold fast to one fact: man’s responsibility. Who is to be blamed for the suffering which makes this world a vale of tears? Is it God’s fault or man’s? If it is God’s, then surely He does not love us. If it is man’s, however, then we can still believe the message of John 3:16. Whose fault is it then—God’s or man’s?

It is man’s! For man is a free being, made in the image of God, and therefore able to choose how he will live and what he will do. He is not a machine—he is a man; and being man he has freedom to make real choices. Man is not a puppet—he is a person; and possession of personality implies freedom to make real choices. You see, in creating man, God was seeking a creature who could really serve Him, really obey Him, really love Him. Hence God made man a free person, not a piece of machinery; for only a free being can serve, obey, and love.

Man could be a real man only if free, able to serve God or able to defy Him, able to obey God or able to rebel against Him, able to love Him or able to hate Him. And all the evil in the world can be traced back ultimately to man’s unforced, sinful choice.

Instead of freely serving God, he elected to defy Him. Instead of freely obeying God, he elected to hate Him. And the result has been tragic. So God is not to be blamed for the suffering and misery abounding on every side. On the contrary, God in His love and grace is bending all His divine power to undo what man has done. And in His wisdom God is making the wrath of man to work out for human good and divine glory. The presence of all the pain in the world does not indicate that John 3:16 is incredible. It indicates, rather, that man is a rebel against God and because a rebel, a sufferer.

How can we know that God loves the world? We can know it because of a great event in history—Calvary!

Does the smallness of our earth make it hard for you to believe that God loves the world? Look at the cross! Does the presence of suffering on every hand make it hard for you to believe that God loves the world? Look at the cross! We know that God loves us because of what He did.

Paul says, **“God commendeth [demonstrated] his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinner, Christ died for us.”**

John says, **“In this was manifested the love of God toward us because God sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him.”**

We know that God loves the world because, in the miracle of incarnation, that miracle of humility, God came in the Person of Jesus Christ to seek and to save the lost. We know that God loves the world because in the miracle of atonement that miracle of love, God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, offered His life as a ransom and shed His own blood on Calvary’s hill that **“whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.”** The message of John 3:16 can be trusted because it is true.

Martin Luther was troubled during his last illness by very severe headaches. Somebody suggested that he try an expensive medicine to see if he could secure a little relief. Luther smiled at the suggestion and said, “No, my best prescription for head and heart is that **‘God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’**”

This scripture is also the best prescription for a troubled heart. Bring all your doubts, all your sins, all your agonies to Calvary, and there by faith receive into your souls the Crucified Christ, and go away with your head satisfied and your heart at peace.

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