



Why Would Anyone Want to Become a Christian?

Is There a Reason for Becoming Christian?

A show on TV that has been popular for seventeen years describes the lives of a collection of surgeons who work at the same hospital. Each of them, despite their success and having reached the pinnacle educationally as well as professionally, has a broken life. Tragedy and heartache come upon nearly all the characters. We are fascinated by the troubled lives they have and intrigued by the various ways they try to overcome their brokenness. Divorce, despair, depression, and dread are all a part of the show and yet it all is what we see too. We may not have ever operated on a patient, but we have known someone who feels inadequate and struggles with a troubled past. Recently, the British royal family has been under the microscope because a TV series has brought them back into the public eye. What a mess they have been. With all their wealth and popularity, the royals have not been very successful at putting together happy and psychologically healthy lives. Sigmund Freud famously mocked Christianity as well as other world religions, calling them an illusion, a construction of the psyche. And yet Freud was addicted to cocaine and could not manage his own personal struggles without cocaine masking his inner pain.

The Apostle Paul, one of the great thinkers of all time obviously had a lot to say about Christianity and because he for much of his life wasn't a Christian, he also knew what it was like to have no faith in Jesus. When he wrote and went about the world proclaiming Christianity (although it wasn't called that in the beginning) it was a tough time to live for many people. Most of the Roman empire was filled with slaves. It was a harsh existence for them. Few ever gained their freedom. They lived and died as slaves. The few rights they had were mostly ignored by those in power. The poor were everywhere; and it was nearly impossible to escape the poverty. Yet the small number who were wealthy and free were also caught in the jaws of circumstances they couldn't control. Death came for even the rich and it was the universality of it that brought the people of Paul's time to their knees. There was great pessimism in the ancient world. Even victory and success were fleeting and never satisfied fully. The ancient playwright Sophocles who was wildly popular in Greece, 400 years before Christ, wrote, "The best thing to happen to a man is never to be born; the next best thing is to be born and to die immediately." Four hundred years before that, the Bill Gates of his time, the famous King Solomon, after looking at the inability of wealth, intelligence, sex, or popularity to keep the soul happy insisted that it all was meaningless, that life was a joke.

Paul, when he wrote his letter to the church at Ephesus, understood the human condition. He had traveled throughout the Roman Empire and saw how people actually were. The worship of gods and goddesses was universal, and every region had its hundreds and sometimes thousands to choose. Yet, to have hundreds was the same as having none. This is what Paul had to say. **Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)— remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.** (Ephesians 2:11-13 NIV)

Paul says there is a great divide between those who have put their hope in Jesus Christ for salvation and those who haven't. He calls one group without God and without hope. Hope is no small matter. When we consider the question why anyone would want to become Christian, hope is perhaps the centerpiece of it all. Karl Marx famously called religion the opium of the masses. That is because he did not know what He was talking about. God hope is not a sedative; it's foundational to life. Without hope, you become dead. You lose you. I recently read about the daughter of Karl Marx who killed herself when she found out her long time boyfriend and partner in promoting communism had secretly married an actress. She had no hope, no God hope, and she died. Hope is not a drug; it is foundational to being human.

A physician who became a Christian, Luke, served as the earliest historian of the Christian movement. He interviewed countless witnesses to Jesus' life and wrote one of the Gospels. He also was a part of the Church in the early years and was a close companion and co-worker with the Apostle Paul. Luke documented the last moments of one of the early Christian martyrs and his last words, having interviewed the Apostle Paul who witnessed it. As he was about to be executed by the Jewish authorities for talking boldly about Jesus publicly, Stephen was not afraid of dying nor was he bitter over being killed. The hope he had in the salvation of Jesus gave him peace, even in this dire circumstance. His last words were recorded by Luke the historian. **While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell asleep.** (Acts 7:59-60 NIV)

Peace like that is built on hope, hope in Christ to carry you through the worst of circumstances. That of course is not normal hope. It is a hope that is far greater than any of us will ever encounter this week and maybe for the rest of our lives. The power of the hope Stephen had, is nothing to shrug off. You and I need this same kind of hope because it has the power to carry us past some very difficult and trying circumstances. Hope like this does not prevent tragedy or sorrow. God hope did not keep Stephen from dying but it did carry him as he died. God hope is not explainable by human logic because it does not originate in human thinking. It is a God given capacity to rise above circumstances. The other day the church gardener came and told me that the lawn mower he used to cut the church lawn had been stolen out of the church shed. The cable had been cut and it was taken. I felt sad because I felt the brokenness of the human condition and how bad people are to take an old lawnmower just because you can. I walked into my office and prayed for God to show me what to think about this. A few minutes later the gardener called me. He had just gotten off the phone with his sister who told him he could have her old lawnmower because it was too big and heavy for her and she had bought a smaller one to replace it.

That may be a silly example of how hope works but it reminded me again why we don't lose hope. Hope is not built on what we can accomplish but rather what God in us can do. When Jesus was dying on the cross, He is recorded by Luke the historian as saying of the ones who had beaten and cursed and ridiculed Him, "Father forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." Later He calmly told one of the others being crucified beside Him, a thief, that on that very day the thief would be with Jesus in paradise. The promise of course was built on hope. How could He possibly not fall into despair as His life painfully seeped out of Him? Jesus had hope, powerful and sweeping hope that He was able to pass along to His dying neighbor. He knew God would raise Him from the dead. He knew his joy could not be buried. It was after all, eternal and unstoppable.

Hope is what makes life more than bearable, it makes it enjoyable. If you have hope, all the good parts of being alive come together. Happiness and joy rise out of hope. Peace and satisfaction flow from hope. Hope is a critical part of having a good life. Take a moment to consider just what Jesus has to offer you. He said I have come so that you can have life, life everlasting. For several thousand years, across numerous generations, one prophet of God after another came announcing that the whole world had a reason for hope. Salvation would be provided through one man, someone who would be known as the

Messiah or the Christ. When Jesus at the age of thirty began to circulate through Israel and Judah, He healed the blind and the crippled and even raised the dead. Each miracle witnessed by critics and friends alike was a sign that He would provide eternal salvation to those who put their hope in Him. His death on the cross, that bloody crucifixion, is how He took your sins from you and gave you life that could not be stopped by death. He gives you a hope that will never be dashed. Your hope is that no matter how bad it gets, no matter the troubles you face, you have everlasting life, and nothing can tear that life from you. Hope is what God gives you. Receive it from Christ and you will never be the same. Joy and peace that come from God will see you through every crisis and victory you face this week and forever.