

How to Believe Again

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peaceful face. God, too, is an artist who, despite our pleas, allows much that we hold dear in this life to shatter. For his thoughts are higher than our thoughts. He is still able to take the rubble of our life and to build bridges and stepping-stones out of them, by which he leads us over all abysses. And no depth may swallow us.

Since neither end nor limit
May be found in God's love,
I lift my hands, then,
Father, to thee, as thy child;
I ask that thou wouldst give me grace,
With all my might,
To embrace you day and night
Throughout my whole life here
Until, after this time is over,
I praise and love you in eternity.
Amen.

7. WHAT HAS GOD TO DO WITH THE MEANING OF LIFE?

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'"

And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth."

And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.

And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!"

And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?"

Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."

Mark 10:17-27

How does it happen that the question about eternal life, about the essentials, arises in a person? It may be some young person (as in this story) who is suddenly moved by this question. It doesn't always come up in such a way that the key words "eternal life" are used. Perhaps a completely different code is used to encipher the question.

For example, the young man could ask, "Who does the right thing with his life: Albert Schweitzer, who gives up a great academic career, who is not interested in a dream house, but

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goes into the African bush instead to busy himself with the unappetizing illnesses of the natives—or the successful business man with his Mercedes and his mosaic tile swimming pool? What makes the difference? Does it come from a person losing himself in the service he performs—or does it come from prestige, career, success, and ultimately from appearing on the cover of a news magazine? What is the essential point around which all else revolves?"

In asking that question, the young man—more implicitly than explicitly—has posed the question of eternal life.

But an old man asks this question too. Perhaps he has just retired. His place at the office has been filled by someone else. No one waits for him any more. No one minds if he sleeps until noon. When he drops in at the office his old co-workers are nice to him, but he notices that he is only in the way. They have other things to attend to. And then the old man asks himself, "What have I really lived for? Have I brought anything essential into my barns to nourish me and fill me in these days? Or did I fool myself in thinking that everything depended on how much work I did, and am I now forsaken and superfluous, now that I only vegetate and am able to do *nothing*?" In suffering this shock of uselessness, the old man also, although implicitly and not explicitly, was posing the question about eternal life: the question of what really makes the difference in life and of what doesn't fade away when my productive functions in society cease.

What is the real goal of my life? That is the question we cannot dodge.

Of course it is possible to ignore the question. What a rush we all are in! I am overjoyed if I can get today's work finished and off my desk. I have no time to think about that distant future, that final goal, at which all this shall one day end. That is a luxury of the lazy, or a hobby for contemplative minds. And yet Albert Einstein once said, "We live in a time of perfect means and confused ends." We have refrigerators and television sets; we have social programs that make life easier and safer. Yet they are all means to make life more worth living. But what do we do with all those things? How perfectly and cleverly a

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television set or a sound movie camera operates! But what Hee-Haw-Hillbilly-Laugh-In soap operas do these clever devices help to produce! Does it really require that immense technical outlay to utter such breathtaking banalities? Is this inane babbling the goal toward which our technical perfection leads? What have we accomplished by that? What is our real goal?

Doesn't this hollowness, our lack of a goal and our inability to discover the meaning of life in all our achievements, lead to boredom? The comfort of our world is only attractive at first sight. The next moment we take it for granted and it becomes insipid. The fact that adolescents provide themselves with some bizarre excitement is only a symptom of this boredom.

But even the pious church-going Christian can pose this question about eternal life. The young man in our story could be called an officer of his church, one of the active laymen. He was a leader, denominationally speaking. It can happen that even such a man suddenly must ask, "Where in all the dogmas and doctrines can I find anything throbbing with life? Where can I find something to overpower me and conquer the gloom that comes over me from time to time? How many times in my life have I heard the Christmas message, 'I bring you good tidings of great joy!' I know those words inside and out. And yet so far they have never swept me along and lifted me out of my seat. They haven't made me really joyous and warm so far. How often at the Lord's Supper have I heard, 'Thy sins are forgiven thee.' I have taken it seriously and have wanted to make a new start. But the next day the old routine set in and I once again did what I had bitterly lamented at the altar. Where, then, is that famous life from God that is supposed to sweep you up and reshape you? Maybe I don't care that much about 'Truth.' Apparently I'm not that intellectual and 'high-brow.' But *life* means much to me; I'm interested in a reality which I feel, before which I must bow, and which can make clear to me in a flash: *That is it; that is what matters!* I am caught in religious routine and utter the empty words of a Christian vocabulary. I ought not to say—the church-going Christian may think—but I'm sick and tired of it."

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This, then, is the frame of mind—and we all share it—in which this young man comes to Jesus. This question can be more important and more vital to a person than the problem of unpaid bills or a stomach that acts up after a big meal. And that is the case with this young man as he runs up and kneels in front of Jesus.

One must have this scene clearly in mind if one is to gauge its significance: People press in upon Jesus from every side. Most of them are simple people. It is already a bit awkward when a man in well-pressed, aristocratic clothes turns up in the midst of this somewhat ordinary multitude. But he doesn't just turn up, he kneels in front of Jesus. That causes a sensation. A man doesn't decide to do something like that unless it is a matter of life and death. A person has to be brimming over with something not to care about the impression he makes on other people or about making a fool of himself. (We saw how Zacchaeus, the tax collector, was similarly above his compromising situation.) A comparable situation might arise today during a rush for tickets to a Super Bowl game, when a fan is so obsessed with the idea that he has to see the game that he pushes up to the window without giving a thought to the fact that the other people in line may think he is crazy.

Thus what is going on around him or who is there doesn't make a bit of difference to the rich young man. As far as he is concerned there is only this *one* man Jesus and this *one* question that has become his destiny. Now what happens?

We are to assume that both Jesus and his disciples rejoiced. At last a man from the power structure and not merely the usual little people! At last someone who doesn't want money or a little casual discussion, or someone with all the bodily aches and pains who was simply looking for the miracle doctor. *Finally, finally a man with a basic question.*

How many counselors, their consultation rooms filled by simple people with everyday routine problems, wish passionately that just *once* in the week someone—only one!—came to them with a question of that nature, driven by the great unrest about what is essential.

"Good master," says the man, "what must I do to attain

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eternal life?" "Tell me something about the meaning of my life, for I have lost it, and tell me whatever you want me to do. I will bear any burden, even an additional commandment or two for the elite (noblesse oblige!), if I only have the feeling that I am in harmony with myself and my destiny. I can't stand living any more if I have no theme to my life. I am caught in meaninglessness. And please don't let outward appearances deceive you into thinking that all is well with me. Good master—please!" Isn't Jesus now supposed to raise him from the ground and tell him, "Thank you for coming to me with this question. I am pleased to encounter a seeking man like you"? But Jesus' reaction is strangely different from what we expected. He has nothing but a dash of cold water for this young seeker. He rejects—did he really have to start off that way?—being called "good master." "No one is good—only God alone."

Why does Jesus say that? Why does he say it at this particular time? Obviously because the rich young man sees Jesus as some sort of *teacher* who has certain patent recipes at his disposal which can help the man out of his life's uncertainties. The young man seems to think that one can bypass God in finding a solution to these problems. Jesus is a sort of "Dear Abby" for him. If you look at the questions readers send in to the problem columns of our newspapers you will notice that they are all pitched in the same key: I suffer from loneliness. How can I find contacts for lively companionship? My husband has left me and has gone away. How can I save my marriage? No one dances with me, how can I make myself attractive?

Dear Abby and her colleagues often provide very helpful suggestions to these questions. They give sound advice about what could be changed, and one even feels they have a warm-hearted desire to help. But a soul-doctor of that sort would obviously be over his head if someone demanded more of him than a little fiddling with the symptoms—for example, if one expected a cure of the basic problems. Nevertheless, good advice and a little adjustment of life-style are not to be sneezed at.

Jesus, however, proceeds entirely differently with this young man. He immediately rejects the level on which "good advice" is usually offered. When a person places himself in Jesus' care,

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he lays a sharp axe to his own roots; "If you just want a prescription for your life's problems from me," he tells the young man who kneels before him and watches him with burning expectation, "then you've come to me on false grounds. Therefore please don't say 'good master' or 'distinguished doctor' to me, as though I possessed patented rules which could help you get control of your life. Your life's problems cannot be solved as long as you push on past the *one* and *desire* question: How you stand with God. In him alone is the good that you seek; he is the goal you are pursuing and the meaning you crave. No one is good—only God alone."

Perhaps one or another of us finds it peculiar that, in this case, God appears not only in the area of the pious inner life, but that he occurs as a very real and decisive factor in everything that is uncontrolled, questionable, and anxiety-producing in our life: that God is to be involved with our marriage, with our professional life, with our loneliness, and with our state of anxiety. In order to understand our story, we need to ponder this question for a moment.

Why is it that I feel lonesome and misunderstood? As a rule I just don't let this feeling surface. There is the TV in the evening, and tomorrow I have a party. Naturally I feel very superficial because of that, as though I were living on the edge of my own being, but nevertheless, it helps me forget for a while. Yet once in a while the set doesn't work, or I have a cold and have to stay home. Then I cannot avoid being alone. Then I don't know what to do with myself. The emptiness of my life gets on my nerves and puts me in a pensive mood. Who actually stands by me then? Who would really be there if I had a bad day? Would there really be an emptiness, an unfilled place, if I disappeared? Maybe that is when, as someone recently recounted to me, I dial the time service on the telephone simply to hear a human voice.

How different it would be if I could pray, so that a "thou" were there who said to me, "Fear not," or "I have called you by your name, you are mine," or "Peace be with you." Could my loneliness have something to do with the fact that I have deserted God? Wouldn't my marriage and my friendships that

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I don't have but want to make so badly be different if I were calmer, if I were more content with myself, if I were less suspicious and uptight—in short, if I lived out of the peace of God and radiated the liberation of a person who knew that God watched over him and gave him a clear conscience? Wouldn't everything really appear in a different light if *this* question, this question about God, were settled for me?

That is the reason for the remarkably unfriendly gesture with which Jesus meets the overwrought young man's problems: "I am no answer man, if you please. I have no universal prescriptions for life. You have to build your life over from the ground up. You must begin by asking who and what God is to mean to you before I can help you."

Now we seem to be only one single step away from a lively religious discussion, one of those conversations which always end, like most discussions of this sort, in a draw. Yet Jesus does not discuss; he makes stern and most compelling claims. To get to deal with God is not a pious feeling; it means to be faced with his commandments. It means to enter the sphere of an unconditional obligation. Thus Jesus goes through the commandments: You shall not kill, you shall not commit adultery, etc. "Take God seriously," he is saying, "that's all. In performing this experiment you will find the 'meaning' for yourself and approach eternal life."

The rich young man is shocked indeed by this answer. "I am grappling with the ultimate things in life and he recites the catechism to me like a kindergarten teacher. He gives me a bottle when I crave bread. I've got *problems*, Jesus of Nazareth, *problems*. But you put me in kindergarten."

The young man only *thinks* all that; he doesn't say it. He controls himself sufficiently to content himself with a brief answer that barely indicates his disappointment: "I have kept all of them from my youth; I *have* taken God seriously, believe me. And nevertheless I have come to a point where I no longer know what to do. All of that has *not* brought me peace. If I thought that was the way to settle things with God, I surely wouldn't be standing here!"

This rich man is certainly *more* than a person with "religious

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interests," more than a mere seeker who, like Faust, feels sure that he will not find anything ultimately binding, but remains caught up in spiritual adventuring, where he can play around without obligation. No, this man has been stern with himself. He has not merely tried a little philosophy of religion and played with the God question; he has taken the issue of God so seriously that he declares his bankruptcy here in front of strangers and semipublicly. The embarrassing situation he has gotten himself into doesn't bother him at all.

But the question now is: Doesn't this man live in a remarkable self-deception? Is it ever possible to say so simply, "I have kept the commandments of God"?

Outwardly, on the level of external deeds it may be possible. He probably had not committed flagrant adultery and had not stolen any silver spoons. But hadn't he ever observed what went on *behind* the scenes of his outwardly proper acts: How he had hated and killed his brother in his thoughts even if he outwardly gave him a helping hand? And how he looked at a woman with desire, committing adultery in his heart? How in foolish attacks of envy—of course outwardly nothing was noticeable—he robbed his neighbor of everything the man had and owned, things the neighbor himself craved? Adalbert Stifter said in his novel *Confidence*, "Each of us has a tigerlike quality, and no one knows what atrocity he would be capable of in a fit of rage, when all the inhibitions disappeared." Had the rich young man never considered what thus, unnoticed by men's eyes, but observed by God, churned and raged in his heart, and how behind the scenes he sabotaged God's commandments piece by piece and one after the other? Isn't he merely playing around with the God question? Doesn't he have a blind spot that enables him grandly to ignore all those shortcomings and to say with the ring of conviction, "I have kept all the commandments from my youth. I have always taken God seriously"??

Certainly that is the sore spot in his life. But the astonishing thing is that Jesus doesn't dig into what this man has done wrong or where he has gone astray. Rather the story says simply, before the conversation continued, "And Jesus, looking upon him, loved him." I find that to be one of the most com-

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forting places in the whole New Testament. Jesus does not love me just when I do something right, when I am therefore perfect and fit. Long before I get to that point, and even when I don't make it, I am *already* beloved. He always has the initiative.

Perhaps I am a young man who as yet hasn't gotten started with him. I have only a great hunger and thirst and many questions on my heart. And since I am still quite helpless, I poke around in Nietzsche, let a few verses by Gottfried Benn dissolve on my tongue, nibble a bit on Sartre, and even leaf through a few pages—why not?—of the Bible. Let's see what speaks to me there; let's see if anything there grips me! In my helplessness, what else can I do than let everything pass in review? And as I do that—perhaps with a cigarette, lying on the rug or curled up on the couch—while everything is still very vague and unclear, there stands Jesus before me, looking at me with affection. Everything that I do—even when it is wrong and I keep on pressing the wrong buttons—everything is included, embraced, and borne by that love. I cannot leave the force-field of that loving glance.

We must remember that, keeping it in mind when Jesus switches to the attack a moment later. For that is what he does. We must put up with the fact that Jesus can also be hard, that he gives us opposition; and that he is not at all like the feminine, coiffured male fitted out with a halo that popular Christian art has made him. But when he thus leads the attack against the rich young man, we must watch it against the background of this *other* word: "Jesus, looking at him, loved him." The attack itself consists of one single sentence: "One thing you yet lack for perfection; go and sell all that you have. Give what you make by doing that to those who have nothing. Thus you will receive a treasure which is prepared for you in heaven. And then come, join my followers."

It is remarkable that for Jesus there is always one crucial thing: "One thing is needful"; "One thing you lack." Each one of us could count up on his fingers a list of who knows how many items that he still needs in order to make his joy complete. Jesus, however, is the great simplifier. For him, every-

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thing that we have to hope and fear reduces itself to the figure "one." Basically there is only *one* problem in my life, only *one* sore spot, only *one* possibility of healing. Everything else arranges itself according to how I start off with this one and primary element.

Thus he says to the rich young man, "You lack one thing." But what a striking thing to point out as lacking! "Sell all you have!" The young man was not prepared for that. No one ought to expect such tomfoolery from him. That was the second dash of cold water he had received. He belonged to the intelligentsia, so he immediately began to calculate: "What would we come to if such a clearance sale were necessary for perfection? Isn't that nonsense? If I sold everything to become perfect, then wouldn't I make the others whom I urged to buy from me imperfect? Then my partner in the sale will have to bear the moral expenses of my emolument! That doesn't make sense!" "Or," he calculates further, "if everyone were to sell all they had, who would be left to buy? What kind of crazy economic system would we have then? That is unrealistic, Jesus of Nazareth, you can't expect any responsible person with good sense to do that!"

So the young man gets up disappointed, confused, and discouraged. How he had trusted this man and how serious he had been! In addition to the Ten Commandments which he had observed from his youth, he was ready to add an eleventh and twelfth commandment with even more difficult ethical training rules. He was ready cheerfully to pray for hours in a darkened room or to introduce two fast days in the week if that would have brought him closer to eternal life. "O yes," he thinks, "I was determined to go to any extremes. Instead of that, he comes out with this nonsense, to take away from me in the name of God all that the blessing of God had brought me." Like a mixed-up sectarian, he tries to destroy the order in life. Hasn't this man deluded himself a second time? Won't he listen and understand what Jesus is saying to him in the code-language of that remarkable challenge? What, then, *did* Jesus want to tell him? Apparently he meant this: No doubt, dear friend, that you want to take God seriously and that you have

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tried hard. Precisely on account of that I now ask you if you have taken God *really* and *radically* seriously. Aren't you actually concerned about "religion," since you seek inner peace? Or since life seems hollow and empty to you, haven't you decided to try an experiment on that point? Or haven't you noticed that a reputation as a pious man could bring social advantages and that you would thus further increase the prestige to which your possessions have already helped you? Wasn't God merely a means to an end for you (in the way we today like to use him in order to oppose a Christian ideology to the Eastern menace, or to shore up the foundations of the Christian West)? Haven't you tried to fit religion into your life with this in view? Very earnestly, very decently, quite certainly. But has God ever meant more to you than a pious "extra" in life, more than a final polish for your standard of living, more than a pious nicety? "Try for once," Jesus tells him, "to test out the priorities. Are you ready to give up everything for God? Only if you could do that would it be shown that he is your one and only concern, that you trust him *completely* and that you take him seriously *without reservation*."

Thus in that remarkable challenge of Jesus to sell all he had lies a challenge to an experiment: "Put everything you treasure and value in your life in the left pan of the scales. In that pan goes all that pertains to your life-style on which you depend (and I have nothing at all against that!); in addition, put your friendships, your social standing, and your talents there. And then put the weight that *God* has in your life in the right-hand pan. Then watch and see which side of the scale sinks." That is the most serious test; that is the fatal experiment. For then it will become clear that the pan which contains all in life that is near and dear to me sinks, having the greater weight, and God is taken more lightly.

Then the young man stood up sadly and went away disappointed "for he was very rich." He was a gifted man, and the left-hand pan in his life was very heavy. He wanted religion to be an extra aroma; he wanted to add the inner possession of breadth and depth of soul to all the outward possessions of his already rich life. Therefore down deep he was not looking for

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eternal life; he sought God as an elixir of life that would shake him loose from the boredom of the wealthy and give him some inner excitement. For him God was to be a final, crowning touch on life; he was to be the means to an end in life, but not to be that life himself.

But God will not sell himself for that price. One cannot speak of God to a person who has not asked himself the hard "all or nothing" question. Therefore the rich and gifted are perhaps the most endangered. A fully loaded camel cannot get through the needle's eye of a city gate. Sometimes a poor and unendowed man has it easier; all he has to do is hold up the hand God has given him. Or a child has it easier, because it has nothing itself and makes no claims.

"Then who can be saved?" ask the shaken disciples. Aren't we all, in one way or another, rich men—that is, people that have something in their lives of which they are proud and on which they have set their hearts? Therefore don't I myself stand in the balance-pan when I want to reach God—and not only with my darker instincts and normal qualms, but also with the very best in my life: my talents, my mental stature, and the core of interests on which all my choices depend?

Yes, that's the way it is; in fact, this is the mystery of the kingdom of God. It is certainly also its greatness. Or isn't it great and exciting that at *this* entrance gate and at *this* needle's eye no one is greater than another; that here all are alike: People from whom God must take all of life's burdens *and* gifts so that they become children who can allow themselves to be given what they need?

When Jesus Christ hung on the cross, when he no longer had anyone or anything, when his disciples were scattered to the four winds and even his robe had fallen into the hands of the gambling and drinking soldiery, *then* he was nearest to his Father. Then there was nothing else that stood between him and his Father. And he bowed his head and committed himself to the eternal hands. Here he had *nothing* left, and therefore the Father could be *everything* to him. Everyone who wants to have eternal life must pass through this "death and resurrection."

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We certainly can't do it ourselves. We are not able to pry open those fists of ours with which we hold on tightly to what is ours. "With men it is impossible." God knows, it is impossible. But with God all things are possible.

The rich young man wasn't able to do it either, and he went away sorrowful. We don't know what happened to him after that. Did the One who saw him and loved him one day catch up with him? Was his leaving perhaps a last attempt at flight which he later gave up?

However things may stand with me—whether I hope to find the solution to my questions from this Nazarene or whether I am disappointed and can only shake my head in amazement over a story such as this—of one thing I can rest assured: Jesus Christ has also seen me and loved me. Now I can go wherever I will. There is no place to which this love does not extend and there is no space which these arms do not encompass.