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THINGS WE ALL HAVE IN COMMON

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in a branch of Starbucks while waiting for my kids. And a few of the chapters were delivered as short talks over three evenings in Costa Coffee as part of a week of events for a church in Sheffield.

The idea was to give some food for thought, provoke discussion, and help people to consider different aspects of what we might call ‘the human condition’ – things that are common to us all. Then we pondered how Jesus Christ directly addresses what we are like.

Now I appreciate that most people will not hate coffee as I do – that’s fine. We’re all different. We live in a world in which our differences are often highlighted: our different colours, religions, cultures, sexualities, genders, abilities, ideologies, philosophies, skills, musical tastes, economic means, sporting preferences, dietary choices, and political persuasions. And there’s something very wonderful about our diversity! The world would be a dull place if we were all the same.

But alongside much diversity, there are still many things that we all have in common. Some are obvious. We all breathe! We all need water, food, and shelter to survive. We all have good days and bad days. We all like to laugh

and smile. We are all relational and want to be loved. We are all afraid – of something at least. We are all physical. We are all emotional. I could go on. It's fair to say that we have more in common than not.

This little book highlights some of those similarities. Each of the first twelve short chapters seeks to uncover something of what we are all really like. The book then ends with an invitation that is open to us all.

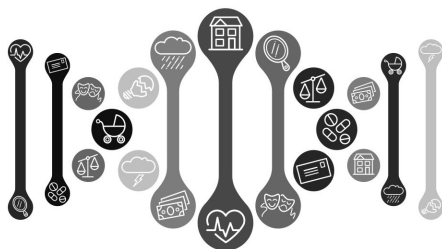
You may want to start with one of the chapters that you already know is true of you – perhaps the one on anxiety, dependency, fear, or shame? Or you may be intrigued to find out how you are a refugee or a lawyer or a worshipper? Start where you like. You could read the chapter on your own, or you may find it helpful to agree with a Christian friend to both read the same chapter (perhaps a different one each week) and then meet to discuss it. At the end of each chapter are three or four questions that might prompt thought or discussion.

Of course, so few pages could not provide a comprehensive answer to any aspect of the human condition. Nor do they attempt to do that. The aim is that they are a starting point – and a

signpost to the One who does have the answers, and who actually claims to be the answer.

I hope the short chapters that follow will help you to begin to consider Jesus Christ – and to see from the Bible how, in the twenty-first century, Jesus continues to be deeply and personally relevant to each and every one of us.

Feel free to read the book with a cup of coffee. Or tea.



1

THE DESIRE IN US ALL

I had just missed my connection and the next train would not arrive for about an hour. I decided to kill some time looking round the shopping centre by the station.

But I never made it to the shops. I got distracted en route by a fascinating exhibition of about fifty life-size photographs of random people. The pictures were mounted high on the walls around the escalator. At the top of the escalator there were more portraits of all kinds of people: black and white; young and old; people who appeared to be well off and those who were clearly poorer.

And underneath each portrait were a few words from that person. They all began with the words, 'I want ...'

Well, I couldn't resist. I spent the next forty-five minutes wandering around, looking at every single portrait and reading what each one of those people wanted. Interestingly, they generally all wanted something quite similar: life – either a happier life or an easier life or a richer life. Many of them just wanted life – that's it. They wanted to live and not die.

One person, obviously aware of how time seems to speed up as you get older, said, 'I want time to slow down.' They were expressing a desire for more life, not really wanting theirs to finish.

Another said, 'I want to live life to the end.'

Still another declared, 'I want to live life to the full.'

Someone else stated, 'I want a cure for cancer.' I imagine many would echo that deep desire for an end to diseases like cancer that cut life short.

A similar idea was evident in the next: 'I want everyone to be happy and no more war.' War not only ends lives but makes life miserable for those who survive. We want life and happiness.

A different person said, 'I want Bowie back.' I reckon we'd all love someone back. Death robs us of the people that we love and precious relationships.

One person simply wrote, 'I want more time.' And there I was, trying to kill time!

The irony was not lost on me. As I wandered around, I knew that I didn't really want to kill time at all. I, too, wished it would slow down.

Time is strange like that. On the one hand, I wanted time to pass quickly, so I could get on the train and get home. Yet, on the other hand, I am very conscious that time is zooming by all too quickly.

Turning fifty was sobering. It almost certainly means that my life is well over halfway through. As a few friends with whom I grew up also turned fifty, I decided to send them each a birthday card. I'm not usually great at that, but fifty felt significant. With each one, I couldn't help but wonder where the last thirty-five years have gone since our carefree teenage years. Time has flown! And there's something a little disconcerting about that. The passing of time points to the passing of life.

But, as the exhibition reminded me, we human beings essentially want to live. *Generally*, we don't want to die.

I have met lots of people in terrible situations, but very few who actually want to die. And even for those few, it's only because the alternative seems to be so bleak or painful that they imagine that even death would be better than continuing to live.

This common desire to live is why some people give up smoking or drink a bit less. Others take regular exercise, and even eat salad.

It's also why dying people tend to cling on. They battle for a few more days, hours, or minutes. The desire for life within them is huge and strong.

And that desire is in us all.

This is no surprise, though, because the Bible says that God has made us for life – eternal life, no less:

*God has ... set eternity in the human heart
(Ecclesiastes 3:11).*

That's why we want to live. The desire for life is hardwired in us all. We were designed that way – with eternity in our hearts.

A mug is a simple but clever thing. It doesn't leak so it can hold liquid. It has a handle so that we can comfortably hold a hot drink without burning ourselves. And when we've finished, the mug can be washed up and used for another drink. Genius! Everything about the design of a mug tells us it would be a great thing from which to consume a hot drink.

In the same way, you and I were designed for life – God set eternity in our hearts. And everything about us, from our first cry to our final breath, is about life. Our constant appetite to grow and learn and experience and try and love and thrive is all a striving to squeeze every last bit of juice out of life – and to not die. That's why we don't like death – or what causes it.

Many regard death as an enemy. We don't even want to talk about it. So we use phrases that refer to death without actually saying someone has died: 'kicked the bucket', 'passed away', 'popped their clogs', 'kicked their oxygen habit', 'flatlined', or 'checked out'. While some are amusing, their purpose is to hide how unamusing death really is.

We don't like death, we don't want it, and we don't talk about it. And yet death is one

of the few things in life that is certain. It's the ultimate statistic: one out of one dies. There are no exceptions.

Even so, we don't know much about death – except that we're all in the queue. Although we don't know exactly where in the queue we are!

But what if we could be certain of life? What if we could have the kind of life that we really crave? What if death were not an invincible enemy?

Christians believe and trust in Jesus partly because He is the one person in all history to have taken on death and won. He died on a Roman cross – His execution is well documented. But so too is His resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead and was seen to be alive by crowds of people¹ – and individuals who were prepared to stake their own lives on this fact. They saw Him; they heard Him; they touched Him.²

This is why Christians have hope in the face of death. Our hope is not mere wishful thinking. It is solidly based on the historical, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

1 1 Corinthians 15:6.

2 Acts 1:3; 1 Corinthians 15:3–7; 1 John 1:1–3.

Underneath all those portraits I saw were various expressions of desire – the desire for life ... or a better life ... or more life. Some of the words spoke of painful situations – such as a battle with cancer. Others expressed deep longings or a sense of being lost. The risen Lord Jesus speaks into them all:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

Jesus is declaring, ‘I am the way’ for people who are lost; ‘I am the way’ for those who are desperate and don’t know which way to turn. If we want direction, we need Jesus. He is the way to a right relationship with God, and the only way through death.

‘I am ... the truth,’ Jesus continues, for people who are confused and don’t know who or what to believe. Experience tells us that we can’t totally trust anyone – even those closest to us can let us down. But Jesus is *the* truth: He is the one person who can be totally relied on – and especially in the face of death.

‘I am ... the life’: Jesus has the answer to death – and He proved it by rising from the dead.

That’s why Jesus is able to take us through death and give us the life that we crave – the good, full, loving, joyful, eternal life that God has hardwired into our hearts. So the Bible can confidently assure us that:

Whoever believes in the Son [Jesus] has eternal life (John 3:36).

Notice that we are all mentioned in the first word of that verse: ‘Whoever ...’ You, me, anyone – whoever will believe in Jesus will have eternal life.

In all of this, Jesus is unique. No one else is the way, the truth, and the life. No one else is able to offer us eternal life. Only Jesus has risen from the dead, so only He can give us hope in the face of death, and only He can give us the full life that we all crave and desire. That’s why Jesus also says, ‘No one comes to the Father except through me.’

If you have ever noticed that desire for life in you, if you want more life ... life to the full ... eternal life, then Jesus is your man.

Killing time is a bad idea. It runs contrary to what we really want and for what we were really made. We all want to live. We desire life. Eternal life. Jesus says he can give it to us!

QUESTIONS TO THINK ABOUT OR DISCUSS

1. What do I want? How would I finish a sentence that begins with the words, 'I want ...'?
2. Am I aware of a personal desire for life? If so, how do I express it? It may be in something positive – embracing certain aspects of life. Or perhaps it is in something that feels negative – anxiety about health or fear of death. Quite possibly it is in both.
3. What do I think of Jesus' claim to be 'the way and the truth and the life'? Am I prepared to investigate this claim?