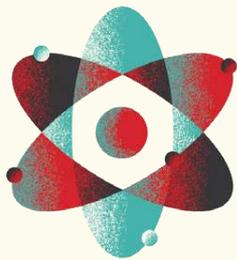


10 Questions



Every Teen Should Ask

(and Answer)



about Christianity



REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

“This is a really clear, compelling, understanding, and engaging response to the biggest objections people have to Christianity today. Read it, wrestle with it, and see what your friends make of it.”

Sam Allberry, speaker; author, *Why Does God Care Who I Sleep With?* and *7 Myths about Singleness*

“Rebecca McLaughlin doesn’t shy away from difficult conversations about heaven, hell, sexuality, and racism but handles them with gentleness, humility, and a refreshing humor that teens will appreciate. Best of all, she presents the gospel so clearly and beautifully. I’m thankful for this winsome resource that I can recommend to young Christians and non-Christians alike.”

Quina Aragon, spoken-word artist; author, *Love Made: A Story of God’s Overflowing, Creative Heart* and *Love Gave: A Story of God’s Greatest Gift*

“Young people might not always articulate their questions about life. But they are wondering. *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity* can help them both express and satisfy their emerging questions and longings. We wish we’d had this book when we were raising our children! But now we can give it away—confidently—starting with our own grandchildren.”

Ray and Jani Ortlund, President and Executive Vice President, Renewal Ministries

“*10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity* is the book every parent, teacher, youth worker, and young person has been waiting for. In her down-to-earth, relatable, winsome, and brilliant manner, Rebecca McLaughlin tackles the major questions confronting this generation, showing that Jesus is still the answer to our greatest needs and longings. If we don’t want to lose a generation, we must have the courage to wrestle with hard questions and show that Christianity is relevant in our rapidly changing world.”

Christine Caine, Founder, A21 and Propel Women

“Our world is complex. Growing up today and having to confront that complexity is not easy. In this short book, McLaughlin helps young adolescents confront, understand, and interpret the complexity of our world in continual dialogue with the central claims of the Christian faith. Readers will have their minds challenged and illuminated; by struggling through these issues, they will be brought closer to the truth.”

Tyler J. VanderWeele, John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb
Professor of Epidemiology, Harvard University

“As a father of five, I was so excited to know about this book. My excitement only grew as I read the truths Rebecca McLaughlin engages in such an accessible manner—many references to Harry Potter and Disney films! Most of all, I was excited to have a theologically rich book that deals with challenging questions that I could place in the hands of my children. This is such an important tool to disciple the next generation!”

John Perritt, Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries

*10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask
(and Answer) about Christianity*

10 Questions
Every Teen Should Ask
(and Answer)
about Christianity

REBECCA McLAUGHLIN

10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity

Copyright © 2021 by Rebecca McLaughlin

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover Image and Design: Tyler Anthony

First printing 2021

Printed in China

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7166-4

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7169-5

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7167-1

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-7168-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McLaughlin, Rebecca, 1980- author.

Title: 10 questions every teen should ask (and answer) about Christianity / Rebecca McLaughlin.

Other titles: Ten questions every teen should ask (and answer) about Christianity

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020020314 (print) | LCCN 2020020315 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433571664 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433571671 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433571688 (mobi) | ISBN 9781433571695 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Christianity—Juvenile literature.

Classification: LCC BR125.5 .M45 2021 (print) | LCC BR125.5 (ebook) | DDC 239—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020314>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020020315>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

RRDS 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For Miranda, Eliza, and Luke,
who ask the hardest questions,
and for everyone who wonders
what this strange world
is all about.

Contents

Preface 11

Note to Parents, Grandparents, Guardians, and
Friends 13

Introduction 19

1 How Can I Live My Best Life Now? 27

Mental and Physical Health Benefits of the Christian Life

2 Isn't Christianity against Diversity? 41

*Racism / Slavery / Christianity as the Most Diverse Movement
in History*

3 Can Jesus Be True for You but Not for Me? 55

Universal Truth / Relativism / Evangelism

4 Can't We Just Be Good without God? 67

*God as the Basis for Morality / 9/11 / Hitler / Stalin /
Human Identity / Abortion*

- 5 How Can You Believe the Bible Is True?** 83
Evidence for the Gospels / Evidence for the Resurrection / True versus Literal
- 6 Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?** 97
Origins of Science / Science and Faith Controversies / Christian Scientists Today
- 7 Why Can't We Just Agree That Love Is Love?** 113
Marriage / Sex / Singleness / Friendship / Same-Sex Attraction / Pornography / Abuse
- 8 Who Cares If You're a Boy or a Girl?** 135
Gender / Feminism / Transgender and Non-Binary Identities
- 9 Does God Care When We Hurt?** 157
God's Sovereignty in Suffering / God's Care for Us / Prayer / Purpose
- 10 How Can You Believe in Heaven and Hell?** 169
Meaning of Heaven and Hell / Sin and Judgment / Salvation / Invitation
- A "Thank You" Note 183
- Notes 187
- General Index 197
- Scripture Index 203

Preface

When I was a kid, I wanted to be a poet. But my first book wasn't a gathering of poems. It was a gathering of ideas from some of the world's brainiest people. After nine years of talking with professors at top universities, I felt like I had a road-map of objections to Christianity, showing where the dead ends lay and pointing to the highways. *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion* (Crossway, 2019) is that map. It looks at twelve reasons *not* to believe in Jesus and argues that—if we look at them more closely—they stop being roadblocks and instead become signposts.

I was thrilled when *Confronting Christianity* was featured as one of the only books about faith on the *TED Talks* Summer Reading List and named Christian Book of the Year 2020 by *Christianity Today* magazine. But I was most thankful for the readers who let me know how much the book meant to them as they'd examined their own beliefs or answered questions from exploring friends. As I read these messages, it struck me that kids and teens have complex questions too. In fact, in my experience, kids ask the hardest questions of all.

PREFACE

You could say this book is a simplified version of *Confronting Christianity*. In one sense, it is. I've written it for folks who aren't yet ready to drive, so they don't need quite so extensive a map. But navigating on a bike has its own challenges, and I believe in taking the training wheels off as soon as possible and letting people explore for themselves.

If you're ready to drive, you may be ready for *Confronting Christianity*. That book gives all the footnotes for the claims I make in this book and explores some issues not included here. If you're not yet driving age, but you have real questions about the world in which we live, this book is for you.

Rebecca McLaughlin

October 2020

Note to Parents, Grandparents, Guardians, and Friends

I finally gave up Christianity when I was 15,” wrote famous atheist Richard Dawkins in his latest book, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide* (2019).¹ Dawkins hoped to reach the rising generation of kids with the good news that they don’t need religion. In the decades since the New Atheist movement launched, you might think this was the only message sounding from the academic world. But that is simply not the case.

Religious belief was supposed to decline as modernization swept the world.² But it hasn’t. Being a world-class academic and a serious, orthodox Christian was supposed to be increasingly untenable. But it isn’t. Giving up on religion was supposed to make people happier, healthier, and more moral. But it doesn’t.³ In fact, even Richard Dawkins has had to acknowledge (grudgingly) the evidence that people who believe in God seem to behave better than those who don’t. He thinks it rather patronizing to say, “Of

course you and I are too intelligent to believe in God, but we think it would be a good idea if *other* people did!”⁴ And yet that does seem to be where the evidence points. Broadly speaking, religious belief and practice seem to be good for society—and good for kids. Writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in 2019, therapist Erica Komisar gave this provocative advice: “Don’t believe in God? Lie to your children.”⁵

Komisar was not shooting in the dark. Mirroring the mental and physical health benefits for adults, there is a growing body of evidence that regular religious practice is measurably good for the health, happiness, and pro-social behavior of our kids. In the same year that Dawkins released his book, the Harvard School of Public Health published the results of a longitudinal study on the impact of a religious upbringing on adolescents and found that it contributes to a wide range of health and well-being outcomes later in life.⁶ In an op-ed for *USA Today*, Harvard professor of epidemiology Tyler VanderWeele summarized some of the key findings:

- Children who were raised in a religious or spiritual environment were better protected from the “big three” dangers of adolescence: depression, drugs, and risky sexual behaviors.
- Those who attended religious services regularly were subsequently 12 percent less likely to have high depressive symptoms and 33 percent less likely to use illicit drugs.
- Those who prayed or meditated frequently were 30 percent less likely to start having sex at a young age and 40 percent less likely to have a sexually transmitted disease.
- Moreover, children with a religious upbringing were also more likely to subsequently have higher levels of happiness, of a sense of purpose, of volunteering, and of forgiveness of others.⁷

Of course, these studies do not mean that belief in God is right, or that Christianity is true. It should, however, give us pause before dismissing religious perspectives out of hand and assuming that our kids are just better off without. As Erika Komisar put it,

As a therapist, I'm often asked to explain why depression and anxiety are so common among children and adolescents. One of the most important explanations—and perhaps the most neglected—is declining interest in religion.⁸

If this data is challenging for non-religious parents, the “declining interest in religion” (at least in the West) is worrying for believers. Just as evidence for the benefits of religious upbringing is mounting, cultural tides are pulling kids and teens away from religious moorings. So what are parents, grandparents, and carers on all sides of these great debates to do?

Whatever our beliefs about God, there are some things on which I'm sure we agree: we all want our kids to be happy, healthy, purpose-filled, and good. Few of us would want to lie to our kids, especially about our deepest beliefs. We want them to know the truth. But we also want to protect them from plausible-sounding lies. Deep down we know there's a tension: to keep our kids truly safe in the long run, we must let them risk-take now. We know this when it comes to practical skills. A baby won't learn to walk unless we let him fall. A child won't learn to ride a bike unless we let her risk a tumble or two. The teenager who wasn't trusted with a bike won't be ready for a car. So how does this translate to the realm of ideas?

For some parents, protecting their kids from dangerous ideas feels like a must. I've heard this both from Christians who don't

want their kids exposed to atheism, and from atheists who don't want their kids exposed to Christianity. I've even heard it from parents who think they are very open-mindedly encouraging their kids to explore different religious traditions, while insisting they respect each tradition equally. For these folks, the dangerous idea is that one religion might actually be *true*. Many of us who are now in the thick of parenting were raised with the idea that questioning someone's religious beliefs was arrogant, offensive, and wrong. Beliefs were personal and should not be challenged.

In this book, I want to offer a different approach. Rather than protecting my kids from divergent ideas, or urging them to affirm all beliefs equally, I want to equip them to have real conversations with real people who really think differently from them—and from me. I want them to learn how to listen well and how to question what they hear. If what I believe is true, it will stand up to scrutiny.

The Christian faith sprang up in a world that was violently hostile to its claims. But rather than extinguishing the small spark of the early church, the winds of opposition gave it oxygen to spread. Two thousand years later (as I explain in chapter 1) it's still spreading. But I don't want my kids to believe in Jesus just because I say so, or just because it's the largest and most diverse religion in the world, or just because going to church makes you happier, healthier, and more generous to others. I want them to see Jesus for themselves and to believe that what he says about himself is true.

Wanting this for my kids doesn't mean hiding other options. If anything, I believe Jesus shines more brightly when all the veils are stripped away. My guess is that if you're not a follower of Jesus,

you also have enough confidence in your beliefs to think they'll stand up to scrutiny, and that you too would like the young people you love—as a parent, grandparent, uncle, aunt, or friend—to think for themselves. My hope is that this book will challenge every reader to do just that. And, in order to do so, we're going to have some adult conversations.

This book engages with some big ideas. It talks about racism and slavery, marriage and sexuality, gender and transgender questions, abortion and pornography, 9/11, Hitler, Stalin, heaven, and hell. In it, I share my early and ongoing experience of same-sex attraction, and the story of one of my best friends, who had multiple sexual relationships with other girls before becoming a Christian as an undergrad at Yale. Whatever your child's current beliefs or emerging attractions, I hope this book will be a help to them. I've tried to write with empathy and care.

My eldest child has just turned ten, and I've written the book in a way I'd be comfortable for her to read. But kids develop at very different rates, and you'll be the best judge of your own child's readiness. You may want to read the book first yourself before passing it on to your kids. You may want to read it *with* the children you love. Or you may think they'll prefer to read for themselves. In any case, my hope is that it will prompt fruitful conversations.

If you are not a Christian, I hope this book will at least give your child a handle on some of the best Christian thinking from some of the most credible sources, when too often we only hear in public from the worst. If you do consider yourself a follower of Jesus, I hope it will encourage your child to take the claims of Christ very seriously, and not to be afraid to ask hard questions.

I'm currently reading the Harry Potter series to my kids, and I must warn you that this book is full of Harry Potter spoilers! If you're a J. K. Rowling fan and the young person you love hasn't yet read her books, you might want to hold off sharing this book for now. If your children aren't ready for the entire Harry Potter series, they may not be ready for this book either.

Harry Potter was eleven when he found out there was magic in the world. Richard Dawkins would say that believing in the Christian story is about as childish as believing that Harry Potter's world is true. But the thousands of Christian professors at the top of their fields—ranging from physics to philosophy to psychology to epidemiology—would disagree. My hope is that this book will help young people to start thinking for themselves. That's one point on which Dawkins and I agree.

Introduction

In *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, Harry has just run away from his awful aunt and uncle's house when he sees an ominous black dog. He's rescued by the Knight Bus, which picks up stranded magical folk. But throughout the book, this dog keeps cropping up. Harry sees it in the tea leaves in Professor Trelawney's divination class. He sees it in the grounds of Hogwarts School. He even sees it in the bleachers of the Quidditch field. He's not sure if he's going mad, imagining this creature everywhere. But then one night it grabs his best friend Ron by the leg and drags him down a tunnel. Harry dashes after, terrified. At the end of the tunnel, he finds Ron in a haunted house. But the dog has gone. It's turned into the evil murderer Sirius Black, who betrayed Harry's parents to their deaths. Now he's going to murder Harry too.

Or so Harry thinks.

If you've read the Harry Potter books, you'll know that that's not right at all. Rather than trying to murder Harry, Sirius wants to protect him. Rather than betraying Harry's parents, Sirius was himself betrayed. Rather than being Harry's enemy, Sirius turns

INTRODUCTION

out to be his faithful friend. In fact, he's the closest thing to family Harry's got. When Harry first saw Sirius, all the evidence was against him. But when he found out the truth of who Sirius was, Harry's mind was changed. So was his heart.

When people look at Christianity, they sometimes make the same mistake that Harry made with Sirius. Many of my friends think Christianity is *against* the things they care about the most. My friends care about racial justice. They see the ways in which Christians have engaged in slavery and racism and they assume that Christianity is against racial justice. My friends hear Christians saying that Jesus is the only way to God, and they think this is arrogant and offensive to those who were raised with other religious beliefs. My friends think people should be able to date and marry whomever they want, but Christianity says that it's not okay to marry someone of the same sex. My friends are excited by the discoveries of science, and they think that believing in a Creator God is the opposite of believing in science. My friends believe that women are equal to men, and they think Christianity puts women down. My friends see all the pain and suffering in the world, and they think there couldn't possibly be a loving God in charge. But just as Harry's view of Sirius totally changed when he discovered more, when we look more closely at each of these concerns, our view of Christianity might just change as well.

Perhaps someone gave you this book and you think believing in Jesus is dumb. When one of my best friends was a teenager, that's what she thought too. Rachel was *really* smart. The Christians she knew were not. Rachel liked her freedom: freedom to party, freedom to get drunk, freedom to try out different kinds of romantic relationships. She thought it was stupid to be a Christian, partly

because you'd have to be dumb to believe the things Christians believe, and partly because you'd have to be dumb to follow a religion that stopped you from having fun. God totally changed Rachel's mind when she was in college. (I'll tell you more of her story in chapter 7.) If you're reading this book and you think like Rachel did, I'm really glad you're here. I hope you find these questions interesting and that they help you think more for yourself.

Maybe you're more like I was at your age. I remember feeling sure about following Jesus when I was nine years old. Most of my friends growing up thought being a Christian was weird, but I mostly didn't mind being different. At my school, being different was okay. (One girl wore wings to school every day for a year and no one cared!) But sometimes it was hard to disagree with all my friends. They thought the Bible was just made-up stories. They thought all religions were equally true. They thought Christians hated gay people and that Christians didn't think women were equal to men. Believing that some guy died on a cross and came back to life two thousand years ago so that we could be forgiven by God sounded crazy to them. Most of the teachers agreed. So were they right?

Since I was your age, I've spent a *really* long time studying, and I've met a lot of *ridiculously* smart people, including professors at some of the best universities in the world. Some of them think it's stupid to believe in Jesus. Others think that following Jesus is the cleverest thing we could possibly do, and that without Jesus, there is no meaning for our lives and no hope for our world. These people have lots of different stories of how they came to believe in Jesus. Some grew up in Christian families. Some became Christians as teenagers. Others started following Jesus when they were

adults, because they realized Jesus was the answer to their biggest questions. And they're not alone. It's easy to imagine Christianity as old-fashioned and dying out, but there are actually more Christians in the world today than ever before.

When I was growing up, experts predicted that as the world became more modern, more educated, and more scientific, religious belief would naturally decline. But they were wrong. In Western countries, like England (where I'm from) and America (where I now live), the number of people who believe in God has decreased. But in the rest of the world, belief in God is actually *increasing*, and Christianity is still the most popular religion. In fact, there are *twice* as many people in the world who say they are Christians as there are who say they aren't religious.¹

By the time you're my age, the percentage of people in the world who say they *don't* believe in God is likely to go down, while the percentage of people who say they are Christians is likely to go up. China is the largest country in the world. It is officially "atheist" (which means being sure that God doesn't exist). People in China can even be sent to prison for following Jesus. But the church in China is growing so fast that by 2025, there will likely be more Christians in China than in America, and some experts think that by 2060, more than half the people in China will be Christians!²

Just because lots of people believe something doesn't make it right. Each of us must think carefully for ourselves about what we believe. But if you think that Christianity is dying out or that all the really educated people have stopped following Jesus, you might want to look more closely. Harvard professor Tyler VanderWeele (whom you'll meet in chapter 1) says that—in light of all the evidence for Christianity—any educated person should look

carefully at the claims of Jesus and be able to explain why he or she does or doesn't believe them.

The most important book to read if you want to know more about Jesus is the Bible. The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. Like the Harry Potter series, it tells one overarching story, but it's broken up into many shorter books (sixty-six in total!) But unlike the Harry Potter series, it claims to offer us the key to everlasting life. The Bible was written by many different human authors, but Christians believe that each of these human authors was inspired by God and that we can meet God and get to know him through this book. I'll reference the Bible at many points in this book, but if you're not familiar with the Bible, don't worry. I'll always explain what I'm talking about.

The Bible is divided into two parts. The first part is known as the Old Testament. This part of the Bible is shared by Jews and Christians. It tells us the story of God and his people before Jesus was born. The second part is called the New Testament. The New Testament tells us the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It then tells the story of the early Christian movement in the book of Acts, and we get to read letters written by some of the first Christian leaders to some of the first Christian churches.

The Bible has done more to change the world than any book in history. In chapter 5, we'll look more closely at why we might think that the Bible is actually true. My hope is that—whether you already believe in Jesus or not—this book will make you want to read the Bible for yourself. You see, the Bible is a bit like an ancient treasure chest. Open it up, and you will find amazing riches with the power to change your life forever. But sometimes

INTRODUCTION

treasure chests get buried and we need to dig through the dirt to find them. My hope is that this book will give you a shovel to dig through the ideas that sometimes stop people from wanting to read the Bible at all. But in order to read this book, I need you to take a risk.

To find out who Sirius really was, Harry had to dive down a tunnel. To read this book, and to understand Christianity, you need to dive in with an open mind. If you do that, you might find—like Harry—that your world turns upside down. That's a big risk to take.

Are you ready?



How Can I Live My Best Life Now?

At the beginning of the film *Moana*, everyone is happy on the island—except Moana. Even though she’s the daughter of the chief, Moana doesn’t quite belong. She longs for adventure. So she looks out to sea, and sings about how she’s been “staring at the edge of the water” all her life.¹ Moana tries to forget adventure and fit in. But it doesn’t work: the voice inside her sings a different song. “What is wrong with me?” she asks.

Perhaps you feel a bit the same: like you don’t quite belong here. Perhaps when you read stories like the Harry Potter series—or see films like *Moana*—you find yourself staring at the edge of the water, wishing those magical worlds were real. That’s how I felt when I first read *The Lord of the Rings*, and I didn’t grow out of the feeling. In fact, I grew *into* it. The older I get, the more sure I am that the real world is *even more* magical than those imaginary ones. It’s one of the reasons I believe in Jesus. The voice inside me sings a different song.

But following Jesus doesn't mean ignoring what I see around me. Just as Moana's dream of sailing out to sea doesn't mean abandoning her island but saving it, so, in this chapter, I want to suggest that following Jesus doesn't only give us a way to live our best life forever after we die. It also—in some unexpected ways—means living our best life together now.

Don't get me wrong. Jesus said that following him would be hard. Really hard. He said it would be like *dying* to yourself (Luke 9:23). But he also promised that following him was the way to *really* live: “I came that they may have life,” he said, “and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

Here are seven pieces of evidence to suggest Jesus was right.

Evidence #1: People Who Go to Church Are Happier and Healthier!

In 2007, a British guy called Christopher Hitchens wrote a best-selling book called, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Lots of people believe that's true. They think we'd all be better off without religion. But since Hitchens wrote his book, a lot of evidence has come out to show that he was wrong! People who go to church at least once a week are happier, healthier and longer lived than people who don't. Harvard professor Tyler VanderWeele is a world expert on this subject. He says that rather than religion being poisonous, going to church every week is like drinking a magical medicine.²

We all know that eating more fruits and vegetables is good for us. But it turns out that going to church once a week or more is equally good for you.³ So if you really hate brussels sprouts but your parents make you eat them anyway, try asking if you can

go to church instead! We all know smoking is bad for you. But going to church once a week or more is *almost* as good for you as stopping smoking!⁴ Professor VanderWeele’s research has also found that children who are brought up going to church tend to end up being happier and having a greater sense of purpose in their lives than those raised non-religious.⁵

Going to church also helps us avoid things that are bad for us, like drinking too much alcohol or taking illegal drugs. This makes sense to me. A big reason people take drugs is that they want to feel something amazing that takes them out of their ordinary lives. But drugs make you feel good for a bit, and then they make you feel terrible—just like jumping off a building might feel really great while you were flying through the air, but terrible when you hit the ground. There are times when singing to Jesus with all sorts of other people at church makes me feel as if my heart will burst with joy! But instead of crashing to the ground afterward, I feel leftover happiness.

This is one of the reasons why people who go to church every week are less likely to get depressed. This doesn’t mean Christians never suffer from depression. Many do. And sadly, some people (Christians and non-Christians) end up feeling so hopeless that they commit suicide. This is a terrible thing and many countries, schools, and cities have “suicide prevention” campaigns to make sure people who want to end their lives get help. But what you probably won’t hear in suicide prevention education is that people who never go to church are as much as *five times more likely* to kill themselves than people who go every week.⁶ In fact, Professor VanderWeele says that attending religious services weekly may be the best protection against suicide there is.

These benefits aren't just limited to Christianity. People who go to synagogue at least once a week also see positive effects in their health and happiness. But doing something non-religious, like going to a golf club once a week, and seeing the same people for a shared activity doesn't appear to have the same effect. It seems we humans thrive best when we worship in community together. We see this in the Bible, as believers meet together to sing and pray and read God's word (e.g., Acts 2:42; Colossians 3:16).

The benefits of going to church don't mean the Christian life isn't hard. It is. Jesus said that following him means picking up a cross, and people who carried crosses in Jesus's day were on the path to execution (Matthew 16:24). For some people across the world today, following Jesus *literally* means getting killed. On average, eleven Christians are executed for their faith *every day*. These people are trusting that life with Jesus forever is *better* than any life they can have here now. But even though it's hard and can be dangerous, following Jesus is also the best life we can live now. The apostle Paul (one of the first Christian leaders) was in prison and facing the possibility of execution for his faith when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. But instead of being sad about his circumstances, Paul kept telling the Philippians to rejoice (e.g., Philippians 1:18; 2:18; 3:1; 4:4).

In *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, Harry discovers he's going to need to swim underwater for a long time to complete one of his tasks, so he eats a special plant called "gillyweed" that makes him grow gills like a fish and webbed feet like a frog.⁷ Harry's mission is still difficult and dangerous, but he's got what he needs to make it through. The Christian life is hard. But it's a

life of joy and meaning and adventure, and the God who made us knows what helps us thrive. If we listen to both the Bible and researchers like Tyler VanderWeele, going to church weekly is a bit like taking gillyweed for life.

Evidence #2: Love Is the Most Important Thing

In the Disney film *Frozen*, Elsa's parents respond to her dangerous ice powers by cutting her off from her sister Anna. But as Elsa grows up, her powers only get stronger. In the end, she stops trying to control them and in the famous song "Let It Go," she decides it's time to throw off all constraints. But by the end of the film, Elsa has realized that what she needed to control her powers wasn't unlimited freedom, it was love. And (as we'll see in chapter 7 of this book) despite what many songs and stories make us think, romantic love isn't the only kind that counts. As Elsa discovered, the love of friends and family is vital to our happiness.⁸

For seventy-five years, professors at Harvard have been running a study on well-being. Younger people in the study tended to expect that their happiness would depend on fame, wealth, and success. But they were wrong. Good relationships with family and friends were what kept people happiest and healthiest.⁹

For Christians, love is the heart of everything. The Bible says that "God is love" (1 John 4:8), and Jesus told his followers to "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). So, according to the Bible, true love flows out of God's love. It doesn't just mean having "warm feelings" or "falling in love" with someone. It means being willing to sacrifice for others. In fact, the Bible says that we know what love *is* because Jesus laid down his life for us (1 John 3:16).

All of us want to be known and loved. The amazing message of the Bible is that the God who knows the very worst things about us also loved us enough to die in our place, so that—if we put our trust in him—we can live with him in happiness forever. People often like to say that love is the most powerful force in the universe. But Christians believe this is literally true.

Evidence #3: Helping Others Is Good for Us

Giving things up to help others feels hard. But Jesus made the strange claim that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). He commanded, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31), and despite being the rightful King of the whole world, he said he “came not to be served but to serve” and told his followers to live like that as well (Mark 10:44–45). Helping others can mean missing out ourselves. But Jesus made this stunning promise: “Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 16:25).

Jesus’s promises are about eternal life. But following his commandments also has benefits now. The scientists and other experts who study the human mind and behavior have found that helping other people is actually good for us. For example, volunteering is good for our mental and physical health. Some studies have shown that caring for others is better for the carer than for the person they’re helping!¹⁰ This doesn’t mean we’ll never miss out by putting other people first. If you follow Jesus, the sacrifices will be real. But the truth is that God made us and knows how we work. In the end, selfishness makes us miserable.

We get a picture of this in the film *Aladdin*. When the evil Jafar finally gains control of the genie’s lamp, he wishes for the genie

to turn him into the most powerful being in the universe. This means becoming a genie himself. But Jafar forgets that genies must serve a master, and because Jafar is masterless, he gets trapped in the magical lamp. As this story illustrates, serving and worshiping ourselves makes us deeply unhappy in the end. It's not freedom; it's imprisonment.

Christians, like me, are often selfish. We don't live up to Jesus's standards. At heart, we're not good people: we're bad people who know we need Jesus's forgiveness every day. But there is good evidence that actively religious people are, on average, more generous than non-religious folk. For example, in America, people who go to church every week give three-and-a-half times as much money to charity and volunteer twice as much as people who never go to church.¹¹

Evidence #4: Gratitude Is Good for Us

Growing up, I loved Christmas except for one thing. For every gift I received, my parents made me grind out a "thank you" card. (Now, any time I give a kid a gift, I tell their parents *not* to have them send me a card, because I remember how much I hated writing them myself!) But what if I hadn't hated writing those cards? What if I had focused on being *truly* thankful for the gift? Christmas would have probably been more fun for me. Psychologists have discovered that people who choose to be grateful (like for example, writing down the things they're thankful for every week) are happier and healthier than those who don't.¹²

If I'd listened to the Bible, I'd have known that already. Paul, who wrote a lot of the New Testament letters, went through all sorts of *terrible* things. He was beaten and shipwrecked and

mocked and laughed at and finally killed for following Jesus. You might think he'd be a bit resentful! But instead he tells Christians to, "rejoice always" and "give thanks in all circumstances" (1 Thesalonians 5:16, 18) because God is really in control. In fact, in Paul's letter to the church in Rome, he tells the Roman Christians that "all things work together for good" for those who love God (Romans 8:28). I cling to that promise when it feels like my life is going wrong. I try to remember that through all my ups and downs, through all my laughter and my tears, God is writing my storyline for good—like the most amazing author.

Christians have so many reasons to be thankful. We believe not only that God created all of us and gives us every good thing we have, but also that he offers us forgiveness and eternal life with him for free, so whatever happens to me here and now, the end of my story will be incredibly happy. As with the gifts I got at Christmas, someone else paid for me to have this gift. But this gift of relationship with God is more expensive than anything else I've ever been given. Jesus paid for it with his life when he died on the cross for me. So, for Christians, thankfulness isn't just like a positive-thinking technique you might learn at school. It's our joyful response to a life-making and life-saving God.

Evidence #5: Forgiveness Is Good for You!

Forgiving people can be hard. Jesus made it harder. One of his disciples suggested an upper limit of seven for how many times you should forgive someone. Jesus replied, "Not . . . seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21–22). He taught his followers to pray, "Forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (Luke 11:4). And—amazingly—as he was

hanging on the cross, Jesus prayed that God would forgive the soldiers who were executing him (Luke 23:34). Forgiven people, Jesus argued, must forgive.

Again, this turns out to be for our good. Experts have found that forgiveness is good for our minds and bodies.¹³ This doesn't mean God doesn't care when we get hurt. (We'll talk more about this in chapter 9.) It also doesn't mean someone who has abused his or her power to hurt someone else should be allowed to keep that power. God is both loving and just, and the Bible teaches again and again that the vulnerable should be protected (e.g., Psalm 68:5). But God wants us to remember that final justice is in his hands, so we don't have to get back at people (Romans 12:19). Instead, Christians are called to forgive others as God has forgiven us.

Evidence #6: Grit Is Great!

The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien is one of my favorite books. Sam, one of the main characters, is a hobbit—like a human, but smaller and with extra hairy feet! Sam isn't rich or good-looking or particularly smart. He's just a gardener. But he really loves his friend Frodo, and he sticks with Frodo on their mission to destroy the evil ring. Frodo has been chosen to bear the ring. But Sam's passion and perseverance end up being vital to Frodo's success. Sam becomes a hero not because he is gifted and talented, but because he is loving and determined.

Do you ever wonder if you're smart enough or talented enough or good looking enough to succeed in life? I'm guessing we all wonder that sometimes. But it turns out that something psychologists call "grit" (which means being like Sam and sticking

with a task we care about for a long time, even when it gets hard) makes more difference to our long-term success than intelligence or talent or good looks.¹⁴

We find the call to be gritty all over the Bible. Jesus said following him was like walking a hard road (Matthew 7:14). Peter (one of Jesus's first followers) calls Christians to have self-control and perseverance (2 Peter 1:6). The New Testament letter to the Hebrews urges Christians, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:1–2). Rather than have us just struggling on alone though, Jesus promised to send his followers a Helper—the Spirit of God, who comes and lives with us if we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior (John 14:16). God also gives us the companionship of other Christians along the way, just like Frodo had Sam. And when we fail, which we often will, we can rest knowing that Jesus has already won the victory.

Evidence #7: Love of Money Lets Us Down

When Aladdin rubs the lamp and the genie emerges to grant three wishes, he is shocked that Aladdin doesn't know what he wants. The genie says most people want money and power. But then he warns Aladdin:

Do me a favor, do not drink from that cup. I promise you, there's not enough money and power on earth for you to be satisfied.¹⁵

We often think money will make us happy. In a 2016 survey of students, 82.3 percent checked becoming rich as an "essential" or "very important" life goal. But when people get some money, they tend to

just want more. And more. And more. For people who are very poor, having a bit more money can help, but experts have discovered that choosing money over friends and family is a sure path to *unhappiness*.¹⁶

Once again, we find this wisdom already in the Bible. Paul calls the love of money “a root of all kinds of evils” (1 Timothy 6:10), and Jesus told a rich young man that he needed to give away all his money to the poor before he could follow Jesus. When that young man went away sad, Jesus said it was harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the tiny hole where the thread goes in a needle (Matthew 19:16–26). Both in our lives today and in eternity, loving money lets us down. You can’t buy happiness.

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t work hard or earn money. Paul tells Christians that they should work to earn a living (2 Thessalonians 3:12) and to be able to support others in need (Ephesians 4:28). He encourages believers that whatever job they’re doing, they should work at it with all their heart, as if working for the Lord (Colossians 3:23). Again, this turns out to be great advice. Experts have found that *how* we do a job matters more to our overall happiness than *what* the job is.¹⁷

You might want to do something that looks or sounds impressive when you grow up—like being a film star or a professional football player or a world-famous doctor or a best-selling author. It’s not wrong to work hard toward getting a job like that. But being a gardener (like Sam) and working at it with all your heart as if you are working for the Lord might turn out to be better than being a film star or a football player. In fact, in Jesus’s kingdom, the most seemingly unimportant people are actually the most important (Matthew 20:16).

What Do We Need?

So what does fill us up? It's easy to look at sports stars or film stars and wish we had their lives. But when superstars like singer Taylor Swift or Olympic athlete Michael Phelps open up about their lives, we often discover that fame and success have left them feeling empty and depressed. Famous people have a spotlight on them all the time. Their success becomes their identity, and their fans start to worship them. But we humans aren't designed for that. Like planets orbiting the sun, we're meant to orbit around God. We're not meant to be the center of our own little universe. Atheist psychologist Jonathan Haidt summarizes our psychological needs like this: "Just as plants need sun, water, and good soil to thrive, people need love, work, and a connection to something larger."¹⁸ Following Jesus gives us all these things.

Daniel Hastings is a world expert in space science and a professor of aeronautics and astronautics at MIT. He became a Christian when he was a teenager in England, after a search for meaning and purpose in his life. "I have found Jesus Christ to provide the purpose and meaning for which I was searching," Professor Hastings recalls. "He has led and guided me ever since."¹⁹

Staring at the edge of the water, Moana wondered if there were any adventures before her and asked how far she'd go. So far in my life, I've found that following Jesus is the surest path to love, joy, and adventure. I still feel as if I don't belong at times. But that's something Jesus followers should expect. Like Harry Potter growing up in the Muggle world, we also don't really belong here. We belong to Jesus's much more magical world, and that world's just starting to break in.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

- Experts have found that going to church is really good for your mental and physical health. People who go to church weekly tend to be:
 - happier
 - healthier
 - longer-lived
 - less likely to suffer from depression
 - less likely to commit suicide
 - less likely to take drugs or abuse alcohol
 - more likely to volunteer
 - more generous with their money
- Psychologists have also found that many of the things that the Bible teaches are good for us, including:
 - going to church
 - putting loving relationships first
 - helping others
 - being thankful
 - forgiving others
 - sticking with hard tasks in the long term
 - not loving money
- Jesus never promised us an easy life now. In fact, he said the opposite. But following Jesus and living as the Bible calls us to live turns out to be really good for us—even here and now.



“This book can help young people both express and satisfy their emerging questions and longings. We wish we’d had this book when we were raising our children! But now we can give it away—confidently—starting with our own grandchildren.”

RAY AND JANI ORTLUND

President and Executive Vice President, Renewal Ministries

“In this short book, readers will have their minds challenged and illuminated.”

TYLER J. VANDERWEELE

John L. Loeb and Frances Lehman Loeb Professor of Epidemiology,
Harvard University

“I’m thankful for this winsome resource that I can recommend to young Christians and non-Christians alike.”

QUINA ARAGON

spoken-word artist; author, *Love Made* and *Love Gave*

YOUTH / DISCIPLESHIP

