

## Isn't Christianity Just a Coping-Mechanism?

In the Lord of the Rings, Sam and Frodo are about to enter Mordor to destroy the ring. They sit down to eat and Sam begins to dream. "I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into?" Frodo confesses that he doesn't know, but, "that's the way of a real tale. Take any one that you're fond of. You may know, or guess, what kind of a tale it is, happy-ending or sad-ending, but the people in it don't know. And you don't want them to."

This gets Sam to thinking about the old stories that have been told for generations. The stories of the Beren, Luthien and Silmarils and then he realizes, "Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the greatest tales never end?"

I find it fascinating to consider that any one of us or all of us together aren't living isolated from the world. Like it or not, we've all been dropped into a story we didn't choose. And you didn't choose your genes (at least your genetic makeup). You didn't decide how the world operates. You didn't choose your family, your country, your history. When you think about it, even with all choices you have to make on daily basis, you still don't *choose* most of the things you experience. You are living only a small part of a bigger story that you don't control.

Think about it for a minute. How does that make you feel? Is it exhilarating? Does it make you angry? Or fearful? Well, the fact is that life can be quite daunting no matter how your story is playing out right now. We all know that it's only a matter of time before

our time runs out and we're facing the great unknown. We also know that in-between now and then, we're in for a great amount of heartache. That's the reality of the world—it always has been. That's why today's question is so important.

This is the fourth week of our Beta series where we are talking about questions people ask about Christianity. Today we're talking about the question, "*Isn't Christianity just a coping-mechanism for people who can't handle life?*" There are some other ways it's often phrased. I've heard, "Christianity is just a psychological crutch for weak-minded people." And then a more philosophical bent—religion or belief in God or Christianity—take your pick—is just a psychological projection of what you want to be true. So, that's the basic question we're dealing with today.

Well, I don't have an answer—I actually have three answers. "Yes," "No," and "Oh, you want to play THAT game?" I'll take them in reverse order.

Now, many times when people say that Christianity is just crutch, what they're implying is that since they can point to our motivation for belief, that shows the belief is false. Well, first of all—no it doesn't. It has some rhetorical power (it *sounds* good), but it's actually what we call the genetic fallacy. How I feel about something or how I came to believe something has nothing to do with whether it's true.

For instance, imagine a couple of kids on a playground and one of them says, "You only believe that because you dad said it." Well, it might be true that my dad did say it and I trust my dad. But that in itself doesn't prove it's right or wrong.

But an even better way to deal with this is just to turn it back on itself. The atheist philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote, *“I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”*

Now, I appreciate that moment of honesty, but does the fact that he wants God not to exist prove that he’s wrong? Of course not. And you can do that with all the ways we ask that questions. Isn’t Christianity just a psychological crutch for people who aren’t strong enough to handle life? Isn’t atheism just a psychological crutch for people who can’t handle the idea of answering to an ultimate authority. Either way, it doesn’t prove anything. So, let’s first get that out of the way.

*But my second answer to this question is, “No” Christianity isn’t just a coping mechanism.* The way Sigmund Freud phrased this is that God is a projection of our desire for a father-figure. Of course, Freud was all about childhood development so he explained it by saying that when we’re young, we look to our father for protection, but as we get older, we realize that we can no longer look to our parents because they’re not big enough, so some people invent an ultimate authority that can do the job. To Freud, religious belief is simply wish-fulfillment.

Of course, this grossly misrepresents religious belief. First, individuals generally don't invent religion for themselves. Most people who believe in God or practice religion subscribe to a set of beliefs they didn't choose.

In fact, some people don't WANT to believe God exists or that Christianity is true, but they do anyway. There are many aspects of Christianity that are just hard and if I were going to project my own psyche and come up with a religion, it probably would look a bit different than Christianity. In general, I would think Jesus is pretty cool, but I would leave out parts like Luke 14, when he says, **"<sup>27</sup>Whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple."** Or I would get rid of things like, **"<sup>26</sup>...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup>and whoever wants to be first must be your slave."**

Think about the martyrs who were stoned, beheaded, baptized to death, fed to the lions, burned at the stake, and impaled on poles and lit on fire, were they fulfilling a subconscious wish? Did they choose not to recant because they were weak-minded?

You see, it's a caricature of religion to think that any person's religion is simply what they want to believe. Now, of course, people can always find ways to explain the harder parts of religion, but there's really no evidence behind it, it's just conjecture.

The fact is, people like Freud—even though he wasn't a believer and didn't think highly of believers—felt he needed to explain why religion is an almost universal phenomenon. The fact is that everyone recognizes this fact. People seem to be wired for

belief in God. And there are certainly more sophisticated explanations than Freud's. One that's particularly popular right now is that religion evolved because its pro-social behavior and its effectiveness at binding groups together.

My favorite atheist, Jon Haidt explained it this way at a gathering of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities gathering, *"Human beings evolved to be religious. It's in our nature...There is a God-shaped hole in the heart of each man...If there is a God-shaped hole in everyone's heart, regardless of how it came about, then it matters how that hole gets filled...If you fill it with a community that values service and decency and responsibility and caring for your family and caring for others then things will go well for those people and for the community and for the country."*

Now, I like Jon Haidt and I think a lot of his research is incredibly insightful. And I agree with him when he quotes Augustine that there's a God-shaped hold in the heart of each human. But his explanation is that this desire for God evolved because it was advantageous for humanity.

But C.S. Lewis had a different explanation in this famous passage from Mere Christianity, *"The Christian says, 'Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly*

*pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing."*

When someone says that Christianity is only a projection of our psyche, wish-fulfillment or an evolutionary trick, they don't do so because they have proof of it, they're just asserting it. And when they do, they often paint a very simplistic picture of religious belief that doesn't deal with all the differences among religions. So, no Christianity isn't just a psychological crutch or wish-fulfillment or coping-mechanism.

And my third answer is, *"yes" Christianity IS a coping-mechanism...and a darn good one at that!* Pretty much everyone from atheists to Christians agree that Christianity helps people cope with the questions, stresses and difficulties of life.

We shouldn't be embarrassed or threatened by that idea. The Bible encourages it. Philippians 4:6-7 says, **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** 2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says, **"<sup>3</sup>Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, <sup>4</sup>who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."**

Even Jesus gets in on it in Matthew 6:25-27, **"<sup>25</sup>Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is**

**not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? <sup>26</sup>Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? <sup>27</sup>Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"** That sounds like coping to me.

Now, here's the reality—everyone has crutches. Everyone tries to cope in different ways. The truth is, the universe is really big. And like I said at the beginning of the message, there's so much in this life that we can't control. We're at the mercy of forces that we can't even perceive, let alone take head-on. On a regular basis, we experience tragedy, illness, disappointment, confusion, busyness, stress and the list goes on and on. And people have both good and bad ways to cope with life. Here are three bad ways.

The first is *numbing*. The obvious way people numb is through substances. It could be alcohol or drugs—including opioids that are so rampant today. But another way we numb ourselves is through social media. In any given room at any particular time today, you can look around and a large percentage of people are staring at a phone, scrolling through our Facebook or Instagram feed—not because there's a lot there that's worthwhile, but because it keeps our brain occupied. When we do see something new or something familiar, we get a little dopamine hit that feels good—it feels like connection until it wears off and we search for the next hit. For many of us, this is preferable to being alone with our thoughts. We would often rather numb our minds than deal with our problems.

The second way people cope overlaps with the first one and that's *distraction*. Catholic professor and author Ulrich Lehner writes, "*Although we do not realize it, entertainment is the second biggest...coping mechanism; we pay sports heroes, movie stars and entertainers so much because they distract us from the conclusion that we are mortal and that our life is meaningless without God.*"

The third way would be to attempt to *gain control*. Here's Lehner again, "*Science is, in my view the number one coping mechanism of humans to deal with the inescapable truth that we and everything we produce will someday cease to exist (at least on this planet). That is the reason we pay doctors more than philosophers; they keep death and pain away from us.*"

We get face-lifts, tummy tucks, butt lifts. We work out obsessively, take billions of dollars in supplements and fall for ridiculous scheme that promise the easy way to a longer life. Why do we do this? We're *coping*.

The problem is that all these ways to cope are unhealthy and ineffective because they're based on lies. All of them deny the reality that eventually, life catches up. But even though Christianity isn't JUST a coping-mechanism, it is a good one. Why do I say that? Well, there are a few things that make for a good way to cope with life.

*First, it's effective and long-lasting.* Of course, this can't be the only reason, but it at least one of the great tests of coping mechanisms is that it works. I'm sure many of you can resonate with this. There have been various times in your life when you've drawn on



your faith to get you through hard times. Maybe someone sent you a Scripture or you came to worship and experienced the presence of God. And even though your circumstance didn't go away, you were covered by a deep sense of peace.

There are few people—even non-believers who disagree that Christianity in particular, and even religion in general is an effective way to deal with the ups and downs of life. That's why even atheists try to recreate that experience. The fact is that faith works and has brought comfort to billions of people throughout history.

*Second, it draws on life-affirming community.* There are some coping-mechanisms—namely ones that numb or distract that end up separating us from other people. But Christianity, when it's working right, draws people into healthy community.

This is one of the ways atheists have tried to recreate what they lose in religious practice. There have been a number of atheist or humanist “churches” that have popped up around the world trying to imitate what Christian churches have—they meet every Sunday, sing and have a message—usually about politics or doing good of some sort. But they haven't been particularly effective and tend to die fairly quickly.

Christianity is a communal faith. It's based on common belief and common support for each other. This is the way it's supposed to be. You see, one of the things people often don't realize is that Christianity isn't just an intellectual belief, it's intended to be a way of life.

I love how Acts, chapter 2 describes the early church, <sup>44</sup>“All the believers were together and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup>**They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup>Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup>praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”**

The New Testament even commands believers to be together to support each other. Ephesians 4:2 says, <sup>2</sup>“**Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.**” James 5 says, <sup>13</sup>“**Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. <sup>14</sup>Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. <sup>15</sup>And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. <sup>16</sup>Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.”**

Now, we’ve talked about this before, I our society has forgotten how to do this. It can be a real struggle for people in our modern, individualistic culture to operate like this. But if we follow, not just the beliefs of Jesus, but they way of Jesus, we have to reclaim this practice, because this is one of the most common ways Christianity has helped people through life.

The third reason Christianity is a good coping-mechanism is that *it connects us to, rather than distractions us from reality*. The best coping mechanism is simply know the truth. Jesus says that when we follow him, **“You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.” (John 8:32)**

A number of years ago, when we were in Iowa, I started to develop some pretty severe anxiety about my health. I wouldn't have been able to label it as that, but as I look back, that's exactly what it was. I never told my wife about it, but for at least a year, I slept for about two hours a night because when the lights would go out, my thoughts would immediately start to think I was dying. Every ache and pain was cancer—that was my big fear. And I was gripped with the thought that my wife would have to raise the kids by herself and my kids would grow up without a dad. It was awful.

It didn't generally happen during the day, except one day when I was sitting at my desk in my office at the church and my heart started racing. I started to get sweaty and light-headed—I really didn't feel well at all.

It was about lunch-time so I went home and laid down in our recliner, hoping to feel better, but only getting worse. Finally, I got my wife, who was staying home with the kids at the time and told her, “Honey, I need you to take me to the doctor. I think something is wrong.”

Well, we went to the doctor and they did an EKG and everything came out fine. While I still didn't feel better, I knew it was time to do something, so I ratcheted up my

courage and set up a doctor's appointment for a full physical—blood work and everything.

I can't tell you how nervous I was going to the doctor. I honestly didn't want to know if anything was wrong, but I was tired of living that way. So, we did the whole thing and I remember being very nervous as I was waiting for the results. Finally, they came when the doctor came in and went over them with me and she said I had a clean bill of health. I wish I could better describe the sense of relief I had when I heard those words from her. When I found out the truth, my life changed. I didn't need to cope anymore because the truth set me free.

Now, there are versions of Christianity—what I would call something like folk-religion that essentially amounts to wishful thinking. *“God will never give you more than you can handle.”* *“When God closes a door, he opens a window.”* It's usually filled with trite sayings and sentimentality. When we fall into that type of faith when Christianity is JUST a coping-mechanism.

But real, historic Christianity is so much more. It's not a spirituality that's so vague as to be meaningless. It's more than just some meditation exercises that amount to psychological tricks. It's been the belief of some of the most robust thinkers in history from Augustine to Anselm in the past to great scientists, writers and philosophers like C.S. Lewis and Alvin Plantinga. And they believe it, not because it works, but because they've explored it and have found it to be true.

It's a crunchy kind of faith that doesn't dodge hard questions. It profoundly diagnoses the human condition. It doesn't pretend that when you follow Jesus everything will go smoothly. It's the kind of faith that doesn't require you to hide your sins or fake holiness, but calls us to *admit* our failures and short-comings so we can deal with them.

It's the kind of faith where God has expectations and actually high standards for those who follow him, but he isn't harsh when we fail to live up to them because when we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us.

It's a faith that's not based on a fairy tale or ethereal philosophy, but on a history that can be explored. Its foundation is a person, Jesus, who modeled deep, abiding trust in God—who lived, died and was resurrected to validate what he said. In 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul lays it out when he says, **“<sup>14</sup>If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”** In other words, if it's not true, you should go on and find something better to do with your life.

But if it IS true, it means this life is not the end and it is the ultimate comfort because it means that what we know is so wrong in this life will someday be made right. That justice *will* come, that suffering will be alleviated and someday we won't just know in part, but we will know fully, even as we are fully known.