

CONQUERING CYNICISM IN A MODERN AGE

HOW THE BIBLE IN NATURE PROVIDES AN ANTIDOTE TO DOUBT AND DESPAIR

BY

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A PRELUDE

The Quest for an Antidote

(Because False Hope is So Easy to Embrace and Real Hope is So Hard to Come By)

TRUTH, n.

“An ingenious compound of desirability and appearance. Discovery of truth is the sole purpose of philosophy, which is the most ancient occupation of the human mind and has a fair prospect of existing with increasing activity to the end of time.”

The Cynic’s Word Book, Ambrose Bierce, 1906

AT ITS MOST basic level, the kind of cynicism we’ll be speaking of here concerns the age-old tendency where it’s so easy to view things like God or truth or justice as the stuff that only fools or con artists profess to believe in. In contrast to the simplicity of doubt and skepticism, there is the incredible difficulty of negotiating real faith or real hope.

The reasons for such cynicism are varied and complex, but essentially—and this is the main thrust of this work—it isn’t because people outright reject or deny the existence of God or truth or justice, as one might assume. Instead, the main reason for cynicism is due to an overwhelming belief in God or truth or justice. Unfortunately, though, because that belief in the reality of such things is so often disappointed due to the presence of evil in the world, the inevitable response is despair that in turn creates the perfect recipe for cynicism. What’s worse, the great irony of modern life is—in the wake of Western progress, democracy, and technology—the greater the level of our hope, the deeper is the level of our cynicism.

That said, *Conquering Cynicism in a Modern Age* traces the history of humanity’s attitude toward God and the world, marred as it is by the presence of evil, particularly in terms of what is communicated in *The Bible*. That’s because, although cynicism, as a by-product of hope disappointed, has reached epidemic levels in today’s world, it is by no means strictly a modern condition. In fact, it’s as old as the most ancient dramas depicted in Scripture. As a result, what begins as a straightforward discussion of conquering cynicism in a modern world soon takes an unexpected turn as we journey forward through time, age after age, in a quest for an antidote to the most corrosive force in God’s creation.

In the process of that search, we find ourselves surveying familiar territory, although it’s territory that takes on new meaning in this ages-long quest. In this case, I’m talking about the ever-present role of the natural world, to uniquely communicate God’s message to a humanity that is generally oblivious to what is right in front of them—a message of hope that is quite literally hidden in plain sight. This idea is most succinctly stated in Scripture, when the Apostle Paul described it this way:

For what may be known about God is evident to all, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power, and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from His workmanship, so that mankind is without excuse.

The Book of Romans

As such, this message conveyed through the natural world around us, speaks just as loudly to people who don't believe in the God of *The Bible* as it does to those who do. More importantly—and this is the unexpected turn I alluded to—our investigation into the natural world will reveal a startling twist of history, because in examining the history of humanity's relationship to God's creation, we confront many facts that no typical science lesson ever imparts.

That is to say, one of the most cynical theories of human existence, namely "evolution," could never have been formulated by Charles Darwin had he not inherited a school of thought utterly alien to his own atheistic perspective. That school of thought—developed by natural philosophers beginning in the seventeenth-century—described the intricate relationship between the Earth and all living things on it as a direct function of the God of *The Bible*, which is why it came to be known as the Economy of Nature. That's because proponents of this new worldview were able to demonstrate the remarkable way that every aspect of the natural world exhibits predictably consistent patterns in spite of all its apparently random aspects, which to the untrained eye give the impression that Nature is nothing more than a by-product of a disinterested Universe.

It was this unique worldview, bequeathed to history by men like Robert Boyle, John Ray, Kenelm Digby, Thomas Burnet, and Carl Linnaeus, that ultimately laid the foundation for many of our modern-day sciences, such as chemistry, biology, botany, zoology, anthropology, and ecology. This divinely-inspired worldview—this Economy of Nature—which speaks of the universally observable qualities of the natural world, is what I'll be proposing provides us with an answer for what ails us most.

In short, what follows here is my attempt to restore a universal message imparted via God's creation so that not only will you learn how this worldview was hijacked and reworked to our subsequent hurt, but you will also come to understand the original purpose that the greatest minds of natural philosophy intended for their discovery. In doing so, you will encounter a most unexpected remedy to one of the most destructive forces in God's creation—more corrosive than sin and the enemy of hope—yet one that can be conquered by even a child ... the power of cynicism.

CHAPTER ONE

The Seeds of Cynicism

(Because Life is Full of Disappointments)

EXISTENCE, n.

"A transient, horrible, fantastic dream."

The Cynic's Word Book, Ambrose Bierce, 1906

STYLES COME, and styles go, but what never goes out of style is cynicism. When adversity strikes, do we embrace the challenge with dignity and grace? Do we rise to the occasion with steely resolve? Or do we instead criticize other people, the Universe, or God for ganging up on us? And why not? We're only human, right? And if you're human, then your life is full of disappointments; and wherever there are disappointments, Lord knows, cynicism is sure to follow.

Now understand, when I say cynicism, I'm not talking about its cousins—skepticism, pessimism, and nihilism. By definition, a skeptic doubts the authenticity of certain ideas that claim to be true, which still opens the door for a change of heart should evidence convince them otherwise. A pessimist sees the worst

in everything, and goes through life without much hope, yet this still doesn't rule out that they'll make more calculated decisions, thus increasing the possibility for success in life. And the nihilist believes that life has no meaning or purpose, and so rejects such concepts as truth and morality. However, this personal sense of uncertainty and powerlessness doesn't always lead to total negativity as one might expect but can motivate a person toward unexpected avenues of renewal and growth.

Cynicism, by contrast, turns out to contain the seeds of a much more toxic sort than any of its cousins. That's because while skepticism, pessimism, and nihilism primarily target abstractions such as ideas, values, and morals, the cynic's favorite targets are people, and more specifically, what motivates people. When certain ones wax on about faith, hope, and love, the cynic instantly mocks them because in their view buying into such nonsense demonstrates how uneducated, unsophisticated, and unrealistic they really are.

Take, for example, the view of one of America's foremost cynics, the nineteenth-century journalist and satirist Ambrose Bierce. When Bierce defined the cynic as "a blackguard whose faulty vision sees things as they are, not as they ought to be," he seems to take great pride in his self-styled role of watching out for the "less sophisticated." From the cynic's intellectual high ground, the things many of us cling to, such as a belief in justice or destiny, are so obviously shams that those who hold such views are deemed self-serving, manipulative liars, or worse, willing dupes who need to be protected. Ironically, though, while cynics offer their advice with such an air of concern for those they see as needing their help, there is also a distinct undercurrent to their remarks that makes it clear the cynic believes those who fail to heed their warnings deserve to be deceived.

On the subject of "justice," Bierce called it "a commodity which in a more or less adulterated condition the State sells to the citizen as a reward for his allegiance, taxes and personal service." And concerning "destiny," Bierce observed it was "a tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure." Notice how in both cases Bierce's target wasn't the idea itself but, rather, the ones with wrong motives who endorsed such foolishness. In Bierce's worldview, then, the victims are no less guilty than the villains, because only tyrants and fools peddle concepts like "destiny," both to their own hurt. Likewise, only the State and its citizens, who are both subject to corruptibility, buy into the fallacy that something as arbitrary as "justice" can actually be had ... that is, for a price.

As such, no one is beyond the scorn or criticism of the cynical mind. Not even God. In fact, the God of *The Bible* is considered an even worthier target for the cynic's contempt and ridicule, since He's thought to be the One to blame for all of humanity's problems. Whether it's because He's too callous, too barbaric, or too inept—you name it—He's presumed guilty as charged. He is, after all, the One Who is responsible for unleashing evil upon the world, isn't He?

Not only that, but the cynic adheres to an even more peculiar train of thought: If anyone fails to live up to the high calling of God, cynics don't blame the people who fail to do so. No, it's not those who commit acts of greed, or abuse, or betrayal, or lust, or lying, or gluttony, or laziness, or theft, or adultery, or perversion, or murder, who are seen as being guilty of sin—no, no, no, certainly not. The real culprit, declares the cynic, is God Himself. As Bierce described it, with his signature acid wit:

By what right, then, do royal rulers rule?
Whose is the sanction of their state and pow'r?
He surely were as stubborn as a mule,
Who, God unwilling, could maintain an hour.
His uninvited session on the throne, or air,
His pride securely in the presidential chair.
Whatever is, is so by right divine;
Whate'er occurs, God wills it so. Good land!
It were a wondrous thing if His design,
A fool could baffle, or a rogue withstand!
If so, then God, I say (intending no offence)
Is guilty of contributory negligence.

The Cynic's Word Book

Never mind that it makes no sense based on any form of logic that I'm aware of, yet there it is—century upon century, verdict upon verdict, guilt upon guilt. God is blamed for crimes He never committed, while the real culprits are judged as though they were the victims in every case.

As to why cynics the world over, proudly and defiantly, cling to such a contrary view is the primary question, among others, that we'll focus on in the following work, *Conquering Cynicism in a Modern Age: How The Bible in Nature Provides an Antidote to Doubt and Despair*.

CHAPTER TWO

The Joy of Cynicism

(Because Doubt Comes So Easily to the Human Race)

DELUSION, n.

“The father of a most respectable family, comprising Enthusiasm, Affection, Self-denial, Faith, Hope, Charity and many other goodly sons and daughters.”

The Cynic's Word Book, Ambrose Bierce, 1906

THE STORY presented in *The Bible* isn't one that describes a perfect world or a perfect people. And because it doesn't, it's argued that neither the human race nor the world were created by a perfect God. According to critics of *The Bible*, the presence of suffering, disease, and death in this imperfect world are undeniable proofs of their various claims regarding belief—or in their case, unbelief—in God. Either God doesn't exist at all, or if a Supreme Being does exist, he clearly isn't in control of the Universe and so is incapable of fixing what's happening on Earth. Or perhaps, he's just too busy with more important matters than that of caring for an unworthy species; or worst of all, he no longer gives a damn about us and has left us to our own devices from here on out.

However, in response to such lines of thought, I'd suggest an alternative interpretation of said proofs. I'd suggest, in light of the scriptural evidence in *The Book of Genesis*, that suffering, disease, and death are actually to be viewed in such a way as to flip the traditional script of the critics. And after reviewing said evidence in the following work, one might not only view suffering, disease, and death in a brand-new way but also the idea that God has been dethroned because the world isn't filled with perfect little darlings who live up to the notion that we're made in His image.

Admittedly, such a task isn't an easy one. It will take a great deal of examining the scriptural record that's available to us, as well as the human condition and the world as we know them today. That's because any genuine understanding of humanity's role on Earth as depicted in *The Bible* always requires tremendous effort, which is just another way of saying, the way of faith is hard—“real faith,” that is, not pseudo-faith, otherwise known as “blind faith.” In contrast to this “hard faith,” there is what I'd call “easy doubt,” otherwise known as “blind skepticism.”

Not that being skeptical about some things is always bad, but in comparison to real faith, skepticism can easily become like a bad habit that one doesn't realize has suddenly become the norm. What began as a healthy critique of ultimate reality, in the face of so many abuses and misconceptions, soon turns into “easy skepticism,” and before you know it, skepticism has metastasized into that more malignant form of doubt known as “cynicism.” And once that happens, there's virtually no known cure to the mindset of the “hardcore cynic.”

When it comes to such issues, then, of believing or doubting the claims of *The Bible*, it's typically analyzed in terms of a person's faith or lack thereof. As such, it's said that if you have faith, you're able to believe the message of Scripture; if you lack faith, then you can't help but doubt that message. But upon further analysis, this seems to me to be a gross oversimplification. That's because by narrowing the issue

of belief in *The Bible* to a faith versus non-faith dichotomy, we're actually no closer to understanding why some people believe in Scripture and others don't. And by oversimplifying this issue, we're nowhere nearer to understanding how a perfect God can co-exist with imperfect humans inhabiting an imperfect world.

FOR AS LONG as I can remember, the question of whether or not we can trust the God of *The Bible* has come down to one's acceptance of the message of Scripture. When non-believers—variously called agnostics, atheists, and infidels—reject the biblical message, believers respond by presenting every kind of evidence they consider valid, both from Scripture and from Nature. In response, the hearers are said to determine their levels of faith or non-faith based on their response.

To prove this point, believers may point to the famous parable of Jesus and the “sower of the seed,” where four types of “soil”—or mindsets, actually—were revealed by the degree to which each group received the teaching of Scripture. While three-quarters of the listeners were impervious to the message, one-quarter responded favorably. Naturally, the typical assumption has been that those who believed did so because they had faith, while the others did not.

But if that's the case, then I'm very curious to know: What, exactly, does that mean? To me, it's not enough to spout the glib verdict that “you just gotta have faith” to receive the biblical message. If, as we're told, it's the same message being expressed to each and every listener, what is it about the listener that creates this attitude of unbelief? Of course, many would claim it was due to the spiritual condition of the listeners themselves. Of course, they were sinners, it would be suggested; that's why they didn't have faith. The only problem with that train of thought is, if you believe the message of Scripture, then you're supposed to be on board with the overall message of the book, which states that all humans have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. As such, then, we're all sinners by nature. And if that's true, then even those in the parable described as being “good soil” are just as likely to reject the message as those who constituted “bad soil.”

That said, the mystery of why some people “have faith” but others “lack faith” doesn't seem to have anything to do with their so-called “spiritual state.” What else could it be, then?

MANY YEARS ago, I heard a story about what was described as the “joy of agnosticism,” in which it was said that agnosticism was a far easier philosophy of life to embrace than that of theism. While theism is defined as the belief in God as the creator of the Universe, intervening in it and sustaining a personal relation to His creatures, agnosticism states that nothing can be known of God's existence or of anything beyond material phenomena.

In contrast to the atheist, who flat out denies the existence of God, the agnostic claims neither belief nor disbelief in God. In either case, whether one embraces agnosticism or atheism, both are said to question any and all evidence offered by the theist as proof of God's existence. In short, both agnosticism and atheism embrace doubt in contrast to theism which embraces faith.

At this juncture, one needs to understand something very important. When I talk about such things as faith and doubt, it's easy to get lost in the traditional meanings of these words. And if this continues unchecked, then there's really no point in examining this question of why some people have faith and others don't. That's because when most people talk about faith, it's generally assumed that we're talking about “blind faith” as opposed to a faith that involves an experience-based analysis. It's assumptions like this that had Bierce railing against the traditional view of faith, when he described it as “belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.” And because of this, most in turn can't help but buy into the misconception that people who do believe in the evidence of Scripture or Nature are naïve, gullible, or foolish for doing so.

As such, it's important to understand that throughout this work, I'm never talking about “blind faith.” What I am talking about is best described as “hard faith,” which is to say, faith that requires great effort and investigation to attain; and because of this it is equally important to understand that “hard faith” is never as cut-and-dry as even the most ardent believer would like it to be. Instead, because real faith is so difficult to achieve, it is always at best a tug of war between doubt and faith, between doubt and certainty. When considering this spiritual tug of war, I'm always reminded of two views expressed by two famous thinkers. On one hand, there is the eighteenth-century French philosopher Voltaire who said, “Doubt is not a pleasant

condition, but certainty is absurd.” And on the other hand, there is the nineteenth-century English philosopher John Stuart Mill who said, “There is no such thing as absolute certainty, but there is assurance sufficient for the purposes of human life.”

And herein lies the crucial difference between agnosticism and theism, because doubt comes so easily to the human race, while certainty comes so very hard. That’s why when I talk about such things as agnosticism, skepticism, and cynicism, I can talk about them in terms of the “joy” they bring. While the agnostic sits in his or her ivory tower and belittles anyone they deem foolish enough to embrace the message of *The Bible*, the theist wrestles daily with the same evidence that confronts the agnostic. But instead of casually, joyfully, dismissing it like the agnostic, the theist anxiously, painstakingly, attempts to reconcile said evidence.

As such, these two worldviews spawn two very different personality types. The ever-seeking believer sees himself or herself as a creature subject to the divine will and though plagued with an inevitable sense of guilt and uncertainty never loses sight of their ultimate destiny beyond one’s mortal self. Compare that to the happy-go-lucky agnostic who thinks himself or herself above all the nonsense, all the hypocrisy, all the self-deception of their less sophisticated counterparts who they see as wallowing in so much self-pity and self-recrimination.

As the Scriptures describe it, there are the troubled ones who constantly struggle to make sense of the incongruities of life, and who groan: “Woe is me, I’m undone. Please God, be merciful to me—a sinner.” Then there are the others who live contentedly, high above all the head games played by those whom they view as religious zealots, and who exclaim: “Joy is me, I’m immune. Please folks, be sensible with me—a realist.”

CHAPTER THREE

The Paradox of Cynicism

(Because One Person’s Doubt is Another Person’s Certainty)

RELIGION, n.

“A daughter of Hope and Fear, explaining to Ignorance the nature of the Unknowable.”

The Cynic’s Word Book, Ambrose Bierce, 1906

AS WITH ALL noble human endeavors—arts, sciences, philosophy, exploration, and the like—this work strives to fulfill a higher purpose. As alluded to at the start, I’m endeavoring to reconcile the paradox of the human condition as set forth in *The Bible*. In short, I’m looking to answer the question: How can imperfect people, living in an imperfect world, co-exist with a perfect God? And just as importantly, I’m hoping to answer this question without succumbing to that age-old condition so endemic to the human race: cynicism.

Keep in mind, though, in my attempt, I’m all too aware of a potential irony: Even if I succeed in this noble endeavor—in my view at least—the end result may still never have the desired effect when seen through the lens of cynicism.

To understand why, we first need to consider how cynicism impacts the human condition:

Cynicism is an attitude characterized by a general distrust of the motives of others. A cynic has a lack of faith or hope in people whom they see as being motivated by ambition, desire, greed, gratification, materialism, goals, and opinions that the cynic perceives as vain, unobtainable, or ultimately meaningless.

The term originally derives from the ancient Greek philosophers, the Cynics, who rejected conventional goals of wealth, power, and honor. They practiced shameless nonconformity with

social norms in religion, manners, housing, dress, or decency, instead advocating the pursuit of virtue in accordance with a simple and natural way of life.

Wikipedia

According to tradition, one of the founding members of this cynical movement was Diogenes of Sinope, born in ancient Greece around 410 B.C. Although none of his writings have survived, much of what he said was recorded by others, among them, Plutarch and Philo.

The term *cynic* derives from the ancient Greek *kynikos*, meaning “dog” or “dog-like.” Calling them this was intended as an insult for their blatant rejection of convention and willingness to live on the streets, but Diogenes actually reveled in the title, stating that “other dogs bite their enemies, but I bite my friends to save them.” He was also heard to say, “I am Diogenes the Dog. I nuzzle the kind, bark at the greedy, and bite scoundrels.” When people laughed at him because he walked backward beneath the portico, he said to them, “Aren’t you ashamed that you walk backward along the whole path of existence, yet you blame me for walking backward along the path of the promenade?” Once Diogenes saw the officials of a temple leading away someone who had stolen a bowl belonging to the treasurers, and he said, “The great thieves are leading away the little thief.” When seized and dragged off to King Philip of Macedonia, he was asked who he was, to which he replied, “A spy upon your insatiable greed.”

Speaking of the original cynic, the ancient Greek philosopher Dio Chrysostom wrote:

Diogenes was surprised by the fact that had he claimed to be a physician for the teeth, everybody would flock to him who needed to have a tooth pulled; yes, and by heavens, had he professed to treat the eyes, all who were suffering from sore eyes would present themselves, and similarly, if he had claimed to know of a medicine for diseases of the spleen or for gout or for running of the nose.

But when he declared that all who should follow his treatment would be relieved of folly, wickedness, and intemperance, not a man would listen to him or seek to be cured by him ... as though it were worse for a man to suffer from an enlarged spleen or a decayed tooth than from a soul that is foolish, ignorant, cowardly, rash, pleasure-loving, illiberal, irascible, unkind, wicked and, in fact, utterly corrupt.

On Virtue, or Diogenes

Ironically, when one examines the roots of cynicism, it should escape no one who has ever studied the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth that these ancient Cynics were actually successors of the Hebrew prophets as well as forerunners of Christ Himself.

After all, who more than the Hebrew prophets were characterized by their outcry against ambition, greed, and materialism? Who railed more against conventional goals of wealth, power, and honor? Who more than Jesus conformed less with the social norms of His day, in religion and manners?

As to the parallels between this original form of cynicism and the teachings of Christ, Dio Chrysostom further recorded, in the century immediately following the birth of Christianity:

Just as the good physician should go and offer his services where the sick are most numerous, so, said Diogenes, the man of wisdom should take up his abode where fools are thickest in order to convict them of their folly and reprove them.

On Virtue, or Diogenes

However, while the cynics of old and their modern-day counterparts are characterized by a general lack of faith or hope as a result of their view of human motives, Jesus and His disciples never succumbed to the negativity that is associated with full-blown cases of cynicism.

Like all things pertaining to the human condition, then, what is valuable in moderation is dangerous when excessively indulged in. In fact, it’s this paradoxical quality of cynicism that lies at the heart of the human dilemma. That’s why I’m suggesting in the following work that we differentiate between the healthy and malignant aspects of this thing called cynicism. So, in the interest of steering clear of any negative

aspects associated with cynicism, I'd suggest that when *The Bible* describes how the prophets and Jesus address the human condition, they're not so much being "cynical" as they're being "suspicious."

BEFORE THE Greek cynics arrived on the scene, warning us about foolishness, ignorance, and cowardice, the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah found himself in a situation that prefigured the dilemma of Diogenes of Sinope. It's said of Diogenes that one day he was seen wandering about the city in broad daylight yet he was carrying a lit lantern. When asked what he was doing, he replied, "I'm looking for an honest man." According to Joshua J. Mark:

This was his way of exposing the hypocrisy and sham of polite societal conventions. By holding a literal light up to people's faces in broad daylight, Diogenes forced them to recognize their participation in practices that prevented them from living truthfully.

World History Encyclopedia 2014

In the case of Jeremiah, he'd been tasked with communicating God's anger toward the southern kingdom of Judah who was on the verge of divine judgment for their persistent rebellion against the Lord. In essence, Jeremiah was the voice of divine suspicion. Said God to His mouthpiece:

"Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find just one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I'll forgive this city. Although they say, 'As surely as the Lord lives,' they still swear falsely..."

So Jeremiah said, "Lord, don't Your eyes look for truth? You struck them, but they felt no pain; you crushed them, but they refused correction. They made their faces harder than stone and refused to repent. I thought, 'These are only the poor; they're foolish, for they don't know the way of the Lord, the requirements of their God. So I'll go to the leaders and speak to them; surely they know the way of the Lord, the requirements of their God.'"

But with one accord they had all broken off the yoke and torn off the bonds. And the Lord said, "The people of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to Me. They lied about Me when they said, 'The Lord won't do anything! No harm will come to us; we'll never see sword or famine.' But the prophets of Judah are but wind, and My word of truth isn't in them; so let what they say be done to them."

The Book of Jeremiah

Several key takeaways present themselves here that will prove important throughout this work. First, the God of *The Bible*, from age to age, encourages—no, commands, actually—that we be suspicious of those who pretend to be *outwardly* what they are not *inwardly*. Second, any attempts to get away with this kind of subterfuge will be searched out and tested by God and His various agents, such as prophets, seers, poets, and the like, as well as by circumstances, historically, naturally, supernaturally. And third, God's typical vehicle of judgment will be to mirror the very words of rebellious people so that their own profession announces their subsequent punishment.

NOW IN USING this word "suspicious," keep in mind the context in which I'm using it. I'm not talking about the same thing that applies to cynicism, in that cynicism is defined as a "general" lack of faith in the motives of others. By definition, suspicion is "the act of suspecting something is wrong without proof or evidence." The difference between being cynical and being suspicious, then, is that the suspicious mind can be altered by the introduction of tangible proof or evidence, while the cynical mind is impervious to it. As such, evidence is capable of shifting one's perspective from that of suspicion to that of conviction, as to either innocence or guilt in the case of a legal matter, or belief or disbelief in the case of an intellectual matter. By contrast, the cynical mind taints one's perspective in regard to all such evidence, in effect altering the very thing that could sway someone's perspective had they not been so inclined toward a cynical view of life.

Dick Keyes poignantly illustrates this, in his book *Seeing Through Cynicism*, in the Pharisees' reaction to the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead. Upon Lazarus emerging from his

tomb, at just a word from Jesus, the onlookers were all confronted with the same evidence. But did they all react the same way to the evidence?

Imagine, if you will, what you'd have been thinking during those long, drawn-out moments after Jesus uttered the command: "Lazarus, come forth!" No doubt if any of us were there at the time, we'd all rightly have been just as suspicious as anyone else standing there in anticipation. What's more, we'd have been suspicious because Jesus Himself warned us to be wary of false prophets who claim to speak for God but do not. Based on that, then, who would've blamed anyone for doubting that anyone would be emerging from the tomb that day.

But when Lazarus did walk out, alive and well, how did the people react then? Was everyone there equally convinced that Jesus was the Son of God? Were all of their suspicions suddenly displaced by belief? Did they all put away their doubts and accept that they were eyewitnesses to God's power and presence in their midst?

As Keyes described the reaction of the crowd, he drew a sharp distinction between those who were moved to believe in Jesus' divine status that day and the Jewish religious leaders who simply couldn't see things the same way. Speaking of those leaders, he said:

The evidential force of what they had just seen was lost on them, eclipsed by their overwhelming anxiety. So they called a special council and concluded, "If we let Jesus go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation."

So, they immediately began plans to kill Jesus ... and Lazarus also, "since it was on account of him that many Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus."

What was the problem here? Was raising a man who was dead for four days not enough evidence to convince them that Jesus was the Son of God? In one sense the problem was the reverse. There was too much evidence... What they saw in Jesus was not a revealer of God but only a threat to their power and security.

Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion

AS FOR GOD'S inevitable efforts in searching out and testing His people's disobedience, we see a similar dynamic at work in the case of Jeremiah and the Judahites in his day. God easily saw through the surface behavior of the people in their stubborn posturing; although they declared, "As surely as the Lord lives," their rebellious behavior betrayed their real attitude. As usual, God's suspicions weren't lacking in proof or evidence, and more importantly, neither was that proof or evidence altered by any cynical view on God's part. Then compare that honest awareness with the dishonest reaction of the people in response to God's chastisement, which was actually designed to get His people's attention in order to steer them toward repentance. Instead of acknowledging the true nature of their predicament, they responded like spoiled children who, when spanked, mockingly moan, "Oh, wow, that didn't even hurt."

Throughout the scriptural record depicting the history of God's people, we see this pattern repeating itself again and again. God calls a person or a group to fulfill a purpose on His behalf, but instead of maintaining a proper balance in that calling, they turn responsibility into privilege, and freedom into license. In doing so, they turn opportunity into failure, and hope into misery.

For example, Adam was commissioned to subdue the Earth and fill it with his children who were to serve the Lord throughout all generations. Instead, Adam succumbed to the wiles of the devil, then when given a chance to take responsibility for his actions, he blamed everyone but himself, saying, "The woman You gave me, Lord, ate first, then she gave me some, and I ate, too."

Here we have the first recorded occurrence of cynicism impacting the human condition. By going along with Eve in partaking of the Forbidden Fruit, Adam revealed his distrust of God's motives in the divine prohibition to avoid eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Consequently mankind, rather than ruling the Earth, became a slave to the elemental things of the Earth, and so mortality began to overtake the human race. Not only that, but the cynical mind was handed the first dagger in the history of its pointing to God's supposed indifference toward suffering, disease, and death. And so, from that point onward, cynicism gave birth to cynicism upon cynicism.

Similarly, God called the sons of Jacob to carry on with the mission that He'd called Abraham and Isaac to fulfill: Be a light to the world and the salt of the Earth. In short, they were to bring the whole world to a knowledge of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to magnify the Lord in the midst of the nations of the Earth. And for a while, everything was proceeding quite nicely.

Among the many blessings that God had bestowed on Jacob's sons, en route to getting that job done: Judah was chosen to bring forth the kings of the clan, Levi was to provide spiritual guides, Benjamin would supply light bearers of wisdom, and Dan was the shipbuilder who would facilitate a series of seafaring migrations.

All was going nicely, that is, until Joseph began to share the strange dreams he was having with his brothers, and because these dreams seemed to indicate this young upstart—as his older, more illustrious brothers saw him—was planning a “take-over,” his brothers grew so jealous they considered the unthinkable. Out of pure spite, the brothers sold Joseph to a caravan of Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt, and then they lied to their father by making Jacob think a wild animal had eaten him.

Just think: Like Adam before them, how might Joseph's brothers reacted had they simply trusted God to know what He was doing in calling them to their task? To me, their actions speak volumes, revealing a complete lack of awareness as to their place in the divine plan of the ages. Because had they truly been confident in God's choice, they'd never have succumbed to their jealousy of Joseph. Had they not reinterpreted their divinely-appointed roles in that plan, they would never have resorted to taking things into their own hands. In short, jealousy gave birth to cynicism, which by its very nature triggered a loss of faith in the motives of even their own flesh and blood, Joseph.

Not only that, but cynicism also ate at the root of their trust in God's motives whom they undoubtedly saw as inspiring this upstart's rebellion, considering the ancient attitude toward dreams. Were it not for Joseph receiving these dreams, only he would've been seen as the guilty party. But because Joseph was apparently being egged on via divine inspiration, the brothers couldn't help but see this as a betrayal of a higher order. So, when the brothers showed Joseph's torn and bloodied coat of many colors to their father, they were able to look him straight in the eye and, without flinching, lie to him about how “Joseph was killed by a wild animal,” instead of breaking down and confessing to their crime as they might have under ordinary circumstances.

Now admittedly, if one were looking for the perfect scenario to prove the cynical view that a perfect God couldn't possibly be involved with this bunch, this is it. When honestly looking at events like this in *The Bible*, one can't help but hang one's head in disgust, to think that God would ever choose these scoundrels to represent Him. I mean, really, how could any of this provide light and salt to people who are seeking to know God?

But here is where I'd begin to ask: What, exactly, does Scripture mean when it says that God intends the offspring of Israel to be light and salt? If that means these human offspring are to be light and salt, in and of themselves, then clearly cynics have absolute cause for their case. However, just as I earlier spoke of flipping the script about how we typically view suffering, disease, and death, I'd also like to introduce a new way to view how God intends biblical Israel to fulfill this mission of being light and salt.

While the brothers of Joseph obviously failed to live up to God's plan willingly, this has never meant that God's plan of the ages would fail because of human fallibility. That's because even though the tragedy of Joseph being sold into Egyptian bondage didn't exemplify light and salt from a human standpoint, it did set the stage for a much larger drama of which the brothers of Joseph could never have imagined they'd play a part.

AGAIN, THE timeless patterns of Scripture reveal a truth hidden to the cynical mind that is impervious to such evidence, while the merely suspicious mind is capable of being swayed if only it's willing to confront said evidence. Case in point, at first glance Joseph's debacle at the hands of his jealous brothers seems to confirm the age-old notion that if God does exist, He certainly doesn't care about human suffering. Certainly, when one looks through a cynical lens at the events depicted in *The Bible*, it's very easy to miss the “big picture,” as it were.

But recall, if you will, the scene we described earlier involving Jeremiah and those rebellious Judahites whom God searched out as to their outward appearance while seeking to hide their inward reality.

Outwardly, the people declared, “As the Lord lives,” yet inwardly, according God, they were swearing falsely. And in response, the verdict of God, through the mouth of Jeremiah, was, “So let what they say be done to them.” What, exactly, did they say? They said, ‘The Lord won’t do anything! No harm will come to us; we’ll never see sword or famine.’” But because there was no truth in their words, the very words they uttered backfired on them and in fact formulated their own judgment in the form of the swords that the fearsome Babylonians brought against them and the famine that afterward overtook the land of Judah.

As for the words of Joseph’s brothers that came back to haunt them, they are those which they spoke just prior to their dastardly deed. As the Scriptures describe it:

Now Joseph’s brothers saw him in the distance, and before he arrived, they plotted to kill him. “Here comes the dreamer!” they said to one another. “Come, let’s kill him and throw him into a pit. We can say a vicious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what becomes of his dreams!”

The Book of Genesis

Little did they know but one day they would come to know what became of his dreams, because as it turned out, Joseph’s bondage in Egypt set the stage for the salvation of Jacob and his family which foreshadowed the ultimate drama in *The Bible*, that of Jesus and His role in the salvation of all mankind, who were typified by Jacob’s family.

As the story goes, once Joseph was delivered into the hands of the Egyptian official Potiphar, he became the unwitting participant in a series of events that elevated him to a position of great power. After interpreting Pharaoh’s strange dreams, Joseph was awarded the position of viceroy of Egypt. Then famine in Palestine forced Jacob’s sons down to Egypt in search of food, and without recognizing him, the brothers came face to face with Joseph as he sat on Egypt’s throne. As it is written:

Joseph was no longer able to control his feelings in front of his servants, so he ordered them all to leave the room. No one else was with him when Joseph told his brothers who he was.

He cried with such loud sobs that the Egyptians heard it, and the news was taken to the king’s palace.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I’m Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But when his brothers heard this, they were so terrified that they couldn’t answer him. Then Joseph said to them, “Please come closer.”

They did, and he said, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. Now don’t be upset or blame yourselves because you sold me here. It was really God Who sent me ahead of you to save your lives.

“This is only the second year of famine in the land; there will be five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor reaping. God sent me ahead of you to rescue you in this amazing way and to make sure that you and your children survive. So it wasn’t really you who sent me here but God.”

The Book of Genesis

But what does the cynical mind see in the debacle of Joseph? Doubtlessly, it sees only what it’s conditioned to see; it sees only failure with no hope of redemption whatsoever. It sees the same thing it sees in Adam’s fall from grace, the same thing it sees in Judah’s fall from grace. Essentially, the cynical mind falls victim to its own devices; and it does so by failing to remember what Bierce once observed:

A cheap and easy cynicism rails at everything. The master of the art accomplishes the formidable task of discrimination.

A Cynic Looks at Life

In other words, rather than see the story of Joseph’s betrayal in the context of the entire narrative of *The Bible*, the cynical mind recalls only the events concerning the betrayal and so thinks itself justified in insisting there’s no use serving a God Who allows such suffering and injustice. In short, it fails to discriminate

between how Joseph's betrayal looks on a personal level, in terms God's apparent failure to protect him, and how it looks on a national level, in terms of how it set the stage for a higher purpose on behalf of God's people in general.

In contrast to the limited view of the cynical mind, the merely suspicious mind sees more than meets the eye. Of course it grieves in response to the initial evidence that reveals the human tragedy for what it is. It, too, confronts the disappointment caused by the betrayal of Joseph's brothers, but unlike the cynical mind, it chooses not to reinterpret the story in terms of its own experience tainted as it may be by its own disappointments. Most importantly, it resists the urge to sugar-coat the events as though they weren't as bad as they first appeared, because to do so would be just as foolish as the cynical mind that refuses to be comforted by the evidence of God's providential hand that entered into said events to work out a much different ending than anyone might have anticipated.

In the final analysis, regarding such instances of injustice and suffering, we see just how the suspicious mind is capable of doing what the cynical mind can never do, which is to allow all the facts to weigh in on the final verdict as to God's motives in allowing certain tragic events to occur in the first place. This ability of the merely suspicious mind to remain elastic in the face of the many incongruities of life is clearly what sets it apart from the cynical mind and is what enables it to remain open to new evidence as it's introduced along the way.

Without this elasticity, it would also certainly succumb to the all-too-human tendency to chalk up Joseph's story as being just another example of a "happy ending" so common in fairy tales but not in real life. And really who can blame anyone for not ruling out the possibility that it was all too good to be true, just as no one can be blamed for thinking the same thing about Lazarus walking out of that tomb at just a word from Jesus. After all, *The Bible* is clearly less concerned about happy endings and more concerned about the question of what is true and what is false.

All things considered, then, how can we determine that something is true and not simply too good to be true? When are outward appearances covering up inward falsehoods? When is suspicion warranted in determining such matters? And when has a healthy suspicion ceased to be valid and thus metastasized into a malignant cynicism that has no redeeming value?

These are some of the questions addressed throughout this work, in the process of asking: How does cynicism affect our view of the most important issues that concern us as human beings? How does it affect our understanding of the world, ourselves, and others? How does it shape our attitude toward our most important institutions, values, and beliefs? And in a world yearning to know what is worthy of our trust, how do we adequately explain how a perfect God expects us to relate to suffering, disease, and death in an imperfect world?

So ends this preview of *Conquering Cynicism in a Modern Age: How The Bible in Nature Provides an Antidote to Doubt and Despair*. To read further, please get the whole book, which is available on this website.