

“Ben Shaw writes humbly and powerfully from his own experience and is always honest, clear and engaging. This is an excellent book for anyone prepared to give the Christian faith a look—or at least open to being persuaded that it might be worth doing so.”

VAUGHAN ROBERTS, Rector, St Ebbe's Church, Oxford, UK

“If you've never seriously considered the claims of Christianity, you will want to read this book. I wish I had read it in my agnostic days. It is clear, credible and convincing. You won't be disappointed.”

REBECCA MANLEY PIPPERT, Author, *Stay Salt*

“This is a book that connects to real people. Its chapter headings got me in. They're all the right questions, and Ben gives compelling answers. It's disarming, thoughtful, warm and hugely relevant.”

ANDREW HEARD, Senior Minister, EV Church, New South Wales, Australia

“Drawing on his own experience of discovery, Ben writes with openness, humour and clarity, pointing us towards a truly stunning prospect—that Jesus Christ was God in human form and that he is worth knowing and following. This is a must-read for anyone considering if there might be more to life.”

DR AMY ORR-EWING, Author, *Where Is God in All the Suffering?*

“This is Ben Shaw at his best, doing what he does best: communicating the Christian faith to those who don't quite know what to make of it. Written for believers and doubters alike, the book is a perfect blend of contrasts: informative and moving, funny and sad, worldly-wise yet pulling no punches about the significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I cannot recommend it highly enough.”

JOHN DICKSON, Author and Historian, Distinguished Fellow in Public Christianity, Ridley College, Australia

“Ben Shaw does not write this book from some theological ivory tower. He writes as a man in the midst of a life-threatening battle with cancer. I found that that fact gave every chapter such a ring of authenticity. This book is clear, well-argued, compelling, vivid and personal. I found it such a help and thoroughly commend it.”

RICO TICE, Senior Minister (Evangelism), All Soul’s Church, London, UK; Founder, Christianity Explored Ministries

“A very personal and personable case for the open-minded to consider or reconsider the claims of Christ. It’s easy to pick up and hard to put down. Enjoy the challenge to think again.”

PHILLIP JENSEN, Founder, Two Ways to Live Ministries

“I enjoyed this book and would highly recommend it to anyone wanting to investigate the claims of Christianity. Ben writes engagingly with honesty and humour as he sets out why the Christian faith is intellectually credible, great news and worthy of serious consideration.”

ADRIAN BLIGHT, Consultant Physician, London

“What a great book to put into the hands of a person who has either never really considered Christianity or who has lost their way. I kept on thinking of people for whom the clarity and simplicity of the engaging presentation might just be what it takes to challenge their misconceptions.”

MARK CALDER, Anglican Bishop, Diocese of Bathurst, NSW, Australia

“What a great book. Ben doesn’t duck any thorny issues that people might have with the Bible, but tackles them head on, with refreshing honesty, humility and skill. True to Ben’s Australian roots, *7 reasons to (re)consider Christianity* is a relaxed read, and his anecdotes entertain; you could definitely read this book at the beach or with a beer in hand!”

SARAH HALL, Women’s Worker, Emmanuel Church, Wimbledon, UK

BEN SHAW

7 reasons to (re)consider Christianity

The logo features a stylized bird or wing shape above the text.
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To my father

Seven Reasons to (Re)Consider Christianity
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Introduction

I don't know how you have ended up holding this book in your hands, but whatever the reason, it was written for you: the inquirer, the curious, the inquisitive, the sceptic, the atheist, the agnostic, and even the doubting Christian. Whoever you are, I'm glad you're here.

I realise that for some of you it might have been a while since you had anything to do with Christianity. It's been ages since you've stepped into a church or glanced at a Bible. Perhaps you went to church as a kid, but you've never really looked at the Christian faith as an adult. But now, for one reason or another, you're wondering whether it's time to look at it afresh and reconsider Christianity.

Or perhaps, like me, you grew up in a family that wasn't religious at all. Christianity has never been on your radar. You're either an atheist or an agnostic, but you don't go to church and have never really believed in God. You've never looked seriously at the Bible or studied the life of Jesus, and besides, all those stories and commands just

seem irrelevant to you—and frankly, not very believable. Or maybe you’ve always suspected that there is a “god” of some kind out there, but you’re not sure what or who. Or perhaps you’re of another faith altogether, but now you’re curious as to whether there’s something worth considering about Christianity.

So, whether you’re reconsidering Christianity or considering Christianity for the first time, I hope you keep reading.

Of course, you might have any number of different personal reasons for reading this book. Perhaps you’re willing to read it because something has happened in your life that has aroused a renewed interest in regards to faith. Or you might have been inspired by a thought-provoking Christian friend.

As a church minister I regularly run introductory courses on Christianity, and people come for a whole lot of reasons. They may be prompted by the death of a friend or family member, a deep conversation they had over a glass of wine about the meaning of life, a discussion about the reliability of the Bible over a coffee, a talk or sermon they heard recently, or a movie or documentary they watched. It may be that they have met an admirable Christian or had a positive experience at a church or their kids have begun to ask them questions about religion, God, faith and so on.

Personally speaking, I first began to think about God and the Bible for several reasons combined: the death of my

mother, the question of the meaning of life, a curiosity about the stories of Jesus and a desire to know what happens when we die.

That journey began over four decades ago. My life has taken many twists and turns since then, but through it all, my faith in Jesus has brought me more hope and joy and meaning than I could ever have imagined.

I hope you'll read this book cover to cover, but I suspect one or two chapters will hit a personal sweet spot. Feel free to jump straight to those chapters if you want to. I don't expect that this book alone will necessarily "convert" you, but I do hope that it at least helps you see the intellectual credibility of the Christian's position, shows you why it's good news, and sets you on a journey to find out more.

In the end, I really hope it makes you think and (re)consider Christianity for yourself.

1. Because it's worth thinking through what life is really all about

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve been searching for some reason why we’re here—what are we doing here, who are we? If this is a chance to find out even just a little part of that answer, I think it’s worth a human life, don’t you?”

Dr Ellie Arroway, played by Jodie Foster in the film *Contact*

Several years ago, Bolton Wanderers were playing Tottenham Hotspur in a Football Association Cup quarter final in London. During the first half of the match, one of the Bolton players, Fabrice Muamba, suddenly collapsed in the middle of the pitch. At first no one knew why the 23-year-old had suddenly crumpled to the ground. He was nowhere near the ball at the time, but pretty soon every player around him could see he was in deep trouble. The players motioned to the medics, who promptly ran onto the field. It became apparent that Muamba was having a heart attack. A deafening silence came over the whole stadium.

Thankfully, one of the spectators in the crowd was Andrew Deaner, a consultant cardiologist at the London Chest Hospital. He immediately sensed what was happening and instinctively ran onto the field to help. More than 30,000 spectators watched these dedicated doctors pump on this young man's heart as he lay in the middle of a stadium on the brink of death.

It was incredibly moving to hear two sets of fans within the stadium become one, going from long spells of silence to applauding together as they tried to encourage the medics and will Fabrice on. His heart was still being worked on as he was stretchered from the ground into a waiting ambulance. Understandably, the game was immediately abandoned. This, by the way, was all happening while his wife and three-year-old son were watching the game at home on TV.

The story has a happy ending though. Fabrice Muamba survived and, after a suspenseful few days in hospital, made a full recovery, despite his heart stopping for an incredible 78 minutes! Yet everyone watching in that stadium—and reading the headlines subsequently—was left with a sobering reminder: none of us are immune to death. It can strike anyone of us at any time, even in the prime of our lives.

STOP AND THINK

It's often only when we're fully confronted by death that we really think about the meaning of life. Death or near-death experiences often lead us to ask ourselves big

questions like: What if that was me? What happens when we die? What's life really all about? Is there a God?

I once came across a grave that had these words inscribed on the tombstone:

“Passer-by, stop and think:

I'm in eternity; you are on the brink!”

If we're all on the edge of eternity, in the words of that tombstone we ought to stop and think—don't you think?! That is, we should all consider what life is all about, not just when we're confronted by death but far more frequently.

However, it often seems that thinking about the meaning of life is a dying art these days. Those who stop to think about the meaning of life are an endangered species in our culture. That is perhaps because we have so many different things crying out for our attention and consuming our valuable time, be it our phones, Netflix, emails, shopping, cooking, kids, music, social media, exercising, holidays, cleaning, renovations, finances, jobs and so on.

So pause here and ask yourself these questions:

- What do you think the meaning or purpose of life is?
- Why are we all here?
- Are we all here by chance—the result of some freak cosmic accident that happened billions of years ago?

- Are we just a collection of random atoms that have simply evolved over time?
- Or is there a purpose behind it all: a grand plan to the universe?
- Is there a God or something like that which suggests there's more to life than meets the eye?
- And what happens when we die? Are we just food for worms or is there another dimension beyond the grave?

Whatever your answers might be, these are questions that are at least worth thinking about.

SEARCHING THE UNIVERSE FOR UNIVERSAL ANSWERS

Humankind has always searched for meaning and purpose. You see this in the writings of ancient Greek philosophers and in the sacred texts of all the major religions. You can detect it in the greatest novels and essays ever penned.

Even many of our scientific endeavours, both ancient and modern, have their origins in trying to understand our significance in the universe or control our destiny in life. We're trying to find out what's over there, up there, under there, around there or just out there.

I'm totally captivated by space exploration. My inner geek comes out whenever the next NASA or SpaceX rocket takes off. Space exploration is not just driven by the desire to

boldly go where no one has gone before but by the desire to find answers to our biggest and deepest questions.

Bruce Jakosky is a planetary scientist and the director of a team within the NASA Astrobiology Institute—to date, he’s been involved in every one of NASA’s missions to Mars. When it comes to justifying NASA’s motives for space exploration, he has said this:

“We’re interested in the search for extrasolar planets because it tells us ... is our solar system unique or common? ... We are interested in the possibility of life on Mars because it provides context for understanding the value of life on Earth ... By learning about the worlds around us, we are learning about ourselves.”¹

This same sentiment is central to one of my favourite films of the 1990s, *Contact*, based on a book of the same name by the astrophysicist Carl Sagan. It’s been called “the movie that asks the big questions”. Jodie Foster plays Dr Ellie Arroway, a scientist who is searching for extra-terrestrial life by listening to pulses through radio telescopes. At a pivotal point in the film she pauses to say these lines, with which we began this chapter, to her questioning co-star:

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve been searching for some reason why we’re here—what are we doing here, who are we? If this is a chance to find out even just a little part of that answer, I think it’s worth a human life, don’t you?”

I totally relate to that burning desire for answers. Sometimes I wonder whether, for me, it stems from the

death of my mother when I was seven years old. Or does it come from camping trips with my friends, when we slept under the stars, stared into space and talked about the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe? Maybe in part. But actually, I don't think the desire for answers is unique to me. It lies deep within every human heart.

THE LONGING IN EVERY HUMAN HEART

Alongside the questions and ambitions of our philosophers and rocket scientists, perhaps the quest for meaning and purpose is no more evident than within the lyrics and poems of our musicians and poets.

I'm showing my age now, but I was, and still am, a fan of the singer-songwriter John Mellencamp. You might know him from songs like "Jack & Diane", "Pink Houses" or "Hurts So Good". Many years ago now, he penned a very honest song entitled "Void in My Heart". It's definitely worth a listen.

Here was a rock star at the height of his career, in bare honesty, revealing his deepest longings and how his life of fame and fortune just wasn't doing it for him. Maybe you know how that feels. Like John Mellencamp, we can reach the pinnacle of our profession and amass great wealth yet still have an overwhelming sense of emptiness and longing.

Mellencamp's lyrics actually echo part of an old poem written by Solomon, king of ancient Israel around 3,000 years ago. It's preserved for us in the Old Testament part of the Bible:

I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. "Laughter," I said, "is madness. And what does pleasure accomplish?" I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives.

I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

In all this my wisdom stayed with me. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labour, and this was the reward for all my toil. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes, chapter 2, verses 1-11)

Can you relate to these words of Solomon? Even after three millennia, there's a strikingly modern ring to them. We go to work, we socialise with our friends, we sometimes reach our ambitions, we have our holidays,

and most of us (in the West) have all the toys we could ever need—yet so many of us are still unsatisfied and looking for more.

Sure, we may be fairly happy and content, and have a reasonable sense of fulfilment; I wouldn't claim otherwise. Most of my friends who aren't religious, including members of my own family, would say they're *reasonably* happy and content. But most of us still feel that there's something more to life than just what meets the eye—that there's more to our existence than just living for 80 years or so and then dying. John Mellencamp felt it, King Solomon felt it and I'm guessing you have felt it too. There seems to be a timeless and universal sense that there's something else going on.

THE MAN WITH THE ANSWERS

In the 1st century, around 2,000 years ago, Jesus made some astonishing claims and gave the world some mind-bending answers to our deepest questions about life and why we're all here. With great confidence, he talked about the meaning of life, true love, the reality and nature of God, where to find hope and happiness, and what happens to us beyond the grave. He taught his followers about "life ... to the full" and how to get it (John 10 v 10). He effectively gave the greatest series of TED Talks of all time, holding audiences captivated for hours on end. Jesus gave answers to many of the questions that we humans have been asking ourselves since the beginning of time.

You may not have given Christianity any serious thought as an adult or even as a child, but here are two reasons why Jesus and his teachings about life are worth considering.

First, while there have been many people who have given their answers to life's biggest questions, none have had a worldwide impact as much as Jesus. (I'll say a lot more about this in chapter 5.) He is arguably the most influential person that has ever lived. He has inspired art and architecture for centuries. More songs and books have been written about him than about any other figure in history. Apparently, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. is regarded as the largest library on the planet. A librarian with a little too much time on their hands has calculated that this library has more than 800 miles of shelving containing more than 24 million catalogued books in over 400 languages. But out of all those millions of volumes, there are, by far, more books on Jesus than on any other person that's ever lived—over 17,000 of them.²

What Jesus has said seems to have struck a chord with many of us. And even if you disagree with what he had to say, his answers are at least worth taking an honest and open-minded look at from a cultural and educational point of view.

Second, Jesus backed up his words with incredible actions. He wasn't just an amazing orator or wordsmith with some fancy answers to our deepest questions. When he talked about life and life to the full, he backed it up by raising

people from the dead. When he talked about seeing what the world was really all about, he then healed people from blindness. And when he preached about love and servant-heartedness being the keys to living a fulfilled life, he then went on to serve others and give up his own life to a grisly death on a Roman cross. If you're sceptical about whether all that is really possible, that's fair enough—please read on to chapter 5. But for now, consider that if these actions of Jesus were even *half* true and he really was who he claimed to be, then what he had to say about life deserves our attention.

Christianity offers some profound and honest answers to our deepest questions and longings, backed up by the incredible life of the person as its centre: Jesus Christ. Through his words, parables and teachings, he gave powerful and thought-provoking answers to the very questions so many of us innately have; and those answers have actually shaped our world. Surely they are at least worth considering, aren't they?

WHAT IF IT'S TRUE?

I once heard a story about two men who were walking along a beach in the Florida Keys, U.S.A. The two were happily soaking up the tranquillity of the seaside as they meandered for a mile or so along the shoreline, when one of them spotted a bottle washed up onto the sand. On closer inspection, they saw that the bottle contained documents wrapped neatly in an official-looking ribbon.