

For Tomorrow We Die

by [Jeff Plude](#) (April 2020)



L'Annonciation, René Magritte, 1930

"HEAVEN HELP US!" blared the giant front-page headline in a Sunday *New York Post*. The coronavirus was sweeping across the country and the world. Like the proverbial soldier under fire in a foxhole, even some unbelievers were crying out for God, for divine help, for salvation—at least for their minds and bodies, if not their souls.

Coincidentally the most important Christian day of the year is this month, though you'd never know it even if the civilized world wasn't in lockdown. There are no physical gifts bought and exchanged. There are no trees to decorate. There are no carols to sing, no cookies to eat (though there are chocolate bunnies perhaps, and a few parents who still dress their kids up like human dolls to attend Easter services).

There are few, if any, outward signs of a special day or season.

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Easter celebrates Christ's resurrection, of course, which is probably the Christian tenet that keeps many people from believing in him. But it is the central Christian tenet, inextricably bound up with the crucifixion and thus salvation. Which is why Paul the apostle, in his inimitable way, chided the wayward Corinthian congregation for their unbelief:

And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins . . . And why stand we in jeopardy every hour? . . . If after the manner of men I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantageth it me, if the dead rise not? let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die.

If the resurrection isn't true, why bother? Why suffer and deny ourselves? For tomorrow we die. For eternity.

It's not often the whole world sees this singular truth in all its awful glory—tomorrow we die. Yet being the irrational and recalcitrant creatures we are, we deny it when life is not under quarantine, just as we deny the need for salvation. How am I so bad? we say. I'm a pretty good person. Sure I'll die someday, some other day certainly but not today, or even tomorrow most likely. We're like the guy described by Jesus who made a killing raising crops and planned to build bigger barns to hold the windfall, then kick back, "eat and drink and be merry."

But God said unto him, *Thou* fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?

We need saving, all of us—not only physically from this virus, but more importantly from that spiritual disease we're born with known as sin (or human nature, if you prefer). Because we will all live on, Christians believe, after we leave this earth sooner than later, either in everlasting joy and peace and comfort in heaven, or in everlasting torment in hell.

There is nothing in between in the afterlife. This is not *The Divine Comedy*. The Bible tells us there is no second chance to follow God's son once you die. No prayers can be submitted to the court for lenience. Despite the title of Dante's epic, it is no light and mundane matter. Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* got it right, theologically and artistically. After

this life, with its “Slough of Despond,” there is the Judgment. There is no discovery process. The facts are all in evidence. The judge is not only all-knowing but all-just, in stark contrast to his counterparts in the courts of this world. There is only one Advocate, and he represents believers only. Unbelievers are *pro se*. There are no appeals.

So my mind turns this time of year to Christ’s brutal but atoning death on the cross that acquits for eternity those who truly believe in him during their life on this earth. But *The New York Post*’s exclamation reminded me of something important I don’t usually think of, though it’s closely related.

Jesus, having walked the earth for forty days after his resurrection (he was seen by more than five hundred people at one time, “of whom the greater part remain unto this present,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians), gathered the apostles on a mountain near Galilee. Before he ascended into a cloud, he gave them the Great Commission:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . .

These are the last words Jesus spoke to the eleven men who lived and apprenticed with him during his three-year ministry. It is not an afterthought. It is a clear command, one that naturally extends to all his followers to come. He left it to the very end of his earthly existence to emphasize it.

It's one of the hardest parts, perhaps, of being a Christian. It's also the most crucial, the most urgent. And it's also what tends to anger many unbelievers.

For example, nearly ten years ago, I was walking in downtown Albany and a slight, older black man in a dark T-shirt and baseball cap and jeans asked me for money. He flashed an ID—he said he was a Vietnam vet and wanted to prove it.

My first inclination was to keep walking, not to look right at him but not look away either, say nothing; I lived in San Francisco for six years, a mecca for panhandlers. But I stopped. I remembered what Jesus said; I'd recently become an evangelical Christian myself. I took a dollar out of my pocket. As I handed it to him, I said: "This is from Jesus."

That's all I said. It didn't quite come out the way I wanted, but he knew what I meant. I didn't mean that I was Jesus, but that I was giving him this dollar *because* of Jesus, because I was a believer in and follower of him. Not because I was a generous soul of my own accord.

But that name, the J-word, was all it took to set him off.

"I know what you mean!" he said loudly. "I know what you mean! But you don't know what it's like to wake up every morning as a black man in America!"

"You're right," I said calmly, surprising myself. "But Jesus

knows what it's like."

I meant that Jesus knew what it was like to suffer and be rejected by the society he lived in, just as this man believed he himself had suffered and been rejected. But that only added supernatural gas to the smoldering fire inside him.

"I know what you mean!" he yelled again. "I know what you mean!"

Later I thought of his mother for some reason—maybe she made him go to church with her when he was a boy, part of the vibrant tradition of Bible-believing African-Americans that used to exist. I also thought of what he'd seen and done in the fields and jungles of Vietnam, what he'd endured. Or at least I tried to think of these things, never having fought in a war myself. As a daily newspaper reporter in my early twenties, I covered the local chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America, and I interviewed many of the former soldiers about what they'd seen and done in the war and about the fallout after they returned home. I was about the same age then or only slightly older as many of these guys were when they were being shot at and bombed.

Of course, not all unbelievers' reactions to being confronted with the gospel are inflammatory. In fact some even understand why Jesus would issue such a command to his troops.

For example, Penn Jillette, the vocal half of the longtime magician-comedy team of Penn & Teller, is well known for his

fervent atheism (he wrote a *New York Times* bestseller called *God No!*). Nevertheless, he describes in a YouTube [video](#), choking up several times, what he thought of a Christian who approached him after a show and gave him a pocket Gideons Bible:

It was really wonderful . . . And I've always said, you know, that I don't respect people who don't proselytize. I don't respect that at all. If you believe that there's a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell, or not getting eternal life, or whatever, and you think that, well, it's not really worth telling him this because he would make it socially awkward. And atheists who think that people shouldn't proselytize, just leave me alone, keep your religion to yourself: how much do you have to hate somebody to not proselytize? How much do you have to hate somebody to believe that everlasting life is possible and not tell them that? I mean, if I believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it, but that truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point where I tackle you. And this is more important than that.

Mr. Jillette went on to effusively praise this faithful, brave Christian, who followed Peter's advice in his first New Testament letter: to tell unbelievers about the gospel with "meekness and fear," i.e. gentleness and respect:

He was polite, and honest, and sane. And he cared enough about me to proselytize and give me a Bible, which had written in it a little note to me . . . and then like five phone numbers with an email address if I wanted to get in touch . . . I'll tell ya, he was a *very, very, very good*

man. And, that's real important. And with that kind of goodness, it's okay to have that deep of a disagreement.

However, despite all his apparent goodwill, Mr. Jillette is still disagreeing with the gospel.

Indeed, I've discovered firsthand that God's enemies can be quite congenial. One spiritual encounter not long after my clash with the Vietnam vet was much less provocative on the surface. But it turned out to be much more insidious at its heart.

I was nonchalantly walking along in the downtown of the small town I was born in, and where my wife and I were living at the time. I was out for my lunchtime stroll, and I saw a friendly face on a park bench on the sidewalk: Dave, an old man we had kind of befriended. I say "kind of" because we didn't really know him. But during our weekend walks we'd usually see him, sitting on the park benches on the sidewalks or in the small park with a white gazebo, or sometimes walking meditatively, his hands clasped behind his back in a dignified pose, his lanky, gaunt figure leaning slightly forward, and sometimes we'd stop and chat with him. He lived at the retirement home right behind our apartment building, and he told me once that he'd retired from a job at a wastewater treatment facility in western New York state.

Wearing long light gray shorts and a matching T-shirt, his tan baseball-style cap was pulled down tight on his bald head, with the visor rolled and curving over his glasses, and his long spindly legs stretched out. It was the end of April, a

few weeks after Easter, a rare sunny, mild day. This was only the second time I'd seen him after the long, brutal winter. He looked like the grandfather or great-grandfather you'd choose if you had a choice. We figured he was seventy-five or eighty.

Dave was telling me in his soft, raspy voice how he hasn't been outside all winter because it's hard for him to breathe the arctic air up here (he had a respiratory condition). He was also hard to hear because he didn't have any teeth. As I listened, I noticed a thin paperback with a blue cover wedged between the park bench armrest and his thigh: *Eckankar: Ancient Wisdom for Today*.

Should I ask him about it? I'd never heard of it, but I had an inkling what was coming . . . sort of. He started telling me about how it had to do with God being light and sound . . . your breath is your soul . . . you chant *HU* to get in touch with your soul and God . . . it's like what some people call the Holy Spirit . . .

When he said *HU*, I instantly recognized it: for the past few years, my wife and I had been finding on the windowsill of the vestibule of our apartment building these bright yellow business cards with *HU* emblazoned on them in large, dark blue capital letters. The front of the card lists the supposed benefits of *HU*, and detailed instructions on the back about how to chant it like a mantra, along with contact info to learn more. We also found two other styles of cards promoting the supernatural snake oil of Eckankar.

So I asked Dave how long he'd been following this cult (though

I didn't use that word). He said he'd been a follower of Eckankar for thirty years! Which meant, I later found out, that he'd been involved in it almost as long as the cult's then *Mahanta*—like the Buddhists' *Dalai Lama*, the supposed present living incarnation of God—had been in that blasphemous position.

In fact, Dave had been a disciple of Eckankar for nearly two-thirds of its existence. It was started in 1965 by a lost soul named Paul Twitchell in Las Vegas, no less. Mr. Twitchell had been a Scientologist, and quit and started his own false following. According to one website, Eckankar has used some of the same tactics on dissenters and escapees as L. Ron Hubbard's dupes have become infamous for. It was formed in a classic syncretic fashion, as are many New Age cults—soul travel, reincarnation, and dream interpretation being its unholy trinity.

I gingerly asked Dave about his belief in Eckankar. There were two things in particular that Dave said about Eckankar that struck me.

First he said, "It's been good to me." How? I didn't ask. The business card mentioned awareness, divine love, a broken heart, solace, peace, calm.

Then he said: "There's nobody who's going to save you. You have to do it yourself."

I said I believed that Jesus Christ was our savior.

“No, no, no,” he said, shaking his head. “But that’s okay, you can believe what you want.”

I asked if he’d grown up with any religious background. He said Methodist. That was all he said about it, but it spoke theological volumes. I grew up Catholic, so I knew how he felt. Both mainline denominations have disregarded the Bible when it suited their worldly purposes, unlike evangelicals. I’d searched for the truth and had been attracted to the occult, just like Dave had been.

Then, redundantly, I asked him if he believed the Bible was the word of God. I already knew the answer. He said no, no, shaking his head again.

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I finally said that if he ever wanted to talk about it more to let me know. And that was it, I finished my jaunt around the forlorn little downtown and park and walked back to my bunker. But before I climbed the stairs, I checked the vestibule for business cards.

Dave and I never spoke again. But it wasn’t the last time I

heard from him, at least in person.

In the wake of a very bad day for me personally that summer, my wife and I were taking our walk downtown and it seemed like everywhere we looked we saw the ghastly yellow business card with the big blue *HU* on it, along with some of the other cards too. We saw them on park benches. We saw them sticking out of door jambs and lying on windowsills of businesses. We saw them in our apartment building lobby. Since my talk with Dave about Jesus, we'd seen only one or two of the cards at a time during our walks. That day we saw a dozen or so in one afternoon!

We put every one of them in our pockets.

These little cards, or rather the ultimate source behind them, seemed to be mocking me. So the spiritual match was in full swing. As Paul the apostle warned the Ephesians:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

And it has been like this for two millennia, for those who dare to step onto the mat and grapple for not only their own soul, but for others' as well. The prize is not a mere trophy or laurel, but as Paul calls it, an "incorruptible" crown. And no virus on this earth, either now or to come, can infect or kill that reward.

Not long after that barrage of business cards, my wife and I stopped seeing Dave on our walks. We wondered if he'd died. We wondered if he thought about what I'd said to him. God only knows.

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