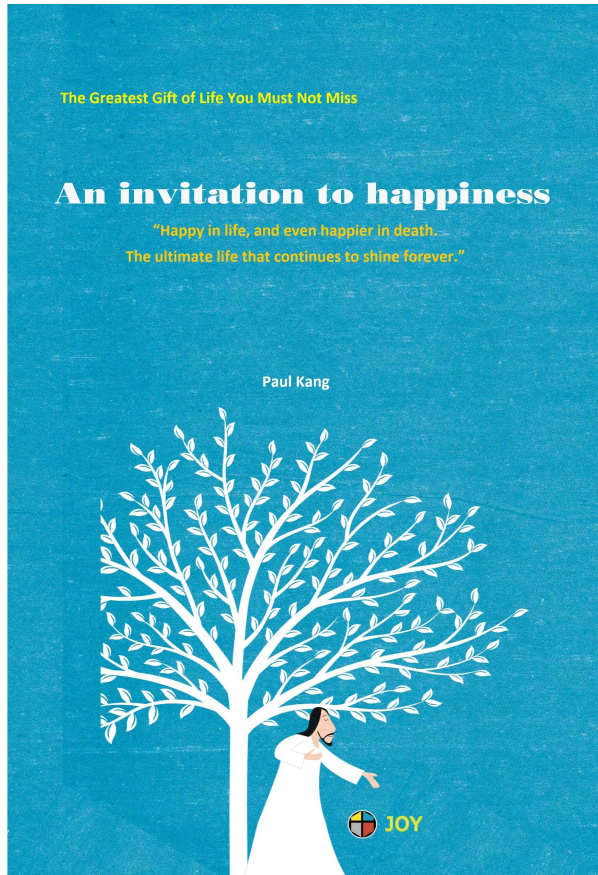


English



This text is translated from Japanese by Google. Therefore, the Bible may not be translated accurately, so please refer directly to your country's Bible.

Foreword

Today's people are living in an era in which high-performance machines and software are valued more than humans in the cutting-edge technology of advanced industries and mass consumption society. In this kind of social system, human relationships are getting weaker, and people often feel lonely and feel heavy stress from work. In addition, people are so busy that they don't even have time to reflect on themselves or think about the purpose and direction of their lives. Then, without realizing it, we repeat the same pattern of life like a machine. Losing something important to live as a human being makes the hole in the heart grow bigger, and the wound gets worse and worse. At the same time, the desire and thirst of the heart to live with dignity as a human being grows stronger.

The purpose of this book is to provide an opportunity for modern people to think about the true nature of human beings and the purpose of life by learning about the wonders of the Bible. I hope that I can find the God I lost again and regain my true self from there. In the Bible, Matthew 4:4, it says that man cannot live on bread alone. If that is the case, I would appreciate it if you could give us an opportunity to think about what we need other than bread for the happiness of human beings.

Heart and preparation for learning

- I think that starting Bible study will be a very important opportunity in your life. Do your best until the end.
- It is best to make time for at least one and a half hours once a week. However, let's adjust the time according to the situation and do not overdo it.
- There is "Appendix 2 Column" after the text. Make sure to read in advance the column with the same number as the chapter you will study that day. You will learn better.
- Don't make it too obligatory, try to have fun while playing games, having dinner parties, and consulting.
- It is important not only to learn from textbooks, but also to share each other's thoughts and ways of life.

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※If you do not have time for Chapters 2 and 3, you can finish them by reading them individually.

※Part 2 is a study for only those who have accepted Jesus.

Chapter

1

Humans and religion

From the very beginning of human history, the act of seeking God has been one of the essential ways of human life. It was not something forced by someone or acquired through learning, but can be said to be a manifestation of the "spontaneous nature" inherently equipped in humans.

Especially we Japanese, as represented by the term "Yaoyorozu no Kami" since ancient times, have nurtured a unique religious thought that God dwells in all existence, or that everything can become God.

According to statistics in 2018, there are approximately 84,000 temples, 88,000 shrines, and 8,600 Christian churches throughout Japan. While the religious population is said to be on a downward trend, statistically it still exceeds 180 million even now. This calculation means that, excluding children, one person is involved in an average of two religious backgrounds. Truly, it can be called "living proof" showing how close the relationship is between Japanese people and religion.

Precisely because the Japanese have walked with religion and God this much, instead of avoiding that existence, isn't it important to try to face it head-on? Thinking about God is, in the end, about "knowing yourself," and it becomes the most important opportunity to deeply reflect on your own way of life.

1. The Point of Contact Between the Creator God of the Bible and Humans

1) The Creator Who Made Humans (An Invisible Spiritual Being)

God is the Maker of all things in heaven and earth and is an invisible "spiritual being." The Bible records the special relationship between humans and God as follows.

【Genesis 1:27】 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

The "image of God" here does not refer to outward appearance, but to God's "inner nature (spirituality, intellect, will, transcendence, love, etc.)." Because God created humans in His own likeness, there originally exists a deep and intimate relationship between us humans and God, our Creator, that cannot be severed.

● What is a Spiritual Being?

Then, what kind of existence is "Spirit"? Jesus Christ spoke as follows.

【John 4:24】 God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.

Imagine invisible "radio waves" or "magnetic fields." Because these have no shape, they do not occupy a specific place and are almost free from constraints of space and time. If radio waves had a shape like an object, this universe would be filled only with radio waves, and the space where we exist would disappear.

This world is made up of visible "matter" and invisible "energy or waves" interacting with each other. God, who cannot be captured by

our naked eyes, is precisely because He is not bound by the framework of shape, a "spiritual Transcendent" who exists in all places beyond time and space and can relate to each one of us.

2) Humans are also Spiritual Beings Created in the Likeness of God (Capable of Fellowship with the Creator)

God made the human body and then breathed the "breath of life" into the nostrils.

【Genesis 2:7】 then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.

The "breath" here is called "Neshamah" in Hebrew. This is not mere air, but God's breath, energy, and life force—God's invisible nature given to humans. Through this, humans became beings equipped not only with a "body" and "soul (heart)" to relate to the visible world, but also a "spirit" to fellowship with the invisible Absolute (God). God completely equipped humans with all the necessary abilities so that they could find Him and have fellowship with Him.

【1 Thessalonians 5:23b】 may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As in this scripture, humans are multilayered beings with three aspects (spirit, soul, and body) and are beings shrouded in mystery. God desires that these three elements not be lost, but be kept forever.

【Romans 1:19】 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

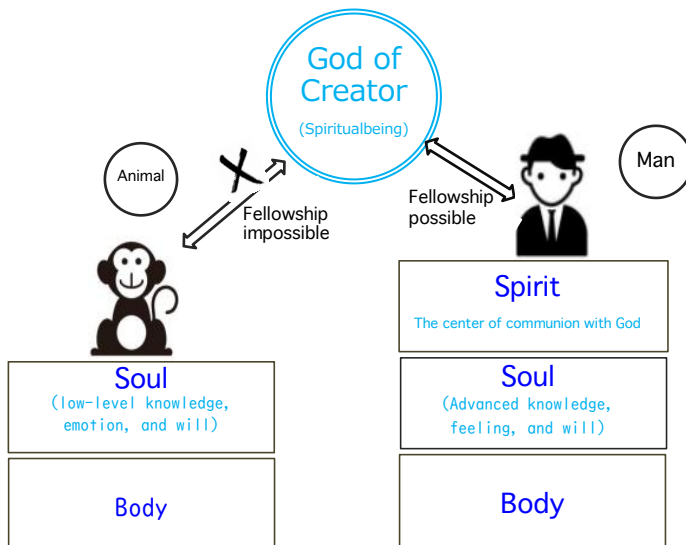
Therefore, humans are decisively different from animals that live only by instinct. As long as there is a heart in a human that "wants to know God," they are designed so that they can know God as deeply as they wish.

God, who created and deeply loves humans, will not keep Himself hidden from them. Just as a parent lets their child know who they are, God also reveals Himself to us in the "easiest form to understand."

<Human beings are spiritual beings different from animals and are proof that fellowship with God is possible>

- ☐ Pangs of conscience, and awe of death or the afterlife
- ☐ A praying heart that seeks God and desires salvation
- ☐ A heart that seeks an object of worship (deification of created things)

(Others, "Existences Living in Transcendental Values": love, compassion, morality and conscience, purpose of life, emptiness in affluence, etc.)



「Creator God and Man's Relationship」

Animals do not have a spirit and therefore cannot fellowship with God, but humans are spiritual beings and can fellowship with God who exists as Spirit.

3) God's Purpose for Seeking Fellowship with Humans

As mentioned before 【Genesis 1:27】 , God created humans as beings with "morality" and "spirituality" different from animals, in His own likeness. This is so that humans can intimately exchange words and share hearts with God.

Well then, with whom specifically can we have fellowship? Let us check the following scripture.

【1 John 1:3】 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

God desires that we do not walk in loneliness, but live within a deep fellowship with God the Father in heaven, and with the Savior Jesus Christ.

● Two Invisible Beings that Influence Humans

Then, why does God desire fellowship with us so much? Let us compare that reason with the purpose of our enemy, the "thief (devil)."

【John 10:10】 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.

● The Purpose of the Thief (Devil)

It lies in "stealing, killing, and destroying" our joy, peace, and

precious life. It tries to break the relationship with God and drag humans into despair.

- **God's (Jesus Christ's) Purpose**

It is for us to obtain "life" in the true sense, and to obtain it "abundantly." The reason God seeks fellowship with us is because only by remaining in God's love can we be released from emptiness and fear and live a truly fulfilled life. Is this not the heart of a parent who has children?

2. Recognition and Misunderstanding of "Religion" in Japanese Society

The recognition of religion among Japanese people is very complex and unique, and cannot be fully explained in a single word. While many Japanese have Shinto shrine visits and Buddhist events deeply rooted in their lives, they tend to have a strong sense of caution or prejudice toward the word "religion." This social recognition has been largely formed by peculiar events in the past or biased information, and does not necessarily capture the original form (facts) of religion.



Therefore, let us calmly organize and think about the recognition of religion in current Japanese society and the "misunderstandings" therein.

① The Misunderstanding that "All Religions are the Same"

• Religion of "Pursuit" and Religion of "Grace"

In general, "religion" is an act by which humans try to approach God, and is often likened to "mountain climbing." It is the idea that "no matter which route you climb, you eventually reach the same summit, so no matter what you believe, the result is the same."

In this way, many religions teach that salvation is reached through human effort such as incessant training or good deeds. These can be called "religions of pursuit."

However, Christianity is the exact opposite. The Bible teaches that no matter how hard an imperfect human tries, they cannot reach the holy God by their own strength. That is why God, in the person of Jesus Christ, came down to this world to save humans.

【 John 3:13 】 No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.

Salvation in Christianity is not a "reward" that a person obtains by climbing a mountain, but an unconditional "gift (grace)" given simply by believing in and accepting Jesus Christ, who came down to us. Therefore, Christianity is called a "religion of grace," or a "religion of revelation" in the sense that God has shown the way of salvation.

• The Misunderstanding that "Every Religion is the Same"

One more thing I would like to convey is that it is very dangerous to think that everything inside is the same just because they are in the same category of "religion." To use an analogy, it's like saying to someone thinking about marriage, "Any man will do" or "Marriage life is the same no matter who the partner is." There could be no story more reckless and irresponsible than this.

Just as your life afterwards changes completely depending on your marriage partner, religions fundamentally differ in their teachings, methods of salvation, processes, and results. Do you really think that you can have a happy marriage with "anyone"? Choosing a religion is more serious than marriage. This is because it is a decision that affects not only life in this world, but eternity after death. Let's think about it.

② The Misunderstanding that "Religion is Something to Seek Benefits"

Many people think of religion as a "means to obtain worldly benefits (blessings)." Certainly, there may be an aspect of seeking help in times of difficulty and expecting some kind of benefit. However, the original role of religion does not stop at that. True religion should exist not merely as a "window for requests," but to enhance internal qualities such as human value, dignity, and love, and to guide life toward a richer and truly happier one.

In other words, religion is something that gives unwavering "meaning" to our daily lives. It answers the questions, "Why am I living?" and "Where am I going?"

We need to turn our eyes not only to the visible benefits obtainable in this world, but also to "invisible eternal values" such as salvation after death and peace of soul. Blessings that last forever, beyond temporary satisfaction, are what humans are truly seeking.

③ The Misunderstanding that "Religion is for Weak People or Strange People"

Religiousness (spirituality) is a universal instinct that all people are born with, regardless of human strength or weakness. It is not a matter of being strong or weak. However, sometimes a heart that wants to be strong, saying "I want to be independent" or "I don't

want to rely on anything," can cover up that instinct. But is trying to act strong really a happy thing?

- **"Unhappiness of acting strong" and "Grace of weakness":
Invitation to True Strength**

There are phrases "unhappiness of acting strong" and "grace of weakness." To not admit one's limits by acting too strong and to look away from the truth that should really be faced is by no means a rich way of living. This is because no matter how much one acts strong, humans will surely face the absolute weakness of "death" someday. It is not that people believe because they are weak or don't believe because they are strong. Rather, people who think they are humanly strong might believe even more.

Admitting human inherent religiousness and standing before God is not about belittling oneself. Rather, it is what makes a human more human and sincere. A person who admits the "weakness" of fearing (revering) God actually gains the strength to be released from "all kinds of terrors of this world," including death. Conversely, a person who denies God and tries to live acting strong may look strong at first glance, but in fact, they may be living in fear of all kinds of things other than God (illness, aging, others' eyes, anxiety about the future).

In the end, there are only two ways for humans to live. "Live fearing only God and not fearing everything else" or "Live not fearing God and fearing everything else." Which path would you wish to walk?

- ④ **The Misunderstanding that Christianity is a "Western Religion" and does not suit Japanese people**

It is often said that "Christianity came from the West and is a religion for Westerners." However, the facts are a little different. First, the roots of Christianity are not in the West, but in Israel, located at

the western edge of Asia. From there it spread westward and gave an immeasurably great influence to the modernization, democracy, scholarship, and development of science and technology of countries such as Europe and America. Rather, it would be more accurate to say, not that "Christianity became a Western thing," but that "it was because there was the foundation of the Bible that today's advanced society was formed."

What is recorded in the Bible is not a teaching limited to a specific region or ethnic group. It is a "universal truth" that should be sought by any human, far beyond the distinction of "West and East."

That is why, even for us in Japan who enjoy the benefits of modernization, the Bible is by no means something that "does not suit us." Rather, it becomes the most important key for knowing the "wonderful values" at the root of the freedom, human rights, and democracy that we cherish.

⑤ The Misunderstanding that "Anyone can go to Heaven after death"

Many Japanese think that "after death one can attain Buddhahood and go to Paradise," that is, everyone can naturally go to heaven. In Mahayana Buddhism, which is the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism, it is taught that even people who were unrelated to training or enlightenment during their lifetime can go to Paradise by receiving a posthumous name and performing a funeral. As time progressed further, sects even appeared that preached that "you can be saved just by chanting the Nenbutsu once." However, isn't this merely a human "wish" in the face of harsh reality? If one is placing hope after death on a groundless illusion, what lies ahead might be irrevocable regret.

In the first place, Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, never said "If you believe in me, you can go to Paradise." Such a teaching was

formed through various thoughts mixing together about 600 years after his death.

On the other hand, the salvation shown by the Bible has "clear facts and grounds" that are not mere wishes. For the sake of us humans who were separated from God because of sin and had no choice but to head for destruction, Jesus Christ paid the "price of sin" on our behalf. The "ultimate sacrifice" of Christ bearing all our sins and dying on the cross. This is the official and certain certificate by God for us to enter heaven. Through this fact of the cross, a "certain ground of salvation" that is not mere comfort, and a true path leading to eternal life, have been opened to humans.

⑥ Anxiety that "Religion might go in the wrong direction"

It is no wonder in modern Japanese society to feel anxiety that "religion becomes something terrifying if one takes a wrong step." The fact that groups borrowing the name of "religion" caused anti-social incidents in the past and produced precious victims has planted a deep sense of caution in our hearts. However, to discard "all religions and churches as unnecessary" because of that caution can be a great loss in another sense.

• Have eyes to discern "healthy places"

To use an analogy, it's like deciding "not to send children to school at all because there may be dishonest teachers in the world." The important thing is not to reject collectively, but to have a "standard" to discern what is healthy and what is dangerous.

In contrast to traditional faiths that have been recognized for thousands of years in history, caution is necessary for emerging groups that lack sociality or ethics. Especially, one cannot help but be cautious about places that have extreme hostility toward existing teachings or take an exclusive attitude.

• Is there Freedom and Love?

In a healthy church, there is always "freedom." Whether to attend or quit, the individual's free will is respected. If individual freedom is taken away and there is bondage or coercion, that would be a place to be cautious.

Jesus Christ, the foundation of Christianity, far from forcing anything on people, is the embodiment of the supreme love who offered His own life to forgive people's sins. In a healthy church that takes that way of life as a model, not a power to dominate people, but "altruistic love" for people to live vibrantly again is at work.

Of course, since it is a place where humans gather, it does not mean that the church is practicing love perfectly. Nevertheless, a church that takes the love of Christ as a guide desires to be "a place that is healthier, safer, and warmer than anywhere else" in this society, and is widening its doors.

3. Conclusion

Every human is given a nature that cannot help but seek God. That is for the true happiness and rich life of humans. I don't think it is good only to deny it with all one's might. Rather, listening to the voice of the nature of the heart would be a shortcut to true happiness.

(1) Is there anything you newly felt about religion and humans?

(2) Among the "Misunderstandings about Religion" in Section 2, which one do you empathize with the most?



[Column 1] The Amazing Power of the Bible

The Bible, which began being written about 3,500 years ago, was completed over 1,600 years. The Bible is the truth that has the greatest influence on all mankind, transcending era, age, race, and nationality. It is a truly amazing book that covers various contents and themes, such as wisdom about human life, the rise and fall of various countries, prophecies about the future, and human death and afterlife. This Bible is God's greatest gift to mankind and is the number one best-selling book in the world every year.

The Bible, which I started reading at the recommendation of a friend when I was in my third year of college, was so refreshing. I was living without any goals or confidence in life, just consuming each day and pursuing only momentary pleasure. The Bible I encountered at that time completely shook my heart, unlike any other book I had read before. As the words of the Bible entered my heart, my heart became energized, I was filled with unknown joy and peace, and my life began to change. In this way, without exception, people who encounter the Bible or the true God experience great changes and have various influences on those around them.

Many Christians were active in various times and regions throughout history. For example, politicians include American Lincoln, President Theodore Roosevelt, and British Prime Minister Churchill; scientists include Einstein, Newton, Pasteur, and Galileo Galilei; musicians include Bach, Haydn, and Beethoven; artists such as Da Vinci and Michelangelo; and writers Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, others like Helen Keller, Mother Teresa, and countless others.

Inazo Nitobe, who served as Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Nations in Japan, Aoi Najima, founder of Tōjisa University, Shigeru Nanbara and Tadao Yanaihara, who served as president of the University of Tokyo, writers Kanzo Uchimura, Ayako Miura, and Shusaku Endo, and social activist Kaga. There are Toyohiko Wa, Chiune Sugihara, who saved Jews from Nazi genocide, Machiko Hasegawa, author of Sazae-san, Takashi Yanase of Anpanman, Hideyo Noguchi, and many others. Many Christians participated in the modernization of Japan.

Lastly, I believe that getting to know faith and God through the Bible without intentionally suppressing your religious nature will be the best opportunity in your life.