

I was raised as a Roman Catholic but by the age of 17 had stopped going to Mass – indeed I seldom, if ever, said a prayer.

I was married in a Protestant Church because my Parish Priest refused to allow me to have the choir or organ at my wedding. This was to show his complete disapproval of my marrying a non-Catholic – my marriage in a Protestant Church showed him my absolute disinterest in the Roman Catholic Church. I was technically excommunicated.

The Second World War which started six months after my marriage turned me into a non-believer – how could a so-called loving and caring God allow such things to happen? When my beloved sister, May, was killed in the London bombings, my heart completely hardened against this so-called God and I referred to myself from then on as an ATHEIST. This was my own chosen label for many years.

Illogically, however, I still wanted my children, two daughters and a son, to have some formal religious education, saying that they could make up their own minds later on about the existence of God. Subsequently, my two daughters went to the local Convent School and my son to the Catholic School.

I was persuaded to take a six-monthly instruction at the local Roman Catholic Church and started going to Mass with my children. However, as I was unable to accept all the dogma of the Catholic Church and particularly their views on birth control, as soon as the children were old enough to attend Mass on their own, I stopped accompanying them. I had read many articles and books attacking organised religion, the myths of Christ's deity, the virgin birth, the resurrection etc, etc and my Church-going with the children was, to say the least, a sham. I was, after all, an Atheist.

Having disposed of God's existence, one would suppose that I could also answer the ever-nagging question of why life didn't live up to my expectations. Why did I always feel that something was missing? I could see no purpose to my existence – was this all there was to life, to be married, raise children, grow old and subsequently die? What was the purpose of it all? On discussing this with my friends I was given many different answers, namely I had been married too young (I was 19 at the

time); my children hadn't perhaps fulfilled my ambitions for them; I needed a job to get me away from the domestic routine; I needed further outside interests. Indeed, one well-meaning friend told me that it was something to do with my own personality. As I had found very few people who felt as I did, I was inclined to go along with this theory. Most people seemed to think life was wonderful, or it was what one made it. Why didn't I feel this way? Obviously, it was a personality defect.

With the children growing up and more time on my hands, I discovered that I really enjoyed gardening, and the quiet times spent planting and weeding allowed my thoughts to wander uninterrupted. The seasons came and went; the little seeds planted weeks before grew into beautiful plants and there was such beauty and order in the world. I was convinced there was some creative force and it would be ridiculous to deny this. Thus, I chose my next label – an AGNOSTIC.

In July 1972, my husband and I flew to America; our fourth visit since my eldest daughter's marriage to an American Airman and two years since our previous visit when Tracy, the youngest of three daughters, had been born. Tracy had been six weeks old when we last saw her and during the intervening two years had grown into a most adorable toddler. It was a hard wrench when the time came to say goodbye, especially for my husband.

On returning home, both my husband and I found it impossible to settle down to our usual routine – we felt so restless. We had never experienced this after our previous visits. One evening walking by the River Thames, my husband startled me by saying "let's go to America again next year". I emphasise the word "startled" because he is a sensible and cautious man where money is concerned and we had agreed that a holiday with our family in the States every two years was all we could afford. To go again the following year seemed rather reckless but since my husband was insistent that we would afford it anyway, who was I to argue? I wanted to go again in 1973 to see little Tracy and the rest of the family as much as he did.

At this stage, it is necessary to say that my eldest daughter, Jackie, was the only Church-going member of the family. She had chosen to worship at the Episcopalian Church because her husband, Bob, was so anti-Catholic. The services in this denomination were similar to the Catholic

ones and she was perfectly happy. However, she and his whole family now attended a fundamentalist Bible Teaching Church.

In the early Spring of 1973 (all our holiday arrangements completed) Jackie wrote to tell me St Gabriel's was starting a Sunday morning Bible Class. Later she wrote to say she was attending another Bible Class in the week at a Calvary Baptist Church, some 15 miles away. Since Jackie and I corresponded weekly with each other, I was always kept up-to-date with all her activities. Weekly the letters arrived with Jackie telling me about the wonderful things she had discovered in the Bible, stating that the Bible was God's inspired Word to man; salvation was a free gift from God; Jesus Christ had died to cancel out our sins once and for all. All these statements were backed up with the Scripture references.

Later Jackie wrote to say that she was a "born again" Christian, that she had asked Jesus Christ to come into her life and her salvation was assured. I was puzzled but remembered being told something similar once before. A Mr Maulden called every week to sell fresh farm eggs and produce – a little business he enjoyed running since he retired. Talking at the door one day, I mentioned how happy he always looked and he surprised me by saying that it was because he was a Christian. He had further stated that he knew he was going to go to heaven when he died because of what Jesus Christ had done on the Cross. At the time, I had thought Mr Maulden was a religious fanatic – I knew from my previous Catholic teaching that no-one could be sure of heaven. It all depended on how we lived this life and whether we had received absolution for our sins from the Priest before we actually died. No-one went to heaven – all spent a period of time in Purgatory, even the best of us. Nevertheless, here was my daughter saying the exact same things as Mr Maulden and quoting Scriptures as evidence.

Meanwhile, the questions on what life was all about became more insistent and I was constantly saying "there must be more to life than this". Indeed, I decided that when I returned from America I would find a part-time job. Hopefully, this would help me to feel more fulfilled.

On seeing Jackie again, it was obvious that something special had happened to her – she looked so radiantly happy. Surprisingly too, Bob was accompanying the family to Church and Bible Study on Sundays. I went too during my stay and also met Pastor Joe de Candelo at the

Calvary Baptist Church Bible Class. I read several of Jackie's religious books while I was in the States and I heard many new and challenging things about Christianity, things I had never learned from Roman Catholic teachings. I began to wonder whether there really was a God after all, if the Bible was indeed true and Jesus Christ was really who He claimed to be. I felt strange and very nervous and for once was glad to say goodbye. I needed to get home to England to think things out. I had become a DON'T KNOW.

Back in England, the questions did not go away. I knew I had to find out about Christianity once and for all and make a definite decision. I had seen such a change in my daughter and deep down inside I envied her her complete assurance. Fortunately, I soon found a Bible Study Class - an American lady, Mrs Norma Dodds, had just started one at the American Base. Through this class, I met many wonderful Christian women. Norma too was most helpful in answering my questions and supplied me with lots of Christian literature. I just read and read and read, the Bible, books by Major Ian Thomas, Dr Francis Schaeffer etc, etc. My hunger for Christian knowledge was almost insatiable. I did my weekly homework for the Bible Study and I started to pray. I knew I was beginning to become a BELIEVER.

One day I was given a little booklet called "The Purpose of Life" – all my questions on life were here and answered. I read that man needed God because he was made with a spiritual side to his nature for contact with God and the spirit world. To be a complete person one had to have fellowship with God. I read the little booklet again and I knew I had the answer to "there must be more to life than this". I also agreed with all Dr Schaeffer's logical arguments on the existence of God; I knew it was true. However, I seemed unable to make a definite commitment.

I prayed hard for direction. I knew I was completely worthless, a sinner and yet God wanted fellowship with me. Somehow, I lacked the humility to say how wrong I had been for so many years. Satan is reluctant to let go – I have learned this since.

I thought back over my holiday in the States and it was very evident that God had been working out His purposes in my life. My husband had had to make the decision to go this year – this explained the unexplainable restlessness. I could see God's hand in directing me to the Bible Class –

Norma only lived across the street from me. Indeed, she had lived there a whole year. Why had I not set eyes on her before? A year earlier, I would not have contemplated attending a Bible Study. All the pieces in my particular puzzle seemed to fit by divine providence.

A few days later I read the booklet yet again and I knew I had come to the crossroad of my life. I had to make a commitment and a small voice deep down inside was urging me on. I knelt down in my bedroom and committed my life to Christ. I knew He was my Saviour – I asked Him to forgive my sins and make me the kind of person He wanted me to be.

Since October 1973, when I was “born again”, I have attended Church regularly and continue with my Bible Study. The purpose of life is no longer a mystery to me – all my questions can be answered in the Word of God, the Bible. I am a CHRISTIAN.

Each day my faith grows stronger – how I regret all those lost years. Philippians 1 : 6 says; being confident of this very thing, that He who hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. I know this promise will be fulfilled because I AM A CHRISTIAN.

Ena R Ribbens