A vertical poster featuring a silhouette of a person standing on a dark, rolling landscape under a vast night sky. The sky is filled with the Milky Way galaxy, showing a vibrant spectrum of colors from purple and pink at the top to yellow and orange at the bottom. The person is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, looking up at the stars. The entire scene is framed by a thin white border.

THOUGHTS FROM A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

# God?

PATRICK DENNIS



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+ + +

PATRICK DENNIS

Art at the beginning of each chapter by Megan Dennis.  
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Feedback is welcomed. Write: [Book@DennisCreative.com](mailto:Book@DennisCreative.com). Every email will be read, even though—depending on volume—it may not be possible for each email to get a reply.

...

I have not sought payment for this book. I want to get it into the hands of as many people who want to read it as possible. If I decide to get it printed one day I will have to charge something for it, of course. But I have had a few people ask if they could pay for it, as a way to help support this project. If you are so motivated, I'd not object to your buying me a cup of coffee:

[BuyMeACoffee.com/PatrickDennis](https://BuyMeACoffee.com/PatrickDennis)

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ISBN (Paperback): 979-8-9857396-0-2

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*To my family, my future family,  
and to every kid who has ever walked  
into our home for Group.*



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## God?

YEARS AGO, I HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO get to know the gifted and award-winning cartoonist, Johnny Hart. Johnny created not one, but two nationally-syndicated comic strips that ran in thousands of newspapers every day. The first was called *B.C.* The second, *The Wizard of Id*, he co-created with a cartoonist named Brant Parker.

Johnny, who died in 2007, inspired me on a number of levels. I loved our conversations.

His comic strips did not usually touch on religion; their goal was to entertain. Still, he did see Easter and Christmas as unique opportunities to use his work as a platform to encourage people to consider the claims of Christianity. He was never shy about sharing what he believed. I was entertained to hear him talk about the handful of newspaper editors who would always threaten to not run his “religious” strips in their papers.

Those editors typically backed down and ran the strips, but even if they had not, I don't think Johnny would have cared. He didn't lose sleep over these sorts of battles.

Here is an example of one such strip, a strip that is meaningful personally because Johnny hand-colored it for me as a gift.



The thing I love about this strip is that B.C., the main character, asks real questions. Throughout my adult life, I've been drawn to people with questions about God, perhaps in part because I had questions to work through as I first considered the claims of Christianity. B.C. asks the same questions that many people would like to ask God: "Are you listening? ... How come you never show yourself? ... How do we know you even exist?"

But what if God *has* shown himself, as the later panels of the strip suggest? What if he has given us evidence but, like B.C., we have missed it, whether due to our busy lives, pre-existing beliefs, personal biases, the way we were raised, or because we've

never stopped to consider that good evidence might actually exist? What if we've missed it because we've simply ignored it?

I'm convinced that God has given us more than enough reason to believe. That he has shown himself, and that there is enough evidence to lead a smart, thoughtful person to conclude that: (a) God does exist, and (b) Christianity is more likely to be true than not true. You may disagree.

Whatever you believe, I hope you'll keep reading.

### **THE BIG IDEA**

From the beginning, I envisioned that this would be a “what I believe and how I came to believe it” sort of book.

I have written this book to challenge curious readers to think. If you are not a Christian or aren't even sure you believe that God exists, I hope you will find this book to be both interesting and thought-provoking. If you are a Christian, I hope it will strengthen your faith.

For philosophers, theologians, and thinkers who have read books on these topics, the arguments here will be familiar. I'm not seeking to make new arguments as much as I'm hoping to pass along arguments that I have found to be compelling. In the Appendix, I will point to books that will dig into these topics in greater depth than I will attempt to do here. My goal, really, is to scratch the surface. If you've never read a book like this, one that seeks to make a case for the rationality of the Christian faith, I think you will be intrigued.

As I begin writing, I have no plans to publish this broadly, though that may change if the right door were to open. And I am writing initially for two specific audiences, though I suspect a wider range of audiences may find it to be helpful.

The first audience is my family. My great grandfather, whom I never knew, was a pastor in the small town of Lebanon, Connecticut. He never wrote anything like this, but I wish he had. I would have enjoyed reading it. Though I hope to know my grandchildren and great-grandchildren one day (if my wife Karey and I should have any), it is obviously not a given that I will live that long. So, this is for them and for their children.

If even one of them reads this at some point in the future, it will have been worth my time and effort.

This book is for my amazing wife, Karey, and for our kids: Ryan, Megan, and Ethan—and for Grace, our newest daughter. It is for my Dad, who loves thought-provoking conversations, and for my Mom, who loves the written word. It is for Bret, Kim, Caroline, Thomas, and Zachary. And for Barb, Kristen, Ken, Kevin, Elizabeth, Corinne, Kim, Bryan, Amanda, Julie, Kellen, and Sarah. It is for David, Kitty, Katherine, Meredith, Reiko, Aunt Ellen, and Barbara. Ellen, it might not be *Auntie Mame*, but I hope you'll like it. And it is for the entire Miner clan, the Beckwith clan, Lynn, Donna, Marcy, and the rest of our extended family. And for our extended family on Karey's side.

My second audience consists of our other family: the hundreds of high school students (and now college students and college graduates) we have welcomed into our home over the past nine years for this thing my kids creatively decided to call “Group.”

Group started when Ryan and Megan invited their friends and other kids I had once coached in basketball to come over to discuss life, from a Christian perspective.

The turnout that first week was larger than we expected. Ryan, Gio, David, John, Mike, Jon, Nick C., Nick B., Kyle, Megan, Sara, Kelley, Elizabeth, Kathryn, Reese, Jess, and Meredith, you

all played a huge role in helping Group get off of the ground, and it just took off from there.

During that first week, at Group, I mentioned a verse from the Bible that points out an interesting idea, whatever we believe about God or the Bible. It simply says that during Jesus' days as a young adult, he grew "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people."

This verse points to four dimensions of life. Each is important.

Life naturally leads us to grow in three of these four dimensions. We grow in wisdom through experience, and as we learn things and figure out how to apply that knowledge. We grow in stature, physically, without having to think much about it. And we grow in favor with people as we invest in relationships.

But that fourth dimension, the spiritual dimension, does not come as naturally to students. Nor to adults. Far too often, it is the most ignored dimension of life, even though many would argue that it is the most important of the four.

The Christian perspective on the spiritual dimension of life suggests that we were created to experience and enjoy a relationship with God. But, for reasons we'll come to later, far too many people never discover how to experience that relationship. And before we can begin to think about a relationship with God, we need to explore more basic questions. Questions like: Does God even exist? How can we know? Can an intelligent person rationally conclude that the central claims of Christianity are true?

As it turns out, the idea that students would enjoy having a safe place to explore these and similar questions about the spiritual dimension of life was a good one. So, that is what Karey and I have sought to provide. That and good food.

I have written this book to explore these same types of questions because so many of us—students and adults alike—wonder about them.

Group, in book form? That's the goal.

On a personal note, if you have been part of Group, you know how much Karey and I love you. No matter who you are, why you came, or what you believe, we have never ceased to be thankful for your presence in our lives. Our doors are always open, however old you are, whatever is going on in your life, and even if it has been a minute since we've heard from you.

And while I cannot possibly mention every kid who has been part of Group in this book, I will mention many of you by name in the following pages. You'll have to read on to find out where, even though I know some of you hate to read.

Beyond these audiences, I hope that students I've known or coached but who never made it to Group will read this. I can think of a number of people who fit into this category. I hope family members of kids who have enjoyed Group will read this.

And if the book somehow finds a wider audience, that would be great, too. I will be especially thrilled if even one person who has written off faith, is wrestling with doubt, or legitimately wonders if God exists finds this to be helpful.

If it never finds a broader audience, I will still be perfectly content. This has been a labor of love, and I am happy to have written it, whatever comes next.



## Penn Jillette Gets It

OUR FAMILY OWNS A HOME ON THE BEAUTIFUL Bohemia River in Maryland, not far from the northern end of the Chesapeake Bay. At least a few of you who may one day read this book have been to the river house with us.

If so, you might remember seeing a small sign that hung on the side of the refrigerator for years. It said:

*Some things matter very little.  
Most things matter not at all.*

The sign was a good reminder that much of what we tend to worry about is simply not worth our emotional energy. When I saw it though, I often had my own variation of the thought:

*Some things matter very much.  
A few things matter immensely.*

## PENN JILLETTE GETS IT

Penn Jillette, half of the uber-talented illusionist duo Penn & Teller, has a thoughtful mind and is a gifted entertainer. He is also an atheist.

In a video posted on YouTube, Jillette talks about a fan who had approached him after a show to give him a Bible. Jillette said the fan initiated a conversation with him about Christianity. Some might assume that this would be annoying for an atheist, but Jillette claimed not to be annoyed at all. Instead, he said he understood and respected the man.

His rationale is on point:

*I've always said I don't respect people who don't [talk about their Christian faith with others.] I don't respect that at all. If you believe there is a heaven and hell, and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life or whatever, and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, how much do you have to hate somebody to not [do that]? How much do you have to hate someone to believe everlasting life is possible and not tell them that?*

*If I believed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that a truck was coming at you, and you didn't believe it, but the truck was bearing down on you, there's a certain point that I tackle you. This is more important than that.<sup>1</sup>*

If Christianity is true—and please note that I am not assuming that you believe it is—there is an eternity we will all face beyond death. That eternity is divided into two possible destinations: an eternity with God and an eternity apart from God.

Penn Jillette is right. *This is more important than that.*

If you have read the Preface, you will already know that I believe evidence exists that could lead a thoughtful, intelligent, and objective observer to conclude that the central claims of historic, biblical Christianity are more likely to be true than not true.

Note here that I am not trying to make the case that these claims can be proven to be true with 100% certainty.

### **SKEPTICS WELCOME**

Some readers will be inclined to disagree with my “more likely to be true than not” idea. I understand. These subjects are not easy. If they were, books like this would not be necessary.

If you would say, “Patrick, nothing that you or anyone else could ever write could possibly change my views,” you are probably right. If your mind is that made up and closed to even the possibility that some sort of god could exist, well, I suppose the case is settled for you.

Some agnostics, who say they don’t know whether a god of some kind exists, have concluded they can’t know and thus decide not to spend a lot of time or energy thinking about it. Some are curious and love to talk about it.

Likewise, some atheists<sup>2</sup> have settled the matter in their hearts and choose not to invest energy in such discussions. Other atheists remain very engaged and seem to have a passion for trying to convince theists like me—those who do believe that a god exists—that we are out to lunch. Others are curious.

If you are not convinced that God exists but are curious, I’d suggest a simple thought exercise. If the circle on the following page represents all knowledge, or every single thing that can be known, imagine drawing a smaller circle inside the larger circle to reflect how much of that knowledge you personally possess.

I'm guessing your circle will be small. My circle would be so small that it would likely appear to be invisible. Once you've drawn your circle, ask yourself this question: Is it possible that a god of some sort could exist somewhere in the larger circle but outside your smaller circle?



Whether you are convinced that no god exists or you simply lack faith that one does exist, if it is even possible that a god could exist outside your smaller circle of knowledge, such thoughts are worth exploring. Actually, could any thought be more important?

If you do believe in God, but struggle with doubt, take courage; you are not alone. Most honest believers, including me, will admit that they wrestle with doubt sometimes. Skeptics have all sorts of doubt. I will write more on faith and doubt later in this book, but let me suggest briefly here that doubt isn't nearly as significant a problem as is *unexamined* doubt.<sup>3</sup>

### **UNEXAMINED DOUBT?**

Some people don't even know why they doubt. Others have held on to their doubt for so long that their doubt prevents them from even considering ideas that suggest that good reasons to believe in God might actually exist. When confronted by doubt, some people fail to carefully examine the reasons for it. As a result, they end up uncritically trusting it.

Although this is not true of all who doubt, it is certainly true of many. These people have never stopped to ask a couple of very important questions:

*Could my reasons for doubt be wrong?  
Should I doubt my doubt?*

I'm suggesting here that in the same way some Christians have been accused of holding onto faith blindly, some skeptics tend to do the same thing with their doubt.

But Christians are never asked to hold onto their faith blindly. Christians learn, in the Bible, that they should always be ready to provide reasons for the hope that is within them, "with gentleness and respect."<sup>4</sup> If you are a Christian, learning why you believe is important.

Likewise, the non-Christian should not blindly hold onto doubt. Knowing why one does *not* believe is very important. If it turns out that a non-believer is wrong and that Christianity is true, the result of the mistake of unbelief is incalculable.

Blaise Pascal was a brilliant French mathematician, scientist, inventor, and philosopher who lived during the 1600s. He was a renaissance man, really. He was also a Christian.

An amazing book containing his observations on Christianity was published in 1670. The content was found after Pascal died in 1662. He had done this work as he prepared to write a book defending Christianity.

Called *Pensées*, or when translated from French, *Thoughts*, it is more a long list of his insights than it is a typical book. But it is fantastic, and absolutely worth reading today. It has challenged thoughtful minds for more than 350 years.

In his book, you will find ideas that, together, have come to be known as Pascal's wager. I have paraphrased it here:

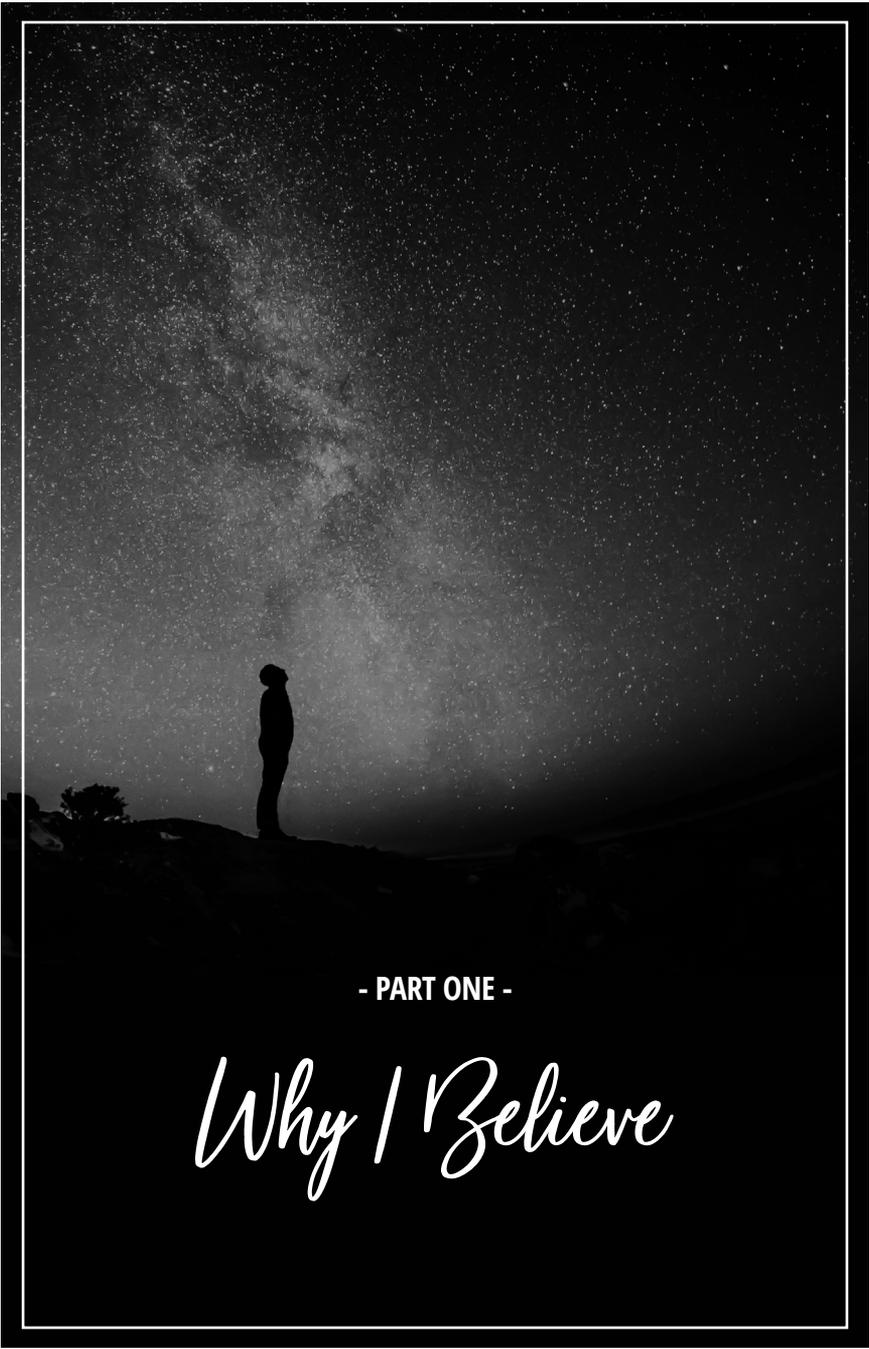
1. If God does not exist, but a person believes that he exists, that person doesn't lose much for having been wrong;<sup>5</sup>
2. If God does not exist, and a person correctly does not believe he exists, the person doesn't gain much by being correct in rejecting his existence;
3. If God does exist, but a person does not believe, that person loses everything; and, finally
4. If God does exist, a person who believes and discovers how to relate rightly to him gains everything.<sup>6</sup>

We should not make the mistake of asking Pascal's wager to do more than it should. I am not convinced that this is a good argument that God exists. Nor do I believe that it is a solid enough reason to believe. Rather, I see it as a tremendous reminder that the stakes are high.

If it is even possible that Christianity is true, one should consider the evidence closely.

My hope is that these pages will provide food for thought for every reader, regardless of the person's spiritual background, because, as Penn Jillette and Blaise Pascal both recognized, this stuff really matters.

So let's dive in.



- PART ONE -

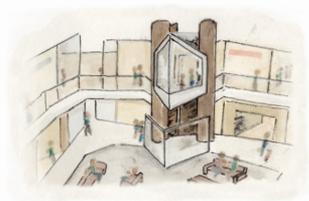
*Why I Believe*



- SECTION ONE -

*Life*





## Blister Soul

ON OCTOBER 25, 1999, TWO F-16 FIGHTER PLANES from the Oklahoma Air National Guard's 138th Fighter Wing scrambled to intercept a Learjet headed into America's heartland.

The plane they were ordered to intercept was not an enemy aircraft. It had not been hijacked. It was not carrying terrorists, drug smugglers, criminals, or anyone harboring ill will toward the United States or its people.

I first read about the intercept of the jet on the internet as it happened, in real time. As the jet flew, there was speculation (later denied by the Pentagon) that our fighter pilots would be ordered to shoot it down if it approached a major city.

The Prime Minister of Canada at the time, Jean Chrétien, did authorize the Royal Canadian Air Force to shoot it down if it entered Canadian airspace without making contact.<sup>1</sup>

He made this decision despite the fact that he was certain that the plane's occupants had no intention of causing harm.

The story was covered live, at least in part, because the jet carried a celebrity passenger, a famous professional golfer named Payne Stewart. As someone who has played more than a little golf in my life, I follow professional golf with some interest. And I had recently become intrigued by Payne's story after reading about a number of powerful changes that had taken place in his life as he had begun to pursue a relationship with God.

✦ ✦ ✦

The plane had taken off from Orlando at 9:19 am, with Stewart, his two agents, and a golf course architect on board. It was headed for Texas, piloted by an experienced crew.

Nearly eight minutes into the flight, air traffic control received the last known radio transmission from the pilot. Approximately six and a half minutes later, an air traffic controller attempted to contact the Learjet, but was unsuccessful.

The National Transportation Safety Board later determined that at some point between those two transmissions, the aircraft had suffered a loss of cabin pressurization and that the pilots failed to receive supplemental oxygen in time. This quickly rendered everyone on the plane, including the pilots, unconscious.

The Learjet, however, continued to fly northwest for several hours, on autopilot.

At different points, the plane was intercepted by pairs of F-16s, including the two from the Oklahoma ANG. The F-16 pilots were instructed to visually inspect the Learjet and to report any signs that the pilots or passengers might be conscious.

None were observed. The cockpit windows were iced over from the inside. The Learjet pilots never responded to radio transmissions, nor to the sight of the F-16s.

As the story unfolded, I refreshed my web browser repeatedly, to get updates as they were posted. I was transfixed, and truly sad. I wanted to look away but could not. I had never experienced a story like this. I would guess I might have prayed for them. I do remember hoping that somehow, in some way, there would be a happy ending.

As the plane's flight path took them northwest, my heart went out to Payne, his companions on the flight, the pilots, and to each of their families. It felt surreal, and heartbreaking, to know that they were on a jet that seemed to be flying just fine, with its navigation, autopilot system, and both engines functioning properly, even as the aircraft and its passengers were in deep, deep trouble.

At approximately 12:10 pm, CDT, the plane began to run out of fuel. At 12:13, it crashed into a field near Mina, South Dakota. There were no survivors.

Even though I didn't know any of the passengers personally, I grieved their loss.

✦ ✦ ✦

If you could have somehow seen that Learjet 35 in flight on that fall day—some time after the crew and passengers had passed out due to the lack of oxygen, but before you knew that fact—you might have thought how impressive the aircraft was. You might have noticed how awesome it looked, cruising at close to 500 miles per hour. You might have wondered if anyone famous was on board or where the plane was headed.

You never would have known, as you watched it fly, that as beautiful and well-built as the Learjet looked on the outside, something had gone terribly wrong on the inside.

This is not a bad description of many people today.

If we were to walk into Fair Oaks Mall, not far from my home, we'd see people who look great, cruising through the mall and seemingly on autopilot, with no apparent worries. As we watched, we would have no clue that as good as they looked on the outside, something had gone terribly wrong on the inside.

### **BROKENNESS SURROUNDS US**

If we walked by the children's play area outside a department store, we might notice two young siblings playing. But we couldn't see the ways that their ability to trust others had been damaged (in ways they won't come to understand for years) when their mom and dad's fighting got worse, leading to a divorce and to their Mom moving out.

If we grabbed a cup of coffee and sat down by the glass elevator in the atrium to watch people, we couldn't tell which ones were living under the weight of crushing stress due to the mountain of debt they had accumulated.

We couldn't know that the gorgeous woman in line at Starbucks, whose looks turn the heads of both men and women, is dealing with debilitating depression and anxiety. Though many might notice her outer beauty, no one could see how profoundly she has struggled with an enduring sense of self-hatred.

We wouldn't know that the man with the stylish haircut, expensive suit, and great shoes, who is walking by and seemingly at ease as he talks on his phone, is battling cancer and in a fight for his life.

We'd never know that the athletic 19-year-old, wearing the cool jeans and trendy shirt, laughing with his identically-dressed friends, never goes more than about 20 minutes without feeling an overwhelming and oppressive sadness caused by the impact his brother's drug addiction has had on his entire family.

We would have no idea that the couple sitting near us with blank looks on their faces had ventured out today for the first time since their toddler's funeral.

We couldn't see the fear in the life of the girl in the Apple store, buying a new phone to replace the one that was broken when she was attacked by a guy on a path near her dorm after a party.

These are just some of the people we might see at one mall, in one fairly affluent community, in one part of America. In many communities and homes, the brokenness is far more obvious.

The examples above are all related to awful realities in these people's lives. Often, however, the brokenness we experience is not related to a specific problem or difficulty.

### **WAYS WE SENSE BROKENNESS**

Whether this brokenness is obvious and evident to everyone or more hidden inside people who look great as they cruise through a shopping mall, we tend to sense this brokenness in different ways.

Here are three:

#### **A Sense that Our World is Broken**

As we look at the current state of America, one of the wealthiest nations in modern history—a nation that many around the world would dream of living in—we still find crime, poverty, hunger, sickness and disease, mental health issues, addiction,

broken families, broken relationships, a range of social injustices (injustices that have destroyed lives, families, and communities), and more. As I write, political and racial tensions dominate the news and are at a boiling point for many.

Despite its problems, there are still many great things about America. But one would have to be blind to miss the brokenness around us. And as challenging as things can seem in the United States today, things are worse in all sorts of places around the world. In many places, they are far worse.

It doesn't take much imagination or genius to observe that the world itself seems terribly broken.

### **A Sense that Other People are Broken**

If we observe that the world is broken, a logical conclusion is that it is broken, at least in part, because people are broken. Henry David Thoreau famously observed that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, the French philosopher who won the Nobel Prize in Literature, concluded that life is absurd. Bertrand Russell, the well-known atheist and philosopher, said, “Unless you assume a God, the question of life's meaning is meaningless.”<sup>3</sup>

If there is no God, we are all flukes of nature; random accidents of chance. If there is no God, Russell was absolutely right. But even if God exists, people are not mistaken if they look at lives around them and conclude that no matter how good people look on the outside, something has gone wrong.

My friend Derrick tweets often about how messed up our world is and about how messed up people are. As he looks at all that goes on in the world in a given day, and the way people treat each other, he is constantly tempted to respond in either anger or despair. He's not the only one.

His anger actually provides a subtle clue that God exists. If you saw the video of the murder of George Floyd in 2020<sup>4</sup> and read about what happened, nobody had to tell you it was wrong. You *knew* it. The fact that we would know it was wrong hints that there are absolute rights and wrongs built into our souls. The fact that we would get angry hints at our ability to judge right from wrong. But if this sense of right and wrong is somehow built into us, how did it get there? We'll come back to that later in the book.

I see brokenness in the world. I see it in other people. But if I stop there, I will likely miss the most important (but admittedly difficult) thought: that I, myself, am broken.

### **A Sense that I Personally Am Broken**

We all may feel a personal sense of brokenness, at times, if something awful happens to us or a loved one.

Still, we must not make the mistake of thinking that this sense that something has gone wrong is only the result of some terrible reality we are facing or of something bad that happens. In our most perceptive moments, many of us recognize something even more troubling: that the brokenness is *within* us, and is not simply a result of things that have happened *to* us.

For generations, songwriters (and poets, authors, playwrights, scriptwriters, and philosophers) have explored this theme. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll look at several songs that point, in different ways, to this personal brokenness.

### **SOMETHING IS MISSING**

Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper's massive hit, *Shallow*, from the 2018 film, *A Star is Born*, struck a chord in the hearts of millions. The lyrics at the beginning of the song reflect what so many people feel: a sense that something is missing.

*Tell me somethin', girl  
Are you happy in this modern world?  
Or do you need more?  
Is there somethin' else you're searchin' for?*

*I'm falling  
In all the good times I find myself  
Longing for change  
And in the bad times I fear myself*

*Tell me something, boy  
Aren't you tired trying to fill that void?  
Or do you need more?  
Ain't it hard keeping it so hardcore?<sup>5</sup>*

If we are honest, many of us do long for more—even in the good times—and are tired of trying to “fill that void.” We too easily believe that sex, money, a career, power, success, the right house in the right neighborhood, social popularity, relationships, possessions, or some other thing will heal what ails us.

My friends Tanner and Katie recently pointed me to a Lauren Alaina song called *Getting Good*. The lyrics reflect our temptation to believe that life would be good if we could just get \_\_\_\_\_.

Each of us fills in our blank differently, but deep down, we know where this road leads. We may manage to actually get that thing we thought would fulfill us, only to discover that it doesn't work. So, we then turn to despair or we change gears and begin to think we need to fill in our blank with something new.

This is why kids beg for that must-have Christmas gift, only to turn their hearts to some new thing after receiving it. We did the same thing as kids. We do the same thing as adults. The married person with a good life leaves his or her spouse.

The shopaholic makes one more unnecessary purchase. The rich person answers the question, “How much money is enough?” by responding, “Just a little more.”<sup>6</sup> I get it. In my own life, I once bought a brand new car, and then—while driving it home from the dealer—caught myself admiring a different car I thought was cooler than my new one.

Here’s the reality: people who have acquired or achieved the very thing we fill in our blanks with have their own blanks that they are trying to fill. This is why so many who have seemingly gained the world ask the same thing we ask: “Is this all there is?”

*Or do you need more? Is there somethin’ else you’re searchin’ for?*

Actor Jim Carrey, in a college commencement speech in 2014, said, “I wish people could realize all of their dreams and wealth and fame so that they could see that it is not where they are going to find their sense of completion.”<sup>7</sup>

Joe Gibbs has been inducted into both the NFL and NASCAR halls of fame. Being inducted into one sport’s hall of fame is a tremendous accomplishment. Being inducted into the halls of fame in two different sports is astounding. Joe led the Washington (then) Redskins to three Super Bowl Championships. His NASCAR racing team has won five top-level, season-long championships and four Daytona 500 races. Very few people have led teams to multiple championships at the highest level of their sport. To have done so in two different sports is legendary. But listen to Gibbs’ perspective: “Every time I accomplished something like winning games, Super Bowls ... making some money, and all that, I still had an emptiness inside of me.”<sup>8</sup>

NF is a rising star in the rap world. He’s had two songs debut at #1 on the Billboard 200 chart, and his song *Let You Down* went triple-platinum. His take on success may surprise you.

*The most successful moment of my life was the worst—the most depressed I’ve ever been—literally feeling like I’d probably be happier if I was just dead. I got to number one on Billboard... My tour, every date sold out except one. So I literally had everything that I had always dreamed of happening. And I felt, well, I didn’t feel happy at all... I was like, “I’m here, and if this is it, there’s gotta be more for me because if this is it, it’s not gonna work.”*<sup>9</sup>

I have a friend who shared similar thoughts, years ago. In college, he had set a goal of becoming a millionaire before he turned 30. On his 30th birthday, he realized that he had met his goal. He called it one of the emptiest days of his life.

The experiences of these men are not uncommon, even among people who have achieved great success. Whatever we achieve, satisfaction can still seem elusive. This is a running theme in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s phenomenal musical, *Hamilton*. In the show, one of the driving forces in Alexander Hamilton’s life is this persistent lack of satisfaction. No matter how much he accomplished, it never seemed to be enough.

*Aren’t you tired trying to fill that void? Or do you need more?*

### **SOMETHING IS WRONG**

Beyond merely having a sense that something is missing, many of us wrestle with a sense that something is actually wrong, deep down inside.

My friend Ryan suggested I listen to the song *Hurt*, from Nine Inch Nails’ 1994 record, *The Downward Spiral*. Written by the band’s frontman, Trent Reznor, the lyrics are a powerful cry of despair. Ryan also suggested I watch the music video of Johnny Cash’s cover of the song. I’m glad he did. It was the single most emotionally haunting music video I’ve ever seen.

Recorded near the end of Cash's life, mostly inside the now-closed and run-down House of Cash (his former museum), the video has a different feel than Nine Inch Nails' version. Cash's interpretation of the song is one of pain and regret as he looks back at his life from the perspective of one nearing death.<sup>10</sup>

Here are several lines from the song:

*What have I become, my sweetest friend?  
Everyone I know goes away in the end.  
You could have it all, my empire of dirt.  
I will let you down. I will make you hurt.  
I wear my crown of thorns, upon my liar's chair,  
Full of broken thoughts I cannot repair.*<sup>11</sup>

In just these few lines, Reznor's lyrics capture a variety of reasons people may experience feelings of personal brokenness. These feelings can come when a person: confronts the fact that he does not like who he is or who he is becoming; contemplates the pain that comes with an end of a significant relationship (whether that end comes through death or because one person has walked away); recognizes that too much of his life was invested in chasing the wrong things; recalls all of the ways he has failed or let other people down; or simply realizes his own thoughts are broken—and that he is incapable of fixing them.

You can find similar thoughts in the Bible. The Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament, wrote, "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." Later he wrote, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps you relate to one or several things in the previous two paragraphs. Perhaps the ways you experience brokenness in your own heart are very different.

Or maybe you are in a good moment in life and cannot relate to this at all because you are content with your health, family, finances, career, and relationships. If that is the case for you, enjoy this moment. But we know how tenuous such a feeling can be. We may be only one disease, death, accident, job loss, financial setback, relational breakdown, or other kind of trial away from that satisfaction disappearing.

### **THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM**

Even if all is well in your world at the moment, do not be surprised if at some point you begin to wrestle with the sense that something has gone terribly wrong on the inside.

C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, suggested a possible reason why:

*Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water. Men feel sexual desire: well, there is such a thing as sex. If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*<sup>13</sup>

We will not find lasting satisfaction in the things of this world. The idea that we may have been made for a different world hints at a solution that some have never stopped to consider.

Bill Mallonee is an artist and musician who has recorded more than 80 albums over the course of his long career. Many people have never heard of him even though he has written more than 2,000 songs. In one poll of the “Top 100 Living Songwriters,” he was voted #65.<sup>14</sup> One of my favorite songs of Bill’s, lyrically, is called *Blister Soul*. The first part of the song captures this sense that something isn’t as it is supposed to be—inside of us.

## BLISTER SOUL

*Yeah, you got this place you go  
It's just a trip before the fall  
Way past the fevered pitch  
Just a spit from the wrecking ball*

*Said you woke up this morning  
Said you woke up under a curse  
I've heard the blues are bad  
but this is something worse  
And the ambulance driver  
Well he tips his hat and stares  
And he asks you in a grave voice  
'Can I take you anywhere?'*

*Yeah, the thing we cannot speak of  
Too painful to behold  
Oh, this blister soul  
Oh, this blister soul  
Oh, this blister soul*

*There's a smaller place you go  
Where there's hardly any sound  
Where the deals have all gone sour  
And the house of cards comes down  
And the damage is costly  
It's beyond all dollars and cents  
You can't measure it with graphs and charts  
or any instruments*

*Yeah, the thing we cannot speak of  
The secret we all know  
This blister soul  
Oh, this blister soul  
Oh, this blister soul  
Oh, this blister soul<sup>15</sup>*

Mallonee suggests that our brokenness is actually found in our souls, and calls it “the secret we all know.”

Ninety years before Mallonee wrote *Blister Soul*, G.K. Chesterton wrote a memorable letter to the editor of a London newspaper. Chesterton was a theologian, thinker, and one of the most prolific writers ever. He lived in Great Britain in the early 1900s and died at 62. Yet, during those 62 years, he somehow managed to write more than 100 books, 200 short stories, hundreds of poems, several plays, and more than 4,000 essays!<sup>16</sup> His work influenced such a broad range of writers that the list of famous authors who have praised his writing might make up a wing of a modern authors’ hall of fame.

In 1905, London’s *Daily News* published a piece titled, “What’s Wrong with the World?” The article generated many responses, including one from Chesterton. If you had lived in London at the time, you might have expected his reply to be a long one.

You would have been wrong.

His entire response is often wrongly reported to have included four words: “Dear Sirs, I am.” Actually, he wrote a short paragraph, but the core of his answer contained only three words:

*The answer to the question, “What is Wrong?” is, or should be, “I am wrong.” ... This original sin belongs to all ages, and is the business of religion.*<sup>17</sup>

G.K. Chesterton’s answer in 1905 was, in a way, the same as Bill Mallonee’s nearly a hundred years later: *I am wrong*. This problem, the one felt or sensed by so many, is a universal one, they both said, and is (importantly) a spiritual one.

*Oh, this blister soul.*

I should deal with a couple of possible objections some may feel at this point. First, nothing written in this chapter is meant to suggest that there aren't happy people in the world. There are. Nor does it imply that there is no good in the world. There is.

The argument here is that however much good we might see in the world, or however happy we might be in our present circumstances, there will be times when we become aware of a very real brokenness, within us and around us, and that this brokenness reflects—at least in part—a spiritual problem.<sup>18</sup>

Some of us feel this deeply. Others less so. Some only become aware of it during a moment of crisis or, as Bill Mallonee wrote, “when the house of cards comes down.”

Whatever you think of God, know this: If there is a God, and if Christianity is true, this broken world is behaving and functioning precisely as we should expect. We see, in mankind (and in ourselves), a capacity for love, kindness, and selflessness. This is what we should expect from the human race, a people created in the image of God. Yet, we also see in mankind (and in ourselves) a capacity for selfishness, unkindness, hate, and ways we often fail to live as we ought to live. We see evil. Sometimes we see evil within ourselves. This, too, is what we should expect from the human race, a people who have fallen by turning away from God and deciding to go their own way, whether through active rebellion against God or through passive indifference.

If you aren't persuaded that God exists, however, it may be difficult to see the problem inside as a spiritual one, and thus one that demands a spiritual solution. This line of thinking would not have made sense to me either, at least for the first 18 years of my life.



When I was a kid, I didn't think much about the brokenness that seems to surround us. I was like many teenagers: preoccupied with my own world. I might have been thinking about some cute girl, what I'd be doing with my friends later, or my practice schedule for the week.

Those things probably represented the depth of my thinking until one awful day during high school.

I was outside, throwing the football with some friends (if I even remember that fact correctly; memories of that day are a bit of a blur). My mom called me to come inside. I could tell something was terribly wrong.

"Dad is very sick," she said. She had already called 911.

+ + +

My brother and I are blessed to have grown up with amazing parents. They were fantastic role models; fun, supportive, encouraging, and involved in our lives. I don't remember them missing a sporting event of mine. They always gave us the freedom to grow and spread our wings, as long as they trusted us. Beyond who they were as parents, they were amazing people. They were kind, generous, and loving. My ideas about how to live and parent were profoundly shaped by their example.

One of the things they often told me and my brother, however, was something I now believe I consistently misheard. They told us often that no matter what happened to us in life, they would always be there for us. In retrospect, I now know what they meant. They meant that they would always be in our corner, no matter what. That has proven to be true. They have lived it, and I have felt it, always. And this has given me the courage to try all sorts of things in life.

What I heard, as a kid, was that they'd *always be here*. Of course, logically, if I had stopped to think about it, I would have seen problems with such a promise. But as I watched my dad being rolled into that ambulance that day, it rocked my world.

*He might die.*

For the first time, I became aware that whether they would always be able to be there for us or not was actually not in their control—no matter how much they might have liked it to be. It seems ridiculous to write, but I had never really pondered that they would not always be able to be there.

Somehow, I had never stopped to think about the possibility that an accident, heart attack, or some disease or sickness could happen, and that one or both could be gone in the blink of an eye. I had no idea, when the ambulance took my dad away, what would happen next. At that point in my life, I don't think I had been to a funeral. Would my dad's be my first?

I had a great relationship with both my dad and my mom. But if either of them, who I had believed would always be there for me, could be gone that quickly, it called everything into question. What else had I trusted that was false?

Clearly, this was a step toward becoming an adult. As kids, we believe all sorts of things, but then come to a point—usually in our late teens or early 20s—of deciding if we will retain those beliefs as our own and carry them forward into adulthood.

Thankfully, my dad pulled through. The EMTs, doctors, and nurses all did their thing. He got well and is still beating me at golf more often than I'd like to admit. The fact that he did not die (and that both of my parents are still alive) is one of the things in my life for which I am most thankful.

Obviously, though, not everyone recovers. Not all hospital trips have happy endings. Not all diseases get healed.

Several students Karey and I know and love have lost a parent far too early. My mom's dad, my wife's dad, and my sister-in-law Kim's dad all died relatively young. On Karey's side of the family, we still mourn the loss of three kids who each died in their 20s. Perhaps losing someone unexpectedly or far too early is part of your story. If so, I am sorry. I know that such a loss is rarely far from your mind or heart.

Most of us have seen significant relationships end sadly. All of us have either had or will have moments in life where the death of someone (or the very real possibility of it) shakes up everything.

If you haven't—as much as I hate to write this—you will one day. And it will threaten to rock your world. In those moments, we often wrestle with some of life's larger questions. This is what happened in my life.

What would have happened in our family if dad had died? What would have happened to him? Is there a heaven? Would he have gone there? If I died, would I go there?

If there is a God, why would he allow this to happen?

Though I don't recall sitting and thinking about these types of questions, I became aware of them. Without recognizing it at the time, this began what I'd now call my spiritual journey.

It would be another year and a half until I started to discover answers that made sense.



## Go Time

WHEN ONE JUMPS INTO A BODY OF WATER from the top of a tall tower, all sorts of unexpected things can happen. Sadly, I know this from experience.

During the first week of my sophomore year in college, I went swimming at a quarry with friends, including my suitemates from the year before, Todd and Keith. If I hadn't learned anything else during my freshman year, I had learned that these guys never seemed to run out of ideas about fun things to do on a given day.

For my younger readers, hanging out with those two was like hanging out with Phineas & Ferb: *I know what we are going to do today.*

The quarry had a small beach-like area fronting a lake. Not too far out, in what turned out to be deep water, was a concrete

tower that rose, I would guess, somewhere between 25 and 40 feet above the lake. My memory suggests it was closer to 40, but I don't know for sure—the height of the tower in my memory might be like the length of the fish that was caught but somehow continues to get longer as time passes and as the story of the catch is re-told.

When we arrived, we watched several kids climb up a metal ladder attached to the tower, as other kids jumped from the top and into the water. It didn't seem particularly tall or scary—it looked like fun.

A little more than halfway up the ladder, a rope hung down that you could grab to swing out over the water and drop in. The first time I climbed the ladder, I grabbed the rope, swung out, and let go. It felt like a trial run, of sorts. It was fun.

I swam back to the ladder and climbed to the top.

When I got there and managed to get close enough to the edge to peek over, I realized that from the ground I had vastly underestimated the full height of the tower.

Standing at the top, I recalibrated and saw that we were, by my new estimation, approximately 47,000 feet in the air. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I must have been aware it wasn't that tall, and that my mind was playing tricks on me. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that if an airplane flew by, we'd be looking down at it.

The top of the tower was flat and formed a decent-sized platform. A couple of kids had brought lawn chairs and beer up the ladder and were making a day of it. One guy, perhaps with alcohol-fueled courage, did a double flip on the way down. One kid did a handstand at the edge before taking the big plunge.

I, on the other hand, was thinking how different the view had looked from the ground. The good news was that the kids who were jumping all seemed to be surviving. Then I saw something more terrifying than the drop itself.

Lightning.

One of those late-afternoon summer storms that seem to come out of nowhere was approaching. You've seen them: bright blue sky in three directions, and an ominous black sky in the fourth.

The storm was not far away and was closing fast. It occurred to me at this point that I might actually be the tallest object in the entire county. I was the tallest guy, on top of a tall tower, above the trees, standing near a wet metal ladder, in the middle of a good-sized lake. I was soaking wet. In my mind, lightning had never seen a better target.

The fact that there were cute girls at the quarry eliminated any thought of climbing back down the ladder. A lesser man might have been paralyzed by fear at this point. I knew it was go time.

I jumped.

Halfway down, everything was good. I felt stable in the air and was maintaining my balance nicely. It was a thrill, and at that point, I was blissfully unaware of what was about to happen. Before I jumped, someone had said I should try to remain as vertically upright as possible while entering the water. That made sense. Other tips were shared. Nobody, however, had bothered to mention what perhaps was obvious to everyone but me: "No matter what happens, *keep your legs together.*"

Then I hit the water. More accurately, the water hit me. My legs were not together.

Let's just say that the water scored a direct hit. Every male who is reading this might be cringing right now, and might even be tempted to laugh. Laughter in the face of this sort of pain seems to be a guy thing.

In addition to the obvious reason I was experiencing pain, something else had happened that I had not expected. When I landed, water was injected into me in a way I had not previously thought possible. Water I had not swallowed seemed to now be present inside of my stomach. Somehow, I simultaneously surfaced, managed to tread water while curling up into a ball, let out a very long groan, and started laughing, even in the midst of the pain. There's that guy thing again.

People say you learn valuable life lessons in college. I learned a few that day—as I often did when hanging out with Todd and Keith. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that a couple of the most profoundly influential things I would ever learn in life, I first learned through the two of them.

✦ ✦ ✦

When I had arrived on campus as a freshman, I hadn't known a single person apart from my orientation weekend roommate, a tennis player named Sonny. I remember thinking, as my parents were leaving after dropping me off, that I had exactly one friend at the entire school: a guy I had known for two days.

My freshman roommate, Mike, showed up in camouflage army fatigue long pants (on a very hot day) and was wearing a Sex Pistols "No Future" t-shirt. He wore several earrings and a mullet before either was considered particularly cool. It turns out he was simply ahead of the curve. He was a musician and an artist and was into bands I'd never heard of. In one of our first conversations, he said, "I hate sports."

*Uh oh.*

Growing up, I had played sports constantly. When I wasn't playing, I was watching, reading about, or talking about sports. Sports occupied a huge percentage of my mind space.

*This could be a long year.*

Our two suitemates, Todd and Keith, let us know pretty quickly that they were Christians, and that their faith played a big role in their lives.

*Yep... This is definitely going to be a long year.*

I remember feeling like I had hell on one side and heaven on the other, and that I wasn't ready for either yet.

During the first weeks of school, I jumped into campus life with both feet. I checked out Greek Row, made friends there, and was encouraged to consider rushing.

I made other friends by getting involved with the yearbook and school newspaper. I had done some sports photography in the past and really enjoyed it. I discovered that both publications actually paid their photographers. I could get sideline passes to any sporting event, use the school's expensive lenses, and get paid to do it. On top of all of that, I got access to a great spread of free food in the press room at football and basketball games. It may have been the best college job ever; I probably would have done it for free.

The guys who lived upstairs were also really fun. We played a lot of pickup basketball, and their weekly Shoot-Tennis-Balls-with-Lacrosse-Sticks-Down-the-Dorm-Hall-and-Directly-at-Each-Other-at-Midnight tournaments were epic.

It turns out, though, that the most fun guys I could find on campus were actually my suitemates. Todd and Keith really did have an endless supply of ideas for adventures. They had a fantastic group of friends, most of whom sought out the kinds of weekend fun they wouldn't regret the next morning. That made them different from some of my other college friends.

But there was something else that made them different. They had a sense of purpose and direction that was different from anyone I had ever met. They drew strength and peace from their faith, and really cared about people. That stood out; I did not know a ton of kids I would have described as selfless. I wouldn't have described myself as selfless.

I had never known guys who would have called themselves committed Christians until I met them. That's not to say there weren't any of those kids in my high school. If there were, I just didn't know much about their faith. A friend did invite me to his youth group once, and I went. I had always assumed there must be a God but I was not religious. Our family went to church occasionally on Easter or at Christmas, but that was the extent of what I knew about God.

As I got to know my suitemates, it occurred to me that somehow, and I wasn't sure why, I had formed a mental image of what a Christian who actually believed the Bible must be like.

It wasn't a flattering picture.

Looking back now, I'd say it was a caricature, based more on my imagination than on any specific people I had known. That caricature led me to assume that anyone I met who believed the Bible must not be smart, interesting, or thoughtful. They wouldn't be relatable, athletic, social, or fun. They certainly wouldn't jump into a lake from atop a 47,000 foot-tall tower.

My caricature included a belief that Christians judge others without knowing them. Sadly, some Christians do this, but those who understand their faith with much depth generally do not. I realized that I was the one who was guilty of making unfair judgments—about Christians—without knowing them.

Todd and Keith broke nearly every stereotype I held about Christians and Christianity. They were funny, social, and smart. It was more interesting to see what creative thing they'd be doing on a weekend night than to hang with other friends who had settled into a routine of looking for the best places to get drunk or to hook up with some random person.

#### **THAT WAS NEW TO ME**

During those first weeks of school, Mike and I became great friends. He was laid back, smart, funny, and interesting. As it turned out, I'm not sure I could have picked a better roommate. We also became great friends with Todd and Keith. The four of us talked about every topic possible, often late into the night. Sometimes, those conversations were about God.

Todd and Keith never minded our questions. They were always totally at ease in talking about their faith. They often had better answers than I had guessed might exist. That was new to me.

I was fascinated by the way they talked about their faith. They talked about a personal relationship with God and not just a system of dos and don'ts. That was new to me.

We listened to mostly the same music, but they also listened to some "contemporary Christian" music. Some of it wasn't particularly contemporary, but some of it was. Some was very good. Sometimes, I found myself listening to it when they weren't around. One song about God kept getting stuck in my head and just seemed to speak to me. That was new to me.

They also prayed. Other than maybe my grandmother, I had not known anyone who regularly and actually prayed. Even more interesting to me was that they kept track of their prayers and had a real expectation that God would answer. They kept a list of things they were praying for on a clipboard, and they wrote down answers as they saw them. Did God actually answer their prayers? I didn't know. But it fascinated me that they were convinced he did. That was new to me.

Very early in the year, they had explained, in a brief way, a high-level overview of Christianity, in four points. Looking back, I guess I'd call their four points an outline that helped me learn what it means to be a Christian. I had to confess that if their outline was really what Christianity was all about, I had been clueless. I'll come back to how they explained it later, but as I heard these ideas, they—like the song I mentioned—resonated with something inside. That was new to me.

My suitemates also explained that Christianity rises or falls on one event in history: the resurrection of Jesus. They showed me, in the Bible, where it openly admits that if Jesus was not actually and physically raised from the dead, then all of Christianity was a fraud and a waste of time—and that Christians should be pitied most of all.<sup>1</sup> That was definitely new to me.



Early in that first semester, I got a call from my parents. My grandmother had suffered a stroke. Doctors said she would live, but the prognosis was not great. Todd and Keith said, "We'll pray for her." They added her to their clipboard.

Three days later, she was released from the hospital. Her doctors couldn't explain what happened. They simply said she had taken a dramatic and inexplicable turn for the better.

I immediately thought of the clipboard, and still remember thinking, “maybe it’s *not* so inexplicable...” I didn’t fully believe yet, but at this point, the possibility that God was real (and actually interested in our lives) at least had my attention.

This is not surprising, if God is real. There are a number of places in the Bible that reveal that God works to draw people back into a relationship with him. Still, the fact that my heart was being drawn toward belief didn’t do a lot to convince my brain. I had questions.

Todd and Keith understood that I’d need to see, rationally, that this was not some kind of weird or cultish understanding of the Bible. They knew I’d need to learn why the Bible was even trustworthy before I would seriously consider Christianity. So they gave me books to read and pointed me to specific chapters in other books. I was surprised by my own curiosity.

I started reading.

One of the first books they gave me seemed to be intended to be more of a reference book than one to be read from cover to cover. It was called *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, by Josh McDowell. I read nearly all of it. I still had questions, but the book fascinated me. And it made sense.<sup>2</sup>

As I read that book, parts of the Bible, and other books, I found myself thinking that if Christianity was actually true, its answers made more sense than anything else I’d heard as to why the world seemed to be so messed up, why people seem so messed up, and about why parts of me seemed so messed up. It explained the brokenness that surrounds us.

As I have continued to learn more about Christianity, I have come to believe, increasingly, that the Christian worldview

offers the most coherent and rational answers to life's biggest questions. Some of these questions include:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you determine right and wrong?
- How do you explain human nature?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What happens to a person at death?

Even though I wasn't consciously asking these exact questions, I did wonder about them. Most of us do, sometimes. My dad's sickness 18 months earlier had opened my eyes to questions like these. But I still had what I saw as more basic questions.

Did God actually exist? I still needed to discover whether there were good, and rational, reasons to believe at all. Was Jesus actually God? Did Jesus actually rise from the dead? How could we know? Couldn't all religions be different ways to the same God? What did "a personal relationship with God" even mean? Would God really answer Todd and Keith's prayer about my grandmother's stroke?

Perhaps you wrestle with similar questions.

Perhaps you are asking something even more basic: Could one *know* any of these things? Do traditional ideas about truth even apply to religion?

We'll pause here, in the middle of my journey, and consider a couple of these questions. We'll pick up my story a bit later.

- SECTION TWO -

Truth





## The Dress

IN MY HUMBLE OPINION, FEBRUARY 26, 2015, was one of the most entertaining days in the history of the internet. Whether you prefer the always popular animal video or a viral social media debate, that day was a great one.

Some of you may remember that Thursday as the day that a young Scottish musician, Caitlin McNeill, nearly broke the internet. Actually, you may not remember her name or the exact date, but if you had internet access that day, you will almost certainly remember (unless you were buried under a rock) the now-famous photo she posted.

It was of a dress. Perhaps more helpfully, it was a photo of what both Google and Wikipedia now simply refer to as *the dress*.<sup>1</sup>

The photo had been taken a few weeks earlier, by a woman named Cecilia Bleasdale, at a mall near Chester, England.

She was shopping for a dress to wear to her daughter's wedding and texted the photo to her daughter. She never could have guessed that her snapshot would become world-famous, or later land her on the *Ellen DeGeneres Show*.

Her daughter showed the photo to her fiancé. The engaged couple disagreed about the color of the dress, so they posted it on Facebook. Was it white and gold, they asked their friends, or was it blue and black?



A couple of days after the ceremony, Caitlin, a musician at the wedding, was still intrigued by the photo. She re-posted it to her Tumblr blog and sent a link to BuzzFeed, asking them to take a poll. BuzzFeed reposted it.

That's when basically every human with internet access got involved in the argument. To say that the photo went viral is an understatement roughly on the same scale as saying people tend to have an opinion about Donald Trump.

Until that day, BuzzFeed had never had more than 420,000 simultaneous users reading one story. A few hours after the dress had gone viral, more than 670,000 people were viewing the article at one time. At its peak, more than 11,000 unique users were coming to the page—every second. Caitlyn's Tumblr post, at its peak, drew 140,000 views per minute.

Within 24 hours, there were 4.4 million tweets about the dress. Over time, BuzzFeed's page would draw 38+ million unique visitors. Caitlyn's Tumblr page, 73+ million. And those numbers are likely far smaller than the millions of others who saw the dress via other social media outlets, the news, or after someone had forwarded the photo of the dress to them.

Taylor Swift tweeted: “I don’t understand this odd dress debate and I feel like it’s a trick somehow. I’m confused and scared. P.S. It’s OBVIOUSLY BLUE AND BLACK.”<sup>2</sup> Her tweet quickly received more than 265,000 likes and retweets (combined).

She wasn’t the only celebrity who chimed in.

Demi Lovato: “Hold on... So people actually see white and gold...?!!”<sup>3</sup>

Anna Kendrick: “If that’s not white and gold the universe is falling apart. Seriously, what is happening???”<sup>4</sup>

Justin Bieber: “And for everyone asking, I see blue and black.”<sup>5</sup>

Kim Kardashian West: “What color is that dress? I see white & gold. Kanye sees black & blue, who is color blind?”<sup>6</sup>

Josh Groban sought input from none other than the Pope: “@Pontifex, help.”<sup>7</sup>

Ariana Grande had an entertaining take: “If one more person asks me what color I think this damn dress is...”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps my favorite was from actress Rashida Jones. She tweeted: “What genius pulled off this elaborate metaphor just to teach us the importance of tolerating other perspectives? #blueandblack #whiteandgold”<sup>9</sup>

Lost in the debate was one critically important fact: there was actually a correct answer to the question. This means that there was also a wrong answer. I’m guessing that most readers will recall that the dress was, in fact, blue and black.<sup>10</sup>

The #whiteandgold camp was wrong.

## TRUTH IS EXCLUSIVE

This leads us to an important idea: truth is exclusive. The right answer excludes many possible but wrong answers.

I will admit that I thought the dress was white and gold. I've spent enough time color-correcting photos in Photoshop to be confident that I was right. According to one poll, 75% of those surveyed were with me on team white and gold.<sup>11</sup>

But no matter how passionately we felt, it turns out that Anna, Kim, and I—and many others—were wrong.

The right answer, that the dress was blue and black, excluded the wrong answer, that it was white and gold. It also excluded the possibility that it was brown and sky blue or gray and teal or any other combination of colors.

Here's a related example. If my friend Zakara asked me where I was sitting when I first saw a reference to the dress, and I told her I first read about it while I was in my home, I would be making a truth claim. She would probably believe me, but even if she didn't, there actually *is* a correct answer.

If it is true that I read about it while inside my home in Virginia, it means I was not somewhere else. I did not read about it while I was on a beach in Cabo. I did not read about it while in a coffee shop, on the Metro, at my parents' house, or while I was sitting in Brooklyn's Prospect Park.

Of the many places I could theoretically have been in the universe that day, I was actually in only one. There is one right answer to the question of where I was that day. There is an enormous, almost incalculable, number of wrong answers.

Truth is exclusive.

## **CAN TRUTH BE DIFFERENT FOR DIFFERENT PEOPLE?**

The answer to this question is: It depends. We first have to sort out whether we are discussing an objective truth claim or a subjective truth claim. Both can be helpful.

To make an objective truth claim is to claim that the truth about a thing is found in the object itself and not in how someone subjectively experiences that object. A claim that the dress was blue and black is an objective truth claim. A claim that a particular bowling ball weighs 16 pounds is an objective truth claim. If such a claim is found to be true, it is true for everyone.

A subjective truth claim is different. A truth that is subjective is one that is personally held and may not be true for everyone.

A six-year-old might say that a 16-pound bowling ball is heavy. But my friend Andrew, a serious weightlifter, might pick up the same ball effortlessly and call it light. Objectively, we know that the ball weighs 16 pounds. But these two people would have very different subjective perceptions about the weight of the ball.

Imagine that my friend Mackenzie looked at a thermometer in a swimming pool and told our friend Aaron that the water temperature was 80°(F). She would be making an objective truth claim. If the water was truly 80°, it would be 80° for everybody.

But if my friends Zoe and Ioanna were swimming in that same pool, one of them might say, “The water is cold.” The other might respond, “No, I think it is perfect.” Neither would be wrong; each would be expressing how she subjectively experiences the objective reality that the water is 80°.

If we don't think well about the difference between objective and subjective truth, we can run into problems as we try to evaluate any truth claim.

Imagine that someone asked my friend Kayla how to spell her name, and she answered “K-a-y-l-a.” In this case, Kayla would be making an objective truth claim. Her answer would be true for everyone. If that person then said, “That may be true for you, but it’s not true for me; for me, your name is spelled C-a-i-l-a,” it would be odd. And wrong.

This “true for you but not for me” idea does have some appeal. Everyone can go home happy. But what if this idea reflects poor thinking? Can a claim of objective truth actually be true for one person but not for another in the same context?

Imagine that my friends Nick and Andrew were discussing Andrew’s shoe collection and Nick asked, “How many shoes are displayed on your wall?” If Andrew responded with a number and Nick replied, “that number may be true for you, but it is not true for me; for me, there is a different number,” we’d have a disagreement to sort out. Ultimately, though, one number would be objectively true.

If my friends Gavin, Taylor, Israel, and Eugene claimed that their Westfield (VA) High School football team won three straight state championships during their high school career, they would be making an objective truth claim. If true (and it is true), this claim would be true for everyone.

The phrase I mentioned above, “in the same context,” is also important.

If my friend Emma was in the basement of her family’s home, she could rightly say, “the kitchen is upstairs.” If Laura, Emma’s mom, was on the top floor, she could rightly say “the kitchen is downstairs.” Both would be correct, from different contexts. If both were hanging out on the top floor, however (in the same context), only Laura’s statement would be true.

If Emma then said, “that may be true for you, Mom, but it is not true for me,” she would be wrong.

The idea that an objective truth claim can be true for one person but not for another, in the same context, simply does not work. But people sometimes lose sight of this when they begin to think about God.

### **SO, HOW DO THESE IDEAS APPLY TO OUR VIEWS ABOUT GOD?**

If someone claims that the central teachings of a particular religion are true, most Americans will shrug and go on with their day. They will either think, “I agree” or “To each his own.”

When someone says “to each his own” about religion, he may be saying, “We all have the right to believe whatever we choose.” I strongly agree. This is called freedom of religion.<sup>12</sup>

He may, however, be suggesting that whatever somebody believes can be *true for that person*. “Oh, right,” he might say to someone who follows a certain religion, “that may be true for you, but it is not true for me.”

There’s that phrase again. It actually works, subjectively. But claims about God are interesting because some are objective while others are subjective. The difference matters.

We know that religions make objective truth claims. But we also know that people from a wide range of different faith perspectives (subjectively) draw comfort, hope, meaning, and more from their faith. Their faith provides the framework through which they interpret the world.

The enormously important question is this: Is it better to evaluate a religion through the dependability and accuracy of its objective truth claims or through people’s subjective experiences?

At Group one Sunday, we addressed this exact topic. I passed around a glass jug of spare change for the students to inspect, and asked each student to write down two things on an index card. First, I asked them to write down exactly how much change they thought was in the jug. Then, I asked them to write down the name of their favorite movie.

When everyone finished, they read their answers out loud and I revealed the precise amount of change in the jug. We discovered that my friend Ana's guess was the closest to correct.

I then asked something they did not expect: "Whose movie choice was the closest to correct?"

This was obviously a strange question. There was a specific amount of money in the jug—an objective standard by which people's guesses could be judged. But to say that one person's favorite movie was more correct than anyone else's was ridiculous. Movie preferences are subjective, a matter of personal opinion and taste.

I then asked this follow-up question: "In your view, is deciding what you believe about God more of an objective investigation, like trying to figure out the amount of change in the jug, or a subjective preference question like the one about movies?"<sup>13</sup>

This should be thought-provoking for us all, because many people tend to settle on a set of beliefs about God in the same way one might choose candy at a vending machine. A person might ask, "Which do I like the most?" Or, "Which seems best?" Or perhaps even, for a few, "Which is least distasteful?"

People sometimes reject a religion because they decide, subjectively, that they don't like or even hate something it teaches. I know people who have done this.

In America, our Constitution guarantees the freedom of religion, so we are free to choose what we believe about God in whatever way we'd like.

But I'd suggest that our personal (subjective) preferences, tastes, and experiences are not the best criteria to use when evaluating the claims of a religion. It is easy to imagine that a person could have a bad experience with followers of what turns out to be a true religion. Likewise, we've all heard too many stories of a person being lured into some kind of awful cult and feeling warmth and love while getting involved.

If one's eternal destiny is on the line, wisdom suggests that a far better question than what I like the most would be, "Which claims about God, if any, are actually true?"

All religions make objective truth claims. But can every religion's central claims be true? If not, it would be smart to sort out which are true and which are not true. If it is possible that the central claims of some (or many, or most, or all) religions are not true, this would be important to know.

**WAIT. PATRICK, YOU BELIEVE THAT SOME RELIGIONS ARE WRONG?**

If I haven't been clear to this point, let me be clear now. I believe that the central teachings of some religions are false. Actually, I'll go a step further: I think that you probably believe that, too. Whether people can bring themselves to admit it or not in our current cultural climate, most people do believe that the central truth claims of at least some religions are wrong.

One night during Group, we discussed whether it was okay to even ask this question. I was sitting on an ottoman in my family room and asked, "What would you think if I said, 'Starting now, you should worship, pray to, and devote your lives to this ottoman—it will change your eternal destiny!'"?

A senior named Colin raised his hand. “Would we have to call it ‘Goddoman?’” Classic Colin. We laughed, and I continued.

*You’d wonder if I was serious. And if you sensed that I really was serious, you would conclude that I was crazy. You would know that an inanimate piece of man-made furniture is not worth our worship or devotion.*

You might object here: “Wait, worshipping an ottoman *is* ridiculous. You just made that up.” You would be correct. So, if I now decided to create this new religion, and asked you to follow it, I would expect you to (rightly) say: “No way.” At that moment we would have confirmed, at least in theory, that you do think it is okay to believe that a religion’s teachings can be wrong.

If a religion can be wrong in theory, what about in reality? Consider three very different examples.

An actual religion, called Jediism, was developed from philosophies of the Jedi Order in the *Star Wars* films. It is growing and has followers around the world. A Temple of the Jedi Order has been built in Texas. Its tagline? “May the force be with you.”

In India, there is a religion that draws people to show up to pray each day to a god they believe exists in the form of a motorcycle. A British-built 300cc Royal Enfield Bullet motorcycle, to be precise. The shrine is called the Shrine of the Bullet Baba and is located just outside of the city of Jodhpur.

Before anyone gets too upset with me for selecting these two religions, what about my own?

What about the belief that Jesus Christ came to earth (God, arriving in the form of a baby), grew up, died for our sins, according to the Bible, was buried, and rose from the dead?

Whatever you think about these three religions, if you were to look closely at the teachings of each and ask if all of those teachings can be true, you would almost certainly conclude no.

The world's religions make such different claims that the law of non-contradiction suggests that it is impossible that the central teachings of *all* of the world's religions are true.

### **THEY CAN'T ALL BE TRUE**

A serious student of the world's religions will tell you that the major religions have very different views on the nature of God; how we can know and relate to God; the afterlife; sin; forgiveness; who Jesus is; and other ideas.

Buddhism is non-theistic, while Hinduism teaches that there are millions of gods. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity claim that there is one god (though in Christianity, God exists in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). So, is there a god or isn't there? How many gods are there?

Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, and others do not teach that Jesus is the Messiah (fully man but also fully God, and that he came to Earth to save us from our sins). Christianity teaches that he is. This is an objective truth claim that is at the heart of Christianity. It is either true or false.

As a Christian, I have no problem with the idea that if Buddhism (or any other of the world's major religions) is true, Christianity must be false. It is possible that none of the world's religions are true. It is not possible, however, that all of them are true.

### **WHY THIS FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE**

There are a number of reasons people feel uncomfortable pondering whether some particular religion's central claims might be false. I'll suggest five.

## 1. There are People of All Faiths Who are Very Sincere

If people believe something and are very sincere, we feel like it would be attacking, or at least unkind, to say we disagree with what they believe. But when done thoughtfully, we are not attacking anyone. We are comparing different systems of belief about life's most important questions.

Be careful here. The fear of offending someone who sincerely believes something can cause us to avoid considering the validity of that person's beliefs. This leads to an observation.

*The sincerity of a person's belief does nothing to help us evaluate how valid or true that belief actually is.*

Put into a formula: Sincerity  $\neq$  Validity.

No matter how sincerely two-thirds of the world and I believed that the dress was white and gold, we were sincerely wrong.

What mattered in the discussion was not the sincerity of one's belief, but rather the object of one's belief. Having even a little bit of faith that the dress was blue and black turns out to be much better than having very sincere faith that the dress was white and gold.

My friend Reese recently married a great guy named Sam, who played on the University of Kansas football team's defensive line. Sam is not a small human being. If Sam decided to walk across a frozen pond in the winter, he would be far better off with a tiny amount of faith in ice that is five feet thick than with a very sincere, deeply held faith in ice that is 1/16th of an inch thick.

If a person sincerely believes that the ottoman in my family room will answer their prayers, the object of their faith—the ottoman—will disappoint them.

## **2. To Claim that One Faith Perspective is Right Seems Arrogant**

It is possible to be right about something while holding that view humbly. Of course, it is also possible to be right and arrogant. Or wrong and arrogant. Or wrong and humble. I'd suggest that a person's humility or arrogance is more a reflection of their personality and character than of whether they happen to be right or wrong about a thing.

What people are often reacting to is any claim that a particular religion is exclusively true or the only true religion.

But if there is a truth that may have an impact on my eternal destiny, I have to get past concern about whether the central claims of that religion might seem arrogant.

The critically important question, the one we can't afford to ignore, is, "Are those claims true?"

## **3. To Claim that Another Religion is Wrong Seems Intolerant**

Consider the concept of tolerance for a moment. In today's culture, tolerance has seemingly become our highest value—in some ways perhaps higher even than truth. We now have safe spaces on college campuses designed to protect students even from *ideas* that they might find to be hurtful.

And the definition of "tolerant" has changed in America. Our conversations and culture now demand not only that we tolerate ideas, but that we either modify certain beliefs to fit whatever is deemed to be culturally correct by the masses or remain silent with our dissent. At the risk of being a bit blunt, if you don't believe this, you haven't been paying attention to the rise of ideological censorship happening on a variety of fronts.<sup>14</sup>

In this new landscape, if any of our views are out of step, we risk being labeled intolerant, or worse.

But these are tricky waters. Isn't it possible that the man who would call someone intolerant might actually be demonstrating his own intolerance, toward the other person's view? I ask this question to point to a more important truth:

*Tolerance assumes disagreement.*

There is a good reason I do not have to tolerate the love that my parents, my brother Bret, my friends Tyler, Jake, Christian, Tory, Ashley, Cami, Katie, Dana, Brent, Pete, Toby, Troy, Mike, Jay, TC, and others have for Washington's NFL team: I share it.

I do, however, have to find a way to tolerate the love my friends Robbie, Tom, Connor, Victoria, Katherine, Matt, and John have for the Eagles. And the love my friends Eric, Raul, Richie, Kloe, Ethan, Lilly, Tom, Kelsey, and Hope have for the Cowboys.

A football team preference, though, is subjective. As hard as this is to admit, there isn't a wrong answer.

Still, true tolerance is part of loving people well. Tim Keller is an author and former pastor who has influenced many over the years through his teaching and writing. He recently tweeted that "tolerance is not about approving an opinion you do not hold. It's about treating the person—who is saying what you can powerfully disagree with—with respect, humility, and love."<sup>15</sup>

This is especially true for Christians. Christians are called to love God, to love other Christians, to love our neighbors, and to love our enemies. We are even called to love Eagles and Cowboys fans. Nobody is exempt.

During a conversation with my friend Andrew over lunch at Red Robin, we talked about God. I listened to his views carefully. He listened carefully to mine. We did not fully agree, but

we had a great conversation. It was fun, interesting, and respectful in both directions. We have had similar conversations since then, and I feel confident we'd both say we look forward to them in the future.

Sadly, though, with so much anger and hostility in our culture, many have lost the ability to have civil conversations on topics like these—topics upon which thoughtful people may disagree. This is a tremendous loss for everyone.

There are two ways that these conversations can go wrong.

Far too often, people get angry at “the other side” and become mean-spirited toward those with whom they disagree. Social media has not helped. In fact, it has hurt. Immensely.<sup>16</sup>

People mock, attack, or even “cancel” those whose views they judge to be wrong. Karey and I have watched different perspectives cause students to walk out of good friends’ lives and, in at least in two cases, out of our lives. This is awful.

On the other end of the spectrum, we can withdraw and avoid having important conversations for fear of how others might react. This too is awful. If my friend Valeria knew something that could change a friend’s life but avoided mentioning it because she feared how her friend might respond, would that be loving?

We should be able to talk about important topics with friends, even topics where we might passionately disagree, without having to fear damaging or ending the relationship.

To believe that the central claims of a person’s religion are wrong does not mean I am being intolerant. It means that I disagree. And it is *only* when I disagree with someone’s perspective that I can truly demonstrate tolerance.

#### **4. What if Different Views About God Help Different People?**

We know that most religions teach at least some things that many of us believe to be true. If any religion teaches that God exists, for example, I will agree.

Many different religions also teach things that are helpful. If a religion motivates someone to become a better spouse, parent, child, friend, neighbor, colleague, or citizen, most of us would call that good. If it were to encourage love, generosity, and kindness, most would say that those things, too, would be good.

But a question arises when we remember that different religions teach profoundly different things about the nature of God, and about the afterlife.

Pause here for a moment and imagine—even if you don't believe this—that there is actually one true religion, and that it teaches that thing X must happen for a person to gain eternal life.

If one of the non-true religions taught us helpful things about how to live on Earth, but failed to teach us about X, we would run into a serious problem. Imagine that a person followed an untrue religion, and thus didn't learn about X, or worse, was taught that X was false. If that person would miss out on the afterlife as a result, shouldn't we re-think our decision to call his or her religion good?

Following a religion that didn't teach X would be like taking self-improvement classes while on the Titanic. The classes might genuinely help and be deeply meaningful, at least in the short term. But they would not address our greatest need.

You might process this differently than I do, but I'm not sure I could say that a religion that denied X would be good—even if it honestly helped someone be a better person on Earth.

## 5. Couldn't All Faiths Be Different Ways to God?

This is related to the question we considered earlier about whether some religion(s) might be wrong. One reason we may feel uncomfortable seeking to evaluate the truth of a particular religion is that if it turns out not to be true, the followers of that wrong religion might face consequences for that choice.

But one of life's most consistent lessons is that our choices have consequences. Why would we think this might be different with regard to what we choose to believe about God?

Compassion causes us to dislike the idea that the central claims of someone else's religion could be wrong. I personally know people who have drawn great comfort and strength from different religious views. You probably do, too. As a result, it can be tempting to comfort ourselves with explanations like "all religions are simply different roads to the same mountaintop."

While this idea may help us feel better, it fails in a couple of ways.

First, most of the major world religions make exclusive truth claims. Many claim to be the only way to God. So, to suggest that there are other ways to reach God is to disregard the teachings of those religions. To set aside an exclusive claim of a religion is to reveal a lack of understanding about its teachings.

Consider just Christianity for a moment. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through me."<sup>17</sup> Here, Jesus was making a bold truth claim. It is a claim that is either true or false. You might respond, "I don't believe what Jesus taught." And that's your right, of course.

But to say that he did not really mean it when he clearly taught that he is the only way to God is to misunderstand a core teaching of Christianity. It is clear, when one studies the message of

the Bible, that according to Christianity, the only hope people have of reaching heaven is to be forgiven for their sin.

A central belief of Christianity is that Jesus' work on the cross is God's only way we can obtain that forgiveness. If all religions led to the same mountaintop, this core teaching of Christianity would be blatantly wrong.

There is a second reason this idea fails. Even if it were true, who could know it? To be confident that all of the world's religions lead to the same place, think about how much knowledge one would have to have. A person would have to *know* that even the most obscure (and outlandish) religions were all true.

Many people have made brash statements like this one: “no religion can claim to have the whole truth about the mystery of faith.”<sup>18</sup> But could a mere human know such a thing? To know that, a person would have to know more about Christianity than Jesus did, because he would be forced to correct Jesus' (presumably incorrect) teaching on a core point of Christianity. He would have to know more about Islam than Muhammad did, so he could correct Muhammad's (presumably incorrect) teaching, too.

In fact, he would have to know more about nearly *every* religion than each of the religions' founders—combined—because nearly every one of these leaders taught something very different than the idea that all roads lead to the same mountaintop.

✦ ✦ ✦

For almost a decade, Karey and I served with a Christian ministry to college students at George Mason University. One of the things the university asked me to do was to attend a monthly meeting with leaders from every religious group on campus.

One guy who showed up for these meetings did not show up for much else on campus. I'm not sure he knew any students.

In these meetings, he always wanted us to offer interfaith prayer and worship services. "Interfaith" refers to people of different religions. This is different from "interdenominational," which means people from different groups within the Christian church.

This push for interfaith prayer or worship events never made sense to me. If different religions have different understandings of who God is, then to whom, exactly, would we be praying? And for what purpose? Who would we be worshipping?

Of course, interfaith discussions or service projects make a lot of sense. Those kinds of events can be fantastic.

But during moments when we were discussing interfaith prayer or worship, I would glance at Muhammad, the leader of the Muslim Campus Ministry. We would make eye contact and smile subtly, non-verbally communicating the same thought.

*How does he not understand that this makes no sense?*

Muhammad and I were always friendly, and we enjoyed the fact that sometimes we became allies during these meetings. Muhammad treated me with respect. I am confident he would tell you that I treated him the same way.

But we disagreed with each other's beliefs—and both of us understood that. Never did we think we were following different roads to the same God.

We taught our students different things about God. We both knew that if his view of God was right, mine was wrong—and that if mine was right, his was wrong.



In this chapter, we have observed that truth is exclusive, and the exclusive nature of truth does apply to religion because world religions teach contradictory things. Thus, we are left to consider the probability that the central claims of at least some of the world's religions may not be true.

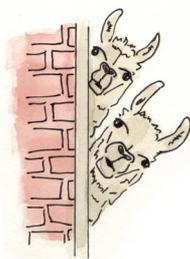
As we wrap up this chapter on truth, each of us must face an unsettling question: Do I—really—even care about what's true? Most of us will have a quick and strong reaction: "*Of course* I do," we will say.

But many people don't.

Dr. Frank Turek, a Christian writer who travels extensively to speak on the rationality of the Christian faith, made a great observation about humans. "Most people," he wrote, "are not on a truth quest. They're on a happiness quest." He went on to suggest that far too many people simply believe "whatever is going to make them happy."<sup>19</sup> I think he is right.

If, however, you actually are on a truth quest, this brings us back to the question we'll continue to explore: How can we know which religion, if any, is true? But first, we must answer an even bigger question.

How can we know anything at all?



## Llamas on the Lam

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER, I WROTE that February 26, 2015, was a great day in internet history. That same day, before the photo of the dress appeared, two llamas captured America's attention when they attempted a daring escape in broad daylight.

During a “Meet and Greet the Llamas” event at a retirement community in a Phoenix suburb called Sun City, two llamas saw an opportunity and boldly made a run for it. Shooters gotta shoot, as they say. The llamas' owner described the scene:

*I have two llamas running loose. We're trying to get them rounded up. Nothing is working. We have people in walkers and wheelchairs and motorized wheelchairs trying to help, but this area is so big that it can't be contained.<sup>1</sup>*

Apparently, you cannot stop llamas, you can only hope to contain them.

In preparing to write this chapter, I found far more great quotes about this story than I have room to share. Actually, they had me at “we have people in walkers and wheelchairs and motorized wheelchairs trying to help.” If your mental image of that scene doesn’t entertain you (even if you personally use a walker or wheelchair), it is safe to say that my sense of humor is very different than yours.

It got better. The llamas actually pulled it off. They escaped. The chase was on. Local television stations weren’t going to miss this. At least one station sent its news helicopter up to broadcast the low-speed llama chase. Llamas on the Lam—Live!

Fox News actually broke into its national coverage to air the chase. Anchor Shepard Smith explained why: “Because we have live pictures of llamas. What would *you* do?”<sup>2</sup> I don’t watch much network television news, so I was not familiar with Shepard Smith, but Shepard, I was so with you on this one.

Police support was called in. Officers would drive close to a llama, get out of the police car, and try to... Well, I’m still not entirely clear on what they hoped to do. After watching the video, I’m going to guess that police training does not include llama wrangling. The officers had no chance. The llamas would let their pursuers get close, almost as if teasing, and then bolt.

Before long, four of Twitter’s top ten trending hashtags, globally, were related to the chase. I received at least one text that day from a friend who referred to it and wondered if I was watching. Seriously? How could I be expected to work at a time like this? I tuned in immediately.

People’s reactions were fantastic. A Twitter user, @that\_lucie\_girl, tweeted, “Humans sitting in offices watching llamas run around free in the sunshine. Somehow I feel like we lost.”<sup>3</sup>

*The New Republic's* Rebecca Traister tweeted, "This is like *Thelma and Louise* if Thelma got lassoed and put inside a truck and Louise was still running free and also was a llama."<sup>4</sup>

When all was said and done, more than 220,000 tweets had been posted about the chase in just 90 minutes.

Eventually, both llamas were lassoed and safely returned to their home. Or to captivity, I guess, depending upon your perspective. The chase was over (No, Llama, Noooo!?) and a nation could get back to work. Or so it thought.

It was about to see a photo of a dress.

✦ ✦ ✦

Stop and ponder this question: Do you believe that the llama story I just told really happened? If so, why? Could someone prove that it happened? Would you need scientific evidence?

Note that I did not ask if you would need "scientific proof." Scientists tend not to use that term. Scientists, it is said, deal in observations and theories. Mathematicians deal in proofs. It doesn't matter if you believe the llama story or not, but the question points to larger questions: How do we know that anything is true? And what level of proof do we need to believe it?

This matters because we cannot prove that the central claims of any particular religion are true with 100% certainty. If truth is exclusive, and if the claims of some religions may be false, how can we know which of those claims (if any) are true, and which (if any) are false?

Let's go back to the llama story for a moment. I'm not trying to be tricky. I believe it happened. I saw part of the video as it was

broadcast live. I saw news reports and references to it on social media. I have seen other evidence since then that leaves me convinced that it did really happen.

I'm convinced even though there is no scientific evidence that it happened. An event from the past can't be repeated and tested. But I do not need scientific evidence to believe all that I believe.

Some people do.

### **MUST A THING BE AFFIRMED THROUGH SCIENCE FOR ME TO BELIEVE?**

On October 18, 2014, Karey and I attended her cousin Erin's wedding. It was held at a gorgeous home high in the hills above Santa Barbara, California. We spent much of the reception on a massive outdoor patio that overlooked the city and, beyond it, the beautiful Pacific Ocean.

During the reception, I got into a fairly deep conversation with someone about truth, religion, and the question of how we can know the things we know. He had thought quite a bit about this topic, and the discussion was fascinating.

His view (at least as I recall him explaining it<sup>6</sup>) was that the only way we can truly come to know anything is through science. I suggested that there are a number of ways we can come to know things apart from science. We discussed them, but he disagreed. The conversation was great, but ultimately we landed in different places.

He is not alone in his view. Nobel prize winner Sir Harry Kroto, in a lecture at a meeting of Nobel laureates in 2011, made the same claim. Kroto said in his speech that "Science is the only philosophical construct we have to determine TRUTH with any degree of reliability." The emphasized words here reflect his own emphasis, in his presentation slides.<sup>7</sup>

The trouble with this view is that it is self-defeating. Kroto's claim—that the only things we can know with any reliability are things we come to know via science—*is not a statement we can scientifically show to be true.*

Do you see the problem?

According to Kroto's own statement, the only reliable way to determine if we can trust a claim would be to use science. But if we can't confirm that his statement is true via science—and we can't—his own words suggest that we can't even trust his own words! At least, not with any reliability. In fact, Kroto's statement would suggest we can't reliably know much of anything we can't use the scientific method to test.

It would have been entertaining if someone had stood up during Kroto's presentation and said, "Can you prove that statement, scientifically? If not, should we consider it to be unreliable?"

Freeman Dyson, the theoretical physicist and mathematician who passed away in 2020, was one of the preeminent scientists of the past 70 years. The impact of his work, across a range of scientific disciplines, was astounding.

Dyson believed it was absurd to think we could only know things through science. People who believe you can know things only through science, Dyson said in an interview, "are suffering from what I'd call a form of scientific fundamentalism, pretending that science can explain everything or that science should explain everything. It's a sort of scientific imperialism—believing that science should be the only source of truth—which I believe is rubbish."<sup>8</sup>

Dr. Francis Collins, the physician-geneticist who led the Human Genome Project and is the former director of the National

Institutes of Health, addressed this specific topic in an article in *The Atlantic*:

*Scientists, by their nature, are trying to understand how nature works. And I think the message to scientists has to be [that] there are really important questions that fall outside of what science is able to address meaningfully, such as “Why is there something instead of nothing? What is the meaning of love? Is there a God? What happens after you die?” Those are not questions for which science or scientific methods can be applied.<sup>9</sup>*

These questions *are* important, and their answers are unknowable through science alone. Even historical events would be hard to know with any degree of reliability, according to Kroto’s view.

But can we not know reliably that my friend Tally ran track at James Madison University? Can we really not know the date of D-Day or that the Nationals won the 2019 World Series? Can we really not reliably know the city in which our parents were born? Can our friend Carson not reliably know that our friends Rachel, Meghan, and Gracie once served on a construction team in Kentucky? We can’t prove these things scientifically.

If you are in the “I’m not going to say I know a thing unless science affirms it” camp, you can’t say you know that the llama story happened. But I am convinced that you can know.

You could have an expert review video and photographic evidence to see if either had been doctored. You could read news reports and track down eyewitnesses. You could interview the llama owners, police officers, and reporters who were there.

A thorough investigation would demand that you also consider other theories to see if a different conclusion made sense.

What other theories could explain the llama story? It could have been an enormously elaborate hoax. The llamas could have been inserted into the video footage using CGI. The broadcast news reports could have been faked. The witnesses could have been recruited to participate. The reporters could have been convinced to knowingly write false stories. Everyone involved could have lied and kept this secret for all of this time.

But is all of that likely? If this was simply a giant hoax, someone would have come forward to expose the truth, even if just for personal fame, gain, amusement, or notoriety.

Conspiracies like that always fail because someone always talks.

Once you had finished evaluating the evidence and other possible theories, you would have to then decide what standard of proof you would need.

In courts of law, there are different standards of proof required in different types of cases. In a criminal case, for example, the prosecuting attorney must convince the jury beyond a reasonable doubt that the accused actually committed the crime. In a civil case, the standard of proof is lower. There, it must be proven only that a claim is more likely to be true than not true.

What level of proof do you need to conclude that something is true? With regard to the llama story, I'd say the evidence points to proof beyond a reasonable doubt. You may disagree.

How does all of this apply in more important discussions?

As we explore whether a god, no god, or several gods might exist, we've already noted that no religion can prove that its central claims are true with 100% certainty. But can we still say that we know things, even if we don't have 100% certainty? I'd say yes.

In the next couple of pages, we'll explore eight ways we come to know things. Then, we'll observe that beyond these types of knowledge, belief and faith play a big role in our lives every day—regardless of what we think about spiritual things.

### **WAYS WE COME TO KNOW THINGS**

The study of knowledge is called epistemology. This is a subject that philosophers have studied and written about for centuries.

What I offer below is not meant to be an in-depth philosophical treatment. Rather, this is a list of personal observations about ways I think a person might come to a conclusion that something is true. Of course, there may be more ways than I'll list here, but this will at least get us thinking about the subject:

1. Mathematical Proof
2. Scientific Evidence
3. Direct Observation
4. The Instruction of a Teacher or Expert
5. Historical/Legal Evidence and Critical Thinking
6. Deductive Reasoning
7. Experience
8. Built-in Knowledge

#### **1. Mathematical Proof**

Mathematical proofs speak for themselves.

#### **2. Scientific Evidence**

Both scientific experimentation and direct observation (which I address next) provide what we call empirical evidence.

Scientific evidence is gained as scientists: ask questions; do research; make observations; form hypotheses; test them; accept, reject, or refine those hypotheses; and then repeat the process as necessary.

Over the years, the problems that have been solved through the thoughtful application of science have been both astounding and wide-ranging. We have gained an immense amount of understanding about our world through science. But scientific knowledge has its limitations, as I noted earlier.

### **3. Direct Observation**

We conclude that some things are true through observation, even if we can't repeat them in the way we might repeat a scientific experiment.

Imagine that my friends Zach and Connor gathered 30 people that they trust most in this world and stationed them at the finish line of a marathon. Now, imagine that they asked those observers to count, without consulting each other, the number of runners who crossed the finish line by a certain time.

If their own counts matched the counts of all 30 observers, Zach and Connor would likely conclude that they knew the right answer. Perhaps you'd require more (or fewer) than 30 observers to conclude that you knew the right answer. Whatever the number, if we were given enough trustworthy observers, most of us would conclude that we knew the truth.

### **4. The Instruction of a Teacher or Expert**

We learn from experts in a variety of ways. The range of things we can learn to do by watching an expert demonstrate or teach something on YouTube is incredible. We can read great books.

We also learn in all sorts of in-person settings, from formal classrooms to personal interactions to seminars and symposia. My friend Alyssa learned a great deal about forensic science from her professors during her time at Penn State. I suspect that my friend Madison would say she learned about design not only from her professors but also during her summer internships.

Does this mean that we should blindly accept everything we hear from an expert or teacher? Of course not. But we will generally give them the benefit of the doubt because they have earned it. Still, we should be wise. When we hear claims of truth—even from an expert or teacher—we should evaluate those claims thoughtfully.

### **5. Historical/Legal Evidence and Critical Thinking**

Reason and the use of logic to evaluate evidence are valuable tools that historians, detectives, and other types of investigators use in order to draw conclusions about what happened in a given situation. We call this critical thinking.

Critical thinking is concerned with the evaluation and analysis of facts and evidence as part of the process of coming to a conclusion about something. Edwin M. Glaser, in his book, *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*, wrote, “Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.”<sup>10</sup>

This is how a jury decides on a defendant’s guilt or innocence. Did the llama story happen? This is a question of evidence.

### **6. Deductive Reasoning**

Deductive reasoning allows us to know things by moving from a general principle to a specific case.

Consider these two premises: (a) all squares are rectangles and (b) all rectangles have four sides. If both of those premises are true, we can know for sure that (c) all squares have four sides.

Here is a simple example of how one might deduce truth in real life. If my friend Kelsey knows that: (a) It is dangerous to drive her car when roads are icy, and (b) the roads are icy right

now, she can deduce from those two premises—assuming they are both true—that (c) it is dangerous to drive right now. We use deductive reasoning like this so often that we usually do it without considering the mental steps involved.

## 7. Experience

Experiential truth consists of those things that we know based on our own personal experiences. For example, I know:

- That I can ride a normal bike
- What my friend Conor's jeep sounds like
- What it is like to scuba dive in shark-infested waters
- That Karey's chocolate chip cookies are delicious
- That my friend Carly makes people laugh
- That, on a clear day, the views are spectacular from the top of Canada's Whistler Blackcomb ski resort
- That my friend Tess loves to think about and discuss things that matter
- That I can (sadly) make a golf ball curve dramatically

I know these things to be true experientially. I need no further proof of any of them.

## 8. Built-in Knowledge

I'd argue that there are a few things in life that we just know, as if that knowledge has been built into us. Not everyone agrees. We will consider this idea further in chapter eight.

+++

There are other things we might say we know that don't fit perfectly into any of these categories. For example, if my friends Laurel, Brittany, Erica, or Kaitlyn think of someone they love, how do they know that they love the person who comes to mind? What category does *that* fit into?

Even if you might categorize these things differently, my hope is that you'll see that we do come to know different things in different ways. But interestingly, the things we know are not always the things that cause us to take action.

### **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF BELIEF?**

We've now looked at eight ways that people come to a conclusion about whether something is true, but we haven't yet discussed the role of belief. Belief plays an enormous role in our daily lives. I may believe something to be true, but be wrong. Or I may not believe something, even though it is actually true.

Either way, it is our belief that usually causes us to act.

If my friends Edson, Gustavo, Nick, and Willy all come to truly believe, during a pickup basketball game, that the gym is on fire, they are going to get out as quickly as they can, whether they actually know the gym is on fire or not.

On the other hand, if the fire alarm goes off falsely at the same time every day, they might eventually begin to ignore it. In that case, if there was an actual fire and the alarm went off, they might shrug and go back to their game, believing that they were safe. If their beliefs changed, and they decided the fire was real, only then would they seek to escape.

Earlier, I asked if you believed the llama story happened. I did not ask if you knew for sure. There is an actual truth; it either really did or really did not happen. *Somebody* knows if it actually happened. The llama owner, police officers, and firsthand witnesses all might say, "I know it happened. I was there." But I was not there, so I have to choose what to believe.

I have to use my deductive reasoning skill, together with logic, as I think critically and weigh the evidence. In this case, as I've

evaluated the evidence (and considered other possible explanations for the evidence), I have concluded that it is far more likely to have happened than not to have happened. If I were a gambler, I would bet that it happened.

Can I now say that I know it happened, or is it better to say that I merely believe that it happened? On a practical level, does it even matter? It does. A rational person would prefer to know something than to merely believe it. But there are times when we may not be able to know with 100% certainty that a thing happened. In the absence of absolute knowledge, we have to make a choice about what we believe is true.

To conclude that the llama story was true demands, in a way, that we exhibit faith. Faith in the work of the reporters. Faith in the video. Faith in the eyewitnesses. Faith in our own analytical abilities. It demands what I'd call a reasonable faith.

#### **REASONABLE FAITH VS. BLIND FAITH**

Imagine that my friends Jack, C.J., and Andrew got together at a pizza place for lunch. Just before they sat down, their minds would evaluate—incredibly quickly and without thinking about it consciously—whether the chairs looked trustworthy. Unless they noticed any reason for concern, they would start with an assumption that the chairs were fine.

They would sit down if: (1) nobody else seemed to be having a problem; (2) the chairs seemed normal; and (3) they believed that a broken chair would have been replaced by the restaurant. At this point could they know that their chairs would not collapse when they sat down? No. But they'd still sit down, because they'd believe the chairs would work as expected.

We make these sorts of decisions, by faith, every day. Reasonable faith? Yes. But by faith.

Now imagine, instead, that these three guys walked in and ran into our friends Kyle and Jacob, who were just leaving. If Kyle said, “Be careful with the chairs, we just saw two of them collapse when people sat down on them,” and any of the three guys sat down without first testing their chair, we would call that blind faith.

We act on our faith in more serious matters, too. My friends Megan and Katrina go to different colleges. If Megan were to pick up Katrina to go visit a third friend at a different school, consider the amount of faith they would be forced to put in other drivers with whom they’d share the road.

If, at some point on their road trip, they had to drive on a two-lane road, at, say, 45 miles per hour, and a car approached in the opposite direction at the same speed, actual danger is involved.

If both drivers do everything perfectly and stay in their lanes, they will avoid a serious head-on collision by only a couple of feet as they pass. For Megan and Katrina, this near-miss will happen again every time an approaching car passes.

As drivers, all of us put an enormous amount of faith, or trust, in oncoming drivers, whether we realize it or not. We can’t know that a driver coming toward us isn’t distracted by his or her phone. We can’t know that the driver isn’t drunk, high, or driving a car with faulty steering. Accidents happen every day.

But still, we get into our cars. We believe, by faith—supported by evidence and the odds—that the trip will turn out just fine. We believe that other drivers do not want to get into an accident either. We bet our lives on it. We exhibit faith... reasonably.

These examples show us how often we rely on what I’d call reasonable faith. We act on faith every day. We act on things we

believe, usually for rational reasons, even if we can't prove what we believe with 100% certainty. We make the best judgment we can, based on what we know, and we act accordingly.

✦ ✦ ✦

We turn now to considering evidence for the existence of God. As the comic strip character B.C. asked in the Preface, “How do we know you even exist?”

Our job? To evaluate the evidence and make the best judgment we can, based on what we know. And then act accordingly.

As I evaluated the sorts of evidence we'll consider in the next few chapters, it played a huge role in helping to lead me to conclude that Christianity was more likely to be true than not true; that it was more rational to believe than to not believe.

It helped move me toward what I'd call a reasonable faith in God.



– SECTION THREE –

*God*





the University of Nottingham, U.K., found that there are, amazingly, at least *two trillion galaxies* in the known universe!<sup>2</sup>

Assuming an average of 100 billion stars per galaxy, which astronomers tell us is a safe assumption, there are at least 200 sextillion (or 200,000,000,000,000,000,000,000) stars in the known universe. I've seen estimates that are far higher.

And the universe is still expanding.

Let me try to help provide some perspective on how enormous the universe is. The speed of light is a little more than 670.6 million miles per hour, or 186,000 miles per second.

If my friend Pat was in a spacecraft that could somehow travel at light speed, he could orbit the earth more than 20 times in less than the time it took you to read this sentence. He could get to the moon in 1.3 seconds, to Mercury in under 4 minutes, and to the sun in fewer than 9 minutes. It would take him only 4.6 hours to get all the way to Pluto. To fully cross the universe, traveling at 186,000 miles per second, it would take him 93 billion years.<sup>3</sup>

Let that sink in for a moment.

If these sorts of numbers are hard for you to understand, don't worry. You will be encouraged by a quote from Dr. Pete Edwards, the Director of Science Outreach at Durham University, in the UK. He said, "You'll never get your head around how big the universe is."<sup>4</sup>

I'm glad it's not just me.

The universe is far larger than most of us can comprehend. Before we move on, consider two final numbers.



It should also be noted that, while many Christians (including me) believe that the Big Bang is a description of what happened when God created the universe, some Christians believe in a far younger universe and may not agree with all or parts of the Big Bang model.

My point is not to argue about the age of the universe. Whatever the universe's age, and regardless of the number of stars it contains, the important idea we'll consider over the next few pages is that, as of today, scientists seem to agree with what theists have believed all along: Our enormous universe had a beginning.

✦ ✦ ✦

One of the more memorable conversations I've had during a round of golf took place a couple of years ago at the Back Creek Golf Club in Middletown, Delaware. The club is not far from our family's river house, where we had gone to stay for a long weekend. I decided to play golf early one day, so I could play fast and get back to the house by the time the rest of the family was getting up and moving in the morning.

When I arrived at the club, I checked in and learned that I had been paired with another early riser. This was not a problem. Golfers who get up early to play golf usually like to play fast.

Early in the round, I learned that my playing partner had spent his career serving our nation in the areas of cosmology and astrophysics. Once he retired, he moved from Washington, DC, to Delaware and began teaching physics and astronomy at the University of Delaware.

He was not the type of golfer who was so focused on his game that he didn't like to chat. He loved to chat. I enjoy both serious rounds of golf and social ones; this round would be social.

Because I've always been fascinated by space, and by the size of the universe, I started asking questions. After all, where else would I ever get to hang out alone for an entire morning with an actual expert on space?

I started with a question that I knew would be easy for him: Are there really more stars in the universe than grains of sand on the earth's beaches and deserts? He assured me that there are.

He seemed happy to answer my questions, so I kept asking.

At some point, he said something that led me to tell him that I was a Christian. He responded, "That's fantastic! I'm an old, liberal, atheist Jew. You are younger, a Christian, and I'm guessing more conservative than me. Yet here we are, having a wonderful time playing golf together and talking about space. Isn't this great?"

"It is," I agreed. I was having a blast.

About halfway through the round, I asked a question I had been waiting to ask until the timing seemed right. I anticipated where the conversation might go next.

"If you had to guess," I asked, "what percentage of scientists in your field believe that the universe had a beginning?"

He said (and this is a very close paraphrase if not his exact reply), "There are other theories out there, but by now, just about all of them." He then launched into an explanation as to why. I understood most of his explanation but not all of it. Still, I got the bigger picture: in the scientific community, it is now generally accepted that the universe had a beginning.

I then asked the second question I knew I had to ask.

“So, as an atheist, if the universe had a beginning, what would you say caused it?”

The tone and manner of his answer surprised me. Our golf cart was stopped when I asked, and he did not begin driving. He just sat there, and looked off into the distance, nodding slowly and seemingly lost in thought.

It would be his first non-animated answer of the day. He said, as he slowly turned to face me, “Well...” followed by a long pause, “that’s the billion-dollar question, isn’t it?”

For the rest of our round, the conversation shifted. We talked more about space, but also talked quite a bit about God. The conversation was tremendous. He was honest about his struggle with my question, and his humility in the discussion impressed me. Among scientists, he is far from alone in that struggle.

✦ ✦ ✦

Early in the 20th century, many in the scientific community (and many atheists) doubted that the universe had a beginning. They believed it to be past-eternal. It had just always existed.

Sir Fred Hoyle, an accomplished English astronomer, was one such scientist. He is thought to have been the first to use the term “Big Bang,” during a BBC radio program that aired on March 28, 1949.

It surprised me (and may surprise you) to learn that the man who first used this term actually rejected the theory, believing it to be fake science. Many reported that he used the term “Big Bang” in a mocking way on the radio show that day. Reportedly, he later denied that he had used the term derisively, even though he did continue to deny that the universe had a beginning.

He believed in the Steady State model, which sought to show how the universe could be eternally old even though it also seemed to be expanding.

The Steady State model, though, had been in crisis since the early 1920s. Anthony Walsh, an author, and professor at Boise State University, explains:

*The Steady State theory began to unravel with Einstein's famous general theory of relativity. Einstein was unsettled to find that his equations predicted the expansion of the universe, which did not fit the accepted notion in science that the universe was static and past eternal. He "corrected" his equations by adding what he termed the 'cosmological constant' representing a repulsive force to counter gravity's attraction, and thus leaving the universe static. He later called this the greatest blunder of his life, because his initial equations turned out to be right—the universe had a beginning, and was expanding.*

*It was a Belgian Catholic priest and mathematician/physicist, Georges Lemaitre, who noted in the early 1920s that all was not right with Einstein's cosmological constant.<sup>7</sup>*

Lemaitre, Walsh writes, “drew the opposite (and correct) conclusion,” that the universe “had to be expanding, and if it was expanding, it had to do so from a finite point in time.”<sup>8</sup>

If Lemaitre's work—along with that of Alexander Friedmann, Edwin Hubble, and others—started to close the casket on the Steady State model in the 1920s, further discoveries by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson began to nail it shut in the 1960s.

Penzias and Wilson discovered cosmic microwave background radiation (CMB). CMB is radiation in the universe that

scientists are confident was left over from the Big Bang. In cosmology, this was an enormously important discovery. For many scientists, it was the final piece of evidence they needed to believe that the universe had a beginning. For their work, Penzias and Wilson were awarded the Nobel prize in Physics in 1978.

Since then, work by other cosmologists and discoveries made possible by the Hubble Space Telescope have provided additional evidence.

The second law of thermodynamics is helpful here, too. It leads scientists to conclude that the universe is slowly running out of usable energy. If that is true, and if the universe actually was infinitely old, it would have run out of usable energy by now.

A similar argument, from philosophy and math, suggests that if the universe was infinitely old, we never would have been able to get to today, due to the impossibility of crossing an actual infinite. This is an argument that took me a while to get my head around, but it is a fascinating one that I find to be compelling.<sup>9</sup>

Interestingly, one of the reasons some scientists initially resisted the idea that the universe had a beginning is that they believed that it pointed to the existence of God. At the very least, it pointed to an answer that could be found only outside of science. Fred Hoyle said bluntly that one of his problems with the idea that the universe had a beginning was that it was too tied to the account of the creation found in the Bible. He said, “the reason why scientists like the ‘Big Bang’ is because they are overshadowed by the Book of Genesis.”<sup>10</sup>

The famous American astrophysicist, Robert Jastrow, wrote,

*For the scientist ... the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer*

*the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.*<sup>11</sup>

Arno Penzias himself said, in a *New York Times* interview, that “the best data we have are exactly what I would have predicted, had I nothing to go on but the first five books of Moses, the Psalms, and the Bible as a whole.”<sup>12</sup>

In a 2003 paper titled *A Christian Physicist Examines the Big Bang Theory*, Dr. Steven Ball writes that while “the Big Bang theory has not only survived intense scrutiny, a series of remarkable confirmations have shown it to be one of the greatest scientific accomplishments of recent years.”<sup>13</sup> Ball continued:

*It has become one of the strongest testimonies to the validity of the biblical account of creation, since it clearly confirms that our universe had a beginning, as described in Genesis 1, in which the cause of it is outside of the physical realm we observe. It is remarkable that the observations have allowed us to trace the record of our universe back to this beginning point.*

*But does our worldview permit us to examine this evidence thoughtfully? One holding a solid faith in the Bible should have no fear of examining the testimony of the universe, since this too bears witness of God’s handiwork. And for the one who appreciates science, but is skeptical of whether it agrees with a Christian worldview, I also urge an open mind. You will find that the evidence provided by the universe doesn’t need a lot of speculative interpreting.*<sup>14</sup>

Dr. Ball’s question about whether our worldview permits “us to examine this evidence thoughtfully” is important for thinking people to consider—whatever their current beliefs.

Sir Fred Hoyle was so professionally respected that he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1972. Still, it seems that this distinguished scientist's bias against even the possibility that the universe had a beginning actually prevented him from believing the evidence that was becoming widely accepted by his peers. We saw similar bias against a non-eternal universe earlier, with Einstein, in what he later called the greatest blunder of his life.

Regardless of what Hoyle or Einstein eventually ended up believing, the thought that the universe had a beginning seems to be what some would call settled science at this point in time.

This is immensely important.



Growing up, my understanding of God was not well-formed. I mentioned earlier that I had a vague idea that some sort of God must exist, but I had no idea what he/she/it would be like.

I remember talking with my friend Joe during high school, on the way to a golf course one day, about the idea that God created the universe. I was not religious, but I remember thinking it would take more faith to believe that the universe came from nothing than to believe that some kind of creator must have created it.

So, during that first year in college, as I began reading the books that Todd and Keith gave me, I started with a basic question: are there good reasons to believe that God exists? It turns out that there are. In fact, this remarkable shift—from scientists believing that the universe was eternal to now believing it had a beginning—helps point us toward one of those good reasons. In the next few chapters, we'll consider a variety of reasons.

For the rest of this chapter, we'll consider just one.

## THE EXISTENCE OF THE UNIVERSE SUGGESTS A CREATOR

One argument that begins to build what I believe to be a good case for God's existence is called the Kalam cosmological argument. The argument has three premises. If the first two are true, logic demands that the third must also be true.

*Premise One:* Anything that begins to exist has a cause.

*Premise Two:* The universe began to exist.

*Therefore:* The universe had a cause.

If one could come into this discussion with no pre-existing biases, I believe that such a person would immediately agree that the first premise is true. Peter Kreeft is a philosopher, a professor at Boston College, and one of my favorite writers. In a book he's written with Ronald K. Tacelli, they agree. They wrote that we should "grant this premise," noting that "most people—outside of asylums and graduate schools—would consider it not only true but certainly and obviously true."<sup>15</sup>

When have you seen a fully-grown cow spontaneously pop into existence? Or a tuba? Or a skyscraper? You haven't. Why? Because we know that things do not pop into existence without a cause. My friends Dylan and Justin may wish, on student budgets, that Chipotle burritos would spontaneously appear on their desks, but sadly for them, this just never seems to happen.

Not long ago, I was on a golf trip, headed south on an interstate in North Carolina in the midst of torrential rain. As I passed a truck, I heard something loud strike my windshield. I then noticed a series of cracks that had appeared in the glass in front of the passenger seat. These cracks had not been there when I left my home. Let's pretend that I had not heard the impact. If I had later noticed the cracks, what would I have thought?

I would *not* have thought, “Wow. Those cracks appeared there for no reason... Weird.” I would have assumed my window had been struck by a rock or some other object. I might have wondered why I didn’t hear it, if the glass was faulty, or how long the cracks had been there. Whatever thoughts I had, I definitely would have wondered what caused them. Why? Because cracks like that do not begin to appear without a cause.

To reject premise one, a person has to believe the unprovable idea that things can begin to exist without a cause. Even though you may find a few people who believe this, I have not seen a compelling case for this idea yet. Does this idea resonate with your experience in this world? Whether a tuba, a burrito, skyscraper, or cracks in a windshield, I believe that everything that begins to exist has a cause. To me, this seems obvious.

Premise two is that the universe began to exist. Alexander Vilenkin, a respected Russian theoretical physicist—and an agnostic—summed up everything we discussed earlier in this chapter:

*With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide behind the possibility of a past-eternal universe. There is no escape: they have to face the problem of a cosmic beginning.<sup>16</sup>*

This is what I discussed with my playing partner on the golf course in Delaware that day. He affirmed Vilenkin’s—and many other scientists’—view that the cosmos had a beginning.

Some people do doubt that the universe had a beginning, but they are in the vast minority. If you do a Google search on the question: “What is the Big Bang?” you will find an overwhelming number of scientific and astronomy-oriented sites that each say the same thing: the Big Bang is the leading explanation of *how the universe began*.

On each of those sites, it is assumed that the universe had a beginning. This answer is so common that even an article on a NASA website designed to explain space in the most simple terms (perhaps for kids) contains this exact phrase.<sup>17</sup>

The universe began to exist.

If our first two premises are true, so must be the third: The universe had a cause. At Group one night, while discussing this, my friend Cliff intuitively understood the logical next question that every one of us should ask at this point: “So what caused it?”

Some skeptics may say that this argument only proves, at best, that something caused it to exist. They say it is a big leap of faith to move from believing that something caused it to believing that God did. I totally understand why someone might say that.

If the cosmological argument was the only argument we had for God’s existence, I might share the skeptic’s concern about the size of the leap. But this is not the only argument we’ll consider. We’ll explore other arguments in the following chapters.

How would *you* answer the question of what caused the universe?

The insight of William Lane Craig, a philosopher, and brilliant thinker, is helpful here. He points out that if the universe did have some sort of cause, that cause must have been:

- Spaceless and timeless (because both space and time began to exist when the universe came into existence)
- Not material (put differently, not a physical being because physical matter began to exist when the universe was born)
- Incredibly powerful (it created a still-expanding universe, with all of its beauty and complexities, a universe that now measures 93 billion light-years wide)<sup>18</sup>

Dr. Craig has written and spoken often on this argument. He has debated atheists in forums all over the world on the existence of God, and this is one of the arguments he has used effectively. His conclusion? That “spaceless, timeless, immaterial, and incredibly powerful is a pretty good description... of God.”<sup>19</sup>

If God did not create the universe, what sort of thing (that meets the criteria listed in the bullet points above) could have done it?

If you choose to believe that something can come from nothing or that the universe is eternally old, that is certainly your choice. But please note that some level of faith is required for you to believe either of those things. I point this out because both the believer in God and the person who says that there is no God require some degree of faith to arrive at their conclusions.

The question, as Steven Ball asked in a different context earlier, is whether your worldview will even *allow* you to believe that a God could exist, and could have created the universe. As for me, I still hold the same thought I held in high school, but now with far more reason: that it would take more faith to believe that the universe sprang into being from nothing and without a cause than to believe that a creator had created it.

✦ ✦ ✦

To wrap up this chapter, note that this argument doesn't answer the question, “What is God like?” It does not point to any specific religion. Muslims have used this argument, as they should. It is a sound argument.

All I am seeking to show in chapters five through eight is why I believe that faith in some kind of God is reasonable.

Let's turn our attention to some of the other arguments.



## You Can't See a Thermal

THE SMALL PLANE TOWED OUR TWO-PERSON GLIDER to nearly 3,000 feet above Lake Tahoe, and we released the tow rope. It was time to soar.

+++

Early in our marriage, Karey and I had to attend a conference in California. We wanted to see America, so we chose to drive. We took seven weeks to do it, not counting time at the conference.

We had time but not a lot of money, so we agreed that each of us could splurge once during the trip on something we'd like to buy or experience. As we were driving our Ford Explorer out of Lake Tahoe, I saw a sign that said "Glider Rides Over the Lake. Turn Here." I immediately turned into the parking lot.

I had found my splurge.

The glider company receptionist said they weren't busy and that I could fly—or soar, to use the term a glider pilot would use—longer than their promised minimum-length flight.

My assumption, when walking into the gliderport, was that our glider would be towed into the air, released, and that we would slowly descend until it was time to land. I did not know that we could repeatedly gain serious altitude during the flight.

That was before I learned about the power of thermals.

Thermals are naturally occurring columns of warm, rising air. They occur, in the most simple terms, because the sun heats the ground unevenly. When the ground is heated in a particular spot, and the air above it becomes warmer than the air around it, this heated air becomes less dense, and rises. The height of thermals can vary, but some have been known to rise 25,000 feet or more into the air.

Thermals and other phenomena, called ridge lifts and wave lifts, allow gliders to stay aloft longer and fly higher than I would have ever guessed. In 2003, a man named Klaus Ohlmann completed a 3009 km (1,869 mile) flight in Argentina. In 1956, a pilot in the French Alps kept his glider aloft for 56 straight hours.

Birds know of the power of thermals. In fact, they seem to be able to sense and find them easily. This is why you will sometimes see them soaring upward effortlessly without needing to flap their wings.

Glider pilots enter thermals and fly in tight circles to stay within the updraft. They then leave the thermal and soar until either finding a new thermal or landing.

✦ ✦ ✦

I was given a safety briefing and climbed into the front seat of the two-seat aircraft. The pilot got into the seat behind me and we were towed into the air. When we were at altitude and released the tow rope, I discovered why they call it soaring. Soaring is a perfect name for it. With no engine noise, it was eerily quiet. It felt like we were riding the wind, because we were.

After a while, we started to search the coast for a thermal. We found one and began to rise as if we were on an enormous spiral escalator. We quadrupled our altitude and left the thermal, soaring once again out over the lake.

We repeated this pattern several times, and the flight was fantastic. The scenic views of Lake Tahoe and the surrounding Sierra Nevada mountains were spectacular. I did not regret my splurge.

Later, I realized I was fascinated by thermals. I did not remember ever having heard of them previously. As I think about thermals now, in the context of this chapter, one thing stands out:

You can't see a thermal.

You can see evidence, or clues, that a thermal exists. You can feel its effects if you are in a glider that is being pushed skyward. Or if you are a bird, I suppose. But thermals are invisible.

Dr. Billy Graham, one of the most loved and widely respected Christian ministers of his day (and perhaps in American history), once made a similar observation about the wind, and about God.

Addressing a capacity crowd that had come to hear him speak in Cleveland's Municipal stadium—then the home of the NFL's Browns and MLB's (then) Indians—Dr. Graham asked, "Can you see God? You haven't seen him? I've never seen the wind. I see the effects of the wind, but I've never seen the wind."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that we cannot see God does not mean he's not there or that he does not exist. Though we can't see him, we can see the effects of his work in the world around us.

In the previous chapter, we considered how discoveries in the past century have flipped the script on the scientific community's idea about the eternity of the universe. Scientists now tend to agree that our universe had a beginning. Some would call the miracle of the existence of the universe an effect of—or a clue that points to—the work of God. I would.

There are other clues—or effects of an invisible God's work—that point us to God. DNA, in my view, is one of many such clues.

Like a thermal, DNA is invisible to the naked eye, but it plays a mission-critical role in the life of every living organism. It contains the blueprint that determines the physical traits and characteristics of all living things.

I have a friend who is a medical doctor and genetic researcher who works at perhaps the world's leading genetic research institution. She reviewed all I've written here about DNA. As we discussed it, she said: "DNA literally provides every instruction our bodies need to live, breathe, and grow."

Even if you are not really into science, bear with me here. I think you may discover, as I have, that DNA is more incredible and interesting than you might have guessed.

It exists in strands that are intertwined in pairs, in the famous double-helix shape that I'm sure you've seen in illustrations. Each DNA strand is ridiculously thin; one human hair is 30,000 to 40,000 times thicker.

Pause to try to imagine how thin that is.

The fact that DNA strands are so thin allows them to be packed tightly into the nucleus of nearly every one of the trillions of cells in your body.

If the strands of DNA in just one microscopic human cell could be tied together and stretched out, the combined length of the strands in that cell would measure more than six feet!

There are likely at least 30 trillion cells in a typical human body. Perhaps far more. If we were able to take all of the strands of DNA in just one person's body and connect them end-to-end, the combined length would be at least 34 billion miles. Put differently, the length of all of the DNA strands in your body, combined, would reach Mars and back more than 120 times.<sup>2</sup>

But DNA is far more interesting than simply the length of its strands. The DNA strands in just one tiny cell contain a staggering amount of precisely ordered information. This information can be expressed as a code, a string made up of the letters, A, T, C, and G—each of which is an abbreviation for one of the four chemical bases that make up our DNA.

The code contained in the DNA in just one microscopic cell is, incredibly, three billion letters long!

The exact order of these 3 billion bits of information—the complex way that these four different bases are arranged—is important for DNA to create the proper RNA, which in turn creates proteins in precisely the right shape and structure to allow the cell to accomplish its function.

The order of these chemical bases is what determines whether an organism is a human, a strawberry, a lobster, or something else entirely. The DNA in each human is 99.9% identical; the remaining 0.1% is what makes each person unique.

Dr. Francis Collins, the man I quoted earlier who led the international initiative that first mapped the complete set of human DNA (the genome), obviously qualifies as a world-class expert on DNA. He wrote a book in which he has called DNA an elegant language.<sup>3</sup>

Microsoft's founder, Bill Gates, in his book, *The Road Ahead*, wrote that “human DNA is like a computer program but far, far more advanced than any software we've ever created.”<sup>4</sup>

This DNA code doesn't just look like a computer program of some kind—it actually works like one.

Dr. Stephen Meyer is a scientist and former professor who earned a Ph.D. from the University of Cambridge and has written three books you should read if you want to take a deeper dive into this topic.<sup>5</sup>

Meyer recently explained that, in 1957, Francis Crick recognized that “the chemical subunits on the inside of the [DNA] molecule were functioning just like alphabetic characters in a written language or digital characters like the 0s and 1s we use in software.” Meyer called it a “stop the press moment in the history of biology.”<sup>6</sup>

He explained:

*Inside the DNA molecule, what we have is literally information or instructions inscribed digitally or alphabetically... in a way that provides the information necessary to build the important proteins and protein machines that keep all cells alive.*<sup>7</sup>

He then provided an illustration from the aircraft builder Boeing's use of computer-assisted design and manufacturing.

*Information in a digital form is used to direct the construction of mechanical parts or physical systems. So, if you are a Boeing engineer, you might sit at a [computer] and write code. That code will go down a wire, and it will be translated into another machine code that can be read at a manufacturing arm or center. That information will be used, for example, to take rivets and put them on the aircraft wing at just the right place.*

*So you have digital information directing the construction of a mechanical system. Something very much like that is going on inside the cell, where the information inside the DNA is being used to direct the construction of the proteins and protein machines that are necessary for all cellular life.<sup>8</sup>*

If this sounds complicated to you, it should. It should also sound amazing. Protein-building machines—inside each tiny cell—that are directed by a precise, three-billion-character-long code that is unique to every living organism? Incredible.

### **WHY SO MUCH ABOUT DNA?**

When we see a series of letters that have been ordered intentionally to communicate meaning, we know that a mind of some kind must have put the letters in that particular order. The longer the phrase, the more confident we are.

Imagine that my friend Meghan walked into her kitchen and found that her husband Landon had poured the lettered tiles from a Scrabble or Bananagrams game onto the table. It is possible (though fairly unlikely) that she might find that a few tiles had randomly fallen into a line to form some short word.

If, however, she found 35 of the tiles perfectly lined up to say, “THE CAT LEAPT WILDLY WHEN IT SAW THE PICKLE,” she would assume that Landon (or someone) had ordered the

tiles intentionally. If she found a more personal message, like “HAVE A PHENOMENALLY GREAT TUESDAY MEGHAN,” her assumption would be stronger still.

If we conclude—by looking at just 35 tiles that communicate meaning—that the tiles must have been ordered by an intelligent mind and that there is no way this could have happened randomly, what could possibly explain the origin of a highly-specific code that is *three billion* characters long?

Dr. Meyer put it like this:

*Whether we are looking at hieroglyphic inscriptions, or a paragraph in a book, or a section of computer code, or even information embedded in a radio signal, whenever we see information—especially when we find information in a digital or typographical form—and we trace it back to its ultimate source, we always come to a mind, and not a material process.”<sup>9</sup>*

In his book, *Signature in the Cell*, Dr. Meyer outlines his argument for the intelligent design of the DNA information found in a cell:

- 1. Despite a thorough search, no material causes have been discovered that demonstrate the power to produce large amounts of specified information.*
- 2. Intelligent causes have demonstrated the power to produce large amounts of specified information. Therefore,*
- 3. Intelligent design constitutes the best, most causally adequate, explanation for the information in the cell.<sup>10</sup>*

Whether the code that makes up DNA is more like written language or a computer code, the conclusion is the same. A book must have had an author. Functioning computer code must

have had a coder. The highly-specific information in DNA must have had an intelligent mind behind it.

### **DESIGN SUGGESTS A DESIGNER**

Imagine that my friends Katie, Carrie, Caroline, and Dorothy were hiking near Katie's family's house in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and came upon a large exposed rock. They might assume that the rock had been there since the Earth was born.

If they stopped to think about it at all, they'd likely think the appearance of the rock was the result of millions or billions of years of just... being. Perhaps it was covered by more dirt or less dirt at some point, but it was always just there.

Now imagine that they climbed to the top of the rock to enjoy the view of the valley, and found a new phone sitting there. Their assumption would be different. They would not assume that the phone's presence there was the result of millions or billions of years of just being. They would know that something so obviously designed and complicated points to a designer.

This has been called the argument from design. The argument was first popularized by a man named William Paley in a book he wrote way back in 1802. He used the illustration of a watch. Paley suggested that the intricate and sophisticated design of a watch implies a watchmaker. Because we see evidence of complexity and design in our world, he argued, we can reasonably conclude that our world must have been designed.

Peter Kreeft and Ronald Tacelli have posed a more formal version of the argument:

- 1. The universe displays a staggering amount of intelligibility, both within the things we observe and in the way these things relate to others outside themselves. That is to say: the*

*way they exist and coexist display an intricately beautiful order and regularity that can fill even the most casual observer with wonder. It is the norm in nature for many different beings to work together to produce the same valuable end—for example, the organs in the body work for our life and health.*

- 2. Either this intelligible order is the product of chance or of intelligent design.*
- 3. Not chance.*
- 4. Therefore, the universe is the product of intelligent design.*
- 5. Design comes only from a mind, a designer.*
- 6. Therefore, the universe was the product of an intelligent designer.<sup>11</sup>*

When we see the incredible complexity, order, and unity of so much in our universe—DNA and the inner workings of a cell are just one of many examples—it absolutely has the appearance of having been designed.

Many non-theists admit that things in our world appear to be designed. The difference, of course, is that they will say it has only the *appearance* of design, and that it all came into being over time through an unguided process, perhaps involving natural selection and random mutation. They would likely take issue with #3, in Kreeft and Tacelli’s argument above: “Not chance.”

But Kreeft and Tacelli would push back:

*It is surely up to nonbelievers to produce a credible alternative to design. And “chance” is simply not credible. For we can understand chance only against a background of order. To say that something happened “by chance” is to say that it did not turn out as we would have expected, or that it did turn out in a way we would not have expected. But expectation is impossible without order. If you take away*

*order and speak of chance alone as a kind of ultimate source, you have taken away the only background that allows us to speak meaningfully of chance at all.*<sup>12</sup>

There is a significant problem with relying on chance as an answer as to how life on Earth came to exist. Even if one were to grant the extraordinarily unlikely possibility that the DNA of the first cell could have come to exist in some naturalistic way, random mutation does not satisfactorily explain how different forms of animal life could have emerged. While random mutation and natural selection clearly seem to account for certain changes that have occurred *within* a species, it would take a tremendous amount of faith to believe it could account for the arrival of entirely new forms of animal life.

When we think of DNA as a type of information, or code, the creation of a new form of animal life would require new information in the form of new DNA, new RNA, new proteins, and new types of cells. A series of random mutations in DNA simply could never get us to an entirely new form of animal.

Dr. Murray Eden, a chemist, and electrical engineering professor at MIT, said, “no currently existing formal language can tolerate random changes in the symbol sequences which express its sentences. Meaning is almost invariably destroyed.”<sup>13</sup>

Put differently, if we were to take the text of a romance novel or the code from word processing software and begin to change letters in the text or code randomly, we know we would ruin both the book and the software. By changing letters completely at random, we would never imagine that we might somehow transform the romance novel into an excellent car repair manual or transform the word processing software into functioning missile guidance software. This would be true no matter how many billions or trillions of times we replicated these experiments.

Moreover, the longer we randomly replaced letters, the more we would mess things up. We would eventually turn both into nonsense.

You may believe that a cell's DNA, proteins, and protein-building machines all came to exist by chance, as a result of some naturalistic process. You may further believe that time, random mutation, and natural selection could have worked together to eventually create all of the different forms of life on our planet.

But if you do believe that, you do so by faith.

✦ ✦ ✦

The basic version of the design argument made sense to me as I was first considering faith in God. Since then, the more I've learned about the order and structure of our world, the universe, DNA, and a more in-depth form of the design argument called the fine-tuning argument (which we'll consider next), the more weight it has carried with me. I believe that the designer behind the design of the universe and every natural thing in it (all the way down to the tiniest details in DNA) is God.

I am not alone. Thoughtful forms of this argument, for example, helped convince one of the most famous atheists of the past 100 years that there must be a God.

Antony Flew was a British philosopher who passed away in 2010. He was a professor who taught at several universities including Oxford. For decades, he was an outspoken critic of the view that God exists. He traveled extensively to take part in debates with theists and Christians on God's existence and wrote a number of books and articles on atheism. He knew the theists' arguments and spent years trying to show the world that they were wrong.

Until he changed his mind.

The tipping point for Flew came when he concluded that there could be no satisfactory naturalistic, non-theistic explanation for the origin of the first reproducing species from DNA. Flew eventually wrote a book (with Roy Abraham Varghese) that documents why he changed his mind. It is called *There is a God*.

In that book, Flew writes:

*Perhaps the most popular and intuitively plausible argument for God's existence is the so-called argument from design. According to this argument, the design that is apparent in nature suggests the existence of a cosmic Designer.*

*I have often stressed that this is actually an argument to design from order; as such arguments proceed from the perceived order in nature to show evidence of design and, thus, a Designer. Although I was once sharply critical of the argument to design, I have since come to see that, when correctly formulated, this argument constitutes a persuasive case for the existence of God.<sup>14</sup>*

Flew did not convert to a particular religion. He called himself a deist, which can be defined as a person who believes in a supreme being who creates the universe but then stays uninvolved in it. But he had come to believe that *some* kind of God—with both immense power and intelligence—must exist.

How was he convinced? At least in part by scientific advancements in our understanding of DNA. This is interesting because our culture seems to buy into the idea that there is some kind of insurmountable conflict between faith in God and science.

I see no such conflict. Neither does Francis Collins.

In an interview with PBS, Collins said, “I actually do not believe that there are any collisions between what I believe as a Christian, and what I know and have learned about as a scientist. I think there’s a broad perception that that’s the case, and that’s what scares many scientists away from a serious consideration of faith.”<sup>15</sup> In the same interview, he suggested that people “mix up the natural and spiritual.”<sup>16</sup>

He explained:

*Science’s domain is the natural. If you want to understand the natural world and be sure you’re not misleading yourself, science is the way to do it. You accumulate data, you make hypotheses, you draw conclusions, you expose them to other people’s critical views, and you eventually decide whether it’s right.*

*The spiritual world is not where science operates. The spiritual world is another part of human existence. I would argue a very critical one.*<sup>17</sup>

Many scientists who believe in God find that scientific inquiry actually helps them understand more about the world that God has made, and report that their work has strengthened their faith. I could provide numerous examples, but I’ll share just one, from mathematical physicist and cosmologist, Frank Tipler:

*When I began my career as a cosmologist some twenty years ago, I was a convinced atheist. I never in my wildest dreams imagined that one day I would be writing a book purporting to show that the central claims of Judeo-Christian theology are in fact true, that these claims are straightforward deductions of the laws of physics as we now understand them. I have been forced into these conclusions by the inexorable logic of my own special branch of physics.*<sup>18</sup>

Science observes our world and seeks to learn from those observations. It seeks to explain how the world works. But, as Dr. Collins pointed out in the quote I cited in chapter four, there are questions that science cannot answer. And the more that science learns about the world, the harder it becomes for many to believe that it all came to exist without a designer.

The skeptic might respond, “Just because things appear to have been designed doesn’t mean that they were actually designed.” Or, “Just because you can’t imagine how these three billion bits of information in one cell could have been precisely ordered or coded without a coder doesn’t mean that God did it.”

I understand these objections, so I’ll repeat this thought: the design argument doesn’t conclusively prove that God exists. It is one argument; another set of clues that point to the idea that belief in God is reasonable. Like an attorney’s case that is built upon multiple arguments, so is the case for God.

In my journey, it was not one argument that convinced me that Christianity was true, but rather a combination of arguments.



If you have enjoyed these past two chapters, you will likely enjoy the next, as we continue to consider what we might learn about God from science, space, and the universe in which we live.

In chapter eight, we will turn a corner and explore a wholly different sort of argument for God.

And then, in chapter nine, we will consider perhaps the most powerful argument for the existence of God; an argument from history. We will consider the claims that this invisible God actually made Himself visible—when he chose to visit Earth.





## Uncannily Perfect

IMAGINE THAT MY SON ETHAN WAS AN ASTRONAUT and that we, with the rest of the world, had tuned in to watch him step out of his lander to become the first human to set foot on Mars.

The atmosphere we watch him step into contains less than 1% oxygen. The environment is beyond cold—the average surface temperature is 80 degrees below zero (Fahrenheit). The conditions are completely hostile to human life.

As we watch him begin to explore the terrain, we see nothing but barren wasteland in every direction. But later, as he passes a rock formation, he turns and spots what appears to be some kind of structure in the distance. As he gets closer, he can see more clearly. It appears to be a dome of some kind.

He finds an airlock and decides to enter. Once inside the dome, the first thing he notices is that there must be some kind of

power source in the building—artificial light fills the interior. The sensors in his spacesuit report that the mix of nitrogen and oxygen filling the dome is perfect for a human to breathe. The interior temperature is 70 degrees—150 degrees warmer than outside of the dome. The humidity is 50%.

In this environment, Ethan could actually take off his spacesuit safely if he chose—or was allowed by NASA—to do so.

He finds a full kitchen, complete with a refrigerator, and cabinets stocked with snacks and imperishable food. Down a hall, he discovers three bedrooms and bathrooms. Each has clearly been designed for human use. He tries the faucet in a sink and clear water comes out. A quick test of the water proves it to be filtered and safe for a human to drink.

As we watch him explore the facility, we are in disbelief. So is Ethan. Everyone is thinking the same thing: *How did this get here?*

✦ ✦ ✦

This is an expanded version of an illustration created by a philosopher and college professor named Robin Collins.<sup>1</sup> I've paraphrased it, expanded it, and added Ethan to my version. In his paper, Collins then asks readers what they'd be thinking if they had discovered what Collins called this biosphere.

I would be thinking one or more of the following thoughts:

- Who built this? (Note my assumption here: *It had to have been built by somebody.*)
- Does anyone live here now?! And, should I be scared?
- Would it be wrong to snag a couple of those snacks?
- This is way better than the habitat that Matt Damon's character built in the film *The Martian*.

You would probably at least ask a question similar to the first question above. *Who built this?*

You would probably conclude that it had to have been built by other humans who had completed a mission or missions to Mars without your knowledge. I have one friend who might wonder if extraterrestrials could be responsible.

While I'm not sure exactly what you would think first, I can make a good guess about what you would not think. There is virtually no chance you'd think that this dome just happened to form on its own, as the result of natural processes, over time.

Collins makes this point in his paper. "Instead," he writes, we would all "conclude that it was designed by someone who knew exactly what would make the best possible living environment for humans."<sup>2</sup>

There is a larger point that Collins wanted to make. Earth, and the larger universe as a whole, is our biosphere.

You will immediately understand this when discussing our planet; Earth provides a human-friendly habitat in a universe that is hostile to human life. The Earth's unique qualities are obvious.

Our planet's atmosphere contains the perfect proportion of nitrogen and oxygen so we can breathe. As we exhale carbon dioxide, plants absorb it and release oxygen from their leaves. The Earth contains an abundance of water, and the water cycle ensures that our fresh water will stay fresh.

We are the perfect distance from the Sun. We are close enough for it to keep us warm, but not so close that we risk baking to death. The fact that Earth's orbit is nearly circular ensures we do not get too close or too far away from the Sun.

The Earth's ozone layer protects life from harmful ultraviolet radiation emitted by the Sun. I could cite many other examples.

The Earth is not merely habitable for humans; it is hospitable.

But as perfect as these and many other details about Earth might be, there would be no Earth, no stars, and no life if the universe itself was even different by the tiniest of margins. Most scientists, whether they believe in God or not, tend to agree: the universe has either been “fine-tuned” to allow for life to exist, or at least has the *appearance* of having been fine-tuned.

### **A FINELY-TUNED UNIVERSE SUGGESTS A FINE-TUNER**

The fine-tuning argument for the existence of God could be considered a grown-up sibling (or perhaps a more mature cousin) of the argument from design. Christopher Hitchens, the famous atheist, considered this to be one of the more challenging arguments for God he'd encountered in his debates with theists.

As we dive into this argument, let's first define fine-tuning.

There are dozens of parameters, or fundamental constants, that determine the structure of our universe. For example, the gravitational constant is a number that helps define the force of gravity. The cosmological constant is a number that is used to determine how fast the universe is expanding.

The values of at least 40 of these fundamental constants seem to have been “fine-tuned,” to an extraordinary degree, to allow for life to exist in the universe. If the values of just one of these constants were different, by even an incredibly, unfathomably small degree, the universe itself could not exist.

A science journalist at MIT, Anil Ananthaswamy, wrote that there is something “uncannily perfect about our universe.”<sup>3</sup>

This is how he explained fine-tuning in an article on the website for PBS television's science show, *NOVA*:

*The laws of physics and the values of physical constants seem, as Goldilocks said, "just right." If even one of a host of physical properties of the universe had been different, stars, planets, and galaxies would never have formed. Life would have been all but impossible.*<sup>4</sup>

Stephen Hawking, in his famous book, *A Brief History of Time*, provided two examples. He wrote that "if the overall density of the universe were changed even by .000000000001 percent, no stars or galaxies could be formed. If the rate of expansion one second after the Big Bang had been smaller by even one part in a hundred thousand million million, the universe would have recollapsed before it reached its present size."<sup>5</sup>

Here is a slightly longer explanation, from the theoretical physicist, philosopher, and Arizona State University professor, Paul Davies (a man who says he is not religious in a typical sense):

*Scientists are slowly waking up to an inconvenient truth—the universe looks suspiciously like a fix. The issue concerns the very laws of nature themselves. For 40 years, physicists and cosmologists have been quietly collecting examples of all too convenient "coincidences" and special features in the underlying laws of the universe that seem to be necessary in order for life, and hence conscious beings, to exist. Change any one of them and the consequences would be lethal. The crucial point is that some of those metaphorical knobs (of which there are 40) must be tuned very precisely, or the universe would be sterile. For example: neutrons are just a tad heavier than protons. If it were the other way around, atoms couldn't exist, because all the protons in the universe would have decayed into neutrons shortly after the big*

*bang. No protons, then no atomic nucleus and no atoms.  
No atoms, no chemistry, no life.*<sup>6</sup>

In chapter four, I quoted Freeman Dyson, the man *National Geographic* called one of the greatest figures in 20th-century physics. Dyson said, “the more I examine the universe and the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the universe in some sense must have known we were coming.”<sup>7</sup>

Dyson described fine-tuning in this way:

*The fact is that [there are] a number of fine-tunings that seem to be necessary to make a universe habitable the way ours is. For example, the water molecule has very special properties. The fact that ice is lighter than water—so it floats instead of sinking when it freezes—[is] absolutely essential to life in the oceans. If oceans froze from the bottom up, there would be no chance for fish to ever have been invented.*<sup>8</sup>

“There are similar problems with nuclear physics,” Dyson continued. He cited a certain energy level in carbon that was necessary in order to produce the carbon in stars.<sup>9</sup>

Without that, Dyson said, “carbon couldn’t have been produced in stars, and there couldn’t be life.” He went on to say that “there are a number of details of that sort that seem to have been finely tuned” to allow for life.<sup>10</sup>

Many accomplished scientists, including a number who do not believe in God, have observed this sort of fine-tuning.

Sir Fred Hoyle, an atheist, wrote that a “common-sense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics.”<sup>11</sup> Stephen Hawking, who I quoted earlier, was

an agnostic. He wrote, “the remarkable fact is that the values of these numbers seem to have been very finely adjusted to make possible the development of life.”<sup>12</sup>

But why does the universe “seem to have been finely adjusted?”

At first glance, there seem to be two options. Either (1) the universe only *appears* to have been fine-tuned, even though it really has not been; or (2) The universe actually *has* been fine-tuned to allow for life. There is a third way of looking at this that I will touch on at the end of the chapter.

### **Option 1: The Universe Only *Appears* to Have Been Fine-Tuned**

If the universe has not been fine-tuned, but rather only appears to have been fine-tuned, it would seem that our planet just got tremendously lucky. But how lucky would we have had to have been in order for chance to have resulted in the fundamental constants of our universe being so perfectly dialed in?

A 2021 article by Philip Goff in *Scientific American* magazine suggests that the odds of these constants being perfectly tuned for life—by chance—would have been “astronomically low.”<sup>13</sup>

*As scientists have studied the fundamental principles that govern our universe, they have discovered that the odds of a universe like ours being compatible with life are astronomically low. We can model what the universe would have looked like if [just three of] its constants—the strength of gravity, the mass of an electron, the cosmological constant—had been slightly different. What has become clear is that, across a huge range of these constants, they had to have pretty much exactly the values they had in order for life to be possible. The physicist Lee Smolin has calculated that the odds of these life-compatible numbers coming up by chance is 1 in  $10^{229}$ .*

Dr. Smolin, whose work is quoted in the article, earned a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from Harvard University and has held several postdoctoral research positions. He has taught at Yale, Syracuse, and Penn State. His calculated probability (1 in  $10^{229}$ ) is almost unimaginably small.<sup>14</sup> Let's consider how small this probability actually is.

Estimates about the number of grains of sand on Earth tend to land somewhere between  $10^{18}$  and  $10^{19}$ . We'll use the smaller number, but regardless of which is closer to correct, this illustration will still work.

Imagine that we were to choose one single grain of sand from anywhere on Earth, somehow mark it, and then replace it where we found it. Now imagine that we challenged my friend Abby to pick out that exact grain of sand, in one try, while blindfolded.

If she put on her blindfold as we transported her to the precise location on Earth where she guessed she might find it, she would then have one attempt to reach down (or dive or dig, I suppose) to try to select that one marked grain of sand. If  $10^{18}$  is the correct number of grains of sand on Earth, her probability of success would be 1 in 1,000,000,000,000,000,000.

One in one quintillion.

But let's say we wanted to make the challenge tougher on my friend Aidan, Abby's brother. Let's say we challenged Aidan to pick out one specific *atom* that we had pre-selected. But rather than limiting his choices to somewhere on Earth, Aidan had to find a specific atom from anywhere in the observable universe.

Typical estimates suggest there are somewhere between  $10^{80}$  and  $10^{85}$  atoms in the observable universe. Using the smaller estimate, the probability that Aidan would pick out the correct atom



mathematician, suggesting the probability of the emergence of a life-permitting universe by chance was far smaller than 1 in  $10^{229}$ :

*The great British mathematician Roger Penrose has calculated—based on only one of the hundreds of parameters of the physical universe—that the probability of the emergence of a life-giving cosmos was 1 divided by 10, raised to the power 10, and again raised to the power of 123. This is a number as close to zero as anyone has ever imagined.*

*(This probability is much, much smaller than that of winning the Mega Millions jackpot for more days than the universe has been in existence.)<sup>16</sup>*

Some see these sorts of numbers and conclude that we just got ridiculously lucky. Others know what even Dr. Smolin's 1 in  $10^{229}$  number means: it would take a tremendous amount of faith to believe that our life-permitting universe was born by chance. Dr. Smolin's reaction to his own calculation is helpful:

*In my opinion, a probability this tiny is not something we can let go unexplained. Luck will certainly not do here; we need some rational explanation of how something this unlikely turned out to be the case.<sup>17</sup>*

Those who reject that some sort of God could have been responsible for the fine-tuning find themselves with a dilemma at this point. They are forced to come up with an explanation as to how fine-tuning could have happened without a fine-tuner.

One theory that some scientists have embraced as an answer is called the multiverse. This idea suggests that billions, trillions, or even far more universes exist. The greater the number, theorists argue, the more likely that a life-permitting universe like ours could have actually been born by chance.

We've all seen, in films and on television, stories involving multiple or parallel universes. In these stories, characters somehow jump from one universe to another, all of which makes for great drama—and drama I often enjoy.

And while the idea of hopping from universe to universe is clearly something that lives only in the realm of science fiction, the concept of a multiverse should not be dismissed so quickly. Some extremely bright scientists have suggested that the theory has merit. But it is only a theory.

Support for the existence of a multiverse is far from universal. A recent article in *Quanta Magazine* points out that many physicists hate the multiverse hypothesis and call it “a cop-out of infinite proportions.”<sup>18</sup>

Why? Of the problems with this idea, here is one of the biggest: no empirical evidence of any kind has ever been detected to suggest the multiverse's existence. None. The idea of a multiverse is pretty much just that: a theoretical idea. It cannot be observed, tested, or measured. Freeman Dyson even went so far as to call it unscientific:

*Unfortunately, [in the multiverse theory] all the other universes are purely hypothetical. We never shall have a chance to verify if they exist or not, so in a way, it puts the question outside of the reach of science.*<sup>19</sup>

Dyson said the question is outside of the reach of science because one cannot use the scientific method to test something that cannot be observed, measured, or even detected.

Worse, it may never be able to be tested. Sarah Scoles, writing in *Smithsonian Magazine*, pointed this out in her article, “Can Physicists Ever Prove the Multiverse is Real?”

She writes:

*For an idea to technically move from hypothesis to theory, though, scientists have to test their predictions and then analyze the results to see whether their initial guess is supported or disproved by the data. If the idea gains enough consistent support and describes nature accurately and reliably, it gets promoted to an official theory.*

*As physicists [dive] deeper into the heart of reality, their hypotheses—like the multiverse—become harder and harder, and maybe even impossible, to test. Without the ability to prove or disprove their ideas, there’s no way for scientists to know how well a theory actually represents reality. It’s like meeting a potential date on the internet: While they may look good on digital paper, you can’t know if their profile represents their actual self until you meet in person. And if you never meet in person, they could be catfishing you. And so could the multiverse.<sup>20</sup>*

In the *Scientific American* article by Phillip Goff I cited earlier, he argues that the apparent fine-tuning in our universe does not lead to the conclusion that a multiverse exists. The article’s title gives away its conclusion: “Our Improbable Existence Is No Evidence for a Multiverse.”

According to experts in the mathematics of probability, Goff argues, multiverse theorists commit a logical fallacy known as the inverse gambler’s fallacy. To understand, it is helpful to first understand the gambler’s fallacy.

At a roulette table in Monte Carlo on August 18, 1913, the roulette ball, incredibly, landed on black—26 spins in a row!<sup>21</sup> Spin after spin, gamblers at the table became increasingly confident that the next spin would result in the ball landing on red.

So, they kept betting red, and lost millions of dollars in one session at the table. This is an example of the gambler's fallacy. Assuming the wheel and ball were balanced and not rigged, there was a 50% chance of either result, every time. No more, no less. The result of previous spins was totally irrelevant when it came to what would happen on the next spin.

Imagine that, during a game night, my friends Ryan, Noah, Aron, Hannah, and Juliet were playing the board game Risk. Let's say Ryan had three armies left on Kamchatka, and he was (as we'd expect from Ryan) making a great defensive stand.

If Ryan rolled three double-sixes in a row, what would you assume would happen next? Would you guess that Ryan would be *less* likely to roll a fourth double-six, because "there's just no way" he'd do it again? Or that he would be *more* likely to roll a fourth double-six, because he's a battler and was "on a roll"?

Either assumption would be an example of the gambler's fallacy. In reality, Ryan would have exactly the same probability of rolling a double-six the fourth time as he did the first three: 1 in 36.

The gambler's fallacy tempts people to look at dice rolls that just happened and then make a bad assumption about what is likely to be rolled next. The inverse gambler's fallacy is, obviously, inverted. It tempts people to look at the result of a current roll and then make a bad assumption about rolls that, in their minds, "must have" happened previously.

Let's say that my friends Claire, Savannah, Paige, Blake, Christina, and Caleb were playing Yahtzee. Now imagine that Paige rolled a Yahtzee as our friend Anna walked by. If Anna assumed that they must have been playing for a while, because the odds of a Yahtzee on the very first roll seemed unlikely, she would commit the inverse gambler's fallacy.

Bringing this back to the multiverse discussion, Goff suggests that some scientists see the existence of our incredibly unlikely universe and imagine that there *must have been* many universes formed before this one, because we would have been far too lucky for this unlikely life-permitting one to have formed first.

This is an example of the inverse gambler's fallacy.

According to Goff, scientists who would say that fine-tuning of our universe points to the multiverse believe that if some huge number of universes had already popped into existence, it would be more likely that a rare life-permitting universe like ours would have begun to exist, too.

But in reality, the number of universes that came into existence previously would not change the probability of any new life-permitting universe being formed by chance.

If Dr. Smolin's calculations are correct, the probability of any new life-permitting universe's coming into existence by chance will be the same each time: 1 in  $10^{229}$ . If Amir Aczel's understanding of Roger Penrose's calculations was correct, the number will be smaller still. Assuming that all of these universes are independent, each universe that came into existence would face the same absurd odds against being life-permitting by chance.

Goff's conclusion is startling in its strength:

*The reason some scientists take seriously the possibility of a multiverse in which the constants vary in different universes is that it seems to explain the fine-tuning. But on closer examination, the inference from fine-tuning to the multiverse proves to be an instance of flawed reasoning. So, what should we make of the fine-tuning? Perhaps there is some other way of explaining it. Or perhaps we just got lucky.*<sup>22</sup>

Goff was not attempting to disprove the existence of a multiverse in this piece. Rather, he was seeking to show that the apparent fine-tuning of our universe is not necessarily good evidence that the multiverse exists. This is important.

If in the future we somehow discover evidence that makes it clear that belief in the multiverse is warranted, it would not fundamentally harm or challenge the arguments for God made in this chapter and the last. At best, it would give the skeptic or atheist a somewhat better explanation as to how the existence of a life-permitting universe could have begun to exist in a naturalistic way.

But as William Lane Craig has pointed out, even in a multiverse the probability that a life-permitting universe like ours could have come to exist by chance is still absurdly low. He points to the Borde–Guth–Vilenkin theorem, which shows that the multiverse itself cannot be extended into the infinite past. So if there is a multiverse, it too must have begun to exist at a specific point in time.<sup>23</sup>

If the multiverse does exist, and did have a beginning, the cosmological argument would also apply to the multiverse.

The first option we considered, that the universe only appears to have been fine-tuned, demands that either we got impossibly lucky or that an unproven, unobserved, undetected multiverse exists—and that we still got impossibly lucky.

There is a second option.

**Option 2: The Universe Actually *Has* Been Fine-Tuned for Life**

This argument holds that the reason scientists observe the appearance of remarkable fine-tuning in so many of the fundamental constants in our universe is that it actually has been fine-tuned

to be life-permitting. That a superintellect really has “monkeyed with the physics.” That someone or something designed and built a 93-billion-light-year-wide “biosphere” that was perfectly fine-tuned to allow life to exist. And that within our universe that same someone or something also created this planet we call home, a planet that seems to have been created specifically to offer an amazing habitat for humans.

If fine-tuning did happen, we have to ask who—or what—could have possibly had the power to have done the fine-tuning?

In my mind, the most reasonable answer—even if it does require faith—would be someone who exists outside of our universe and has the power to have fine-tuned his creation.

God.

✦ ✦ ✦

I mentioned earlier that there is a third way that some have suggested we view all of this.

It is called the anthropic principle, and (in simple terms) it suggests that the reason we find ourselves in what seems to be an absurdly lucky sort of universe is that if we were *not* in this sort of universe, we never would have been alive to know it.

This argument is interesting, but doesn’t really even try to answer the question of what could explain the fine-tuning that everyone seems to agree exists in *this* specific universe. I cannot devote much more time to this idea here. But for anyone interested, I will suggest a two-part video, in the Endnotes, in which William Lane Craig responds to this argument in greater depth.<sup>24</sup>

✦ ✦ ✦

You may choose to believe that this universe—the one universe that we can observe and that we can know exists—only appears to be fine-tuned and that we just got exceedingly, mind-bogglingly lucky. Or, you may choose to believe in the multiverse and believe that we still got exceedingly, mind-bogglingly lucky.

But if you believe either, you do so, at least in part, by faith.

Of course, I also believe what I believe by faith. But I'd suggest it takes more faith to believe we got preposterously lucky than it does to believe that our uncannily perfect and well-crafted universe was intentionally fine-tuned to be life-permitting by the imaginative, powerful mind who created it.

As with the prior arguments, the fine-tuning argument doesn't point to one specific God. It is simply one more argument as we continue to build this case that it is both reasonable and rational to believe in God.

In the following chapter, we will change gears completely. We'll move away from discussions of the universe, fine-tuning, science, and DNA.

It will be our final argument for the existence of God in general before we begin to consider the evidence for a very specific God.





## Is that Right?

IN CHAPTER SIX, I WROTE ABOUT THE AFTERNOON I spent soaring above Lake Tahoe in a glider. I did not, however, write about the man who piloted the glider that day.

At some point in the flight, I asked the pilot how he first learned to fly. He said he had learned just before World War II, when he was trained to fly as a fighter pilot... for Germany.

I was not expecting that. I was intrigued, however. Ever since I was a little boy, I have been fascinated by World War II, and especially by fighter planes from that era. As you probably guessed if you know me, I started asking questions.

At first, the pilot was a bit hesitant to talk about the war. I get that. The same has been true of several men I've known who had seen combat. Perhaps it was even more true for a man who had fought against America but now lived here.

So I asked a couple of questions about the Focke-Wulf Fw 190 and different Messerschmitts flown by the Luftwaffe (the German air force) during the war. That got him talking.

I asked at some point how he ended up deciding to come to America. He told me that he had started to become concerned about the direction of Germany under Hitler and the Nazi party, even before the war. As the war progressed, his concern grew. He believed that Hitler was leading Germany down the wrong path.

Over time, he started to wrestle with a brutal decision. Should he desert, and walk away from his squadron and the war without permission? Or should he keep fighting—and risking his life—for a cause in which he no longer believed?

If he had deserted and gotten caught, he would have been executed. But even worse, he said, if he had deserted he would have put his parents' lives in danger. During the war, members of the German military understood that if they deserted or even failed to show courage, both they and their family members at home would likely face imprisonment or execution.

Ultimately, he said he was not willing to dishonor his parents nor to risk their safety by failing to fulfill his military commitment. His plan—if he survived the war—was to fulfill that commitment, but to then move to America as soon as the war ended. That's what he did.

As I think back about our conversation that day, I was interested but not surprised to hear him say he thought Hitler was wrong.<sup>1</sup> He knew it then, just as we know it now. But how do we know that? On what basis can we make that judgment? I'm not questioning whether Hitler was wrong—I'm sure that most readers will agree that he was. Rather, I am asking how we come to know such a thing.

## A UNIVERSAL MORAL COMPASS?

I would suggest that this is an example of what I called built-in knowledge in chapter four: *we just know*. I believe that sane humans have a moral compass that points to a universal reality: some things are always and truly right, while other things are always and truly wrong.

Seeking to wipe an entire race of people off the face of the planet in order to create a so-called “master race” is wrong. We know this as surely as we know that recreational cruelty is wrong. Nobody has to tell us that torturing babies for entertainment is wrong. We know it. Rape is wrong. We know it.

We know these things in the same way that we know that courage, generosity, and self-sacrifice for the benefit of another are virtues that are admirable. Cultures and religions of all kinds, across the globe, affirm this.

Of course, one cannot prove that such an objective system of moral values exists universally. But even if we cannot prove it, is it reasonable to believe that such a system does exist?

I think it is.



If I had to recommend only five books on Christianity, I'd have a hard time narrowing the list. The Bible would be a given, of course. And a book I mentioned earlier, C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*, would probably be one of the remaining four.

Lewis was a writer, a professor at the famous Oxford University, and an amazing defender of the Christian faith. His writing is brilliant. In *Mere Christianity*, he argues that there really is a set of universal moral values that govern our world.

He begins making this case on the first page of his book:

*Everyone has heard people quarrelling. Sometimes it sounds funny and sometimes it sounds merely unpleasant; but however it sounds, I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"—"Why should you shove in first?" "Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—"Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups.*

*Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise.*

*It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong.*

*And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.<sup>2</sup>*

In his typically clear style, Lewis makes a thought-provoking case for universal rights and wrongs. He argues later that these values provide the sense we all have of the way the world *ought* to be.

And he's right. We do have this shared perception about how things ought to be, and we must not ignore that. When something goes differently than we believe it ought to have gone, we say, "that was wrong." Or, "that was not fair."

But this makes no sense without a standard by which to make such a judgment.

If something bad were to happen to my friend Sammie, how could she have any ability to call the thing bad unless she had a clear understanding of what good and bad actually are?

This line of thinking played a role in Lewis deciding, as an adult, that his views about God had been all wrong.

*My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of "just" and "unjust"? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust? If the whole show was bad and senseless from A to Z, so to speak, why did I, who was supposed to be part of the show, find myself in such violent reaction against it? A man feels wet when he falls into water, because man is not a water animal: a fish would not feel wet.*

*Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too—for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist—in other words, that the whole of reality was senseless—I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality—namely my idea of justice—was full of sense.*

*Consequently atheism turns out to be too simple. If the whole universe has no meaning, we should never have found out that it has no meaning; just as, if there were no light in the universe and therefore no creatures with eyes, we should never know it was dark. Dark would be a word without meaning.<sup>3</sup>*

### **The Problem with Subjective Morality**

An objective moral value is one that is universal, and binding to every person. If objective moral values did *not* exist, all moral values would be subjective. A subjective moral value is based on one's personal point of view. It is private, and not binding for anyone else. But if all moral values are subjective and there is no external source of objective morality, then any argument about what is right or wrong is simply an argument between opinions.

In a world of fully subjective morality, if my friends Ben and Shea were not friends (they are, but ignore that for a moment) and Ben was able to steal a superhero-related collectible from Shea, it would not be morally wrong for Ben to steal it.

From Ben's perspective, he would have obtained something he wanted, for free. But from Shea's perspective, Ben would be wrong. In a world of subjective morality, whose opinion would carry more weight?

Of course, our legal system would have something to say about such a theft. Ben could be found to be legally in the wrong. But morally wrong? In a world of fully subjective moral values, no.

One might ask at this point if a government's laws should shape one's moral values. I hope not. Consider two examples.

First, in a vast number of nations around the world throughout history, slavery was legal. Shockingly, in many countries today, it is still not illegal.<sup>4</sup> If my friends Sydney and Erin moved to such a country, to serve as nurses, would you suggest that their new country's lack of laws against slavery should lead them to conclude that slavery is morally okay? I hope that you are shaking your head no.

The fact that my pilot believed that Hitler was wrong is a second example. He was not the only German who came to that conclusion. According to historian Peter Hoffmann, more than 77,000 German citizens were executed by the Nazis for somehow playing a role in the German resistance movement.<sup>5</sup> Many thousands more were thrown into concentration camps, and more still were never captured. These men and women's sense of right and wrong transcended their own government's definitions.

If moral values are truly subjective, we cannot conclude that Hitler was wrong. Nazi ideas about genocide and eugenics could not be judged to be more or less wrong than anyone else's ideas. Just different. And if Nazi Germany had achieved its goals, we would have grown up learning that it is acceptable to kill Jewish people, Slavic people, Black people, other non-Aryans, the sick, and the disabled, all in pursuit of the so-called master race.

But every fiber of our being screams: We *know* that Hitler was wrong about these ideas. And we would still know that even if Germany had won the war.

This was illustrated in a variety of interesting ways in a streaming series from Amazon Studios called *The Man in the High Castle*. Viewers who are sensitive to mature content may want to proceed with caution, as Amazon rated the series 18+ due to its sometimes graphic violence and occasional sexual situations.

The premise of the series, though, is fascinating. The drama (with a science fiction twist<sup>6</sup>) explores what the world might have looked like if Germany and Japan had won World War II. In this alternate reality, Germany controls the eastern half of what was previously America. Japan controls the west coast. The Rocky Mountains serve as a neutral zone between the two.

One of the main characters in the series, John Smith, is a highly-ranked Nazi military officer who is happily living with his family in what is now called Nazi America.

His family is happy, that is, until their son is found to have a disease. When the son's illness is discovered, the Nazi policy on eugenics demands that the son be taken away and killed.

Smith and his wife react as you or I might in a similar situation. They try to save their son. At different points in the series, they each come to the awful realization that they had gone along with Nazi policies (or had looked the other way) in exchange for their personal comfort, well-being, and for Smith's career.

But when facing the prospect of their son being executed, they are forced to re-think their worldview. Why? Because they know deep down that the Nazi views on eugenics are wrong.

Hitler was wrong. We know it. Nobody has to tell us, we just know it.

Objective moral values exist.

## **OBJECTIVE MORAL LAWS SUGGEST A MORAL LAW-GIVER**

The existence of objective values is, many philosophers and Christian thinkers believe, a persuasive argument for the existence of God.

Dr. Sean McDowell, an author, and professor at Biola University, formulates the argument this way:

1. If objective moral values exist, God must exist.
2. Objective moral values exist.
3. Therefore, God must exist.<sup>7</sup>

We've already discussed premise two. Premise one, however, may also give a skeptic pause. Is it a leap in logic? I don't think so. If we find that such a system of moral values and obligations is built into us, this discovery raises the question: How would these universal values have been defined in the first place? And how would they have ever been "installed" into us?

If they are truly objective, they must have been defined and built into humans by some third party, one that is external to the human race. And one that is very powerful. This is why the existence of objective moral values does more than suggest the existence of a moral law-giver; it demands it.

In human terms, what law has ever been written except by the hand of one or more lawmakers? Without a universal lawmaker, how could there be universal laws?

Even the well-known atheist, philosopher J.L. Mackie, recognized this. He wrote that ethics "are most unlikely to have arisen in the ordinary course of events, without an all-powerful god to create them. If, then, there are such intrinsically prescriptive objective values, they make the existence of a god more probable than it would have been without them."<sup>8</sup>

Some skeptics may object, and suggest that there are other ways a moral law could have begun to exist. Perhaps, one might argue, the moral impulses we have now evolved, as they helped previous generations of humans survive. But even if that is somehow true—and I do not believe that it is—there would be no reason that such moral feelings should be binding for everyone.

You may choose to believe that there are no objective moral values, or that an unguided, natural process could have installed this value system in each of us. That is your right. But if you do, please know that you believe it—at least partially—by faith.



#### **ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON OBJECTIVE VERSUS SUBJECTIVE MORALITY**

There are three other ideas I should mention at this point:

##### **1. Faith in God is Not Necessary to Grasp Right vs. Wrong**

Some people may assume that I am arguing that a person must believe in God to know right vs. wrong or to make moral decisions. I am not. I'm suggesting that God has made humans in his image and has built this sense of right and wrong into each person—regardless of what that person believes about God.

##### **2. If There is No God, Oppression is Not Wrong**

If there is no God, as I mentioned earlier, we are mere flukes of nature. There are no binding moral values that apply to all of us, because we are simply the result of chemistry and chance. From a moral perspective, we are no different than a rock, a tulip, or a cat. And, as William Lane Craig has pointed out, nobody judges a cat for killing a mouse; it is just being a cat.<sup>9</sup>

If we were the result of only chemistry and chance, we would find ourselves living in a survival-of-the-fittest sort of world. In such a world, the strong are (by definition) greater than the weak.

In such a world, not even oppression could be condemned as wrong. Why? Because oppression would simply be part of the normal course of life as the fittest rule over the less fit.

In American culture today, there are a lot of discussions on power inequalities, oppression, and privilege. Whatever you believe about these topics, they make no sense if God does not exist.

This is not to say that atheists all agree that oppression is okay. I'd guess that most would say that oppression is wrong. But if there is no God, their opinion is subjective and is no more right or wrong than anyone else's opinion. It should be thought-provoking for the atheist to contemplate this question: In a world of subjective moral values, where there is no universal moral law, *on what basis* can an atheist say oppression is wrong?

Some might answer, "On the basis of what's good for humanity." But again, we run into the same problem. Who is to say that one's view of "good" for humanity is better than another's? The crux of this issue is that the atheist—whether he or she realizes it or not—has to actually borrow a concept from a theist's worldview to call *anything* objectively "wrong."

### **3. "Bad" Things that Happen Do Not Disprove God**

Some people do not believe in God because in their judgment, if God were real, some bad thing or event never would have happened.

But we've already observed that the words "good" and "bad" don't have any objective meaning without some universal standard. So, if something a person calls "bad" results in that person doubting that God exists, things get really weird. Think about this carefully. In using "bad things" to argue that God *doesn't* exist, the atheist must use a line of reasoning that only makes sense if God *does* exist. I hope you can see the problem here.

There are also people who believe that God exists, but who refuse to follow him because he allows bad things happen. This is a different sort of problem that demands more space than I can devote to it here, but I have written two pages on this topic in the Endnotes because it is a very important question.<sup>9</sup>



In this and the three previous chapters, we've considered arguments for the existence of some kind of God. These arguments help explain why I believe in God. Arguments for God's existence do demand some level of faith—a faith that I'd call reasonable. I've also sought to show that a belief that God does *not* exist requires a person to believe that by faith.

Writers and thinkers have made other arguments for the existence of God over the years. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, for example, provide overviews of twenty different arguments for the existence of God in their excellent *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*. But now it is time to turn our attention from arguments for some generic God to an argument specifically for the rationality of the Christian faith.

From the beginning of this book, I've said that I believe biblical Christianity is more likely to be true than not true, and that the Christian conception of God is correct. In the chapters that follow, we'll consider why.

I believe the next two chapters offer one of the most compelling arguments for the existence of God we will consider: evidence that God Himself actually stepped into the time-space continuum and visited our planet, in the form of man.

A man named Jesus.

- SECTION FOUR -

# Christianity





## Evidence Matters

FRED KRUEGER<sup>1</sup> WAS RETURNING TO HIS HOME in Connecticut when he saw two men firing a shotgun not far from his home. He didn't know what they were up to, but when he pulled into his driveway, he realized that at least some of their shotgun blasts were actually hitting his house.

Fred was well-liked in his community and was known to be a good man. But he was also a military veteran who had survived combat and an intense fire as part of a tank unit. He was not going to be frightened by two fools with a shotgun.

He went inside and grabbed his .22 pistol.

Fred wanted to let the two men know that they needed to stop. He couldn't see them, so he fired two warning shots into the ground and one high into the air. He hoped that this would scare them away.

When he had first walked outside with his pistol, Fred had no intention of shooting either of the men.

Regardless, one would soon be dead.

✦ ✦ ✦

My mom's cousin by marriage, Jim, is a man I've looked up to since I was a boy. If I were to name the men in my life who I respect the most, he would absolutely be high on the list. At the time that this incident took place near Fred's home, Jim was an investigator in the Connecticut State's Attorneys Office and was assigned to review the evidence.

On the day of the incident, the police had arrived and discovered that the dead man was the victim of a gunshot wound. Over the next few days, detectives talked to the victim's friend, to Fred, and to others. They sought evidence and canvassed the area for witnesses. When the ballistics report came back, it revealed a key piece of evidence.

The lethal bullet had been fired from a .22 pistol.

✦ ✦ ✦

The two men with the shotgun had been in a recreation area goofing off. They thought it would be fun to throw different things up into the air and shoot these flying "targets" out of the sky. They had not imagined that their shotgun blasts could actually reach anyone's home from where they were.

So, when one of the two men suddenly collapsed, it wasn't clear to his buddy what had happened. It turns out, though, that the old adage, "what goes up must come down," is also true of bullets. Tragically so, in this case.

Fred's unaimed warning shot, the one he fired up into the air, had indeed come down. Astonishingly, the bullet—as it literally fell from the sky—had struck and killed one of the two men who were wielding the shotgun.

As he recalled the case, Jim told me, “it was just an awful, awful situation. For everyone. A man with a young family had been killed. And Fred was a good man. But he had fired a bullet that had taken another man's life. There had to be consequences.” Jim understood that his office would have to follow the evidence where it led, regardless of how he or anyone else felt about the story it told.



As we continue to explore evidence for the existence of God, we too must follow it where it leads, regardless of how we may feel about God, religion, or even religious people. And much like investigators do, we should pay attention to how various lines of evidence come together to build a case.

In a court case, it is often true that one single piece of evidence is not enough to secure a conviction. But as different lines of evidence come together, the case against a defendant becomes much more persuasive.

In the previous chapters, we have considered four arguments for the existence of God: the cosmological argument, the argument from design, the fine-tuning argument, and the moral argument. You may find that none of these arguments is fully persuasive on its own. But when considered together, the case gathers strength.

In this chapter, as we turn from evidence for the existence of some non-specific god toward evidence that Christianity is true, I believe the case will become stronger still.

## A DIFFICULT ROAD

In this chapter and the next, we will examine evidence for what I'd call the single most important event in world history, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This can be difficult. Not because the evidence is hard to understand, but because we are talking about an event in the past that we didn't see. Perhaps even more challenging is that the story contains supernatural elements.

Christianity claims that God visited Earth, as a man born to a virgin, grew up, was killed, and then rose from the dead. These are extraordinary claims. Further, eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life include numerous other stories of miracles.

So, if we are honest, we should admit from the beginning that our inclination is to not believe. Not because the evidence is bad, but because—if true—this is the most incredible story ever told. And it is a story that has implications for each of us.

We live in a cynical, skeptical age in which people roll their eyes when any claim is made that would be out of the ordinary or (especially) supernatural. We slip into thinking, even if subconsciously, that we are too sophisticated to believe such a story. We are too easily tempted to believe that people in the past simply weren't as intelligent as we are today. There is a name for this. It is called chronological snobbery.

Earlier in this book, I shared a thought that is worth repeating. Todd and Keith had told me, early in my freshman year, that all of Christianity rises or falls on one event in history: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It either happened or it did not.

That's important because, when considering Christianity, we are not merely considering a philosophical question. We are not

considering a question of religious preference. This is not a “you should believe this because some person you love believed it and taught it to you” question. But be careful; this is also not a “you should reject this because a person you love rejected it and taught you” question. It is also not a “you should reject this because you do not like something Christianity teaches” question.

This is a historical question. Did the resurrection happen?

If it did happen, we should pay careful attention to all that Jesus taught. Men don't rise from the dead every day. Beyond that, Jesus had actually predicted that he'd die and rise again, before it ever happened. Beyond that, Jesus did not claim to merely point to God, but rather to actually *be* God. If the resurrection happened, it gives tremendous weight to all that he taught. But if it did not happen, the Bible acknowledges that believers in the resurrection are to be pitied most of all.<sup>2</sup>

Before I got to college, I did not understand that Christianity claimed to be a religion based on evidence and history. As I explored the evidence for the resurrection, I was fascinated.

It turns out that it is easy to find books that present this evidence. Most go into greater depth than I'll do here. Some of these books were written by men who were skeptics when they began writing. They had set out to disprove the resurrection but found themselves compelled to follow the evidence where it led, even if they didn't initially like their own conclusions.

Albert Henry Ross was a writer from England who wrote books under the pseudonym Frank Morison. He set out to prove that the resurrection was a myth. However, his research led him to a conclusion he did not expect: that the resurrection had actually happened. The first chapter of his book, *Who Moved the Stone?* is called “The Book that Refused to be Written.”

I mentioned earlier that the book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* had been helpful in my journey. The writer, Josh McDowell, knew that if he could disprove the resurrection, he would crush Christianity. And crushing Christianity was his goal. Yet he eventually came to the very same conclusion as did Albert Henry Ross: the resurrection had actually happened.

Lee Strobel's story is nearly identical. An American journalist who earned a Master in Law degree from Yale, Strobel won awards for his work as the legal editor at the *Chicago Tribune*. He was an atheist who also set out to disprove Christianity. His research led him to faith in Christ. In 1998, he took the results of his research and wrote the best-selling book, *The Case for Christ*, a book that has since been turned into a feature film.

Simon Greenleaf played an instrumental role in the founding of Harvard Law School, the most influential law school in America. His three-volume work, *A Treatise on the Law of Evidence*, was written in 1842 and is still considered to be one of the most important legal works on evidence ever written. It helped define the rules for what is and what is not considered to be admissible evidence in America's legal system.

While teaching at Harvard Law, as a Christian, he decided to apply the guidelines he had written on admissible evidence to the evidence for the resurrection. His analysis led him to write a book called *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists, by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*.

His conclusion? That the testimonies recorded in the Bible would stand up well in our courts of law. This is a remarkable conclusion by a brilliant legal mind.

There are other books like these that I could mention, but I'll stop here.

The skeptic may well object at this point: “So what? Some books have been written. That doesn’t mean that these writers came to the right conclusions.” This is true. The fact that I’m writing this book doesn’t mean that my conclusions are correct.

The arguments in these books do matter, however, for at least two reasons.

First, they show that there is a case that can be made on the basis of evidence, a case that very intelligent people have found to be compelling over the years. So, even if I fail to make a persuasive case in this book, there are far brighter thinkers than I am who have studied and written about these topics in greater depth than I have here. I am simply scratching the surface of these arguments, and I will suggest books in the Appendix that will help you take a deeper dive.

Wisdom suggests that we should follow the evidence, whether we like where it leads or not. The question of whether Jesus Christ actually rose from the dead is that important.

### **FACTS ARE FACTS**

Two historical facts about Jesus’ resurrection have always stood out the most to me: the empty tomb and the radically changed lives of Jesus’ disciples.

Add to these two facts Jesus’ own prediction that he’d die and rise again, the claims that he appeared physically to many after his death, the rise of the Christian church despite opposition from the Roman Empire, and the reality that Christianity has profoundly changed the world, and the evidence does indeed begin to demand a verdict.

The empty tomb and the changed lives of the disciples are particularly interesting because it is reasonable to believe both

without having to believe any miracle in the Bible. Each of these facts asks you only to use your mind and logic.

### **1. The Empty Tomb**

Two important historical claims of Christianity are that:

- (1) Jesus of Nazareth was crucified.
- (2) On the third day (counting the day he was crucified), his tomb was found to be empty.

Dr. Paul L. Maier, the Russell H. Seibert Professor of Ancient History at Western Michigan University, wrote:

*If all the evidence is weighed carefully and fairly, it is indeed justifiable, according to the canons of historical research, to conclude that the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea, in which Jesus was buried, was actually empty on the morning of the first Easter. And no shred of evidence has yet been discovered in literary sources, epigraphy, or archaeology that would disprove this statement.<sup>3</sup>*

The claim that Jesus' tomb was empty is one that is found both in and outside of the Bible. The fact that neither Roman nor Jewish sources ever denied the empty tomb is significant.

But even if Dr. Maier's (and others') work, from a historical perspective, doesn't persuade you, simple logic should convince you that the tomb must have been empty. If Jesus' body had been in the tomb, the earliest believers could never have convinced anyone that Jesus had risen. At least not for long.

The disciples began to preach that Jesus had risen from the dead just a short time after the crucifixion. Importantly, they began in Jerusalem, where Jesus had been crucified. Many believed, and the Christian church was born.

If the tomb had not been empty, the disciples' lies (or lunacy) would have quickly been revealed. Once proven wrong, when Jesus' body was shown to still be in the tomb, Christianity would have died in its infancy.

German theologian Paul Althaus has pointed out that claims of Jesus' resurrection "could have not been maintained in Jerusalem for a single day, for a single hour, if the emptiness of the tomb had not been established as a fact for all concerned."<sup>4</sup>

Even the Jewish leaders' response, that Jesus' followers had "stolen the body," affirms the empty tomb. If they had not believed the tomb to be empty, their explanation would have made no sense.

For me, even as an 18-year-old college student, this piece of evidence seemed incredibly important. It still does. The Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire were both highly motivated, for different reasons, to prove wrong the early Christians' claims that Jesus had risen. They wanted to put a stop to the spread of Christianity. All they had to do was to produce Jesus' dead body.

They couldn't do it.

Some might ask, "What if the disciples actually did steal the body?" We'll explore that question in the next chapter.

I'm not going to go much more deeply into evidence for the empty tomb than I've gone here because I think logic screams that it must have been empty. But other evidence does exist.

One of the world's most renowned scholars on the resurrection is Dr. Gary Habermas. He has written more than 20 books on the resurrection, and I've read that he has been working for some time on a massive new book on the subject that may turn

out to be 5,000 pages long when finished. If you want to learn more, from a scholarly perspective, read his books.

In a statement that shows that I am only scratching the surface here, Habermas once said, “how many facts do you need to believe that America won the Revolutionary War? I can give you 21 historical evidences for why the tomb of Jesus was empty that Sunday morning.”<sup>5</sup>

Though I believe it is safe to trust that Jesus’ tomb was empty, a good investigation should also include a consideration of other possible explanations. In the next chapter, we’ll consider other theories that have sought to explain the empty tomb.

## **2. The Disciples Became Convinced That Jesus had Risen**

Consider for a moment the emotional state of Jesus’ disciples after Jesus had been crucified. They were devastated.

They had encountered, in Jesus, a man who could see into their souls, who knew them the best, and yet loved them the most; a man they had seen heal sickness, give sight to the blind, and raise the dead; a man who commanded the wind and waves, all while serving others rather than demanding to be served; and a man who really seemed to be the long-awaited Messiah, yet who was humble enough to have washed their feet.

These men had left everything to follow him. For three years, they had experienced the adventure of a lifetime. They had pushed their chips to the middle and gone all in, believing that he was who he claimed to be: God. But they had lost. Whatever the dream had been, it was over. Now in shock, and doubting all that they had seen with their own eyes, reality set in.

Jesus was dead. It was time to slink back to their homes. Can you feel their pain?

They had never quite let themselves believe that Jesus would die. Their pre-existing Jewish beliefs about resurrection never would have suggested that they could expect Jesus to rise from the dead. Thus, they had not understood Jesus' prediction that he would die and then rise again.

So, they did what many people might have done when Jesus was crucified; they fled, and hid in fear. Peter was so afraid of being found to have been with Jesus that he denied knowing him three times, twice to servant girls. These denials came less than 24 hours after Jesus had predicted Peter would deny him. Peter had responded, "even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." The other disciples made the same sort of promise.<sup>6</sup>

If you had been there the day after Jesus' crucifixion and had seen these men—now broken and hiding in fear—you could never have imagined them one day fearlessly ignoring the threat of death in order to boldly proclaim the Christian message.

You could never have imagined it... unless something dramatically changed. And something did change, dramatically.

They all came to believe that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Whether you believe that Jesus rose from the dead or not, you can trust this: the apostles became absolutely and fully convinced, abruptly, that he did. Even non-Christian New Testament scholars generally admit this.

Think again about the disciples' fragile state immediately after Jesus had been crucified. Now consider that in the coming days, this small band of brothers would gather once more. These formerly broken and fearful men would then do the astounding.

They would change the world.

Their commitment to proclaiming the news of Jesus' resurrection far and wide is what God used to transform lives, start churches, and launch a movement that continues to grow to this day. A movement that, according to a report by Pew Research a few years ago, had grown to 2.3 billion people—or more than a third of the world's population.<sup>7</sup>

Stop here for a moment and think about human nature. The radical change in their lives absolutely demands an explanation. It wasn't just that these frightened men, who had run in fear when Christ was crucified, were now proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. That alone would be remarkable.

Rather, it was that they were doing so without concern for their own lives or safety. They were doing so not only despite direct resistance from the Jewish authorities, but despite the threat of death by the most awesome and feared human fighting force the world had ever known: the Roman Empire.

In the first centuries after Christ's death, the persecution of Christians for proclaiming the resurrection was widespread.

Before the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., a person in the Roman Empire who was found to be a Christian could face execution, imprisonment, or other punishments. The Roman historian Tacitus documented the cruel and inhumane ways that the Roman Emperor Nero had ordered Christians to be killed.

For his book, *The Fate of the Apostles*, Dr. Sean McDowell invested hundreds of hours over more than three years in studying the historical accounts of what happened to the apostles as a result of their proclaiming the message that Christ had risen.

His research tells us that we have good historical confidence, from a range of sources (including a number of non-Christian

sources), that four of Jesus' apostles were killed for proclaiming their faith. Those four were Paul, Peter, Jesus' brother James, and James, the son of Zebedee.<sup>8</sup>

James, the son of Zebedee, was killed by the sword. Though we do not have the same degree of confidence about how the other three were killed, many believe that Paul was beheaded, Peter was crucified (perhaps upside down), and Jesus' brother James was stoned to death.

McDowell further concluded that it is "at least more probable than not" that Thomas and Andrew, too, were killed for proclaiming their faith in the resurrection.<sup>9</sup>

Traditions about the other apostles' deaths suggest that all but John may have also died for their faith. McDowell called accounts of these other apostles' martyrdom "as plausible as not."<sup>10</sup>

Because he found accounts of these other men's deaths to contain contradictions and at least some legend, he admits that we have less historical confidence than we have for the deaths of James, James, Peter, Paul, Thomas, and Andrew.

For example, he said, different ancient sources reported that Bartholomew had been: "crucified; burned to death; killed with swords; skinned alive; and put in a bag and thrown into the water." One of those accounts may be correct, but we do not have what he'd call good historical confidence in any single account.<sup>11</sup>

Dr. McDowell suggests that the most important thing about the persecution of the apostles is that there is no record anywhere of any of them recanting or denying their faith, despite persecution and the threat of death.<sup>12</sup> "The willingness of the apostles to face persecution and death," he said, "indicates their sincere belief that Jesus appeared to them after his death."<sup>13</sup>

Consider the example of Jesus' brother James. During Jesus' life, James was a skeptic. Mark wrote that Jesus' siblings thought he was "out of his mind." John wrote that James had mocked Jesus and did not believe that he was God. And yet this very same man became a bold leader in the church in Jerusalem, and went to his death proclaiming that the Christian message was true.

Pause for a moment here and ask yourself one really important question: What would it take to cause such a radical change in the lives of this entire group of men?

That these men would, over a short period of time, be so profoundly transformed from fearful and denying Jesus to being willing to fearlessly proclaim the resurrection in the face of opposition from the Roman Empire is inexplicable. Inexplicable, that is, unless they had become absolutely and utterly convinced that Jesus had risen from the dead.

They had.

As I considered Christianity as a freshman in college, the facts about this radical transformation of the early followers of Christ seemed convincing. These facts remain important and persuasive to me today.

There are other lines of evidence that point to the conclusion that Jesus rose from the dead, but I've only sought to focus on two so far. Whether you are convinced or not, it seems to me that a thoughtful, objective observer will at least be challenged to think at this point.

Here is one other line of evidence that must be considered.

At least six different historical sources reported that Jesus appeared—bodily—to a variety of people after his death.

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the church at Corinth (found in the Bible as the book called First Corinthians), lists witnesses who had seen and interacted with the risen Christ.<sup>14</sup>

His list included Peter, Jesus' brother James (which would certainly explain his transformation we considered earlier), the twelve disciples together, a group of more than 500 people simultaneously, and other individuals. These people spent time with him, ate with him, and hung out with him, over a period of forty days.

The skeptic may object to my citing the Bible here, but I'd ask that person to be patient; we will tackle the question of the reliability of the Bible in chapter eleven. But it is important to point out that Christianity's founding documents do not leave us with a buried or now-missing Jesus.

This is not, by the way, a "the Bible says it so I believe it" argument. The Bible does say so, but using arguments I've already cited, and will cite in the next chapter, I conclude that Jesus rose from the dead without the Bible having to be supernatural or inspired. In fact, it doesn't need to be anything other than a document of what people reported.

But the different accounts of Jesus' post-crucifixion appearances should not be dismissed. John Warwick Montgomery, an attorney, professor, and theologian, addressed this in his excellent book, *History and Christianity*:

*In 56 A.D. Paul wrote that over 500 people had seen the risen Jesus and that most of them were still alive (1 Corinthians 15:6 ff.). It passes the bounds of credibility that the early Christians could have manufactured such a tale and then preached it among those who might have easily refuted it simply by producing the body of Christ.<sup>15</sup>*

The fact that we do have these different eyewitness reports is at least worth pondering. I'd suggest it is compelling.

The question is, how will you process these testimonies?

+ + +

As we arrive at the end of this chapter, let's remember how it started. We discussed the case of the falling warning shot, and the importance of following the evidence wherever it leads, regardless of how we feel about it.

Any good investigation will not only look at the evidence for a particular theory, but will also explore other possible explanations to see if they hold water. Skeptics have proposed several such explanations.

We'll explore those next.



## A Memorable Pregame

OF ALL THE STORIES I'LL TELL IN THIS BOOK, one of my favorites happened on December 15, 1985, in Washington, DC, at the Washington Convention Center. It involves my favorite pro football team, someone wearing a San Diego Chicken costume while packing a loaded gun, and a pregame like no other.

+++

Seven weeks before that Sunday, a newly-formed all-sports television station called Flagship International Sports TV (or FIST; remember that acronym) had invited a few thousand special guests to the Washington Convention Center for what would prove to be a memorable day.

The invitations said that the guests' names had been randomly selected from DC area residents. Recipients were informed that they would receive brunch, round-trip bus transportation from

the Convention Center to RFK Stadium, and tickets to watch Washington play the Cincinnati Bengals.

A *Washington Post* article on the brunch said,

*Invitees were told to redeem their prize with fellow winners at a pregame party, where they also could enter a drawing for 1986 Redskins season tickets and a one-week, all-expenses-paid trip to Super Bowl XX in New Orleans.<sup>1</sup>*

Of the VIPs invited, 101 showed up. As they entered the Convention Center that morning, they noticed buses outside, warming up and running. This made sense; they had been promised a bus trip to the stadium and back. Attendees were greeted by cheerleaders, the famous San Diego Chicken mascot, an emcee in a top hat and tails, and by others in typical fans' regalia. Highlights from the team's history played on a big screen.

The VIPs were then taken into a smaller room upstairs, 14-16 guests at a time. There, they were told, they would be given their tickets and further details about the day. The mood was festive.

The festive mood would not last long.

As they were settling into the smaller room upstairs, the doors burst open violently. Heavily armed men rushed in, as cheerleaders, the emcee, and even the San Diego Chicken drew weapons. Every gun in the room was aimed at the guests.

There would be no football game for the VIPs that day. They were taken to the buses that were warming up, but RFK Stadium was not on the itinerary. They enjoyed a one-way trip to the DC Superior Court, where they were processed as criminals.

✦ ✦ ✦

Several years prior to that Sunday, the U.S. Marshals Service had formed the Fugitive Investigative Strike Team (or FIST; see what they did there?) to address the growing number of outstanding federal fugitive warrants. Robert Leschorn, who worked for the Marshals Service, came up with a large-scale sting operation in Washington, DC. He called it Operation Flagship.

Operation Flagship involved mailing invitations to the last known address of 3,000 fugitives with outstanding warrants in the DC area. As expected, many of those invitations were returned as undeliverable. But this took place in the era when Washington actually had a great football team, and tickets were hard to get. Leschorn assumed, rightly, that the bait of tickets to a game would be enticing to at least some of the criminals who actually received the invitation.

On the morning of the game, law enforcement officers from a variety of agencies donned costumes and prepared for the arrival of their guests. Leschorn's assumption proved to be correct. Criminals began to show up. They had no idea that anything was wrong. Operation Flagship was a complete surprise and a fantastic success. It was one of the most successful stings of its kind in law enforcement history.<sup>2</sup>

✦ ✦ ✦

A sting. Fugitives brought to justice. Subterfuge. A win for the good guys. My favorite football team. The San Diego Chicken costume as a disguise for an armed, undercover law enforcement agent. This was my kind of story.

The U.S. Marshals Service had created an elaborate hoax. They created a story designed to fool people into believing that if they did X (show up at the Convention Center), the result would be that good thing Y (getting NFL tickets) would happen to them.

“It was party time, and they fell for it hook, line and sinker,” said Herbert M. Rutherford, who was the U.S. Marshal for the District of Columbia.<sup>3</sup>

At this point in the book, it must be asked: could the resurrection—and thus all of Christianity—be based on the same sort of hoax? Is the faith of billions around the globe a result of some giant trick or fraud? Is it a huge mistake? Simon Greenleaf pointed out that if the disciples did not tell the truth, they perpetrated one of the greatest hoaxes the world has ever seen. They started a religion that now boasts billions of followers worldwide.

“Either the men of Galilee were men of superlative wisdom and extensive knowledge and experience, and of deeper skill in the arts of deception, than any and all others, before or after them,” Greenleaf wrote, “or they have truly stated the astonishing things which they saw and heard.”<sup>4</sup>

In the previous chapter, we considered several lines of evidence for the resurrection, including arguments for the empty tomb. A skeptic, however, may say, “even if I accept that the tomb was empty, that doesn’t mean Jesus rose from the dead.” This is true. An empty tomb is easier to believe than that God came to earth as a man, died, and rose from the grave.



## FIVE THEORIES

We will now turn our attention to five theories that skeptics have proposed as alternate explanations for the facts that we considered in the last chapter.

### 1. **The Hoax Theory:** *The apostles lied.*

The hoax theory suggests that the disciples somehow overcame their fear and sadness, snuck past or defeated the highly-trained

guards at Jesus' tomb, rolled away the massive stone, and stole the body, all to help prove the lie they were about to foist upon the world: that Christ had risen.

This theory has always been impossible for me to believe, for several reasons. First, I have never been able to come up with any possible motive the disciples might have had to do this. Further, even if it had somehow seemed like a good idea to one of them, common sense screams that this sort of hoax would never have seemed like a good idea to *all* of them.

Even if some motive existed, I do not believe they would have had the courage, emotional energy, or capacity to actually pull it off. For example, I do not believe that a team of Roman guards would have been sleeping, as the Jewish authorities claimed. If caught sleeping on duty, a Roman soldier would have likely faced his own execution. If the guards weren't sleeping, the disciples would have had to overpower them.

Even if they had somehow overpowered (or snuck by) the guards and successfully stolen Jesus' body, I do not believe that they would have been willing to be persecuted for what they knew to be a lie. And even if they had somehow maintained the lie and had been willing to be persecuted for it, I do not believe that all of them would have taken this secret with them to their graves. One or more of them certainly would have admitted the hoax, eventually.

And even if none of them ever admitted that they had made up the story, someone (again, knowing it to be a lie) almost certainly would have denied his faith in it. At least one of them would have said, "I don't believe it," even if only to save his own skin.

A man might die for something that turns out to be a lie, but *only if he never realizes it was a lie.*

In this case, if the disciples made this whole thing up, do you honestly believe that all of them would have then willingly faced persecution, torture, potential death—and in some cases, actual death—to tell this story that they knew was false? I do not.

The resurrection story was not a hoax created by the apostles.

**2. The Mistake Theory:** *The apostles were fooled or mistaken.*

The mistake theory suggests that the apostles actually came to believe that Jesus had risen, but that all of them were wrong.

Skeptics have suggested at least three different possible ways that this could have happened:

*Jesus' Body was Stolen or Moved*

We have already considered the improbable idea that the disciples stole Jesus' body. But what if someone else had done it?

If his body had been stolen or moved, it would be logical to ask, "Who did it?" And, "Why?" And, "Who would have risked taking on the guards to steal or move it?"

Some have suggested that his body might have been placed in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb only for a short period of time and then moved. However, Jewish laws prohibited moving a non-family member's body after it had been interred. And, again, if the body had been moved and the disciples started preaching that Jesus had actually risen from the dead, those who knew better would have pointed out the error.

Another possibility is that the opponents of Christianity stole or moved the body. But this seems unlikely as well. Again, the authorities were highly motivated to prove that Jesus did not rise from the dead. If Christianity's opponents had stolen the body, they certainly would have produced it, and possibly even

paraded it around in some sort of gruesome show, to completely shut down rumors of the resurrection.

So, if neither Jesus' friends nor the authorities stole the body, could some random third party have done it?

Perhaps, but is there any possible motive for such a third party to have done this? There would have been no profit involved. Worse, they would have had to risk confronting the guards at the tomb to steal the body.

This theory also fails to address Jesus' post-death appearances.

### *Jesus' Body was Accidentally Buried in the Wrong Tomb*

Although it is possible to imagine that Jesus' body could have somehow been placed in the wrong tomb, it is incredibly difficult to imagine that this mistake would not have been quickly discovered.

The disciples would soon begin preaching that Jesus had risen from the dead. The authorities did not want to deal with this new religion that, in different ways, would challenge both the Roman and Jewish authorities. If Jesus' body had simply been placed in the wrong tomb, we can be sure that the authorities would have spared no expense to produce Jesus' body in order to stop the growth of this new religion.

This possibility also fails to explain the fact that the disciples would later become convinced that many people had physically encountered the risen Jesus.

### *Jesus' Post-Death Appearances were Hallucinations*

Another theory about how the apostles could have been fooled has been suggested: hallucinations. This theory suggests that all of the people who reported having seen Jesus alive had

actually only thought they had seen the risen Christ when, in fact, he was still dead. They hallucinated. But this theory, too, faces problems. I will list four.

- a. Generally, hallucinations are understood by psychologists to be unique, very personal, and subjective experiences. It would be unusual for even two people to share the same hallucination. In the case of the reported appearances of Jesus, more than 500 people—in different places, times, and contexts—would have had to share this hallucination.
- b. Hallucinations tend to last only a short period of time that typically would be measured in seconds or, occasionally, minutes. After Jesus' first post-death appearance, the Bible claims that he spent time interacting with people for more than five weeks.
- c. It is thought that hallucinations tend to be linked to a person's pre-existing or subconscious knowledge, understanding, and/or hopes. Jesus' first followers were Jewish. Their understanding of resurrection would have made it incredibly unlikely that they would have even dreamed for a moment that Jesus would actually rise from the dead.
- d. Perhaps the most crushing of the problems with this theory is that if this sort of mass hallucination did happen, it would mean Jesus' body would still have been in the tomb. At that point, one of two things would have happened. Either the disciples would have gone back to somehow check the grave, to see if Jesus' body was still there, or the authorities would have done it. Jesus' body would have been found, and Christianity would have never have been born.

Could the disciples have simply been fooled? I doubt it.

Again, what explanation best fits the facts? The disciples would have been totally confident that the Roman executioners had done their job correctly. They had been so sure that Jesus was dead that when they first heard that the tomb was empty, even they wondered if someone had taken the body. Why? The idea of a resurrection was not even on their radar.

They still didn't get it.

A few days after the empty grave had been discovered—and after they had heard from Mary Magdalene that she had seen and talked to the risen Jesus—they still locked themselves into a room in fear. And even after the other disciples told Thomas that they had seen Jesus, his doubt was so great that his unfortunate nickname, “Doubting Thomas,” was born. Thomas and the other disciples knew that Jesus was dead.

Until they knew that he was alive once again.

“The early Christians,” Tim Keller has written, “did not believe because they wanted to believe. They didn't believe just because it was an inspiring story. They believed because the evidence was so overwhelming they were forced to believe it in spite of everything they actually thought.”<sup>5</sup>

They became so profoundly convinced that Jesus had risen that they were all willing to openly defy the emperor by taking the Christian message to the world.

Consider Thomas. If he had even a hint that he might be wrong, his doubts would have paralyzed him. But he became so convinced that the church in India tells us he spent the rest of his life taking the message of Christ's resurrection there.<sup>6</sup>

I wrote earlier that sincerity of belief does not equal validity. This is true. But it is also possible for a truth discovery to change skepticism into sincerity.

The disciples' behavior is consistent with what we might expect from people who had experienced something that would change any of our lives: an encounter with a formerly dead but now-alive Savior. They knew what they had seen.

**3. The Myth Theory:** *The resurrection story is a myth.*

Many writers have examined the myth theory and found it to be less than compelling. Peter Kreeft and Ronald J. Tacelli, in their *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, proposed six arguments to refute the Myth Theory. I will share the big idea from each of their six points, as I have no hope of making this case more clearly than they have.

- a. *The style of the Gospels is radically and clearly different from the style of all of the myths. Any literary scholar who knows and appreciates myths can verify this.*
- b. *There was not enough time for the myth to develop... Several generations have to pass before the added mythological elements can be mistakenly believed to be facts. Eyewitnesses would be around before that to discredit the new, mythic versions.*
- c. *The myth theory has two layers. The first layer is the historical Jesus, who was not divine, did not claim divinity, performed no miracles, and did not rise from the dead. The second, [added] later, mythologized layer is the Gospels as we have them, with a Jesus who claimed to be divine, performed miracles, and rose from the dead. The problem with this theory is that there is not the slightest bit of any real evidence whatever of the existence of any such first layer...*

- d. *The first witnesses of the resurrection were women. In first-century Judaism, women had low social status and no legal right to serve as witnesses. If the empty tomb were an invented legend, its inventors would not have had it discovered by women, whose testimony was considered worthless...*
- e. *The New Testament could not be misinterpreted and confused with fact because it specifically distinguishes the two and [rejects] the mythic interpretation...*
- f. *The Gospels, first, “were [actually] written by the disciples, not later myth-makers,” and second, the “Gospels we have today are essentially the same as the originals.”<sup>7</sup>*

We will further explore the reliability of the Gospels (and of the Bible as a whole) in the following chapter.

#### **4. False History Theory:** *Jesus never actually lived.*

Although this idea has popped up in different places at different times, I will not spend much time on it here. The vast majority of historians—even agnostic and atheistic historians—agree that Jesus of Nazareth was a real, historical person. Even Bart Ehrman, an agnostic and outspoken critic of Christianity, has written that Jesus “certainly existed, as virtually every competent scholar of antiquity, Christian or non-Christian agrees.”<sup>8</sup>

To deny that Jesus lived would demand that we reject just about all of what we know about ancient history, and that we disagree with the weight of historical scholarship.

#### **5. The Swoon Theory:** *Jesus never actually died.*

This theory suggests that Jesus only seemed to have died—that he “swooned,” or just appeared to be dead. So, after having been placed in the tomb, he got up, somehow escaped from the tomb, and was able to convince his disciples that he had risen.

But history, medicine, and logic work together to show that this hypothesis is problematic, on several levels. To understand how unreasonable it is to believe that Jesus did not die on what the church now calls Good Friday, it is important to understand all that he was forced to endure that day.

I will refer to the Bible here only as a record of Jesus' sufferings. The Bible mentions the scourging (or whipping) that Jesus endured at the hands of Romans, but without a lot of detail.

In Jesus' day, a person set to be crucified by the Romans would often have been scourged first, using a flagrum, a multi-strand whip that contained bone and/or metal balls. The flagrum was designed to literally tear into the skin and rip away chunks of flesh—a punishment intended to torture if not kill.

The Romans believed that 40 lashes would kill a person, though they would often need to stop before 40 if they wanted to be sure that a subject did not die. We do not know exactly how many lashes Jesus received, though it is very likely that his scourging was brutal. I've explained why in the Endnotes.<sup>9</sup>

Research by a number of medical professionals who reviewed Jesus' likely physical condition throughout his ordeal suggests that his body would have been starting to fail before the cross. "Jesus' condition after scourging was serious," one article said.<sup>10</sup> "The torture would have left him in early traumatic or injury shock. And also, most likely, in early hypovolemic shock" [a condition that occurs as a result of blood and water loss].<sup>11</sup>

We tend not to think much about the crown of thorns that was pressed onto Jesus' head because it seems less serious than other cruelties to which Jesus was subjected. But, according to the article cited above, it likely would have "triggered a condition that causes a blinding, extraordinary amount of facial pain."<sup>12</sup>

In this weakened state, he was forced to carry the beam of the cross to the site outside of Jerusalem where he would be crucified. He fell several times, as he struggled under its weight, until the soldiers ordered a man named Simon of Cyrene to help him.

And then came the cross.

Crucifixion is one of the most horrific ways a person can die. It has been called barbaric because it is a cruel, slow process designed to torture. The Roman troops were occupying Israel at that time, and history tells us that they crucified many in Jerusalem who dared to rise up against them. By allowing the public to witness these awful deaths, it served as a warning to anyone tempted to revolt: “You do *not* want this to be your fate.”

The Roman executioners were disciplined and well-trained. They knew what they were doing and had experience in understanding when a crucified person was truly dead. They were professional killers, and if they failed to execute a prisoner properly, they could potentially face execution themselves.

When they were not positive whether someone on the cross was truly dead, they broke the person’s legs. This sped up the process by making it more difficult for the person on the cross to bear weight on his legs, making it harder to lift his body up into a position to breathe.

The soldiers, however, were so sure that Jesus was dead that they never broke his legs. Further, the biblical report that blood and water came from Jesus’ side after they stabbed him was something that they would not have known then—but we know now—provides additional proof that Jesus had died.

Jesus’ body was then taken down from the cross, wrapped in linens and spices, and taken to the tomb.

A stone—which a range of estimates suggest may have weighed between one and two tons—was rolled into place to secure the tomb. After the tomb was sealed, guards were stationed outside. According to Matthew, the Jewish chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate to have the tomb guarded to prevent the disciples from stealing the body.

Let's pause at this point and imagine that Jesus had not really died. If, after all he had just been through, he somehow was still alive, he almost certainly would have been in what today we might call critical condition. Even escaping from the hardened (or still hardening) linens and spices in which his body had been wrapped would have been very difficult.

At that point, while barely clinging to life, he would have had to: (1) remove the heavy stone, which would have been borderline impossible for any one person to do, but especially difficult from the inside of the tomb; (2) overpower what was likely a team of highly-trained Roman guards; (3) find his now-scattered—and shattered—disciples; and (4) somehow convince them that he was the risen savior and God of the universe, who had conquered death.

*The Journal of the American Medical Association* chimed in on the swoon theory after reviewing the evidence. It concluded that “any swoon hypothesis is entirely irreconcilable with contemporary medical science.”<sup>13</sup>

Though non-Christian historians tend to debate which parts of Jesus' life story they believe to be true, very few doubt that he was crucified. Jesus actually died.

### **SO, WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?**

If Jesus lived and died, and the disciples were not mistaken, and were neither deceivers nor myth-makers, the skeptic begins to

run out of good ways to explain the empty tomb. One of the strengths of the empty tomb argument is that alternate explanations are simply not compelling.

We have now considered a series of six historical facts:

1. Jesus was crucified and buried. We have first-century, non-Christian historians who affirm this, like Josephus and the widely-respected Tacitus. We have Christian sources from outside of the New Testament (including Ignatius, Clement of Rome, and others) who affirm this. And we have affirmations in six different books of the New Testament (written by five different authors).
2. On the third day (counting the day Jesus died), his tomb was found to be empty, despite the fact that it had been guarded to ensure that nobody could steal the body.
3. Neither the Roman Empire nor the Jewish authorities disputed that the tomb was empty. The Jewish leaders even sought to explain the empty tomb by saying the disciples had stolen the body.
4. Jesus' formerly frightened and hiding disciples each experienced, after reporting that they had seen the risen Christ, a profoundly radical transformation. So much so that they began to courageously preach that Jesus had risen, even in the face of opposition and persecution.
5. At least four of them—and perhaps nearly all of them—died for proclaiming the resurrection.
6. There is no record of any of them recanting their faith nor their belief that Jesus actually and physically rose from the dead.

We can have historical confidence that these six facts are true. In addition, Jesus predicted that he would die and rise again. And the Bible reports that Jesus' closest followers, along with more than 500 other people, in different contexts and different places, reported that they had seen the risen Christ.

How do you process these facts? What best explains the empty tomb, the radical change in the apostles, and the testimonies provided by Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul?

If you want to explore further evidence for the resurrection, check all that Dr. Gary Habermas has written on the subject. He once said, "the most common objection to the resurrection is not that there's not enough evidence. The most common objection is, 'I don't like it.'"<sup>14</sup>



### **CHANGED LIVES... AND A CHANGED WORLD**

If a person does conclude that Jesus rose from the dead, it is worth asking what more evidence one might need for the truth of Christianity. But beyond the resurrection, there is other evidence that further suggests that the disciples were not guilty of creating the world's greatest hoax.

For example, Jesus fulfilled an extraordinarily unlikely number of specific Old Testament prophecies that had been made about the coming Messiah—prophecies recorded long before Jesus was born. Many who have studied this deeply can make a compelling case that this line of evidence is a strong one.<sup>15</sup>

Another line of evidence is one that I know may cause a skeptic to object. Still, it is worthy of our consideration. The changed lives of billions of followers of Christ through the centuries, across cultures, and around the world—and the profound

changes Christianity has brought into the world—are things we should expect to see if Christianity is true. In churches in every culture where the Christian message has made inroads (and, remarkably, in many cultures where it has been banned), you will find Christians who credit Jesus for having changed their lives, sometimes in specific and miraculous ways.

These people will tell you that they have found hope, strength, purpose, freedom, and transformation through Christ. Many will tell you that their faith has provided a peace that passes understanding, and joy—even in the midst of life’s various trials.

But be careful here.

I have already mentioned that we should be wary of subjective experiences, and that sincerity does not equal validity. The fact that a person believes some idea does not make that idea true.

So, I am not suggesting that stories of life change prove that Christianity is true. Rather, I am arguing in the other direction. I am suggesting that if Christ did rise from the dead, and Christianity really is true, we should expect to see these kinds of changes, both in individual lives and in the world as a whole.

Everyone’s story is different. But I believe that each story is a small piece of evidence. It is, in a way, icing on the cake. But maybe it is more than just icing on the cake. If billions of lives have been changed, one would expect that the world itself would also have been changed by Christianity. And it has been, perhaps in more ways than you realize.

I don’t have space here to get into this topic with the depth it deserves, but I will recommend two good books on this in the Endnotes.<sup>16</sup> Suffice it to say that Jesus’ teachings and influence have had an extraordinary impact. Examples are everywhere.

From human rights to the value and dignity of human life, Christ's teachings have transformed how most modern cultures view and value others. Before Christ, these ideas were simply not on anyone's radar.

Jesus' teachings made it clear that racism is a sin. Christianity's teachings on compassion and care for the less fortunate led to the founding of the first hospitals and orphanages. The Christian worldview has elevated the status of women in cultures where biblical values have been embraced. Prior to the rise of Christianity, women were widely viewed as second-class citizens in cultures all over the world. In some cultures, they still are.

Christianity has had an enormous impact on science and education. In America alone, our oldest and most prestigious universities—including Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and many others—were founded by Christians to glorify God and make him known in the world.

Scientific pioneers like Galileo, Boyle, Newton, Copernicus, Kepler, and others were Christians who sought to glorify God through their discoveries and work.

If Christianity is true, we should expect that it would have had an impact not only in the areas listed above, but also in areas including law, art, architecture, literature, music, and more. And it has.

Why? Because Jesus' life and teachings were truly revolutionary.

None of this is to say that Christians (even those who have experienced genuine life change through their faith) are perfect. If you know me, you have heard me confess openly that I fail to live out Christ's teachings perfectly. I fail at this more often than I'd care to admit.

And we must not ignore the fact that some people have been deeply and profoundly hurt by Christians and by terrible things that have been done by Christians—sometimes even in the name of Christianity. It would be wrong to pretend that this isn't true. But even in the Bible, writers call out some gross sin, sometimes sin within churches. We know that this grieves God.

When Christians or a group of Christians fail to live, love, or act as they should, it damages the reputation of the church. Sometimes, it tempts people to turn away from God. And skeptics certainly will see this as further ammunition for arguing that Christianity must not be true.

But we know that until we die, even Christians will continue to battle with temptation, sin, and struggles of different kinds. So, it is important to recognize that the wrong or even terrible actions of some Christians do not invalidate Jesus' teachings about how we *ought* to live.

I once read that “an idea is not responsible for those who choose to follow it.”<sup>17</sup> Applied to Christianity, this suggests that if Jesus is really God, his teachings are still true even if his followers fail to perfectly obey them.

If anything, these failures point to our brokenness. To our need for forgiveness. And to the reality of spiritual warfare.

If you have been wounded in some way by the actions of a Christian or group of Christians, I am truly sorry. But as difficult as this may be, I would encourage you to look beyond the failure of his imperfect followers. Look instead to the fully perfect savior, Jesus, who, for the joy set before him, laid down his life for broken and sinful people like us. Regardless of how badly some of his followers have acted, Jesus' impact on the world has been unrivaled in all of history.

Consider James Allan Francis' famous four paragraphs about Jesus, called *One Solitary Life*.

*He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then, for three years, he was an itinerant preacher.*

*He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn't go to college. He never lived in a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.*

*He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his garments, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend.*

*Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race. I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned—put together—have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life.<sup>18</sup>*

As powerful as Francis' words are, if Jesus actually rose from the dead, his impact reaches far beyond just the difference he made while on earth. His impact literally reaches into heaven.

And his teachings about life, eternal life, and how we can relate to God should dramatically change our lives.

The best record of those teachings is found in the Bible. This is why the Bible matters. But many people ask if the Bible can be trusted. This is an important question.

We will tackle that next.





## The Collection

IMAGINE THAT MY FRIEND BECKY DECIDED TO PURSUE a law degree. Let's say that she graduated from law school, put in the 400+ hours of study it takes to prepare for the bar exam, passed it, and went on to land a job with a criminal defense firm. She looked forward to becoming a trial lawyer, to defending the innocent, and to ensuring that the guilty would receive fair trials.

Fast forward a couple of years, and imagine that my friends Tori, Riley, Anne, and Kate were at dinner with Becky when Riley asked for Becky's help. She said that her boyfriend Chad had been arrested and wrongly accused of a crime. She was positive he was innocent and was scared. Becky agreed to take his case.

At the heart of Chad's defense would be five eyewitnesses. Each, Becky thought, would be credible and convincing. The witnesses did not know each other, came from different walks of life, and had no motive to help Chad. Chad's case looked solid to Becky.

As required, Becky gave the witnesses' names to the prosecutor before the trial. Each witness had a slightly different take on some of the details, as eyewitnesses do, but their stories lined up in all the ways that mattered. They knew what they had seen; Chad had been an innocent bystander.

Just before the trial, Becky learned that the prosecutor was going to make a motion to suppress (or disallow) the testimony of all five of her key witnesses. She was not happy.

When she arrived for the hearing, she saw that the prosecutor had printed all five of her witnesses' statements and that he had bundled them together into one document. His document (oddly) had a title page. He had titled it *The Collection*. When he stood to explain his motion, he repeatedly waved the document around as he argued that:

1. Each of the testimonies was included in *The Collection*;
2. *The Collection*, as a whole, seemed biased—the whole thing pointed toward Chad's innocence; and therefore
3. Everything in *The Collection* should be disallowed.

If you are even sort of awake as you read this, you will recognize how ridiculous such an argument would be. The prosecutor, who had been the one who bound *The Collection* together in the first place, was desperate. He was grasping at straws. No prosecutor would dare make such a motion; the judge would be angry that the prosecutor had wasted the court's time.

Becky shook her head in disbelief. Her *goal* was to call witnesses whose testimonies would prove Chad's innocence. The fact that the prosecutor had bundled the testimonies together did nothing to weaken any one of their stories. That the testimony of an eyewitness should be thrown out simply because it had been bundled with other testimonies is an awful argument.

However realistic or unrealistic this scenario might be from a legal perspective, the prosecutor's rationale in this imagined case is not terribly different than the rationale some people seem to use when thinking about testimonies found in the Bible. If it's in the Bible, some are tempted to think, it can't be trusted.

But this line of thinking needs to be challenged. Rather than rejecting a testimony in the Bible simply because it has been bound together with other documents, the content of the different authors' writings should be viewed and evaluated on their own merit, as standalone historical documents.

Consider one claim: that Jesus appeared alive, to many, after his death. It is not wrong to say, "the Bible makes this claim." But it is more helpful to recognize that six *separate* historical documents (all now part of the Bible) claim that these appearances happened. These documents were written by five different authors, each writing in a different context. It was only later that they were bound together as part of the Bible.

The fact that these six separate documents exist, historically speaking, carries more weight with historians than if just one source document existed. The fact that they were eventually pulled together into a larger collection is not a sufficient reason to reject any of them.

✦ ✦ ✦

Any mention of the Bible, in a discussion with a non-Christian, will sometimes threaten to shut down the entire conversation. I get it: the Bible contains some pretty wild stories and even some radical ideas. (Love your enemies?) But shouldn't we expect that a collection of books that claim to be the inspired word of God would contain stories and ideas that are quite different than what some might call a more "normal" book?

If God does exist, and God really did inspire the writers to write what they wrote, it has always seemed to me that we should expect the Bible to be a book that is different (and perhaps very different) from all other books. And it is.

### **THREE TESTS FOR THE RELIABILITY OF AN ANCIENT BOOK**

There are several tests that have been used to help determine whether an ancient book should be considered historically reliable. Here are three: the internal evidence test, the external evidence test, and the bibliographical test.

#### **1. Is the Book Internally Consistent?**

The internal evidence test looks at a document's internal consistency. It asks whether inconsistencies and or inexplicable errors are found within the document itself. Historical documents that fail here are deemed not to be reliable.

The Bible is an extraordinary, and extraordinarily unique, book. In fact, it is a bit misleading to think of it as one book at all. Rather it really is an anthology—a collection, really—of 66 different books written by more than 30 different authors. The very word “Bible” comes from the Greek word *biblia*, or “books.”

The biblical writers included kings, scholars, shepherds, fishermen, a military general, a physician, a priest, and others. They wrote on three different continents, in three different languages, over a period of nearly 2,000 years. Yet, despite this wide range of contexts, their writings reflect profoundly consistent themes and a consistent overarching story.

A second piece of internal evidence comes from the various historical accounts recorded in the Bible. For example, the Bible includes four different accounts of Jesus' life. The fact that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote their Gospels in different places, with different purposes, and with different audiences in

mind, helps to strengthen the New Testament's reliability. Because these are four distinct historical documents written by four different men, we find that their perspectives provide a fuller picture of Jesus' life and teachings. There are stories and details in each of the four Gospels that fill in gaps that are missing in the other three. The writers' testimonies are compelling.

A man named J. Warner Wallace is one of America's most well-known cold-case detectives. Before he retired, he worked to solve homicides for many years in southern California. His work, and his commentary on other cases, have been featured on *NBC News*, *Dateline*, *Fox News*, and CourtTV.

Wallace grew up as an atheist, and shared his father's view that Christianity was a delusion. But when his wife suggested they try going to church, he agreed. He was sure he would never believe the Christian message but thought the church might have something helpful to offer him and his wife as parents.

They picked a church, and on the first Sunday they visited, the pastor claimed that Jesus was the smartest man who had ever lived. Wallace immediately doubted that claim. Further, the pastor claimed that upon the teaching of Jesus, all of western civilization had been founded.

Wallace thought, "That is not true."<sup>1</sup>

But he did want to learn more about the teachings of Jesus, so he bought a Bible, out of curiosity. As he began to read through the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life, he realized two things.

First, he recognized that the way the reports from the eyewitnesses were written reminded him very much of the kind of eyewitness accounts he was used to seeing when examining evidence in criminal cold cases.<sup>2</sup>

Here's how he described the similarities:

*I don't have access to the original eyewitnesses—sometimes it is 35 years later, and they are dead. I don't even have access to the people who wrote the reports about the original eyewitnesses, because those guys are dead. So I'm looking at reports of eyewitness accounts where I have no access to either the eyewitnesses or the report writer. What does that sound like to you? Those are the Gospels.<sup>3</sup>*

Second, as Wallace read the eyewitness accounts in the New Testament, he found that they had what he called a compelling texture to them. So, he decided to apply the same template he used in his criminal cold cases to examine these documents.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, he concluded that the testimonies contained in the Gospels seemed credible and demanded further study. He set aside his presuppositions as an atheist, followed the evidence where it led, and eventually became a Christian. I do not share Wallace's story here as an attempt to claim that the New Testament is true simply because Wallace came to believe it is true. Rather, I share his story as an illustration of the compelling nature of the internal evidence—the content—found in the Bible. It does not disqualify itself.

In Frank Turek and Norman Geisler's book, *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, they provide a list of details that they suggest would have been unlikely to have made it into the Bible if it had been a made-up work of fiction.<sup>5</sup> Nine of the points from their list, in my view, offer internal evidence that strengthens the credibility of the Bible. Turek and Geisler point out (in a slightly different order) that the biblical writers:

- Included embarrassing details about themselves
- Included embarrassing details and difficult sayings of Jesus

- Included demanding sayings of Jesus
- Carefully distinguished Jesus' words from their own
- Included events related to the resurrection that they would not have invented
- Included more than 30 historically confirmed people in their writings
- Described miracles like other historical events: with simple, unembellished accounts
- Challenged their readers to check out verifiable facts, even facts about miracles
- Included divergent details<sup>6</sup>

This final point, above, that the writers included divergent details, is seen by some as a problem. Some would call these divergent details contradictions that hurt the Bible's credibility.

I've talked to people over the years who claimed that the Bible is "full of contradictions." In most cases, I've asked the person if they would show me a contradiction that bothered them, so we could discuss it. They usually weren't able to name one; they had simply repeated an objection they had heard elsewhere.

That's not to say that apparent contradictions do not exist; they do. But through the centuries a number of thoughtful and intelligent Christians have listed and examined every apparent contradiction in the Bible.

Their conclusions are always the same: Yes, there are things that seem to be contradictions in the Bible. But the apparent contradictions can be explained, and thus generally do not pose a serious threat to the Bible's credibility (or to one's faith).

Mark Strauss, a seminary professor, has written a great article on types of situations that might cause something in the Bible to appear to be a contradiction when it actually is not.<sup>7</sup>

Here is one example he provides:

*If you were to ask a husband and wife what they did last Saturday, you're going to get different responses. Maybe the husband will tell you that they worked in the yard, went to the hardware store, and went out for lunch. The wife, on the other hand, might tell you, "We planted rosebushes, talked to our friends Jarriid and Allie (who they ran into at the store), and got into an argument (because the husband ordered a milkshake even though he's lactose intolerant)."*

*These two stories don't represent discrepancies; they highlight differences in perspective. For the wife, running into their friends was a bigger deal than going to the hardware store, so she focused on the important point and omitted the other. The husband had already forgotten about the argument, and remembered lunch as a high point...*

*This example represents the differences you expect to encounter with people describing the same event. We run into the same kind of thing with the gospel writers. They each focused on some details while ignoring others entirely. On the surface, it's easy to assume that these omissions are contradictory, but that's not necessarily so.<sup>8</sup>*

Here is a different, real-life, example that you may remember. On February 23, 2021, professional golfer Tiger Woods was in a horrible car crash just south of Los Angeles.

When a friend texted me about it, I visited the websites of a couple of news outlets that were providing live coverage. I was immediately struck by what seemed to be contradictory reports. First, a reporter in a helicopter said that it had been a single-car accident. I switched websites and heard a different reporter who was on the scene claim that three cars were involved.

This is a great example of what can happen when two different people describe the exact same scene. As it turns out, what seemed to be a contradiction is easily understood. The first reporter was telling the truth when he reported that it had been a single-car accident. No other vehicle had struck or been struck by Woods' SUV. The second reporter, who reported that three cars were involved, was also telling the truth. When Woods' car veered across the median, a car in the oncoming lane stopped short to avoid being hit by Woods' car. That person's car had then been rear-ended by a third car.

As far as I know, Woods' accident was officially a single-vehicle accident. But it had caused a separate accident that involved two other vehicles. Did the reporters report different facts? Yes. Did they seem contradictory? Yes. Was either lying or mistaken? I don't think so. I would be surprised if anyone would accuse either reporter of getting the story wrong.

These two reports are a great example of one of the types of things that some have called contradictions in the Bible.

For example, some have claimed that the four Gospels disagree on the number of angels present at Jesus' tomb when it was found to be empty. Matthew and Mark mention one angel's presence. Luke and John mention the presence of two angels.

But neither Matthew nor Mark writes that there was *only* one angel at the tomb. Further, in reading the four accounts, one will see that Matthew and Mark seemed to focus on how the stone got rolled away. On the other hand, Luke and John seem to focus more on the discussion with the women who had shown up, and on how many angels helped Jesus get out of the tomb.<sup>9</sup>

I'll share one final illustration that may be helpful when thinking about this specific example of the angels at the tomb.

Imagine that my wife's sister Kim, her friend Susan, and our niece Sarah (Kim's daughter) stopped by our house to drop something off for Karey while Karey was out. Let's further imagine that two of our friends—neighbors both named Beth—were standing on the sidewalk talking when Kim pulled up, and that Kim and Susan got out of the car to chat with them. Finally, let's say that neither of the two Beths noticed Sarah, who had stayed in the back seat of the car so she could text a friend.

Now imagine that later that day, I was getting into my car to run an errand when Karey pulled into the driveway. I would probably say where I was headed. I might also add, "Oh, by the way, Kim stopped by to drop something off for you. It's in the garage."

I would not have felt the need, as I talked to Karey in passing, to share every detail of Kim's visit. I would have only shared what I judged to be most important for Karey to know in that moment—that Kim had left something in the garage for her.

If one of our two friends named Beth happened to run into Karey later, she might say that she enjoyed the conversation she had with Kim and Susan when they stopped by. This, of course, would be new information for Karey, who would not have known that Susan also stopped by with Kim.

Finally, imagine that Kim texted Karey later: "Hey. Susan, Sarah, and I stopped by and left something in the garage for you."

Some might suggest that the three of us had contradicted each other. I had shared only the most important detail. Beth focused, relationally, on the fact that she enjoyed seeing Kim and Susan. And Kim simply texted facts.

I'd call our versions of the story complementary rather than contradictory. Each filled in different details for Karey. But each

of our stories did seem to be different. And differing reports are typical when more than one eyewitness observes the same event.

Detectives say that if witnesses' stories match too perfectly, they get suspicious. J. Warner Wallace has spoken about this often. During his career as a police detective, Wallace said, he "realized early on that no two eyewitnesses ever agree." He went on:

*When I get called to a murder scene, the first thing I ask the dispatcher is, "Is there an officer on the scene?" Why do I ask that? Because I don't want to get there and get four exact, repeated stories because they have been sitting around talking to each other for an hour before I got there and they got their stories together. I expect them to come at it with some things that will even seem self-contradictory at first. Things that will look different from the [other] accounts. Questions raised by one witness that will be answered by the other. That's the nature of true, reliable eyewitness accounts. And once you know that, you are able to puzzle the accounts back together.<sup>10</sup>*

Wallace has written quite a bit about apparent contradictions in the Bible, and about how to think about them. His article, *Ten Principles When Considering Alleged Bible Contradictions*, is helpful, as are books I'll mention in the Appendix.<sup>11</sup>

So, should two things in the Bible that seem to be contradictory at first glance automatically be viewed as evidence that the Bible is not reliable or that we should not trust it? No.

In fact, I would argue that many of the seemingly contradictory details may actually make the Bible *more* trustworthy. Why? Because if people had set out to create a false religion and had made up the Bible to support their big lie, it seems clear that they would have cleaned up the apparent contradictions.

When one considers the consistency of the overarching Biblical story and the nature of its internal evidence, it seems fairly clear that the Bible does not disqualify itself.

## **2. Is the Book Consistent with External Sources?**

The external evidence test looks at evidence from outside of the document being examined. It compares external evidence about events, locations, and historical references with the content of the document in question.

Archaeology, books, letters, and maps from the same era are some of the sources that can help confirm a document's historical reliability. The study of archaeology has been a tremendously ally in confirming historical facts found in the Bible. Over the centuries, some biblical stories and facts have been questioned and called false, only to have later been proven correct—often by archaeology.

Here is one example. It is widely believed by New Testament scholars—even non-Christian New Testament scholars—that both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts were written by the same person, a physician named Luke. Some have even called the book of Acts “part two” of the Gospel of Luke. Together, these two books make up more than one-fourth of the entire New Testament.

Luke's influence was enormous. But in the late 1800s, some began to challenge the historical reliability of his work. Critics felt that archaeology had not provided enough support for much of what Luke wrote. Put differently, when they applied the external evidence test to his work, some claimed it failed.

This led an archaeologist, William Ramsay, to investigate. As an atheist, he rejected Acts as an accurate record of history. He reportedly thought it to be a book of fables. To prove it, he moved

from Scotland to Asia Minor and invested years of his life trying to show that Luke had gotten it wrong. But he couldn't do it.

The more time he invested, the more he was forced to admit that Luke's work was excellent. From the smallest details to descriptions of geography, terminology, people, titles, and events, Ramsay concluded that Luke was "a historian of the first rank,"<sup>12</sup> and that he "should be placed along with the greatest of historians."<sup>13</sup>

Ramsay's conclusions matter; he was later knighted in England as the result of his distinguished scholarship. He went on to receive three honorary fellowships from Oxford colleges and nine honorary doctorates from universities in Europe and North America.

By the time he died, he had written more than 20 books and was considered to be one of the world's leading authorities on the history and geography of Asia Minor. Ramsay's first-hand research led him to become a Christian—an admission that surprised many when they learned of it.

His conclusions, however, should not be surprising.

Colin Hemer, in an important book called *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, listed 84 facts from the latter part of the Book of Acts alone that have all been confirmed by historical and archaeological research.<sup>14</sup> The more we've discovered, the more confidence we have in Luke's work as a historian.

But it isn't just Luke's writings that pass the external evidence test. If Luke and Acts are found to be trustworthy historical documents, it seems that this would immediately suggest that at least Matthew, Mark, and John must also be trustworthy.

And archaeology confirms more than just the history found in the four Gospels.

Nelson Glueck, an American rabbi, academic, and archaeologist, played an enormous role in the discovery of many archaeological sites of biblical importance. Glueck said, “it may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever controverted a Biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”<sup>15</sup>

And archaeologists are continually making new finds that support the biblical narrative. Every year, *Christianity Today* magazine runs a fascinating article on the year’s top 10 discoveries in biblical archaeology.

Beyond finds that have definitively confirmed biblical history, many digs in areas of biblical significance are yielding fascinating discoveries that seem promising but require more study.

For example, in 2021, a group of 21 scientists reported—in a highly-technical, peer-reviewed journal—astonishing findings from the Tall el-Hammam archaeological site. Evidence from the now-15-year-long dig in modern-day Jordan revealed a city that was destroyed in a way entirely consistent with the biblical description of the destruction of Sodom, an Old Testament city.

Archaeological evidence shows that the city and nearby villages were incinerated by a firestorm that was 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped at Hiroshima and that generated temperatures exceeding 3,500 degrees (F).<sup>16</sup>

Some archaeologists and scientists who are working the site are convinced that the city is Sodom. The similarities between the biblical account and the evidence are hard to miss. But some other archaeologists are not yet convinced that it was Sodom, based on disagreements about the biblical timeline and the site’s specific location.

But, at least in this case, the jury is still out.

The bottom line is that archaeology and writings from ancient extra-biblical authors provide a compelling—and growing—body of external evidence that affirms the Bible’s historicity.

### **3. Can We Trust the Version of the Book We Have Today?**

The bibliographical test examines the number of copies of a document that have been discovered and the elapsed time between the original writing of a document and our earliest copies.

This test seeks to show how confident we can be that today’s versions of a document are as close as possible to the original.

The more copies or fragments of an early document that are found, the more able we are to ensure consistency with the original documents. The closer the time span between the copies we have and the original, the less likely it is that serious textual error could creep in.

New Testament scholars Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts wrote, “when compared with other works of antiquity, the New Testament has far greater (numerical) and earlier documentation than any other book. Most of the available works of antiquity have only a few manuscripts that attest to their existence.”<sup>17</sup>

I won’t dig into all of the numbers—but they are eye-opening. There are far more full and partial manuscripts of the Bible than there are for any other famous book of antiquity.

As of 2017, more than 66,000 full and partial copies of the Bible had been discovered, more than 41,000 of which are ancient. By contrast, we have only 238 ancient copies or fragments of Plato’s most famous writings. We have even fewer ancient copies of many other important books.<sup>18</sup>

*The Histories*, by Herodotus, is considered to be one of the most significant historical works ever written. We have 106 ancient copies or fragments of it. And nobody suggests that we should doubt its historical reliability. Likewise, nobody doubts that the works of Homer, Tacitus, Sophocles, and others have been accurately transmitted to us, despite the fact that we have comparatively tiny numbers of copies and fragments of their works.<sup>19</sup>

When compared to the more than 41,000 full and partial ancient copies of the Bible that we have, the difference is astounding.<sup>20</sup>

Further, the gap in time between when the New Testament was likely to have been written and the date of the earliest copies and fragments of the New Testament we have found is much smaller than the time gap for other ancient books.

Together, these numbers reveal a fact that might surprise you—that the Bible has stronger bibliographical support than any other book of antiquity.

Far stronger, actually.

Still, some people wonder if the Bible has changed over time, whether due to copying errors, translation problems, or cultural considerations. This question is understandable. Until the 1450s, the only way to create a new Bible was to copy it by hand, a process that could take a scribe 15 months or more to complete.

Because of the manual nature of the work, errors did happen at times. Scribes were human. But some people make a bad assumption at this point, believing that these errors would multiply, like that old telephone game you may have played as a kid.

The game started with a person whispering a message to someone else, who would whisper it to a third person, and so on. This

would continue until the person at the end would repeat, out loud, a message that was usually wildly different from the original.

Applying this assumption to the way the Bible was copied would make sense if each scribe only had the version of the Bible created by the scribe who came immediately before him, and if all previous versions were destroyed every time a new copy was made. But this is not the case.

The scribes who copied the Bible cared deeply about the quality of their work. Were mistakes made? Of course. Sometimes words were duplicated, left out, or misspelled. Occasionally, an entire line might be left out or duplicated. Some copies are clearly better than others. But if a scribe noticed an oddity in a copy made by a previous scribe, he could review earlier versions to get it right.

If we were to correct the telephone game analogy above, the actual process would look more like this: My friend Erin would write a message down and hand it to Nina. Nina would copy the message and give it to Olivia. At this point, Olivia could check back with *both* Erin's and Nina's copies to be sure that the message was still accurate. If my friends Natalie and Danielle were the 20th and 21st people who were set to copy the message, they could check the message they received against earlier copies to ensure what Natalie received from the 19th person was still accurate.

Today, biblical scholars have access to thousands of ancient manuscripts and fragments that they can compare in order to ensure accuracy. Computers are improving this process further.

Dr. Peter Gurry is an expert in textual criticism, the process of examining an ancient text to ascertain what it originally said. In a recent interview, Dr. Gurry made a remarkable claim: that the best versions of the New Testament we have today are likely closer to the original than versions people had access to 500 years ago!<sup>21</sup>

The internal evidence test, the external evidence test, and the bibliographical test do not claim to prove that the Bible is true.

Rather, they prove that the Bible doesn't disqualify itself, that outside facts do not disqualify it, and that the Bible we have today has been reliably passed down to us.

When we apply these three tests to the Bible, we also learn that if you want to reject the Bible as historically unreliable, that's your call. But to be consistent with yourself, you should also deem the works of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, and every other ancient writer to be unreliable as well.

### **WHY SOME PEOPLE DOUBT THE BIBLE'S HISTORICAL RELIABILITY**

Because the Bible makes some remarkable claims, it is not surprising that some doubt its historical reliability. Here are three reasons I'd suggest that some wrestle with this sort of doubt.

#### **1. A Belief that Any Supernatural Claim Must Be False**

When people say, "the Bible can't be trusted," what are they really saying? Obviously, *some* things in the Bible can be trusted. Historians and archaeologists have confirmed a tremendous number of historical facts, places, and references in the Bible.

Many who claim that the Bible can't be trusted do so because they have some sort of pre-existing belief (or presupposition) that any record or story of a supernatural event must be wrong. These sorts of presuppositions can be problematic.

When such a person confronts a supernatural claim (like the claim that God exists, that he came to earth as a baby, or of miracles reported in the Bible), it can be difficult for that person to examine this sort of claim fairly. Such a person's rejection of the supernatural may have more to do with his or her own biases than with some problem with the Bible.

For example, I've met more than one person who has said: (1) he doubts that the Bible is reliable; but also admits (2) that he has not read much of it; and yet (3) has no problem trusting that other works of antiquity (say, Aristotle's works) are reliable. This sort of thinking may reflect a bias.

But as Simon Greenleaf wrote, "In examining the evidence of the Christian religion, it is essential to the discovery of truth that we bring to the investigation a mind freed, as far as possible, from existing prejudice."<sup>22</sup>

## **2. A Belief that New Ideas are Better than Old Ones**

Owen Barfield was a British philosopher and a member of a remarkable literary group called the Inklings in the 1930s and 1940s. J.R.R. Tolkien (who wrote *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy) and C.S. Lewis were the most famous of the Inklings. Barfield is generally credited with coming up with a term I mentioned earlier, "chronological snobbery."

Lewis also wrote about it. Barfield defined it as a belief, "fueled by the modern [idea] of progress, that all thinking, all art, and all science of an earlier time are inherently inferior, indeed childlike or even imbecilic, compared to that of the present."<sup>23</sup>

Put more plainly, chronological snobbery assumes that modern ideas are better than those from the past, because we've come so far. Barfield and Lewis pointed out that rather than rejecting ideas simply because they are old, we should instead consider whether those ideas are still good. They knew that even if an idea aged and lost popularity, it still may very well be true.

The results of this logical fallacy are obvious when considering the Bible: *all* of its ideas are old. Chronological snobbery could tempt a person to assume that we've simply advanced or moved beyond the "outdated" teachings in the Bible.

When confronted with controversial teachings or miraculous stories from the Bible, the modern person is tempted to believe things like this: “The writers and eyewitnesses were fooled. They lived in more primitive times. They aren’t as sophisticated as we are today; we never would have fallen for that. We know so much more now than they did then.”

Barfield and Lewis called this chronological snobbery. I call it modern arrogance. What really matters is not how old an idea is, but rather whether or not the idea is true.

### **3. A Dislike for Some Particular Teaching in the Bible**

I mentioned earlier that some people reject the Bible not on the basis of whether it’s true, but because they simply don’t like something it teaches. Some people utterly hate things it teaches. I get it. There are some difficult things taught in the Bible.

My interest has always been in trying to figure out if there are good reasons to believe that the Bible is God’s word. And, if there are, in then seeking to discover how we can reconcile its hard teachings with its teachings about God’s love and character.

In the final analysis, it seems clear to me that what matters far more than whether I like its teachings is the question of whether its teachings are true. If Christianity *is* true, its teachings really matter, even if some of them initially seem hard to understand.



We’ve now considered arguments that God exists, without needing the Bible. We’ve considered an argument that God performed the greatest miracle ever when he created the universe, also without having to cite the Bible. And we’ve considered evidence that supports the biblical claims of Jesus’ resurrection, without having to rely on the Bible’s supernatural claims.

When you add the testimonies in the New Testament to the evidence above, the case for Christianity grows stronger still. But if you have doubts about the Bible and yet have never explored those doubts, consider the following thought experiment.

Imagine that my friend Allan found what seemed to be a deed and ownership documents—in his name—to a beach house in North Carolina’s Outer Banks. Now imagine that he ignored them, skeptically asking “What if they are forgeries?”<sup>24</sup>

If this doubt kept him from ever looking more carefully into the authenticity of the documents, most of us would say he was crazy. But I know Allan, and know that if he were to find himself in this scenario he would do the same thing you and I would do. He would ask, “Is there a good reason for my doubt in these papers?” He’d seek to find out if they were genuine.

When I first considered Christianity, I needed to wrestle with the same questions about the Bible.

The Bible is the most remarkable book ever written. It is the runaway all-time bestselling book. There are—by far—more copies of the Bible in print than any other book. It is the most widely translated book in history. But none of those things makes the Bible true. I have come to believe the Bible for reasons I’ve written about in the previous chapters of this book.

Do these arguments mean we now have 100% proof that the Bible (and its claim that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead) is true? No. We may never get to 100% proof, at least this side of heaven. As we’ll see in chapter 16, this may be, in part, because God values faith.

From early in this book, though, my contention has simply been that Christianity is more likely to be true than not true.

I began to believe that as a college freshman. Today, I am more convinced than ever. I'm convinced by the evidence I've shared. I'm convinced by other evidence. I'm convinced by logic. I'm convinced by the impact Christianity has made in the world and in people's lives. I'm convinced by ways I've seen God work that defy any other explanation.

You may not be so convinced. That is fine. Each of us is on our own spiritual journey. I've never assumed that this book would fully convince every reader.

Rather, I hoped to show at least two things.

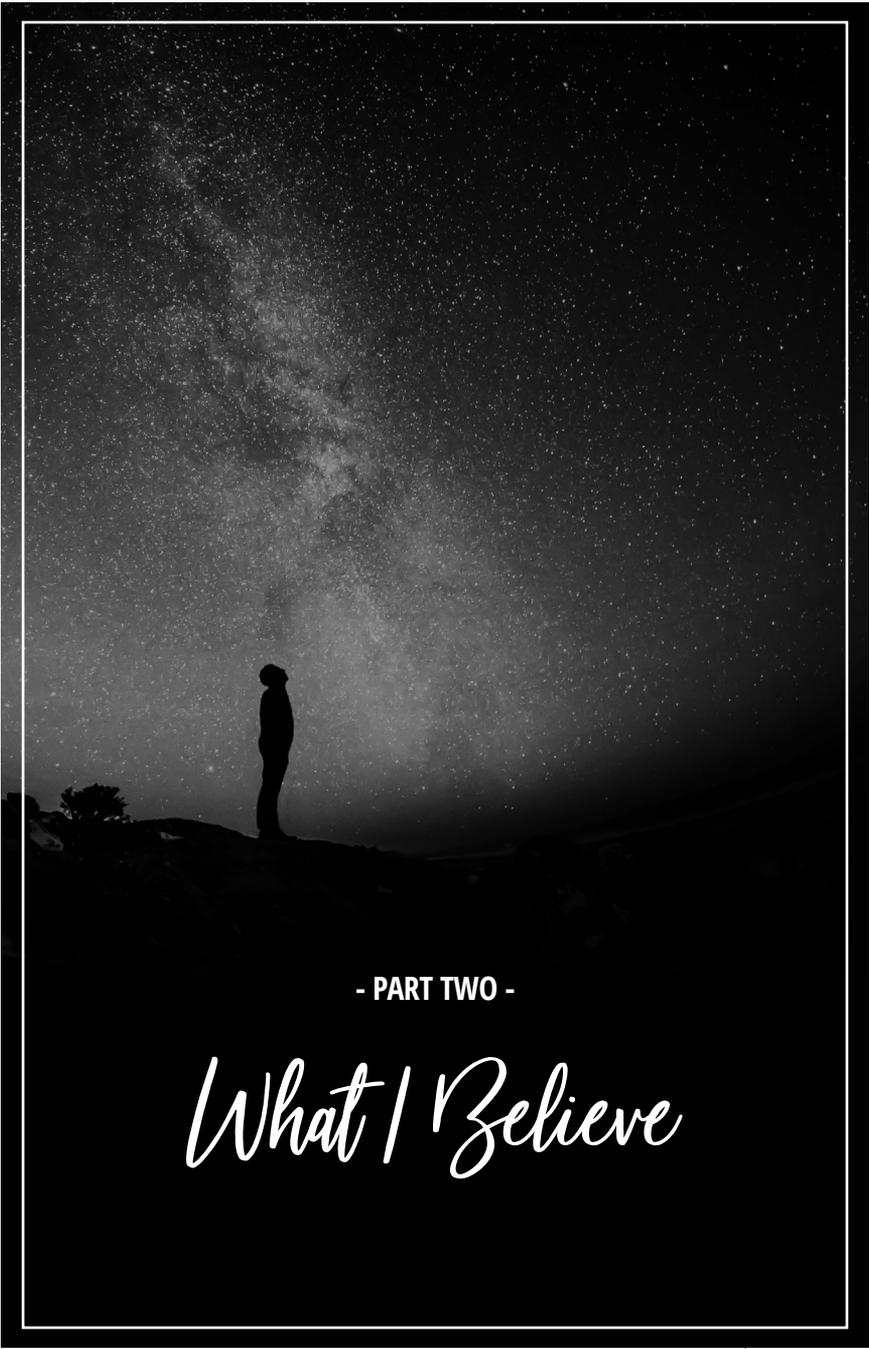
First, I hoped to show (at a very high level) that there are rational reasons for a thinking person to believe that God exists and that Jesus is who he claimed to be.

Second, I hoped that this book might spark some sort of curiosity or desire that would lead people to explore some of these arguments in greater depth. That's why I have provided a list, in the Appendix, of books that will help in that pursuit.

✦ ✦ ✦

Now we will pivot from *why* I believe to *what* I believe, and explore what the Bible actually says about the most important question that one could ever ask.

How could a person experience a right relationship with God?



- PART TWO -

*What I Believe*



- SECTION FIVE -

# Redemption





## She's My Friend

“WHATEVER THEIR PLANNED TARGET, the mortar rounds landed in an orphanage run by a missionary group in the small Vietnamese village.”

I had flipped open an old issue of *Reader's Digest* magazine that was sitting on a table in the barber shop's waiting area. In just 21 words, the writer had grabbed my attention as I waited to get a haircut.

The title of the article was “No Greater Love.” I kept reading:

*The missionaries and one or two children were killed outright, and several more children were wounded, including one young girl, about eight years old.*

*People from the village requested medical help from a neighboring town that had radio contact with the American*

*forces. Finally, an American Navy doctor and nurse arrived in a jeep with only their medical kits. They established that the girl was the most critically injured.*

*Without quick action, she would die of shock and loss of blood. A transfusion was imperative, and a donor with a matching blood type was required. A quick test showed that neither American had the correct type, but several of the uninjured orphans did.*

*The doctor spoke some pidgin Vietnamese, and the nurse a smattering of high-school French. Using that combination, together with much impromptu sign language, they tried to explain to their young, frightened audience that unless they could replace some of the girl's lost blood, she would certainly die. They then asked if anyone would be willing to give blood to help.*

*Their request was met with wide-eyed silence.*

*After several long moments, a small hand waveringly went up, dropped back down, and then went up again.*

*"Oh, thank you," the nurse said in French. "What is your name?"*

*"Heng," came the reply.*

*Heng was quickly laid on a pallet, his arm swabbed with alcohol, and a needle inserted in his vein.*

*Through this ordeal, Heng lay stiff and silent.*

*After a moment, he let out a shuddering sob, quickly covering his face with his free hand.*

*“Is it hurting, Heng?” the doctor asked. Heng shook his head, but after a few moments another sob escaped, and once more he tried to cover up his crying. Again the doctor asked him if the needle hurt, and again Heng shook his head.*

*But now his occasional sobs gave way to a steady, silent crying, his eyes screwed tightly shut, his fist in his mouth to stifle his sobs.*

*The medical team was concerned. Something was obviously very wrong. At this point, a Vietnamese nurse arrived to help. Seeing the little boy’s distress, she spoke to him rapidly in Vietnamese, listened to his reply, and answered him in a soothing voice.*

*After a moment, the patient stopped crying and looked questioningly at the Vietnamese nurse. When she nodded, a look of great relief spread over his face.*

*Glancing up, the nurse said quietly to the Americans, “He thought he was dying. He misunderstood you. He thought you had asked him to give all his blood so the little girl could live.”*

*“Why would he be willing to do that?” asked the Navy nurse.*

*The Vietnamese nurse repeated the question to the little boy, who answered simply, “She’s my friend.”*

The author, Colonel John Mansur<sup>1</sup>, USAF, Ret., concluded the article perfectly, with Jesus’ words:

*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.<sup>2</sup>*

Most of us have heard stories of people who made instinctive decisions to risk or even lay down their lives to save others. Stories like this often happen in times of war. And stories of this kind of selflessness and self-sacrifice move us profoundly.

They should.

But in this story, we learn of a little boy who did not simply react instinctively. Rather, he paused and thought about it before making an intentional decision. He *decided* that he was willing to die so his friend could live. Of course, the doctor and nurse had not asked him to die, but he thought that's what they were asking of him.

*A small hand waveringly went up.*

Amazing. The story of Heng's courage and love for his friend is beautiful. And it is an excellent reminder that, in a similar way, God has demonstrated his love for us.

When Jesus first said “greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends,” he had to be looking ahead to the day that he would intentionally decide to lay down his life for us. After all, he called himself the good shepherd, and also said that “the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.”<sup>3</sup>

Even if you've heard this many times, it is still hard to fathom. That the God of the universe, who had come to Earth as a man, would allow himself to be killed at the very hands of the people he created seems crazy. Why would Jesus have done that?

My son Ryan asked that exact question when he was young. He was five years old, if I remember correctly, when he asked if the two of us could have a business meeting. I said, “Absolutely, Ry. Let's have one tomorrow. We'll have a business lunch.”

He agreed and we formally shook hands to seal the deal. He smiled as I made a point of showing him that I had added our meeting to my work calendar.

The next day, we headed out to Spartans, a restaurant our family enjoys in Burke, Virginia. I still remember where we sat, and I will never forget one part of our conversation.

*Ryan: Dad, do you know about the soldiers in Star Wars?*

*Me [confident that Ryan had never seen Star Wars]: Yep.*

*Ryan: Could they kill God?*

*Me: Interesting question. What do you think?*

*Ryan: I don't think so.*

*Me: Why—wait, have you even seen Star Wars?*

*Ryan: No. But I know about it.*

*Me [not sure how, but nodding]: I think you are right. They couldn't kill God. But you know that those soldiers aren't real, right? That Star Wars is a made-up movie?*

*Ryan: Yeah.*

*Me: Even if they were real, they couldn't kill God.*

*Ryan: But soldiers killed Jesus, right?*

*Me: Yes... Yes, they did.*

*Ryan: And Jesus was God?*

At this point, I thought, it's one thing to be engaged in a theological conversation with a five-year-old. It is quite another thing to realize he has you on the ropes.

*Me: Yes. And that's a great point, Ryan. But Jesus allowed them to kill him.*

*Ryan: Why did he do that?*

*Me: Because of his love for people.*

Now, Ryan seemed to be deep in thought, his eyes fixed on the ceiling above me. I was also deep in thought. My mind was spinning as I tried to wrestle with how to explain to a five-year-old that Christ was our substitute when he died (and what that had to do with love). But I knew I should let him speak next.

*Ryan: Hey Dad, look at that awesome fan!*

That was it. The ceiling fan had captured his attention and our conversation shifted gears. That's how conversations with five-year-olds go. I knew we would talk more later. But his question is one many have asked: Why did he do that?

When people ask this question, there are two very closely related but slightly different questions they might actually be asking: one of effectiveness, and one of motive.

First, a person could be asking, "What difference would Jesus' death make?" Or, put differently, "What good could possibly be accomplished by his death?" As my friend Charlotte asked me once, "If Jesus was doing this great stuff on earth, why did he have to die? Wouldn't it have been better if he had stayed alive?" Those are questions we'll consider in the next two chapters.

But the person could also be asking, “What would motivate him to be willing to lay down his life?” Part of his motive was certainly related to the question of what his death would accomplish. But part of his motivation was love.



Years ago, I was given a recording of a modern parable called *The Parable of the Strings*. Set to music, it artistically re-told the biblical story as if God had created man to play music in tune with him. In the parable, God put Adam and Eve in the garden and gave them perfect sets of strings so that they could play music together. The music was a metaphor for the relationship that God created us to enjoy with him.

When God put them in the Garden, he warned them that their strings would corrode if they ate fruit from one forbidden tree. That they'd have to leave the garden, and they wouldn't be able to play music together any longer. Here's how God reacts in the parable when they eventually do eat from the tree:

*God: Don't you see? We can't make music together anymore.  
We are no longer in tune.*

Then, as he sent them out of the garden, God said quietly:

*I can fix this, but you have no idea how much it is going to cost.<sup>4</sup>*

That last line is phenomenal. A theologian might quibble with the word “can fix this,” as if God would somehow have been surprised by this turn of events. But even if we have to grant a bit of creative license to the writer, I love the way it reflects God the Father's heart for Jesus, and for the world.

God certainly knew, before Adam and Eve sinned, that when he gave humans the freedom to live however they wanted, they would ultimately turn away from him. He knew that the relationship he designed us to have with him would be broken. And he understood how costly the “fix” would be.

To fix it, God the Father knew he would have to watch Jesus, his only son, die a terrible death on a cross.

To fix it, Jesus knew he would have to willingly choose to go to the cross. The night before his death, he understood how agonizing the next day was going to be physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Emotionally, he knew that he would be mocked by the very people he was choosing to die for, and that he’d be ridiculed by crowds seeking to humiliate him. He knew that his closest friends would betray him, and that all who loved him would be crushed by this turn of events. He knew that he would be leaving his mother behind, to be cared for by others.

Physically, he knew that he was facing all that we discussed in chapter ten. Luke—a doctor—records that Jesus was so deeply aware of how brutal the next day would be that, as he prayed that night, “his sweat became like drops of blood.”<sup>5</sup>

But beyond the physical and emotional toll it would take, he knew how difficult it was going to be on a spiritual level. His dread was so real that he asked God the Father if there was another way. As we will see in the following pages, there was not.

So Jesus, God in the form of a man, who had only come to serve, allowed the soldiers to whip him. He allowed the soldiers to mockingly and painfully press the crown of thorns onto his head. And he allowed the soldiers to crucify him.

Like Heng, Jesus made an intentional decision to willingly lay down his life. Unlike Heng, who volunteered to die for a friend but ultimately did not have to die, Jesus died a very real death—for a race of people who had turned their backs on God.

The Bible tells us that “God demonstrates his love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” That one verse, Romans 5:8, captures what we are talking about here. (I should pause and note, for readers who are new to the Bible, that when I cite a Bible verse, like Romans 5:8, it is simply an easy way to refer to the eighth verse of the fifth chapter of Romans.)

In Hebrews 12:2, the writer of Hebrews uses a powerful phrase to describe Jesus’ decision to lay down his life, writing that, “*for the joy set before him,*” Jesus “endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (emphasis mine).

Scholars have suggested a couple of different possible explanations for what “the joy set before him” means. Some suggest it means the joy of accomplishing the mission God the Father had given him. Others have written that it refers to the joy of knowing his death would make forgiveness possible and that it would enable many to eventually be with him forever, in heaven. Because those two ideas are so completely linked, I believe that both are true.

As we are reminded in John 15:13, “*Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.*”

Don’t miss the profoundly amazing truth here. The idea of God’s love is not some abstract, hard-to-understand theoretical or philosophical concept. He proved it.

And he proved it despite the unfathomably high cost.

The first part of the famous verse, John 3:16, reminds us that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.”

We are talking here about the same God who spoke our incomprehensibly huge universe into existence; who knows the exact number of stars the universe contains, and calls them each by name (Psalm 147:4); who wrote the DNA code—and knit you together in your mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13); and who knows the number of hairs on your head (Luke 12:7).

This is the same God who created us in his image, making humankind unique among all of the creatures. And this is the same God who created us to enjoy a relationship with him, both now and for all eternity.

1 John 4:16 says “God is love.” Don’t ever take that thought lightly.

*God so loved the world that he gave his only son.*

But none of this answers the question as to what his death accomplished. Before we can answer that, we have to understand that even though God is love and that he created us to enjoy a relationship with him, there’s a problem. And the problem is an enormous one.

The relationship we were created to have with God has been broken... By us.



## Hero or Criminal?

ON MAY 12, 2017, A 22-YEAR-OLD named Marcus Hutchins, working from his parents' home on a cattle farm near the west coast of England, saved the internet.

If this claim—made in the cover story of *Wired* magazine's June 2020 issue—sounds remarkable to you, it should.<sup>1</sup>

+++

On that Friday, one of the worst ransomware cyberattacks in internet history was unleashed. The attack came in the form of a bit of computer malware called WannaCry—no relation to my friend Wanna—and it spread with ferocious speed.<sup>2</sup>

Within just a few hours of its release, the virus had infected more than 230,000 computers, worldwide. When all was said and done, it had crippled computers in more than 150 countries.

The attack was not aimed at any one company or entity, but rather it spread wherever possible—to businesses, non-profits, educational institutions, the healthcare industry, governments, and personal computers around the world. From global companies including FedEx, Hitachi, Boeing, Nissan, and many others, to the UK's National Health Service, to a large Russian bank, to Germany's rail network, to Chinese universities, to law enforcement agencies in India and far beyond, the reach of WannaCry was utterly extraordinary.

When the virus was released, data security firms around the world went into full crisis mode, devoting enormous resources to try to stop it. Hutchins, working from his bedroom, succeeded.

He was able to reverse engineer the virus and discovered what is known as a “kill switch” that had been carefully hidden in the code of WannaCry. The kill switch had been built into the code to allow the original programmer to stop the virus if desired.

Here's how the kill switch worked. Whenever WannaCry infected a new computer, this kill switch code caused WannaCry to try to contact a specific website with a very weird domain name that did not actually exist. As long as no website was found at this strange URL, the malware would continue its destructive work and render the computer unusable. Hutchins discovered this, quickly registered the odd domain name, and put up a simple website there. WannaCry was neutralized.

In its very short lifespan, the virus was estimated to have caused between \$4 billion and \$8 billion worth of damage globally.

In the computer hacking community, Hutchins was hailed as a hero and eventually found himself in the spotlight.

It was not a spotlight he wanted.

A few months later, while in Las Vegas, Hutchins was arrested by the FBI. He was not arrested for anything related to his great work on WannaCry. Rather, he was arrested for work he had done several years prior, in his late teens, on a malicious piece of software called Kronos. Other hackers used Kronos to help them steal money from internet users.

During the time between his work on Kronos and his cracking of the WannaCry malware, Hutchins had begun using his hacking skills for good, rather than destructive, purposes. But it was too late. His work on Kronos came back to haunt him.

The title of the cover story of *Wired* magazine was:

*The Hero Criminal Hacker who Saved the Internet.*

Stop for a moment and consider this question: in your opinion, was Marcus Hutchins a hero or a criminal? You could argue either side. I believe that he was both. To me, this was the most interesting part of the story. Most of us understand that every human—including you and me—has the capacity to act and think in ways that are both great and terrible. I touched on this in chapter one. Personal self-analysis, psychology, sociology, history, the Bible, and common sense all point to this reality.

Marcus Hutchins initially used his hacking skills in ways that others exploited to hurt people financially. Then, he did a 180.

In court, he was found guilty of the charges that had been brought against him. When he had to stand before Judge Joseph Stadtmueller for sentencing, the judge's ruling was fascinating.

Although Judge Stadtmueller did not downplay Hutchins' crimes, he clearly weighed the turn Hutchins had made toward using his hacking skills for good.

Here is *Wired's* recap of the final ruling:

*Stadtmueller delivered his conclusion: "There are just too many positives on the other side of the ledger," he said. "The final call in the case of Marcus Hutchins today is a sentence of time served, with a one-year period of supervised release."*

*Hutchins could hardly believe what he'd just heard: The judge had weighed his good deeds against his bad ones and decided that his moral debt was canceled. After a few more formalities, the gavel dropped.<sup>3</sup>*

This is exactly how many people assume that God will judge us when deciding whether to allow us into heaven. He will, people are tempted to believe, weigh our good deeds in life against our bad deeds, and make a decision.

If Christianity is true, however, there are two serious problems with this idea. First, it completely misunderstands how significant God's holiness and our lack of holiness actually are. We'll come back to this.

There is a second and related problem with this idea that God will "weigh the scales" between our good and bad. It suggests if we *are* somehow good enough, we can earn our way into heaven. But that raises a question. If we could earn our way into heaven as a result of our being good, how good would we have to be?



#### **HOW GOOD DO YOU HAVE TO BE?**

For more than a decade, Karey and I were part of a Christian ministry called Cru. We served students who wanted to explore issues of faith at George Mason University, in Fairfax, Virginia.

A number of students who were involved were athletes, and I led a Bible study that included several GMU wrestlers. The wrestlers were crazy—in all sorts of great ways—and were also amazing young men. I enjoyed every minute I spent with them.

Several of them were not shy about talking about their faith with other students. One year, a couple of the wrestlers and I decided to invite their teammates and other athletes who lived in their dorm to take part in what we called a focus group. It wasn't a focus group in the strictest technical sense of the word, but I promised that I would bring plenty of pizza, ask questions, and listen to their opinions without ever injecting my views.

On the night of the event, we had a great turnout. We gathered in a study lounge of Dominion Hall, the dorm where many of the athletes lived. Some wrestlers showed up, as did a number of basketball players I knew, track athletes, and other students.

One of the guys who came was the point guard on the GMU basketball team. He was perhaps the most highly visible athlete (if not student) on the Mason campus, and he thought it sounded interesting. Either that or he just wanted free pizza.

A couple of Christians showed up. I asked them not to talk, but rather to simply be great listeners.

At the start of the evening, most of the students shared that they believed that some kind of God probably does exist. Here's how the next part of the conversation went:

*Me: Do you believe there is such thing as heaven?*

*Virtually everyone: Yes.*

*Me: Does everyone get into heaven?*

*Nearly all: No.*

*One student: Yes.*

*Me, to that student: Does that mean you believe Hitler is in heaven?*

*That same student: Actually... [long pause] I doubt it. Maybe everyone doesn't get into heaven.*

*Me, to everyone: How would someone get into heaven?*

*Nearly everyone: By being a good person.*

*Me: How good do you have to be?*

*Everyone: Um... What?*

*Me: If everyone doesn't get in, how good is good enough?*

*Me: Let me put it differently. Where is the dividing line? Can someone who has committed three murders get into heaven? Or is the limit two? Or seven? Can someone who has never murdered anyone but is a serial rapist get in?*

*What about someone who has never murdered, raped, stolen, or been unfaithful—but who has spent his life as a lying, nasty, unforgiving, hateful, racist?*

When you ask these questions in a group, one of two things happen. Either everyone looks at you blankly, or everyone talks at once. This night, it was the latter. I just sat back and listened, as promised. Everyone had ideas, but any time someone suggested a possible answer, four others immediately shot it down, sometimes in colorful language. The conversation was fantastic.

And it went absolutely nowhere. This did not surprise me.

They began to realize there were no answers that seemed fair. They asked me for my opinion, but I refused to chime in. Eventually, the point guard got exasperated. He said to me, “C’mon P, seriously. You would not have asked if you didn’t have an opinion. Tell us what you think.”

Even though I did have an opinion, I had made a promise that I knew I had to keep. I shook my head no and shrugged my shoulders. “I’m here to listen, not to talk. Sorry.”

Over time, they landed in an interesting and, I think, insightful place. They concluded that, with any sort of dividing line, the gap between the two people (on one side, the person going to heaven who is the closest to not getting in; on the other, the person not going to heaven who is the closest to getting in) would be too small to draw the line anywhere. They argued a bit longer before they eventually settled on the idea of a balance, as mentioned above. That God would weigh each person’s good against the bad and make a decision.

They again asked me again what I believed. I said, “I promised not to talk about what I believe, and that we’d stop the focus group after 59 minutes. Once we finish, if anyone wants to hang around, I’ll stay too, and we can discuss it more. I could share some thoughts at that point.”

At the 59-minute mark, I ended the event and thanked them for coming. Only a couple of students left; everyone else stayed. I think it was about 10 p.m. at that point. From there, we had one of the best group discussions about faith and Christianity that I’ve ever experienced with a group of non-Christians. By the time we finally wrapped it up, it was closing in on midnight. The pizza was long gone.

Over the course of the evening, other students had stopped in to see what was going on. They sat down to listen and jumped into the fray eventually. Some left to go bring their roommate back. We finally wrapped up with just about as many students in the room at the end as had been there in the beginning.

The things the students agreed on that night were revealing. Not all groups would agree to these five points, but this group seemed to generally agree that:

1. Some kind of God probably exists.
2. Assuming that there is a God, there is probably a heaven.
3. A person gets to heaven by being good.
4. They, their friends, and their families were all definitely good enough to get into heaven.
5. Hitler most definitely will not be there.

I share this story because I've talked to a lot of people who believe all five of these points. Perhaps you are one of them.

For these students, there was definitely a line that could be crossed beyond which someone will *not* go to heaven. They just had no idea where the line was. Yet they somehow had complete confidence that neither they nor their loved ones had crossed that line. When the meeting had officially ended, they asked again for me to share my views on this. Here is something pretty close to what I remember saying that night:

*First, we have to admit that what we think is fair—or good—in our limited understanding is probably not the exact same way God would define it. He has far greater wisdom, understanding, insight, and visibility into our hearts than we do. Second, when we talk about good versus bad, we are usually comparing ourselves to other people. We are not comparing ourselves to God.*

*This is a huge problem. He is holy and we are not. But bottom line, if there is no fair dividing line, it seems to me that there are really only two reasonable answers about how this might work. Either everyone deserves to get into heaven, or nobody deserves it.*

*None of you believe that everyone is getting into heaven. We've already talked about that. Neither do I. The Bible definitely does not teach that everyone will go to heaven.*

*That leaves the second option: that nobody is good enough to deserve to go to heaven. That's where the Bible lands.*

They weren't expecting that.

Several of them started talking at once, with the objections you would expect. Or maybe with objections similar to your own:

*Wait, what?*

*Nobody's perfect!*

*That can't be right.*

*You don't really believe that nobody gets in... do you?*

*God is love. He is forgiving!*

Then we got into the heart of true Christianity; a discussion of our biggest problem, and the lengths God went to in order to solve it. I told them that Christianity offered the best news possible, but before we could understand how good the good news is, we have to understand how bad the bad news is.

The same thing is true for anyone reading this book.



Many in our culture today do believe in some sort of God. Many do believe in heaven. And many who believe in heaven believe that being a good person will get you there; that God really will—like the judge in the Marcus Hutchins case—weigh our good against our bad to determine whether we get to heaven or not. This seems right to us, at least at first glance.

Because we all have a built-in sense of right and wrong (one that I've already argued comes from God) and an equally-built-in desire for justice, we all want good to be rewarded and bad to be punished. So, if we can find some way (often by comparing ourselves to others) to view ourselves as good, we can take comfort in thinking that we deserve heaven.

This is not what Christianity teaches.

In chapter one, we talked about the brokenness we see all around us. According to the Bible, the types of brokenness we discussed there are not our worst problems. The types of brokenness described there are symptoms of a much larger problem. The lyrics to Bill Mallonee's *Blister Soul* started to get us thinking in the right direction, pointing out that our biggest problem is spiritual.

*The thing we cannot speak of, too painful to behold.*

If we don't admit that we have a spiritual problem, however, we will never look in the right direction for a solution.

According to the Bible, the biggest problem we'll ever face is what it calls sin, because our sin is what separates us from God. Because God is holy, he cannot merely dismiss or ignore our sin. This is a huge problem that we'll come back to in a moment.

## **WE WANT JUSTICE... SOMETIMES**

When it comes to wrongs committed, you can be encouraged. There is a lot of talk in our culture today about injustice. And there is good news. Every wrong that has been done, everything that is actually evil, hateful, dishonest, racist, or in some other way wrong in God's eyes—and every sin and injustice that has been committed against you and others—will be punished. This is good; we want God to punish those who we judge to have done wrong. Those people, we are quite sure, deserve it.

Unfortunately, this cuts both ways. The other side of that same coin is that if the Bible is true, our own sin will also be punished.

We want wrongs to be punished—just not our wrongs. So, we say “nobody's perfect” when pondering our own failures and how we fall short of ways God would want us to live. But while the idea that nobody's perfect is true, it is also a cop-out. In a sense, it is us hoping that God will grade on a curve: *I'm not as bad as the next guy.*

But God does not grade on a curve. God cannot ignore his nature and thus cannot ignore our sin.

So, to return to the “God will weigh our good against our bad” idea for a moment, here is the problem. We make the assumption that if our good were to outweigh our bad, we'd get a green light into heaven. If our good and bad were to somehow balance out perfectly, God would have to sort it out. And if our bad were to outweigh our good, we'd get a red light.

But Christianity teaches that our sin has caused a red light. God is holy, and this is a really big deal because we are far from holy. This has created a divide between us and God that no number of good works can overcome.

My friends Harrison, Micah, Trey, and Josh are brothers. Each is physically fit. But if they drove to Virginia Beach to see who could come the closest to swimming to Spain, their fitness would only take them so far. Regardless of which brother won the contest—and regardless of how well-conditioned he was on that particular day—the winner would likely only make it a fraction of one percent of the way to Europe before needing to be rescued.

I do not share this illustration to claim that some people get closer to heaven than others by being better people. I share it to reflect the fact that attempting to cross the divide between us and God by being good has no hope of success, no matter how good a person may be. None of us would ever get close.

When we think of sinful people, we have no problem calling a tyrant or murderous dictator who starves or kills his own people sinful. We have no problem calling a murderer, rapist, or child molester sinful.

But it is jarring to think of the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta as someone who was deeply troubled by the depth of her own sin. It is jarring to read that the Apostle Paul, who wrote much of the New Testament of the Bible, called himself the worst of all sinners. And it is jarring to think of the best, most moral people we've ever met as sinful. Because if those people—people who seem, at least compared to others, to be very good—are sinful, we face an uncomfortable truth: we too are sinful.

Professor and theologian Dr. Wayne Grudem has written that a biblical definition of sin is “any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature.”<sup>4</sup>

I know that I am sinful. That is the one part of the biblical message that I've never struggled to believe.

My guess is that if you are willing to be honest, you probably know that this is true of you, too. Most of us understand that if there is a perfect God, we often fall short of his standard. Many of us have seen ways that our sin is destructive.

*Of course*, we understand that, we think. We're not perfect. But still, all of us want to think of ourselves as good.

We have helped the old lady cross the street. We have returned the wallet we found, with all of the cash (even if we peeked to see how much money it contained). We have bought a meal for a homeless guy. We have thrown some change into the Salvation Army kettle in December. And thus, like the students I mentioned earlier, even though we know we sin, we see ourselves as basically good (even if imperfect) people who are deserving of heaven.

But this doesn't square with the biblical ideas that our hearts are desperately wicked<sup>5</sup>, that we are rebels who have literally turned our backs on God, and that our very nature is sinful.

This sinful nature—which drives our inclination to rebel against *any* authority—shows up early in life.

I've heard people say that children are born good. I usually wonder if those people have raised children. As a parent, I don't remember my kids ever having to learn to lie. Or having to learn to push each other down to get their way. Or having to learn to do an end run around a rule they didn't like. No, they pretty much came out of the womb with those instincts. We all did.

One day, when my daughter was about three years old, she was jumping off of her bed in a way we thought was dangerous. She was fearless and we didn't want her to get hurt, so we made it clear that she had to stop.

When I walked into her room, she was standing on her bed and about to do it again. Karey was standing behind me. “Megan,” I said, as I knelt down to talk to her, “if you do that again, you are going to be in trouble and I’m going to have to punish you. I don’t want to have to do that. Okay?”

She looked up at me innocently, with her angelic little face, and said, “You gotta do what you gotta do, Daddy.” And she jumped.

It was hard to even get angry. Her response was hilarious. “You gotta do what you gotta do?!” *From a three-year-old?*

I turned away so Megan wouldn’t see that I was about to start laughing. When I turned, I noticed that Karey was long gone. She had bailed and was in the other room laughing, I was sure. I needed to pull it together. Megan had to face the music.

But her bold, brazen rebellion is a great picture of our human nature. And that nature leads us to rebel against God himself.

In a book by my friend Randy Newman, he shares a great story about a young woman in Ireland who had to think outside of the box to teach the rowdy boys in her religion class about our rebellion against God. He writes:

*She dressed in less than fine clothes and said they were going to have a playday with modeling clay and paper-mâché. “Today we are going to create a world,” she told them. “We’re going to use these things to make our own little planet, and tomorrow we’ll make creatures to put on our planet.” The boys responded with much joy!*

*As you might guess, [the boys] chose to inhabit their newly created planet with creatures that all looked like Godzilla, fire-breathing dragons, and sharp-toothed goblins.*

*For several days, they 'played' with their creatures on their planet and had a grand old time. Then one day the teacher announced: "We need some rules for your creatures. They're biting each others' heads off, falling into the water and melting (remember that they were made of clay and paper-mâché), and ruining the planet."*

*So the boys put together a list of rules, one of the first being, "You must obey us, your creators!"*

*After a day or two of playing by the rules (or else experiencing the dragon equivalent of a timeout), the young teacher began a class with another announcement: "The creatures have decided not to obey your rules."*

*[But boys] are not known for their subtlety. "What!?" they cried.*

*"They are not going to obey your rules. They told me. They've got free will. They don't like your restrictive rules. Now, go play with them. But remember that they are not going to do what you say."*

*One by one, the boys expressed outrage. "But we made them!" they insisted.*

*"So what?" she replied.*

*Finally, one boy from the back of the room stood up, hands on hips, and yelled at the top of his lungs, "I'll break their #^@\* legs!"<sup>6</sup>*

This story, Randy points out, helps "drive home the audacity of our sin, the sheer gall of creatures telling their creator to buzz off (or worse!)."<sup>7</sup>

As a race, we have gone our own way. We've told God with our lives, "You gotta do what you gotta do." We have brazenly rebelled, and our sin has caused the brokenness—both personal and societal—that we talked about in chapter one. If the Bible is true, man's sin has broken everything.

Again, Dr. Grudem's perspective is helpful:

*It is not just that some parts of us are sinful and others are pure. Rather, every part of our being is affected by sin—our intellects, our emotions and desires, our hearts (the center of our desires and decision-making processes), our goals and motives, and even our physical bodies.*<sup>8</sup>

It is important to note that the Bible does not teach that we are as bad as we can possibly be. It's easy to find examples of people who are worse than us if we compare ourselves to others. Rather, the Bible teaches that because of our sin, our situation before God is as bad as it can possibly be. The Bible uses strong language to describe the spiritual condition in which our sin has left us. In different ways, it describes each of us as being "dead" in our sins.<sup>9</sup>

In Romans 3:23, we learn that "*all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Three chapters later, we learn that "the wages of sin is death."<sup>10</sup> What each of us deserves is a spiritual death.

A spiritual separation from God.

I haven't even used the Bible's strongest language here. The Bible calls sinful people "objects of God's wrath."<sup>11</sup> But how are we to make sense of this? God created us in his image. He is love. But we are objects of his wrath because of our sin?

Actually, yes.

One explanation I've found to be helpful is from A.W. Tozer's classic book, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (emphasis mine in the third paragraph below):

*Because God's first concern for his universe is its moral health, that is, its holiness, whatever is contrary to this is necessarily under his eternal displeasure. To preserve his creation God must destroy whatever would destroy it.*

*When he arises to put down [sin] and save the world from irreparable moral collapse, he is said to be angry. Every wrathful judgment in the history of the world has been a holy act of preservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of the creation are inseparably united.*

*God's wrath is his utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates [sin] as a mother hates the polio that would take the life of her child.<sup>12</sup>*

We understand a mother's hate for a disease that would kill her child. If sin is destructive and is actually killing us (whether we feel it or not), we can understand why God would hate it.

So, if our sin has left us in a state of spiritual death, and we can't earn our way to heaven by being good, we find ourselves in a horrendously bad place. No matter how good we think we are, and no matter how well we compare to others, we find ourselves headed for an eternity apart from God.

We find ourselves headed for hell.

Even as I type the word hell, I am aware that most readers will recoil. It is no fun for me to write about hell. It is no fun for any of us to ponder it. But Jesus had a lot to say about hell. And if hell is real, it would be unloving of me to ignore it.

Pastor Matt Chandler, in his excellent book, *The Explicit Gospel*, addressed people's reactions to mentions of hell.

*What's the general response of most sensitive people to the idea of hell? Here's the primary and most popular response: "How can a loving, just God create and fill a place like hell? That's not fair. It's not right. The punishment does not fit the crime. If I tell one lie or steal a pack of gum or say a curse word when I stub my toe, I get eternal torment?"*

*Am I close? Isn't this where most people's logic lands? "It's not fair."*

*But to discount the enormity of God's severity, as if we aren't really that bad and really deserve mostly kindness, is to discount the enormity of God's holiness. It is very easy, in this trajectory of logic, to switch things up, completely disregard the Scriptures and teachings of Jesus, and move into the idea that it's we who are good and God who is fallen.<sup>13</sup>*

Chandler makes a great observation at the end of this quote. When we learn something about God that we don't like or find to be unpleasant, we declare that *he must be wrong*. Not us.

We don't like the idea of hell, so we pass judgment on God. We define sin in our own terms, and not his, assuring ourselves that we really aren't *that* bad. Hell is not fair, we judge. But if God is real, this is a dangerously arrogant assumption for us to make.

We underestimate how significant God's holiness is. This makes it easier to compare ourselves to others and conclude that we are deserving of heaven. But we are not.

This is the problem Chesterton, Mallonee, Tozer, Chandler, Grudem, and so many others have observed.

Our sin, and not anything else we can imagine, is the biggest problem any of us will ever face because its consequences last beyond the grave. It is a bigger problem than a relational breakdown, mental breakdown, an awful medical diagnosis, a crippling injury, the loss of a loved one, or financial ruin.

When it comes to heaven, our sin has caused a red light.

Like the Learjet from the first chapter, we are in a desperate situation. We are cruising through life and our outer shell might even look great while we are doing it. But spiritually speaking, we are dead on the inside. And we are facing the wrath of a holy God because of our sin.

Fortunately for us, the story does not end there.





## But Still, He Wept

WHEN I STARTED THIS BOOK, I WAS A PRISONER in my own home. My family didn't want me to leave. My friends didn't want me to leave. My enemies didn't want me to leave. The United States Government asked me not to leave, though they never threatened criminal prosecution if I did leave.

I did have one visitor who showed up every few days. His name was Jack. He and my daughter were dating at the time, so it is possible that he was here to see her, but I am pretty sure he was actually here to visit me during my confinement.

I began writing in 2020, and I was imprisoned, willingly, by a strange, invisible captor: the coronavirus. Known more formally as COVID-19, the virus seemed to hit the world hard and spread with remarkable speed. Its global reach was stunning. In some areas, the number of patients needing help initially overwhelmed some hospitals.

I am thankful for the doctors, nurses, and first responders who served others—and have continued to serve—with courage.

Beyond the physical toll that the coronavirus has taken, the economic crisis caused by the pandemic had an enormous impact in a wide range of industries and in a wide range of people's lives. It left many families reeling financially.

Yet for all of the fear, upheaval, closures of businesses and schools, loss of financial well-being, sickness, and loss of life, it has accomplished at least one thing that might be called good.

In my lifetime, it is difficult to remember anything that has done as good a job as has this pandemic of shining a spotlight on the foolishness of trusting in our own self-sufficiency.

As Americans, the fact that we are not as self-sufficient as we'd like to believe can be a bitter pill to swallow. Humans—perhaps especially Americans—do not like being faced with the reality that so much of the control we believe we have in life is an illusion. The notion that we aren't actually the masters of our own destiny feels somehow almost un-American to write.

During the pandemic, a U.S. Army colonel commented on the impact it was having on his unit: "Usually when we encounter a problem, we figure out a solution—and go solve it. But in this case, we just have to sit here."<sup>1</sup>

As my friend Karlie would say, the pandemic has hit different.

It has shown that the things in which people often place their trust—their money, career, relationships, and health are four big ones—can disappear in the blink of an eye. This thought can be deeply troubling, and may contribute to the stunning rise in reports of anxiety among Americans in the past 18 months.

Imagine being in the shoes, for just a moment, of someone who got COVID-19 and was hit hard by it. (I hope this is a theoretical exercise, and you weren't personally hit hard by the virus.) You would have had a significant problem. You would have had a problem that you would have been incapable of fixing on your own. You would have needed help from someone outside yourself; help from someone with the intelligence, knowledge, and resources to solve the problem.

This imagined COVID situation is not a terrible picture of our spiritual condition, apart from a right relationship with God. Our sin is a problem. An enormous problem, actually. It is a far bigger problem than COVID-19. And our sin, too, is a problem we are incapable of fixing on our own.

Though I don't think he was writing about sin as the monster in his life in this song, these lines from Eminem's song, *The Monster*, are fantastic:

*I need an interventionist  
To intervene between me and this monster  
And save me from myself and all this conflict  
'Cause the very thing that I love's killing me  
And I can't conquer it.*<sup>2</sup>

I've always found some of Eminem's lyrics to be thought-provoking. Here, even if he did not intend to do so, he paints a great picture of our inability to conquer the sin problem that faces every one of us. We need an interventionist.

We need help from someone outside ourselves; help from someone with the intelligence, knowledge, and resources to solve the problem. We are guilty. We need forgiveness.

We need a savior.

This idea, however, flies in the face of all things American. Our nation has always been a place characterized by a ‘can-do’ spirit. Got a problem? Roll up your sleeves and, as the Army colonel said, solve it. We are a nation of people who hate the thought that we would ever need help from the outside.

We don’t like the idea that we might need a savior because we want to earn whatever we get. Our pride says we can solve our own problems. But if we can’t solve this one, what then?

Thankfully, God has provided a savior. His name is Jesus Christ.

On what I’ll call my friend Katie’s unusual “goodness scale” of one to ten, where ten is the upper limit of good, Katie would rate this news as about a 47 billion. Out of ten. I warned you that her scale was unusual. When I told her I was going to write this, she replied, “47 billion isn’t high enough.”

It’s not just that Jesus came to Earth, it’s that he did so knowing he would one day have to die to knock down the dividing wall between us and God. And that he would thus make it possible for all who would turn to him to find forgiveness for their sin.

When we hear “God is love,” it can sometimes feel like a nice greeting card sentiment—until we remember how much his love cost. Until we remember that because of his love, God the Father had to watch his only son go through a sham of a trial at the hands of his own creations, be tortured, and ultimately killed. When one considers what Jesus gave up—for a people in outright rebellion against him—it seems reasonable to say that his death was the most stunning display of love in all of history.

## **JESUS CHRIST**

There are at least four important things about Jesus that anyone who wants to understand Christianity should know.

## 1. He is Fully God. And Fully Human.

When we say that God sent a savior to Earth, this was not a case of God having sent a savior in the same way as he might have sent an angel or a messenger. In this case, it was God himself who showed up, in the person of Jesus Christ. Theologians call this (God coming to Earth, as a man) the incarnation. The belief that Jesus is both fully God and fully man has been a central teaching in every major branch of the Christian church since the first century.

In the early church, if Christians got this wrong, they typically messed up by believing that Jesus was fully God but not fully man. This fascinates me. Jesus' miracles and his resurrection were so deeply believed that history tells us that early Christians found it easier to believe that he was God than that he was a man.

Today, it is just the opposite. People are happy to call Jesus a great moral teacher or a great man, but not God.

At the risk of offending someone who has said this, the idea that he was only a great man but not God makes no sense. If Jesus was not God, the entire foundation of his teaching would have been a lie. He was either a great teacher, and also God, or he was dishonest about who he was—and thus a liar and an awful teacher. A great teacher but *not* God? No chance.

Those of you who know me know that my favorite band is U2. Some of you may even be shocked that it has taken me this long to mention them. The band's lead singer, Bono, has been open about his Christian faith. He is also open about the fact that he's made some missteps along the way. (Haven't we all?)

In a biography that was the result of a series of interviews Bono did with French writer Michka Assayas, Bono challenged this idea that Jesus could have been a great teacher but not God.

*Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet, obviously a very interesting guy, had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets, be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually, Christ doesn't allow you that. He doesn't let you off that hook.*

*Christ says: "No. I'm not saying I'm a teacher, don't call me teacher. I'm not saying I'm a prophet. I'm saying: I'm the Messiah. I'm saying: I'm God incarnate."*

*And people say: "No, no, please just be a prophet. A prophet we can take... But don't mention the M word! Because, you know, we are going to have to crucify you." And he goes: "No, no, I know you're expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah." At this point everyone starts looking at their shoes and says: "Oh my God, he's going to keep saying this."*

*What you are left with is either Christ was who he said he was—the Messiah—or a complete nutcase. I mean we're talking a nutcase on the level of Charles Manson.<sup>3</sup>*

"I'm not joking here," Bono said. "The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside down by a nutcase, for me, *that* is farfetched."<sup>4</sup>

C.S. Lewis shared similar thoughts, 53 years earlier (thoughts that may well have influenced Bono), in *Mere Christianity*:

*A man who said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or else*

*he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a mad-man or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about him becoming a great human teacher.<sup>5</sup>*

To ponder the idea that Jesus is both fully God and also fully man is to wrestle with a mystery. How could this be possible? A man who is also God? God who is also a man? The idea that Jesus has two distinct natures is both a mystery and a miracle.

Both of Jesus' two natures are important. The fact that he is fully human matters to theologians for a few reasons, but I'll focus on one reason it should matter to all of us: he can relate to everything we will ever go through.

The shortest verse in the Bible is found in John 11:35. It says, "Jesus wept." If you ever felt motivated to memorize a verse of the Bible, this would be a good place to start.

This verse is tucked into the story of the death of a man named Lazarus. Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha, were very close to Jesus. When Lazarus got sick, Mary and Martha sent someone to deliver a message to Jesus, asking him to come quickly. Jesus did not come quickly, however. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had died. The sisters were distraught, and upset with Jesus for not having returned sooner.

When he saw the two of them crying, John tells us, Jesus was "deeply moved in his spirit and troubled" (John 11:33).

Two verses later we learn that Jesus wept. This is interesting because Jesus had made it clear that he already knew that Lazarus

would die, and that he already knew he would raise Lazarus from the dead. Put differently, he knew exactly what was going to go down, and he knew he would make it turn out well.

But still, he wept.

His heart broke when he saw his friends heartbroken. He never minimized their pain. He did not say, “Mary, Martha, chill. I got this.” He did not discourage or ignore their crying. Instead, he wept with them.

This was the king of the universe, through whom everything that exists was created, weeping—despite knowing that he had the situation totally under control.

We learn a lot about Jesus here. Among other things, we learn of his compassion for our pain. Jesus is not a distant and untouchable king in a castle on some hill, removed from—and unmoved by—the problems of his people.

Have you ever been tempted to sin? Jesus has. Ever dealt with anxiety or stress? Jesus has experienced both, intensely. Have you ever been abandoned by someone you loved—in a time of need? Jesus has. Have you been betrayed by a friend? Jesus has. Have you ever felt unfairly accused or attacked? Jesus has. Have you felt hungry or tired? Or angry at things you’ve witnessed? Jesus has felt each of those things. Like we have.

Perhaps you are going through something right now that feels brutally difficult. If Christianity is true, this story should give you great comfort. You can know that Jesus cares.

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that we should “approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16)

The fact that Jesus is fully human was evident in his compassionate response to Mary and Martha's grief. That he was also fully God meant he had the power to do something about that grief. The same is true today. We are invited to boldly approach this compassionate and powerful king's throne.

The fact that Jesus is fully God and fully man makes him different than every other religious leader in history. Other religious leaders pointed the way to God; they were advisors, or spiritual guides of sorts. And their bodies are all in their tombs.

Only Jesus claimed to be God. He proved it through his life and through the resurrection. Jesus was fully God. And fully man. He did not come to merely advise or point the way.

He came to die.

## **2. He Died In Our Place**

Jesus said in Luke 19:10 that he came to Earth to “seek and save the lost.” But for him to save the lost—to be the savior—he actually had to die.

But why?

That was part of the question Ryan asked during our lunch that day at Spartans. It is the question my friend Charlotte asked me: “If Jesus was doing this great stuff on earth, why did he have to die?” Put differently, what difference could Jesus' death make? These are great questions.

Not long ago, I was on the verge of falling asleep when I got a text from a high school student who was wrestling with this exact question. I will share part of our text exchange, with the student's permission. I have edited it lightly for clarity and spelled out any abbreviations.

*Student: Why did Jesus have to die? I know it seems basic.*

*Me: That is actually a really important question. Jesus had to die because God's justice and holiness require him to punish sin.*

*Student: OK, but what does Jesus have to do with our sin?*

*Me: In order for God to be a just (or right) judge, he has to punish sin. When Jesus died, the worst part was not his physical death on the cross, but rather that, while he was on the cross, God poured out his anger at our sin onto Jesus. Jesus literally took the punishment we deserved for our sin upon himself. This is amazing. Everything I've ever done wrong in life, or thought wrong—every lie I've told, every bad motive, every selfish, hateful, or otherwise wrong act or thought—has been an offense against God. God punished Jesus for it, instead of me. Jesus took my place so I would not have to face that punishment.*

*Student: But doesn't God forgive our sins?*

*Me: Yes, but there was a cost involved. He doesn't forgive simply by ignoring sin or by just being a nice God. It's like this. Imagine a judge in a courtroom whose daughter came before him, and that he found her guilty of breaking some law, and had to sentence her to pay a big fine. A girl wouldn't be allowed to stand trial before her dad in a courtroom, of course, but stay with me here. Imagine that she cried out to her father, "Dad! It's me. I can't pay that!"*

*As an honest judge with integrity, he must uphold the law. The sentence must be handed down and the fine must be paid. He cannot (because of love or kindness or fatherly concern) simply ignore his responsibility to find her guilty.*

*Imagine the dad then pausing the trial, taking off his robe, and walking around to the front of the bench, as a dad, and paying the fine his daughter was supposed to pay.*

*The judge has now done the right thing. He has handed down the sentence and ensured that the fine would be paid. But he literally took her punishment upon himself.*

*You asked if God forgives our sins. Yes—but Jesus had to choose to die and take our punishment so that we could be forgiven—even though we didn't deserve it.*

The conversation went on, and the student began to understand. Jesus was our substitute. This is what the Bible is talking about in First Corinthians 15:3 when it says, “Christ died for our sins.” There are a variety of passages in the Bible that talk about this idea. Let’s explore a few of them.

In the Old Testament, a prophecy about the coming savior, written long before Jesus was born (Isaiah 53:5), predicted that he would be “pierced for our transgressions, and crushed for our sin.” It continues, “the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”

In the New Testament, there are several passages that remind us that Jesus died in our place.

In Romans 3:25, Paul used a word that, when translated into English, is unfamiliar to many. He wrote that God sent Jesus as a “propitiation” for our sin. The book of First John uses the same word: “in this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). Propitiation can be loosely translated as “the sacrifice” or “the satisfaction” for our sins. Jesus’ death satisfied God’s anger toward our sin.

Peter wrote that Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounding you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24) Later, he wrote “Christ suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God.” (1 Peter 3:18)

Wayne Grudem explains what it means that Jesus “bore our sins in his body on the tree”:

*God the Father, the mighty Creator, the Lord of the universe, poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.*<sup>6</sup>

Grudem’s observation that Jesus “became the object of [God’s] intense hatred of sin” reminds us, yet again, that as much as we like thinking of God as love—which he is—we must not lose sight that the biblical God is also holy and righteous. Jesus’ death means that all who trust in his sacrifice on the cross will never have to be the object of God’s fury.

The last line of Grudem’s quote refers in part to the end of Romans 3:25, which paints a picture of a righteous God who was patient even as his anger was building as he watched sin destroy generation after generation. But he always had a plan, and that plan was to send a savior. God’s plan was Jesus.

*I can fix this, but you have no idea how much it is going to cost.*

Jesus died in our place, for the joy set before him. He became our substitute when he willingly laid down his life so we could escape God’s fury at our sin. At my sin. Amazing.

And then he didn’t stay dead.

### **3. He Rose from the Dead.**

We explored evidence for Jesus' resurrection in chapters nine and ten. If Jesus did rise from the dead, as he had predicted, it proves that he is who he claimed to be. God.

### **4. He is the Only Way to God.**

When Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life," and that "no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6), he meant exactly what it sounds like he meant. He was claiming to be the *only way* to God. This is a bold statement, and not one that is particularly politically correct these days. But as we discussed in chapter four, it is a claim that is either true or false.

You can disagree, but please know that this is at the very heart of Christianity. *Jesus is God's only solution for man's sin.* We, as the human race, utterly rebelled against the God of the universe. And in the most amazing display of love ever, he took upon himself the punishment we deserved for our rebellion.

Without Jesus' death on our behalf, we would have no hope of forgiveness. Without forgiveness, we would have no hope of spending eternity with God.

Peter said it like this when he was called before the Jewish high priests, rulers, scribes, and elders in Jerusalem (in Acts 4:12): "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to people by which we must be saved."

Thank God that he sent a savior.

But merely having a mental understanding of these four facts about Jesus Christ will not save us. That's why the following chapter is the most important chapter in this entire book.





## Now Pitching for the Red Sox

FOR TEN YEARS, I OWNED A COMPANY I LAUNCHED in 1999 with a friend and business partner named Kevin. Working with Kevin was fantastic. He is one of the best (and funniest) human beings I have ever known.

I've known Kevin to get up early on snowy mornings and get in his truck when the roads were dangerous, in order to drive around our area looking to see if anyone needed help or needed to have a car pulled out of a ditch. Maybe other people do that, too. I've just never met anyone else who does.

He is also the kind of person who often finds himself walking into seemingly normal situations, and then walking out later, having had experiences that defy explanation. I could tell you a number of these stories, including the time Kevin and I flew to Chicago to see a Cubs game at Wrigley Field to celebrate our company's fifth anniversary.

We walked into the stadium with tickets for seats in the upper deck. We ended up being able to choose between using Dusty Baker's personal tickets just a few rows from the field near home plate (Dusty was the Cubs' manager at the time), and sitting equally close using a Cubs player's personal tickets.

This story might surprise you if you don't know Kevin, but it isn't even his best story about visiting an iconic baseball stadium.

While he was still dating his now-wife, Chrissy, they went to visit her family in Massachusetts. Like everyone in New England, Chrissy's family loves the Boston Red Sox, so they decided to go to a game at Boston's historic Fenway Park.

Fairly early in the game, Kevin was surprised to hear the public address announcer say, "Now pitching for the Red Sox, number 41, Bill Pulsipher."

Kevin wasn't even aware, as he walked into Fenway that day, that Bill had signed with Boston. Bill had bounced around the majors after having dealt with some injuries, and as Kevin watched Bill warm up, he thought back to their days as teammates in high school.

He wondered if he could catch up with his old friend after the game. When Bill was taken out of the game, Kevin left his seat and wandered down into the bowels of Fenway Park.

He eventually found a security guard and explained that he was an old friend and ex-teammate of Bill's, and would really like to say hello after the game. He was hoping to find out where the players would leave the stadium once the game had ended. The guard, however, directed Kevin to a hallway with an unmarked door and no external doorknob—a door that actually led into the Red Sox clubhouse.

The guard told Kevin to knock on the door and said another guard or a clubhouse attendant would likely answer, someone who might be able to deliver a message to Bill.

Kevin found the door, knocked, and it opened. The person inside agreed, with no promises, to try to deliver Kevin's message, and asked Kevin to wait. A few minutes later, the door opened again, but this time it was not the clubhouse attendant who opened the door. It was Bill himself.

He had been icing his arm after having come out of the game and caught Kevin by surprise when he came to the door. The two talked for a while, catching up on each other's lives. Eventually, Kevin returned to his seat with Chrissy and her family.

I still shake my head at the thought of Chrissy's family in the stands, watching the game, wondering why Kevin had been gone so long. They could not have guessed that he was actually hanging out with a Red Sox player—during the game.

Here's why I share that story: It was not Kevin's charm that allowed him to get time with Bill that day. It was not that (at least when compared to other people) he is a good man. It was not Kevin's good works on snowy days. It required a gracious act by the clubhouse attendant.

The clubhouse attendant (and Bill, of course) took every step necessary to make it possible for Kevin and Bill to reconnect.

But once the clubhouse attendant asked Kevin to wait, Kevin had to decide how he would respond. He could have refused and walked away.

In a similar way, God has taken every step necessary to make it possible for us to reconnect with him. He has taken every step

necessary to make it possible for us to find forgiveness and for our broken relationship to be healed. He has taken every step necessary to ensure that we can become his children and one day spend eternity with him.

But each of us has to decide how we will respond.



Several weeks into my first semester in college, my friends and I got tickets to see The Go-Go's, who were coming to campus. Little did I know, as I got ready to head out for the concert, that I would come to look back at that night as the single most important night of my life.

A few weeks earlier, within the first few days of school, in a conversation in our suite late one night, my suitemates asked me what I thought it meant to be a Christian.

I think I said something about believing in God and being a good person. Whatever I said, I am sure now it was not quite right. I asked how they would explain it. One of them used the four-point outline I mentioned earlier in the book to share what they believed.

Here is my paraphrased version of the four points they shared:

1. God's love for the world is astounding, and he created us to know him personally.
2. However, because each of us is sinful, we are separated from him, the holy and righteous God of the universe. The relationship we were created to have with God was broken, by our sin, and therefore, we cannot know him personally or experience his love.

3. Jesus Christ is God's *only* provision for our sin. Only his death on the cross makes it possible for us to be forgiven and to experience a right relationship with God.
4. We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, by faith, in order to receive forgiveness, enter into a right relationship with God, and receive God's gift of eternal life.

As I shared earlier, these four points resonated with something inside me when I first heard them. But my brain still needed convincing.

I did believe that some kind of God must exist, and didn't struggle to believe in his love. Point one made sense. I also had no problem with point two. If there was a God who is holy, I understood that I was surely sinful. Although I knew that some people might describe me as a "pretty good kid," I knew my heart. And looking around at the world, the idea that man's sin (and rebellion against God) had pretty much wrecked everything made sense to me. It still does today.

But I wasn't convinced that points three and four were true. I had questions. That's when I began to read.

A couple of weeks later (I think it was the week before The Go-Go's concert), Todd and Keith went away for the weekend. They let a friend, a tennis player from William & Mary who was visiting for the weekend, crash in their room while they were gone.

I don't remember his name, but on that Sunday afternoon, I was alone in our suite when he got back from wherever he had been. As we hung out and talked, the subject of Christianity came up. He was a Christian. I told him I had been reading and thinking a lot about becoming a Christian myself.

He asked what was holding me back. This is a great question, by the way, for any person to ask themselves as they ponder the Christian faith.

At that point, I didn't really have a good answer.

I still remember that conversation. He told me that his faith wasn't just about getting to heaven, but also about a relationship with God on Earth—a relationship that was life-changing. He said that the gospel (the good news of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf) had made a difference in every part of his life. And that living God's way had been profoundly freeing.

He said that his faith gave him a sense of peace, and that it helped shape who he understood himself to be. It also shaped his sense of purpose, from his studies to his future, to how he approached his tennis matches, to how he thought about women and dating, to how he treated people.

All of this made sense to me. Hearing his perspective was another step in helping clarify much of what I had already been thinking over the previous couple of weeks.

That conversation might have been the moment that I really began to fully get it. Perhaps it was then that God opened up my eyes (spiritually speaking) so I could see.

After reading more, and thinking about it some more, I walked into my suitemates' room sometime after 2 a.m. on that next Friday night, after the concert.

My ears were still ringing when I sat down in their chair by the window, and said something like, "I believe. So, now what?"

✦ ✦ ✦

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RESPOND... TO GOD?**

Earlier in the book, I mentioned the first part of Romans 6:23, which says “the wages of sin is death.” The second part of that same verse says “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

If my friend Morgan wanted to buy a Christmas gift for her sister (and my friend) Reilly, she would decide what she wanted to buy. She would order it online or go to a store to pick it up, and probably wrap it. Perhaps she would then mail it, put it under a Christmas tree, or hand it directly to Reilly.

At that point, Morgan would have done everything possible in order to make that gift available to her sister. But Reilly would then have to decide to accept, or receive, the gift. Of course, she could also ignore or reject it.

The fourth point I shared earlier said, “We must individually receive Jesus as Savior and Lord.” To receive Jesus is to respond to God’s offer of this free gift.

John 1:12 says that “as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in his name.”

We receive Jesus by faith. Paul wrote this to the church at Ephesus (in Ephesians 2:8-9): “By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works so that no one may boast.”

A little booklet that I’ve seen provides a great and simple explanation of what it means to receive Christ:

*Receiving Christ involves turning to God from self (repentance) and trusting Christ to come into our lives to forgive*

*us of our sins and to make us what He wants us to be. Just to agree intellectually that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for our sins is not enough. Nor is it enough to have an emotional experience. We receive Jesus Christ by faith, as an act of our will.”<sup>1</sup>*

It is important for any person who may be considering Christianity to understand what it means to repent. To repent is to turn around; to change our minds; to decide to make a complete change of direction, away from ourselves and our sin and toward Christ, the heavenly king who has called us to follow him.

When early church leaders in the book of Acts explained how to become a Christ-follower, they often included the word repent. Jesus’ own words, as recorded in the book of Mark (1:15), called on people to “repent and believe in the [good news].” Jesus had not yet died for our sins, but he knew then that he had come to take away the sins of the world. He also talked about there being joy in heaven when one sinner repents.<sup>2</sup>

If I had to sum up what it means to receive Christ in two words, I’d use these two: repent and believe. But let me be very clear here: we do not repent in an attempt to earn our forgiveness by being good. We cannot earn it—it is a gift. We are saved by grace, through faith.

God took every step necessary.

But once we truly understand the depth of our sin—and the amazing news that Christ died the death we deserved—repentance should be our logical response. If, as I shared in chapter four, my friends truly believed that the gym where they were playing basketball was on fire, they’d get out. True belief leads to action. Likewise, we are saved only through our faith—but true faith will cause us to act.

## SO, NOW WHAT?

That Friday night in our dorm, when I asked, “So, now what?” I was really asking what it meant to respond to God and to accept his offer of salvation. Todd and Keith reminded me of the four points they had shared weeks before. They asked me if I truly believed that I was sinful and that I needed God’s forgiveness.

I said yes.

They asked me if I believed that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins, and then rose again from the dead.

I said yes.

At that point, they suggested a prayer. They explained that the prayer would not save me, but rather that God would save me, based on his grace, through my faith. The prayer would simply be a way I could express my faith to God. The following prayer is very similar to the prayer I prayed that night:

*Jesus, I need You. I am sinful. Thank you for dying on the cross for my sins. I receive you as my Savior and Lord.*

*Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Help me to live the kind of life you want me to live. Please make me the kind of person you want me to be. Amen.*

In that prayer, I prayed to receive Jesus as Savior and Lord. To receive Jesus as Savior was to receive the salvation and forgiveness he promised. To receive him as Lord was to make a decision to turn from my sin, to align myself with his kingdom, and to follow him, the heavenly king.

After I prayed, I didn’t immediately feel much different. Some people do. But over the next weeks and months, I began to see

God change my life, from the inside out. When I learned that baptism was an essential next step, to publicly identify myself with Christ and His church and to make an outward statement about my inner faith, I got baptized.

Since receiving Christ, God has done more in my life than I have space to detail here. He has been faithful, despite the fact that I've (often) been less than faithful to him. He still has work to do in my life, but thankfully, he is not finished with me yet.



### **WE ARE ALL ON A JOURNEY**

Even as I've shared my own story, it is important to point out that everybody's story is different. Some wrestle with questions about God and eventually become convinced, as I did. Then, their hearts get in line.

Others, like my wife Karey, hear the gospel and simply embrace it as true. They respond in faith when they learn that they can find forgiveness for their sin. When Karey first understood the gospel at a camp in Colorado, she believed, and then later began to learn some of the types of things I've written about in this book. Her transformation was (and continues to be) beautiful.

My friend Brooke became a Christian when she trusted Christ during a humanitarian/construction trip to Kentucky.

She pulled me aside as we returned from a great evening at a lake where our friends Claire and Emma had just been baptized. She said she had been thinking about becoming a Christian for a while, and was ready. This was her "now what?" moment.

So, later, at a beaten-up picnic table beside an unremarkable pool in the outdoor courtyard of a not-quite-super motel, she

responded to God by placing her faith in Christ. And heaven rejoiced. Her eternity was changed forever as she decided to follow Jesus, the one who had formed her in her mother's womb and who loved her so much that he died for her.

I will never forget watching her roommate Kayla's joyful reaction when Brooke told Kayla about her decision. And I will never forget, a few weeks later, a weekend at our family's river house with my wife, our son Ethan, and approximately 20 of the student leaders from Group. That Saturday evening, I had the privilege of baptizing Brooke as the other students hung out in the river with us and celebrated with her.

It may be my single favorite memory of the many great memories I have of our family and friends at the river house.

My friends Nick and Tyler would describe coming to faith in different ways. Nick would tell you that he simply came to realize that he believed, and decided to follow Christ with his life. He doesn't really remember a specific day that his faith became real to him. It just did.

Tyler, on the other hand, remembers becoming a Christian on a specific night at my house, but really didn't tell anyone for a while, even as he started to grow in his faith. But I had the honor of baptizing both Tyler and Nick on the same day in a river near Front Royal, Virginia. It was another day I will never forget.

My friend Amanda became a Christian in our kitchen one night after telling Karey she wanted to know more about what it meant to accept the gift of salvation that Christ offered.

My friend Mike's family was transformed after his mom saw questions about the Bible on the game show *Jeopardy!* She realized she didn't know much about the Bible, and went out and

bought one the next day. The Bible she bought had a page inside the front cover that contained the four points I shared earlier.

She received Christ, trusting him for her salvation. She explained all of this to her husband, and he too came to faith in Christ. The changes God then made in their lives were so obvious to their kids that they also became Christians.

My friend Dave was at the very top of a ridiculously tall tower, ready to make a base jump (a parachute jump from the top of a tall object or structure, rather than from an airplane) when he asked his friend why he had so much peace in his life. Standing atop that tower, his friend said, “because I know where I’m going when I die.” He smiled and jumped. That led to further discussions, and to Dave becoming a follower of Christ.

My friend Harold was known as Big Hal while he did time in the United States Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. He intimidated everybody. Everybody, that is, except for a woman named Mary. Mary, who Harold would later call his “90-pound angel,” would visit him and other prisoners and tell them that they needed to turn to Jesus and away from their sin.

Mary wasn’t afraid to tell Harold the truth. Eventually, he began to listen. After receiving Christ, his life was so powerfully changed that he decided to personally tell every prisoner about Jesus three times. He thought if he only told them once, they might not get it. The impact God made through Harold—in other prisoner’s lives and in the prison as a whole—was so dramatic that on December 21, 1973, U.S. President Richard Nixon commuted Harold’s sentence. Harold was free, many years before he was due to have been released.

When Harold got out of prison, he married Mary, and they launched the prison ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ.

I quoted Joe Gibbs earlier, on the emptiness he felt even as he was in the middle of a hall of fame career as a football coach. He found a solution to that emptiness, and it was a solution that did not come through wins, money, fame, football, or NASCAR. It came through his relationship with God. Gibbs said this about his journey to faith:

*You know why I had that emptiness? I started discovering in 1982 that God had made me and he had put that void there and it didn't matter how much money I tried to put in there or how many football games I tried to win, I still had that empty feeling inside of me... God made us with that empty feeling because he made us for a personal relationship with him.<sup>3</sup>*

I could share even more dramatic stories, of missionaries arriving in a remote village only to have the people who live there ask, “Have you come to tell us about the God we’ve always longed to know?” Or of God drawing Muslims around the world to become Christians by speaking to them through their dreams.

Or I could share one more simple story that was meaningful to me: that my freshman roommate, Mike, came to faith in Christ the same week that I did.

Why do I share these stories? Because they remind us of God’s power, providence, and grace. And of his heart for people. They remind us that Jesus is the good shepherd who would leave his 99 sheep to find the one who was lost. They remind us that he draws people into a relationship with him in a wide (and sometimes wild) variety of ways.

#### **WHAT REALLY MATTERS**

As interesting and encouraging as these stories may be, however, they are not what should matter most to a reader.

For every reader, there are two questions that matter far more than any other person's story. First is the question we've been wrestling with since page one:

*Is Christianity true?*

This question matters more than how you may feel about Christianity, how highly (or not highly) you think of Christians, and how highly (or not highly) you think of some of Christianity's more difficult teachings. The second question is related:

*If Christianity is true, what will you do about it?*

As I begin to wind down this book, I want to consider this question from two different perspectives.

In chapter 17, we will look at this "what will you do about it" question for readers who are Christians. In the remainder of this chapter, however, I'd like to share a story and a thought about this question for my non-Christian readers.

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On May 27, 1830, the Circuit Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania sentenced a man named George Wilson to die for robbing a mail carrier and endangering the carrier's life. Less than three weeks later, the president of the United States, Andrew Jackson, granted Wilson a pardon for the crime for which he had been sentenced to die. Wilson faced other charges, but none would cost him his life.

Stunningly, Wilson refused the pardon.

At this point, the same government that had just finished trying to prove Wilson's guilt now had a strange dilemma on its hands.

Can a man on death row, who has been granted a pardon (by the president of the United States, no less), reject that pardon? The question went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Chief Justice John Marshall, writing for the majority, wrote, “a pardon is an act of grace... which exempts the individual, on whom it is bestowed, from the punishment the law inflicts for a crime he has committed.” But, Marshall then wrote, a pardon must be delivered, and “delivery is not complete without acceptance. It may then be rejected by the person to whom it is tendered; and if it [is] rejected, we have discovered no power in a court to force it on him.”<sup>4</sup>

The Supreme Court’s conclusion was that if the president’s offer of a pardon is rejected, there is no pardon.

When Romans 6:23 tells us that “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus,” we learn that God has offered us a gift. It was a gift motivated by his love and graciously made possible by Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross.

The gift that God offers to all who would turn to him is far better—and was far more costly—than a mere presidential pardon. God has taken every step necessary to make it possible for you to be forgiven for your sin. He has offered you not only forgiveness, but peace, freedom from shame and guilt, freedom from bondage, a restored relationship with him, and eternal life.

But much like the offer of a pardon, God’s offer of eternal life is only an offer. It is an offer that must be accepted by the guilty.

When I have had the opportunity to talk to non-Christians who were ready to believe and at a “now what?” moment, I’ve asked them if they were ready to accept God’s offer of eternal life, and to follow Jesus Christ with their lives.

If they've said yes, I've shared a four-point outline with them that was similar to the one Todd and Keith first shared with me. This leads me to one final thought in this chapter.

It is possible that at least one person who is reading this book right now may be at his or her own “now what?” moment. If that is you, perhaps you attended church growing up but walked away. Perhaps you've been attending a church but have never taken that decisive step to turn from your sin and to place your trust in Jesus, by faith. Or perhaps you have never gone to church or have never seriously considered the claims of Christianity. Perhaps you've been considering them for years.

Whatever the case, if find yourself at your own “now what?” moment, I would say to you that your next steps are not difficult to understand. Accept the gift of salvation that God has offered. Confess your sin to God, make a decision to turn away from your sin and to Christ, and place your trust in his death on the cross for your forgiveness. Repent. Believe.

You can use your own words to pray and express this desire to God. Or you can pray a prayer like the one I prayed. But remember: the prayer is not what will save you. God knows your heart, and saves people by his grace, through their faith.

If you do receive Christ and become a Christian, your next steps are very important. First, tell another Christian that you have received Christ. Don't be shy; Christians will rejoice with you. Please let me know if possible—I'd love to hear this and to pray for you.

Second, get connected with a good local church and get baptized. You were made by God to flourish as part of a faith community. You were not made to live out your faith on your own. The church is called the “body of Christ” and every believer needs

the support that comes from that body. I'll talk more about this in chapter 17.

Getting baptized should be your first step of obedience as a Christian. Baptism is a physical act that reflects the spiritual reality that has happened in your life. When we are immersed into the water, it's like a kind of death, spiritually speaking. We die to ourselves and die to our reliance on our own goodness or efforts to get us to heaven. When we rise up again, out of the water, we rise to new life.

If you are a college student, it would also be helpful for you to find a faith community on your campus. Good campus ministries that exist at colleges in the United States include Chi Alpha, Christian Union, Cru, Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), Intersarsity, the Navigators, Reformed University Fellowship (RUF), and others. If several of these ministries are active on your campus, you will likely find students from a variety of backgrounds and interests who are seeking to grow in their faith.

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To those readers not ready to receive Christ, I'd say that life is short. Eternity is long. Take a moment and go back to the Introduction of this book, and re-read Pascal's wager. Remember my two questions: Is Christianity true? And, if Christianity is true, what will I do about it?

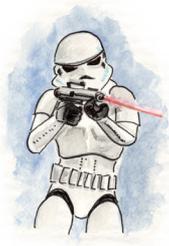
In the conclusion, I'll share a few other steps for you to consider.



- SECTION SIX -

*Faith*





## He Sought an Answer

IN CHAPTER 12, I TOLD THE STORY OF A MEAL I ATE with Ryan when he was five years old. He had a question about whether the Stormtroopers in the movie *Star Wars* could kill God. His conclusion troubled him.

Here's what I loved about that conversation: he had a doubt—or at least a question—so he asked me about it. He didn't let it sit in his brain unexplored.

He sought an answer.

During his freshman year of college, he and I had one of our many conversations about God, this time at an IHOP over breakfast. This was a very different sort of conversation. He was home for Christmas break, and he shared that he had been dealing with a lot of doubt. In fact, he said, he wasn't even sure he still believed in God.

The conversation concerned me, but not because I was fearful that he would read the best Christian thinkers and find their arguments to be poor. I was concerned because I feared that he might not take the time to really explore his reasons for doubt. I feared that he might blindly accept his doubts, and walk away from his faith without analyzing those doubts carefully.

Thankfully, I also managed to recognize that he'd have to figure this one out on his own. He was going through the process of deciding whether to own the faith he had grown up believing. So even as I sat there during the conversation, I bit my tongue and avoided launching into arguments for God.

For all of the times in my life that I've put my foot in my mouth and said too much or said the wrong thing (and sadly, there have been a few), I for once had the wisdom to be patient.

He had to wrestle with his faith (and doubt) on his terms.

Still, I did ask Ryan to promise me that during this wrestling period, however long it lasted, he would not simply accept his doubts as facts. I wanted him to see that it was possible that his reason for doubt could actually be wrong.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is the opposite of faith. I mentioned earlier in the book that doubt is not nearly as significant a problem as is unexamined doubt.

Over time, many have made the helpful observation that doubts are actually alternate beliefs, and thus we should not accept our doubts (or these new, alternate beliefs) without careful thought.

If I begin to doubt that the Earth is round, for example, it is because I am being tempted to put my faith in a different idea. That the Earth might be flat. Or tubular. Or some other shape.

If we do not examine our own doubts, we risk becoming comfortable with them and allowing them to take up a permanent place in our lives. When that happens, they can be hard to shake. It fascinates me that when people explore issues of faith, they tend to ask careful questions, like: “Should I believe this?” Or, “Are there good reasons to believe?” But they tend to just blindly accept their doubts—their alternate beliefs—without exploring them with the same degree of care.

One of the things I tried to do in the early chapters, on evidence for God’s existence, was to show that skeptics also have to believe some of what they believe by faith. To believe there is no God requires someone to believe (at a minimum): that something (the universe, in this case) could begin to exist without a cause—or that it is eternally old, despite scientific evidence to the contrary; that the fine-tuning we see in the universe happened by chance (against all odds); that our sophisticated and highly-ordered world and everything in it (including DNA) came to exist without an intelligent mind behind it; that the objective moral values that many people believe exist do not actually exist; and that Jesus Christ was either a liar or a lunatic.

Whatever you believe, faith is important in this discussion, because we cannot prove that God exists with 100% certainty. And, of course, we also cannot prove that he does not exist.

In Ryan’s case, his doubts were a movement toward a belief that if God exists at all, he is something other than what Ryan had grown up believing. With so many distractions at college, I was nervous that he would not carefully examine these different ideas (or reasons for doubt) that he was tempted to embrace. During this time, though, it seems clear that God’s grace was at work in his life.

So was God’s Grace.

Grace was Ryan's girlfriend at the time, and she patiently encouraged Ryan during this season of doubt. She sent him podcasts to listen to and articles to read, and continued to challenge his thinking in a variety of ways. He was able to hear her in ways he might not have been able to hear me and Karey.

As she encouraged him, he eventually did examine his doubts with care. He didn't simply accept them. Over time, Ryan came to the conclusion that his reasons for doubt were not as strong as his reasons for faith in Christ. He decided that he did believe that Jesus must have been who he had claimed to be, and has sought to follow Jesus ever since.

Grace (now his wife—and our newest daughter) is now encouraging others to consider and pursue Christ in her role in full-time ministry at George Mason University. Her work at GMU feels like a really cool full-circle sort of thing to Karey and me. And we are thankful for Grace for far more reasons than just the impact she had on Ryan's life in college. But we will never forget her role during that time.

She never gave up on him. Neither did God.

### **IN THE REALM OF FAITH, DOUBT HAPPENS**

This chapter is about the importance of faith. But we know, when discussing faith, that we can't ignore the reality of doubt. If you are in the midst of your own season of doubt, it is important to respond well to your doubt. I've seen too many people experience doubt, not deal with it well, and then begin to walk away from God.

This happens sometimes in the lives of students in their first year of college, as it did to Ryan. Here is what the process often looks like (this is not about any specific student, but rather is about the way I've seen it happen in different students' lives).

A student who seems committed to wanting to grow in his faith will sit down with me before leaving for college. He will talk about wanting to get involved with a Christian community at the school he is about to attend. But upon his arrival on campus, everything changes. He either decides against, or perhaps simply never gets around to, following his plan.

Why? Did his belief system suddenly change or did some argument persuade him that what he had been thinking about God was wrong? Sometimes, yes. But not typically.

More often, such a student will go away to school and immediately begin to look to fit in with the people he meets—as all of us tend to do when walking into a new environment. So, the student connects with a club, a fraternity, or whatever group he happens to meet. And he jumps in. None of these things are necessarily bad, but they do demand the student's time.

Even though he has more available time than he has ever had before, he suddenly feels super busy. And before he knows what hit him, he's a month or two into school, committed to a variety of activities, and he settles into a pattern. He has not been intentional about finding a community that will help develop the spiritual dimension of his life.

Either that or he simply decides that Christian community is not a priority. Whatever the reasons, when a Christian student does not seek out relationships with other Christians, and ends up with mostly non-Christian friendships, this is less than ideal from a faith perspective. The same is true for adults, by the way.

Then, when a (normal) thought or season of doubt occurs in such a student's life, the student will not have the kind of relationships or support system to help him think through his doubt in helpful ways.

If you add that to the tendency we all have to become like the people with whom we spend the most time, we can see why the Bible urges believers to “not stop meeting together.”<sup>1</sup>

Karey and I have a friend we love and enjoy very much who went through something like this fairly recently when she moved to a new area.

After being there a while, she let us know that she had “found her tribe” and was happy. Sometime later, she let us know that she had been dealing with serious doubt, caused in part by the important question of why God allows bad things to happen. But because she had not gotten involved in a community that would encourage her faith, she really didn’t tell anyone who might have been able to help her wrestle with her question thoughtfully. And she admits that her faith has suffered.

None of this leads Karey and me to love her or anyone else in a similar situation any less, of course. The book of Jude calls us to show mercy to those who doubt (v.22). This isn’t hard for me, in part because Ryan went through it, and in part because I’ve dealt with doubt myself. So I do understand, and feel compassion for, anyone wrestling with doubt.

At times during my Christian life when I have run into doubt, I’ve gone back to reasons why I believe in God. And why I believe in the resurrection. I’ve reflected on ways I’ve seen God work in my life and in the lives of others. And I’ve read and sought insight from others on the alternate belief that I was tempted to believe. Each of those things has been helpful.

#### **DOUBT IS NEITHER FINAL NOR FATAL**

In Ryan’s case, his season of doubt (because he investigated his doubts well) actually ended up strengthening his faith. This is a great example of how doubt doesn’t have to be fatal to faith.

Doubt is not even necessarily unhealthy, as long as the believer works through it thoughtfully. In his book, *Reason for God*, Tim Keller wrote this about doubt:

*A faith without some doubts is like a human body without any antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she has failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.*<sup>2</sup>

We should not be surprised when we run into doubt, and should never fall into the trap of thinking that it reveals some sort of character flaw. Of course, we know that even people who take their faith seriously will experience doubt at times. One of Jesus' own disciples has been called "Doubting" Thomas. If Thomas could doubt even after walking through life with Jesus and seeing him perform miracles, why should we think we are any less susceptible to it?

It encourages me to read of Jesus' interaction with a man in Mark 9:14-29. The man approaches Jesus with a request and at one point tells Jesus, "I believe. Help me in my unbelief."

One pastor calls this "a confession of faith and a cry for help."<sup>3</sup> He says that this is "a good and appropriate prayer," noting that "even on our best days we are people of imperfect faith."<sup>4</sup>

Jesus' response is interesting. He challenges the onlookers to believe, but then grants the man's request. The man's faith was not perfect, but he did exhibit faith. We learn an important lesson here: faith matters to God.

## FAITH MATTERS

I wrote earlier that Ryan's season of doubt ended up strengthening his faith. I did not write that coming through his season of doubt led him to a place where he could prove to anyone else, with 100% certainty, that Christianity is true.

Now that I've spent most of this book arguing that Christianity is rational, and more likely to be true than not to be true, I have to say once more that it cannot be proven with 100% certainty to someone who is a skeptic or nonbeliever.

This does not mean, however, that a believer can't have a high level of confidence that Christianity is true.

Hebrews 11:1 says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Here we learn that the Christian can have both assurance and conviction about the truth of those things he or she believes, by faith.

When believers see God work repeatedly, over the years, in ways that would seem impossible to accept as mere coincidences, their faith grows. I could tell you numerous stories of ways Karey and I have seen God work, often in ways that defy explanation. When we've seen those things happen, our faith has grown and we've discovered yet another line of evidence that God is real. But this line of evidence isn't convincing for the skeptic—and I understand that. He or she will likely write these things off to coincidence. I cannot.

Likewise, when believers see God answer very specific prayer in ways that seem wildly improbable or even impossible to accept as coincidences, their faith grows.

Believers around the world have seen God perform miracles, either on their behalf or in the lives of others.<sup>5</sup> This has surely

strengthened their faith. As my friend David once said about a miracle that took place in someone's life, "it is amazing when God shows you that he knows your address."

Another piece of what I might call a believer's internal evidence for the existence of God is found in Romans 8:16. There, we learn that "the Holy Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are God's children."

This, of course, can't be proven to anyone. But for these reasons and others, many believers will say they are absolutely certain that Christianity is true.

Interestingly, the fact that Christianity can't be proven to others with 100% certainty seems to be by design. God absolutely could have chosen to make it completely clear, to each of us, that he exists. And he will one day, when Jesus returns to Earth as he has promised he will do. But he has not yet chosen to do so. Why? We don't know.

The Bible doesn't always tell us why God does some of what he does, but it gives us tremendous insight into the sorts of things that he values.

### **GOD VALUES FAITH**

Hebrews 11:6 tells us that "without faith, it is impossible to please God, since the one who draws near to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." Impossible is a strong word and it begins to show us how much God values faith.

It is easy to see how much Jesus valued faith. One of the few things he ever rebuked his disciples for was when they displayed a lack of faith. He once criticized Nazareth—his hometown—for the lack of faith he found in people there.

On the other hand, there is a great story, found in Luke 7 and Matthew 8, of a Roman Centurion who comes to Jesus with a request. His faith in Jesus was so strong that both Luke and Matthew record that Jesus was “amazed by” (some translations say Jesus “marveled at”) the Centurion’s faith.

### **FAITH IS BEST NURTURED IN COMMUNITY**

The pattern I shared earlier, of how some students can walk away from their faith in college, is not universally true of students, of course. Karey and I have known many students who have grown and even thrived in their faith during college.

The difference is often one of community. Those who make the effort to get plugged into a healthy Christian community will often find that their faith will grow in college.

My friend Meredith went to a great university in the southeast that employs a New Testament professor on the faculty who doesn’t actually believe the New Testament. In fact, he is known for trying to dissuade others from believing it.

The professor attacked some of the things Meredith had long believed. But because her Christian community on campus was used to responding to this professor’s attacks, she was able to have conversations and find resources to help her process his critiques in helpful ways. By confronting what might have grown into doubt, her faith grew stronger.

Whatever your experience in college or in life, Christian community is absolutely necessary for our faith to grow. Hebrews 10:23-25 reminds us of this:

*23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,*

*25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*

There are at least three important takeaways in this short passage.

First, Christians—both students and adults—are challenged to exhibit a faith that doesn't waver. Jesus challenged his disciples to exhibit faith. The writer of Hebrews does the same. Proverbs 3:5-6 remind us to “trust in the Lord with all of your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” Faith matters.

Second, we see that we need other Christians who will build us up, and encourage us to pursue love and good works. Relationships with other Christians help us fight the human tendency toward self-centeredness, selfishness, and a lack of compassion.

Finally, we see that Christians are not to stop meeting together. The message here is clear: Christians need each other. We are a people who have embraced what is quickly becoming a counter-cultural worldview in America, and going it alone is difficult.

Years ago, I heard an illustration that has always stuck with me. If you start a fire using a pile of charcoal, and one of the charcoal bricks tumbles away from the fire, it will cool much more quickly than if it had stayed close to the pile.

When one adds to that the reality of spiritual warfare and the reality that the enemy of God, Satan, would love to isolate believers, our need for each other becomes even more important.

God's plan for community starts with the church. Jesus established the church as the earthly institution that would be a light to the world, declare the good news, and make a public statement about the people who make up the family of God.

If the church is the body of Christ, then all of us who are part of that body are called to participate in the life of the church. If you are a Christian, you need the people in the church. And they need you. God has given different members of the body different gifts. Part of the reason he has given you the gifts that he has is so that you can use those gifts to serve or help others.

A Christian should never believe the lie that going to church is only about what he or she might get out of it. Satan would love to have you believe this. Going to church is about becoming part of God's visible body on earth, about the body being all it can be in this world, and about your contributing your gifts to the life and mission of that body as we grow together.

#### **PEOPLE WHO CHALLENGE US TO GROW IN OUR FAITH**

If Christians want to grow in their faith, there are three non-negotiables: time invested in reading the Bible, time invested in prayer, and involvement with other believers.

I have already mentioned how important the church is in this process. But to get more specific, there are three types of people who will really help us thrive in our faith. Each will play different but important roles. You might think of these roles as that of a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy.<sup>6</sup>

#### **A Mentor Like Paul**

Timothy had Paul, a mentor, in his life. Timothy could go to Paul with questions. He could look to Paul's experience in life and ministry for guidance.

My father has been the most influential man in my life, and for that I am grateful beyond words. A mentor named Spencer Brand has also played an extraordinarily important role in my life over the last 30 years. He has had a profound impact on my walk with the Lord, in my ministry, and in my life in general.

We all need mentors who will help us become the people God has created us to be.

### **Friends Like Barnabas**

Barnabas was a peer of Paul's. A friend. In the book of Acts, we see Paul and Barnabas as companions who experienced wild adventures on their journeys together. We might think of them as partners in crime—even if their crime was ignoring Rome's attempts to get them to shut up about their faith.

Relationships with Christian friends are incredibly important. We need a Barnabas, or several of them, in our lives. We need to develop go-to friendships with people who take their faith seriously, who pray (and who will pray for us), and who will walk alongside us and challenge us as we pursue Christ together.

### **Younger Believers Like Timothy**

Finally, Paul had younger men like Timothy in his life. He took Timothy under his wing to help him grow. Paul challenged him to invest in others who would invest in others) in the same way Paul had invested in him. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, “the things you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, these things entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2)

That same challenge applies to us today. It may sound odd to say that our faith will grow as we help others grow, but we are told here to pass on all that we've learned about God to others. This is God's plan for reaching the world.

If you are new to the faith, relationships with people who might become like a Timothy to you will come in time, but begin asking God to bring people like this into your life even now. It is never too early to begin learning how to invest in others. Consider that in all I've written in this book about Todd and

Keith—and ways God used them in my life—they were only 19 years old when they helped lead me to faith in Christ. You are never too young, or even young in your faith, to begin helping point others to Jesus.

And nothing you can do for another person can possibly be more significant.

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When we are part of a thriving Christian community, spending time in God's word and in prayer, and are investing in relationships with these different types of people, we will put ourselves in a great position to see our relationship with God grow. And as that relationship grows, we'll find ourselves learning to live, increasingly, in ways that God wants us to live. We'll find ourselves learning to live by faith.

But what does it look like to live by faith? We will consider that question in our final chapter.



## The Great Reversal

MORE THAN 200,000 BASEBALL GAMES have been played in Major League Baseball history. Hundreds of thousands of minor league games have been played. Add to that all of the pro, semi-pro, college, summer league, high school, travel, Babe Ruth, Little League and other games played around the world by people of all ages, and I'd guess that the total number of baseball games that have ever been played must easily be in the tens of millions.

Whatever the number, I suspect that a game my son Ethan played in, on June 17, 2013, ended in a way that very few other games have ended.

Ethan and a friend, Jake, were named to a 10- and 11-year-old all-star team that was to take part in a local postseason tournament. Their team was talented, though most of the best pitchers played on the 12-and-under team that would try to earn a spot in the Little League World Series.

So, although teams in this younger tournament could all hit, there was not a ton of pitching depth. As you might guess, the tournament featured some high-scoring games.

This particular game was played in Northern Virginia, at a field called LLV. Ethan and Jake's team was losing by 11 or 12 runs as they came to bat in what would turn out to be the final inning of the game. Then, they began a furious comeback.

The fact that they were able to come all the way back, after being that far behind, to take the lead in the fifth inning, was great. But that was not what made this game memorable. It was what happened after they scored the go-ahead run that I will never forget.

The team's coaches knew, even during their comeback inning, that they were facing a challenge on two fronts.

First, the boys obviously had to score enough runs to catch up. But beyond that, they had to do so quickly. The game was running late and the field at LLV had a hard deadline of 11 p.m., at which point the field's lights would be turned off. If the lights went off during an inning, the game score would revert, by rule, to the score at the end of the previous inning.

The timing was going to be tight. As the team began to score runs, we all knew that the lights could go out at any moment and that they'd lose. But the boys kept scoring runs and eventually managed to take the lead.

It was at that moment that everything got wacky.

To win the game, the single most important goal for each team suddenly became the exact opposite of everything a team is supposed to try to do in baseball.

Beginning at that moment, our team—which was batting—needed to make outs as fast as possible, to end the inning and ensure that all of the runs they just scored would count. The team in the field, on the other hand, needed to extend the inning and still be in the field when the lights went out. They wanted to avoid getting any of our batters out and needed our players to get on base and even score runs. The more runs our team got, the more likely their team was to win.

This is not how baseball usually works.

The player who was set to bat next for Ethan and Jake's team was instructed to strike out by swinging at the first three pitches. He was told to swing no matter what, to swing at every pitched ball, and to swing in such a way that he could not possibly hit the ball. I cannot remember if the other team changed pitchers, which slows everything down, but they did not hurry.

Eventually, their pitcher began throwing ridiculous pitches, trying to walk our batter. Our batter made three equally ridiculous and entertaining swings. The most bizarre strikeout you'll ever see ended the inning. The lights went off moments later, and the game became official. It was a comeback for the ages.

An offense trying not to score. A defense trying to let the other team score. Even if you've never watched, played, or cared much about baseball, you probably can imagine how bizarre this situation was. For Ethan and Jake's team to win, everything we know about baseball had to be turned upside down.

You could call the final moments of that game a great reversal.

This idea of a great reversal—of everything being turned upside down—is a good description of Christianity, and of how Christians should view life.

## CHRISTIANITY'S GREAT REVERSAL

In this chapter, we will explore the same question we asked in chapter 15, but here from the perspective of a Christian: If Christianity is true, what will I do about it?

There are two ways that thinking about this “great reversal” can be helpful to us. First, as we consider Christianity, we find incredible encouragement in Jesus’ great reversal on our behalf. He turned everything upside down for us.

The most brilliant depiction I’ve ever seen of this great reversal was a video written by Jason Dyba for a Passion gathering on Good Friday in 2015. I have included the link in the Endnotes.<sup>1</sup>

The video begins with these words, scrolling from the bottom upward until they scroll off of the top of the screen:

*Good Friday  
how can one describe such a day?  
the wrongdoing of all humanity  
putting to an end  
an innocent man  
the son of God  
this is the story of Jesus  
death, by way of a cross  
all in one moment, bringing death to  
the bright light of our future  
He never stopped loving us  
and yet, this is the incredible part of it:  
our sin stopped his heart  
our sin drove the nails  
firmly in the hands of God  
all along, these were the plans  
we told ourselves that we were in control  
and this was deemed sufficient for all of us*

*the brutal beating  
the inhuman flogging  
the naked humiliation  
Heaven watched and saw it all:  
our rebellion, our guilt, our shame  
erasing the very notion of  
reconciling us with God  
our sin and our debt  
overcoming  
Jesus  
here is our King  
obliterated  
the enemy laughing: his plans  
unstoppable—there's no longer the sound of  
freedom rising, now God's people are  
utterly broken—behold  
the chains of mortality  
yes, this is what is true  
we had heard the stories of old:  
the lost are found  
the blind can see  
the weak are made strong  
but now we are witnesses to this reality:  
God is dead  
we had almost believed  
there is a way of redemption  
there is a life of fulfillment  
there is a peace beyond understanding  
now we know better  
for us  
we can say that God is  
encapsulated in this one realization:  
the single greatest sacrifice in human history  
is finished...  
how clearly we can see it<sup>2</sup>*

As you finished reading that text, of Jesus being obliterated and of Satan laughing, you might have thought, “Yeah, that’s interesting. But would you really call it brilliant, Patrick?”

Yes, I would—because of what happens next in the video.

At that moment, the video stops scrolling and says: “So what’s so good about Good Friday? Just one thing; that the blood of Jesus can reverse the curse of sin and raise the dead to life.”

At this moment, the video literally does its own great reversal. The words begin to scroll in the opposite direction. As the exact same lines of text begin to move from the top to the bottom of the screen, the brilliance of the video begins to become clear. Go back a page and re-read the text, but this time start at the bottom, with “how clearly we can see it.” Read from the bottom to the top, ending with “Good Friday.”

The same lines, reversed, focus no longer on Satan’s victory and Jesus’ death, but rather on Jesus’ victory on our behalf. Reversed, they tell the story of Jesus’ great reversal. The power of this piece is simply extraordinary; its creativity is breathtaking. (Seriously, if you didn’t go back and re-read it from bottom to top, do it now. It is one of the most creative things I’ve ever seen.)

+ + +

Nearly five hundred years ago, a theologian and pastor named John Calvin wrote, in his own creative way, about Jesus’ great reversal. If you are unfamiliar with 1500s-era English, this might read a bit oddly, but it is worth the effort. It is great:

*[Jesus] was sold, to buy us back; captive, to deliver us; condemned, to absolve us; he was made a curse for our blessing, sin offering for our righteousness; marred that*

*we may be made fair; he died for our life; so that by him  
fury is made gentle, wrath appeased, darkness turned into  
light, fear reassured, despisal despised, debt canceled, labor  
lightened, sadness made merry, misfortune made fortunate,  
difficulty easy, disorder ordered, division united, ignominy  
ennobled, rebellion subjected, intimidation intimidated,  
ambush uncovered, assaults assailed, force forced back,  
combat combated, war warred against, vengeance avenged,  
torment tormented, damnation damned, the abyss sunk  
into the abyss, hell transfixed, death dead, mortality made  
immortal. In short, mercy has swallowed up all misery,  
and goodness all misfortune.<sup>3</sup>*

Calvin noted a range of things that Christ accomplished for Christians—each its own sort of reversal. This should lead us to worship. Calvin then transitioned to the impact that this great reversal should have in the life of a Christian:

*We are comforted in tribulation, joyful in sorrow, glorying  
under vituperation [verbal abuse], abounding in poverty,  
warmed in our nakedness, patient amongst evils, living in  
death. This is what we should in short seek in the whole  
of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite  
riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by  
him from God the Father.<sup>4</sup>*

I love Calvin's perspective here. We should seek "truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father." This is what the Christian life is about: getting to know, and walking with, the God who loves us so much that he came to Earth as a man, was tortured, and ultimately killed in our place.

One historic document on the Christian faith says that "the chief [purpose] of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."<sup>5</sup>

But how do we go about pursuing such a thing?

Even as I write this paragraph, I wonder how many Christians sense that they know what it means to “enjoy” God. Recently, a high school student sent me an email that said: “for a while, I have had trouble connecting to Christ. It’s like I’m not really sure where to begin and it is a little overwhelming.” When I responded, I told her that she is not alone in that feeling. This is a question that many Christians ask.

The short answer, to anyone asking the same question that the student asked, would have three parts. First, I would ask the person if he or she has ever truly made a personal decision to become a Christian, as we discussed in chapter 15. I would not ask if the person was religious, went to church, or was raised by Christian parents. These questions do not get to the heart of what matters. What matters is whether the person had responded to God’s offer of salvation by trusting Christ for the forgiveness of his or her sin.

If so, the second thing I’d point out is that, like any relationship, our relationship with God is unlikely to grow unless we invest time in that relationship. There are no shortcuts.

James 4:8 tells us that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us. It is a promise. The two best ways to draw near to God are through prayer and reading his word.

It should never fail to amaze us that the God who spoke our entire universe into existence invites us to spend time with him. It is astonishing that God wants to know us! But God’s enemy (and ours), Satan, would rather have us do just about anything other than pray. He would even rather us do good things. This is why it is not surprising that it can often feel hard to find time to pray.

As we spend time with God and begin to really understand the width, length, height, and depth of his love for us, our faith will be strengthened and our walk with God deepened. Our connection with Christ will grow.

Each of these things, plus being in community with other believers, is mission-critical. But if we truly want to experience life the way God intended it, we have to be willing to take a much bigger step than merely starting to pray or read the Bible, as great as those things are.

We have to be willing to die.

I obviously do not mean that we need to literally die, in the physical sense, but rather, I mean that we have to decide for whom we will live. Will we live for ourselves, our own desires, and our own interests? Or will we seek instead to “die” to ourselves, and fully pursue God’s ways, desires, and interests?

Matthew records two different times that Jesus taught this idea: “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it.” (Matthew 10:39 and also Matthew 16:25)

This is the great reversal to which God calls his followers, and it is a hard teaching. We are to lay down our lives in order to gain life and find true joy. But what does that even look like?

Let’s consider one answer, from the book of Romans.

#### **WATER SKIING THROUGH THE FIRST FEW CHAPTERS OF ROMANS**

Romans is one of my favorite books in the Bible. It explains Christianity in a way that has always made sense to me. Some have observed that Paul’s style, in what was originally a letter to the church at Rome, reminds them of a lawyer making a case.

Throughout the book, Paul makes a point, predicts how readers might respond to that point, and then and then addresses the responses he foresees. The first 70% of the book (chapters 1-11) teaches theological truth. The last 30% of the book (chapters 12-16) focuses more on how we should live in light of that truth.

In chapters 1, 2, and the first part of chapter 3, Paul addresses the same thing I wrote about in chapter 13 of this book: our sin. He reminds us that our sin is a massive problem for religious people, non-religious people, Jewish people, and non-Jewish people. It is even a problem for those who consider themselves to be good. In fact, the middle of chapter 3 reminds us, “there is no one righteous,” and “there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away.” (Romans 3:10-12)

Then, in the second half of chapter three, he introduces what might be called a thought bomb that is at the very heart of Christianity: that “God has revealed a righteousness that comes through faith to all who believe.” He explains that Christians are declared righteous in God’s eyes “by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 3:21 & 24)

The idea that we (as sinful people) could be declared righteous by God, through faith—and not by religious ceremony, by doing good deeds, or by our own self-effort—is amazing beyond words. This is what I wrote about in chapters 14 and 15.

In different ways, Paul then unpacks and explains this righteousness that comes through faith in Romans chapters 4-8. The end of Romans 8 is highlighted by Paul’s sheer wonder at how incredible God’s goodness to us is:

*If God is for us, who is against us? He did not even spare his own Son but gave him up for us all. How will he not also with him grant us everything? (Romans 8:31-32)*

And then:

*... in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39)*

If you were to read the book of Romans straight through, as it was originally written (a letter from Paul to the church at Rome), you'd feel the power of Paul's emotion here. You would understand how moved he was by the gospel and by God's grace.

We, too, should be similarly moved.

#### **SCUBA DIVING INTO ROMANS 12:1-2**

When Paul gets to Romans 12, he turns the corner from teaching theological truth to teaching, in very real and practical ways, how that truth should change how we live.

He begins with two powerful verses:

*Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. (Romans 12:1-2)*

#### **Our Source of Motivation**

Here we begin to learn what it means to die to ourselves.

Paul first addresses our motivation by starting with: "in view of the mercies of God." For 11 chapters in Romans, Paul has

written about the mercies of God—the amazing, unfathomable, overwhelming grace of God to believers. He has reminded us of the lengths to which God has gone to rescue us from our sin.

This matters because we will be most motivated to live God’s way not by some sense of guilt or fear that God is looking to smack us when we mess up, but rather when we are motivated by our thankfulness for God’s mercies toward us.

### **A Living... Sacrifice?**

So, in light of God’s mercies, Paul instructs us to do three things. He starts by calling us to present our bodies as a “living sacrifice.” Again, we are not called to do this to earn God’s favor, nor to earn our way to heaven.

We are to do this as a response to all God has done for us.

This idea of being a living sacrifice would have been a jarring thought to people familiar with the sacrificial system in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, of course, the animal to be sacrificed actually had to die.

As a *living* sacrifice, however, we are to put God’s desires, cares, and values above our own. We are to offer him our lives and give our bodies to his service in any way that he sees fit.

Paul writes that presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice is our “true worship.” He means here that this is our most reasonable, or logical, response to God’s mercies. If God has done all of this for us, Paul writes, it makes sense for us to be living sacrifices.

As in Penn Jillette’s quote earlier in the book, imagine that my friend Bridgette was about to get hit by a truck she never saw coming. But just before impact, imagine that our friend Riley jumped in to save Bridgette’s life. Bridgette would feel

incredible gratitude toward Riley, and would do anything she could for her, out of thankfulness. This would be Bridgette's logical response. But even if it is logical, it is not easily done, especially when talking about yielding our lives to God.

Instead, we are tempted to want to only give parts of our lives to him. We are tempted to see Jesus' role in our lives as if he is some sort of supernatural hitchhiker who might make our journey easier or more enjoyable. Perhaps we'd pull over to pick him up and nod to the back seat, saying, "Hop in" as we move clothes, basketball shoes, and the Chick-fil-A bag from lunch out of the way to make room.

But we'd learn that Jesus wants to drive. We might shrug and say, "Okay, Jesus. You can sit in the front. But I'm driving." Still, Jesus wants to drive. So, we sigh and say, "All right, all right. You can sit in the front, and you can even pick the music. But I'm driving." Still, Jesus wants to drive.

I know people who seem to view Jesus not as a king for whom they would lay down their lives, but rather as a sort of add-on to make their lives happier or better. They might view Christianity as something helpful, but not as something that will make any difference in the decisions they make on a Friday or Saturday night. They might love the promise of God's forgiveness and might even think of Jesus as their savior, but the idea of letting Jesus drive goes a bit too far.

As a minister named Alexander Moody Stuart once observed, "many are willing that Christ should be something, but few will consent that Christ should be everything."<sup>6</sup> These people enjoy the idea that they will benefit from Christianity—at least until Jesus calls them to live differently.

This is a problem.

Although it is true that Jesus is our savior who came to save us from our sins, he also came to be Lord. To be our king. Jesus did not come to be some sort of add-on to our lives.

Jesus said, “if anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”<sup>7</sup> When Jesus called his disciples, he said, “Follow me.” And they dropped whatever they were doing and followed. He calls us to do the same. Make no mistake: Jesus’ call to follow him is a call to obey.

And that is the final thought I would have for the student who sent me the email about not feeling connected to Christ. Nothing will short-circuit a Christian’s closeness—or connection—with Christ more quickly than when he or she is not obeying God in some area of his or her life.

The night before Jesus was crucified, as he was spending time with his disciples, he shared three different variations of this thought. First, he said, “If you love me, you will keep my commands (John 14:15).” Six verses later (in v.21), John records that Jesus said, “the one who has my commands and keeps them is the one who loves me.” Later, Jesus said, again, “you are my friends if you do what I command you.” (John 15:14)

Christ calls his followers to obey. This is a calling that has caused many to turn away in sadness. But along with that call, he promises rest, peace, joy, and an abundant life to all who follow.

To help us further understand how to live out this idea of being a living sacrifice, Paul gives us two more instructions, in Romans 12:2. The first is to “not be conformed to this age.”

### **Do Not Be Conformed to this Age**

Christ-followers are called by God to stand out. He calls us to *look* different than the rest of the world because he calls us to

actually *be* different. To not be conformed to this age is to be willing to say no to the crowd. To not drink our culture's (or any political party's) Kool-aid. To be different than the world in our thoughts, motives, and actions.

The call to avoid conforming to the world means we must, in a variety of ways, be willing to be rebels.

We must not fear rebelling against the prevailing or popular views held by those in our society today. Jesus never played to the crowd. Nor should we.

This requires hard decisions. It demands hard decisions on Friday and Saturday nights. It demands hard decisions in our relationships and in our finances. It demands that we trust God, because in choosing not to conform to the world, we face possible rejection, ridicule, or even persecution.

As Tim Keller has written:

*This upside-down pattern so contradicts the thinking and practice of the world that it creates an "alternate kingdom," an alternate reality, a counterculture among those who have been transformed by it. In this peaceable kingdom there is a reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, and wealth.*

*In this new counterculture, Christians look at money as something to give away. They look at power as something to use strictly for service. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition, these normal marks of human life, are the opposite of the mindset of those who have understood and experienced the Cross. Christ creates a whole new order of life.*

*Those who are shaped by the great reversal of the Cross no longer need self-justification through money, status, career, or pride of race and class. So the Cross creates a counter-culture in which sex, money, and power cease to control us and are used in life-giving and community-building rather than destructive ways.<sup>8</sup>*

### **Be Transformed by the Renewing of Your Mind**

Paul's second instruction in Romans 12:2 is to be transformed. How? By the renewing of our minds. Our minds are renewed when we spend time with God and with other believers.

We need to have our minds renewed often, because we still sin. As Christians, we will not be free from our battle against sin until we are in heaven, and so, we will not always obey perfectly. As our minds are renewed, we are reminded how amazing God's grace is; we have been declared righteous before him.

A related reason we need to have our minds renewed is that we tend to forget the great things that God has done for us.

In the Old Testament, we can read on one page about an amazing thing God did to deliver Israel from some danger or drama, only to turn the page and discover Israel's tendency to immediately forget what God had just done. We then see Israel complain, whine, forget, and sometimes blatantly turn their backs on the same God who had just rescued them in some way.

When I was new to the Bible, I would read this type of story and think, "How could they have been like that?"

And then I realized that—far too often—I am exactly like that. I might see God provide or work in some way, but then, when a new trial or challenge arrives, forget how he provided or showed up the last time.

As our minds are renewed, we begin to see God change our hearts, thoughts, motives, and desires. We see him change our perspective on things going on around us. We discover that our compassion is growing and we find an increased capacity to love our friends (and enemies) well. We become more others-centered and begin to hold healthier views on our money, career, possessions, romantic relationships, and on our life itself.

To say that a life is being transformed is not to suggest that it is perfect or without struggle. I haven't met any thoughtful people who would say that their life is perfect or struggle-free. And it is definitely not to say that such a life is without sin.

Rather, it is to say that a person is, increasingly, seeking to yield to God's leading, confessing their sin to God, and repenting. But transformed people do tend to look different than much of the rest of the world, in some very real and meaningful ways.

Transformed people tend to be expectant and hopeful. Why? Because they wake up and ask, "what do you have for me today, Lord?" And then they live their lives with their eyes wide open, trusting God to show up or to work in different situations.

Transformed people see prayer as an opportunity, not a chore. And they have seen God answer prayer. So they pray.

Transformed people are deeply thankful. Why? Because they know they did not do anything to earn God's kindness and mercy. They are overwhelmed by God's grace.

Transformed people are generous. Why? Because they are totally aware that everything good they have was made possible by God. They know that God is their provider, so they dare not be selfish. They understand that God gives us things so that we can meet the needs of others. So, they give, trusting that in God's

economy you can't outgive God. This is not just about money. Transformed people give of their time, talent, and treasure.

Whatever their circumstances, transformed people tend to be content. Why? Because they trust God, even during hard times.

Transformed people tend to be gracious and not judgmental. They are deeply aware of how much they have been forgiven by God and understand how desperately they needed God's forgiveness. So they do not look down on anyone who is struggling, but rather react with compassion.

Finally, transformed people have purpose. They recognize that the greatest investment they could ever make in life is in helping others discover the grace and forgiveness that only can come through Christ. So, they pursue that purpose with passion.

✦ ✦ ✦

In my life, I see myself growing in these areas, even if progress seems slow sometimes. It has been 37 years since my “now what?” moment, when I trusted Christ for my salvation in Todd and Keith's room.

And I still don't have it all together. I'm still in the life-long process of becoming who God wants me to be. I wrote earlier in the book that I still fail more often than I'd care to admit. But I am thankful that God is still at work in my life. During those 37 years, there have been seasons when I have yielded as fully to God's leading as I know how. But there have also been seasons when I have not. In these seasons, I have stubbornly (or sinfully) taken back the steering wheel.

This is evidence of what many call the spiritual battle—a battle, really, that is a daily one: *Who am I going to let drive today?*

As Frank Turek once asked in a Tweet, “Are we going to follow Jesus, or are we just going to follow our desires?”<sup>9</sup>

I can say without hesitation that the best and most fulfilling times of my life, without question, have been those when I was most yielded to God, letting him drive, and trusting that he can run my life better than I can.

I am fully confident of this truth: following Jesus—by dying to ourselves and fully yielding to his leading—is the one decision we can make, in any given situation, that will never let us down.

✦ ✦ ✦

To die to ourselves so that we can experience a life of joy, purpose, and fulfillment? That is a great reversal.

It is also a great adventure.





## Saddle Up Your Horses

I SPENT THE SUMMER AFTER MY SOPHOMORE YEAR of college at a camp in western North Carolina called Windy Gap.

One of the other college students who worked there was named Amy. She was a horse wrangler, so she cared for the horses and took campers on horseback rides. She was also cute.

On a day off, she found me at breakfast and asked if I wanted to go on a horseback ride with her. I was planning to play basketball, but (again) Amy was cute. If she wanted to spend what I imagined might be a romantic day riding horses with me, who was I to say no? I could play ball later.

When it was time to go, I headed off for the horse barn. When I got there, I quickly realized that my vision for how this ride might go was very different than Amy's. She had invited a bunch of other people to go on the ride, too.

I immediately wondered if it was too late to escape so I could play basketball. But I got on the horse, and we headed out to explore trails in the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains. As we rode, I had to admit it was fun. It was a pretty cool way to spend a morning.

Near the end of the ride, Amy stopped us before we went out into a clearing. She told us to turn our horses to the left in the clearing because if the horse turned right, it would see the barn and immediately want to run for it.

We came out into the clearing and turned left. Amy rode around in front of us and explained that in just a moment, we were going to turn and run for the barn. She explained that we should try to keep our weight on our feet in the stirrups, squeeze in with our knees, and hold on to the reins with one hand and the horn of the saddle with the other. She said to try to lean forward a bit, and to be in an athletic posture.

That all sounded good. I assumed we would trot. Or prance. Or some other word that meant “horse jog for beginners.”

I couldn't have been more wrong.

We turned around and, before I knew what was happening, I found myself in the middle of the Kentucky Derby. We were in an all-out run, at what seemed to be about 400 miles per hour.

I had a horse running right beside me and could hear the rest of the horses' hooves pounding behind me. It was thrilling. It was also terrifying. Horses are enormous.

But my fear was short-lived. It was quickly replaced by my competitiveness as I realized that not only was I *in* the Kentucky Derby, I was *winning* the Kentucky Derby. Even if nobody else

thought we were racing at that point, I definitely did. If I was going to die, at least I'd be in first place when the end came.

It was at that moment that I saw the most incredible sight I had ever seen. It was a fence. And it was coming at us at about 400 miles per hour. It wasn't just that we were moving at 400 miles per hour. The fence itself was moving that fast, right at us. You may be thinking, "No, Patrick. The fence was stationary. Only the horses and riders were moving." You were not there. I was.

I quickly calculated that I was about to have a collision at approximately 16 billion miles per hour. My math may have been a little off; I'm not a math guy. And I had other things to worry about at the moment, like my impending death.

It seemed to me that the horse had three options. First, it could decide to jump the fence. If it did that, I thought, at least my parents would still have my younger brother to enjoy.

A second option was that the horse would put down its front feet and skid to a stop like you'd see in a cartoon, with its front legs extended out in front of it. It might stop, I thought, but it would catapult me half way to Tennessee.

The final option was that the horse didn't see the fence, and we were about to crash into it. I wasn't sure what would happen next, but I knew it was going to be exciting.

✦ ✦ ✦

Obviously, I did not die that day. I lived to see another day and to eventually write this book. As it turns out, there was an open gate that was at an angle that made it impossible to see until we were very close to it. *Of course* we weren't going to run into the fence; the horses had done this before. They knew the drill.

We came over a subtle hill that hid the path in front of us, made a couple of small turns, and ran smoothly through the gate and to the barn. Thankfully, all fatalities were avoided on the ride that day. And thus, this story's build-up was a bit more exciting than its conclusion.

But I could have died. And that's one of the odd things about death; many of us will wake up on our last day on Earth without having any clue that we will die that day.

As I was writing this part of the book, I read about yet another horrific school shooting. In this case, I read an article about a kid named Tate, a high school junior. I saw his photo and a tweet about his visit to a college that was interested in having him come play football there after graduation.

According to reports, while everyone else was running from the danger, Tate ran toward it. He selflessly ran toward the shooter to see whether he could stop him. He was shot, and tragically died on the way to the hospital. His efforts were heroic. In the days after he died, nearly 300,000 people agreed, and signed a petition to name the school's football stadium after him.

As I read the article, I couldn't get past the thought that Tate had woken up on that cool fall day with no idea that it would be his last on this planet.

I do not know when my last day on Earth will be. Neither do you. I'm sorry if this seems morbid, but we must understand that life is short. None of us is guaranteed a tomorrow.

We know that life is short, at least in theory. But, because we all tend to think "I've got time left," too few of us allow the brevity of life to drive us toward living intentionally with the time we do have left.

## **DON'T SETTLE**

Sadly and far too often, most of us (myself included, at times) settle for less in life than what God would have for us. Blaise Pascal pointed to what could be called a God-shaped vacuum in each of our hearts, a vacuum that only God can fill. And we try to fill that vacuum with all sorts of other things.

C.S. Lewis addressed this in a sermon called *The Weight of Glory*:

*It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.<sup>1</sup>*

Many of us too readily believe that the things of this world will satisfy us. We touched on this in chapter one. Each of us pursues these things, not realizing that people who have obtained those very things are also searching. We really are just like Lewis' imagined ignorant child who is content to play in the mud.

We settle. And yet, God offers us something so much better.

Jesus said (as recorded in John 10:10) he came to Earth that we “might have life, and have it abundantly.” Other versions of the Bible translate the last part of the verse, “so that they could live life to the fullest.” And, “to give them a rich and satisfying life.”

## **MY HOPE FOR THE NON-CHRISTIAN**

My sincere hope for you, if you are not a Christian, is that a hunger to continue the exploration you've begun will have been awakened in you as you have read this book, and that you'll continue to seek answers for your questions.

My hope is that you'd re-examine your reasons for doubt, and that you'd ask yourself the question that I was once asked: What's holding you back from turning to Christ?

My hope is that one day soon you will discover that he who knows you the best also loves you the most. And that you will recognize your need for forgiveness, put aside the pride that makes it hard for us to admit we need a savior, and be drawn to the God who willingly laid down his life so that you could live.

God has invited you to turn to him and to accept the forgiveness he offers by trusting Christ's work on the cross and deciding to follow Jesus. He has invited you to experience a restored relationship with him. But as strange as this might sound, this is a limited-time offer. It is only available during your lifetime.

My most profound hope is that one day soon you will receive Christ, get baptized, and yield to his leading in your life. If Christianity is true, the decision to repent and believe will be the best decision you will ever make. It will change both your eternal destiny and your present experience in life.

My question for you is this: What is your next step? What is holding you back?

To have read a book like this has, I hope, been a good thing. To act on something, as a result of having read it, would be far better. Every reader may have a slightly different next step. Pause for a moment and consider yours.

If you are a non-Christian, a great next step might be to talk to someone about questions you still have about Christianity. It might be to read one or more of the books in the Appendix in search of answers to questions you still have. It might be to decide to turn to Christ, by repenting and believing.

It might be to actually say yes to that friend who invites you to go to church, or—if you are a student—to decide to check out a Christian group on campus.

A great next step might also be to pray something like this: “God, if you are real, would you reveal yourself to me? Would you show me in some way I can understand or see?”

And then keep your eyes open for an answer.

### **MY HOPE FOR THE CHRISTIAN**

My hope for the Christian reader is the same that I’d want you to hope for me; that you would draw near to God, trusting his promise that, if you draw near to him, he will draw near to you. That you would seek to glorify God and enjoy him forever. That God’s mercies (the gospel) would drive you to yield to his leading in every area of your life. And that you’d do this not out of duty or obligation, but out of gratitude.

When we choose to live a life not conformed to this world, and as we yield our lives fully to God, he promises a quality and richness of life that is simply unavailable anywhere else.

This does not mean that a life invested in walking with God will always be exciting in an adrenaline-fueled way. In fact, when we read the Bible we learn what many of us know by experience, that the Christian life will sometimes involve suffering and pain.

Jesus himself suffered while on Earth. So did his first followers. It should not surprise us when we suffer in different ways. But God promises to meet us in the midst of that suffering and to walk with us through the fire. He invites us to take courage because he has overcome the world. And he calls us to set our minds on things above, not on things here on Earth. Put differently, he calls us to live for the upper story.

The lead pastor of my church, Brett, often talks about God's upper story and our lower story. The lower story is our experience on Earth. The upper story is what God is doing to accomplish his purposes.

When Jesus was crucified, for example, things looked so bad in the lower story that the disciples fled in fear. In the upper story, however, God allowed the crucifixion to happen. If he had not, none of us would have any hope of forgiveness.

The question for all Christians, of course, is whether we will live our lives focused on the upper story or the lower.

Living for the upper story requires trust, but eliminates so many of the things that can cause us to be overwhelmed by stress, worry, and fear in the lower story.

My hope for you is that you would be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That you would wake up in the morning and pray, "Lord, what do you have for me today?"

If you are a follower of Christ, you are invited by God himself to interact with him. You have the opportunity to talk to—and walk through life with—the supernatural, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, and all-loving creator.

He created you. He loves you. You are his child. You can experience intimacy with him.

You are also, according to Second Corinthians 5:20, his ambassador. You represent him here on Earth. Every day that you wake up, if you are a Christian, you have the opportunity (should you choose to pursue it) to not only watch God work, but to participate with him in his work. And this is the real source of adventure for the Christian.

Years ago, a Steven Curtis Chapman song called *The Great Adventure* was popular among Christians. Whatever you think of the music, the song's lyrics reflect a desire that most of us share, a desire for adventure and for a life that is well-lived.

Here are some of the lyrics:

*Come on get ready  
for the ride of your life.  
Gonna leave long-faced religion  
in a cloud of dust behind.  
And discover all the new horizons  
just waiting to be explored.  
This is what we were created for.*

*Saddle up your horses  
we've got a trail to blaze  
Through the wild blue yonder  
of God's amazing grace  
Let's follow our leader  
into the glorious unknown  
This is life like no other, whoa  
This is the great adventure*

*We'll travel long, over mountains so high.  
We'll go through valleys below.  
Still through it all we'll find that  
this is the greatest journey  
that the human heart will ever see.  
The love of God will take us  
far beyond our wildest dreams.<sup>2</sup>*

Chapman writes here of a life that “we were created for,” and of one that is the opposite of the life lived by the child who wants to go on making mud pies.

I do believe that God calls us to a great adventure, and that we will find our greatest fulfillment only when we wholeheartedly seek God and the life that he'd have for us.

But if we want to experience that adventure, we have to invest in it. If we aren't promised a tomorrow, and we know we will have to give an account to God for how we lived, it is time to get busy and live the way God would have us live.

For all of us who are Christians, we must remember that life is short. We must remember what Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:15-16: "pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise—making the most of the time."

When I was still a student, I heard Josh McDowell (the man who wrote *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, the book that had influenced me so profoundly) speak at a conference. He challenged us to invest our lives in something that would outlive us.

I've never forgotten that challenge.

If we only have one life to invest, we should live intentionally and invest it wisely, in a way that will bring us the greatest possible return on the investment of our lives.

None of us want to get to the end of our life and find that we wish we had invested it in different things.

That's one reason I was moved so powerfully by the Johnny Cash video of the song "Hurt" that I mentioned in the first chapter. The video was filmed in Johnny's old museum.

In the video, we see that his museum was closed and in disrepair. To film the video there, of a song in which Johnny sings about his "empire of dirt," was perfect.

Johnny had achieved tremendous fame, financial success, and artistic acclaim in his lifetime. But, to the degree that the video was autobiographical, we see Johnny's recognition that worldly success and acclaim are not lasting and will not bring lasting satisfaction.

Thankfully, Johnny was a Christian. That's why I loved the clips near the end of the video, of Christ on the cross, dying for Johnny's sins. And for ours. They hint at his Christian faith, and at the reason Johnny could face his eventual death with hope.

### **WHAT'S NEXT?**

On the first page of the introduction to this book, I wrote that some things matter very much, and a few things matter immensely. I will conclude with the same idea. How we live, how we influence others, and how we invest our lives and resources really matter. These things matter... immensely.

Whatever your stage of life, what is your next step? A few pages ago, I listed possible next steps for a non-Christian. If you are a Christian, a next step might be to rededicate your life to Christ. It might be to join a Bible study or to go back to church—however long you have been away. It might be to ask whether there is an area of your life you are not yielding to God and to repent. It might be to get baptized or to begin investing in God's upper story in meaningful ways. Or to initiate conversations with people you love about topics like these. It might be to find a mentor. Or to become one.

Whatever the case, I hope you will take a next step.

✦ ✦ ✦

As for me, I have no idea when the Lord will call me home. But in whatever time I have left in this life, I plan to continue to

pursue the adventure God still has before me and Karey. I never want to stop battling against the temptation to settle for mud pies. I want to keep investing in the upper story.

Obviously, I won't (and don't) get it right all of the time, but I am encouraged and challenged by Paul's perspective found in Philippians 3:12-14:

*I do not consider myself to have “arrived”, spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect. But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me. My brothers, I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now. But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal—my reward the honor of being called by God in Christ.*

His words capture how I want to live.

Wherever you are spiritually, and however old you may be, please join me, Karey, and Christians from around the world in this great adventure.

Saddle up your horses.

# Acknowledgments

Thank you...

To my wife Karey, for encouraging (and even pushing) me to finish this book. Also for the extraordinary love, wisdom, and encouragement you provide every day. Thank you for being so much like Jesus, in so many ways, and for loving me unconditionally. After all of these years, you still amaze me.

To Mom and Dad, for your encouragement about this book. And to Mom for your careful and patient edits and proofreading—I've never been more thankful for your career as an editor. If there is a typo or grammatical problem in this book, it is only because I've messed something up since your final edits.

To my most committed and thoughtful readers throughout the process: Grace and Ryan. Both of you were incredibly insightful and perceptive—on so many levels—with your feedback.

And also to Kayla, Ryan C., Randy, Madison, Megan G., and Tim. Each of you, in different ways, challenged me, encouraged

me, and helped make this better. I couldn't be more thankful to each of you for the time you invested in this project, and for your thoughtful feedback.

To Megan, for the ridiculously great art you created for the beginning of each chapter. Seriously—what can't you do?

To Ethan, for simply being you. I love how your mind works, your sense of humor, and so much more about you. You've had more of an impact on this book than you might suspect.

To my small band of test readers from Group (current and past) who volunteered feedback at different points along the way. I know that some of you all hate to read, and that makes your feedback even more encouraging. A special shout out especially to Tyler, Nick, Brooke, Emma, Katie, Tanner, Robbie, and Pat.

To my friend Curt, for your encouragement.

To Brett, my friend and pastor, for continually challenging me to live for the upper story.

To Spencer, for your decades-long investment in my life.

To Colonel Mansur, for permission to use the “No Greater Love” article, for your graciousness when we talked, and for your life of service, both to our nation and to our God.

To my friends Dan, Wendy, Dave, and John, for your willingness to contribute your time and expertise to specific chapters.

Finally, to Chick-fil-A, for your chicken sandwiches. As Peter Kreeft once wrote about something else entirely: “you either see this one or you don't.”

# Endnotes

Beyond merely citing the source of others' material that I have quoted in the book, I have included some additional thoughts on a few topics below, in case anyone wants to keep reading.

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## INTRODUCTION

1. "A Gift of a Bible," YouTube video, accessed on April 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6md638smQd8>
2. I want to be careful to define our terms thoughtfully in this book. Most of us think we know what "atheist" means, but it is an interesting word. Some atheists believe that God does not exist; I've met such people. But other atheists define themselves as people who "lack a belief that God exists." This distinction is important, and comes from [atheists.org](https://www.atheists.org/activism/resources/about-atheism/). "What is Atheism," accessed on December 11, 2020, <https://www.atheists.org/activism/resources/about-atheism/>
3. Tim Keller, *Reason for God*, (Riverhead Books, 2008), xvii-xix. I will talk more about unexamined doubt in chapter 16, but I credit Keller for this line of thinking. Also for the 'doubting your doubt' idea.
4. See 1 Peter 3:15-16.

5. There are exceptions to this, of course. If a person lives in a country where he or she is persecuted, imprisoned, or otherwise harassed for his or her Christian faith, real loss may be risked by a believer. There are parts of the world where the persecution of Christians is very real and an ever-present danger.
6. I have chosen to paraphrase Pascal's Wager here. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc, 1958), Section III, #233. This version is available online as part of the Gutenberg Project (accessed December 11, 2021, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h/18269-h.htm>).

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## CHAPTER 1

1. Jean Chrétien, *My Stories, My Times*, (Random House Canada, 2018), 62-63.
2. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, (Peter Pauper Press, 1966), 8.
3. Quoted by Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life*, (Oxford University Press, 2013) 23.
4. The mention of George Floyd is not intended to be political in any way. It is an established fact that his killer was convicted of second- and third-degree murder. I mentioned it because I believe it is a great recent example of the reality that sometimes we see things that *we just know* are wrong.
5. Stefani Germanotta, Mark Ronson, Anthony Rossomando, and Andrew Wyatt, "Shallow," Interscope Records, 2018.
6. I first heard late-night television host Johnny Carson say this line many years ago; the original quote is attributed to John Rockefeller, perhaps the first American billionaire.
7. "Jim Carrey at MIU: Commencement Address at the 2014 Graduation," YouTube video, accessed on August 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V80-gPkpH6M>
8. "Joe's Story," joegibbsstory.com, accessed September 4, 2020, <http://www.joegibbsstory.com/joes-story-page-2/>
9. NF, "Interlude," from the album, "The Search," (NF Real Music / Caroline, 2019).
10. "Johnny Cash – Hurt," YouTube video, accessed on July 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8AHCfZTRGiI>
11. Trent Reznor, "Hurt," from the album, "The Downward Spiral," (A&M Studios, 1995).

12. The two verses quoted here are from Romans 7:15 (ESV) and Romans 7:24.
13. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Mercy House Publishing, 2019, accessed via Apple Books, 136.
14. “Paste Magazine’s Top 100 Living Songwriters,” [trouserpress.com](http://trouserpress.com), accessed July 29, 2020, <https://trouserpress.com/forum/read.php?1,5470>
15. Bill Mallonee, “Blister Soul,” from the album, “Blister Soul,” (Capricorn Records, 1995).
16. Dale Ahlquist, “Who is this Guy and Why Haven’t I Heard of Him?,” accessed May 8, 2020, <https://www.chesterton.org/who-is-this-guy/>
17. G.K. Chesterton, Letter to the Editor, London’s *Daily News*, August 16, 1905.
18. Beyond the spiritual nature of the brokenness we face, some also deal with emotional and/or mental health challenges. Others deal with very real physical problems. But whatever our challenges, the idea that we all have a spiritual problem is still very real and significant.

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## CHAPTER 2

1. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 says, “12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say, ‘There is no resurrection of the dead’? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain, and so is your faith. 15 Moreover, we are found to be false witnesses about God, because we have testified wrongly about God that he raised up Christ—whom he did not raise up, if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. 18 Those, then, who have fallen asleep in Christ have also perished. 19 If we have put our hope in Christ for this life only, we should be pitied more than anyone.”
2. Books like *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* fit into the category of Christian “apologetics.” This comes from the Greek word “apologia.” In the Classical Greek legal, when someone was facing charges in a courtroom, they would reply with an apologia, or defense. Thus, Christian apologetics is the discipline of study and thought concerned with reasoned arguments to defend the truth and rationality of Christianity.

1. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_dress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress)
2. Taylor Swift, via Twitter, February 27, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
3. Demi Lovato, via Twitter, February 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
4. Anna Kendrick, via Twitter, February 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
5. Justin Bieber, via Twitter, February 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
6. Kim Kardashian, via Twitter, February 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
7. Josh Groban, via Twitter, February 26, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
8. Ariana Grande, via Twitter, February 27, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
9. Rashida Jones, via Twitter, February 27, 2015, accessed May 7, 2020.
10. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_dress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_dress)
11. A poll that showed 75% of those who took the poll saw the dress as white and gold ran on BuzzFeed (source: <https://says.com/my/fun/people-on-the-internet-are-arguing-about-the-colour-of-this-dress>, accessed May 7, 2020), but you can also find polls that say a majority saw it as blue and black. The fact that polls can't even agree on this entertains me.
12. I'm thankful for the freedom of religion—to the degree that we can keep it. What I did not write is that this freedom is being whittled away in America. This is a hot button topic for me. When Thomas Jefferson wrote (in a letter) of a “wall of separation” between the church and the state, the idea was that the church should be protected from intrusion or the influence of the government—not the other way around! Today that has been flipped, as if the government somehow needs protection from the church. This makes me crazy because a tiny minority is crushing the much larger majority in this battle.
13. This idea for this came from a pastor named Stephen Bilynskyj. He originally used a jar full of jelly beans and a question about favorite songs.
14. Social media platforms have openly admitted to censorship by removing accounts of people with views that disagree with a platform's ideology. Thoughtful voices who defend Christianity and historic biblical values, for example, have been removed from different platforms for their views. Even Amazon, which (in theory) is in business to make money for its shareholders, has removed books with which it disagrees. This is nothing other than blatant censorship and it should be troubling, whatever you believe about an idea.
15. Tim Keller, via Twitter, December 29, 2021.
16. If you haven't already done so, be sure to watch the Netflix film, *The*

*Social Dilemma*. It chronicles how social media platforms have been carefully designed to ensure that people only get information from like-minded people. The resulting echo chamber causes people to ridicule and demean those who might disagree—even if there might be good reason for dissent.

17. John 14:6
18. Desmond Tutu, in *Desmond Tutu, a Spiritual Biography of South Africa's Confessor*, by Michael Battle, Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.
19. Frank Turek, via Twitter, August 9, 2020.

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## CHAPTER 4

1. Charlie Warzel, quoting Karen Freund in BuzzFeed News, accessed May 7, 2020, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/charliewarzel/226-how-two-runaway-llamas-and-a-dress-gave-us-the-internets>
2. Ibid.
3. Lucie Zhang, via Twitter, February 26, 2015.
4. Rebecca Traister, via Twitter, February 26, 2015.
5. I couldn't write this much about llamas without including this completely unrelated video that entertained my kids when they were younger. Ryan, Megs, and Ethan, this is for you: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ddn6YWqd0Us>
6. This conversation took place seven years ago. I have a clear memory of the conversation, but in case I somehow misquote the man with whom I was speaking, I will not name him.
7. Sir Harold Kroto, from video of a presentation he gave. <https://www.mediatheque.lindau-nobel.org/videos/31303/creativitee-sans-frontieres-2011/meeting-2011>, accessed June 21, 2020.
8. Freeman Dyson, "Does a Fine-Tuned Universe Lead to God?," An interview on the Closer to Truth website: <https://www.closertotruth.com/interviews/4582>, accessed February 27, 2021.
9. Peter Wehner, "NIH Director: We're on an Exponential Curve," *The Atlantic*, accessed on September 23, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/interview-francis-collins-nih/608221/>
10. Edwin M. Glaser, *An Experiment in the Development of Critical Thinking*, (Columbia University, 1941), as cited on <https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/defining-critical-thinking/766>

1. This is probably a conservative estimate. Counting to 100 billion is based on the estimate that 9/10 of all numbers have nine digits and the average amount of time it takes to say a nine digit number is slightly more than 3 seconds. Feel free to debate this methodology. I could be wrong here, but if I'm wrong, I suspect I've erred on the conservative side, and it would take more than 10,000 years to count to 100 billion.
2. NASA, "Hubble Reveals Observable Universe Contains 10 Times More Galaxies Than Previously Thought," <https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2016/hubble-reveals-observable-universe-contains-10-times-more-galaxies-than-previously-thought>, accessed on July 6, 2020. Also, "A Universe of 2 Trillion Galaxies," on Phys.org, cites the team's work from the *Astrophysical Journal*, <https://phys.org/news/2017-01-universe-trillion-galaxies.html>, accessed July 9, 2020.
3. The currently accepted size of the universe seems to be 93 billion light years wide. One reference I saw for this comes from a book by Itzhak Bars and John Terning, called *Extra Dimension in Space and Time*, (Springer Science + Business Media, 2010), 27.
4. "How Big is the Universe... Compared with a Grain of Sand?," YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC7yFDb1zOA>, accessed July 7, 2020.
5. Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*, Kindle edition, (Random House, LLC, 2012), 130.
6. Ibid.
7. Anthony Walsh, *Answering the New Atheists*, (Vernon Press, 2018), 60.
8. Ibid.
9. This argument, about the impossibility of crossing an actual infinite, is really interesting to me. You can read more about it in a great book by J.P. Moreland, called *Scaling the Secular City*. William Lane Craig has also addressed this article in books, articles and videos you can find at ReasonableFaith.org. One such video can be accessed at <https://www.reasonable-faith.org/videos/short-videos/explaining-hilberts-hotel>
10. Adam Curtis, "A Mile or Two Off Yarmouth," an interview on BBC, February 24, 2012, accessed July 8, 2020.
11. Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers*, (Norton, 1978), chapter 9.
12. Malcolm W. Browne, "Clues to Universe Origin Expected," *New York Times*, March 12, 1978, p.1.

13. Steven Ball, “A Christian Physicist Examines the Big Bang Theory,” p.6, accessed July 8, 2021, <https://www.letu.edu/academics/arts-and-sciences/files/big-bang.pdf>.
14. Ibid.
15. Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, (InterVarsity Press, 1994), 59.
16. Alexander Vilenkin, *Many Worlds in One*, (Hill and Wang, 2006), 176.
17. From the article, “What is the Big Bang?,” accessed on May 5, 2021, <https://spaceplace.nasa.gov/big-bang/en/>
18. Dr. Craig has spoken and written about this, using this language, often. A brief overview of these ideas is found in his great animated video: “The Kalam Cosmological Argument - Part 1,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6CulBuMCLg0>, accessed July 10, 2021.
19. Ibid.

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## CHAPTER 6

1. Billy Graham in Cleveland, date unknown, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYSgg3WvYeE>, accessed February 27, 2021.
2. This number—120 times—is based on Mars’ average distance from Earth, 142 million miles.
3. Francis Collins, *The Language of God*, (Free Press, 2007).
4. Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead*, (Viking, Penguin Group, 1996, Revised Edition), 228.
5. Stephen Meyer’s three books: First, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*. Second is *Darwin’s Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design*. Finally, his most recent book is *The Return of the God Hypothesis: Compelling Scientific Evidence for the Existence of God*.
6. “Stephen Meyer: DNA and Information,” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7c9PaZzsqEg>, accessed July 9, 2020.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. “Information Enigma: Where Does Information Come From?,” YouTube, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA-FcnLsF1g>
10. Stephen Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*, (Harper Collins eBooks, 2009), 300.

11. Kreeft and Tacelli, 55-56.
12. Ibid.
13. “Information Enigma: Where Does Information Come From?,” YouTube, accessed July 10, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aA-FcnLsF1g>
14. Antony Flew & Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is a God*, (Harper Collins eBooks, 2007), 91.
15. Quotation from the transcript of an interview as part of the “Faith and Reason” television program, produced by PBS, accessed on July 12, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/transcript/coll-frame.html>.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Frank Tipler, *The Physics of Immortality*, (Doubleday Books, 1994), ix.

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## CHAPTER 7

1. Robin Collins, “God, Design, and Fine-Tuning,” accessed on February 20, 2021, <http://home.messiah.edu/~rcollins/Fine-tuning/ft.htm>.
2. Ibid.
3. Anil Ananthaswamy, “Is the Universe Fine-Tuned for Life?,” accessed on February 23, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/article/is-the-universe-fine-tuned-for-life/>.
4. Ibid.
5. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History in Time*, (Bantam Books, 1988), 126.
6. I’ve seen an almost identical quote from Davies cited in many places, including his book *Cosmic Jackpot*, (Houghton Mifflin, 2007), 149. But this quote is slightly more up to date and I’ve seen it cited by a couple of writers, including Graduate Christian Union’s blog, at <https://ubcgcu.org/2014/08/22/mind-expanding-quotes-on-fine-tuning/>.
7. Freeman Dyson, *Disturbing the Universe*, (Pan Books, 1979), 250.
8. Freeman Dyson, “Does a Fine-Tuned Universe Lead to God?,” From an interview on the Closer to Truth website: <https://www.closertotruth.com/interviews/4582>, accessed February 27, 2021.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Fred Hoyle, “The Universe: Past and Present Reflections,” “Annual Review of Astronomy and Astrophysics,” Volume 20, September 1982, 16.
12. Hawking, *A Brief History in Time*, 125.

13. Philip Goff, “Our Improbable Existence is No Evidence for a Multiverse,” from the *Scientific American* website, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/our-improbable-existence-is-no-evidence-for-a-multiverse/>, accessed on February 27, 2021.
14. This number, cited by Goff, is from Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos*, (Oxford University Press, 1997), 45.
15. Numbers this large are hard to get our heads around. In his book, *Creator and the Cosmos*, (NavPress, 1993, p. 115), Hugh Ross tries to help readers understand the size of a different enormous number,  $10^{37}$ . He writes that if we were to cover the entire continent of North America with dimes, in a pile high enough to reach the moon—and then create *one billion more* identically-sized piles—we’d have approximately  $10^{37}$  dimes. That’s a lot of dimes. If you were to take *that* number of dimes, and multiply it by 10,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, you’d end up with  $10^{80}$  dimes. Aidan’s odds, in our illustration, of 1 in  $10^{80}$ , would be like finding one specific dime from this new, absurdly large number of enormous piles of dimes.
16. Amir Ancel, “Why Science Does Not Disprove God,” <https://time.com/77676/why-science-does-not-disprove-god/>, accessed July 27, 2021
17. Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos*, 45.
18. Natalie Wolchover and Peter Byrne, “In a Multiverse, What Are the Odds?” From *Quanta Magazine*, November 3, 2014, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/the-multiverses-measure-problem-20141103/>, accessed July 28, 2021.
19. Dyson, “Does a Fine-Tuned Universe Lead to God?” <https://www.closer-totruth.com/interviews/4582>, accessed February 27, 2021.
20. Sarah Scoles, “Can Physicists Ever Prove the Multiverse is Real?” From *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 19, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/can-physicists-ever-prove-multiverse-real-180958813/> accessed July 27, 2021.
21. “Why We Gamble Like Monkeys,” from [bbc.org](https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150127-why-we-gamble-like-monkeys), <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150127-why-we-gamble-like-monkeys>, accessed on December 19, 2021.
22. Philip Goff, “Our Improbable Existence is No Evidence for a Multiverse,” from the *Scientific American* website, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/our-improbable-existence-is-no-evidence-for-a-multiverse/>, accessed on February 27, 2021.
23. William Lane Craig, “Why Can’t the Multiverse Be Eternal?” from ReasonableFaith.org on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=11ScQ9EBFKM>, accessed on February 27, 2021. See also

William Lane Craig, “Multiverse and the Design Argument,” from <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/multiverse-and-the-design-argument>, accessed on December 19, 2021. Here he points to the book, *Many Worlds in One: The Search for Other Universes* (Hill and Wang, 2006). If you are really interested in the multiverse, please also see this article by Dr. Craig: <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/existence-nature-of-god/has-the-multiverse-replaced-god>.

24. William Lane Craig, “The Big Bang, Multiverses, and the Anthropic Principle,” a podcast in two parts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-J5D7R3pyro> (Part 1) and also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyQMGBmPkdl> (Part 2), accessed December 19, 2021.

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## CHAPTER 8

1. I realize that a man who had fought for Germany in World War II but now was living in America may have, at some point along the line, begun to say that he knew Hitler was wrong, regardless of what he had believed during the war. If he had believed in the Third Reich’s cause, the odds are low that he would admit that to any American. But I had no real reason to doubt him. And even if he was shading the truth about his own perspective, there was still widespread opposition, from many Germans, to Hitler’s aims. I point this out later in the chapter.
2. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Mercy House Publishing, 2019), 17. I cite here the ebook version of this book, found at <https://books.apple.com/us/book/mere-christianity/id1488426288>. This book was first published in 1952, and was adapted from a series of radio broadcasts made by Lewis between 1942 and 1944.
3. *Ibid*, 43.
4. Slavery is still a massive problem in our modern world. Anyone who thinks otherwise has his or her head in the sand. I wrote that “in many countries today, slavery is still not illegal.” This is true. Although the article I’ll cite below does say that “legal ownership of people was indeed abolished in all countries over the last two centuries,” it goes on to say that, “but in many countries it has not been criminalized... In 94 countries, you cannot be prosecuted and punished in a criminal court for enslaving another human being.” This means that more than half of the world’s nations

- (as of 2020) had not yet put laws into place against slavery. Further, more than 40 million people are estimated to be trapped in slavery worldwide today, 25% of whom are children. The stats about the laws around the world were cited in the article, “Slavery is Not a Crime in Almost Half the Countries of the World – New Research,” accessed December 13, 2021, <https://theconversation.com/slavery-is-not-a-crime-in-almost-half-the-countries-of-the-world-new-research-115596>. The number of people trapped in slavery comes from <https://www.antislavery.org>.
5. Peter Hoffman, *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), xiii.
  6. If you like reading science fiction, “The Man in the High Castle” was originally a 1962 novel of the same name, by the renowned American science fiction writer, Philip K. Dick.
  7. Sean McDowell has used this formation of the argument in a few places, but here is a short video in which he unpacks it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yTMN7NEL1SU>, accessed August 22, 2021. Watch any of McDowell’s YouTube videos—he is a great thinker and communicator.
  8. J.L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, (Clarendon Press, 1982), 115-116.
  9. William Lane Craig has created a series of fantastic animated videos on arguments for the existence of God. The video that explains the moral argument makes the point about a cat killing a mouse: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OxiAikEk2vU>, accessed August 22, 2021. The larger list of his animated videos on apologetics arguments can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3gdeV4Rk9Efl-NyraEGXX-wSjDNeMaRoX>.
  10. The often-asked question about why God might allow bad things to happen is an important one. Here are a few thoughts, though a more complete treatment of this subject would obviously demand much more than two pages in this Endnote.

There are two reasons people often ask this sort of question. Some may ask it in the middle of intense or very real pain. Generally speaking, these people are not looking for a philosophical or theological answer.

What most people need in the midst of pain is compassion; someone to cry with them or to simply be there—even if in silence—through the pain. Philosophical and/or theological answers will not typically ease our pain and may even sound cold or uncaring. Years ago, I made the mistake of trying to give a theological answer when someone in pain stopped by my house to talk. I didn’t help. But I learned and grew from that mistake.

But when we are not in the midst of some sort of pain or suffering, thinking about this topic intellectually (rather than emotionally) is important.

The idea that we'd even think to call something "evil" hints at God's existence. This is a big part of chapter eight. The skeptic may suggest that if God does exist, he is either not good (because he can stop evil from happening and sometimes does not) or that he is not all-powerful (because he might want to stop evil, but sometimes cannot). But there is a third option; that he *is* both good and all-powerful, even if he sometimes allows things to happen that we wish he would not have.

As Tim Keller, who is currently in the midst of a terrible battle with cancer, has said often, just because we cannot imagine a good reason that a loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing God might allow something to happen certainly does not mean that a good reason does not exist. We are finite beings. From our finite perspective, we see something bad and are quick to judge that God *must* be wrong for allowing it. But if God is real, it seems arrogant for us—his creations—to judge the actions of our creator.

If we turn to the Bible, we find that it only gives us parts of answers as to why God might allow any particular thing to happen.

First, we live in a world that is fallen. I've written about this in chapters 1 and 13. The fall of man messed up everything: our hearts, desires, actions, and even our motives. Further, it has even corrupted our physical universe. When humanity, as a race, turned away from God, the result was that everything that is a part of his creation broke.

A second part of the answer is that mankind's turn away from God was possible because God does not force us to love or follow him. He did not want us to be robots, and will not force anyone to go to heaven. He gives us the freedom to make moral decisions. And decisions have consequences.

We've all seen awful things happen as a result of a person's bad decision. Sometimes, as in the case of a drunk driver, bad decisions have an impact on the lives of others. Sometimes, as in the case of a murderous dictator, they have an impact on the lives of many. This has been called moral evil.

Some bad things, however, like a disease or natural disaster—things we might call natural evil—are not directly the result of a bad decision or

due to something a person did wrong (see John 9). This type of evil can be harder for many of us to stomach because it feels so random.

It is at least worth pondering that we have no clue how often God actually *does* stop evil on a given day—or how often he works for good on our behalf. But this doesn't soften the pain we feel when we recognize that God could have stopped a particular thing from happening but did not.

The reality is that each of us will suffer at some point in our life. This should not surprise us. Jesus himself suffered, brutally and unfairly. So did his first followers. When facing suffering, we must not forget Jesus' reminder in John 16:33 that in this world we *will* face tribulation, but that we should take courage because he has overcome the world.

In the midst of suffering, God may not choose to reveal his rationale for allowing it to happen. But the Christian can take great comfort that God promises to provide resources to help us face suffering with strength and hope. He promises that in all things, even bad things, he is at work for good in the lives of those who follow him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

The Apostle Paul—who suffered immensely—had it right when he wrote, “I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us,” in Romans 8:18. That thought, by Paul, points us to our most significant reason for hope in the face of evil and suffering: we are not home yet. We know that God will resolve evil once and for all in eternity. We rejoice that one day believers will be with God in a place where there will be no more sin, no more pain, no more moral or natural evil, and no more tears.

Is that line of thought fully satisfying? Perhaps not. But I'd argue that it is far more satisfying than the atheist's answer: “Stuff happens.”

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I'll stop here, but I have listed several books on this topic in the Appendix. I'd particularly recommend Clay Jones' book, *Why Does God Allow Evil?* It is thoughtful, helpful, and accessible. For a far shorter treatment, John Lennox's booklet *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?* is only 62 pages long but is very good.

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## CHAPTER 9

1. Yes, Fred Krueger was actually his name. This case took place long before a horror movie would introduce millions to a different Freddie Krueger.
2. First Corinthians 15:12-19; specifically verse 19.
3. Paul Maier, *The Very First Easter*, (Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 120.
4. Paul Althaus. *Die Wahrheit des kirchlichen Osterglaubens* (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1941), 22.
5. Cited by Jerry Pierce in “The Towering Truth of the Resurrection,” from *Decision Magazine*, <https://decisionmagazine.com/towering-truth-resurrection/>, accessed September 15, 2021.
6. Matthew 26:35
7. Conrad Hackett and David McClendon, “Christians Remain the World’s Largest Religious Group, but they are Declining in Europe,” from Pew Center Research, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/05/christians-remain-worlds-largest-religious-group-but-they-are-declining-in-europe/>, accessed January 14, 2022.
8. Sean McDowell, in a lecture on his book, *The Fate of the Apostles*, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_sy1BwLBIU8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sy1BwLBIU8), accessed on September 16, 2021.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. 1 Corinthians 15:5-8.
15. John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity*, (Bethany House Publishers, 1964), 78. In the edition of this book that I own, it is actually unclear whether this is Montgomery’s original idea or whether he is quoting Frank Morison’s book, *Who Moved the Stone?*

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## CHAPTER 10

1. Scott Allen, “How U.S. Marshals Used Redskins Tickets to Bust Fugitives in 1985 Sting,” *The Washington Post*, December 18, 2015, accessed at

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/dc-sports-bog/wp/2015/12/18/how-u-s-marshals-used-redskins-tickets-to-bust-fugitives-in-1985-sting/>  
on August 14, 2021

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Simon Greenleaf, *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*, (A. Maxwell & Son, 1847), 73. Note that this page number is from an eBook edition.
5. Tim Keller, via Twitter, April 8, 2021.
6. I should say here that Indian Christians widely believe that Thomas took the gospel to India, though this does rely on church tradition.
7. Kreeft & Tacelli, 189-194.
8. Bart Ehrman, *Forged*, (HarperOne, 2011), 285.
9. We do not actually know for certain which specific instrument of pain was used to scourge Jesus. That said, any non-Roman who was to be crucified by the Romans was typically flogged, most often using a flagrum as I have described here. It is helpful to note that Jesus was scourged before it was clear that he would be crucified. Pilate said in Luke 23, "I will have him flogged and release him." Pilate did not find Jesus to be deserving of death, and thus tried to release him instead of crucifying him (see John 19). In John 19:5, after the scourging, Pilate said "Behold, the man!" Here, he seemed to say to the crowd "This surely isn't a king." Many have speculated that by scourging Jesus brutally, Pilate thought he could dissuade the crowd from demanding Jesus' death. He was wrong.
10. Terry McDermott, "The Physical Effects of the Scourging and Crucifixion of Jesus," *Catholic Insight*, March 13, 2020.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. William Edwards, Wesley Gabel, Floyd Hosmer, "On the Physical Death of Jesus Christ," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 255: 1455-63.
14. Cited by Pierce, "The Towering Truth of the Resurrection."
15. For a variety of sources and resources on prophecies Jesus fulfilled, see chapter 9 of the recently updated *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, by Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell, (Harper Collins, 2017), 209-231.
16. I'll recommend two books here. First is J. Warner Wallace's *Person of Interest*. Second is Alvin Schmidt's *How Christianity Changed the World*. Both books are listed in the Appendix.
17. The internet seems to attribute this to a columnist named Don Marquis.
18. James Allan Francis, *The Real Jesus and Other Sermons*, (The Judson Press, 1926), p.121.

1. J. Warner Wallace, “Why I Rarely Share My Personal Testimony and Why You Shouldn’t Be Quick to Share Yours,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFdYXzz2-P0>, accessed on May 27, 2021.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Frank Turek and Norman Geisler, *I Do Not Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, (Crossway, 2004), chapter 11.
6. Ibid.
7. Mark Strauss, “Bible Contradictions Explained: 4 Reasons the Gospels ‘Disagree,’” ZondervanAcademic.com, <https://zondervanacademic.com/blog/bible-contradictions-explained>, access May 28, 2021.
8. Ibid.
9. Many people have made this same point, but it is covered briefly but clearly by J. Warner Wallace here: <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/how-many-angels-were-present-at-jesus-tomb/>, accessed May 27, 2021.
10. J. Warner Wallace, “Why the Differences in the Gospel Accounts Make them More Reliable,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jp-cn6rVFO8>, accessed May 27, 2021.
11. J. Warner Wallace, “Ten Principles When Considering Alleged Bible Contradictions,” <https://coldcasechristianity.com/writings/ten-principles-when-considering-alleged-bible-contradictions/>, accessed May 27, 2021.
12. William Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*, (Hodder and Stoughton, 1915), 222.
13. Ibid.
14. I first saw Hemer’s work cited in Turek and Geisler’s *I Do Not Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*, (Crossway, 2004).
15. Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev*, (Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1959), 31.
16. “A Tunguska Type Airburst Destroyed Tall el-Hammam, a Middle Bronze Age City in the Jordan Valley Near the Dead Sea,” Scientific Reports, September 20, 2021, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-97778-3>, accessed October 1, 2021.
17. Stanley E. Porter and Andrew W. Pitts, *Fundamentals of New Testament Textual Criticism*, (Eerdmans, 2015), 50.

18. McDowell and McDowell, 56.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Sean McDowell and Peter Gurry, “Avoiding Big Mistakes in Defending the Bible: Interview with Dr. Peter Gurry,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPXY2PF7eB0>, accessed on May 27, 2021.
22. Greenleaf, 41. (Again, this is from Apple books, so the page numbering may be different for viewers reading the eBook from different sized browser windows, tablets, or smart phones.)
23. Owen Barfield, “Chronological Snobbery,” from <https://www.owenbarfield.org/chronological-snobbery/>, accessed May 27, 2021.
24. This illustration is my modern re-telling of one of Blaise Pascal’s thoughts in his book, *Pensées*. (#217)

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## CHAPTER 12

1. John Mansur, “No Greater Love,” *The Missileer*, February 13, 1987. Here is a great story—about this great story. “No Greater Love” first appeared in *The Missileer*, an U.S. Air Force newsletter. *Reader’s Digest* later reprinted it, and theirs was the version I ran across at the barber shop. While writing this book, *Reader’s Digest* could not give me permission to use the story because permission was not theirs to grant; they had received permission from the Air Force newsletter. But the newsletter no longer exists. Thankfully, I was able to track down Colonel Mansur himself, and he graciously extended permission for me to use it here. It turns out that Col. Mansur is a decorated combat veteran who received a Silver Star and served our nation with distinction during a long Air Force career. I was also encouraged to learn of his deep faith in Christ. We had a wonderful conversation in which he shared some remarkable ways that God has used this story.
2. John 15:13
3. John 10:11
4. Clayton Brumby, *The Parable of the Strings*
5. Luke 22:44 records that, “being in anguish, he prayed more fervently, and his sweat became like drops of blood falling to the ground.” Today we know of a medical condition we now call hematothidrosis that is caused by overwhelming stress and can result in a person sweating blood.

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## CHAPTER 13

1. Andy Greenberg, “The Confessions of Marcus Hutchins, the Hacker Who Saved the Internet,” *Wired*, June 2020.
2. Ibid. All of the details I share about the Marcus Hutchins story in the next two pages are taken from this same *Wired* magazine article.
3. Ibid.
4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, (Zondervan, 1994), 490.
5. Jeremiah 17:9 ESV. Some translations say that the heart is “incurable,” while others say it is “desperately sick.”
6. Randy Newman, *Bringing the Gospel Home*, (Crossway, 2011), 64-65.
7. Ibid.
8. Grudem, 497.
9. Ephesians 2:1
10. Romans 6:23
11. Ephesians 2:3
12. A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, (Harper & Row, 1961), 106.
13. Matt Chandler, *The Explicit Gospel*, (Crossway, 2012), 44.

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## CHAPTER 14

1. This story was passed along to me directly from a now-second lieutenant in the U.S. Army.
2. Eminem Ft. Rihanna, “The Monster,” (Sony/ATV Music Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group, MBG Rights Management, Reach Music Publishing), Track 12 on “The Marshall Mathers LP2,” 2013.
3. Michka Assayas, *Bono*, in *Conversation with Michka Assayas*, (Riverhead Books, 2005), 204-205
4. Ibid.
5. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 202 (in eBook format, this page number will be different on different devices).
6. Grudem, 574-575.

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## CHAPTER 15

1. Bill Bright, “Knowing God Personally,” ©1965-2021 BMF and Cru.
2. See Luke 15.
3. “Joe’s Story,” joegibbsstory.com, accessed September 4, 2020, <http://www.joegibbsstory.com/joes-story-page-2/>
4. United States v. George Wilson, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/32/150>, accessed on December 8, 2021.

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## CHAPTER 16

1. Hebrews 10:25-27
2. Keller, xvii.
3. Matthew Breeden, “I Believe, Help My Unbelief,” a sermon delivered on January 10, 2021 at Southern Hills Baptist Church in Round Rock, TX.
4. Ibid.
5. In the U.S., there seems to be less openness than there is in other parts of the world to the idea that God still performs miracles today. I understand the temptation to doubt, but if God is still performing miracles (at any intervals), this would surely strengthen the faith of the Christian. And it should also give skeptics more reason to doubt their doubt. Perhaps our perception of our own sophistication keeps some from believing. Or perhaps just an old-fashioned lack of faith. Whatever the case, if you find yourself doubting that God is still in the miracle business, I’d recommend that you challenge your own thinking by reading either Eric Metaxas’ book, *Miracles*, or Craig Keener’s massive two-volume work by the same name. I have not yet read Lee Strobel’s 2018 book, *The Case for Miracles*, but I have heard that it is good, as I would expect it to be. Keener’s is (by far) the most extensive and in-depth treatment of the subject, of these three.
6. I heard the concept years ago in a talk somewhere, and it has always stuck with me. My friend Jay mentioned that this thought may have originated with Howard Hendricks.

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## CHAPTER 17

1. “What’s So Good About Good Friday?” YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzxXvEtf9D0>, accessed January 12, 2022.
2. Ibid.
3. John Calvin, from the preface he wrote for Pierre Robert Olivétan’s French translation of the New Testament (1534). English translation from Joseph Haroutunian, ed., *Calvin: Commentaries, The Library of Christian Classics*.
4. Ibid.
5. “The Westminster Shorter Catechism,” by the Westminster Assembly, 1647.
6. Alexander Moody Stuart, as quoted by Frank Turek in a tweet on December 9, 2021. I could not find the original source for this quote from Dr. Moody Stuart, a pastor from the 1800s.
7. Matthew 16:24
8. Keller, 204.
9. Frank Turek, via Twitter, May 5, 2021.

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## CONCLUSION

1. C.S. Lewis, “The Weight of Glory,” in a sermon preached in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, June 8, 1942. This sermon was later included in a collection called *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, (Simon and Schuster).
2. Steven Curtis Chapman, “The Great Adventure,” track 2 on the album “The Great Adventure,” Sparrow Records, 1992.

## For Further Review

I have not included every book by the authors in the list below, and I certainly couldn't list every person who has done great work in the area of apologetics. So, this list is not even close to exhaustive. My hope is to introduce you to these authors, and that you'll explore their other books as well.

By including these books, I am not suggesting that I totally agree with every belief of every author, of course. The authors don't fully agree with each other on some topics. Peter Kreeft, a Christian, is Roman Catholic. I am not, but the books of his that I've listed below are absolutely fantastic. Tim Keller is a man I quote often and his ministry has made a significant impact in my life. But even he has said some things with which I do not fully agree. Still, the books of his that I've listed below are excellent. At least one of the authors I've listed below is a non-Christian.

The fact that these authors might have different takes on certain topics should neither surprise nor bother us. When we read authors with a range of views, we are challenged to think.

I have not listed books by people who attack Christianity or would be likely to reject the arguments I've made here. To anyone wanting to dig into these sorts of books further, I'd suggest becoming deeply familiar with Christianity's best arguments first. And then engage with thoughtful writers and thinkers who disagree.

This is how we grow. The more we learn about Christianity—and about opposing arguments—the more we will be ready to “give a reason for the hope that is within us.” (1 Peter 3:15)

Finally, I should say that while I have read most of these books, I have not read every page of every book below. If I've listed a book I've not fully read, it is for three reasons: (1) I have either heard the author speak on this topic or have read parts of the book; and (2) am so familiar with the writer and the content that I'm comfortable recommending it; and (3) I have heard or read strong recommendations on it from people I trust.

#### **60 BOOKS (IN ALPHABETICAL ORDER BY AUTHOR'S LAST NAME):**

##### **Michael Behe**

- *Darwin's Black Box*
- *A Mousetrap for Darwin*
- *Darwin Devolves*

##### **David Berlinski**

- *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions*  
Note: Berlinski, a mathematician, calls himself a “secular Jew.”

##### **Craig L. Blomberg**

- *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*

##### **G.K. Chesterton**

- *Orthodoxy*
- *The Everlasting Man*

### **William Lane Craig**

- *Reasonable Faith*
- *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus*

Visit ReasonableFaith.org web site for hundreds of Dr. Craig's talks, articles, videos, and responses to critiques from skeptics. His animated video series offers fantastic high-level overviews of various arguments for God's existence: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL3gdeV4Rk9Efl-NyraEGXXwSjDNeMaRoX>

### **William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland**

- *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*

### **William Dembski, Casey Luskin, and Joseph M. Holden**

- *The Comprehensive Guide to Science and Faith: Exploring the Ultimate Questions About Life and the Cosmos*

### **Greg Ganssle**

- *A Reasonable God: Engaging the New Face of Atheism*

### **Simon Greenleaf**

- *An Examination of the Testimony of the Four Evangelists By the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*

### **Gary Habermas**

- *Evidence for the Historical Jesus: Is the Jesus of History the Christ of Faith?*

### **Gary Habermas and Michael R. Licona**

- *The Case for the Resurrection of Jesus*

### **Julie P. Hannah**

- *A Skeptic's Investigation into Jesus*

### **Joseph M. Holden, General Editor**

- *The Comprehensive Guide to Apologetics*

The copyright in this book is from 2018, but I have only just discovered it in 2022. I recently received it, have already read parts of it,

and am enjoying it. It features 75 different articles on a wide range of topics from a wide range of great writers and thinkers. In fact, some of the people whose books I recommend here have written articles for this book. Their articles will give you a sense of how they might answer a question, and you can then choose to read their entire books if you'd care to do so. For example, Dr. Clay Jones is a great person to read on the problem of evil. This book contains an excellent four-page article on the problem of evil that he unpacks in much greater depth in his book, which is next on the list below.

### **Clay Jones**

- *Why Does God Allow Evil?*

### **Craig Keener**

- *Miracles: The Credibility of New Testament Accounts, 2 Volumes*

### **Tim Keller**

- *Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*
- *Making Sense of God: Finding God in the Modern World*
- *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*

### **Gregory Koukl**

- *The Story of Reality: How the World Began, How It Ends, and Everything Important that Happens in Between*

### **Peter Kreeft**

- *Between Heaven & Hell*

This book is an imagined conversation—after their death—between C.S. Lewis, Aldous Huxley, and John F. Kennedy, all of whom died on the same day. Lewis' thoughts (as imagined by Kreeft) defend Christianity using apologetics in this fascinating “conversation.”

- *Socrates Meets Jesus*

### **Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli**

- *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*

This is one of books in this list that I'd recommend the most highly, to have on your shelf as a resource. Or to read, as I did. For clarity, I should note that this book is a different book than the *Handbook*

*of Catholic Apologetics*, written by the same authors. I have not read that book and thus cannot comment on it.

### **John Lennox**

- *Cosmic Chemistry: Do God and Science Mix?*
- *God and Stephen Hawking: Whose design is it, anyway? (2nd Ed.)*
- *Where is God in a Coronavirus World?*

### **C.S. Lewis**

- *Mere Christianity*
- *The Problem of Pain*
- *The Abolition of Man*

### **Josh McDowell and Sean McDowell**

- *Evidence That Demands a Verdict: Life-Changing Truth for a Skeptical World*
- *77 FAQs About God and the Bible*

### **Sean McDowell**

- *The Fate of the Apostles*

McDowell has written and co-written a number of excellent books, but I also want to point you toward the phenomenal content on his YouTube channel. See also: [SeanMcDowell.org](http://SeanMcDowell.org).

### **Rebecca McLaughlin**

- *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World's Largest Religion*

### **Eric Metaxas**

- *Is Atheism Dead?*
- *Miracles What They Are, How They Happen, and How They Can Change Your Life*

### **Stephen Meyer**

- *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design*
- *Darwin's Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design*

- *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries That Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe*

### **Mark Mittelberg**

- *The Questions Christians Hope No One Will Ask (with Answers)*

### **J.P. Moreland**

- *Scaling the Secular City*

This may be the most intellectually rigorous of the books I'll list. I once heard Moreland say in a class that he wrote this book so that the "typical graduate student would only understand 50-60% of it after the first reading."

- *Love Your God with All Your Mind*
- *The God Question: An Invitation to a Life of Meaning*

I once heard Moreland say that we should buy books for four reasons: (1) to read (obviously); (2) to support the authors so they will continue to write; (3) to have great resources available on our bookshelves; and (4) to give away to others. I love all four of these thoughts. Re: #4, I've given away—or have allowed someone to borrow—so many books that I've lost count. And every time I think about that, I consider it to have been a good investment.

### **Randy Newman**

- *Mere Evangelism*

This book explores principles used by C.S. Lewis to help us talk about issues of faith with those who are not Christians. It is not purely about apologetics, but it is outstanding for any Christian interested in discussing his or her faith with others.

### **Blaise Pascal**

- *Pensées*

### **Nabeel Qureshi**

- *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity*

### **Alvin Schmidt**

- *How Christianity Changed the World*

### **Lee Strobel**

- *The Case for Christ*
- *The Case for Faith*
- *The Case for a Creator*
- *The Case for Miracles*
- *The Case for Easter*
- *The Case for Christmas*
- *The Case for Heaven*

### **Frank Turek and Norman Geisler**

- *I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist*

Frank Turek, like J. Warner Wallace, Sean McDowell, and William Lane Craig, has posted truly excellent content for the believer and seeker alike on his website, [www.CrossExamined.org](http://www.CrossExamined.org).

### **J. Warner Wallace**

- *Cold-Case Christianity: A Homicide Detective Investigates the Claims of the Gospels*
- *God's Crime Scene: A Cold-Case Detective Examines the Evidence for a Divinely Created Universe*
- *Person of Interest: Why Jesus Still Matters in a World that Rejects the Bible*

As mentioned previously, Wallace has posted tremendous apologetics-related content online, at [ColdCaseChristianity.com](http://ColdCaseChristianity.com), and updates it often. From podcasts to videos to blog posts, he does a great job. Wallace's content was very helpful to my son Ryan during his spiritual journey.







To take a journey is to travel from one place to another.

But what does a spiritual journey look like? How does a person move from one place to another when it comes to belief in God?

In our modern world, is a journey toward faith in God even defensible? Are there reasons for faith when most of us observe that the world seems to be terribly broken? Are there reasons for optimism when it seems clear that so many people are broken? And are there reasons for hope when—in our most perceptive moments—we recognize ways that we too are broken?

Is there evidence that suggests it is rational to believe that some kind of God exists? Or that the central claims of Christianity are true? Regardless of what you've believed about God in the past, what if such evidence does exist?

This is the story of one person's journey. It is a story of discovery. I wrote it with the hope that it might be thought-provoking for you, wherever you are in your spiritual journey.

ISBN 979-8-9857396-0-2

