

OBJECTIONS TO CHRISTIANITY

David Bast

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© 1996 by David Bast

Published by Words of Hope, 700 Ball Ave., N.E.,
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-1308

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Printed in the United States of America

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Preface

This book is a small but serious attempt to respond to the questions many thoughtful people raise when they are confronted with the teachings of the Christian faith. Christianity claims to be true; its central figure, Jesus Christ, once said, “*I am* the truth.” It purports to tell what God is actually like. It is based on historical events that are really believed to have taken place.

So the issue at stake in all the various objections people offer to Christians is basically this: Are you telling the truth? Are the facts Christianity teaches real, or only made up? Did the events on which it is based actually happen? Are the things it asks me to do real demands that I must not ignore?

In replying to some of the most common objections to Christianity, I want to answer them from the Bible. I am doing this because the Bible is the ultimate authority for all Christian belief, so if you want to know what Christianity teaches about any subject you must go back to this source. Whether or not you accept its teaching, you can surely agree that any fair examination of the Christian faith ought at least to consider what the Bible says.

I recognize the limitations of attempting to answer serious objections to faith in a series of brief Bible studies. Each of these questions could easily call forth an entire book; indeed, most of them have! But in the end, none of them will be answered by intellectual arguments, however lengthy and detailed. The reason is that they aren’t primarily intellectual questions; they are, to use an overworked modern term, existential ones. They come from a deeper level and have a more profound importance than any mere theological or religious debate. They cannot be answered by reason alone. They can only be answered by meeting the One in whom all our questions are turned into praise.

1

The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.”

Matthew 16:13-18

OBJECTION: Jesus Christ was just another religious teacher, right? So why single him out for worship?

In a culture that is most often described by adjectives like *post-modern*, *pluralistic*, *multicultural*, *relativist*, the claim that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God and the only way of salvation is hard to make, and even harder to accept. Isn't it enough to recognize him as a great man and an important teacher? Shouldn't we classify him as a significant influence on Western religious life and social history and leave it at that, without attempting to impose him on people of other religions and cultures? Wouldn't it be more sensitive, less ethnocentric, less spiritually arrogant, to lump him together with Moses and Mohammed and the Buddha and other members of the “Hall of Fame” of world religion, without trying to place him above everyone else? To assert Jesus' superiority in such an absolute way seems neither right nor fair, particularly in a world where religious “fundamentalism” seems to have spawned so much hatred and conflict. Wouldn't it be far better if every religion were tolerant of all others, and none claimed to be the exclusive truth?

The Main Point

This first objection takes us right to the central issue of Christianity, which is the identity of Jesus Christ himself. Here is the main point of debate. Who was he anyway? Who did he claim to be? Most important, who do *I* think he is? This question is central because Jesus Christ himself is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Christianity is not just another religion, in the sense of being a set of teachings about God and other ultimate issues. Christianity is essentially about a relationship, a living relationship with this man Jesus Christ. Eventually everyone on earth must decide one way or the other about him. Was he just another religious teacher? Was he a good man, or even perhaps the greatest man who ever lived? Or was he something more than that?

I still remember clearly a conversation I had one day in school nearly thirty years ago. I was talking with one of my classmates, a very bright young man named Marvin, and the subject turned to religion. He asked me what I believed, so I told him that I was a Christian and that I believed in Jesus Christ. I asked him what he thought about Jesus and he replied, “I don’t believe there ever was such a man. I think the whole story was invented by the first Christians.” Needless to say, I was somewhat taken aback by this view. My friend Marvin’s opinion may not have been very defensible on historical grounds, but at least it had the advantage of allowing him to dismiss the question of Jesus quite easily. If Jesus was a fictional character, then you no more need to worry about who he was, or what he said or did, than you do about Hamlet or Don Quixote or Mickey Mouse.

But the fact is, very few people in the world today—including even non-Christians—can deny the historical existence of Jesus Christ. In contrast to the mythical figures of ancient pagan literature, Jesus was a real man who lived in the real world. Referring to the events of his life, the apostle Paul, one of his early followers, said, “[This] was not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). The fact is, the existence of Jesus Christ is better attested than that of any other figure from the ancient world.

Who Do People Say I Am?

So Jesus actually lived, but just who was he? That is a question people have been asking and trying to answer from the very beginning. In fact, there was one occasion during his public life when Jesus himself asked it:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

(Matthew 16:13-16)

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” “Son of Man” was one of Jesus’ favorite self designations, so what he is asking about is popular opinion concerning his identity. His question brought a variety of responses: “Some people think you’re John the Baptist come back to life,” they answered. “Others are saying you’re Elijah or one of the other prophets of the Old Testament”—and the different answers still have not stopped coming.

Probably the most common opinion about Jesus among those who are not Christians is that he was a great prophet, a teacher who spoke about God and pointed people toward him. The Jewish historian Josephus, living in the generation immediately after Jesus, described him as “a wise man who performed surprising works” (quoted by F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament*). This opinion has continued down to our own day. Of course, there

have been many variants. Different interpreters in different ages have seen Jesus as a radical revolutionary, a gentle liberal, a faith healer, a member of a communal cult, a socialistic peasant agitator, a misguided fanatic—the theories go on and on.

None of these views, however, reflects Jesus as he is actually described in the New Testament. In order to see him as a merely human figure of whatever type (and the type usually conforms to the viewer's own religious, political, or social preferences), one must either ignore or explain away most of what the gospels tell us about him. If we turn to the pages of the New Testament and listen to the testimony of the eyewitnesses who knew him and lived with him, who heard his words and saw his actions, we come up with a very different answer to the question of who Jesus really is.

“You Are the Christ, The Son of God”

This different answer is the one first given by his disciple Peter and echoed since by all Christians everywhere. “But what about you?” Jesus asked his disciples. “Who do *you* say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Peter realized that Jesus was the *Christ*. This Greek word translates the Hebrew term “Messiah,” or “Anointed One.” The Messiah was the hero who would be chosen and designated by God to bring history to its appointed climax. The Messiah was God's champion, the savior of the people of God. But Peter recognized Jesus as something else in addition to this. The Messiah may have been the greatest man who ever lived, but Jesus was greater still. He was also “the Son of the living God.” In Peter's view, Jesus was more than just a man, more even than the greatest man. He was God himself come in human flesh.

What was it that made Peter say that? This was an amazing confession for a man of his background and upbringing. Remember that Peter was a devout Jew. For fifteen hundred years the Jews had confessed as the center of their faith that there was only one God—the Lord, the God of Israel, the Creator of heaven and earth. The wonderful truth of monotheism was first taught to the Hebrew people when God revealed his name and nature to them. “Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, . . . there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:21-22). Peter was not expecting the one and only God to have a Son who would take human flesh.

Furthermore, remember Peter's circumstances. He had been living with Jesus as one of his most intimate companions for more than a year. All told, he would spend three years in the closest fellowship with Jesus. As you and I well know, living with another person soon reveals to us their foibles and shortcomings. It would be rare indeed for a wife to think of her husband as perfect, or for a brother to ascribe deity to his sister. Close, day-to-day contact within a family is the quickest way for us to see through any claims to human perfection. But when Peter looked at Jesus, that is exactly what he saw. In fact, he saw even more. When he looked at Jesus Christ, Peter realized he was seeing God.

A Great Confession

So the question is: What made him realize this? Peter witnessed two things in Jesus that revealed him to be something infinitely more than just a human being. The first was Jesus' *words*. Despite the widespread opinion that Jesus was a great moral teacher, he said many things that, when you listen carefully to them, sound very odd. It is true that some of the sayings of Jesus have entered our ethical vocabulary, such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," or "Love your neighbor as yourself."

But many things Jesus said are not ethical at all; in fact, they sound like either lies or delusions—if the one who spoke them was only a man. For example, he claimed that he had the authority to forgive peoples' sins; not just their sins against him personally, but all sins. He claimed to be equal with God, to share God's status, even God's very being. He said, "I and the Father are one," (John 10:30) and "before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58b), applying to himself the personal form of God's very name. He claimed to possess all authority in the universe and to be the one who would judge every human being, both living and dead, at the end of time. When he was on trial for his life and was asked whether he was in fact the Messiah and the Son of God, he replied, "Yes, it is as you say . . . In the future you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt. 26:64).

These are not the claims of a great religious teacher. They are not even the claims of a good man. As the Christian writer C.S. Lewis put it fifty years ago: "A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would either be a lunatic—on a level with the 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 madman or something worse . . . but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He did not leave that option open to us. He did not intend to." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*).

The other thing that set Jesus apart from everyone else was his *actions*. It is easy enough to claim to be God. Others have done as much from time to time, and they have usually turned out to be mentally ill. The difference in Jesus' case is that he lived up to his claim. He healed the sick. He cast out demons. He calmed storms and multiplied bread and fish to feed multitudes. He loved his enemies and blessed those who cursed him, and when they finally put him to death, he rose again in triumph to a life that cannot die. His life was exactly the sort of life we would expect—a life of awesome power mixed with astonishing love—if God in fact did become a man. Jesus' life was a perfection of love in action. No one who ever met him thought that he was unbalanced or deceitful. When confronted with his grace, some loved him and some hated him, but none could deny his goodness.

So here is the question: Who *is* Jesus Christ? Scholars still struggle for the answer, and so do ordinary people every day, people like you and me. Was he only a prophet? Or was he infinitely more? When Peter uttered his great confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus himself added an interesting comment. He blessed Peter and then said that flesh and blood had not revealed this truth to him but rather that God had. Peter heard Jesus' claims and

witnessed his actions, but in the end, Jesus' identity was revealed to Peter when God opened his eyes to the truth.

Do you want to know the truth about Jesus Christ? Are you an honest seeker after God? If you honestly consider the claims of Jesus and open your mind to the truth, God will make him known to you, and you too will say, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Study Questions

1. Who do you think Jesus is?
2. How did you come to your idea of who Jesus is?
3. Why do you think Jesus so often refers to himself as the Son of Man? What does he mean by this?
4. Has God opened your eyes to significant truths as he opened Peter's eyes to the truth that Jesus was God's Son? What are they?

2

Born to Believe?

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

John 20:24-29

OBJECTION: Faith—any kind of faith—is a product of environment and conditioning. If you have been raised in a Christian home, you will become a Christian. If you were born in an Islamic country, you will grow up to be a Muslim. So how can people be held responsible for their beliefs?

The next objection I want to consider rises out of the observation of ordinary, everyday life. If you look for the source of the basic beliefs held by different people, it seems in most cases to lie in the individual's culture and upbringing. For example, most people who are Christians were raised in Christian families, just as most Jews or Muslims or Hindus have been brought up in those faiths. Is not religious belief largely then, or perhaps entirely, due to one's environment and early training? We are conditioned as children to believe certain things, and as a result, we rarely change those basic patterns of belief.

Yet Christianity says that everyone will be judged on the basis of their beliefs; specifically, whether they believe in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:18).

But if beliefs are conditioned, major difficulties arise with the claims of Christianity to teach the truth about God and to offer the exclusive way of salvation through Jesus Christ. Chief among them is the fact that most people do not really seem to have much choice about whether they will be Christians. What chance is there that a person who was born and raised in Saudi Arabia would ever believe in Christ? So how could God in all fairness judge him or her for not doing so?

Another side of this problem involves those of us who are Christians. So much of Christianity can be a veneer, a cultural relic, the product of habit and surroundings. Is it possible for our faith to be real, and not merely a prejudice inherited from our parents?

I do not believe that faith is merely the result of social conditioning. My response is based largely upon experience, both my own and that of others, including the experience of people in the Bible. Whatever role our upbringing and early training might play in the beliefs we eventually hold, faith is more than a product of heredity and environment. In the last analysis, genuine faith in Christ is a gift from God, offered and made available anytime, anywhere, to anyone who desires and asks for it.

It is possible for people who have been raised in a Christian family to be not merely nominal Christians but to embrace Jesus Christ for themselves and to trust him in a relationship that is real and alive. I know, because I've done that myself. It is also possible for people who've been raised in other religions, including the anti-religion of secularism, to turn in a genuine conversion to the Lord Jesus. Let me tell you about one man who did exactly that.

Doubting Thomas

His name was Thomas. He was one of Jesus' twelve disciples and his story is told toward the end of the gospel of John:

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it."

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

(John 20:19-20, 24-29)

This incident took place on a Sunday evening one week after Jesus rose from the dead. Ten of Jesus' original twelve disciples saw him alive on Easter Sunday, and the evidence of their own senses convinced them that he had risen from the dead. But Thomas was not there. Thomas had

not seen Jesus, and Thomas did not believe. As far as he was concerned, seeing is believing. When the other disciples told him excitedly that they had seen the Lord, he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

The following week the disciples gathered once more, probably in the same upper room where they had spent those memorable hours with Jesus, both before and after his death and resurrection. This time Thomas was present. The story introduces him as “one of the Twelve,” that is, one of Jesus’ disciples. Now, that is an interesting description. Here is a man who doesn’t believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, who has rejected the testimony of all the other apostles, whose attendance record at the Sunday services of the fledgling Christian church leaves much to be desired (he has missed half of them—one out of two!). Yet he is still called one of the Twelve. He is Thomas the disciple, not Thomas the ex-disciple.

How could that be? How can someone who doubts such a basic truth of the faith not only still be considered a disciple but still keep his place as one of the twelve apostles? The fact is, you do not have to have perfect faith to be a Christian. It’s all right if you have doubts and difficulties—you can still be a follower of Jesus Christ and a member of his church. Being a believer does not mean you never question anything.

Have you ever lain awake at night wondering whether it is all true after all? Have you ever asked if there really is a God, or if Jesus Christ really is alive and the Bible is trustworthy? Have you ever cried out because secretly you doubted whether God cared about you at all, or could do anything to help you? Well, if you have, you’re in good company. Believers do all those things.

“Wait a minute!” someone says. “If a Christian can still have doubts, then what makes someone a non-Christian? How do you tell the difference between a doubting believer and an unbelieving doubter?”

The answer might be found in the nature of Thomas’s doubt. It was not *head* doubt. It was *heart* doubt. His doubt was not primarily intellectual in nature; it was deeper and more personal than that. Though he was skeptical, Thomas was not cynical. Even though he had trouble believing in Jesus, that didn’t stop Thomas from *loving* him.

There is a kind of doubt that exists only on the surface. It does not cause those who entertain it any deep pain or trouble, nor is it something they earnestly desire to overcome. This is the sort of doubt that characterizes the uncommitted and serves as an excuse for their non-involvement. It’s the doubt of permanent fence sitters. It’s the doubt of people who love to argue and find difficulties but who do not really want answers, people who claim they *cannot* believe but whose real problem is they *do not want to* believe. The reason they do not want to believe is that faith would require a commitment that would disrupt their lives. It would make them have to bow the knee like Thomas did.

That was not Thomas’s doubt. His doubt didn’t come from intellectual questions. It didn’t lie easily on the surface of his mind. It rose from deep out of his sorrow. The reason Thomas found it difficult to accept the testimony of his friends to Jesus’ resurrection was because Jesus’ death had so utterly devastated him. From what we learn about him elsewhere in the gospel of John,

Thomas seems to have been one of those people whose basic temperament was gloomy. He may have been melancholic by nature, but he was not coolly detached. He was not neutral. Thomas's was the doubt that is prepared to be overcome, if only it can believe that the news that seems too good to be true really is true after all.

Blessed Are Those Who Believe

Despite Thomas's doubt, Jesus still loved him. When he came again into the midst of his gathered followers, he came especially for Thomas's sake. His first words were "Peace be with you"—not "Peace be with you except for Thomas who doesn't believe in me, and so has made me angry with him and I intend to punish him." No. Jesus sought Thomas out. He went to him; he did not make Thomas come to him. He readily offered to him the proof that Thomas had demanded.

What an amazing thing! The risen Lord invites Thomas to crudely handle his glorified body. He breaks every rule in the book. Of course, Thomas was wrong in arrogantly demanding certain things before he would believe, and laying down conditions before he would have faith, and demanding specific proof. Of course the blessing that Jesus pronounces is for those who believe even though they have not seen. Of course, the Word of God alone is the resting place for our faith, not any subjective experiences we have. But in this case Jesus brushes all that aside, comes to Thomas and invites him to touch.

Thomas did not take him up on the offer. As someone commented, Thomas did not need to see the nail prints any more—he recognized Jesus by his love. Instead of examining Jesus, Thomas fell to his knees crying out, "My Lord and my God." When he actually came face to face with Jesus, all his doubts vanished away like the morning mist under the summer sun, and he bowed down and worshiped.

So you see, it is possible to change your beliefs, whatever they are. Faith in Christ is available to whoever wants to believe in him. It does not really matter how or where you have been raised, whether you call yourself a Christian or call yourself something else altogether. The only thing that really matters is whether you have come to the point that Thomas did.

In Thomas's action we find exactly what it is that separates Christians from non-Christians. Believe it or not, it really isn't how much faith or doubt you have. What defines a Christian is the act of worshiping Jesus. If you fall before him as Lord and God, then you belong to him, you are one of his. If you don't, then you are not.

Maybe you are struggling with doubts right now. Maybe you have been laying out conditions that you think have to be met before you could really believe in God. What would it take for you? To witness a miracle? Would you believe if you could see the lame walk or the dead raised? Or would you have to actually see God or hear his voice? Would you need to lay your eyes upon Jesus, touch him with your own hands? If you did, would you believe then? I wonder. You know, whenever we say, "If I could only see, I would believe," God says, "If you would only believe, you could see." You can prove that by trying it.

Study Questions

1. Is there a part of Thomas with which you identify? Explain.
2. Are there times when you feel like a doubter, or when you struggle with aspects of your faith? Explain.
3. Were you “born to believe” or did it take some “seeing” for you to believe?
4. Do you worship Jesus?

3

Your Word Is Truth

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

OBJECTION: Christianity is based on the Bible. But isn't the Bible an unreliable book, filled with legendary material, including all sorts of errors and mistakes? No modern, well-educated person could possibly accept what it teaches as true.

How do Christians respond to criticism of the book whose contents provide us with all our basic beliefs? Is it true that we have staked our lives on the teachings of a book (the Bible) that is full of myths and legends, and contains errors and contradictions?

These are very important questions because they touch upon the issue of authority. Different religions teach different things about God. So how do you know which are true? How do you know that the things you believe are based on reality and not fantasy? For Christians questions of truth are settled by the Bible, which is our ultimate authority. Whether it is a matter of what we should believe or how we should live, we turn to the Bible for the answer because it is God's Word in written form. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible is *revelation*. It is God disclosing the truth about himself in a way that we can understand. Do Christians have good reasons for thinking this way about the Bible?

The Book of God

In the first place, we should observe that believers have always recognized the Bible to be God's Word. Everyone knows love songs that have been written to people. Well, one of the ancient Hebrew poets wrote a love song to the Bible, and it says things like this:

Your word, O LORD, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens.

To all perfection I see a limit; but your commands are boundless.

Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.

The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple.

All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal.

I hate and abhor falsehood but I love your law.

May my tongue sing of your word, for all your commands are righteous.

(Psalm 119, selected verses)

Whether the psalmist calls it God's law, his word, or his commandments, he is talking in every instance about the scriptures, the book we call the Bible. To him the Bible was unlimited perfection, all its words were righteous and true, and it was more to be desired than anything else on earth.

The same understanding of the Bible is evident in the New Testament. The apostle Paul said that all scripture, even though it was written in human words and came from the pens of various authors, nevertheless was inspired by God: "All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17 NRSV). Peter confirmed this view when he said that the Bible came to be written as "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21).

And Christians of all ages and places have agreed that the Bible, unlike any other book on earth, is uniquely the Word of God. John Wesley spoke for every believer when he wrote these words, which he called "the inmost thoughts of my heart":

I want to know one thing, the way to heaven: how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way; for this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book! Oh, give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me."

(John Wesley, from the preface to his *Collected Sermons*, 1747)

So here is the issue, a fundamental one: Is the Bible "the book of God," as Wesley calls it? Or is it merely a human book, a collection of interesting stories, perhaps, or of religious precepts, a book that might be useful or even inspiring, but one that shares the limitations and imperfections of every other human writing? If it is the latter, then we can take it or leave it as we please, or take parts of it that appeal to us and discard other parts of it that do not.

However, if the Bible is God's Word in written form, then we must accept it, all of it, and believe and obey it. In the one case, we can judge the Bible. In the other case, it must judge us.

Three Affirmations

In order to consider the evidence for the Bible's reliability, we need to know just what Christians do believe about this book. Here are three affirmations all Bible-believing (that is to say, authentic) Christians make.

1. *All scripture is inspired by God.*

This is what Paul affirms in 2 Timothy 3:16. We sometimes speak of great poets like Shakespeare or Milton being inspired, by which we mean that they wrote in an unusually beautiful or profound fashion. But Paul does not use the term *inspiration* in this sense. He doesn't say the biblical *writers* were inspired, but that the very words they wrote were, to

translate literally, “God-breathed.” The Bible offers us “the heart of God in the words of God,” as Pope Gregory the Great said. The words of scripture have God’s breath behind them just as surely as the words I speak have my breath behind them, and it is this that sets the Bible apart from all the other words that have ever been uttered or recorded on earth.

In 2 Peter 1:21, the apostle explains how the Bible actually came to be written: “Holy men spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” So the Bible was written both by human authors and by God. If we put the question this way: “Is the Bible a human book or a divine book?” the answer is “yes.” It is both.

Christians do not believe, as some religions do, that our holy book was physically written by God and then miraculously dropped to earth from heaven. No. It was written by real people, several dozen of them, who worked over a span of fourteen or fifteen centuries and spoke different languages, living in different places and under different circumstances. Moreover, the personalities of each of these individual writers come through in their work, so that their books have different perspectives, viewpoints, and emphases. The words they wrote were not dictated to them by God in the sense that the authors merely transcribed a message that was given to them verbatim. They *wrote* the Bible, they did not just copy it down.

But they also wrote “as they were moved by the Holy Spirit,” so Peter can say that they “spoke from God.” The whole process of writing—in their own words and with their own insights and characteristics—was superintended by God so that in every case the result could be accurately described as *God’s Word*. Here is how one biblical scholar explains it:

. . . we are to think of God as preparing his agents through the years in all their dealings with him and with their fellow men. The result is words that are the words of men. They express exactly what Paul or Peter or whoever wished to write. But there is more to it than that. They are the words of men, but they are also the words of God, the words that God has prepared his servants to write!

(Leon Morris, *I Believe in Revelation*)

2. All scripture is true.

Precisely because the Bible is God-breathed, because it comes from God, its words are true; that is, they always correspond accurately with reality. God cannot lie. “Your word is truth,” exclaimed Jesus (John 17:17). The Bible never misleads us or gives us false information. It is utterly reliable and trustworthy in everything it wants to teach.

“But how do you know it is true?” someone asks. I can think of at least three pieces of evidence that witness to the uniqueness and the absolute truthfulness of the Bible. One is its wide acceptance. Before the invention of the printing press some five hundred years ago, every book had to be copied by hand, a time-consuming and very expensive process. Because of this, almost every book that has survived from the ancient world has come down to us in only a handful of copies—at most a dozen or two. But there are *five thousand* manuscript

copies of the New Testament alone. The first book ever printed was the Bible, and from Gutenberg's day to ours, it remains the world's perennial best seller. The whole Bible or portions of it have been translated into more than eighteen hundred languages, and the total keeps growing every year.

Now my question is this: Why have so many countless thousands of people dedicated their lives to the preservation and distribution and translation and proclamation of this one book? Remember the old saying, "You can't fool all of the people all of the time." Why do more people read the Bible every day than all the world's newspapers put together? Either it is the biggest hoax in human history or it is the Word of God.

Secondly, there is the Bible's remarkable accuracy. Despite the counterclaims and criticisms offered by those who generally are predisposed to reject it, I can honestly tell you that I know of no case where the Bible in its original form has been proven to have a substantive error. On the contrary, the more we learn from history and archeology, the more ancient manuscripts we discover, the more the Bible's historical and technical accuracy is substantiated.

Of course The Bible's words must be interpreted according to their author's intended meaning, and according to the usage of the ancient pre-scientific world in which they were written. Obviously, minor discrepancies may have crept into Bible manuscripts as they have been copied and translated throughout the centuries. Yes, there are things in the Bible that are difficult to understand or explain and questions that have not yet been completely answered. But there is nothing that shows it to be anything other than God's very own Word, completely truthful throughout.

A third piece of evidence that testifies to the truth of the Bible is the fulfilled prophecies it contains. I recall reading an article about the psychics' predictions for the coming year. Not one of the specific things they prophesied actually happened that year. Of course they didn't, because psychics who claim to have the ability to see the future are either lying or pretending. It's all a scam. But the Bible is filled with detailed prophecies that subsequent events have shown to be accurate down to the letter.

The most remarkable of them have to do with Jesus Christ. In the Old Testament—in a variety of books written by different authors—numerous statements were made about Jesus, all of them at least four hundred years before he was born, and every one of them came true. The place and manner of his birth, specific details of his trial and torture, his execution and burial and subsequent resurrection, all of these things are there, written down centuries beforehand and perfectly fulfilled in the events of Christ's life. How could that be? Was it a coincidence? Or was it because the Bible is the Word of God?

3. All scripture has authority.

The third basic affirmation about scripture follows from the first two. All scripture is inspired, therefore all scripture is true; all scripture is true, therefore all scripture is

authoritative. The Bible is useful, writes the apostle Paul, “for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” What this means in the first place is that we do not make up what we want to believe about God. As Christians, we are like the soldier who came to Jesus one day—people under authority. The Bible, not speculative philosophy, teaches us the truth about who God is and what he has done to save us.

Moreover, the Bible is our authority for our practice as well as for our faith. We do not decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong. We derive our moral standards and code of behavior from the Bible. The scriptures rebuke us when we have done wrong. It is the Bible that stirs our conscience and appeals to us and sets us straight, correcting us when we go astray. God’s Word is like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. It always shows us the right way to go in our walk with him.

Can the Bible really do all this, you may be wondering? More basically: Can I trust it? If I accept it and believe it and do what it tells me to do, will the Bible lead me to God? Well, there is only one way to find that out. Why not try it?

Study Questions

1. What is the difference between being “inspired” and having one’s words be “God-breathed”?
2. How are we to deal with the parts of the Bible that are difficult to understand or explain?
3. The Bible was written centuries ago and the world is much different now. How can it still be our authority?

4

Help for the Helpless

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25, NRSV

OBJECTION: Religious faith is just a crutch for weak and helpless people. Those smart enough to see and strong enough to face reality know there is no God.

A Spiritual Crutch?

One of the most persistent criticisms of Christianity during the last one hundred and fifty years has been that Christian faith, or for that matter, religious belief in general, is a fantasy for the support of weak people. It is a sort of emotional crutch that ignorant folk use to help them face life with all its fears and problems. But modern, rational men and women will recognize that belief in God is a primitive superstition that has finally been recognized as such, and outgrown.

This view, developed by the most influential secular thinkers of the last century, has come to be called "secular humanism." For example, Sigmund Freud, the father of modern psychiatry, believed that religion was a form of wishful thinking which the human race developed because people needed to believe in some sort of higher power to give meaning and hope to their lives. And Karl Marx's famous statement was that "religion is the opiate of the people." By this he meant both that the oppressed classes used religion as a sort of drug to escape from the miseries of a harsh existence, and that society's authorities supported it to divert the attention of the poor from the injustice of their own lives.

Accompanying the criticism that religious faith is a fantasy fueled by the need to believe is the assumption that those in the know will discard it. One of the harshest critics of religious faith was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was convinced that religion, especially Christianity with its insistence on sin and humility, was the most harmful influence in human history. He thought that it, more than anything else, held the human race back from realizing its full potential. He summed up the need to discard religion once and for all with the stark assertion, "God is dead!"

Recently, I saw a T-shirt that comes closer to what I think is the truth. It had two quotations printed one above the other. The first said, "God is dead. —[signed] Nietzsche." The second said, "Nietzsche is dead. — [signed] God." God always has the last word.

Nevertheless, the common attitude of western society, especially in the media and the universities, seems to be that modern and intelligent people will recognize the truth that there is no God and that religious faith in general and Christianity in particular is a symptom of weakness, ignorance, and backwardness. Those who are truly smart and up to date will identify themselves as secular humanists who believe only in humanity and its potential and who live entirely for this life here on earth, because it's the only life there is.

A Matter of Faith

Obviously this disagreement between secularists and Christians is a basic one. We cannot both be right. Either there is a God or there is not. If there is a God who has made himself known in Jesus Christ, then Christian belief, Christian commitment and Christian behavior all make sense. They are neither a crutch nor an invention. They are reality and truth. In fact, these things represent the only sensible way to live. But if there is not a God, then we Christians do appear to be pretty foolish. So who is right and who is wrong?

Before I try to answer that question, I want to make a very important point. One of the favorite tricks of modern skeptics is to say that Christians form their beliefs on the basis of faith (by which they mean a blind acceptance of things for which there is no proof), while they themselves are guided only by reason and evidence. This is simply untrue.

Everyone has to start with certain assumptions or presuppositions about life, things that cannot be proved by pure reason alone. Everyone believes in things that they cannot see, things they accept on faith. Everyone accepts the truth of things that they do not fully understand. Non-Christians are no different from Christians in this regard. It is as much a statement of faith to say that “the Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be” (the opening line of *Cosmos*, written by the agnostic astronomer Carl Sagan) as it is to confess “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.” You cannot finally and conclusively prove by reason that God does exist, but neither can you finally and conclusively prove that he does not. In the end, you have to weigh the evidence, think it through as carefully as you can and then *believe*—one way or the other.

Reasons for Believing

So why do I believe in God? Why do I believe he is more than just a projection of my own wishes or an invention made up to meet my needs? I believe in God in part because of the evidence for his existence that I see in the world around me. It just does not make sense to me that all of this complex world could have come into existence without a Creator. Especially when I consider human nature—our capacity for reason and thought, our sense of right and wrong, our creativity, our ability to love—it seems impossible to me that we are the result of nothing more than a random, chance process of evolution.

Whoever heard of order developing spontaneously out of disorder without any directing and controlling intelligence behind it? Ours is a world, noted G.K. Chesterton, where if you leave it alone, a white post will soon turn into a black post. It is our universal experience that things just left alone do not become more ordered and complex, but lapse into disorder. Does a symphony write itself out of randomly generated sounds? Does a house build itself when a pile of wood and stone is left alone for a long time? If several million letters were thrown together by chance, would the likely result be the *Encyclopedia Britannica*? If everything we make takes thought and energy and planning and work, how could we imagine that we ourselves, the makers, are the product of a mindless accident? It seems to me, as it does to the majority of people, that both reason and the evidence of our senses point to the existence of God.

How to Believe in God

But most of all, I believe in God because I have come to know him through Jesus Christ. You know, there is an even more important question than why to believe in God. The question is *how* to believe in him.

When the apostle Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he was addressing people very much like our modern-day secular humanists. The ancient Greeks were interested in and impressed by human wisdom. After all, they invented philosophy. Luke, the New Testament historian, was describing people like the Corinthians when he said they spent their time “doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (Acts 17:21). They loved language and debate, logic and rhetoric. They were particularly interested in the relationship between wisdom and power. Great orators and philosophers were the superstars of the Greek world, gathering fans and followers like some ancient version of pop musicians. The Greeks especially valued those who combined brilliant thought with powerful speaking and could excite and sway public opinion.

So Paul’s words to them in the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians come as a bombshell. “Where is the wise man?” he asks. “Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” (1 Cor. 1:20). His point is this: When it comes to the most important question of all, the question of how to know God, wisdom does not work. No one will ever come to know him through the pure exercise of reason. Research, study, philosophy, science: these things may uncover many secrets about the world, but by themselves they will never lead to God. In fact, they are dead ends, or even worse, they are paths that take us away from God, because if we rely only on them, they will produce a pride that engenders the skepticism that is so abundant in our world today.

Then how does one come to know God? God’s wisdom is very different from ours; so different, in fact, that to the proud and worldly it seems like foolishness, just as his power looks like weakness. God’s wisdom and power are both found in Jesus Christ: Christ is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24). The way to come to know God is not through the cleverness of our thinking but by listening to a simple message—the story of Jesus’ life, death

and resurrection. "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our preaching, to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). I must admit, it does look a bit foolish. Here are all these philosophers and religious teachers trying to find God through their study and speculations, their research and their rituals, and yet God remains a mystery to them. But then millions of people, ranging from ignorant to brilliant, come to know God as a result of hearing the news about a man named Jesus who was crucified in the first century.

Christians are certainly not irrational or against reason. We value the mind. We respect good science and honest scholarship. Christians can be found among the intellectual leaders in every field of human inquiry. We make use of reason—indeed, I have been appealing to your reason all along. But the Bible says that human wisdom—the power of the unaided human intellect—is not able to discover God on its own. God has passed judgment on our wisdom. He has turned things upside down, making what seems wise foolish, and what appears to be foolish wise, “so that no one may boast before him” (1 Cor. 1:29).

You can understand why God would do this, can't you? It would be intolerable if we had to find God on our own, because then knowing him would depend on how strong and smart we were. The geniuses of the world might discover him, and they would grow arrogant as a result, but where would that leave the rest of us? So God does not permit it. When it comes to knowing him, all of us—intelligent or backward, strong or weak, quick or slow—are in the same boat. None of us has any advantage; we must all come to God through faith in the message of the cross, by believing in Jesus Christ and his death for us.

So in a sense the critics are right, though not in the way they think. Christian faith really is a crutch for weak and helpless people. I am glad to admit I am one of them. I cannot find God on my own. I cannot save myself. I cannot make it by myself. I need him, his wisdom and power. I need Jesus Christ.

“Christianity has always been the religion of slaves,” said the French intellectual Simone Weil, “myself among them.” Are you too proud to say that? Maybe you are one of the critics I have been talking about. Perhaps you have all sorts of questions about God, or you doubt whether he is even real. I must tell you, you will not find the answers to your questions on your own. You can speculate all you want, you can spend a lifetime studying philosophy and world religions, but you will never come to know the true God until you meet him in the Crucified One, Jesus Christ. But if you will turn to Christ and honestly ask him to make God known to you, he will. The only thing you have to lose is your pride.

Study Questions

1. Why do you think many modern thinkers cannot reconcile themselves to Jesus Christ?
2. Explain how “God has made foolish the wisdom of the world” (Acts 17:20).
3. Do you identify with Weil’s quote, “Christianity has always been the religion of slaves, myself among them,” or does it make you uncomfortable?

5

A Faith for the Times

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.

Psalm 19:1-4a, RSV

OBJECTION: Modern people cannot accept Christianity because science contradicts it. Only naive or uneducated people can believe in God in this day and age.

One of the most powerful objections to Christianity for educated people in our time is the criticism that the Christian belief in God is an outmoded superstition. People in earlier ages may have believed in God, but they did not really understand the universe. Their world was a dark and mysterious place filled with things they could only explain as the work of gods and spirits, but since the dawn of the modern age the steady advances of science and reason have drawn aside the veil that covered nature, so that now we know how the world really works. We no longer need the hypothesis of a God who created the world and the human race. In fact, modern people can no more believe in God than they can believe that the earth is flat, or that the sun, moon, and stars are lights on a dome that revolves around our world. For those who live at the end of the twentieth century, believing in God is irrational and unscientific.

That is how much contemporary thinking goes, especially in our universities and among society's elite. People who do believe in God often feel as though they have to keep it a secret. Religious faith is something that may be indulged in private, but it is no longer acceptable as a part of public life.

Must we be ashamed of our faith in God? Do we have to apologize for believing that there is a Creator? Or if we do take a stand for faith, are we forced to reject science and higher education and retreat into ignorance? The answer to all these questions is a resounding No. The truth is that science—good science—is not opposed to the Bible. Nor are faith and reason incompatible. In fact, I would say that the more one knows about the universe and the more clearly one thinks about the big questions, the more sense it makes to believe in God.

An Accidental Universe?

One of *Words of Hope's* broadcast partners recently received a letter from a young person in China who said this: "I have three classmates; one is studying medicine and has many doubts and cannot believe in a God that is invisible. Another one is interested in any and all religions, adopting the attitude that you have to believe in something but you can't believe totally. The third one feels it is impossible for God to exist. He's an atheist. Would you please tell me how to make

them know the true God?" There are millions of people like these three young Chinese students in our world. How is it possible for them—or for you—to know the true God?

The Bible's nineteenth psalm suggests one answer. It opens by asserting that the universe itself points to its Creator. "The heavens declare the glory of God," says the psalmist. "The skies proclaim the work of his hands" (v. 1). In the psalmist's world, most people worshiped the sun, moon, and stars, thinking that these heavenly bodies were powerful deities who ruled the world. They also believed strongly in astrology, the idea that the stars controlled human destiny by their movements. The Bible, however, states that the heavenly bodies are not alive, but are themselves part of creation. The only power the heavens possess is the powerful witness of their beauty, order, and splendor to the existence of an all-powerful Creator.

If the ancients approached the universe with a mixture of fear and worship, moderns are tempted to explain it away as an accident. The modern unbeliever thinks that the whole cosmos is the result only of physical causes. The modern world view is both naturalistic (nothing exists outside the physical world of nature), and materialistic (only matter is real and only material causes that can be seen and measured are allowed to explain what happens in the universe). But there is nothing especially rational or scientific about this world view. Naturalism and materialism are systems of faith, which are believed on that basis and not because science has proved them to be true.

What the Heavens Are Telling

The Bible suggests that if we look at it objectively the universe will send us a different message. It will speak to us of the God who is there, who created all things, a God of infinite power and intelligence and glory.

When you consider the universe, two things about it especially stand out. One is its greatness. Just looking up into the starry sky on a clear night is enough for the sheer vastness of the heavens to dazzle us as much as it did the psalmist. But the more we learn about it, the more incredible the universe becomes. Science has neither solved its mysteries nor reduced it to understanding. If anything, our greatly increased knowledge has only heightened the wonder of the cosmos. Astronomers measure the distances of space in light years, the distance that light travels in a year at a speed of 186,000 miles per second. Our solar system is part of a galaxy, the Milky Way, that is 100,000 light years in diameter.

In recent years American scientists have built and placed into orbit around the earth the Hubble space telescope, which enables us to see farther and more clearly than ever before. It can see across one million other galaxies almost to the edge of the universe itself. Incredible! And the best minds in the world say that it appears that the whole universe began at a single, definite point in time and space. How did that happen? What single cause could be enough to produce this unimaginably great universe? Where did it all come from?

Did everything come from nothing, without any cause whatsoever? Or did an almighty God create it all? "Lift your eyes and look to the heavens," says the Bible. "Who created all these? He

who brings out the starry host one by one, and calls them each by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing" (Isaiah 40:26). I do not care if you are as smart as Einstein, this explanation still makes more sense today than any other. In fact, it makes more sense if you *are* Einstein because he, along with many other of history's greatest minds, believed in a Creator.

The other thing that stands out about the universe, according to the Bible, is its design. "The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the firmament proclaims *his handiwork*." To an unbiased observer, it certainly appears as if there is a sense of order and planning to the universe, that it is in fact the handiwork of a master Designer. Even agnostic scientists admit that life is a very unlikely event. The conditions that allow life to exist are so precisely balanced, so exactly right, that the slightest change in any one of a hundred variables would have made life impossible. It certainly appears as though the world has been very carefully prepared so that we could live in it.

Think about our own nature. Humans, with our incredibly complex bodies, with minds that enable us to think and reason, to explore our world, to learn truth, to appreciate beauty, to do good or evil (and to know the difference between the two)—just where did we come from? The simplest building block of life is a protein molecule, and yet a single protein molecule contains over 2,000 different atoms, all of which must be arranged in precisely the right order. How did this come into being? To say that it is the result of a chance process is like saying that someone could randomly strike the keys of a typewriter and after a billion or two years end up with the works of Shakespeare.

The Bible teaches that when we look at the world around us and see what appear to be evidences of design, it is because there was a Designer. When I was a schoolboy, our class once visited a large automobile factory. At one end of the plant we saw the raw materials being brought in: steel and glass and plastic and rubber. At the other end, after a long trip down the assembly line, brand new gleaming automobiles were rolling off. You could say a lot of things about that factory assembly line. You could say it was complex, expensive, impressive. The one thing you could not say is that it was accidental. It was not a random process that was turning those raw materials into finished cars.

Complex things do not get built unless someone designs them carefully. So how is it that some can imagine that human beings, infinitely more complex than any machine, could have come about without any plan at all? Which is more reasonable: to believe the whole universe, including ourselves, is the result of a mindless, purposeless process, or to see it the way the psalmist did, as the handiwork of God?

Wordless Speech

If both the greatness and the design of the cosmos point to the existence of the Creator, they do so in a way that is universal. These are signs that can be seen and understood by everyone. Creation reveals God generally to all people because it communicates without using words. As

the psalmist says, “There is no speech, nor are there words... yet their voice goes out through all the earth” (vv. 3-4). Everyone can understand what the universe is trying to teach us about God. Anyone can gaze into the infinite depths of space and read what is written about God there in the heavens. So the truth about him is visible to all, thus making each person responsible for whether he or she accepts or rejects God.

No one can claim that he did not have enough information to make up his mind. No one will be able to say she lacked enough evidence to decide for or against God. The Bible says that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that [all] are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

What this means for you is that you have to think through these basic questions for yourself. Do I really believe that everything in the world came from nothing? Does it seem likely that life was just spontaneously generated by dead chemicals and minerals, even though nothing like that ever happens in the observable world? Do I really imagine that I myself—my body and mind and soul—have been produced by chance and that my life therefore is essentially meaningless? Is it reasonable to conclude that even though the odds against an accidental universe are infinite, nevertheless that is what it is? Or will I accept the wordless witness of creation to the reality, the power, and the glory of God?

But now I must tell you that just believing in a Creator is not enough. Being convinced that there is a God will not really matter to you unless you come to know him. You may see his infinite power and wisdom written in the heavens, but you can only find out about his heart from the book that he has written. James Packer has observed that the central message of the Bible is that the Creator is the Redeemer. God became that when he entered his own creation as a creature, Jesus Christ, and died and rose again to save us. The universe is a vast place and it can make us feel pretty insignificant. But behind it all is a God who is greater still, and because I know Jesus Christ, I know that the God who calls the stars by name knows my name too, and cares about me. That gives me hope. It can do the same for you.

Study Questions

1. In what ways can you see the hand of a Creator in your life?
2. To what does the psalmist refer when he says, “There is no speech, nor are there words . . . yet their voice goes out through all the earth” (vv. 3-4)?
3. Do you agree that “the central message of the Bible is that the Creator is the Redeemer”? Explain.

6

Does God Exist?

Job 38-42

Then Job replied to the LORD, “. . . Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. . . . My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”

Job 42:1, 3, 5, 6

OBJECTION: There is no real evidence for the existence of any God. In fact, if you consider how much suffering there is in the world, it seems as though the evidence is against it.

For the past few chapters I have been responding to a series of objections against Christianity that mostly involve intellectual problems like the identity of Jesus Christ or the trustworthiness of the Bible. Now, however, we come to a difficulty not primarily of the head but of the heart; one that can shake the very foundations of faith even for a believer.

The Problem of Evil

The problem is this: If there is a God such as the one Christians believe in, a God who is powerful and loving and good and who rules all things, then why is the world the way it is? Why do the innocent so often suffer? Why does injustice run rampant through the earth? Why do little babies die? Why are teenagers' lives snuffed out in accidents? How could a good God allow something as monstrous as the holocaust to happen? Or something as painful as your broken heart? All of these questions, together with many others like them, make up what philosophers and theologians call “the problem of evil.” And I can tell you that for faith this is the biggest problem there is.

It is a problem, though, *only for those who believe in the Christian God*. It strikes me that the very fact we struggle with this problem is evidence that God does exist. If there were no loving and sovereign God, then why would anyone be bothered by the injustice and suffering in the world? How could we even have thought up a concept like “evil” that presents a “problem” for faith?

If you do not believe in God, you really should not be bothered by the problem of evil, because without a God in control, there is no reason for anything that happens. Then it is all just a matter of luck. If your life is good, there is no one to thank for it, and if your life is bad, there is no one to complain to. It is all just a roll of the dice. Suffering should not be a theological problem for atheists. Nor is it a mystery to those who follow one of the religions that say good and evil are only illusions, or to people who have a fatalistic faith in a powerful but an uncaring God, or who are dualistic (two equal spiritual powers, one good, one bad). No, the existence of

evil in the world is a difficulty only for those who believe, as Christians do, in a personal God who alone rules the world, and who is both all-powerful and all-loving.

Many Christian children learn a little prayer that begins, “God is great; God is good.” That is exactly what we do believe about God. God is both great—sovereign, totally in control, all powerful; and good—loving, gracious and kind. But it is just this belief that suffering and evil call into question. When something bad happens, we wonder: If God is great, why does he allow it? And if God is good, how could he allow it?

The Story of Job

There is nothing new at all about the problem of evil. One of the most profound stories ever written, the book of Job in the Bible, focuses squarely upon it. Job was an important man. He had enormous wealth and vast possessions, but all his pleasure and delight was in his children. He prayed for them every day. Job was not only the greatest man of his time; he was also the most godly. And then came a day when Job lost everything. The messengers visited him, one after another, each with worse news than the one before, and the reports of loss fell like hammer blows on Job’s defenseless head. “It’s all gone, Job,” they told him. “Your flocks and your herds, your servants and your goods, your daughters and your sons.” Overnight Job went from being on top of the world to sitting in the ashes, scraping his sores and crying out to God in his pain.

Attempted Answers

The great question raised by the story of Job, of course, is the same question we ask when we suffer. It is the question “why?” Why do people who do not deserve it suffer in so many terrible ways? People like Job. People like us. How can God permit this to happen? And since it does happen, could it be that there is no God after all? Does God even exist?

Almost everyone struggles to find an answer to these questions, because we refuse to believe that life is meaningless. But so many of the answers that are offered are inadequate. One such answer is the one that was first suggested by Job’s friends. Three men came to visit him in his affliction and tried to set Job straight about the meaning of his suffering. Their explanation was quite simple. Job was responsible for what was happening to him. His suffering was a punishment for his sin. After all, you reap what you sow. If you sin, you will suffer. So if you are suffering, they reasoned, it must be because you have sinned. The answer of Job’s friends resolved the problem of evil by explaining that the tragedies that had befallen him were really not senseless or unfair. What happened to him was not evil; it was justice.

But the explanation of Job’s friends completely missed the mark where he was concerned. It is just not true that all suffering is a deserved punishment for sins. Much of the suffering in the world is unearned and undeserved. Did the 5,000 people who died in the 1995 earthquake in Kobe, Japan, deserve what happened to them? No more than Job deserved what happened to him.

God's Not to Blame

Another possible answer to our dilemma is to absolve God from blame for the problem of evil by relieving him of responsibility for the bad things that happen. In this view, God does not really control everything that goes on in the world. His power is limited. He does care, but he cannot always help. Often all God can do is to suffer along with us.

Now the fact that God does suffer along with us is both true and profoundly comforting. But to say that God is not responsible because he is not in control is grossly inadequate. This view was made popular several years ago by Rabbi Harold Kushner in his best seller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. God “wants justice and fairness but cannot always arrange for them,” wrote Kushner. “Fate, not God, sends us the problem.” And the best that we can do is “to forgive the world for not being perfect, to forgive God for not making a better world, to reach out to the people around us and to go on living despite it all.”

The trouble with this is that it offers only half a God. This God is good, but he is also rather helpless. That seems like an arbitrary choice. You could just as easily resolve the problem of evil by thinking of God as being powerful but not very good. But the God of the Bible, the God of Job, is both great *and* good. The children's prayer has it exactly right. This is what Job believed. When he lost everything, his first response was to bow his head in worship and say, “The *Lord* gave, and the *Lord* has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.” As far as he was concerned, it was God who was behind everything—not the storm, not the devil, not the enemy, but God.

Sometimes we try to help God with his public relations. We play the role of theological “spin-doctors.” We attempt to do damage control, to protect God's image when he does things that do not seem right to us. But the one thing we cannot do if we are going to remain faithful to the Bible is to stop God from being God. Job's story says that God is always in charge. Go ahead. Try to figure that out. Wrestle with questions about his goodness and his purpose. Cry out to him if you must and ask your questions. Come face to face with the mystery of God, but don't rob him of his sovereignty, because if you do, you will be left with nothing.

Questions Without Answers

So what do we say about the problem of evil? I have to tell you honestly that this is one objection I cannot finally answer. But I can tell you that it is possible to believe in God—the real God, the God who is always both great and good. At the end of his story, Job finally encounters the living God. He has been searching for answers, for some relief from the pain in his spirit that went deeper than any physical affliction. Job could not be satisfied with any of the easy explanations. He cried out to God over and over, asking him to come and explain himself.

In the end, God did come. But he did not explain. Instead of answers, God gave Job more questions. “Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm: “Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me” (Job 40:6-7). God's response to Job does not solve the

problem of evil for us, but it does shed light on it in two ways. First, it suggests that part of the problem is our own limited perspective.

“Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?... while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked in the recesses of the deep? Have you comprehended the vast expanses of the earth? Can you bind the beautiful Pleiades? Can you loose the cords of Orion? Can you bring forth the constellations in their seasons? Do you know the laws of the heavens? Can you set up God’s dominion over the earth? Who endowed the heart with wisdom or gave understanding to the mind?”

(Job 38:4, 7, 16, 18, 31-33, 36)

What God is doing here is contrasting his infinity with Job’s limitations. How can we begin to understand everything that God is doing when he is the eternal Creator and we are only finite creatures, limited by time and space? Imagine trying to explain to a sick baby why you are causing him to suffer more by forcing him to take medicine. The baby doesn’t even know what’s wrong; how can he possibly grasp the reason for his pain? He looks as though you are tormenting him but in fact you are making him well. God’s questions to Job suggest to us that before we look at the world around us and convict God of wrong, or even decide that he must not exist, we should consider the possibility that the problem lies not in God’s actions but in our ability to understand them.

The second thing Job teaches us is that the problem of evil becomes less a problem when we talk *to* God instead of just talking *about* him. “Then Job replied to the LORD, . . . Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. . . . My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:1, 3, 5, 6). What Job suggests is that in the end we will never reconcile the existence of suffering and evil with the nature of God as long as we treat it as an abstract problem. The only satisfying answer is not just to think about God, but to know God himself in his greatness and his goodness, to be drawn into his presence and to be comforted with his life and love.

The Whole Story

But the one thing Job cannot do for us is to tell us the whole story, because, of course, he lived B.C. (before Christ). You cannot get to the heart of the problem of evil until you understand what God did about it through Jesus Christ. Because Jesus came into our world, God himself knows what it is like to feel pain, to experience the effects of evil, to suffer, even to die. But because Jesus is God, death and evil will never have the last word.

A number of years ago Bishop Festo Kivengere, the great Ugandan Christian leader, was asked how he was able to serve in Africa where there was so much poverty, famine, and violence—so much suffering. “We don’t claim to know how to cope with bewilderment. Christ

alone can pierce the gloom of terror, fear, and insecurity. He is the one who gives new hope. The only way to minister in heartbreaking situations is to be closer to Jesus, who died and rose again” (Bishop Festo Kivengere, as interviewed in *Christianity Today*, August 8, 1986). How I hope for you to know this same truth yourself! Whatever pain you bear, whatever your questions and struggles might be, if you draw close to the Lord Jesus you will find the only answer that matters.

Study Questions

1. If we do not have the ability to understand God’s actions, how can we learn to reconcile what seems cruel or unfair in our lives?
2. What keeps us from turning to Jesus when we experience pain and suffering?
3. What are some ways in which you can be “closer to Jesus” as a means of enduring pain?
4. Does anger seem to be an acceptable response to God when we experience pain and suffering?

7

Only One Way?

Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

Acts 17:22-23

OBJECTION: All religions are basically the same so it does not really matter what you believe, and it is certainly arrogant to assume that your religion is better or truer than the others.

Everybody knows that ours is a shrinking world where today as never before different cultures and religions are mixing with one another. I happen to live in a medium-sized city in the middle of America. It is a long way—in every sense—from either New York or Los Angeles, but about a mile from my house, there is a building that has been turned into an Islamic center to serve our city's Muslim population. People who look and act and think and worship very differently from us are no longer just the inhabitants of faraway places, known only from books and picture magazines. They have become our next-door neighbors.

Because we now live in a pluralistic society, we need the quality of tolerance (the willingness to respect peoples' differences) more than ever. Christians, of all people, should be tolerant. It was Christianity that eventually gave rise to the idea of religious liberty, so Christians should especially value the right of everyone to follow his or her conscience in matters of belief.

But pluralism and tolerance often produce another attitude that Christians do not share, the viewpoint known as relativism. In this view, it does not matter much what religion people believe or practice because all religions are pretty much the same. They are all more or less true (or, depending on your outlook, more or less false), so it does not make much difference which one you follow as long as you are sincere. To this way of thinking, the claims of biblical Christianity seem downright offensive. After all, Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father but by me" (John 14:6).

This claim that Jesus Christ is the only way to the true God is one that, to say the very least, contradicts much contemporary thinking. Is it reasonable or fair that Christ should be the only way to God? What does that mean for those who have never heard of him? Doesn't it make more sense to believe that God can be found through any religion?

To all these questions Christians answer with a respectful no. While we do not claim that we alone know all the truth, we do say that there is only one way to God, only one name that can save, and that is the name of Jesus. In a pluralistic world of many religions, we say that no

religion, no human search for God, can ever find him. Rather, God must find us. To a relativistic age that blurs all distinctions, we claim that Jesus Christ is *the* truth, not one option among many equal alternatives, but God's supreme statement to the world. How we do this can be seen in the story of the apostle Paul's visit to the ancient city of Athens. It is told in Acts 17.

The Gospel and the Philosophers

Athens, though some 500 years past her golden age, was still the chief center of culture, art and philosophy in the Mediterranean world when Paul arrived there in the middle of the first century. His friend and companion Luke tells what happened during Paul's first visit to the great city.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there. A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

(Acts 17:16-18)

The city of Athens was a very religious place. Wherever one turned, temples and altars to the various gods of the ancient world abounded, and statues of them sprouted like weeds on a vacant lot. Paul's reaction to all this was intense distress. He did not look at the city like a tourist, admiring the Parthenon and the other glorious buildings, nor did he view it as an art historian, deriving pleasure from the beauty of the sculpture and painting, nor, yet again, as a sociologist, fascinated by the diversity of religious practices.

Paul viewed Athens as a Christian, and therefore his reaction was a strong one. From a Christian viewpoint, the idolatry of Athens was not interesting or entertaining but appalling, because it was dishonoring to the true God. Paul was grieved by the ignorance of people who "exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1:25).

The apostle did more than merely observe and react to his surroundings, however. He responded to the pluralism of the Athenian religious scene by introducing a new subject. Speaking both in the synagogue and the marketplace, to religious people, to the highly educated, and to ordinary folks alike, Paul began to preach "the good news about Jesus and the resurrection." He came not with another philosophy or religion but with the gospel, the announcement that God had come into our world in Jesus Christ, who died and rose again to save lost people.

The religious and intellectual leaders of Athens were puzzled by Paul's message, and they invited him to speak to their assembly. So Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and

said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

(Acts 17: 22-23)

God Made Known

The dominant spirit of our age believes there is no absolute truth and that no religion is more right than any other. But modern secularists are often curiously intolerant in their behavior toward believers. In contrast, Paul was dogmatic in his assertion of the truth of the gospel, but he was very gentle in his approach to the followers of other religions. He began with a simple statement that would be arrogant if it were not both true and motivated by genuine concern: “What you worship as unknown, I’m going to proclaim to you.”

And then he proceeded to do exactly that:

“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

“Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by man’s design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all . . . by raising him from the dead.”

(Acts 17:24-31)

The fundamental mistake of human religion is that it makes God dependent upon us instead of us on him. The evidence for this is seen in the way people assumed that God could be housed in man-made buildings (“God does not live in temples”), and sustained by the offerings they gave (“he is not served by hands, as if he needed anything”), and represented by the images they fashioned (“we should not think that the divine being is like...an image”). Paul accompanied his criticism of the pagan religion of Athens with a proclamation of four fundamental truths about the living—to them the unknown—God:

1. *God is the Creator of all*, the one “who made the world and everything in it” (v. 24) including “every nation of men” (v. 26). He is the Creator; we are his creatures. The reason idolatry is wrong is that we were made in God’s image, not God in ours.

2. *God is the Lord of all*. He is the sovereign ruler and sustainer of the universe and of every living creature in it. He is not contained within his creation, let alone any part of it. He is not served by sacrifices of food or treasure, as if he needed such things to live. On the contrary, God is the one who sustains our life. “For in him we live and move and have our being” (v. 28). Remarkably, this quotation, which Paul used to confirm his point, is not from the Bible but from an ancient Greek writer. He quoted their own literature to reinforce his criticism of Greek religion, which shows that Paul was both familiar with the teachings of other religious traditions and respectfully accepting of whatever truths they contained. (In these things he set an example for all Christians to follow.)

3. *God is the Father of all*. “We are his offspring,” Paul quotes again. The universal fatherhood of God is affirmed in the sense that God has made and gives life to every single person and that he desires all to seek and find him. It is God the Father who has planted within human nature the desire to know him, and this desire is what gives rise to religion. Just as we all have physical and social instincts, so we all have an instinct for worship. All religions are *not* alike; not at all. But they do all have this in common: they all spring from the hunger for God in the human heart. They all have their origin in the various ways human cultures are searching for him. Whether they can find him is another matter.

4. *God is the Judge of all*. “He has set a day,” the apostle declares, “when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed” (v. 31). The proof of this is seen in God’s act of raising Jesus from the dead. If you want to know what warrant Christians have for putting the claims of Christ above everyone and everything else, the evidence we offer is the resurrection. This is what makes Christianity unique. If Jesus has actually risen from the dead, that changes everything! Then it is not a question of debating the relative merits of this religion versus that religion. God will judge all people not by their religion but by their response to his Son, Jesus Christ. The only thing to do is to repent and turn to him in faith.

Found by the Truth

There are some truths that are common to many religions. As the Bible itself shows in this story of Paul’s encounter with the philosophers of Athens, most religions teach that there is a God who is the universal Creator, the Lord and Father of the human family. Most religions also talk about how to find God through acts of obedience, charity and morality. But here is the crucial difference: though many are seeking God, none can find him on their own.

The Christian gospel is different. It does not tell us how to find God. It tells us how God has found us. Christianity is not a religion at all, in the ordinary sense of the word. It is a message about Jesus, about what he has done for us and about how, if we believe in him, we can come to know God. In the past, God has tolerated much ignorance among those who lived before the time of Christ, or who have never heard of him. But now he commands that all people repent, turn to him, and put their faith in Jesus Christ.

If you think it is enough just to seek for God, then I guess any religion will do. But if it is important for you to *find* him, then Jesus Christ is the only way. It is not arrogant to say that. It is just the truth.

Study Questions

1. How did Paul present his message to the Athenians who worshiped many gods and idols?

2. What was the reaction to Paul's message proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and his resurrection (Acts 17:32-34)?

3. How should a Christian combine tolerance with sharing the news of Jesus Christ?

8

It's About a Dead Man Who's Alive

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

Matthew 28:1-6

PERHAPS YOU ARE A SKEPTIC. You know some of the Christian claims about God and Jesus but you are not quite convinced of them. "Give me one good reason to believe," you say. All right, I will.

Let's imagine that we are listening in on one of history's most fascinating conversations. It took place in the audience chamber of the Roman governor's palace in the ancient city of Caesarea, located not far from present-day Tel-Aviv. Caesarea served as the capital of the Roman province of Palestine, and some time around the year A.D. 60, a man called Festus arrived there to take up his duties as governor of the territory.

He could not have been very happy at the prospect. Palestine was a long way from the limelight in Rome, and to make matters worse, it was a province with a long history of trouble and a well-deserved reputation as difficult to govern. The big problem in Palestine was, of course, the Jews, an obstinate and cantankerous people who refused to be assimilated with their Gentile neighbors and who constantly got into quarrels, often violent and bloody ones, over religion. To a cultured, well-educated, and above all cynical Roman official like Festus, these infernal people with their interminable wrangles, people who were perfectly ready to die for something as unimportant as religion, were simply incomprehensible.

What It's All About

When Festus had settled in and could turn his attention to getting his new administration up and running, he made a discovery that politicians have been repeating for thousands of years. Bureaucrats retiring from office have always had a habit of sweeping some of their most awkward problems under the rug and leaving them for others to deal with after they are long gone.

In Festus's case, the problem was an especially sticky one involving a man named Paul. It seems that Paul had been the cause of a riot in Jerusalem, and had been languishing in protective custody in Caesarea for two years while the previous governor, Felix, tried to decide what to do with him. For some reason which Festus could not quite figure out, the religious leaders in Jerusalem all wanted to kill Paul, and Festus had to decide whether to let them have their way.

On the particular day we happen to overhear him in the governor's palace, Festus is about to listen to Paul's side of the story. He is talking over the case with Agrippa, a local prince who had stopped by on a courtesy call. "They had some points of dispute about their own religion," Festus explained to King Agrippa; "*it's about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive*" (Acts 25:19).

Festus doesn't seem to have been an especially bright man, but he certainly got this right. This is indeed what it is all about. This is the central point; as far as Christianity is concerned, it is the most basic issue. It's not about religion, it's not about philosophy, it's not about politics, it's not about psychology. It's about a dead man named Jesus who we claim is alive. If he is not alive, then no one needs to bother about us; we Christians really have nothing to say. But if he is alive, then every person on earth needs to know it. And do something about it.

The Easter Story

Let's consider briefly the evidence for the Christian claim that Jesus is alive. Here is one of the earliest accounts of what happened on Easter morning, three days after Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay."

(Matthew 28:1-6)

"Don't be afraid," the angel said to the women. "I know what you've come for. You're looking for Jesus, the one who was crucified. Well, he isn't here; he has risen from the dead, as he said he would." These three simple statements constitute the earliest testimony to the resurrection, and also indicate the most important evidence for it.

Three Statements

1. "He is not here."

The first piece of evidence to which the historical record points is the fact of the empty tomb. "He is not here" means "his body is gone." The angel intended those words in a strictly literal sense. It was not like the comment that you will sometimes hear murmured at a grave side: "He's not really there, you know."

In Jesus' case, the angel was not speaking of his spirit, his soul or his personality. He was talking about Jesus' body. This is why he added the invitation, "Come and see where he lay" (in the past tense). The record says that the grave had been opened. The stone sealed and guarded by soldiers had been rolled away; not, we surmise, to let Jesus out, but to let others in so that everyone could see that his grave was quite empty.

The initial testimony to the absence of Jesus' body from his tomb was confirmed by numerous eyewitnesses. It has never been disproved. To the angel's statement, "He is not here," no one has ever been able to say, "He *is* here."

This point was easily verifiable; as Paul remarked to Festus and Agrippa, "These things were not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). Jesus' followers first began to publicly proclaim that he had risen from the dead only days after the event. They did so in Jerusalem, the very same city where the resurrection had occurred, so anyone could have visited the tomb for himself whenever he wanted. And yet no one, not even Jesus' harshest enemies, could deny that his tomb was empty. What this means is that the resurrection was no illusion. It was a real and literal event, not a myth, not a metaphor, but a fact of history.

2. "He has risen."

The statement testifying to the empty tomb is, by itself, not enough. The absence of Jesus' body from his grave could be accounted for by any of several alternative explanations. The women might have gone to the wrong grave in the early morning darkness. Jesus might not really have died on the cross but only lost consciousness, later to revive and walk out of his tomb on his own. Perhaps someone stole the body after it had been buried. On careful examination, none of those explanations is plausible, though each has been suggested at one time or another. But the more one studies it, the more clear it seems that the true explanation, fantastic as it sounds, is the one given by the angel. "He has risen."

This was an entirely new thing. The resurrection does not mean that Jesus simply came back to life. On rare occasions Jesus himself had restored other people to life after they had suffered death, but that is not what happened with him. His dead body did not suddenly begin to breathe again and then to stir and then to rise and walk from the tomb. Jesus' resurrection means that he was changed from earthly life into a different kind of life altogether. If we could have witnessed it, what we would have seen at the moment of Jesus' resurrection was

an instantaneous transformation. In the twinkling of an eye, his body was changed from a physical to a spiritual one.

The life he entered on Easter morning was the life not of this world but of the world to come. Jesus' resurrection has no precedent. It was the first and only thing of its kind—but some day, according to the Bible, there will be many more just like it.

3. "As he said."

The third statement serves as a reminder that Jesus' resurrection was not a surprise, an unexpected bonus after the painful experience of his death. During his lifetime, Jesus himself was as aware of his ultimate resurrection as he was of his impending passion and death. On at least three separate occasions he spoke of how he must suffer many things and be crucified, and then how afterwards he would rise again (Jesus' predictions are recorded in three successive chapters in the gospel of Mark—chapters 8, 9, and 10.)

This awareness of what would happen after his death was not merely due to some kind of supernatural knowledge of the future that Jesus possessed. He was sure about his resurrection because he knew the scriptures of the Old Testament, which foretold not only the Messiah's suffering and dying but his subsequent rising as well. "This is what I told you while I was still with you," said the risen Christ to his followers. "Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me. . . . 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. . . .'" (Luke 24:44, 46). So the resurrection was not only real and unprecedented; it was planned by God from the very beginning, and revealed in the prophecies of the Old Testament.

Why It Matters

Let's think about why it matters. Suppose for just a moment that the evidence of the New Testament to the literal, physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is true, as I believe it is. Does it really matter? It most certainly does! Here are three reasons why.

First, Jesus' resurrection settles the most basic question of all, the question of God. Does God really exist? Humans have struggled with that question for almost as long as they have been human. But if Jesus Christ rose from the grave, that settles it once and for all. Yes, there is a God; because only God could do what Jesus has done. Not only that, we know exactly what God is like, because Jesus himself is God. If you want to see God, look at Jesus!

Second, the resurrection of Jesus Christ establishes the truth of the Christian faith. In this little book I have examined a number of common objections to Christianity. Is the Bible a trustworthy book? Can a loving God exist in a world that has so much suffering? Is it fair to claim that Christianity is the only way to God?

The ultimate answer to all these questions is found in Jesus' resurrection. For, you see, if Jesus rose from the dead, then he is unique. This one act sets him apart from every other prophet or religious teacher. This shows why he is not only to be listened to but worshiped.

In the light of this stupendous miracle, the religion of Christ is stamped at once from heaven as divine . . . so long as it stands, Christianity too must stand as the one supernatural religion. The resurrection of Christ is the fundamental apologetic fact of Christianity.

(B. B. Warfield, *The Risen Christ*)

The third reason why Jesus' resurrection matters is that it confirms everything he ever said. All of his claims are shown to be true, and all of his promises trustworthy. To those who struggled with the burdens of life, he called, "Come to me and I will give you rest." To the lonely, he said, "I will never leave you or forsake you." To those searching for meaning or purpose in life, he cried, "Follow me." To frail mortals facing death he promised, "Everyone who believes in me has eternal life." The best thing of all is that because Jesus is alive today, you can know the truth of all these promises yourself. Believe in him, and his life will be yours.

Study Questions

1. How is it possible to believe such a thing as fantastic as the resurrection of Jesus Christ?
2. How does Jesus' death confirm the existence of God?
3. Discuss what Warfield means when he states that "the resurrection of Christ is the fundamental apologetic fact of Christianity."

Postscript

I hope that what I have written has been of help in answering some of your questions. But now I want to ask you to do something. Please do not allow any remaining doubts or uncertainties to keep you from coming to Christ.

It's not enough merely to be a seeker after truth. What matters is whether or not you are a finder. "I believe in order to understand," said a great Christian thinker long ago. That's how it has to be. If you wait to understand everything before you commit yourself to faith, you will never believe in anything. But if you are willing to humbly bow before Jesus Christ and say to him, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief," you will find everything you are looking and hoping for.