

Millennials

And Beyond

A Modern Day Book of Hebrews

By

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New International Version

PREFACE

The New Testament Book of Hebrews was written to Jewish believers of the first century A.D. who were in danger of casting aside their Christian faith and reverting to Judaism. The author exhorted them not to fall away from their faith because Jesus and the New Covenant he brought were better than Moses and the Old Covenant that they would be reverting to.

In our day, many young people from Christian families are falling away from the faith, not to revert to Judaism, but to adhere to a non-theistic world view. This book is written to challenge these of the millennial generation and beyond to consider carefully before turning away from the “faith of their fathers,” because what Jesus and the Christian faith have to offer is better in several important respects than what they would be replacing it with.

While the inspiration for this short book comes from the book of Hebrews, the author does not claim that this book is on the level of divinely inspired scripture. It is his prayer, however, that God will use it to help many not to fall away due to the influence of the prevailing culture around them, but to persevere in their faith to the saving of their souls.

1. God, who in time past was recognized by most as the Creator and Sustainer of all things, has, in these last days, been abandoned by many and relegated to the status of legend. Many of your generation are leaving the church and their Christian faith behind for what they think to be a better way, rejecting the “faith of their fathers,” not just as irrelevant, but as unscientific, morally restrictive and judgmental. And you have joined them in turning away, or are thinking about doing so. But is leaving the faith truly the best choice?

Consider, first of all, how the Christian faith provides better answers to life’s big questions. Most everyone asks themselves these questions at some point, or they should, if they are thoughtful individuals. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? Let’s consider them one at a time.

Better Explanation for Where we Came From

Where did we come from? How did we, as human beings, come to inhabit this planet? I submit to you that the Christian faith provides a better explanation for how we got here than the non-theistic alternatives.

You may have come to think that one can only accept the Biblical view of origins by rejecting science and embracing faith—not an informed faith, but a faith that closes its eyes to the evidence. You may be surprised to know that among top-level scientists, about half are theists.¹ One of these, Dr. Francis Collins, once the director of the Human Genome Project, states:

I am a scientist and a believer, and I find no conflict between those world views.²

This is not surprising when one realizes that modern science sprung out of a Christian world view. Key pioneers of modern Western science such as Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, Newton and Boyle were all serious Christians. This is not merely coincidental--rather, it was their

1. Elaine Ecklund, Science vs Religion, Oxford Press, 2010.

2. Francis Collins, The Language of God, New York: Free Press (A Division of Simon & Schuster), 2006.

faith that gave them confidence that the physical world could be understood. Science for them was the challenge of discovering the inner workings of what God had created. Johannes Kepler had this understanding when he stated that in his scientific research he was “thinking God’s thoughts after him.”¹

Among followers of Christ, there are different opinions about evolution—some reject it at the macro level and others believe God used the process of evolution to create the world. But, for the purpose of establishing the intellectual viability of theism, it is not necessary to get sidetracked with this debate. Let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that Darwin’s theory of evolution is essentially true. There still remains the question of where the first living cell came from, for without that, evolution of higher life forms, including humans, could not take place. Solving this question is a remarkably difficult challenge for which scientists still do not have a very satisfactory answer, even after decades of scientific research. But even this is not the primary issue. Suppose that scientists could adequately explain, in purely naturalistic terms, the origin of life. The question still remains of how a universe such as ours exists, in which there is even the possibility of life. For a bio-friendly universe requires the constants of the universe to be exceedingly fine-tuned.

For example, the expansion rate of the early universe had to be precise to the extreme. If the universe had expanded too quickly, matter would have dispersed so efficiently that none of it would have clumped to form galaxies. If no galaxies had formed, then no stars would have formed, and if no stars had formed, no planets would have formed. And if no planets had formed, there would be no place for life. On the other hand, if the universe had expanded too slowly, matter would have clumped so efficiently that the whole universe would have collapsed into a super-dense lump before any solar-type stars could have formed. As astronomer Hugh Ross explains,² the expansion velocity is affected by the cosmic mass density and by the cosmic space energy density. In order for the universe to have produced all the stars and planets necessary to explain the possibility of the earth sustaining physical life, the value of the cosmic

1. http://www.azquotes.com/author/7921-Johannes_Kepler

2. Hugh Ross, The Creator and the Cosmos, pp. 150-151.

mass density had to be fine-tuned to better than one part in 10^{60} and the value of the space energy density needed fine tuning to better than one part in 10^{120} .

These are just two constants among many that must be fine-tuned to make life possible. These are not secrets to the scientific community. One scientist has said:

A superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology.¹

And another, the renowned and brilliant scientist Stephen Hawking, has added:

Our universe and its laws appear to have a design that both is tailor-made to support us and, if we are to exist, leaves little room for alteration. That is not easily explained, and raises the natural question of why it is this way.²

Another well-known physicist has likened the fine-tuning of the universe to an elaborate control room with many levers assigned to precise settings, which, if even one of them is moved enough to be discernible, will disable the possibility of life in our universe.³

2. For many, the reasonable conclusion, when confronted with such evidence, is to recognize that there must be an Intelligent Designer, a Master Mathematician, namely God, who perfectly prepared our universe for life. Such a conclusion is a reasonable belief. It almost seems to be an inescapable conclusion, as even a prize-winning astronomer agrees when he says:

I find it quite improbable that such order came out of chaos. There has to be some organizing principle. God to me is a mystery but the explanation for the miracle of existence, why there is something instead of nothing.⁴

1. Fred Hoyle, quoted in Hugh Ross, The Creator and the Cosmos, p. 157

2. Stephen Hawking, The Grand Design, p. 162.

3. Paul Davies, referenced several times later in this section.

4. Allan Sandage, quoted in Hugh Ross, The Creator and the Cosmos, p. 160. Sandage is a winner of the Crafoord prize in astronomy.

To this to scripture adds its support, saying:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.⁹

For 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 men are without excuse.¹⁰

Yet not all agree with this conclusion. Because they do not wish to be bound to faith in God, they use their intellects to devise viable alternatives which can allow them to sustain their atheism. Hawking proposes multiple universes— 10^{500} of them!¹¹ In spite of the extreme fine-tuning needed for a bio-friendly universe, given potentially such a large number of universes, it becomes feasible that one of them could have just the right parameters needed for life. But keep in mind that this is a speculative theory and not an established scientific conclusion. Fellow scientist Paul Davies points out that the multi-verse theory requires a lot of very “convenient” physics to make it work. For starters, it must have a universe-generating mechanism. Davies concludes: “The problem of existence has therefore not gone away, it has only been shifted up a level.”¹²

Do not think that because scientists like Hawking or others claim to explain the existence of a bio-friendly universe without God that they have disproved the existence of God. When they propose such ideas, they have gone beyond science into naturalistic philosophy. Hawking has merely discarded faith in a God he cannot see for faith in multiple universes which he cannot see. For science, by definition, can only observe and study the universe we live in—all others remain hypothetical and incapable of proof through means of science.

So, the choice before you is not one of science versus faith, as though you must throw out your intellect to be a believer in God, but rather faith

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1. Psalm 19:1
 2. Romans 1:20
 3. Stephen Hawking, The Grand Design, pp. 117-118.
 4. Paul Davies, The Cosmic Jackpot, p. 264.

in one thing versus faith in another—faith in someone you cannot see versus faith in something you cannot see, in this case faith in God versus faith in multiple universes.¹³ You may think you will take your chances by going with the speculations of a brilliant scientist rather than the teachings of outdated theologians. But remember, half of top-level scientists *do* believe in God, and they do so *in spite of* the anti-faith bias that they, like many of you, have experienced during the rigors of academic training.

What principle might guide you in choosing between the theistic and non-theistic options on the matter of origins? Is it merely a toss-up? Does the Christian faith provides a *better* explanation for how we got here than the non-theistic alternatives? The conclusion you reach is influenced by your own bias—whether a faith bias or an anti-faith bias. Is there any objective way to evaluate the two ideas to determine the better option?

A man by the name of Occam proposed a principle that bears his name, a principle which helps us to answer the question: “If a given set of facts about the world can be explained by more than one theory, how do we choose between them?” The principle of Occam’s razor is that you pick the theory with the least number of independent assumptions. In other words, when it comes to a convincing explanation, simpler is usually better. Physicist Paul Davies, a theist of sorts, though not a traditional theist¹⁴, argues that by introducing vast complexity to explain the fine-tuned qualities of our one universe, the many-universes theory runs contrary to the principle of Occam’s razor. Davies finds this approach to

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1. Other options exist as well, such as an eternal universe. If the universe has always existed, then with unlimited time, anything is possible, even the chance formation of a fine-tuned universe. But belief in an eternal universe went out of favor with most scientists when the “big bang” became the consensus among scientists. Fred Hoyle with his steady state theory was a holdout for an eternal universe, and other variations, such as oscillating models, were also proposed (see William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith, pp. 126-156, for a summary of models). A theorem by Borde, Guth and Vilenkin in 2003 effectively ruled out the option of an eternal universe. It states that any universe which on average over its past history has been in a state of cosmic expansion cannot be eternal in the past but must have a spacetime boundary (Craig, p. 140).
 2. Davies believes in a sort of Cosmic Mind, but not in the personal God of the Bible.

explaining the specialness of our universe to be scientifically questionable.¹ Thus, it can be argued that theism, such as the theism of the Christian faith (though at this point in our argument not limited to that) provides a better explanation for how we got here than the non-theistic alternatives.

Better Explanation for the Purpose of Life

3. The relevance of the first big question carries over to the next two. For if there is no personal Creator who made this universe and ultimately us, if rather we are here only as the product of random chance, then there is no real meaning in life or purpose for which we are here. Philosopher William Lane Craig has put it like this:

Modern man thought that when he had gotten rid of God, he had freed himself from all that repressed and stifled him. Instead, he discovered that in killing God, he had only succeeded in orphaning himself. For if there is no God, then man's life becomes absurd.²

In the Wisdom literature of the Biblical canon, we find the same thing stated by Solomon, who said:

Meaningless, meaningless, utterly meaningless.
Everything is meaningless.³

Atheists, of course, cannot ignore the question of life's meaning. Every human heart yearns for an answer. Bertrand Russell argued that only by recognizing that the world really is a terrible place can we successfully come to terms with life. We must build our lives on the "firm foundation of unyielding despair." However, as Craig has said:

One cannot live consistently and happily in this world view—if one lives consistently, he will not be happy; if he lives happily, he will not be consistent.⁴

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1. Davies, The Cosmic Jackpot. p. 264.
 2. William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith, p. 71.
 3. Ecclesiastes 1:2
 4. Craig, p. 78.

Another approach, the existentialist approach of Jean-Paul Sarte and others, is to acknowledge that life objectively has no meaning but to live like it does. In other words, create your own meaning in life by choosing to follow a certain course of action. But this is simply an exercise in self-deception—a Noble Lie, which in the end is unworkable. For, as Craig has said:

The more convinced you are of the necessity of a Noble Lie, the less you are able to believe in it. Like a placebo, a Noble Lie works only on those who believe it is the truth. Once we have seen through the fiction, then the Lie has lost its power over us.¹

Some may be willing to live with the despair of realism or the self-delusion of existentialism, but I don't believe that will satisfy you. You long to live within a world-view that allows you to truly experience meaning and purpose in life—a true meaning and purpose established on a foundation that can support it.

The Christian world-view and Jesus in particular establishes that firm foundation on which you can find meaning and purpose in life. Jesus said,

Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock.²

When trials come down and doubts rise up, when people you know or the culture at large blow against your beliefs and convictions, your foundation will stand firm, if you have built that foundation on Christ and a Christian world view.

That foundation begins with belief in God as Creator, a Creator who made us in his own image, as it is written:

In the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.³

1. Craig, p. 85.

2. Matthew 7:24-25.

3. Genesis 1:28.

God made us similar enough to himself in intellectual, emotional and volitional capacity as to be capable of a relationship with him. He also assigned the first humans the responsibility of ruling over and caring for God's world, as it is also written:

Let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.²²

As the purpose of a thing is assigned by its maker, so our purpose as humans was assigned by our Maker, and it is found in experiencing a relationship with God and doing the work God has given us to do. Because of this, it is true, as Augustine has said:

Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.²³

And true satisfaction and fulfilment can come only when we can say to our Father in heaven:

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.²⁴

Better Hope for the Future

4. A Christian world-view also provides a better answer to the third big question: "Where am I going?" If there is no God, then the answer is that you are not going anywhere. When you die, that is the end. But the Christian hope is that the believer will be resurrected in the last day to live forever in heaven with God and with Christ. Jesus himself said:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.²⁵

When the Apostle speaks of the "hope of eternal life,"²⁶ he is not speaking of a fairy-tale wish to live happily ever after, but is talking of a confident expectation of future blessing. It is a hope based on the promise of Christ, as stated above, and on the resurrection of Christ.

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1. Genesis 1:27.
 2. Augustine, in Confessions.
 3. John 17:4
 4. John 11:25
 5. Titus 3:7

How can we possibly believe in such a thing as the future resurrection of the body? It is because Jesus has himself been raised from death to live forever. To the extent that Christ's resurrection is established as a historical event based on eyewitness testimony—and the whole Christian faith rises or falls on this point, to that extent we have confidence that such a thing as resurrection from the dead is possible. Jesus has himself been victorious over death, as the Scripture says:

It was impossible for death to keep its hold on him¹

This same Jesus says to us:

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.²

One might say, “Why would I want to live forever?” But, other things being equal, certainly living forever is better than dying without a future and a hope. One might indeed prefer death to living forever if he is already experiencing death even while he lives—death, in the sense of spiritual death, or separation from God, with its resultant sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. If one is experiencing this kind of life, then he may prefer death as a final cessation of being over the alternative of living forever. But if one has experiencing, even in the midst of life's suffering and trials, the kind of life of which Christ speaks when he says:

I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,³

then how much more will living forever in a perfect world without suffering and death be the happy experience which many have longed to see.

The answer to the third big question has implications for the second. For if we die to live no more, then this adds to the sense of futility of our current life. The philosophy of here randomly for a little while and then gone permanently never to return leads almost inevitably to a sense of here presently without purpose or hope. The natural outcome of such a philosophy is to say:

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1. Acts 2:24
 2. John 5:28
 3. John 10:10

Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.¹

When some do rise above such a self-focused and dismal outlook, it is in spite of, not because of, their atheistic world view.

Several specific advantages accompany a strong hope of eternal life. First is the ability to sacrifice for an eternal benefit. Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.²

The mindset of laying up treasures in heaven allows you to see life as an investment in eternity. When you invest money, you are sacrificing what pleasures or goods could be secured with those funds now in hope of a greater return later. The success of our economy depends on the willingness of people to invest in this way. Likewise, when a follower of Christ has the mindset of investing his or her present life for the benefit of a future return in heaven, this allows him or her to sacrifice for the greater good of society.

A strong hope of eternal life can also give you the ability to persevere through suffering. You can endure almost anything if you know that something better is ahead and that your suffering has a worthwhile purpose. For the Christian, the something better that is ahead is heaven, and not only that, but greater reward in proportion to one's patience in enduring suffering, especially for the cause of the gospel. Jesus says:

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.³

Similarly, the Apostle Paul says:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.⁴

1. 1 Corinthians 15:32

2. Matthew 7:19-20.

3. Matthew 5:11-12.

4. Romans 8:18

If, however, you face the sufferings and trials of life with no hope of anything better and no expectation of a worthwhile result, then it is very difficult, perhaps impossible in some cases, to find the strength to go on.

Third, belief in an afterlife as conceived in the Christian worldview—not only eternal life for some but punishment for others, gives one assurance of final justice and with it a basis for moral living. Justice is not always served in this life. Criminals are not always punished. Sacrificial acts are not always noticed. Nice guys do sometimes finish last and those who are greedy and self-serving do sometimes get ahead. Jesus turns our thoughts about this upside down when he says with reference to the age to come:

But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first.¹

The scripture says:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.²

While to some, such a prospect is fear inducing, belief in a future judgment day is an essential aspect of a cohesive worldview that offers a proper resolution to the injustices that so many experience in this life. It also provides a sense of ultimate accountability for our actions, apart from which evil goes on unchecked. However, if this life is all there is, as in the atheistic worldview, then there is no final justice and there is no convincing deterrent to improper behavior.

The Christian faith provides a solid foundation for a coherent worldview—one that gives us a better explanation for how we got here, a better purpose for life and a better hope for the future than non-theistic alternatives.

1. Matthew 19:30

2. Revelation 20:12

The Problem of Suffering

5. But, some will say, it does not provide a better explanation for pain and suffering. In a non-theistic, naturalistic world view, it is not hard to imagine a world filled with these, for the Darwinian concept of survival of the fittest predicts just such a world. But if one believes in a personal God who is both all-powerful and good, then how can we explain the problem of pain and suffering? For if God is good, why would he allow such suffering, unless he lacked the power to prevent it? And if he is all-powerful, yet chooses to allow suffering, then how is he good? This dilemma has been a stumbling block to many who have turned away from the Christian faith.

Yet the objection is not unanswerable. First, there is the free will explanation. Yes, God, if he is all-powerful, could choose to eliminate human suffering and pain from this world, but only at the expense of human free will. Human actions cause pain and suffering to others, actions like slander, desertion, theft, abuse, rape, adultery, murder and warfare. In order to prevent the suffering caused by such actions, God would have to eliminate human freedom, but this is not something he is willing to do. Think of the problem as a cost-benefit analysis. The cost of human suffering is exceedingly high, and not to be trivialized or dismissed. Yet the benefit of human freedom, on the other hand, is an intrinsic non-negotiable in God's plan of creation. Free will is an essential component of being made in the image of God. God made us for a relationship with him; yet that relationship would lack genuineness apart from human free will.

Second, God permits suffering because it can lead to greater good. When the suffering is intense, it is hard to imagine that this could be the case, and yet our inability to conceive of any greater good that could justify extreme forms of suffering may be the result of our own limited perspective. God's viewpoint includes not only the present but the future, not only the individuals directly involved, but individuals indirectly impacted, not only physical suffering but character development and not only this life but eternity. Perhaps the most significant greater good is when a person, because of suffering in a time of crisis, turns to God and enters into a relationship with him that both transforms his present life for the better and secures his eternal destiny in heaven, where he will enjoy that relationship with God forever. Most people do not think about their

need for God when everything is going well. But when a time of crisis comes, such as a natural disaster or a war, for example, hundreds or even thousands of people may turn to God and to Christ who otherwise would not do so. So in the eternal scheme of things the greater good significantly outweighs the suffering of the time, as terrible as it may be. Within an atheistic worldview, this argument may seem irrelevant, but it must be recognized that within the Christian worldview, it is a very powerful one. If a personal and loving God exists, then there is nothing greater than knowing him, regardless of what it takes to come to the point of knowing him.

The greatest example of God allowing human suffering for a greater good was in the suffering and death of his own Son. Why did God allow his own beloved Son to suffer in this way? The Apostle Paul records the answer:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!¹

God allowed his Son to die as a sacrifice so that our sins could be taken away and so that we might live (have eternal life) through him. In other words, God allowed a great evil—the suffering and death of his only Son, to provide for the greater good—a way for us to receive forgiveness and eternal life.

If the problem of suffering is a major obstacle for you to come to faith in God, push through it to find an answer. Some of the greatest minds have worked through this issue and have resolved it in favor of faith rather than despair. Consider, for example, The Problem of Pain by C.S.Lewis or Tim Keller's Reason for God chapter two: "How could a good God allow suffering?"

1. Romans 5:8-9

So it may be stated again, the problem of suffering notwithstanding: the Christian faith provides a solid foundation for a coherent world view—one that gives us a better explanation for how we got here, a better purpose for life and a better hope for the future than non-theistic alternatives. If, after having known the way of truth, you deliberately reject the faith and all that goes with it—including adherence to a moral standard, a sense of accountability to a Creator, and fellowship within the Christian community, what remains but a life lacking purpose and ultimate meaning and a future devoid of hope? What is left to you but a house desolate and crumbling, without a foundation capable of supporting a meaningful existence?

True Freedom

6. But, you may say, “all that goes with it” is precisely what I want freedom from—freedom from a moral standard, freedom from answering to God, freedom from the obligation of going to church. But what is real freedom? Is it merely doing whatever you want, sleeping with whomever you wish and answering to no one but yourself?

The irony is that such freedom actually leads to its very opposite—slavery to your own desires. Whether your pursuit of freedom takes you in the direction of alcohol, drugs, sex, power, wealth, success, an alternate identity or anything else, you will find that you either become enslaved to that pursuit or are disappointed with its attainment. The alcohol, drugs and sex may well become addictive and ensnare you, leaving you empty but still longing for more, even as they destroy you. The pursuit of power, wealth and success will most often come up short, but even if, due to hard work, talent, intelligence and a few good breaks, you achieve what most consider to be the pinnacle, you will still feel driven for more, because you will find that pinnacle to be lonely and less fulfilling than you thought. None of these things are bad necessarily or in and of themselves. In fact, they can be good in their proper context. But the unrestrained pursuit of them will not leave you feeling free, but rather trapped in a never ending quest for more.

What is true freedom then? Jesus says:

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.¹

1. John 8:32

And in the same chapter, he also says:

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.¹

In saying “free indeed,” he distinguishes it from the false freedom of which we have just spoken. What does it mean to be free indeed—really free, free in a way that does not leave one feeling trapped and frustrated but soaring and fulfilled? True freedom means being free to experience life as you were created to experience it within the safe boundaries established by your Creator.

Mankind was created to experience a relationship with God. He established boundaries so that we would have a “safe space” in which to enjoy that relationship with him. Freedom comes when we are content to live within those boundaries, knowing that they are established by a loving Father God for our own good, and in doing so experience the relationship with God for which we were created.

But we humans, beginning with Adam and Eve, came to feel that these boundaries were holding us back from experiencing something good, that they were limitations to our freedom. We stepped over those boundaries—transgressed God’s laws, trespassed into forbidden territory. When we did so, we moved away from God and our relationship with him was broken. We were free, we thought, but lonely for the relationship that was lost, free, but lost in our freedom, free, but plagued with guilt for transgressing the commands of the only one who truly loved us while knowing us completely.

You think that freedom from guilt will be the result of no longer believing in God. Then you will be free from a moral standard, free from answering to God, free from the condemning glances of church goers. But you still have your own values, your own standards, more or less shared with your peer group. Do you always live up to your standards? Do you always live up to the expectations of your friends? When you don’t, do you not feel guilty? And what if doubt plagues your disbelief? What if you really want to be free from God but you cannot escape the sense that he is there and that someday you will be accountable to him?

1. John 8:36

You don't like that religious people are always judging, trying to make you feel guilty. You say that they are intolerant because they hold convictions that some behaviors are wrong. You call them "haters" because they oppose lifestyles based on some of these behaviors. But do you not judge the judgers and hate the haters? Are you not intolerant of the intolerant? And so you become guilty of the very things you condemn.

7. Freedom from guilt is not achieved by being free from God, but by returning to a relationship with God through experiencing his forgiveness. Although mankind's relationship with God was broken, as previously described, God did not stop loving us. He desired for that relationship to be restored, and when the time was right, he did something about it. He sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to become human like us. He lived a perfect life, which none of us ever did. He died on the cross to pay for our sins, to bring us back into a relationship with God, as the Bible says:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.¹

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.²

In dying for us, Jesus turned away God's displeasure from us. God's sense of what was needed to make us right with him was satisfied.

True freedom is costly. The freedoms we enjoy in our nation cost the lives of many of our young men and women who fought for those freedoms. Likewise, the freedom we are talking about here, spiritual freedom, if you will, the freedom to experience life as we were created to experience it, is a costly freedom. God sacrificed his own Son for it. Jesus submitted to the will of the Father to die for us, as he anticipated when he said,

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.³

The Apostle spoke of the cost of this freedom when he said:

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1. 1 Peter 3:18
 2. Romans 5:8
 3. John 10:11

You were bought at a price.¹

But, you may say, being “bought at a price” doesn’t sound like being free. That is the paradox. Jesus paid the price—his own life, his own blood shed for you, to set you free from sin, to set you free from your own lostness, so that you could belong to him, and by doing so become truly free. And so his statement is fulfilled:

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

But why, you may ask, does God require a bloody sacrifice in order to be satisfied? If he is a God of love, why doesn’t he accept me as I am without need of a sacrifice? “God is love,” but not a God of soft love without standards, but a God of sacrificial love whose love rises to meet those standards. “God is love,” but that is not all he is. He is also holy as the prophet Isaiah reported to us when he said:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.²

God holds an exalted position, set above his creation. God is absolute purity and justice and righteousness. In his justice as the Judge of the Universe, he requires that those who transgress his boundaries should pay a price. If he simply overlooks the transgression, if he dismisses it as trivial, then he has not been true to his own character. We who are guilty should pay the price. But God’s love intervenes with a plan to restore us without us having to suffer the consequences. But still the consequences must be paid. God, in his sacrificial love, sent his Son to pay the price that we ought to have paid so that we would not have to pay it ourselves.

If you acknowledge that you have turned away from your Creator, if you repent, that is, make a spiritual U-turn, and turn back to him by believing in his Son Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, then you will experience forgiveness, as the scripture says:

Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.³

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1. 1 Corinthians 6:19
 2. Isaiah 6:3
 3. Acts 16:31

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.¹

And with that forgiveness comes freedom from guilt and freedom to enjoy a relationship with God within the safe boundaries that he has provided.

But, you may say, I “prayed the prayer” when I was young. I tried the church routine. If I step back into that arena, I will just be under the burden of rules and restrictions. If that is what you think, then you have misunderstood what Jesus is all about. For he is the one who said:

Take my yoke upon me and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.²

Jesus is not saying that it is easy to follow him, for often that is not the case, but that he does not, like the Pharisaical religion of his time, impose on his followers a heavy burden of legalistic rules and regulations. This is what Paul also meant when he said:

You are not under the law, but under grace.³

This does not mean you can live however you please when you follow Jesus, for, speaking of this freedom from the law, Paul said:

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love.⁴

The follower of Christ should live to please God and to be a blessing to those around him, but not by focusing on a list of legalistic rules, but by following the law of love and doing so in the power of the Holy Spirit, as Paul also explains when he says:

We have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.⁵

1. Acts 3:19

2. Matthew 11:29-30

3. Romans 6:14

4. Galatians 5:13

5. Romans 7:6

What is truth?

8. In speaking of freedom, we have noted that Jesus said:

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Freedom fails when founded on an unstable foundation. If the world view that you live within does not correspond to the way things really are, then the freedom you experience within that world view is not true freedom, but an illusion of freedom. True freedom must be founded upon the truth.

What is truth? It is common in our day to regard truth as relative. We speak of “your truth” and “my truth” as though every person can define reality the way he or she wishes. But can we really live consistently as a relativist? Even the statement, “All is relative” is an absolute statement, and thus contradicts the claim.

We could not function in our world if we did not believe in some sort of absolute truth. Does not the scientific enterprise, in which non-theists place their confidence to the exclusion of God, depend on the reliability of mathematics and consistent natural laws and constants? Does not our moving about safely from place to place depend on reliable cars and consistent traffic signals, both of which were engineered using mathematics?

In our increasingly polarized society, does anyone even act like a relativist anymore? People do not respond to one another as though they believe: “Your truth is OK for you and my truth is OK for me,” but rather they heap insults on each other through social media as if to say: “My way of looking at things is right and your way of looking at things is ridiculous and dangerous.”

Jesus said:

The reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.¹

1. John 18:37

Pilate, the Roman governor who sentenced Jesus to death, responded to these words by asking cynically, “What is truth?” Ironically, he walked away without an answer when the answer was literally staring him in the face. For the man in front of him, Jesus the Christ, was the one who said:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.¹

But you may say, “How arrogant to claim to be the only way!” Now you are talking like a relativist, but remember, you are not a consistent relativist. This is not the time to be a relativist. One who is lost does not want just any directions, he wants the right directions. One who is sick with cancer does not want just any treatment, she wants the treatment that will bring the cure. If you want true freedom, it must be built on the foundation of truth.

Regarding the charge of arrogance, do we not want to follow leaders who are confident of who they are and know where they are going? The words of Jesus just quoted were preceded by the question,

Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?²

It was in response to this question that Jesus said:

I am the way and the truth and the life.

Jesus knows who he is and where he is going. In a world that is clouded with the confusion of competing ideas, he tells us, in essence, “don’t be confused—I am the way.”

Yet we do prefer our confident and competent leaders not to be arrogant. And such is the case with Jesus. He was bold but not arrogant, confident yet humble. He who was the Teacher washed his disciples’ feet.³ He who was sought after by the crowds took the time to have a significant conversation with a woman at the bottom of the social ladder.⁴ He who was known by all as “good” sat down to eat with “tax collectors and sinners.”⁵

1. John 14:6

2. John 14:5

3. John 13:1-18

4. John 4

5. Luke 18:18; Matthew 9:11

But how can we know that Jesus is the truth? Jesus made many astounding claims about himself, such as:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.¹

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.²

I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.³

I and the Father are one.⁴

Can such statements really be true? And yet, do we not hope they are true? Do we not long to find that confident leader who truly knows who he is and where he is going, who is more than just a good leader, but Savior and Lord, who is more than just a man, but the Son of God? Do we not long to find that one who can truly satisfy our spiritual hunger, who can show us the way in this dark world, who can give to us eternal life?

Who is Jesus?

9. But how can you know? Let's think about it logically. What are your choices regarding who Jesus is? C.S. Lewis, an Oxford intellectual skeptic, struggled with this question before becoming a well-known Christian author and apologist. Concerning our options about who Jesus is he said:

I am trying to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic--on the level with the man who

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1. John 6:35
 2. John 8:12
 3. John 11:25
 4. John 10:30

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.¹

In other words, Jesus was either a lunatic, a liar or Lord,² none of which are comfortable conclusions. Thus we face a dilemma—or rather, trilemma, concerning who Jesus is. Before seeking to resolve this trilemma, let us consider whether there is a fourth option.

Some have suggested there is—that Jesus is legend. For the trilemma argument is based on the premise that the four gospels in the New Testament are historically reliable documents that accurately record what Jesus said and did. But is this true?

The Reliability of the Gospels

Few would suggest that Jesus was legend in the sense that he never existed. For his existence as a first century Jewish prophet living in Palestine is attested not only by the New Testament but by the Jewish historian Josephus and the Roman historian Tacitus, among others.³ However, many do say that he was legendary in the sense that it is difficult to separate the “historical Jesus” from the legends that grew up about him, such that we cannot be sure that he really made the amazing claims or did the miraculous works that are attributed to him in the gospels. Scholars called form critics have proposed that the New Testament gospels are not authentic, eye-witness accounts of what Jesus said and did but rather are the mythological creations of the Christian community, having been altered freely to meet various life situations and needs.⁴

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1. C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, (New York: MacMillan, 1943), pages 55-56.
 2. Josh McDowell, Evidence that Demands a Verdict, Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972, p. 107.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 84-85.
 4. Robert L. Thomas, editor and Stanley N. Gundry, associate editor, “Form Criticism,” in A Harmony of the Gospels, Chicago: Moody Press, 1978, pp. 281-282.

However, this proposal faces the difficulty of explaining how a tradition altering church itself came into existence. For it was gospel history that created the church, not vice versa. If early Christian faith created the gospel record, as critics claim, then what created Christian faith?¹ The Christian communities were groups of people who had received Christian traditions—traditions that had been passed on to them by eyewitnesses, and had believed them to be true. They did not change and alter the traditions to suit their own needs, but they received and believed the traditions, and in doing so found their deepest spiritual needs were in fact met. The eyewitnesses who had passed these traditions on to them—the Apostles, had so sincerely believed these traditions to be true that all but one of them had died as a martyr in defense of these beliefs--the one exception being the Apostle John, who also was persecuted for his faith by being exiled to the Isle of Patmos.

Another problem with the form critical view is that the time was not adequate for the community to develop its own legendary tradition. According to this view, the Christian community altered the traditions about Jesus to suit its needs according to the life situations it found itself in. Thus, over a period of time, the oral tradition was transformed into the mythological creation of the Church. But surely such a process would take time. Studies have shown that the shortest known time for such development of tradition is 100 years, and in other cases it took 200 to 400 years.² Yet form critics, based on their own dates for the writing of the gospels (70 to 100 A.D.) allow only 40 to 70 years for such a tradition to develop. Thus, form criticism overlooks the length of time necessary to create folk lore and legend.

The testimony of the early church fathers in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D. is consistent and strong in support of the four New Testament gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as authentic, eyewitness

1. Thomas & Gundry, p. 284.

2. McGinlay's study in Form Criticism of the Synoptic Healing Narratives, cited in "Syllabus for the Beginnings of the Gospel," Denver Seminary, 1984, p. 24.

accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus.¹ Matthew and John were themselves among the 12 original disciples and thus eyewitnesses. Mark, according to strong tradition, was informed by Peter, the leader of the disciples and an eyewitness. And Luke, the author of the third gospel, is explicit in speaking of the careful historical research he did to ensure that his gospel was based on eyewitness testimony.

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were *eyewitnesses* and servants of the word. With this in mind, since *I myself have carefully investigated* everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught* (Luke 1:1-4, emphasis added).

The contrary opinions of higher-critical scholars are far from being objective, scientific findings, although they would like you to believe that they are. External testimony of the early Church fathers is minimized or dismissed, even though these men had the advantage of being close in time to the writing of the Gospels. Internal evidences which don't fit their conclusions are dismissed as later additions, even though there is no textual evidence of such.² It is assumed that the Gospel writers were more interested in altering the traditions to meet the needs of the Community than they were in preserving an accurate history, even though Luke, one of the authors, explicitly claimed the opposite. In short, their reasons for rejecting traditional authorship are based more on their own unproven assumptions and anti-faith biases than they are on any objective facts. At best, what they have done is to create a viable alternative to accepting the gospels as authentic, eyewitness accounts, viable enough that those who are looking for an escape from the uncomfortable trilemma posed above are quick to latch onto it, but not convincing enough to dissuade true believers who, through the confirmation of their own experience, have come to believe in Christ as Son of God and resurrected Lord.

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1. Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1970, pp. 33-41 (Matthew), pp. 69-72 (Mark), pp.98-99 (Luke), pp. 258-263 (John).
 2. E.g., see their treatment of John 21 as discussed in Guthrie, NTI, p. 244.

Even many who had not yet experienced Christ but were able to set aside their anti-faith bias long enough to objectively look at the evidence have become convinced that the gospels are authentic, reliable accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus. For example, the reliability of Luke is attested to by Sir William Ramsey, who was regarded as one of the greatest geographers who ever lived. He was trained in the German historical school and originally accepted the higher critical theories against the traditional authorship of the New Testament. But his own archaeological discoveries compelled him to conclude that: “Luke is a historian of the first rank . . .” Ramsey rejected his former view that Acts (the sequel to the Gospel of Luke also written by Luke) was a second century document and accepted it as a mid-first century historically reliable account.¹ Another scholar who became convinced of the reliability of the New Testament gospels even though he originally held to the higher critical view is Dr. John A. T. Robinson, lecturer at Trinity College in Cambridge. As “little more than a theological joke” he decided to investigate the issue of the authorship of the New Testament. He concluded, to his own surprise, that the New Testament is the work of the apostles themselves or of contemporaries who worked closely with them.² Among those who have turned from skeptic to believer after examining the evidence are Josh McDowell, author of Evidence that Demands a Verdict, and Lee Strobel, an unbelieving journalist who through his own research became a convinced Christian and the author of such apologetic works as The Case for Christ and The Case for the Bible.

We have been speaking of the four New Testament gospels, but what if the “real” story of Jesus is not contained in these, but in other gospels about Jesus which have been suppressed by the Church? These kind of questions and doubts arise because of the existence of a number of non-canonical gospels and have been spurred on by conspiracy theories promoted in popular writings.³ But the reality is that the four authorized gospels are included in the New Testament because they are clearly more

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1. Josh McDowell and John Gilcrest, The Islam Debate, San Bernadino, CA; Here’s Life Publishers, 1983, pp. 55-56.
 2. Ibid., p. 56.
 3. Such as The DaVinci Code by Dan Brown.

authentic than the excluded gospels. They were written closer to the time of Jesus' life by eyewitnesses (Matthew and John) or those who had access to eyewitnesses (Mark and Luke). The other gospels were written 100 to 200 years after the time of Christ. The manuscript evidence for the authorized gospels is far superior—5,500 Greek manuscripts compared to only one or a few manuscripts for the other gospels. The authorized gospels had apostolic backing. The others claim it, but fraudulently so. It is recognized by all scholars that they weren't written until 100 to 200 years later. The New Testament gospels were used widely by the churches from an early date, whereas the fake gospels can be traced to spurious groups in the 2nd century or later that taught gnostic or other heresies. Even some secular historians acknowledge that the four New Testament gospels are the most reliable accounts of Jesus' life.¹

The Evidence for Jesus

10. So, while some would like to avoid the difficult trilemma posed by C.S. Lewis, the person who is honest with the evidence about the essential integrity and authenticity of the New Testament gospels cannot easily dismiss it. If logically speaking Jesus was either liar, lunatic or Lord, what convincing evidence is there to compel us to choose the third option?

First, there is his exemplary life. Christians believe he was sinless. Muslims agree. It is hard to find a person who would not say he was a good man. So it is difficult, if not absurd, to argue that Jesus, a good man, was a liar, a liar of such proportions as to deliberately mislead people regarding his very identity and so pull off the greatest religious hoax in history.

Second, there is his inspiring teaching. Even a non-Christian leader such as Gandhi was greatly inspired by Jesus' teaching, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. Mother Teresa was inspired by his teaching to give her life sacrificially to serve the poor in India. His teaching was insightful and penetrating. He made effective use of parable and paradox and he was fearless in exposing the hypocrisy and evil intent of human hearts. It is inconceivable that the one who taught in such an insightful and inspiring way could be dismissed as a lunatic.

Third, there are his miracles. His healings showed his power over disease. He healed all manner of sickness and disability, including lepers, the deaf, the lame and the blind.¹ His exorcisms demonstrated his power over the devil and the spirit world.² And on three occasions he raised the dead back to life, showing his power even over death.³ He also did miracles that showed his power over nature, such as walking on water, calming the storm and feeding the 5,000.⁴ These miracles were witnessed, not just by his 12 disciples, but by large crowds, sometimes whole villages or crowds numbering in the thousands. In fact, the best explanation as to why such large crowds followed him is that they heard about his miracles and wanted to see for themselves. None of Jesus' contemporaries, even his enemies, questioned whether he did such miracles, because everyone knew that he did. Jesus himself appealed to these miracles as evidence to back up his claims about himself. After Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), some of the Jews wanted to stone him because he, a mere man, claimed to be God. Jesus responded by saying, "I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?"⁵

The Possibility of Miracles

Many today find it hard to believe in miracles and may think that Christians or others who do believe in them are ignorant or naïve. But the possibility of miracles has been defended by such academics as Oxford scholar C.S. Lewis⁶ and by such scientists as Francis Collins, former director of the human genome project.⁷ You might think it is unscientific to believe in miracles, but it is simply outside the scope of science. Science deals with how things predictably, repeatedly behave according to the laws of nature, and miracles, by definition, are extraordinary occurrences that are exceptions to the law of nature. Scientists can discover and explain to

1. See Mark 1:29-34; 1:40-45; 2:1-12; Matthew 20:29-34.

2. See Mark 1:21-28

3. See Matthew 9:18-26; Luke 7:11-17; John 11:1-44

4. John 6:1-24; Luke 8:22-25

5. John 10:32

6. C.S. Lewis, Miracles, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960.

7. Francis Collins, The Language of God. New York: Free Press (Division of Simon & Schuster), 2006.

us the laws of nature, but they cannot authoritatively tell us that exceptions are impossible. The alleged occurrence of miracles can only be supported or disparaged by means of history, not science. And how do we know anything happened in history?—it is because the event was seen by eyewitnesses and was recorded by a reputable historian. The miracles of Jesus were seen by thousands of eyewitnesses and were recorded by reputable historians. Remember that Luke was acknowledged by Ramsay, an expert and former skeptic, as a historian of first rank.

If one says that he refuses to believe in miracles because miracles are impossible, then he is simply stating his assumption as his conclusion. Can a scientist state a hypothesis as his conclusion without seeing first whether the hypothesis adequately explains the data? If the data does not fit the hypothesis, then the scientist needs to alter the hypothesis. Likewise, one cannot simply throw out data, in this case eyewitness accounts of miracles, because it does not fit one's belief.

The Resurrection

11. The greatest miracle of all and the primary proof that Jesus was who he claimed to be is his resurrection from the dead. Without the resurrection of Jesus, there would be no Christian faith. When Jesus died, his core group of followers was in disarray. One of them betrayed Jesus and then hanged himself. The leader of the group denied three times that he knew him. And when Jesus was arrested, the rest forsook him and fled. When Jesus was crucified, except for John, they were nowhere to be seen. After Jesus was buried, they were hiding in a room, full of doubt and fear. Had they been mistaken in believing Jesus was the Son of God and Messiah? What would happen to them now—would they be killed too? They were not about to go out and start a new religious movement that would turn the world upside down.

It was the resurrection of Jesus that changed all this. At first, the disciples were not sure they could believe it. But once they saw the resurrected Jesus for themselves, were commissioned by him to spread the gospel to all nations and were filled with the Holy Spirit they went out with renewed faith and boldness to tell others about Jesus and the Christian movement was born and spread like wild-fire.

Fifty days after Jesus' resurrection, Peter preached to a large crowd in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost saying:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.¹

He went on to say:

God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are witnesses of it.²

Then he concluded:

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this, God made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.³

Three thousand people responded to Peter's sermon by being baptized and becoming followers of Christ. It was the resurrection that both reignited the faith of the 11 disciples and served as a catalyst for the spread of the new movement.

Jesus also appealed to his own resurrection as the primary proof to back up his claims. After clearing the temple of moneychangers, the religious authorities had asked him:

What sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?

Jesus answered:

Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.⁴

1. Acts 2:22-24

2. Acts 2:32

3. Acts 2:36

4. John 2:18-19

As the disciples would understand later, he was speaking of the temple of his body and was pointing to his future resurrection as the primary sign which proved his authority to do the things he did and say the things he said.

But can we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead? One must let the evidence speak for itself and not dismiss the possibility out of hand. A journalist named Frank Morrison once set out to write a book disproving the resurrection of Jesus, but, in spite of his starting bias, once he looked at the evidence objectively, as he had been trained as a journalist to do, he changed his mind and instead wrote a book in favor of the resurrection called, Who Moved the Stone?¹ What kind of evidence could convince a reasonable person that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

First, there is the empty tomb. When the women came to look at the tomb, the stone was rolled away. When Peter and John went into the tomb, they found it empty, as recorded in the gospel of John:

Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.²

All the detractors of Jesus had to do to dispel rumors of Jesus' resurrection was go to the tomb and produce the body. But they could not do so. The tomb was empty.

Second, the angel announced to several eyewitnesses that Jesus had risen from the dead. The angel said to the women who went to look at the tomb:

He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay.³

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1. Frank Morrison, Who Moved the Stone? Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002. First published in 1930. Free pdf available online.
 2. John 20:6-8
 3. Matthew 28:6

The angel reminded them that Jesus had said he would rise again, as recorded earlier in Matthew's gospel:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.¹

Who else would dare to predict his own resurrection, and who else could deliver on the promise? Thus the women had a double confirmation, the reminder that Jesus, whom they had never known to lie, had said that he would rise and the announcement from the angel that he had done so.

Third, there were the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to those who saw him alive after he had been confirmed dead on Friday. Apart from this evidence, some credence might be given to the claim that his body was stolen. Such was the first thought of Mary Magdalene when she saw that the stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb.² But many eyewitnesses saw the risen Christ, of which Mary was the first.³ The disciples as a group saw him several times and on one occasion he appeared to a group of 500 at the same time.⁴ The instances were too many and the numbers who saw him too great to dismiss these reports as hearsay. When Paul wrote about the resurrection 20+ years later, he said of the 500 witnesses that most were still living. In other words, if you have doubt, find one of the eyewitnesses and ask them for yourself. Throughout the formative beginnings of the Christian movement, eyewitnesses could personally attest to the resurrection of Jesus.

The tomb was empty, the angel reported that he was risen and Jesus was seen alive on numerous occasions after he was confirmed dead. These are the primary evidences. In addition, the impact of the resurrection on the disciples, leading to a renewal of their faith and the beginnings of the Christian movement, as described earlier, is also significant, so much so

1. Matthew 16:21

2. John 20:1-2

3. John 20:10-18

4. See 1 Corinthians 15:3-8 for a summary of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Also see the gospel accounts in Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-49; John 20:10-29

that it can be said that without the resurrection of Jesus, there would be no Christian faith, as Paul argues when he says:

If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless
and so is your faith.¹

Additional testimony comes from the experience of millions of believers throughout the centuries since then who have had a personal, life-changing relationship with the risen Christ, as expressed in this hymn:

He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know he lives? He lives within my heart.²

Prophetic Blue-Print

12. If the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the primary proof of his claims to be the Messiah, Son of God and Savior of the world, then the remarkable correspondence between the life of Jesus and the Old Testament prophetic blueprint of the coming Messiah and suffering servant is the remarkable confirmation of that proof.

The prophets Micah and Isaiah, writing hundreds of years before Jesus, predicted concerning the Messiah that he would be a descendant of David, that he would be born of a virgin and that he would be born in Bethlehem.³ Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem from the virgin Mary in the line of David.⁴ These prophecies also say concerning the Messiah that his “origins are from of old, from ancient times,” and call him by the name “Mighty God,” which are consistent with the New Testament identification of Jesus as the incarnation of God.⁵ The prophets also predicted concerning the Messiah that he would be preceded by a forerunner who would prepare the way before him⁶ and that he would do miracles such as restoring sight to the blind and causing the lame to walk.⁷ Jesus was indeed preceded by a

1. 1 Corinthians 15:14

2. Alfred H. Ackley, “He Lives,” #132 in Great Hymns of the Faith, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1981.

3. Isaiah 9:6-7; Isaiah 7:14; Micah 5:2.

4. Luke 2:1-7; Matthew 1:1-25

5. John 1:1-2

6. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3

7. Isaiah 35:5-6

well-defined forerunner, John the Baptist,¹ and he did these predicted miracles and many more.²

Jesus fulfilled these and other prophecies about the Messiah and he also fulfilled a second set of prophecies about the suffering servant. It was not commonly understood in the Old Testament era that both sets of prophecies would be fulfilled in one person. By fulfilling the prophetic blueprint of both the Messiah and suffering servant, Jesus demonstrated that he was the one sent by God to fulfill both roles—as Messiah to bring God’s kingdom to the world, as suffering servant to be the Savior who pays for the sins of the world.

The most clear and amazing of these suffering servant prophecies is found in Isaiah 53. Written about 700 years before Christ, this prophecy describes the purpose for which Jesus would die:

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.³

Not only so, but the same prophecy predicts that the people of his time would not understand that he was suffering for this purpose but would reject him and consider him forsaken by God. It predicts that he would die without descendants, that he would be silent before his accusers, that he would be buried in a rich man’s tomb, and that, in the end, he would be honored as great.⁴ Every detail was fulfilled exactly in the experience of Jesus, 700 years later.

A number of other details fulfilled in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus are also described in the Messianic psalms, written by David about 1,000 years before Jesus. Most notable of these is Psalm 22, which opens with the very words spoken by Jesus on the cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

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1. Matthew 3:1-6; John 1:35-42
 2. Matthew 11:2-6
 3. Isaiah 53:5-6
 4. Isaiah 53:3-4; 7-9, 11-12.

The Psalm continues to describe how Jesus would be mocked and insulted, how he would thirst, how his hands and his feet would be pierced and even how people would cast lots for his clothing.¹ Can it be a mere coincidence that all these things happened, in precise detail, just as written 1,000 years earlier and 700 years earlier? Does this not show that there was in fact a pre-determined plan being worked out, as also spoken of by Isaiah when he says:

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer?²

Understanding that Jesus fulfilled the prophetic blueprint of both Messiah and suffering servant explains why Jesus did not fully take on the role of king as many expected him to. At one time, the crowd was determined to make Jesus king by force, but he slipped away.³ When Pilate asked him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world."⁴ It was not then his purpose to rule with political power, for he knew he had to die for the sins of the world. He clearly identified himself as the Messiah—a king, but deferred the full realization of that role to the future. Thus, when the high priest said to him, "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God," he answered:

You have said so. But I say to all of you: 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.⁵

The Second Coming

In speaking of his coming on the clouds of heaven, he is referring to his second coming, a topic on which he taught at considerable length on the Mount of Olives just two nights before his arrest. His disciples asked him: "What will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" He responded by giving eight signs of the end. When the time is ripe, as

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1. Psalm 22:1, 7-8, 15-18. For fulfillment, see Mark 15:21-38, especially verse 24 (casting lots for his clothing) and verse 34 (My God, why have you forsaken me?).
 2. Isaiah 53:10
 3. John 6:14-15
 4. John 18:33,36
 5. Matthew 26:63-64

indicated by these signs, the end will come. There will be great tribulation, such as has never been since the beginning of the world, followed by the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. When this will all happen, he said, no one knows, but we must be ready, lest that day should catch us unprepared.¹

Can we really believe that Jesus is coming again? To see whether we can trust his prediction about his return we should see whether his other predictions came true. Jesus predicted that one of the Twelve would betray him, and Judas did so, even though none of the others suspected Judas, but were shocked that any of them could do such a thing.² Jesus predicted that Peter would deny him three times, which he did, even though he insisted that he would not.³ Jesus predicted that he was going to Jerusalem to be killed and said he would rise on the third day, and he did!⁴ Has anyone else ever dared to call his own resurrection, and succeed in doing so? He predicted that the culmination of God's judgment would fall on the Jewish people for rejecting the prophets, and that it would happen within one generation. More specifically, he predicted the destruction of the Jewish temple, with not one stone being left on another.⁵ Within 40 years, this came true—Roman armies, led by Titus, surrounded Jerusalem and destroyed it in 70 A.D., including the complete destruction of the temple.⁶

If Jesus' past record is any indication, one would be foolish to ignore his prediction that he is coming again. The uncanny correspondence between the signs of the end predicted by Jesus and the situation in the world today also serves to bolster the viability of his prediction and leads many to believe he is coming soon. These eight signs of the end are: (1) that others will falsely claim to be Christ, (2) there will be many wars and rumors of wars, (3) there will be famines, (4) earthquakes, (5) persecution of Christians, (6) many will turn away from the faith, (7) wickedness will

1. Matthew 24:3-44

2. Matthew 26:20-25; 20:47-50

3. Matthew 26:31-35; 26:69-75

4. Luke 9:22

5. Matthew 23:33-36; 24:1-2

6. See "Siege of Jerusalem (70AD)" in Wikipedia, or any other standard encyclopedia.

increase and (8) the gospel will be preached in the whole world.¹ Search for yourself and see if it is not true that all of these signs are being fulfilled in the world today, and with increasing frequency and intensity.

The Apostle Paul speaks also of the sixth sign when he says that the day of the Lord will not come “except there come a falling away first.”² Note that Jesus predicted that the decline of the faith and the spread of the faith would occur simultaneously. This may seem like a contradiction, and yet it is exactly what we see in the world today. In the Western world, previously the domain of “Christendom,” the Christian faith has been and is declining—first in Europe and now in America. But in the global south, including Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, which Philip Jenkins describes as the “New Christendom,”³ as well as in unlikely places like China, Christianity has grown and is growing tremendously.

In America, the decline has been most notable in your generation. From 2001 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who identified as Christians fell from 84% to 70%.⁴ Much of that decline was due to the turning away from the faith by those now in their 20s and 30s. Isn't it interesting that by turning away from the faith, your generation is actually fulfilling one of the signs of the end predicted by Jesus 2,000 years ago? Even in denying the faith, you cannot help but to confirm it.

When Jesus comes, will he find faith on the earth?⁵ He will find it, for he will not come until the gospel has spread to every people group, but will he find it in the places where it once thrived? Will he find it in your generation? Will he find it in you?

1. Matthew 24:3-14

2. 2 Thessalonians 2:3, KJV

3. Philip Jenkins, The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, 3rd edition, Oxford: University Press, 2011.

4. Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, Operation World, 6th edition, Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001; Ed Stourton, “The Decline of Religion in the West,” June 26, 2015, posted at <http://www.bbc.com>

5. Luke 18:8

What is faith?

13. Faith, in the subjective sense, is putting your faith or confidence in someone or something, particularly when you cannot see the object of your faith. In this regard, the writer of Hebrews defines it as such:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.¹

Faith, in the objective sense, is the belief system, usually religious, to which one adheres. Those who believe in the God of the Bible and in Jesus Christ, his Son, adhere to the Christian faith, or have a Christian world-view. Others have an Islamic or Buddhist faith, or world-view. Your world-view is the lens through which you look at the world and make sense of it. Even those of your generation who have no religious identity—the “Nones,” have a world-view, or faith. For many “Nones,” that world-view is naturalism—belief that everything can be explained by science, leaving no room for supernatural intervention. This world-view also requires faith—faith that science can explain everything, even though it has not yet explained everything, such as the origin of life or the fine-tuning of the universe. Even if science could eliminate all explanatory gaps, even if scientists could discover the elusive theory of everything that unifies all the laws and constants of nature into one elegant and powerful mathematical equation, would not this very reality be a thing of wonder that points to the existence of a Master Mathematician and Designer?

Moreover, some statements that are taken to be science because scientists say them are really nothing other than naturalistic philosophy and require faith to believe them. For example, as discussed earlier, Stephen Hawking explains the fine-tuning of the universe by postulating multiple universes—universes which we have not seen. This is not science but faith in multiple unseen realities, a faith that he is driven to by his naturalistic world-view. Discard the false dichotomy between faith and science or faith and reason. The question is not whether you have faith, but what your faith is in.

1. Hebrews 11:1

What is it that determines your faith, or world-view? Historically, most have followed the faith of their parents. This is increasingly not the case for millennials and beyond. The reason is that the dominant faith of Western Culture is shifting from Christianity to a naturalistic and pluralistic world-view. The culture that you live in indoctrinates you with this world-view, through education, media, peer influence, etc. The air that you breathe is the air of the prevailing culture and it impacts you. You follow the path of least resistance and start thinking like those around you. As you look at the world through that lens, you find that your Christian faith no longer makes sense, and you discard it. But what has changed? Has the evidence for the Christian faith changed? No, it is not the evidence that has changed but the environment you are in that has changed. It is not that the evidence fails to support Christianity but that you have assumed an anti-faith bias. It is not that Christianity fails to make sense of the world, but that you are looking through a different lens.

It is not easy to be a Christian in an environment that is anti-Christian. But Christianity has survived for two millennia and has flourished around the world precisely because Christians have gone against the flow, because they believed when believing was not the norm and followed God when others were not. By faith Noah, though ridiculed by the people of his time, built an ark, and in doing so, saved his civilization from extinction.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.¹

By faith he also, though past age, believed in God to have a son, and through that son became the great nation God had promised.² By faith Joseph believed in God for the fulfillment of his dreams, even when sold into slavery and forgotten in prison, and saved Egypt from famine and his own family—the beginnings of that great nation promised to Abraham, from extinction. By faith Moses, though driven from Egypt and forgotten in Midian, responded to God's call to lead his people out of Egypt. By faith he also, when the Israelites were pursued by Pharaoh and hemmed in by the sea, raised his staff and parted the waters so his people could escape to their freedom and journey to the Promised Land.

1. Hebrews 11:8

2. Hebrews 11:11

By faith the Apostles, after they had seen the resurrected Lord, spread the gospel near and far, even in the face of threats and persecution. Some were exiled, beheaded or crucified upside down, yet they were strong in the faith and gave glory to God. Future generations, inspired by their example, continued to spread the gospel to new lands. By faith St. Patrick, though kidnapped and enslaved, after escaping to his home in England, responded to God's call and returned to Ireland and led the people to embrace the Christian faith.

By faith William Wilberforce fought against slavery in England, and though denied and delayed by vested interests, racism and personal sickness, persevered to bring an end to the slave trade and to hear, three days before his death, of the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act, abolishing slavery altogether in the British empire.¹ By faith William Carey, the father of modern missions, in spite of the apathy of his own church and the mental incapacity of his wife, brought to India not only the gospel, but advancements in education, agriculture and botany as well as social reforms that led to more humane treatment of lepers and the abolition of infanticide and widow burning.² By faith Jim Elliott and his companions, motivated by a desire to share with them the good news of the gospel, sought to establish contact with the Auca Indians in Ecuador, which no outsider had successfully done, and were slaughtered and left dead on the beach. Yet his words, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose," lived on to inspire many, including his wife and others, who returned to those same Indians with a message of

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1. <http://www.wilberforceacademy.org/wilberforce.html>, page on William Wilberforce;
<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/activists/wilberforce.html>, "William Wilberforce." See also "Slave Trade Act 1807" in Wikipedia. John Piper's blog: "[This Politician Was Passionate for Precious Doctrine,](http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/2276)" at <http://www.desiringgod.org/Blog/2276>
 2. Paul Pierson, "The History of Transformation," in [Perspectives on the World Christian Movement](#), 3rd edition, edited by Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne, Pasadena, California: William Carey Library, 1999, p. 265. "William Carey," <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/aghort/founder.htm>; Charles C. Creegan and Josephine A. B. Goodnow, "William Carey," at <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/bcarey12.html>; "William Carey," in Wikipedia.

forgiveness and hope, and led them to embrace the Christian faith.¹

By faith Mother Teresa established an order of nuns that served the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, picking up thousands that were left to die on the streets, thus overcoming the prevailing indifference to show that even “the least of these” possessed human dignity and worth.⁴ By faith the ordinary Christians of China resisted indoctrination, endured persecution and spread the gospel after the western missionaries were expelled, leading to the many-fold growth of the church during the following decades, so remarkably so that one prominent researcher has said:

The survival and reviving of the Church in China was one of the decisive events of the 20th century.²

By faith also many of your own generation are going against the flow to stand for Christ. By faith, Trip Lee, the “hip-hop theologian,” used his music to brag about God and then left his music career behind to go to seminary. By faith Dale Partridge started a business and dared to put people before profits—and succeeded. By faith Christena Cleveland wrote a book that calls Christians to task for division within the church along racial and political lines. By faith Nabeel Qureshi left his Muslim faith behind, though it meant being disowned by his family, and became an evangelist for the Christian faith. By faith, Jena Lee Nardela co-founded Blood: Water Mission alongside Jars of Clay to help the band use its influence to promote the clean water cause.³ These and many more of the millennial generation are putting their faith into action to make a difference in this world and for the cause of Christ.

Pascal was a 17th century mathematician and Christian who articulated what is now called “Pascal’s wager.” He reasoned that if one believes in the Christian faith and is right, then he has infinite gain—eternity in heaven with God, whereas if he believes in the Christian faith and is wrong, then he has only finite loss, such as sinful pleasures he may have foregone or time spent on church activities or Christian service, etc. If, however, one rejects the Christian faith and is right, he has only finite gain

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1. David Aikman, Great Souls, Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998, pp. 197, 203, 212.
 2. Johnstone and Mandryk, Operation World, 6th edition, p. 161.
 3. “33 Under 33,” Christianity Today, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/july-august/33-under-33.html>

in this life (although even that is arguable, as the Christian life provides a more meaningful life), while if he rejects the Christian faith and is wrong he faces infinite loss—eternal punishment and separation from God. Therefore a rational person is wise to follow the Christian faith.¹ While this argument does not prove whether the Christian faith is true, it highlights what is at stake in deciding for or against. To follow the path away from Christ is a risky choice.

Do not be of those who shrink back into a life without hope or purpose, but of those who believe and are saved. Do not throw away your faith, for it will be richly rewarded.

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. For in just a little while,

He who is coming will come and will not delay.

But my righteous one will live by faith.

And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back.²

Don't just look around and follow the crowd of those in your generation who are walking away from the faith. Take a deeper view, and see that following Christ offers a better purpose for living based on a coherent belief system. Don't just follow the latest trends, but take a longer view, and see that by following Christ you are part of a historic faith that goes back for 2,000 years. Take a global view and see that, while Christianity may be declining in the West, it is growing in many parts of the world. Don't be oblivious to what is going on in the world around us, but take a watchful view, and see that the signs of the times indicate that Christ may be coming soon. Don't just look around and follow the crowd, but take a forward-looking view—be a leader who guides your peers to a better alternative. Along with other millennials and beyond, you can be part of a hero generation³ that reforms the evangelical church and helps it to regain a relevant witness in our culture.

1. "Pascal's Wager," in Wikipedia.

2. Hebrews 10:37-38

3. www.generationhero.org

Arise, shine, for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord rises upon you.
See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the
peoples,
But the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.¹

So may it be, Amen.

1. Isaiah 60:1-2.