

Why we believe.

A confident faith in a
challenging world.

*"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have
believed."*

John 20v29

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Introduction.

As Christians today we face huge challenges to our faith. Our kids do especially – often from teachers as well as friends.

It may be intellectual objections, or ridicule, or the barrage of ideas from the world that imply (or blatantly state) that Christians are arrogant or hateful because of what they believe. And then there are the times of suffering or hardship that cause the best Christians to waver, as well as the day to day enticements to just give it all up and live as we please.

What this means, is that in our discipling we must ensure that we and any children we have know why we believe, not only so that we will stand firm, but so that we are properly “prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks [us] to give the reason for the hope that [we] have.” (1 Pet 3v15).

These short studies have been written for that reason. My hope is that they can be understood by those who

are secondary school age and up – perhaps those a little younger too. But they are written for adults to benefit from as well.

They could be read before a meal with the concluding questions being discussed as you eat. Or they could be done before bed or at any other time.

The first few in the second section titled “why we believe” are a bit more philosophical and so need a little more thought. If you are reading them to children it would be worth considering them first yourself, so that you understand the arguments being made.

If you do have any questions, do please email me:
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Why we doubt.

(1) Doubt can be good.

“My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42v5)

Q: What two things enable Job to know God?

Doubt is not always wrong. In fact, it can be good for us. If a friend tells you to go on a rope swing, doubt protects you. It ensures you weigh things up properly, until you can be sure the swing can take your weight.

In the same way, a little doubt can help us as Christians. God doesn't want us to believe blindly. He calls us to love him with all our “mind” as well as our heart, soul and strength. He gives us many good reasons to believe as we will see in these studies. And doubt forces us to think hard about them, so we can be absolutely confident that we can entrust our lives to him.

That doesn't mean doubt is always OK. As we grow in faith it should become only ever momentary. But

it is very common when you are young in age or faith, because you have not had much time to think things through or experience God's word at work in your life. And it will only really lessen if you start to exercise faith in Jesus.

Think about the swing again. You ask your friend whether it will hold you. Your faith grows as they tell you they've been on it loads of time. You still have some doubts, but because of what they've said you exercise faith by giving it a go. And then, the more you swing, the more confident you become because you can see it really is able to take your weight.

That's the point Job made in our Bible verse. The main reason we believe is because of what we hear in the Bible, perhaps taught to us by parents or people at church. Yet even though we believe, we may still suffer niggling doubts. As we get to know more of the Bible, these will lessen. But as we choose to trust God anyway, we will also find our faith strengthened by what we see of him in our lives.

Spectacular experiences are rare. But all Christians will see him answering prayers. They will see a goodness in true Christians at church that contrasts

with how most people are in the world. In time they will see something of this in themselves too. And they will certainly see how much better the life of love, purity and hope that God works in us is, than what is offered elsewhere.

Q: Have you ever doubted something in life, and then found you didn't need to doubt? What changed your mind?

Q: In what ways have you already seen God at work in your life or that of others? How has that helped you trust him?

(2) Reasons we doubt.

“Be merciful to those who doubt.” (Jude 22)

Q: Jude is writing to a church. What does he tell us here about doubt?

Often non-Christians doubt what we believe because they are already so committed to their own beliefs that they just assume Christianity is wrong, without looking into it. It's hardly open-minded.

But those in church may doubt too. They may find Jesus' miracles and eternal life hard to believe in – like Thomas, who doubted that Jesus could have risen from the dead. Or they may struggle because the difficulties of life don't seem to fit with there being a loving God. For example, the writer of Psalm 73 felt that bad people were enjoying happy lives, whereas he and others served God but faced hardship. Being in a country where most don't believe can cause doubt too. We wonder whether so many could really be wrong.

But there are two particular ways Christians can be tempted to doubt. The first is when they find

something the Bible teaches hard or harsh when compared to modern ideas – whether its teaching on hell, the need to believe in Jesus, or on gender or relationships.

This is not new. The gospels tell us some of Jesus' first disciples found his teaching offensive and *“turned back and no longer followed him”* (John 6v61-66). But not to believe in Jesus because we don't like what he teaches is rather like saying we won't believe in rain because we don't like getting wet! Whether something is real or not does not depend on how we feel about it.

The second temptation is to doubt in order to get out of making sacrifices for Jesus. The parable of the sower makes this point. When people don't want to be treated badly for being Christians, or when they want to follow a course of action they know is wrong – a relationship perhaps, they may look for reasons to doubt, so they can reject Christianity, or at least hold it at a distance. As one Bible writer puts it: “They will gather round them a great number of teachers to tell them what their itching ears want to hear.” (2 Tim 4v3).

But, again, this is very foolish because the truth about Jesus doesn't depend on whether it suits our purposes.

Living as a Christian in our country and at this time is hard. Our faith will be challenged in ways Christians a hundred years ago never knew. And so, we really do need to know why we believe so that we can stand firm. But don't worry. The coming studies will give us lots and lots of reasons to know our faith has the firmest of foundations.

Q: Some people doubt that astronauts ever landed on the moon. What do you think might lead someone to doubt this? What might change their mind?

Q: What causes you to doubt the truth of Christianity? What would enable you to overcome your doubt?

Why we believe.

(1) The universe must have a cause.

“By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” (Heb 11v3)

Q: What do we learn here about the birth of the universe?

What caused you to be where you are now? What caused you to get up this morning? What caused you to be born into your family?

Some people like to say that the universe just suddenly appeared for no reason, or that it has always existed. But everything that happens in life happens because something made it happen. And so, saying these sorts of things is a leap of faith that really has no basis. Instead, the fact that everything we observe operates by cause and effect suggests that the universe must have had a cause too.

Now that doesn't lead us to believe in the good and personal God who controls every part of our universe, and who came to us as Jesus. We're going to see all sorts of reasons we can be certain of that. For now, we can simply say that the fact that the universe must have had a cause shows the existence of some sort of God is much more likely than there not being a God.

Of course, someone might respond by asking what caused God. The answer is that nothing did. It's a bit mind stretching, but for everything to exist as it does, there must have been an uncaused cause at the beginning – something or someone that exists outside of space and time and that has brought it all into being.

How do we know this? Well, think of each cause like a domino falling into another domino. If there was no start to this in an uncaused something or someone, the line of dominoes would stretch back in time infinitely with no end. But if you think hard about that, it would mean that even if you travelled a million dominoes along the line, you would still be no closer to today. So today could never arrive!

Don't worry if that's caused your brain to implode. You can think on it more another time. For now, we can just agree that the existence of a God creating our universe is much more likely than there being no God. Belief in God is therefore much more sensible than believing there isn't one.

Q: Have you ever seen a line of dominoes fall? What caused it?

Q: How should the fact that our universe has been created by God make us thankful? What are you especially thankful for?

(2) The universe appears designed.

“For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.” (Psalm 139v13-14)

Q: What do you learn here about yourself?

If an amazon tribesman had grown up with no technology, and then came across a mobile phone dropped in the middle of his path, do you think he would assume it was designed or that it came into being by chance?

It’s a reworking of a famous argument for how the design in nature points to the existence of a designer.

But not all think this way today. Perhaps that’s because we are so regularly told our universe has arisen by random events. It is said that for some reason a big bang kicked it all off, and the right events just happened to take place for the earth to form in a way that could host life, and then for life to spontaneously start. And,

from then, zillions and zillions of miniscule changes have just happened to take place in a way that has caused the first microscopic organisms to develop into all we marvel at today. Just think about the incredible diversity of inter-related ecosystems and complex creatures that fill our planet.

But, if you like maths, consider this: One mathematician has calculated that for the universe to come into being, whatever started it would have had to have been accurate to 1 part in 10 to the power of 123 – a number so long, that if you were to write it out, there would not be enough particles in the universe for every zero in it.¹ In easy speak, that means it is mathematically so unlikely for the universe to start by chance, as to be utterly impossible.

And if biology is your thing, listen to this: A biologist has written that each cell in us earth-dwellers resembles “an immense automated factory, a factory larger than a city and carrying out almost as many unique functions as all the manufacturing activities of

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<https://godevidence.com/2010/12/ok-i-want-numbers-what-is-the-probability-the-universe-is-the-result-of-chance>, accessed 19/8/2020

man on earth.”² And do you know what? We’re each made of up to 37 trillion of these, and each of these is able to replicate itself again and again and again.

Now those who believe everything evolved without God’s guiding hand will give an explanation as to why they think all this could have happened by chance. But the key question is this: Is it really more likely that impersonal nothingness would lead to our deeply relational and apparently designed world, or that a personal creator is behind it all?

People laugh at Christians for believing in the virgin birth of Jesus, whilst themselves believing in the virgin birth of the universe! Again then, we can see that belief in God is much more sensible than belief that there isn’t one. More than that, the fact that the world seems designed in a way that is inter-related and that so abundantly provides for us implies that the God who made it is amazingly wise, powerful, relational and kind.

Q: Can you think of ways your body is cleverly designed?

² <https://home.apu.edu/~jsimons/Bio101/quotes2.htm>, accessed 19/8/2020

Q: What in the world makes you most praise God because it's so amazing? Why do you find it so amazing?

(3) Suffering and death feel wrong.

“My comfort in my suffering is this: your promise preserves my life.” (Ps 119v50)

Q: According to this verse, what comfort does God give us in suffering?

So why do we cry over the suffering of people and not over discarded rubbish?

Of course, it sounds silly to even ask. You seem more significant because you are able to think and act. But if we are not specially made and cherished by a God, then in real terms we are not worth anything more than anything else in the universe. We're all just made of atoms in whatever way chance has determined. And we will all decompose the same way in the ground.

The fact that what this means for suffering is so silly, shows that our concern over suffering makes no sense if there is no God. When people say that the existence of suffering proves there cannot be a loving God, we can therefore gently point out that if there was

no loving God then we would not care about suffering in the first-place.

Some do argue that we have learnt what we call “care” through evolution as a way to look after one-another so that the human race develops. But that doesn’t really explain why we care about the suffering and death of the elderly or disabled who can’t help our race anymore. It doesn’t explain why suffering and death always feels sort of wrong.³

In fact, according to the theory of evolution the suffering and death of those who are not strong and healthy is a good thing. It tells us it is nature’s way of freeing the rest of us from the burden of looking after them, and ensuring there is more food and resource to go round.

But only the most cold-hearted person thinks this way. Most recognize that this world is not what it should be, and should ultimately be free from suffering and death. That’s why we so love the NHS. So, there’s a real

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<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/505370-creatures-are-not-born-wit-h-desires-unless-satisfaction-for-those>, accessed 26/2/24

sense that those who don't even believe in heaven, feel as if it should exist.

Now, our instincts aren't always reliable. But, when we all share the same instinct, it is evidence of something real. CS Lewis wrote the famous Narnia books. He became a Christian as a professor at Oxford University partly after realising just this. He wrote: "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water... If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."

In the last couple of studies, we've seen that the belief that there is a God makes much more sense than the belief that there isn't. Now we're seeing that it better fits what we instinctively know and feel too.

Q: If it's not too painful to think about, remember when someone you have cared about has suffered or died. Why did you feel sad?

Q: The book of Ecclesiastes tells us that God has “set eternity in the human heart” (Eccl 3v11). What do you think he means?

(4) Selflessness and justice feel right.

“And I saw something else under the sun: in the place of judgment—wickedness was there, in the place of justice—wickedness was there.” (Eccl 3v16)

Q: What does the writer see as he looks at the world?

You don't have to teach a toddler to say no or throw a tantrum. So, why do we try to change that? We don't consider it wrong for dogs to bark or lions to attack. But human beings lead much of their lives making selfish decisions, arguing with one-another and regularly going to war. So why do we still think that's unacceptable? Why don't we just say it's what human animals do?

If there is no God, we would have to say we have simply evolved to be selfish, and that this is in some sense right and so “good,” because it's the product of evolution and so the natural way things are meant to be for our species to flourish. But this just doesn't fit with how we feel.

More than that, if there is no God, how can we even decide what is good or bad? Everything is just what

each human cluster of atoms prefers or doesn't prefer. So, there is no real justice. We can never say anything is actually right or wrong and that it should therefore be rewarded or punished. We can only say that if there is a God who has made us to live a certain way.

Many assume that "good" is what the individual chooses, what makes most people happy, or what a particular nation decides it is. But who gets to decide that? What if a mass of people say something different? How can they be said to be wrong?

The Nazis thought it was good to exterminate millions of Jews to make their nation great. If there is no God, there's a sense in which that is no better or worse than one pack of wolves hunting down a herd of deer. It's just what human animals do.

Don't just take my word on all this. Richard Dawkins was an Oxford professor who has made a big thing of trying to persuade people there is no God. He wrote: *"The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference."*

The problem with this is that those who say there is no God don't act as if this is true. They live as if selflessness and justice is good, as if there really is right and wrong. But can you see that is to be inconsistent? If you say you don't believe in legs but use yours to get around anyway, maybe you've got your beliefs wrong!

And so, once again, we're learning that belief in God better fits what we know and feel deep down, than belief that God doesn't exist.

Q: Name something you think is evil. Why do you think it matters so much?

Q: Why is it good news that God has made known what is right and wrong?

(5) People desire God.

“My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42v2)

Q: What do you think the writer here means?

Driving to the beach recently, we saw a sign spray-painted onto a wall saying: “Covid-19 is a hoax.” It proves an important point. New ideas or not always better, and not always true.

Believing there is no God is called “atheism.” And it is a fairly new idea too. There were very few atheists until around 300 years ago. But even today, although there are a lot of atheists in our country, only around 7% of the world agree with them. That means that 93% of people today believe there is or might be some kind of God!⁴ That’s good to remember when we feel so few.

But even amongst those who say there is no God, there are many who still believe in fate – the idea that their life is planned and that things happen for a

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<https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/the-secular-life/201510/how-many-atheists-are-there>, accessed 20/8/20

reason. People talk of “the universe” telling them something, or throwing something at them when life gets hard. But if the universe has just come about by chance it can’t do that anymore than your toenail can! No, what we are seeing is that even those who claim there is no God governing life, can’t shake off the sense that there really is.

Previously we heard CS Lewis talk of a “desire which no experience in this world can satisfy” that, like hunger - or thirst, is evidence the thing desired exists. It’s a desire not just for heaven but for the God who reigns there too. It’s an awareness even in those who try to ignore it, that there really is an amazing being ruling over all things.⁵

Yet, despite this, people still don’t believe. The Bible’s book of Romans says this is because they “suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Rom 1v18-20). It sounds a bit harsh. But when you think about it, people

⁵ Some may say not every desire we have points to what is real. I remember being convinced for a moment I could fly, jumping off a climbing frame, and crashing to the ground. But I was a child not an adult. I knew that I couldn’t really fly. And it was just me thinking that anyway. But when the massive majority of throughout history are all convinced there is a God who made us, that’s quite another matter.

do push away the idea there is a God so that they can live as they please, or feel superior to religious people, or fit in with their friends. And this is serious, because deep down their instincts tell them there is a personal, powerful and moral God, even if they won't admit it to themselves.

As we've seen, they show concern over suffering and death as if they are somehow wrong. They aspire to selflessness and justice as if they are not just preferences. And they sense that there is something at work behind the scenes of the universe, that they are dependent on.

We might say the things that come with there being a God are sort of hard-wired into who we are. Add in the fact that the overwhelming majority believe in a God anyway, and the best explanation is that a God must actually exist, who is needed for life to add up.

Have you ever tried to fit a square shape in a round hole? When it doesn't fit, no amount of squeezing will help. You have to accept you've got it wrong and pick up the right piece. In the same way, the idea that there is no God just doesn't fit with what people feel and how they know they should live.

Q: Have you ever felt really thirsty? Obviously, that told you water exists. But what else did it tell you?

Q: Why do you think so many in our country don't believe in God?

(6) The best explanation for the Bible is that God was behind it.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” (2 Tim 3:16)

Q: What do you think it means for the Bible's writings to be “God-breathed”?

If you've read the Harry Potter books, you will know how obvious it is they share the same author. Ideas are developed throughout. For example (spoiler alert), Harry battles Voldemort from the beginning. But only as the books progress do you learn of how horcruxes need to be destroyed for Harry to be victorious. And only at the end, do you realize that he must die and then rise for that to happen!

It's like that with the Bible. It contains sixty-six books of all sorts of types, from forty or so human authors, spanning one thousand five hundred years. But, the more you read it, the more you realize how amazingly those books work together with a coherent

message, in a way that is just impossible, unless God was the ultimate author, governing the thought processes of those writing so that they wrote exactly what he wanted. That's why Jesus called the Bible "the Word of God," giving it an equal authority to his teaching (Jn 3v34, 10v35).

The books of other religions are nothing like this: Islam's Quran and Hinduism's Gita are both said to be the product of single individuals.

But that's not all. Christians speak of how superior and original the message and wisdom of the Bible is compared with other religious texts. It makes sense of reality like nothing else. And it is filled with ideas like the Trinity and grace, that human beings would never make up, but that make such sense when understood. Its authors were just ordinary men not geniuses. So, we can only conclude that God himself was behind what they wrote.

Of course, those who don't believe in Jesus question the Bible's accuracy and teachings. There are good answers to be given. But we must realize that questions will always arise because we will always be limited in our grasp of the Bible's content and times. Yet

we can accept God as its author, because the more we do get to know it, the more we realize this is the only way we can explain what we read.

The hard thing if you are a young or new Christian is that you won't fully experience this until you get to know the Bible well. But what it starts to show is that the God who is there is the God of the Bible – the one who was behind its history, and who fulfils that history, like Harry, in death and resurrection.

Q: If you've read a book series, what showed they were by the same author?

Q: What in the Bible most convinces you that God is its author?

(7) The best explanation for the gospels is that it all really happened.

“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 eye witnesses 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.” (Lk 1v1-4)

Q: What do we learn here about Luke's gospel?

In 1992 a man bought a dirty painting for £400 in an antiques shop. He took it onto the Antiques Roadshow, and they thought it might be by a famous artist called Van Dyck. But the experts had to check it wasn't a fake. It wasn't. And so, it was worth around half a million pounds.

As Luke's words show, the four gospels are history not made up spiritual stories. They record Jesus'

life. And there are a whole number of reasons we can be sure that they are not fake, and so of the greatest value to us in a very different way.

First, they were all written between thirty and fifty years after the events happened. That means eyewitnesses were still around who could have said if what was recorded was wrong. And as the things we read in the gospels were being taught throughout that time, everything would have remained fresh in their minds. It has been seventy-five years since the second world war. But we still accept what its veterans tell us happened.

Second, the authors had nothing to gain by making up what they wrote. The first Christians were rejected and attacked for what they believed. Some were even executed. So, in recording their gospels from eyewitnesses, Luke and Mark would have made very sure it was all true. And as eyewitnesses themselves, Matthew and John must have seen Jesus' miracles, resurrection and ascension – which would explain why they were ready to die for what they believed.

Third, we have lots of partial and fuller copies of the New Testament from very close to when the originals

were written.⁶ During this period, we also have much of what we find in the gospels quoted in letters by early church leaders. And we should remember that during that same period copies would have been taken all over the world. This tells us that the gospels couldn't have been changed after their writing, because you'd have to change every copy wherever it was – and the quotes by the early church leaders too. It wasn't like Chinese whispers.

FF Bruce was a brainy man. He was a professor at the Universities of Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester. And he wrote that if the New Testament was just another history book from that period, the reliability of what we have would generally be regarded as “beyond all doubt.”⁷

Now, in our previous study we saw that we can hold the whole Bible to be trustworthy because it is inspired by God. But what we have now learnt, is that

⁶ For example, Caesar's book on the gallic wars was written between 100-44 BC. But we have only ten copies, with the earliest around 1000 years after the original. But we have 250 copies of most of the New Testament from just 150 years after the original, and 325 copies from 225 years after. McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that demands a verdict* p.38

⁷ Bruce, FF. *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* p15

even if we just treat the gospels like other ancient works, we can be confident of what we read and so of the God we meet there.

Q: What makes you trust what you read in history books?

Q: Why is it so encouraging to know the gospels this reliable?

(8) The best explanation for Jesus' fulfilment of prophecies is that God was directing events.

"These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5v39-40)

Q: What does it mean to testify about someone?

Have you ever played darts? Most of us only ever get the bullseye as a fluke. But would you say it was a fluke if it happened every single time? No, hitting it every time is evidence of a most awesome and skillful player.

A prophecy is a message from God, often predicting some future event. But there are over a 300 hundred in the Old Testament that predict things in Jesus' life, and they hit home absolutely every time.⁸

Some are very clear indeed: predictions of where he would be born, the nature of his birth, the area he would live, the miracles he would perform, the manner of

⁸ McDowell, Josh. *Evidence that demands a verdict*. p168

his death, the details of his death, the details of his burial and, of course, his resurrection.

Now no-one argues that the Old Testament was written after Jesus in a way that looked like it was pointing to him. Scholars accept that what we have in our Bibles was written before Jesus lived. But some might say that the gospel writers simply created the story of Jesus to fit the prophecies. We've already dealt with this. They had no reason to, and people could have pointed out if they had.

Others might say that Jesus purposefully fulfilled the prophecies. The problem here is that every one of the eight just mentioned were beyond his control. Still others might say that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies by coincidence. Well, one or two, possibly. But eight, or three hundred?

This brings us to some more maths I'm afraid. A maths professor called Peter Stoner has worked out the probability of any man fulfilling just eight prophecies. He says the chances are 1 in 10 to the power of 17 – that means unlikely to the point of being impossible.⁹

⁹ http://sciencespeaks.dstoner.net/Christ_of_Prophecy.html, accessed 25/8/20

If you add in the many more prophecies involved, and the way the Old Testament looks to Jesus in other ways too, then the likelihood of Jesus fulfilling the Jewish scriptures is so infinitesimally small as to be beyond all belief – but for God's hand lying behind all history.

You can think of the prophecies like pieces of a puzzle, personally designed by God to provide a picture of Jesus' life so that he could be recognized when he came. This is why he and the apostles made so much of them.

And it's yet another reason we believe in the God of the Bible.

Q: Imagine following a long trail to a treasure. How would you feel when you arrived at the end?

Q: The book of Micah was written over 700 years before Jesus. What prophecies can you spot in this one verse? "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." (Mic 5v2)

(9) The best explanation for Jesus' claims and character is that he was the Son of God.

Jesus said: "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me?" (John 8v46)

Q: Why does the fact Jesus couldn't be shown to be sinful mean he must have been telling the truth?

So what's the most important question ever? It's got to be: "Who is Jesus?" Everything depends on the answer.

When you understand how Jewish people would have heard what Jesus said, it's quite clear he claimed to be God living as a man. He said he and the Father were one, and that he could do whatever the Father could do. So, his opponents charged him with blasphemy, saying "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2v7). And they sought to kill him for "making himself equal with God" (Jn 5v19), recognizing that as a "claim to be God" (Jn 10v34).

We met CS Lewis in a previous study. He argued there are only three possible conclusions we can have about someone who makes this sort of claim: Either they are a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord they claim to be.

He made the point that if Jesus was a liar, he would be deeply evil, because he claimed everyone's lives depended on him. But if that were the case, like all evil people, his life would have been marked out by selfishness, nastiness and deception. And that would have been very clear to his followers who spent so much time with him. But instead, they were convinced he was without sin. And in his teaching, we see nothing but selflessness and goodness.

Was Jesus a lunatic then? Well, to claim something so bizarre, you'd expect signs of nuttiness throughout! But his followers never thought that to be the case. Instead, Jesus always had a right response to his critics. And his teaching has been regarded even by many non-Christians as amongst the wisest in all history.

It seems to leave the only sensible conclusion to be that he was Lord. Listen to the way CS Lewis put it. It might make you smile: "I am trying here 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 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...[So] let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."¹⁰

Q: What most amazes you about Jesus' personality?

Q: Can you think of any convincing alternative to Jesus being a liar, a lunatic, or Lord?

¹⁰ Lewis, CS. *Mere Christianity*.

(10) The best explanation of Jesus' teaching is that he had the wisdom of God.

Jesus said: "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." (John 10v17)

Q: Where does Jesus say his teaching has come from?

Do you prefer Alexa and Siri? Both are amazing. Whatever you ask they seem to have the answer. We know why. They access the mind of the internet. In a similar way, Jesus' teaching shows that what he accessed, was the very mind of God.

"What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" "You are the salt of the earth." "Turn the other cheek." "Love your enemies." "Do to others as you'd have them do to you." "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself."

We are so used to Jesus' teaching that we miss how astonishing it is. Intelligent people can say profound things. But no-one has ever put such wisdom so simply and memorably.

But it's not just its wisdom and simplicity. Consider its goodness and power too. Wouldn't our whole world be transformed if we lived just by the sayings I have quoted? And millions of Christians down the ages can testify to how Jesus' teaching has saved their marriage, transformed their parenting, checked their pride or relieved their depression.

Bernard Levin was a journalist, and not a Christian. Yet even he recognized this. He wrote: *"Is not the nature of Christ, in the words of the New testament, enough to pierce to the soul anyone with a soul to be pierced?....he still looms over the world, his message still clear, his pity still infinite, his consolation still effective, his words still full of glory, wisdom and love."*¹¹

What should we make of this? Do we just say Jesus was a gifted man, when he himself claimed that as the Son of God he taught the wisdom of God?

If my car breaks down on diesel but runs brilliantly on petrol, it proves that petrol is the fuel it was designed for. In the same way, if our lives run brilliantly on Jesus' teaching, it suggests that Jesus' teaching is

¹¹ Quoted in Gumble, *N Questions of life*.

what we were designed for too – that his teaching comes from our maker.

And this is yet another reason to believe not only that there is a God, but that he has come to us in Jesus.

Q: What makes you think someone is wise?

Q: Which of the saying of Jesus do you think would most transform your life?

(11) The best explanation for Jesus' miracles is that he held the authority of God.

At the end of John's gospel, we read: "Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20v30-31)

Q: In what way do Jesus' miracles act like "signs"?

I was once a Policeman. I was given an authority. It was great. If I told someone to stop doing something they would – usually!

Jesus' miracles show he had the authority of God himself. When he told a storm to stop, it did – immediately. The same whenever he told sickness or disability to stop. He even told death to stop for Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, and it did.

These not only proved Jesus was God's Son, but that he is able to bring about the kingdom he spoke of, free of all suffering and death.

Now some might suggest the miracles were made up by the gospel writers. But we've seen they had no reason to do that. And even opponents of Jesus accepted he did miracles. They just dismissed them as magic – like a modern day con-trick.¹² But we've seen his character showed nothing of deceptiveness. And the miracles were major events that couldn't be set-up.

Others might say we don't know how they happened, but science will one day show us. But even if that were the case, miracles are in the timing too. We may one day hear of someone's sickness suddenly disappearing, leaving them fit and well. But this only happened for Peter's mother-in-law the moment Jesus commanded it.

¹² A Jewish document from the second century confirms not only that Jesus lived and was crucified as the gospels say, but that he did what at least seemed miraculous: "Jesus of Nazareth was hung up on the day of preparation for the Passover...because he practiced sorcery and he led Israel astray." Baraitha Sanhedrin 43a, from the Talmud. Quoted in Dickson, John. *Simply Christianity: Leaders manual*.

Perhaps the most famous objection to the miracles, is to say that because people don't generally witness miracles today, the likelihood that Jesus did not really perform them is much greater than the likelihood that he did. But think here about meteorites. We're told that every twenty million years or so a massive meteorite is likely to hit the earth. No-one has ever seen that. And it's much rarer than the many miracles recorded in the Bible. But we don't dismiss it because we don't observe such massive impacts today. We recognize it occurred because of the evidence of geology.

In the same way, we recognize that Jesus' miracles occurred because of the evidence of the gospels. And this is yet another reason to believe in God, come to us in him. He did what only God could do.

Q: What do you like about the idea of having authority?

Q: What different things do Jesus' miracles tell us about the world he is bringing about?

(12) The best explanation for Jesus' resurrection is that it proves him God made man.

On seeing Jesus alive again, "Thomas said to him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20v28)

Q: How does Jesus' resurrection prove him God?

If I was to ask whether you thought Alexander the Great was really "great," you'd have to look into the evidence of history. He became king aged 20, and by 30 had created one of the largest empires ever. You might at least say this proves his greatness in fighting battles.

So why should we shy away from saying there is proof that Jesus is not just great, but God? We might agree our first few studies don't strictly prove this. They are more pointers to the reality of a God. But it's different when we get to the gospels. What their history shows Jesus did is just as much proof as the history of what Alexander did. And the greatest proof is the fact that for a period of forty days after he died, Jesus was seen alive, on numerous occasions, by over 500 people,

before being seen to literally rise up into the air and pass into heaven (1 Cor 15v3-8, Acts 1v1-11).

As Luke puts it in the book of Acts: Jesus “gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” And the apostle Paul tells us that by this means God “has given proof” of who Jesus is (Acts 1v3, 17v31).

Now, we’ve already seen that we can’t argue the apostles were lying or that miracles can’t happen. But some do wonder if the apostles were mistaken about the resurrection.

Some suggest Jesus might have just fainted, then revived and told his followers he had risen. But the Romans were expert executioners. And Jesus had been tortured, crucified, and then stabbed in the side with a spear. So, with nail shredded wrists and ankles, are we really to believe that he could roll the heavy stone from the tomb’s entrance, walk out, and convince his disciples he was better than new? Not likely.

But could his disciples have been hallucinating then, or gone to the wrong tomb, found it empty and assumed Jesus had risen? Or could the real tomb have been empty because the body had been stolen?

Well if they were hallucinating or had the wrong tomb, the Jewish leaders would have produced Jesus' body from the right tomb and stopped Christianity in its tracks. But what shows all these theories must be wrong, is that hundreds of disciples claimed to have touched, talked with, or eaten with Jesus, before seeing him ascend into heaven. Seeing and talking with him proved they weren't just assuming he rose because of an empty tomb. And touching and eating with him proved he wasn't a ghost!

Simon Greenleaf was a founder of Harvard Law School. He wrote one of the greatest works on the laws of evidence ever written. As a non-Christian he sought to use his expertise to disprove the resurrection. But, you guessed it: He became convinced by the evidence and started following Jesus. He wrote that an examination of the witnesses to the resurrection, leads to "an undoubted conviction of their integrity, ability and truth."¹³

Q: How would you define the word "evidence"?

¹³ Greenleaf, Simon. *The testimony of the evangelists*.

Q: What different things does Jesus' resurrection tell us?

(13) The best explanation for the existence of the church is that God is behind it.

A Jewish leader called Gamaliel spoke about the first Christians, saying: "If their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is from God, you will not be able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God." (Acts 5v38-39)

Q: What does he say the survival of Christianity shows?

Paul was an important leader, who sought to imprison believers, approving their execution. And then he suddenly became a Christian, and started preaching about Jesus instead. He explained that when travelling to Damascus the risen Jesus appeared to him, talked with him, struck him blind to make a point, and then healed him and sent him to share the good news.

Now what do you make of that? Paul left everything to travel the world on this mission. He was repeatedly attacked for doing so, and eventually put to death. Nothing can explain such a transformation other than the truth of what he claimed and the power of God

within him. If a letter from a power company promises to supply electricity to your home, and your lights switch on when you plug them in, then you know the company must exist. It's the same with God's promises.

And its hard to explain the survival and growth of the church itself without putting it down to his power. Everything was against it. The Jewish leaders and mighty Roman Empire sought to extinguish it. So, those who believed had little to gain by doing so, except being rejected by those they loved, discriminated against in society, and often hurt or killed. Yet despite all that, within 300 years, Christianity had transformed the Empire.

Records tell us that a key factor was the difference faith brought about in people's lives. Christians didn't just tell people how we can know there is a world of love, purity and peace beyond this one; they showed it was already at work within them.

And this continues. In 2008, journalist Matthew Parris wrote an article titled "As an atheist, I believe

Africa needs God.”¹⁴ Returning to where he grew up in Malawi, he wrote of the difference he saw in Christians there compared to others. He wrote: “Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.” He added that this was something “that seemed to be missing in traditional African life.” In other words, the Christians stood apart.

Of course, no Christian is perfect. And there are many in churches who don't take it seriously. But where people do – perhaps friends of yours, or family members, you will see the difference between them and those in the world.

You will often hear people speaking badly of Christians or Christianity. But the lives of true Christians shine out like a light in the darkness. And this is yet another reason we can know not only that there is a God, but that he is the God of the Bible, who came to us in Jesus, and is at work within the church. In fact, it is

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<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/as-an-atheist-i-truly-believe-africa-needs-god-3xj9bm80h8m>, accessed 25/8/2020

worth remembering the key things he does in your own life, as this is its own evidence too.

Q: What difference do you see in true Christians?

Q: What area of your life have you seen God work in?

(14) It all adds up.

Read through the 14 reasons to believe from the contents page as a reminder of what we've learnt.

“The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Col 1v15-17)

Q: How is everything in the universe related to the Son of God?

It's estimated that the universe contains 100 billion galaxies, each containing around 100 billion stars, of which our sun is just one. Wow!

This tells us that we will never fully understand our Creator or his ways. He's far bigger and beyond us than we can ever imagine. So, there will be a lot going

on in space-time-history than we are not party to. And this means that we should not be surprised if we are left with questions as to why the world is as it is, why our lives have panned out as they have, why God does what he does, or why he requires what he requires.

It is in these areas that you will find objections to your faith coming from others: They will ask how you can still believe in the face of evil and suffering or the failings of the church, how science and the Bible fit, how you can accept all it says as good and true, or how its teachings on hell, gender, or relationships can be loving.

There are very good answers to all these questions. But even if you struggle to fully appreciate those answers, that doesn't have to rock your faith, because – as the song goes – our God is a great big God. And so, we will never fully grasp his ways. But we can trust him and accept his word the Bible anyway, because of the many reasons for faith we have studied.

Nicolaus Copernicus was a sixteenth century astronomer. Before he lived, most people thought that

our planet was the centre of the Solar System and that the sun and everything else revolved around us. But what was termed “the Copernican revolution” was the discovery that actually the sun was the centre, and everything revolved around it.

That’s the sort of revolution the things we’ve considered bring about. We come to realise not only that there is a God, but that his Son is the centre of the universe. And so, how we think and act should now revolve around him.

The Copernican revolution would have come about through all sorts of lines of evidence: observation, data, maths. Each would have pointed to the same conclusion. Apart they would have been compelling, but together they were convincing. And it’s the same with our faith. Each of our fourteen reasons is significant. But add them all together, and you can be certain that your faith is built on the firmest of foundations.

Q: As we finish: Are there any uncertainties about Christianity you still have?

Q: Which of our reasons to believe do you find the most persuasive?

Further reading.

The Case for Christ by Lee Strobel

But is it true? By Michael Ots

What kind of God by Michael Ots

Notes.