

## **King of Kings From Death to Glory**

*If Christ is risen, nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, nothing else matters.*

Jaroslav Pelikan

*On the third day he rose again. He ascended into Heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.*

The Apostles' Creed

*Despite our efforts to keep him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked, "No Entrance" and he left through a door marked "No Exit."*

Peter Larson

When we left Jesus, his lifeless body was lying cold and still inside a guarded tomb.

His last week had started with great promise. He had paraded into Jerusalem as a popular hero and would-be king. Hopes were high, flags were waving and the people were shouting "Hosanna." But everything unraveled pretty quickly after that. On Wednesday evening he was betrayed. Very early on Friday morning he was arrested, and by 9 a.m. of that day Roman executioners were driving spikes through his hands and feet.

It was over soon after that. The people jeered, the afternoon sky turned dark and Jesus suffered and died as a cursed and despised criminal.

The big question is, what happened next? Exactly what transpired in the early hours of Sunday morning? There appear to be two options. Either Jesus defeated death and rose from the grave, confirming his claims to be the Son of God and Savior of the World, or something else happened that led a lot of people to think he did. And those who were misled – whether it was through a deliberate hoax or an unwitting mix-up – ended up misleading others, who in turn misled others, until this mistaken belief was on its way around the world.

Both options are shocking. On the one hand we have God Almighty, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, showing up as a first-century Jewish carpenter, and on the other we have several billion people basing their life on a sham.

For a number of reasons – both historical and personal – I believe the first choice is the right one, and in the course of this study I want to explain why. But before we turn there I want to set the resurrection in context. In one sense it stands on its own as the defining event that separates Jesus from every other moral and religious leader – he conquered death and they did not. But in another, it can only be appreciated if it's seen as the culmination and confirmation of a much bigger story. I want to be sure you see Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as the axis around which everything rotates.

## The Claim

The crux of what I've been arguing over the last 100 pages can be summarized in six points.

**One: The Bible is the Story of our Rescue.** The Bible is not a random collection of morality lessons and inspirational anecdotes. It is the story of God's efforts to rescue us and restore his kingdom. In all of this, Jesus is the star. The Old Testament points ahead to his arrival. The Gospels point ahead to the final week of his life, and the rest of the New Testament points back to his death and resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

**Two: Jesus is God.** Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah, nor is he almost God, God-like, God-lite, god with a small "g," or the Vice President of Heaven. He is fully God and equal to the Father. There never has been, nor will there ever be, anyone like him.

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<sup>1</sup> Christ is assumed in Genesis 1, introduced in Genesis 3 and alluded to in Genesis 12. Though he never walks on center stage in the Old Testament, he is never far off it either. The Law and sacrificial systems were established to help people see their need for him, and the prophets kept reminding people that he was coming. Granted, the plan took much longer to unfold than anyone seemed to expect, but the Old Testament laid the foundation for him to arrive, and then the Gospels devote the bulk of their attention to the final week of Christ's life. Finally, the rest of the New Testament documents point back to the crucifixion and resurrection. The Bible reveals God's unfolding plan to restore his work, starting with the restoration of those he made in his image.

**Three: Jesus was born to die.** Jesus existed as God from the very beginning. At the appointed time he “took on flesh,” adding humanity to deity and showing up in the backwaters of the Roman Empire to rescue us. He did this out of love and in compliance with his Father’s plan. During his time on earth Jesus passed the test that Adam failed, revealed God’s true nature, modeled how to live, fulfilled the Law and inaugurated the kingdom. But his principal task was to suffer the death we deserve. A careful review of the biblical text makes several things clear:

- **Christ’s death was planned.** The crucifixion was not an accident. It was foretold in Genesis 3, predicted by the prophets and described in detail hundreds of years before it happened.<sup>2</sup> Jesus did not lose his life because of some political miscalculations. He willingly laid it down as part of a plan. Christ was born to die. In fact, he paraded into Jerusalem with the cross in mind.
- **Christ’s death was necessary.** God’s holiness and love combined to make the cross necessary. The first made it impossible for him to ignore our sin. The second made it impossible for him to walk away. Only by dying in our place could God satisfy the demands of both justice and love.<sup>3</sup>
- **Christ’s death was horrible.** Few deaths are as horrific as crucifixion,<sup>4</sup> but the physical pain Jesus endured was insignificant compared to the spiritual agony. There is no calculus that allows us to understand how much Christ suffered on our behalf.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> One of the ways to show that Christ’s death was planned is to show that it was predicted. One thousand years before he was born the Psalmist described the Messiah’s death by writing, “they pierced my hands and my feet.” (Note: This was written hundreds of years before crucifixion was even invented.) Several hundred years later – but still 700 years before Christ was born – Isaiah added additional details, such as the fact that he would be killed alongside the wicked (thieves) yet buried with the rich (he was buried in Joseph of Arimathea’s tomb). See also: Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34 and Luke 13:32f.

<sup>3</sup> Some have argued that a benevolent God could simply accept us as we are. However, that argument minimizes both the magnitude of God’s holiness and the seriousness of our sin. Our debt must be atoned for. God’s plan satisfies justice while demonstrating love. Indeed, it demonstrates the greatest love of all, that of one who would lay down his life for another.

<sup>4</sup> The Romans had some interest in justice, but they also had a large interest in deterrence. They wanted crucifixion to be so horrible and humiliating that it would deter people from acting out against the state.

<sup>5</sup> Some believe that Christ’s final cry – “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps. 22) – indicates that the Father turned his back on the Son; that is, that the perfect fellowship which had existed from eternity past between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was broken apart, at least for a moment, when Christ became sin. Others hold that what happened fell just short of that. The spiritual and emotional anguish experienced by Christ on the cross when he bore my sin (and yours) is beyond our comprehension. But the Father was in the Son acted together on our behalf.

- **Christ's death was transformational.** Christ's death changed everything. It did away with the need for both sacrifices and the Temple.<sup>6</sup> It brought clear focus on the covenant of grace. It gave us direct and immediate access to the Father. The life and death of Jesus of Nazareth erased our debt, secured our justification and inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth.

**Four: Jesus rose from the dead.** Right alongside Christ's amazing death was his supernatural resurrection. About forty hours after his body was placed in the tomb, Jesus crossed back over the dark divide and emerged as the "first born of the dead."<sup>7</sup>

- This was not a simple *resuscitation*, such as Lazarus had already undergone. Lazarus' life was restored, but he would later die a second time. Jesus was raised immortal and imperishable. He had returned with a body that would last forever.
- This was not simply a *spiritual resurrection* – where his soul lived on but his body remained in the grave. Christ was neither a ghost nor an apparition. He was flesh and blood. He had risen in the "self-same"<sup>8</sup> body in which he had died.
- Finally, his resurrection was not a metaphor. Christ was not "living on in people's hearts," present each time "the sun rises" or "alive again in every child's laughter." When the apostles spoke about Christ's resurrection they were making an historical claim not a religious one. This was not the stuff of folklore, myth or legend. It was history. Jesus had really lived, really died and really returned from the dead.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of Christ's death the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was ripped from the top to the bottom – i.e., it was ripped by God. The theological significance of this act was profound. It meant that through Christ's sacrificial death his followers were now able to approach God directly, as long as they did so in Christ's name. Christians no longer needed a Temple, nor did they need to offer a sacrifice or go through an earthly priest, they (we) could now approach God the Father anywhere and anytime via Jesus Christ, our High Priest.

<sup>7</sup> Most first-century Jews believed the same thing that many people currently believe, that at the time of our death some aspect of our soul lives on. Therefore, they would not have been shocked to hear that Christ was spiritually alive. But that is not what happened. Christ's body had come back to life. He was not a ghost or some kind of spirit, he was physically alive. The disciples clung to his feet (Mt. 28:9), Thomas touched him (Jn 20:24-29), Mary saw and spoke to him (Jn 20:14-17), he ate food in front of them (Lk 24:36-43). He went out of his way to prove that he had risen physically from the dead.

<sup>8</sup> "Self-same" is a term used by the early Christians to describe Christ's resurrection body. In some ways it was the same body that had died. In other ways it was different – i.e., it was immortal and Christ apparently looked slightly different than he had before. (Some have speculated that he was a bit younger, and that when we are resurrected we will all be 29 – the perfect age!). In any event, when the New Testament writers refer to Christ's resurrection body they are clear that it was real flesh and blood.

<sup>9</sup> J.B. Phillips famously suggested that the early Christians "gossiped the Gospel" throughout the Roman Empire. To the extent that this was true, they gossiped the resurrection. The idea that Christ had come back from the dead was

For Paul, the resurrection changed everything. It explained Christ's miracles, validated his life and supported his claims. It was the linchpin. Had Jesus remained in the grave there would be no reason to follow him or believe any of his other claims – and there certainly would not be any reason to worship him. In fact, according to Paul, if Christ did not rise from the dead then Christianity was a bad joke. But since he did rise from the dead there was every reason to trust his other claims as well.

**Five: The Story does not end with the resurrection.** Christ's life not only started before Christmas, it continued after Easter. In the days after he rose from the dead Jesus did five significant things:

- **He explained the story.** The disciples had never really understood who Jesus was or what he was doing. In fact, even when they seemed to get it – such as Peter's Confession – it later became clear that they had not. This changed during the forty days Christ spent on earth between his resurrection and ascension. During this time he "began with Moses and all the prophets and explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself."<sup>10</sup> They finally understood who he was and what his death had accomplished.

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one of the best known aspects of the Christian faith. Confirming this are the words of the Roman Governor, Festus found in Acts 25:19. He could not follow much of the debate between Paul and Paul's Jewish opponents, but he perceived that they disagreed "about a certain dead man, Jesus, whom Paul asserted to be alive." This point needs to be stressed today because many people relegate "matters of faith" to the realm of the irrational and subjective. In their mind faith is nothing like science or history where there are right and wrong answers. Some Christians even traffic in this kind of thinking, suggesting that people should "try Jesus, because even if it's not true you'll have a more peaceful and meaningful life." The Apostle Paul aggressively countered this line of thought. For him, the resurrection either happened or it didn't. If it did (as he believed), it changed everything. And if it did not then Christians were to be pitied because their life was a bad joke.

<sup>10</sup> This passage is taken from Luke 24. It would be wonderful to have a record of that explanation! Lacking that, I am including an excerpt from a sermon Tim Keller gave in which he highlights a number of the signs the disciples may have missed. "The light went on and they came to realize that David killing Goliath wasn't ultimately a call for us to defeat giants, it was an event that pointed ahead to Jesus, who would defeat the giants that can really kill us. They realized that Jesus was and is the true and better Adam, who passed the test in a much tougher Garden, and whose obedience is imputed to us. Jesus is the true and better Abel, who, though innocent, was slain and whose blood cries out, not for our condemnation but for our redemption. Jesus is the true and better Abraham, who answered God's call and left the comfort of the familiar to go into the void – a place not known – for us. Jesus is the true and better Isaac, who was not just offered up but who was sacrificed by his father. Jesus is the true and better Joseph, who was sold into slavery but who rose to sit at the right hand of power, and forgives those who sold him. Jesus is the true and better Moses, who stands in the gap between the Father and mankind and mediates a better covenant. Jesus is the true and better Esther, who didn't just risk losing an earthly position but lost a heavenly one, and didn't just risk his life but gave his life; who didn't just say, 'If I perish, I perish', but who said, 'when I perish I do so to save my people.' Jesus is the true and better Jonah, who was cast out from the boat into the storm so that we can be saved, and who survived three days in the belly of the beast. Jesus is the true and better Passover Lamb. Jesus is the true and better Temple. Jesus is the true and better Prophet. Jesus is the true and better Priest." In so many

- **He commissioned the church.** At the end of the forty days Christ gathered his disciples on a mountain in Galilee and gave them a final charge, instructing them to spread his kingdom by proclaiming the Good News and engaging in good works. The last words of Matthew’s Gospel record this “Great Commission.” They read:

Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.’

- **He ascended into heaven.** Shortly after charging his followers to carry on his work, Christ slowly rose up through the sky and into heaven itself. Luke describes the Ascension in two places. At the end of his Gospel we read, “When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.” He also opens the Book of Acts by retelling the event, stating that Jesus was, “...taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.”<sup>11</sup> The word used here for “cloud” is the same term used in other places to describe the glory that accompanies the presence of God.
- **He was crowned King of Kings:** The fourth thing Jesus did was full of royal symbolism: he sat down in the place of highest honor - the right hand of his Father. Christ did not simply levitate into the sky – he was received into heaven as King of Kings.<sup>12</sup> Paul used the words of a first-century hymn to describe this event. It begins by noting that Christ humbled himself by becoming man and dying on a cross, before proclaiming that the Father consequently “exalted him to the highest place, and gave him the name that is

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ways, the Hebrew Scriptures point to Jesus. During the forty days between his resurrection and ascension, Christ explained who he was, why he had come and how the Old Testament had been pointing ahead to him.

<sup>11</sup> Acts 1:8f.

<sup>12</sup> The Ascension and Coronation of Christ – which was prophesied about by Daniel (Daniel 7:13f), David (Ps. 110:1-5) Isaiah (Is. 52:13) and Jesus (John 17) and referenced by Paul (Phil 2:5-11; Eph. 1) – not only let the disciples know that Christ’s post-resurrection appearances were over, and made it clear that he had been exalted to the highest place, they also gave them a clear understanding of the resurrection body. Jesus did not rise as a spirit. He went into heaven in his body. The incarnation of the Son of Man was (and is) an eternal thing. He did not shed humanity at death or in his ascension. Though the Ascension is only mentioned twice in the New Testament, Christians in the early church considered the Thursday that fell forty days after Easter as one of the six most important days of the year.

above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” As a result of his service on earth, God the Father exalted Jesus to the highest place in the universe.<sup>13</sup> No one has ever descended lower or been exalted higher than Jesus.

- **He sent the Holy Spirit:** One of the very first things Christ did as King was to send the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower his followers. In Acts 2 we read that the Spirit of God “fell upon” those gathered in the Upper Room, and that under this supernatural empowerment they preached the Gospel in other languages and many came to faith. This indwelling changed everything. From this point on the disciples moved forward with a courage and zeal they had not previously shown.<sup>14</sup>

**Six: The Story Continues.** The Book of Acts records what happened after Pentecost. In fact, it documents the next thirty years, during which time the church expanded beyond Jerusalem and Judea and moved into Rome. During the next several hundred years those who affirmed the deity of Christ grew in number and influence until Christianity became the dominant view in Europe. Today the church is the largest, oldest, most influential and most ethnically- and geographically-diverse movement in the world.<sup>15</sup>

And the story does not end here. According to the Bible, four events remain:

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<sup>13</sup> Jesus existed as God (the Logos) before he became the God-Man. During this time he enjoyed more glory and honor than we can imagine. At the incarnation he gave all of this up, agreeing to not simply become a man, or even a slave, but a slave who went to his death, “even death on a cross.” Paul notes that Jesus became sin (2 Cor. 5:21) and that he bore the Father’s wrath. No one ever went lower. As a result, the Father exalted him to the highest place – one even higher than he had previously enjoyed.

<sup>14</sup> A more complete explanation of the Holy Spirit lies outside the context of this study. Suffice it to say that, prior to Christ’s ascension the Holy Spirit (the third member of the Trinity) empowered certain people at certain times (prophets, kings, etc), but after Pentecost he indwells every true believer, equipping and empowering them for the work he has called them to do. Part of growing in joy and faith is learning to yield more of our life to the Spirit of God.

<sup>15</sup> The church has not been perfect. In fact, she falls well short of her calling. However, acting together or alone, Christ’s followers have been on the forefront of many of the best causes – e.g., starting hospitals, building orphanages, funding and staffing homeless shelters and founding schools and universities. Christians have championed labor rights, prison reform and public sanitation. It is popular to dismiss the church – or even bash it. But many historians report it to be one the most successful – if not the single most – successful humanitarian and reform movement in history.

- **Christ will return:** At the appointed hour Jesus will return to earth, only this time he will not arrive as a helpless infant but as a conquering King. When he does, everything will be brought under his rule and reign.
- **The dead will rise.** At the time Christ returns, the souls of everyone who has ever lived will be reunited with their resurrected bodies. With these new bodies we will be prepared for eternity.<sup>16</sup>
- **Christ will judge each of us.** Every person will stand accountable for the life they have lived. Those who have repented of their sin and been redeemed by Christ will have their works reviewed at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Fire will burn away the “wood, hay and stubble” of activities of no value, leaving some with “gold, silver and precious stones” and others with a sense of regret for selfish choices and lost opportunity. However, the overwhelming emotion for all believers will be one of joy at the chance to enter into the immediate presence of Christ. In contrast, those who stand on their own – without Christ as Savior – will have their life reviewed at the Great White Throne Judgment, fall short of his glory and be removed to the Abyss.<sup>17</sup>
- **Christ will restore a New Heaven and New Earth.** In the end, God’s initial plans will finally and fully be realized. The tragic delay caused by sin will be no more. A new heaven and a new earth will be revealed. Death – which had previously been defeated – will be destroyed, Christ will be exalted and the children of God will enjoy life with God in its fullest.

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<sup>16</sup> At the moment of our death, our body and soul (spirit) separate. The first returns to dirt while the second either goes to a place of great joy or great sorrow. (The place of great joy is referred to as Paradise or Abraham’s bosom but not Heaven. Likewise, the place of suffering is referred to as *Hades* or *Sheol*, but not hell. Heaven and hell are technically understood to be permanent locations where we are sent after judgment.) After Christ returns, our bodies will be renewed and reunited with our souls and in this new state we will stand ready for final judgment.

<sup>17</sup> There are two separate judgments. Those who have been justified through Christ are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12); those who stand outside of Christ are judged at the Great White Throne Judgment (Rev. 20:11-15). Every believer in Christ will give an account of himself, and the Lord will judge the decisions he made. This judgment does not determine salvation, which is by faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9). Rather, it is the time when believers will give an account of their lives in service to Christ (I Cor. 3:11-15). Those things we have done that honor God and reflect the values of Christ will yield “gold, silver and precious stones.” The fire of God’s judgment will burn up the “wood, hay and stubble” of the words we spoke and things we did which had no eternal value. The second judgment (The Great White Throne Judgment) is for unbelievers. This judgment does not determine salvation, either. Everyone at the Great White Throne is an unbeliever and therefore already doomed to be cut off from God. Those who stand alone – without Christ – will be judged on the basis of their works alone. All thoughts, words and actions will be judged against God’s perfect standard and found wanting.



Future events raise lots of questions. We will take up a few of them in our final chapter. But right now we return to the critical question: Is this story true? Is Jesus God? Did he rise from the dead?

### **It All Comes Down to the Resurrection**

In the end, it all comes down to the resurrection. There are a host of other arguments that could be made in support of the Christian faith - we could review the cosmological, ontological and teleological arguments for the existence of God, study the archeological and bibliographic support for the New Testament, ponder the brilliance of Christ's ethics, calculate the odds of anyone accidentally fulfilling the Messianic prophecies he did, or pour over the stories of the hundreds of millions of people who claim Jesus changed their lives. There is real value in all of these. But in the end, it all turns on the resurrection. Did Jesus rise from the dead or not?

Christ did not claim to be a great teacher who should be listened to, he claimed to be to the Creator of the universe who should be worshipped. Part of that claim included the promise to defeat death. Either he defeated death or he didn't. If he did, we have every reason to believe all of his other claims – i.e., he is Lord, God and King. If he did not, then all bets are off – he's an interesting figure but little more. In fact, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead then the only material difference between him and all of the other would-be Messiahs is that he not only failed to liberate the Jews, he also got caught in a wild and malicious lie. After all, he claimed to be God and they did not.

As the early church announced, Jesus is either God or a bad man, and everything turns on the resurrection.

So, did Christ rise or didn't he?

Here is what virtually everyone agrees on, including honest skeptics.<sup>18</sup>

- Christ died around three o'clock on Friday afternoon.

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<sup>18</sup>There are those who refuse to discuss the empty tomb because they refuse to accept any part of the story as true. Some go so far as to deny that Jesus even existed. As I noted earlier, this is not a viable option. We not only have the record of the New Testament – one of the best attested ancient documents we have – we also have non-Christian sources that contend that: there was a first century prophet named Jesus who lived in the area of Palestine; he was esteemed for his wisdom and virtue; he was condemned for blasphemy and crucified under Pontius Pilate. There is enough information from “hostile witnesses” to establish all of this plus the fact that the Christian faith was born out of the belief that he had risen from the dead. Those who dismiss Jesus on the basis of too little evidence not only need to be prepared to write off Plato, Socrates, Homer and Virgil, they need to admit that they have less reason to believe in Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great, Joan of Arc, and Dante than they do in Christ.

- In the few hours between his last breath and sunset – when Sabbath laws would prevent law-abiding Jews from touching a corpse – his body was taken off the cross, treated with seventy-five to eighty pounds of spices, wrapped in a linen sheet and placed in a garden tomb.
- The next morning Pilate agreed to the Jewish leaders’ request to have a military unit guard the tomb. They did this to ensure that no one stole the body.
- Nevertheless, when Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome arrived at the tomb on Sunday morning they discovered that the stone sealing its entrance had been rolled away and the body was gone. They also reported that Jesus appeared to them, that he was alive and well, and that he had instructed them to go tell others.
- Over the next few weeks hundreds of other people reported seeing, talking to and touching Jesus.
- The belief that Christ had risen from the grave launched the Christian faith.

The critical question is: what happened to the body – where did it go? Millions of people have wrestled with this question. Thousands have devoted years of their lives to studying it. A number of different theories have been advanced; in the end they break into six camps.<sup>19</sup>

### **Option One: Jesus did not die on the cross**

Some people contend that Jesus did not die on the cross – he simply fainted from a loss of blood and later revived in the cool of the tomb. This is known as the Swoon Theory.<sup>20</sup>

In order to embrace this option we must believe that:

- Though Jesus was exhausted, traumatized and hemorrhaging immense amounts of blood, he merely lost consciousness on the cross. Indeed, he remained alive even after the Roman executioner thrust a spear into his side.

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<sup>19</sup> The historical arguments for the resurrection are significant and have persuaded many skeptics. Do not let this brief treatment deter you from more detailed explorations of this topic. In the 1930s Frank Morrison (a lawyer) set out to disprove the resurrection and in the end became persuaded that it was true. His book, *Who Moved the Stone?* (Faber & Faber, 1930) is considered a classic. More recently, another attorney – Yale-trained Lee Strobel – set out to do the same thing. Frustrated with his wife’s decision to become a Christian, he set out to disprove the basis for her faith. In the process he also became a Christian. His book, *The Case for Christ*, chronicles his journey to faith. Many other books on the same topic are available as well, including Dr. William Lane Craig’s *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody, 1981); Gary Habermas and Anthony Flew, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*, ed. Terry Miethe (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), et al.

<sup>20</sup> There are variations on the Swoon Theory – e.g., Luke gave Jesus drugs that allowed him to fake his death; a secret society helped stage the event, etc. – but they all require us to assume that Jesus was able to survive the flogging and crucifixion.

- Neither the professional executioner nor those treating his body ever noticed that he was still alive.
- He not only survived being mummified and then sealed in a tomb without food, water or air for around forty hours, he somehow got better.<sup>21</sup>
- After he regained consciousness he was able to wriggle out of his tightly wrapped shroud, push back the massive stone, overpower the Roman soldiers and walk several miles on pierced feet.
- Instead of reaching the obvious conclusion – i.e., Jesus had somehow survived a botched crucifixion – those who saw him were tricked into believing that he had entered a glorious new dimension of life.
- After being hailed the risen Son of God he slipped away to live the rest of his life in obscurity.

Beyond the obvious weaknesses of this theory, several more emerge with additional study.

- We need to remember that Jesus was not simply crucified; he was first beaten and flogged. The latter was so brutal that many died from it alone. In fact, it was widely held that no one could survive forty lashes – Jesus received thirty-nine. Without immediate medical care he likely would have died from the flogging and infection that followed, even if he had not been crucified.<sup>22</sup>
- Roman executioners who failed to kill their prisoner were killed for their incompetence. They were not known to make mistakes.
- Pilate did not initially accept Joseph of Arimathea's claim that Jesus was dead; instead he asked the guards confirm it. When the executioners checked on Christ they determined that he had already died and consequently did not bother to break his legs as was the custom. Nevertheless, one of them rammed a spear into his side, producing a flow of

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<sup>21</sup> According to Merrill Tenney (*The Reality of the Resurrection*, Harper and Row, 1963), Jewish custom included washing and straightening the body and then bandaging it tightly from the armpits to the ankles in strips of linen about one foot wide. Aromatic spices, "often of a gummy consistency, were placed between the wrappings or folds." We are told that Joseph and Nicodemus treated the body with 75 pounds of aromatic spices. It seems unlikely that a healthy person could survive being mummified for more than five minutes, never mind a critically-injured one surviving for forty hours. (Merrill Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1963).

<sup>22</sup>One writer suggested that you set the following challenge in front of advocates of the Swoon Theory. "Let me beat you with a cat-o-nine tails for thirty-nine strokes, nail you to a cross, hang in the blistering sun for six hours, run a spear into your heart, embalm you and then set you in an airless tomb for a few days. After that we'll see how you are feeling." It makes the point. If you have doubts about the horrors of flogging, watch a few minutes of Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Jesus was reduced to a bloody piece of meat. You can also review the basics of the crucifixion found in the previous study.

‘blood and water.’ Modern medical experts suggest that these symptoms point in one of two directions: either the trauma Christ experienced caused fluid to build up in the pericardial sac surrounding his heart, or the blood inside the heart itself had started to separate into plasma and red blood cells. Either situation was a clear indication of death.<sup>23</sup>

There are other problems with this theory – it requires us to believe that the world’s greatest ethical system was established by a con man, and suggests that Christ fulfilled all of the Messianic prophecies by chance. But these are enough to doom it.<sup>24</sup>

### **Option Two: It was a group hallucination**

The second theory goes something like this: the disciples were so disappointed when Jesus died that they refused to accept it. Instead they collectively willed themselves into imagining that he rose from the dead.

As theories go, this one is easy to suggest but hard to defend. To start with, it does nothing to explain the empty tomb or the fulfilled prophecy. Additionally, it violates almost everything we know about hallucinations.

- Hallucinations are typically associated with people who are either neurotic or actually psychotic, but those who claim to have seen Jesus not only include “the distressed women but also the hot-tempered John, the aggressive Peter, an ordered public servant like Matthew, a brilliant intellectual like Paul and a stubborn skeptic like Thomas.”<sup>25</sup>
- Hallucinations usually occur in favorable settings and at times when a person is wrapped in sentimental feelings. But hardly any of the reported appearances fit those circumstances. They were not in places where Jesus had spent time with his followers; instead they occurred in places filled with stress and confusion.
- Hallucinations are individual experiences tied to a person’s own subconscious. Yet the New Testament reports that Jesus not only appeared to individuals, he also appeared to groups of two, three, seven and at one point over five hundred. In each case, everyone

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<sup>23</sup> The Gospel writers described what happened even though they did not know that medically-trained personnel would later affirm that this separation was a clear sign of death.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. John Blanchard notes that there have been more conspiracy theories about the resurrection of Jesus Christ than about the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He goes on to note that while some of the Kennedy theories have a measure of credibility, the Swoon Theory has none. (Blanchard, *Jesus: Dead or Alive*, Darlington, England: EP Books, 2009), p. 11.

<sup>25</sup> John Blanchard, *Jesus: Dead or Alive*, Darlington: EP, 2009, p. 17.

reported seeing the same thing. This is not how hallucinations work. It may be that many people hallucinate at the same time - Woodstock comes to mind – but they do not share the same hallucination.

Some moderns wrongly imagine that the citizens of the first century were unsophisticated naïfs who readily – and easily – embraced the resurrection. This is not true. The followers of Jesus were initially skeptical of Christ’s appearances. The women who had gone to the tomb had done so to embalm Jesus, not embrace him. When the women told the disciples that he was alive the disciples did not believe them.<sup>26</sup> Thomas went so far as to say, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”<sup>27</sup> And Mark reports that Jesus later “rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.”<sup>28</sup>

Paul’s vision of Christ came after the excitement of seeing Jesus had died down. And far from wanting to believe the earlier reports, Paul was on his way to arrest those who were spreading them. He was convinced that Christ’s resurrection was a deadly lie. His vision of the risen Christ was not the result of wishful thinking. It was about the worst news he could imagine. He only believed it because the evidence persuaded him that it was true.

### **Option Three: The Women Went to the Wrong Tomb**

In 1907 a British scholar named Kirsopp Lake advanced a new idea. He claimed the three women going to care for Christ’s body had gone to the wrong tomb. Overwhelmed with grief and unable to see clearly in the dim light of the early morning, they had become lost. Spotting a cemetery worker they asked for directions. The caretaker responded, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He is not here.” He then pointed to the correct tomb, but the women misunderstood him, decided that he was actually an angel and that he had been sent to announce that Christ had risen from the dead.

This theory gets points for creativity, but not many for viability. Three factors overwhelm it.

First, Mark 15 reports that two of the three women had been present for Jesus’ burial just thirty-six hours earlier. They “saw where he was laid.” The word translated “saw” represents a person who looks on “with interest and for a purpose, usually indicating a careful observation of details.”<sup>29</sup> Having recently returned from Israel I can add that the Old City of Jerusalem is small

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<sup>26</sup> Mark 16:11

<sup>27</sup> John 20:25

<sup>28</sup> Mark 16:14

<sup>29</sup> W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

and the first-century burial sites are quite close. A fifteen minute walk (at most) takes you to them.<sup>30</sup> It's hard to imagine anyone getting lost in an area they would know so well, or anyone accepting the resurrection without checking out the tomb themselves.

Second, Lake bases his theory on some creative editing of Mark 16, which reports that after entering the tomb:

The women saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. “Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

Lake leaves most of the text out – starting with the angel’s announcement that Jesus was risen.

Finally, in order for the Wrong Tomb theory to be true, it’s not just the women who need to get it wrong, everyone else must as well. When Peter and John heard that Jesus had risen from the dead they ran to the tomb to see for themselves. The sun would have been up by then. Are we to suppose that they also went to the wrong tomb? One of the Marys later returned to the tomb. Did she get it wrong a second time? What about the Roman guards – were they posted at the wrong tomb? What about Joseph? He owned the tomb. Are we to imagine that he never went to the right tomb and discovered the body? For that matter, what about the Jewish and Roman authorities? They were motivated to discredit Christianity. Without the resurrection this new sect would collapse. They possessed the means, motive and opportunity to find the body and put an end to everything. Are we to suppose that none of them ever went to the tomb to check things out for themselves?

It’s worth adding that even if everyone went to the wrong tomb, this theory does nothing to explain the post-resurrection appearances of Christ, his fulfillment of Messianic prophecies or the transformation of the disciples.

### **Option Four: Jesus Had a Secret Look-a-Like**

The fourth theory is based on the idea that someone who looked exactly like Jesus had been waiting in the shadows to step in at the appropriate moment. This person (a twin?) either died in Jesus’ place as the ultimate stunt double, or he presented himself as Christ after Jesus had been crucified.

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<sup>30</sup> Two different locations vie for the spot where Christ was buried: one is located at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher; the other is called the Garden Tomb. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is located with the city walls (which are not the same walls as were present at the time of Christ). This location would not require a fifteen minute walk. The Garden Tomb is outside the city gates – but not far.

This theory has never gained much traction for a handful of reasons. First, there is absolutely no evidence for it. Second, anyone wishing to present themselves as the risen Christ needed to dispose of the real Christ's body first. This immediately brings us back to the Roman guards standing watch at a sealed tomb. How were they overcome? Third, it is hard to believe that someone other than Christ could persuade those who had been close to Christ – i.e., the disciples, Mary, etc. – that they were Jesus. He had only been away for a few days. If your best friend went away for a three-day weekend and then someone else tried to take their place, do you think they impersonator could trick you? Fourth, Thomas only believed after he put his hands in the holes in Christ's hands and feet. Did the imitation Christ inflict these wounds on himself? The list goes on – where did the substitute go after forty days? How were Christ's miracles performed? Why was any of this done? As I noted, this theory has been panned by most everyone.

### **Option Five: Someone Stole the Body**

From the very earliest days some have argued that Christ's body was stolen. Those in this camp accept that he died, was buried in Joseph's tomb and that the body disappeared before Sunday morning. But they do not believe that he rose from the dead. Instead, they contend that one of four groups stole the body: the Roman authorities, the Jewish leaders, a group of grave robbers or the disciples. Let's consider each group separately.

**The Roman Authorities:** The idea that Roman leaders had Christ's body removed is a nonstarter for one main reason – there is no motive. The Empire depended upon stability. This is why they crucified Christ and posted a guard at his tomb. Additionally, they had enough problems in Judea without word leaking out that their executioners were inept and their legionnaires couldn't guard a grave site. Pilate had literally and symbolically washed his hands of Jesus. He wanted everything about Christ to go away. Stirring things up was not a part of their plan. The Romans may have had the means and the opportunity to steal Christ's body, but they lacked anything approaching a motive.

**The Jewish Leaders:** This theory also dies before it starts. And once again it dies for lack of motive. An empty tomb was the Jewish leaders' worst fear. Christ had promised that he would rise on the third day. His integrity and identity now depended upon it. The members of the Sanhedrin only needed to ensure that the body was still in the grave on the fourth day. This is why they had asked Pilate to post a guard at the tomb.

After the body went missing the Jewish leaders had those who spoke about it arrested, imprisoned, threatened and flogged. All of this would have been unnecessary if they had the body. In fact, they could have shut the whole movement down by putting Christ's body in a cart and wheeling it into the center of Jerusalem.

If the Jewish leaders had stolen the body – or had any idea where it was – they could have put a quick end to their problems. They did not. As the Scottish theologian Andrew Fairbairn has said, “The silence of the Jews is as significant as the speech of the Christians.”<sup>31</sup>

**Grave Robbers:** Very few people rob graves, and those who do would not steal the body, they would steal the gold, jewelry and other valuables buried with it. In the off chance that someone was unbalanced enough to steal a body, it’s unlikely they would decide to rob the one tomb that is being guarded by Roman soldiers. It’s equally unlikely that they would take time during the theft to unwrap the body from its burial shroud, neatly refold the sheet and then leave it in the tomb.<sup>32</sup>

**The disciples:** The idea that the disciples stole the body is one of the earliest explanations put forward. In fact, it’s found in Matthew 28, where we read:

While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, “You are to say, ‘His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.

Were the disciples capable of stealing the body? It seems unlikely for a handful of reasons. First, the task required a level of leadership, planning and courage they had failed to display when Christ was alive. It seems doubtful they could pull off something this bold in his absence.

Second, a review of the details suggests that the disciples not only lacked the means, they also lacked a motive. Some skeptics have mistakenly looked at the wealth of the church today and assumed that the disciples were selfishly motivated to keep the movement together – that there were assets to protect, money to be made and power to be gained by persuading people that Jesus was still alive. This is not true. Believing that the disciples stole the body not only requires us to assume that they were willing to lie to everyone, it also ignores the perils they faced in promoting the idea that Christ did rise. From an earthly perspective, the only thing the disciples got out of claiming that Christ rose from the dead was a hard life and an early death.

The final reason to dismiss this theory is the steadfast convictions of the disciples over the next thirty years. During this time they were hated, scorned, excommunicated, beaten, imprisoned and tortured. Ten of them were martyred. And yet, at no point did any of them waiver from their

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<sup>31</sup> Andrew Fairbairn, *Studies in the Life of Christ*, cited in Blanchard, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> John 20:1-9; Lk 24:9-12



claim: the tomb was empty because Jesus was God. Few people will die for the truth. Are we to believe that these men died for a lie?<sup>33</sup>

The late Charles Colson, who served as chief counsel to President Nixon before being sent to prison for his role in the Watergate scandal, dismissed this idea in light of his own experiences. He writes:

In my Watergate experience I saw the inability of men – powerful, highly motivated professionals – to hold together a conspiracy based on a lie... Yet Christ’s followers maintained to their grim deaths by execution that they had in fact seen Jesus Christ raised from the dead. There was no conspiracy. Men do not give up comfort – and certainly not their lives – for what they know to be a lie.<sup>34</sup>

Some are willing to die for something they believe to be true (and countless have done so). But nobody is prepared to die for something they know to be false.

It is possible that the disciples were mistaken about Christ’s resurrection. But the transformation of their lives and the unwavering nature of their testimony make it clear that they believed Christ rose from the dead.<sup>35</sup> They did not steal the body.

## **Option Six: Christ Rose From The Dead**

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<sup>33</sup> There are many powerful quotes to cite here. I will only include two. First, C.F.D. Moule: “From the very first, the conviction that Jesus had been raised from death has been that by which [the Christians’] very existence has stood or fallen. There was no other motive to account for them, to explain them... At no point within the New Testament is there any evidence that the Christians stood for an original philosophy of life or an original ethic. Their sole function is to bear witness to what they claim as an event – the raising of Jesus from among the dead... The one really distinctive thing for which the Christians stood was their declaration that Jesus had been raised from the dead according to God’s design, and the consequent estimate of Him as in a unique sense Son of God and representative man, and the resulting conception of the way to reconciliation.” Second: Dr. William Lane Craig, an author with two earned Ph.Ds. (one in philosophy and one in history) writes: “Without the belief in the Resurrection the Christian faith could not have come into being. The disciples would have remained crushed and defeated men. Even had they continued to remember Jesus as their beloved teacher, His crucifixion would have forever silenced any hopes of His being the Messiah. The cross would have remained the sad and shameful end of His career. The origin of Christianity therefore hinges on the belief of the early disciples that God had raised Jesus from the dead.”

<sup>34</sup> Charles Colson, *Kingdoms in Conflict*, Hodder & Stoughton, p. 70.

<sup>35</sup> “Had the crucifixion of Jesus ended His disciples’ experience of Him, it is hard to see how the Christian Church could have come into existence. The Church was founded on faith in the Messiahship of Jesus. A crucified Messiah was no Messiah at all. He was one rejected by Judaism and accursed by God. It was the Resurrection of Jesus, as St. Paul describes in Romans 1:4, which proclaimed Him to be the Son of God with power.” H.D.A. Major

The final explanation for the empty tomb is the one found in the Bible itself. It is the belief that Jesus is who he claimed to be – the Savior of the World and Son of God – and that he did what he promised he would do – defeat death and rise again.

Here are eight of the many reasons to hold to this view.

**One: The resurrection pulls everything together.** It’s worth taking three steps back and reviewing the big picture. The Bible is a collection of sixty-six books written over sixteen hundred years by forty different authors in three languages and on three continents – and the whole thing pivots around the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything written before these two events is pointing ahead to them; everything written later is pointing back. Those who discount the resurrection are not harmlessly ignoring a trifling matter, they are yanking on the thread that unravels the entire tapestry. If you throw out the resurrection, the only thing you are left with is questions: If Jesus wasn’t the Son of God then who was he? Where did he get such profound wisdom? How did he pull off his miracles? How did he turn twelve also-rans into a force that humbled the Roman Empire? How could he fulfill so many prophecies? Who started the story that he rose from the dead? How did the tomb end up empty?

**Two: The initial eye-witnesses were women.** Women were not allowed to testify in first-century Jewish or Roman courts because they were not believed to be trustworthy witnesses.<sup>36</sup> It follows that if someone had set out to fabricate the resurrection they would not have had women be the first to view the risen Christ, especially a woman with Mary Magdalene’s questionable past. They would have had a highly influential male leader instead.<sup>37</sup>

**Three: The Gospel accounts sound authentic.** The Gospel reports of Christ’s resurrection read exactly like what they claim to be – first and second hand accounts of a real event. For instance, Mark reports that when the women entered the tomb, “they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side.” Luke reports that after they discovered the tomb was empty, “two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them.” Matthew’s account mentions “an angel of the Lord” who was at the tomb.” Which is it? Were they angels or men? Were there one or two?

Some have pointed to these verses<sup>38</sup> as a contradiction in the Bible.<sup>39</sup> Those who are used to reading multiple accounts of a single event see these reports as authentic accounts. In fact, far

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<sup>36</sup> One of the early opponents of the Christian faith was the second-century Greek philosopher, Celsus. One of the arguments he put forward against the resurrection unfolded as follows, “Christianity cannot be true because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women, and we all know that women are hysterical.”

<sup>37</sup> If someone had fabricated the resurrection they would have chosen a man to be the first to see the risen Christ. Indeed, it is likely that they would have had a prominent man witness the resurrection itself. As it is, no one actually sees the resurrection occur, and women are the first to talk with Jesus after he rose.

<sup>38</sup> Mark 16:5; Luke 24:4 and Matthew 28:2f.

from being troubled with the initial discrepancies, they are leery of multiple accounts of the same story that are too perfect. To put it simply – whenever everyone is saying exactly the same thing, someone is copying off of someone else, or they all agreed beforehand on what they were going to write. These accounts sound like authentic reports from firsthand and second hand witnesses.

**Four: Something happened to change the date of worship.** The first church gatherings were comprised exclusively of Jews or Jewish proselytes. Their understanding of the fourth commandment – to say nothing of their practice over thousands of years – led them to worship God on Saturday. Something major had to happen to cause them to move their sacred day of rest and worship.

**Five: Something happened to change the object of worship.** It’s not just that the Jews moved their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday, they extended their worship to include Jesus as well. This is extraordinary. At the very top of the list of Jewish affirmation is the understanding that there is only one God. And yet, even before anyone had articulated the Triune nature of God, the Jews began worshipping the Son of God alongside the Father God.

**Six: Jesus had predicted his resurrection.** Christ had frequently alluded to his death. This is unremarkable in itself; after all, everyone is going to die, so predicting your own death is an exercise in stating the obvious. However, Christ went beyond this. He never spoke about his death without also claiming that he would rise again. He even pinpointed how long he would be dead before he would rise.<sup>40</sup>

**Seven: The changed lives of the disciples.** Most legends start generations after the death of the first hand witnesses. The Christian faith did not. In fact, it started right after Pentecost and it was started by those closest to the events. As was noted above, the disciples morphed from timid and clueless followers to bold and fearless witnesses. They did this in response to their belief that Jesus had risen.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> The discrepancies are quickly reconcilable to those who’ve studied history. Were they angels or men? Angels. Men “dressed in white robes” or “in clothes that gleam like lightning” are angels, not men. Were there one or two? There were two. Mark only mentions one, but he does not say “only one.”

<sup>40</sup> Even Christ’s enemies acknowledged that he predicted his death and resurrection. See: Mt. 27:63. See also Mk 8:31; Mt. 17:22 and Luke 9:22.

<sup>41</sup> It’s unthinkable that a group of liars would remain loyal to one another and die for their lie in poverty and disgrace. The radical change in their lives makes it clear; they believed Jesus was God. Simon Greenleaf, a professor at Harvard Law School and an expert on legal evidence, wrote, “it’s impossible that they could have persisted in affirming the truths they have narrated, had Jesus not actually risen from the dead, and had they not known this fact as certainly as they knew any other fact.” Simon Greenleaf, *The Testimony of the Evangelists: The Gospels Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1995), p. 32. First cited in *Vintage Jesus*, Mark Driscoll (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), p. 135.

**Eight: Christ was the most amazing person to ever live.** Finally, it's worth reminding ourselves that the resurrection was not a remarkable ending to an otherwise un-remarkable life; it was the capstone miracle of the most amazing life ever. As we noted in the first chapter, Jesus stands above all others. He lived a sinless life. He taught with authority, healed the sick, multiplied food, walked on water, quieted storms and raised the dead. Claiming that Christ conquered death is not like claiming that you or I did. That would be amazing. Jesus is the most interesting and important person who has ever lived. He did the most amazing things that have ever been done. He claimed to be God, predicted his death and promised to rise again on the third day. Given all the facts, it would have been more remarkable if Jesus hadn't defeated death.

### **So Now What?**

There is more that could be said, but I believe it's time to call the question. You have a decision to make. Sherlock Holmes said, "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." C.S. Lewis brought that logic to the person of Christ, writing:

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. The man we are talking about was and is just what he said or else insane or something worse. Now, it seems to me obvious that he was neither insane nor a fiend; and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that he was and is God.

Are you persuaded? I hope so. I believe that Christ's claims, warnings and promises are all true, and that placing your faith in him is the best decision you could ever make. Through Christ, God will forgive you and welcome you into his family as an adopted son or daughter. You will gain eternal life, be filled with God's Spirit and become part of the expanding Kingdom of God.

One of the reasons these studies were written was to persuade you to do just that. Taking a next step does not require a blind leap of faith. As I hope is clear by now, there are good reasons for you to believe that Jesus is God.<sup>42</sup>

This does, however, require you to take action – to go beyond giving a simple head-nod to God or affirming that Christ is God. Becoming a Christ-follower involves repenting of your sins and placing your hope in Christ. It engages both your mind and your heart. God is not forcing your hand. There is not enough evidence to persuade those who chose not to believe. But there is an open invitation for those who do. If you would like to take a next step, I invite you to pray the following prayer.

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<sup>42</sup> Our culture has wrongly divided fact and faith – suggesting that fields like science and finance traffic in the first, while religion and spirituality are based entirely on the second. This is not true. Indeed, I believe the case for faith in Christ is overwhelming.

Lord Jesus Christ, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life. I am sorry for my selfishness, greed, pride, anger and many other sins. Please forgive me. Thank you for dying on the cross so that I could be forgiven. I now turn from everything I know that is wrong. Spirit of God, thank you for coming to live in me now. Please guide and direct my path. Help me to become more like you. Thank you. Amen