

From Facts to Faith
A Teen Apologetics Series
Version 2
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Is there a creator-sustainer God, or can science explain everything there is about the universe? What do atheists believe, and do their beliefs make any sense? Is the Bible divinely inspired, or is it just a collection of old myths handed down through the generations? If all religions are basically the same, how can Christianity claim to be the one true path to God?

In today's era of social media and instant information, everyone needs a healthy dose of skepticism. But should matters involving faith be exempt? Certainly not! Teenagers are naturally and rightly skeptical as they mature, gain independence and develop their own sense of individuality. *From Facts to Faith* is a devotional series designed to help teens thoughtfully and productively examine matters of faith. It is also designed to aid teens in developing critical thinking skills and put them on the life-long road of satisfying their own doubts. Ultimately it is on this road where their faith will become certain, unshakable, and worth sharing.

In this series, teens will learn:

- How to think for themselves by discerning reliable facts and reasonable arguments.
- How the scientific mysteries of the origin and intricacy of the universe point to a creator.
- Why the Bible is a trustworthy source of information.
- Why biblical and secular writings confirm that Jesus was much more than a good teacher.
- Why Christianity, as Jesus taught it, makes imminent sense when compared to other religions.

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EPILOGUE. IT'S NOW UP TO YOU

SECTION 1. STANDING UP FOR YOUR FAITH - DEFENSE AND OFFENSE

In the first century, it wasn't particularly easy to be a Christian as there were often some very serious consequences. It makes sense, then, that a high degree of credibility and trust had to be established before anyone would risk losing friends, family, reputation, and at times, even their own life when deciding to follow Jesus. The same is true today for many teens – although not so much the losing one's life part, unless you live in the 40 or 50 countries where it's illegal or perilous to follow Christ.

When it comes to standing up for your faith, the apostle Peter puts it this way:

Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. (1 Peter 3:13-16)

To paraphrase Peter:

- There's no need to be afraid of those who oppose us, provided our hearts are pure.
- We are to be *intentionally* prepared with answers to questions and challenges that are bound to come our way.
- Standing up for faith has two sides: defense and offense. We are to *defend* our faith from damaging accusations *and* we're also to put forth reliable facts and reasoned arguments for how faith in God, the Bible and Jesus is more than reasonable.
- We're to treat non-believers with gentleness and respect, not contentious behavior.
- In so doing, we'll keep our consciences clear. With clear consciences, we'll exercise better judgment and truly mirror Jesus' good example of personal interaction with people.

In short, standing up for your faith requires using your head and not responding simply, "Because the Bible says so." If you're going to have any impact on nonbelieving friends, what you say must make sense. And it all starts with things first making complete sense to you.

Let's put the shoe on the other foot and imagine that you're the one with little or no faith. Would you commit to something that your mind says is irrational? Of course not! Faith must first be rational and reasonable for someone to be convinced there is a God. As one famous philosopher said, "Coming to faith isn't a leap into the dark, but a leap into the light."

The good news is that God doesn't ask us to be brainless in any matter, let alone in matters of faith. In fact, he commands us to "love the Lord... with all your *mind*" (Mark 12:30). God wants our minds to be godly, not empty. He wants sincere loyalty, not blind devotion; sacrifice, not stupidity; integrity, not weak logic.

Pop Quiz! On what should our faith be based?

1. Our feelings
2. Our experiences
3. Others' faith
4. Reliable facts and reasonable arguments

How about all of four? God also gives us feelings, experiences and relationships to add color to our lives and enhance our appreciation and love for him. So in effect, they should all work together to help form a more beautiful, meaningful and faith-filled relationship with him.

Nonetheless, when we share or stand up for our faith, our words and actions should first and foremost be built on reliable facts and reasonable arguments. This is what most people respect.

But when it comes to truly getting to the bottom of deep questions and thorny issues, critical thinking skills are indispensable. And spoiler alert! This lesson series is designed to help you develop your own critical thinking skills—in particular, with respect to matters of faith in God, the Bible and Jesus.

What do critical thinking skills look like and how do we engage in them? In short, we:

1. Suspend our personal judgments to check the validity of an argument or action.
2. Break issues and arguments down to their most basic forms and assumptions.
3. Consider alternative perspectives.
4. Explore the implications and consequences of each perspective.
5. Use reason, logic and reliable information to identify and resolve inconsistencies, if possible.
6. Re-evaluate our personal views in light of new information.

Let's put it to the test! Your teacher says that God doesn't exist because no scientific evidence proves he does. So, let's:

1. Suspend our personal judgments and open our minds to the possibility.
2. Break the argument down to its basic form and assumptions. In this case, God can only exist if he's physical or "seen". That is, things that can't be seen don't exist.
3. Consider alternative perspectives. Are there things that people generally accept as true without having been physically seen?
4. Explore the implications and consequences. No one has ever physically seen "gravity" and yet we know it exists through its effects. The same is true with sound waves, protons, magnetism, and so on. We know they exist because of their observable effects.
5. Identify and resolve inconsistencies. If things can exist without being physically seen, can God be one of them? Yes.
6. Re-evaluate our personal views in view of new information. The argument that God must be physical or "seen" to exist is flawed. Indeed, the biblical description that God is omnipotent, omnipresent and beyond all physical limitation (even time) makes sense.

Discussion Starters

1. With respect to the four faith-factors of feelings, experiences, others' faith, and reliable facts and reasonable arguments, take a moment to consider your own faith. In which areas should you improve to achieve a more balanced faith?
2. Since God gave us our brains and expects us to use them in everything, especially in matters of faith, how would you describe someone with a healthy dose of skepticism?
3. Bonus Round!

- How many sides are there to a circle? *Two: an inside and an outside.*
- Bob's father has 4 kids: Mimi, Momo, Mumu and who else? *Bob.*
- How many days can you go without sleep? *Every day, if you sleep at night.*
- Is it "penguins fly" or "penguins flies"? *Neither. Penguins don't fly.*
- A hatless man comes in from the rain without wet hair. How is this possible? *He's bald.*

Congratulations. You've just used critical thinking skills to solve some tricky questions. How do you think these skills can help you with truth-seeking?

SECTION 1. STANDING UP FOR YOUR FAITH – USING RELIABLE FACTS

In the first lesson, we discussed how standing up for your faith requires having both a defense and an offense. We learned that whatever we say to nonbelievers should first and foremost be built on reliable facts and reasonable arguments. This is what people respect and if open, will respond to - more so than feelings and experiences.

In this lesson, we're going to continue in the theme of standing up for your faith by discussing what one should consider to be reliable facts.

There are many reasons why people don't believe in God and the Bible. A big one may be the enormous amount of information *and* misinformation on the Internet and other media.

It's easy to believe that lots of things posted on the Internet are credible. But a good dose of healthy skepticism can serve us very well. For example, here are some of things you can find on the Internet:

1. Before he died, Oscar winning director Stanley Kubrick confessed to filming a staged moon landing in 1969. This explains why the American flag appears to be blowing in the wind in all the photographs, although we all know there's no atmosphere on the moon. According to Kubrick, Neil Armstrong never set one foot on the moon.

Do you think this statement is true or false? It's false. Kubrick never made this confession and all the scientific evidence proves the lunar landing was real.

2. In 2016, President Obama awarded himself the Distinguished Public Service medal for working to end the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and for keeping US troops out of the Syrian conflict.

Do you think this statement is true or false? It's false. President Obama never awarded himself any honors.

3. Every year the US National Security Administration pays Apple and Samsung \$16.5 billion to spy on citizens using smart phone cameras and tracking capabilities.

Do you think this statement is true or false? It's false. No such item has ever existed in the federal budget and no such allegation has ever been supported with any proof.

But what about these statements make them *appear* credible and trustworthy?

- While presented sincerely, they're also presented as strong matters of fact. Remember, strong opinions do not make truths!
- They include some reliable facts to support wild claims. Barack Obama was indeed the US president in 2016, and he did indeed strive to end US military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq and to keep US troops out of Syria.
- They get our attention by raising our natural suspicions. Many of us have wondered if technology is being used against us in some sinister way.

Yes, we're all smart enough to understand that not everything on the Internet or social media is credible or trustworthy. But with all the information that's available on every side of every issue, we can easily make the mistake of concluding that there's simply no real "truth". But this would be

tragic because there certainly *is* truth in the world — and God gave us brains and critical thinking skills in part because he wants us to seek truth, and in so doing, develop strong faith.

The point is simple: If we're going to use facts and information when standing up for faith, they'd better be rock-solid. To evaluate information reliability, we should consider things like:

- What are the author's motives for presenting the information? Is he or she seeking to add to an existing body of knowledge or is the author simply seeking to sell, entertain or persuade you to his or her opinion?
- Does the author have any apparent conflicts of interest such as monetary gain, a specific agenda or an axe to grind?
- Is the information objectively presented? Is it fair and balanced with consideration given to opposing perspectives or is it all one-sided?
- Can the information be cross-checked with credible sources such as government agency websites, industry trade groups, research organizations or major news agencies with fair and balanced reputations?
- Does the author cite supporting information sources or is it all just his or her opinions?
- Who is ultimately responsible for the information? The author or a credible organization?
- Finally, does it pass the smell test? Sometimes, the more sensational the lie, the more some people are willing to believe it. And as they say, "If it's too good to be true, it probably isn't."

Vetting facts requires time and effort but rest assured, it's well worth it. Certainly no one wants or intends to base their personal beliefs on lies and deceptions. So it makes sense that we first train ourselves to properly assess information through the filters of logic, reason and careful study, using fair and balanced information from credible sources.

In fact, this no-nonsense approach is insisted on in the Bible itself. In Acts 26:25 the apostle Paul challenged governor Festus to examine the truth about Christ on the basis of what's "*true and reasonable*." Few religions invite people to closely examine their claims as Christianity does.

Pop Quiz! Is the following information reliable or unreliable?

1. A manufacturer's advertisement for a new smart phone. *Unreliable*. The manufacturer's main goal is to sell products. And while certain new features may sound appealing, they most likely do not reflect the opinions of objective consumer group tests or industry experts.
2. An Internet posting describing someone's bad experience on a college campus. *Unreliable*. While negative reports should encourage us to seek more comprehensive information, a single person's experience isn't necessarily a reliable indicator.
3. A scientific journal's article on the accuracy of carbon dating. *Reliable*. Scientific journals are held to very high peer review standards.
4. A Wikipedia post on global warming. *Unreliable*. While Wikipedia seeks to inform readers, contributing authors are anonymous so it can be difficult to truly determine if they are objective or biased. Wikipedia posts often list supporting information sources as well, but again, caution is advised.

Discussion Starters

1. We discussed the important filters of logic, reason, and careful study, using objectively fair and balanced information from credible sources. What does *careful* study look like?
2. What does *careless* study look like?
3. What are some examples of using the skill of determining reliable facts in your personal truth seeking?

SECTION 1 – STANDING UP FOR YOUR FAITH – USING REASONABLE ARGUMENTS

In the first lesson, we discussed how standing up for your faith requires having both a defense and an offense. We also learned that whatever we say must be built on reliable facts and reasonable arguments because these are what people usually respond to and respect.

In the second lesson, we covered the skill of determining reliable facts and how we should train ourselves to properly process information through the filters of logic, reason and careful research. This of course, takes time and effort but in the end, it's well worth it. The same can be said of today's topic of using reasonable arguments.

When you write a position paper in school, most teachers expect reasonable arguments. There are usually three simple tests:

1. Does the argument itself make sense?
2. Is it feasible?
3. Is it ethical?

Let's use an example to see how this works using the argument that *everyone should obey speed limits*.

- If an argument is to make sense, listeners first need to see that it makes sense — in other words, that the benefits outweigh the costs. In our example, obeying speed limits is difficult when we're running late, but in the end, it helps protect people's lives and the environment. Check! *It makes sense*.
- If an argument is feasible, people also need to see that it's practical. All drivers are perfectly capable of driving the speed limit. Check! *It's feasible*.
- Last, for the sake of what's ethical, people need to see that it's both good and right. Saving lives and reducing carbon emissions are both highly ethical. Check! *It's ethical*.

We can safely conclude that the argument that everyone should obey speed limits is indeed reasonable. And yes, there are emergency exceptions.

However, things can get squishy fast when it comes to arguments for or against belief in God, the Bible and Jesus. For example, one popular argument against faith in God is, "There are millions of highly educated people in the world who don't believe in God, so why should I?"

Is this a reasonable argument? Let's start with our critical thinking skills to break it down to its most basic form and assumptions and see if it holds water. When you think about it, there are far more *uneducated* people who don't believe in God. And on the other hand, there are millions of intelligent people who do, in part, because they *are* intelligent — not to mention the millions who aren't. So, no, this isn't a reasonable argument because on closer inspection it fails the common sense test.

But be careful; the numbers game cuts both ways! If you claim that billions of believers can't all be wrong, you fall into the same trap. Remember, simple head counts do not prove that an argument is reasonable.

Here's another popular argument: "Truth is subjective and everyone's entitled to their own version."

As before, we begin by breaking it down to its most basic form and assumptions. By general definition, a “truth” applies in all situations regardless of time and culture. This argument fails truth’s general definition because truth is *not* subjective. At best, this statement is simply a strong opinion and strong opinions do not constitute truth. Logically, however, faith can be a reasonable response to established truth.

One may also argue, “Hey, believing in heaven and hell is fine for you, but not for me.” Whether heaven and hell exist can be debated — but that’s not the premise of this argument which is that everyone can determine their own version of truth. Ultimately, this statement adds nothing to the debate over the existence of heaven and hell. Again, it’s simply an opinion or sentiment.

Keep in mind, however, that strong faith doesn’t make truth either. You can be completely mistaken by placing faith in the wrong things. Would you rather have a strong faith in a weak bridge or a weak faith in a strong bridge? In other words, shouldn’t you first know whether the bridge can support your weight before you use it?

Discussion Starters

1. Do the filters of logic, reason and careful study apply equally to both reliable facts and reasonable arguments?
2. We discussed how reasonable arguments must make sense, be feasible and be ethical. But aren’t ethics themselves subjective? So the question is asked, “Are society’s ethics truth?” What do you think? Give an example.
3. We discussed the general definition of truth as being something that applies in all situations regardless of time and culture. Are the following statements ideals, popular sentiments, or truths?
 - Life can be stressful at any age. *Truth*
 - Karma. What goes around, comes around. *Sentiment*
 - Men and women should be treated equally. *Ideal*
 - Deep down, we all want to be loved and accepted. *Truth*
 - The way others treat you affects your views on life. *Truth*
 - More money makes everyone happier. *Sentiment*
 - All emotions are good because they add color to life. *Ideal or sentiment*

What were your decision criteria for this exercise? Did you:

- Suspend personal judgments or opinions?
- Break the statement down to its basic form and assumptions?
- Consider alternative perspectives?
- Explore implications and consequences?
- Use reason, logic and reliable information to identify and resolve any inconsistencies?
- Re-evaluate your personal views in light of any new information?

SECTION 1 – STANDING UP FOR YOUR FAITH – GOOD AND BAD DOUBTS

So far in this series we've discussed how standing up for your faith requires:

- Both a defense and an offense, but always in a respectful and considerate manner.
- Using reliable facts and reasonable arguments.
- Training yourself to process questions and issues with critical thinking skills.

We've also learned that:

- Truths apply in all situations, regardless of time and culture.
- Faith can be a reasonable response to truth.

When considering the issues covered in this series, you've likely surfaced some of your own questions and doubts. Does God truly exist? Is the Bible reliable? Did Jesus really rise from the dead? And so on. Good! This is exactly the point. God gave us brains so that we can pursue the answers. Yet it's up to each of us individually to decide what we'll ultimately do, or not do, with our intelligence.

If nothing else, remember this: It is your responsibility – and ONLY your responsibility – to satisfy your doubts. It's not your parents', your teachers', your favorite celebrities', or your ministers'. It's solely up to you.

Apart from the fact that God can't be physically seen or touched, what may be some reasons we may doubt his existence? How about:

- We prayed prayers that went unanswered.
- We stepped out in faith, only to be disappointed.
- We were hurt by religious people or know others who were.
- We read things in the Bible that made no sense or appear contradictory.

Well, welcome to the party! The good news is that you're normal and have a healthy dose of skepticism. Doubts, if properly responded to, can and should inspire us to search out the answers, open new avenues for spiritual adventure and ultimately lead us to truth.

But here's the deal: Doubts can be either good or bad and it's entirely up to you to decide which one it will be. You can decide to make them good doubts that inspire truth-seeking, *or* you can do nothing and allow your faith to languish.

Assuming we all want to have good doubts that inspire us to take on the tough and thorny issues, where's a good place to start? Believe it or not, it's the Bible. You should know that a major theme of the Bible is seeking truth. And how do you suppose God expects us to do this? Drum roll please... You guessed it! By using reliable facts and reasonable arguments developed through critical thinking skills! Such a faith is certain, unshakable and worth sharing.

In fact, let's look at some scriptural examples.

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 7:17)

Here we see Jesus challenging people to put God's teachings into practice so that they'll *know* if Jesus speaks on God's behalf or not. The concept is simple. You can believe that the Eiffel Tower exists but until you go to Paris to see it and touch it, you won't truly know it exists as there will always be a small element of doubt. Until then, it's just a matter of faith based on what others have told you or what you've seen in photographs and movies. Why should faith in God be any different? You'll never truly know if God's teachings are truth unless you put them into practice and find out for yourself. This was Jesus' challenge 2000 years ago, and it still applies to us today.

In Matthew 11:1-19, we read that when John the Baptist was in prison, he asked his disciples to inquire of Jesus whether he's the Messiah, or if they should look for someone else. We may paraphrase Jesus' response as: "Look at all the evidence around you and decide for yourselves." And note that he concludes the passage with: "Wisdom is proved right by her *actions*."

We started this lesson series on the premise that for someone to accept the Christian message there must be a high degree of credibility and trust in both the messenger and the message. We established that faith should be built on the evidences — not in spite of it. And yet, despite the evidences, there can still be lingering doubts. Good! Seeking truth isn't easy, and in all likelihood, the process of seeking and finding truth and faith will last the rest of your life. It's *your* journey, and some truths will be easy to find, while others may take years.

Here's another gem worth remembering: Honesty about doubts, coupled with humility, persistence and openness, creates a healthy mindset of truth-seeking. Doesn't this sound a lot like critical thinking? And as you carefully and thoughtfully work through your doubts, your understanding and faith will very likely become stronger.

Because God gave us all free will, we're able to be in control of our own spiritual journey. This is a very good thing. As it is, God's invisibility is a sort of guarantee that we'll respond authentically to him, and not under pressure. We'll talk more about this concept in a later lesson.

Discussion Starters

1. How would you describe someone with "healthy" doubts?
2. What are some of your nagging doubts? What are some practical steps you can take today to begin to satisfy them?
3. What may be some reasons why some people may *not* want to satisfy their doubts? What may eventually happen to their faith?

SECTION 2. EVIDENCE FOR GOD – OKAY, PROVE THERE’S A GOD!

With this lesson, we begin a new section in our apologetics series entitled Evidence for God. In it, we’ll cover:

1. Okay, Prove There’s a God!
2. What Atheists Believe
3. Gods That Don’t Exist
4. Why God and Science Go Hand in Hand
5. The Problem of Suffering

When it comes to belief in a creator-sustainer God, skeptics often argue that there are many logical “proofs” that such belief is illogical. For example, if there’s really a God, could he:

- Create loud silence?
- Make a circle square?
- Make a rock so heavy he couldn’t lift it?

What do you think of these arguments? Believe it or not, the skeptics are right (sort of). The answer to this type of questioning is obviously *no*. And to finish the argument, since God isn’t all-powerful, he’s merely fictional. And yet we somehow sense that something’s not quite right here. Putting on our critical thinking caps, let’s start by breaking the questions down to their barest forms and assumptions.

Because loud silence isn’t silent, loud silence is, by definition, impossible. How can non-silence (non-A) be silence (A)? “A” must equal “A” to be true. The only way for it to be true is to tinker with the definitions or subvert the logic. Since even infinite power can’t overthrow logic, the concept of loud silence is incoherent and the question is exposed as a trick. The same can be said for a square circle and an impossibly heavy rock. In other words, these are non-sense questions and sorry, even an infinite and omnipotent God can’t make $2+2=5$.

The fact of the matter is that there’s never been a logical question that’s disproved the existence of God. Moreover, such questions fail to account for God’s true nature, which as we’ve discussed, is beyond all physical limitations, including time. That aside, by logic alone, it’s as impossible to disprove God’s existence as it is to prove it. Logic is only a tool that helps point us in the right direction for truth-seeking. It is not an ultimate answer.

This is a good example of where skeptics and believers are at a draw, or impasse, with neither side able to win the argument.

Another popular skeptic argument that God doesn’t exist concerns all the hypocrisy in religion. Indeed, people love to point to the inglorious deeds done in the name of God throughout history; religious wars, the Spanish inquisition, crusades, institutionalized racism, and so on. Sadly, these charges are true.

While the skeptics’ point is valid, it’s hardly original. During his earthly ministry, Jesus openly attacked hypocrisy with white-hot intensity and the apostle Paul also echoed such a charge when writing to the

Christian church in Rome, “The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you” (Romans 2:24).

So don’t confuse the messenger with the message. A salesman might be a poor representative for an otherwise great product. If a doctor in poor physical condition gives you a prescription, will you refuse it? Probably not. A messenger may *discredit* the message, but that’s not the same as *disproving* it.

Question: If there is a God, why do you suppose he chooses to remain “hidden”? Did you ever think that it may actually be for our benefit if we *can’t* prove God’s existence? If he were visible, if we could literally see or touch him every moment of our lives, how could we possibly say “no” to him and still have free will? We’d very likely feel compelled to always just fall in line. But then, any relationship with God would be forced, and forced relationships are very difficult because good relationships usually require mutual respect, certain freedoms and, at times, healthy distances. In short, an invisible God is more logical than a visible one because otherwise, we couldn’t really live as our true selves.

So back to science - the reason no one has ever scientifically proven God’s existence is because God isn’t *physical*. Of course, a skeptic might say, “Oh, how convenient, your God is invisible!” Okay, true. But there are *many* real, scientifically observable things that aren’t visible either. For example, sound waves, protons, gravity and magnetism. We only understand them by their properties and effects. No scientist has ever actually “seen” gravity.

Also by definition, science *only* explores what can be measured with instruments. So it follows that the lack of any hard physical evidence isn’t a logical reason to reject the reality of God. Remember this pearl of wisdom: The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence. In other words, a lack of *physical* proof doesn’t automatically prove something doesn’t exist.

In fact, there are lots of things we generally accept as real, without having *physical* evidence. For example, numbers, justice, love, beauty, and so on. And while mathematics is the “language” of physics, the “existence” of numbers can’t be physically proven. We *assume* them and go about our calculations — and things usually work out just fine.

Basically, if we reject the existence of what we can’t see or physically prove, we end up denying half of reality! Fortunately, as we’ll see in later lessons, there are plenty of strong reasons for believing in God, despite not being able to prove his existence.

Discussion Starters

1. After this lesson, what might you say to someone who rejects God on the grounds that religions are basically full of hypocrites?
2. Take 20 seconds to close your eyes and imagine God as an ever-present ball of light in every corner of every room and in the sky above. Now, what thoughts and feelings did you have? Would you rather have a visible God or an invisible God? Why?
3. 2 Corinthians 5:7 says, “We live by faith and not by sight.” In the light of this lesson, what does this scripture now mean to you?

SECTION 2. EVIDENCE FOR GOD - WHAT ATHEISTS BELIEVE

In the last lesson, Okay, Prove There's a God!, we learned that you can neither prove nor disprove the existence of God. All you can do is look for where the signs ultimately point. In this lesson, we're going to turn the tables and examine what atheists believe and determine if it makes any sense.

Atheists believe there is no God. The word "atheism" comes from Greek "a" meaning "not" and "theós" meaning "god." Its opposite is theism, which is, of course, the belief in a God or gods.

Agnosticism falls somewhere in the middle. The word comes from Greek "a" or "not" plus "gnosis" meaning "knowledge". *Hard* agnosticism is the belief that God is unknowable; he may exist, but we can't know for sure. *Soft* agnosticism isn't a clearly thought out position either way. It effectively means "I don't know" and all too often, "I'm basically not inclined to find out." Generally, many people today are soft agnostics — if not in word, then in practice.

So atheism maintains there is no God or gods; that essentially, the universe came about and continues to exist purely by random chance. And to explain man's longstanding history of belief, atheists argue that early man developed supernatural beliefs to explain events like thunder and lightning, earthquakes, floods, eclipses, etc., as well as to comfort those in the face of death (one's own, or those of loved ones). To support these arguments, atheists further assert that since no one has ever scientifically proven God exists, theism is just fantasy.

Do you remember this from our last lesson: "Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence"? In other words, just because there's no physical evidence doesn't automatically mean something doesn't exist. In fact, there are lots of things we accept as real despite having no hard, physical evidence. Gravity being one example we discussed. Further, people of faith would argue that spiritual realities aren't dependent on physical laws and that to definitively prove that the universe has no all-powerful, all knowing God, you yourself must be all-powerful and all knowing. This, of course, is impossible.

So again, it appears that theists and atheists are at an impasse.

As promised, let's dig into the practical implications of atheism to see what we can learn. To begin with, if there is no God, there should be no true moral absolutes or standards, only rules upon which we generally agree. In this regard, atheism is technically amoral. To be clear, amoral is different from immoral. If someone is amoral, it means he or she has no moral sense; he or she has no concern regarding what's right or wrong. But if someone is immoral, the person knows the difference and simply does the wrong thing anyway.

Question: What do you suppose will happen if faith in God is completely removed from society? Well, there's no need to wonder because this has been played out in history many times in places like communist Cambodia, Russia and China. And in North Korea today, all people are forced to *nearly* worship their dictator.

One must wonder, then, if atheism as a political ideology is so effective, why do these countries fail so spectacularly socially, politically and economically? In large part because these amoral societies

made religion illegal and relied exclusively on leader-imposed laws. Sadly, each of these regimes executed millions of their own citizens to squash opposition and maintain their authoritarian power.

So to live amorally means to live as though there's no ultimate right or wrong. And if history is any guide, it shows us that, in the end, amoral societies eventually dehumanize and horribly exploit people as though they were simply objects. So in this regard, I think we'd all agree that morality *should* transcend societies and governments.

This is not to say, however, that atheists can't act morally. Only that if they do, it's not because of their ideology — but despite it. True atheism is amoral, and a thorough-going atheist imagines a world without ultimate moral accountability where he or she is answerable to no one. This is simply a recipe for disaster.

However, it's also fair to say that history is filled with horrific wars waged in the name of God and religion. In the case of Christianity, kings and governments who used religion to wage war were not following the words of Jesus. While they acted in the name of Christ, they were not in obedience to Jesus teaching his followers to love their enemies, be kind and pray for them and not be vengeful.

A world without God's moral standards would not only be amoral, it would also be meaningless. One of the great benefits of religion is that it provides insightful answers to questions fundamental to the meaning and purpose of life. Without these ultimate insights, all we can do is guess as to any meaning to our own existence.

At the dawn of the 20th century, the famous Swiss psychologist Carl Jung said, "Emptiness is the central neurosis of our time." A neurosis is a mild mental illness not caused by disease. Of course, atheism explains away spiritual phenomena as functions of neurochemistry, projections of the mind, wishful thinking, and large-scale corporate delusion. In so doing, however, it fails to apprehend all of reality, and to answer even the basic questions of human existence. At best, atheism's answers are incomplete as they fail to help us understand things like:

- What is ultimately right and what is ultimately wrong?
- Who are we and what is the meaning and purpose of life?
- How can we be truly happy and fulfilled in relationships?
- What lies beyond this life?

Because its foundations are faulty, it's not surprising, then, that atheism gets quickly bogged down in its own contradictions. For example:

1. Atheists frequently reject God because of the problem of evil. Yet it's contradictory to deny that evil is real on the one hand, and yet argue there's too much evil — say, wars in the name of religion — on the other.
2. Atheists often emphasize environmental responsibility (and so should believers, for that matter) yet if mankind is on the same level as all animals, it's difficult to prove that caring for the environment is natural. Isn't it more natural for mankind to exploit the world?

3. Atheists often denounce believers for their convictions, typically labeling them as intolerant. But if it's wrong to tell others they're wrong, then by what right may atheists tell others they're misguided? Doesn't that make them guilty of the same charge?

Discussion Starters

1. How many of your friends are self-proclaimed atheists? Hard agnostics? Soft agnostics?
2. If they ever explained their reasoning to you, do parts of this lesson sound familiar? How might you now be better able to have quality conversations (not arguments) about belief in God with them?
3. What new appreciation for God and his moral standards do you have as a result of this lesson?
4. Pop Quiz! Is the following celebrity an atheist or a believer?
 - Ricky Gervais. *Atheist*.
 - Daniel Radcliffe. *Atheist*.
 - Chuck Norris. *Believer*.
 - Brad Pitt. *Atheist*.
 - Keira Knightly. *Atheist*.
 - Denzel Washington. *Believer*.
 - Ryan Gosling. *Believer*.
 - Carrie Underwood. *Believer*.

SECTION 2. EVIDENCE FOR GOD - GODS THAT DON'T EXIST

In the last lesson, we learned what atheists believe and that their arguments don't make much sense when broken down to their barest forms and assumptions. We also learned earlier that when it comes to solid proof supporting whether God exists, we arrive at an impasse; there's no definitive proof either way and so all we can do is look at where the signs point. When it comes to the question of atheism being useful for answering life's fundamental questions such as the meaning and purpose of life, it simply can't compete with theism. In short, we learned that there's extraordinary value in belief.

Interestingly, however, atheists and theists have more in common than one might think. For example, both agree that many of the common "deity" concepts are downright silly. In fact, both Christians and atheists alike *ought to reject* many of the familiar caricatures of God. Let's go over the most common.

1. The Old Man in the Sky. You may have noticed in movies and paintings that God is often portrayed as an old man in the sky with a long, flowing robe and great white beard. In fact, he sometimes comes across as lonely in heaven, though we can cheer him up by saying our prayers.

Logically, however, if there is a God, he's certainly not going to have human form, and he certainly won't share in our human limitations. Have you ever thought:

- How can God possibly hear millions of prayers at the same time?
- What color is God... black, white, pink? Is he male or female?
- With everything going on in the world, is God happy or sad?
- Does God really care if I pray? Surely, he's got bigger things to worry about.

The Bible teaches that God is limitless, omnipotent and omnipresent. This means that he's larger than what our brains can ever imagine, and because time is no constraint for him, God can be everywhere all the times. Also, the Bible teaches that God is spirit, not flesh; personal, but not human; and real, though not bound by space and time. If we accept this, then all these questions are easily answered. If all time is equally accessible to God, then he has all eternity to consider our prayers. He isn't black, white or yellow because he isn't in human form. Nor is he male or female.

Interestingly, many skeptics use passages in the Bible to argue that because God can be jealous or angry, he's unworthy of divinity. But is this true? *Shouldn't* people be jealous when their spouses flirt with others? Of course, they should! And is anger always wrong? If that were the case, what kind of a God *wouldn't* be angry when someone is cruelly murdered. On the contrary, we should argue that if he *weren't* angry, he wouldn't be God.

God doesn't honestly *need* our worship; any need is actually on *our* side. When living to please God isn't a focus of our lives, we're susceptible to filling up with pride, all sorts of selfishness and are likely to end up hurting others. Is this really what we want? So not only is worship a natural response of the created to the creator, it also helps us maintain a healthy life balance. With God in our heads and hearts, it's hard to justify being selfish jerks.

2. I am God. Many people have been influenced by eastern religions' claim that God is everywhere (which is true) and in everything (which is false). "All is one." This god is identical to the universe and everything in it. Philosophers and theologians speak of pantheism: everything is God, and there is no independent self. Nor is there right or wrong, God or non-God, being or non-being. It's all just "One."

Of course, we can all easily see why this is a popular view; it appeals to our selfishness, while coming across as non-offensive and politically correct. Yet while this view of God is frequently promoted in the media, and central to the New Age Movement, it crumbles under closer inspection as we'll see in a later lesson.

3. The Force. This view has been popularized by the *Star Wars* films. Many people who may be unsure whether there is a God do acknowledge some sort of "force" in the universe. The Force is an omnipotent, omnipresent and impersonal energy source with both a good side and a dark side. However, real-world forces like electricity, flowing water, magnetism or gravity are insufficient to create, let alone generate, personality or morality. Thus, the Force view of God offers no real explanations for anything and in the end is just science fiction.
4. Nice warm feelings. Some people say, "I can't define God, but I can sure feel him, especially when I'm watching a sunset or a baby being born." Equating sentimental circumstances with God doesn't answer important questions. After all, it's not the *feeling* that is ultimate, but the truth and reality that leads to the feeling.
5. Idols. Today billions of people the world over worship idols – statues or images of gods that are somehow believed to be linked to the gods themselves. Idol worshippers present their prayers and offerings in the hope of controlling their gods to get what they selfishly want. So instead of God controlling man, some resort to idols to control their version of God. This is fundamentally flawed.

Does this mean the Christians shouldn't pray? Of course not. But it does mean that when we do, it should be done selflessly.

When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures. (James 4:3)

The other thing about idols is that they don't always come in the form of statues and images. The Bible teaches that anything that monopolizes our time and draws our energy away from God can be a form of idolatry. Just look around today and you'll see all sorts of idol worship centered on money, power, gadgets, celebrities, sex, addictions — you name it. None of these are worthy of worship. They're all weak false gods.

In summary, chances are good that many of our unbelieving friends don't have a clear understanding of the biblical God. Or perhaps they do, but have had bad religious experiences, are galled by widespread hypocrisy, or as is often the case, are simply unwilling to acknowledge God and his authority because doing so would inconvenience their lives.

Discussion Starters

1. What would be the first thing you'd do if you were all-powerful and all-present? Would you:
 - Fly in the air like a superhero?
 - Travel throughout time?
 - Eliminate diseases and hunger?
 - What else?
2. What are some of the things you've personally wondered about the nature of God? Do they better fit a movie version of God or the biblical version?
3. In truth, many atheists discount the nature of God because it's an excuse to "worship" whatever's important to them. Later, they scramble for reasons to justify their actions. Do you ever find yourself doing this and if so, why do you think this is?

SECTION 2. EVIDENCE FOR GOD - WHY GOD AND SCIENCE GO HAND IN HAND

Now that we understand what atheists believe, along with common misconceptions about the nature of God, our next lesson begins the discussion on why God and science go hand in hand.

Even though God is invisible, we can still find signs pointing to his existence. In fact, our world is filled with them. Like snooping around for forensic evidence in popular TV detective shows, we should first open our eyes for some clues that may be right in front of us.

But before we start, however, we should address a widespread misunderstanding. Lots of people think that science and belief are completely at odds with each other. If you want to be a scientist, you must reject all things related to faith, and if you want to be a believer, you must ignore your intelligence and science. Yet it didn't used to be this way at all. In fact, modern science was born in large part because of faith - faith in the scriptures *and* faith in the God of order – in the God who created and sustains all things, the lawgiver behind the laws of nature. Indeed, the vast majority of early modern scientists were strong believers in God, the Bible and Jesus. Scientists like Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, Newton, and many others.

Interestingly, there are at least three pathways to faith rooted in modern science:

1. Cosmology – explains the origin and development of the universe as we know it.
2. Design – explains the amazingly intricate complexity of all things – including us.
3. Evolution – explains how processes in motion over time have led to a livable world, along with the millions of species that populate it.

When it comes to cosmology, back in the 1800s, it was thought that the universe was fixed, eternal and consisting only of our own Milky Way Galaxy. In time, however, these beliefs were overturned by new information discovered through astronomy. With more and more powerful telescopes, it was eventually revealed that there are literally billions of stars in billions of “Milky Way” galaxies.

The second big discovery was that the universe is constantly expanding. An ever-expanding universe implies a beginning. By going back in time and studying the universe on rewind, so to speak, scientists calculate that the universe's starting point was approximately 13.8 billion years ago. What's even more stunning is that this point of origin was not only the beginning of matter and energy, but also of space and time!

If we accept the evidence that space, time, matter and energy all came into existence some 14 billion years ago, we're left with the fundamental question: Who or what initially caused the cosmos? We're talking about the Big Bang, of course. Logically, there are only three options:

1. The universe has always existed.
2. The universe caused itself to exist.
3. There was an external force — “the unmoved mover,” as Aristotle put it.

Accepted science behind the Big Bang refutes the first option that the universe has always existed. The second option, that the universe came into being on its own, is preposterous; how could

something not yet in existence cause its own existence? So logically, we're left with the third and only viable option: There was an external force. Since we know that God isn't defined by matter or energy, nor is he trapped by space and time, isn't it reasonable to believe that the cosmos came into existence through his doing? Of course, there isn't any scientific proof to back this up, but remember, we're looking for where the signs point.

With respect to the universe's design, astrophysicists now know that the force of the Big Bang explosion was exactly right for generating an intricately balanced universe and an Earth capable of supporting life. If the Big Bang had been just 1% weaker, the universe would have stopped expanding and eventually imploded — leading to none of the conditions necessary for the formation of planets. A similar fate would have befallen the cosmos had the Big Bang been just 1% stronger. The stars and planets would not have been able to coalesce from the clouds of matter created in the explosion.

At the other end of the spectrum, there's a similar story of the amazing accuracy needed for just the right ratio of neutrons to protons for matter to exist. Each has an atomic weight of 1. (Electrons, by comparison, are minuscule.) Neutrons are only *slightly* heavier than protons. Slightly tweak the ratio by 1 or 2% and *voilà* — no universe is possible!

Not surprisingly, there are nearly 50 such factors known, each requiring perfect tuning for the existence of the universe and life. If these scientific facts appear too amazing to believe, especially on the atheistic assumption that the universe is just one big coincidence, well, you decide where to put your faith!

On the other hand, if you accept the idea of a creator God, there's no surprise and not much to explain. So let's just say that it's perfectly reasonable to believe that our highly complex universe (about which scientists only admit we understand a mere 5%) strongly suggests a designer.

A third and final path connecting science and faith is evolution. Unfortunately, many believers assume that when God creates, things just magically appear fully formed. This notion is clearly contradicted by science. And when you think about it, God creates through *process*, and not by a proverbial snap of his fingers. For example, you took roughly nine months to develop in your mother's womb before being born. Sure, God could have created all things instantaneously, but to someone for whom time is meaningless, that would hardly be necessary. Or take a moment to think about the elements. From hydrogen to uranium, all of the 92 naturally-occurring elements are formed in the nuclei of stars. This process alone requires millions and millions of years.

Some believers claim that the universe is very young if you follow a literal interpretation of the Bible, and that scientists are deceived in their assertion that the universe is 14 billion years old. Yet it's not really God's nature to deceive people with such things. Because there are many lines of evidence that prove the universe is 14 billion of years old, it is perfectly reasonable to believe that God takes his time creating things and that he simply set the entire process in motion.

Last, it should not be overlooked that some famous atheist scientists have come to faith precisely *because of* cosmology, design and evolution. For example:

1. Francis Collins, the Director of the Human Genome Project and the Director of the National Institute of Health.

2. Hugh Ross, the noted Canadian astrophysicist.
3. Alexis Carrel, the French surgeon, biologist and winner of the Nobel Prize for Medicine.

Pop Quiz! Who said the following?

“I have never denied the existence of God. I think the theory of evolution is fully compatible with faith in God. I think the greatest argument for the existence of God is the impossibility of demonstrating and understanding that the immense universe, sublime and above all measure, and man were the result of chance.”

1. Albert Einstein, the 20th century physicist who developed the theory of relativity.
2. Marie Curie, the woman scientist who pioneered research on radioactivity.
3. Charles Darwin, the originator of the biological theory of evolution.
4. Justin Bieber, the Canadian pop singer and songwriter.

Answer: Charles Darwin.

Discussion Starters

1. Even though modern science began with a healthy respect for God and the Bible, why do you think this relationship took a bad turn?
2. The Bible is filled with all sorts of useful and insightful information, but it never claims itself to be a book of science. Is it then wise to look for scientific answers in the Bible? Of course not. Conversely, it's not wise to look for theological truths in chemistry books. Do you have an experience of looking for an answer in the wrong place?
3. Understanding that God is not a deceiver and that he works through time and process, can one still reasonably argue that God and evolution are incompatible?

SECTION 2. EVIDENCE FOR GOD - THE PROBLEM OF SUFFERING

In this lesson entitled The Problem of Suffering, we bring Section 2 – Evidence for God to a close. To recap, we've learned that:

1. You can't prove or disprove the existence of a creator-sustainer God. You can only thoughtfully consider the direction in which the signs logically point.
2. A closer look at atheism reveals it is amoral, meaningless and often contradictory in its arguments against belief.
3. While there are many fanciful descriptions of God, only the Bible provides a logical and authoritative one: a God beyond all physical limitations, including space and time.
4. When considering the origin and functioning of the universe, we learned that belief in God and science can and should work hand in hand.
5. God answers the *why* questions, while science answers the *how* questions.

This lesson covers what's probably the most common objection to faith, or at least the most heartfelt: The problem of suffering. It should come as no surprise that our world has lots of pain, despair, financial poverty, physical abuse, disease, earthquakes and so on. This helps explain why skeptics often argue, "If there's a loving God, how could he let such terrible things happen?"

But is it automatically true that evil and undeserved suffering disprove God's existence? Not at all. As with any argument, let's break it down to its basic form and assumptions. To be fair, it must be said up front that Christianity offers no easy solution to the problem of suffering. It does, however, offer grace and strength so that those facing pain and suffering may do so with dignity and purpose.

So what might be some reasons God allows suffering? Not that the God who "spoke the universe into existence" can't perform pain-preventing miracles; it's just that there may be some good reasons for him not to. Here are some we're going to discuss further:

- Most suffering is the result of our own free will and doing, not God's.
- We live in an inherently dangerous world. In order for there to be life, powerful forces must be in play. For example, hurricanes, fires and floods are all essential for life on this planet.
- If we persevere, suffering can be good for our character growth, especially in compassion.
- Suffering can and should draw us nearer to God.

Who of us can truly blame God for our own evil actions? The fact of the matter is that most suffering is inflicted *on* people *by* people. With free will, this is simply part of the bargain. Consequently, one of the greatest gifts God gave us – the ability to choose for ourselves – allows us to do both good and bad without divine hindrance.

It can be explained this way: If God intervened every time someone was about to do something hurtful or something that would ultimately lead to a bad accident, disease, cancer, etc., free will wouldn't exist and we'd basically live extremely insulated and controlled lives. And if this were true, we'd never be able to appreciate God's great gift of unconditional love.

Ah, but you may be thinking that man's free will doesn't explain suffering caused by natural disasters and horrible diseases like cancer!

Let's not hastily assume that all nature-driven deaths are God's sole doing. The Earth is naturally dynamic, with constantly shifting tectonic plates, wind and water currents, hurricanes, floods and so on that ironically help sustain life on Earth. Unfortunately, people sometimes build cities and homes on fault lines and flood plains. Essentially, the laws governing nature can be both a blessing and a curse and especially when mankind destroys and pollutes the Earth making matters worse.

You may be wondering that if we're all simply doomed to live in a broken world, how can God, if he exists at all, be "loving"? Well, "loving" as defined by whom? It's easy for us to believe in a God when we think he all but guarantees a happy and carefree life. But is this realistic? Would you even want this? Viewed with the right perspective, pain and suffering lead to personal character growth. Perhaps this is the kind of love we need, even if we don't want it.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that when family and friends go through pain and suffering, they need our love and support and not trite religious statements like, "This is all just part of God's eternal plan". What they need is someone who listens, understands and cares. This is compassion, and it's a wonderful attribute we'd never have unless we too, had experienced our own pain and suffering.

Last, could it be that one of God's purposes for suffering is to bring us to him and keep us close? Being comfortable tends to make us forget about God and not seek him because we don't feel the need. For some, suffering may lead to anger and disbelief, while others experience it as an opportunity to draw nearer to God – but not so much for pain relief, but for strength, dignity and purpose. Indeed, the spiritually minded consider their sufferings as blessings.

C.S. Lewis summed it up nicely: "God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world." (C.S. Lewis. The Problem of Pain. 1940)

So then, does God intentionally cause pain and suffering? No, but he's masterful enough to weave into all our struggles and pains the opportunity to grow in wisdom, grace, compassion, and in our relationship with him.

But wait! If God surpasses all physical limits, how can he understand our pain and suffering, since he never experienced them himself? Good question. God understands our suffering, not just because he's all-wise, but because he once walked the Earth in the form of his Son.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death -- even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Discussion Starters

1. Describe a pain-free world that's also without free will. How would this change your life from what it is today? Would you really want to live in such a world?
2. Remember a time when you suffered pain. Did it bring you nearer to God, or take you away from him? With what you now know, what will you change the next time you go through suffering?
3. What's the best thing to say to a friend who just lost a loved one?
 - a. *C'est la vie*, that's life! Better luck next time.
 - b. Relax, this is all just part of God's eternal plan.
 - c. **I know how this must hurt. I care and I'm here if you need me.**
 - d. Hey, everyone dies sooner or later.
4. No one should have to wait alone while a loved one is in danger or have no one to talk to when his or her life is in crisis. Because Christians are a community of believers, decide today to be the compassionate person God wants you to be.

SECTION 3. EVIDENCE FOR THE BIBLE - A MESSAGE TO MANKIND

With this lesson we start a new section, entitled Evidence for the Bible. In it we'll discuss:

- How the Bible is God's message to mankind regardless of culture, time and intelligence.
- Common excuses for not following the Bible, including some popular conspiracy theories.

If there is a God, wouldn't it be reasonable to think that he'd communicate with his created beings on important things like who he is and what he expects? This make sense. Generally, when we want to communicate with people, we can either speak to them directly, send a messenger, or write letters. Not surprisingly, God did all of these when creating the Bible.

For Christians, the most personal way God communicated with mankind was through the incarnation of himself in his son Jesus. Colossians 1:15 says, "He is the image of the invisible God." The term "incarnation" literally means God becoming human flesh and blood. It's certainly here where Christianity differs from other religions. And it's important to keep in mind that by doing so, God took the initiative to reach out to mankind — something else that's unique.

If "incarnation" sounds too theological, perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine a colony of ants, busily going about their business, completely unaware that a hungry anteater is approaching. A scientist comes across the unsuspecting colony and, wishing to warn them of the danger, tries shouting at them. This doesn't work. He then tries pointing the way to safety with his finger and this too, fails. Finally, he comes up with an ingenious idea; he'll use his laboratory to turn himself into an ant so he can speak to the ants in their language and show them the way to safety. This is essentially what God did for us in Jesus. He literally came down to our level to save us.

You might ask why the scientist would concern himself with the ants, and even more, why the Lord of the universe would concern himself with mankind. This is an excellent question. Fortunately for us, God is a God of love, and through Jesus we can personally know this love. In effect, Jesus chose to come to Earth to share in our humanity; our hurts, our laughter, our sufferings, our tears and our joys. And yet Jesus came not only to inform us of God, but also to save us by removing the sin barrier between us and God. This is the message of the gospel.

Question: If you were God and wanted to effectively communicate with mankind regardless of any differences in culture, time and intelligence — and you also wanted to respect people's independence and free will — how would you go about it? What criteria would you use? Well, we can logically expect the message to at least meet the following criteria:

1. It would have to be intelligible. If people can't understand the message, what's the point? So not only would it have to be intelligible for everyone, in all times and in all cultures, it'd also have to be the right length to convey a clear understanding of who God is and what he expects of us -- especially in a relationship with him. The message would also need to be simple enough to capture the minds and hearts of all mankind, regardless of intellectual capacity.
2. It would have to be consistent. The heavenly message would not be incoherent, nor would it contradict truth in areas such as humanity and history. Did you know that lots of people mentioned in the Bible are also confirmed in secular sources? About 80 persons named in the Old Testament and nearly 30 in the New Testament are known from non-biblical records.

Moreover, archaeologists have unearthed hundreds of artefacts that confirm biblical life and times. These all illustrate the *external* consistency of the Scriptures.

The Bible also displays *internal* consistency. Remarkably, even with scores of authors from multiple cultures writing in several languages and spanning centuries, one consistent picture of God and mankind emerges. There is a single storyline and a compelling view of the meaning of history. Have you ever tried to get two people to agree 100% of the time on spiritual and historic matters? Try getting 60 to agree, over centuries of time!

3. It would have to be uncorrupted by time. No ancient document comes even close to the Bible in the area of accurate textual transmission. Although the original manuscripts have long since perished (often worn out through constant reading or confiscated and burned by authorities), multiple copies were made, safeguarding the message. For the Old Testament, numerous copies of biblical manuscripts have survived from the centuries before Christ, especially among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although these ancient finds are not identical to later manuscripts owing to different spellings, miscopied numbers, etc., the match is so close (about 97%) that we can confidently say that the message has been preserved intact throughout history.
4. It would have to be authoritative. God doesn't offer polite or tentative suggestions to mankind. His message is definitive and meant for our prompt application – assuming a proper context. The Bible repeatedly and unapologetically identifies itself as the Word of God. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus didn't say, "If you pray..." He said, "When you pray" (Matthew 6). And the Great Commission (Matthew 28) isn't simply "the Great Suggestion"; Jesus said "Go!"
5. It would have to be honest. The lives of the men and women in the Bible aren't whitewashed; they're presented clearly with all their weaknesses and sins. Abraham lies, David commits adultery and murder, Peter is impetuous, Sarah is mean, Mary, the mother of Jesus, misunderstands her son, Paul and Barnabas argue... The point is that throughout the Bible, the people are unapologetically real. All this honesty only enhances the credibility of the message.
6. It would have to show signs of supernatural origin. Not surprisingly, there are numerous traces of the message's supernatural origin such as fulfilled prophecies of the rise and fall of nations; the coming of the Messiah and details of Jesus' life and death. All of these and more, were described centuries beforehand in scripture. In 1947, the discovery of the first Dead Sea Scrolls silenced the skeptics in this regard. We'll cover this important find further in a later lesson.
7. It would have to be practical. A message from God would also need to contain valuable and practical information on what we need to know about him, what he expects of us, our relationships with each other, and so on.

In sum, the Bible contains a single, integrated account of reality, with no passage contradicting another or any known facts. This is not to say that Bible contains the complete truth about history, science or any other area of reality. In truth, its history is confined mainly to the eastern Mediterranean, and there's no attempt to provide scientific explanations of any kind. God simply

worked with what people knew, correcting them only when important spiritual or moral points were at stake.

The Bible is true in what it affirms, nearly all of which pertains to relationships with God and each other. The Bible central theme isn't rules and regulations but relationships.

The bottom line is that the Bible meets every reasonable criterion for being a message from God. There's no great mystery to it; the Bible is meant for all people, in all times, in all cultures -- regardless of race, class, or intellect. Anything less would be arguably unfair and contrary to the nature of a loving god. This cannot be said of other religions' scriptures, which are often obscure, historically inaccurate, impractical, inconsistent, and confusing.

Discussion Starters

1. Most people appreciate honesty and transparency in communication. Do you think that the social media you and your friends use today helps or hurts relationships? Explain your answer.
2. Does the fact that the Bible is brutally honest when talking about people help or hurt its credibility?
3. If you could send a message to yourself today going back ten years, what personal, non-financial "life" advice would give yourself? How does compare to the Bible's central theme of relationships?
4. Since the Bible transcends time, culture and intellect, is there a valid reason not to follow it?

SECTION 3. EVIDENCE FOR THE BIBLE - EXCUSES AND CONSPIRACIES

In the last lesson, A Message to Mankind, we learned that there's nothing unreasonable about the Bible being a written communication from God. And even though the Bible is pure, powerful and persuasive for those with open minds, this lesson covers the importance of being aware of common excuses people often use to reject the Bible as well as some common conspiracy theories.

Question: Besides a possible lack of time or interest, what are some of the excuses you've heard people use, or told yourself, for not reading the Bible?

Here's a few:

1. The Bible isn't relevant today. If you really think about it, human nature hasn't changed much over the millennia. Mankind's relationship and spiritual needs remain as strong as ever. Environments, not people, change over time. God's word is no less relevant today than when it was originally given thousands of years ago. "Irrelevance" isn't a good excuse for not reading the Bible.
2. The language is so old, no one can understand it. Not to say that some parts aren't difficult to understand, but most of the Bible is clear once you understand the passage's context. In fact, one could argue that its clarity is one of the Bible's greatest qualities and a good reason to follow it. The objection that the Bible is incomprehensible often comes from those who think that scripture is only available in the King James Version of 1611. Just as there were other English versions before the King James, there have been over 100 additional translations made since that time. There's really no excuse for getting bogged down in archaic language.
3. The Bible has been altered by man over time. Believe it or not, this excuse is partially true. Over time there have been many minor copying errors, like *Christ Jesus* instead of *Jesus Christ*, or the occasional grammatical error. But this charge implies that the Bible's content has been altered over time, and therefore it is now untrustworthy. But this isn't the case at all. As discussed in the last lesson, the message of the Bible has remained intact through the millennia. This excuse simply doesn't hold water.
4. Because men wrote it, it isn't truly God's word. Scripture is the word of God *and* the word of man. It's not either/or, but both/and. Beware of false choices!
5. Everyone has their own interpretation of the Bible. I think you'd agree that reading the Bible requires *careful* interpretation. Though not because it's ambiguous. It just takes extra effort to understand the original context. As mentioned earlier, there are only two kinds of biblical interpretation: *careful and careless*. One of the goals of this lesson series is to help you develop solid critical thinking skills *and* the ability to carefully interpret.

Conspiracies! Everyone loves a good juicy conspiracy: government cover-ups, plots afoot in the Vatican, salacious relationships, secret pay-offs, lies, intrigue, and so on. These days, conspiracies are everywhere, and of course we're drawn to them like moths to a flame. We pore over them on the Internet, devour them on the big screen, and talk endlessly about them with our friends. In a word, they're fun!

It should come as no surprise, then, that there are scores of Bible-related conspiracies. In fact, here are the two most common:

- Some Bible books or passages were intentionally removed or added years later.
- Evidence disproving the Bible's authenticity has long been suppressed by church authorities.

First, let's discuss the so-called missing books of the Bible. There are thousands of religious documents written before, during, and after biblical times that are not considered "scripture." In truth, the "candidates" for scripture are surprisingly few.

In the early years of the church, there were also a few fraudulent books written by men seeking to advance their own status or theology under the guise of lost or secret teachings. The most famous example is the Gospel of Thomas that was written about 170 AD, long after the apostles' deaths. Most credible theologians and historians agree it is bogus, primarily because it blatantly contradicts core apostolic teachings in suspicious favor of the heretical Gnostic sect's theology.

When it comes to the church suppressing evidence disproving the Bible's divine origin, a good response is the scientifically authenticated Dead Sea Scrolls. We know from an earlier lesson that the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947 and contained actual books of the Bible, many of which were dated to the second and first centuries BC – and certainly before the lifetime of Jesus.

One conspiracy holds that the Vatican suppressed the Dead Sea Scrolls because they prove that the Bible was altered over time. But this is nonsense. True, the scrolls weren't quickly published, but this is because their condition was extremely fragile and some cases, there were only bits and fragments. The actual translation work was also extremely labor intensive, not to mention that the principal translators were few and kept dying due to old age. Since 1992, however, all the scrolls have been translated and made public. They shed considerable light on ancient Judaism as well as Christianity and the New Testament. If nothing else, the Dead Sea Scrolls confirm that the Bible remains principally intact after literally thousands of years.

The point is that these Bible conspiracies fail upon closer examination. Yes, they're juicier than the historical truth, but as truth-seekers we should always check the reliability of the information behind an argument and consider its reasonableness before taking a position. Otherwise, we risk becoming complicit in a lie. So don't be taken in by the sensationalism of conspiracy theories, because chances are good that they're just sensational lies.

Discussion Starters

1. Why do you think people are naturally drawn to conspiracies? What does this say about human nature?
2. What tools can truth-seekers use to keep from falling victim to sensationalist conspiracies?
3. Using your critical thinking skills, how would you tackle these popular conspiracies:
 - a. If you read the scriptures closely, you'll find that Jesus taught about reincarnation.
 - b. Jesus and Mary Magdalene were secretly married and had children.
 - c. Judas wrote a gospel that provides the real "truth" about Jesus and the resurrection.

SECTION 4. EVIDENCE FOR JESUS - LEGEND, LIAR, LUNATIC OR LORD?

With this lesson, we begin a new section entitled Evidence for Jesus. As we'll see, the fact that Jesus lived in Palestine 2000 years ago isn't seriously disputed among scholars and historians. There's also no question that Jesus of Nazareth has personally impacted more people than anyone else in the history of mankind. Countless kings, presidents and leaders of all kinds have bent a knee to his lordship, and even Islam teaches that Jesus was a great prophet of God.

At the very least, most non-religious people would agree that Jesus was a good moral teacher.

With so many views on Jesus, which one is the truth? In this lesson, we're going to get to the bottom of this very important question, "Who was Jesus?" Regardless of what you think of him, the Bible records some rather outrageous and controversial claims Jesus made about himself. Can you think of a few? Here are some good ones:

- Jesus claimed to have always existed (John 8:58).
- Jesus claimed to have never sinned (John 8:46).
- Jesus claimed to have all authority in heaven and on Earth (Matthew 28:19).
- Jesus claimed he was prophesied in the scriptures (Luke 24:25-27).
- Jesus claimed he came from heaven (John 8:23).
- Jesus claimed he would raise the dead at the end of time (John 5:28-29).
- Jesus claimed to be one with God (John 10:30).
- Jesus claimed to be the one through whom we must pray to God (John 16:23-24).

It should come as no surprise that Jesus' claims of divinity and messiahship provoked strong reactions from the Jewish leaders of his day – reactions so strong they eventually executed him as a blasphemer against God.

If Jesus was just a good moral teacher, it's hard to reconcile these claims of divinity and messiahship with the man who also taught his followers to be truthful. In fact, to get to the heart of the matter, the question of who Jesus was has only four serious possibilities: a legend, a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. We'll consider the validity of each of these possibilities in order.

Legend. Did Jesus truly exist, or was his persona fabricated by a group of clever people bent on creating a new religion? The fact is there's strong historical witness to Jesus and his movement. In addition to 33 Christian sources, 9 non-Christian sources mention him in the first 150 years after his death. In comparison, Tiberius, the Roman emperor when Jesus was crucified, appears in only ten contemporary sources in total. In addition, most of the apostles who evangelized the Roman world suffered martyrs' deaths for Christ. It doesn't seem likely that 11 of his 12 apostles would invent an elaborate hoax and then suffer painful deaths because of it. We may sacrifice our lives for something we believe in, but who would die for a lie?

So the possibility that Jesus was a legend falls to the ground. The man certainly existed. But this doesn't answer the question of whether his claims of divinity and messiahship were true or not, only

that he (or someone else) made them. In this regard, we need to explore the remaining three possibilities.

Liar. If Jesus was a real person, then what of his radical claims? They're either true or false. First, let's assume they're false, which in turn, entail two possibilities as to Christ's identity.

If Jesus *knew* that he was misrepresenting the truth, he was a liar. Yet even unbelievers generally concede that Jesus was a man of strong integrity. Is it likely that a man known for his emphasis on truthfulness would himself be a deceiver? Or that he would send his friends and followers to their deaths, knowing it was all a hoax? Is it even remotely probable that a man whose life was so consumed with exposing religious hypocrisy would be the greatest hypocrite of them all, a master deceiver?

And if so, what would be his motive? If it was money, Jesus was the one who taught, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" and died penniless. Did he want to make our lives poor and miserable? Then why would he constantly pour his life out to serve others, and eventually die for the sins of the world - including his enemies? The point is simple: Jesus had no reason to deceive. Few opponents of Christianity charge Jesus with dishonesty, nor should they.

Jesus existed; he wasn't a legend. He made radical claims, and he believed them to be true. Since he wasn't lying, *if* his claims were false and he didn't realize it, he would qualify as a lunatic.

Lunatic. When you think about it, no mere man could have made the extraordinary claims Jesus did and truly believe them, unless he was certifiably insane. And yet Jesus' personality shows none of the instability, obsession, irrational fears, paranoia, anxiety, or mood swings accompanying insanity. In fact, his followers consistently described him as rational, living what he taught, forgiving, disciplined, compassionate, generous, kind, gracious, unflinching in love, and so on. If Jesus is at risk of being labeled a lunatic, then aren't we all in danger of being committed?

Lord. Where does our analysis leave us? Jesus truly existed; he wasn't legend. Jesus made extraordinary claims. If his claims were false, he'd be either a liar or a lunatic. As these options have been logically ruled out, only one remains: He spoke the truth, and truly is Lord. Given what we know from both Christian *and* non-Christian sources, it's the only plausible option.

Discussion Starters

1. If Jesus was everything we want to be in life and more (that is, smart, disciplined, impacting, loving, generous, compassionate, honest, etc.), why wouldn't someone want to be his follower? What insights does the following scripture teach us?

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. (John 3:19-21)

2. What can you say to someone who believes that following Jesus is just a matter of religious preference and that there are lots of other paths to God?
3. Close your eyes and image an adult that you know well and respect. If asked, would you willingly leave your family and friends to follow him or her indefinitely? What would it take for you to do so? What does this say about Jesus?

SECTION 4. EVIDENCE FOR JESUS - PROPHECIES FULFILLED

What are the odds of you being descended from Charlemagne, the 8th century European emperor? And what are the odds of you also being born in Cincinnati, moving to Chicago and then later to Mule Shoe Texas? Pretty thin, right?

Here's the thing: Jesus fulfilled hundreds of Old Testament messianic prophecies; some vague, some detailed, and some completely out of his control. Things like who his ancestors were, where he was born, what others said and did to him, how he died, and ultimately, his resurrection from the dead.

Before we jump into the lesson on fulfilled prophecies, however, we should first understand the term *messiah*. The word comes from the Hebrew word for "anointed" or "ordained" by God. And in the context of the OT, it refers to God's coming king and savior. The Greek translation is "christos," or Christ, in English.

Here are 7 faith-building OT messianic prophecies that Jesus fulfilled:

1. The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

Around 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah proclaimed, "*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will for me the one who will be ruler over Israel whose origins are from old, from ancient times.*" (Micah 5:2).

In Luke 2:4-7, we read, "*So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.*"

2. The Messiah will triumphantly enter Jerusalem riding a donkey with its colt.

Around 500 years before Jesus was born, the prophet Zechariah, speaking of God's coming salvation, said, "*Rejoice greatly, o Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey*" (Zechariah 9:9).

In Matthew 21:7-11 we read, "*They brought the donkey and the colt, placed their cloaks on them, and Jesus sat on them. A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David." "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest." When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?" The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet, from Nazareth in Galilee."*

3. The Messiah will be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver with the money later being returned and given to the potter.

Zechariah prophesied, *"I told them, 'If you think it best, give me my pay; but if not, keep it.' So they paid me thirty pieces of silver. And the Lord said to me, 'Throw it to the potter'— the handsome price at which they priced me! So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter"* (Zechariah 11:12-13).

In Matthew 27:3-7 we read, *"When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty silver coins to the chief priests and elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.'" "What is that to us?", they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners."*

4. The Messiah will suffer.

Perhaps some of the most detailed and convincing prophecies about the Messiah are described in Isaiah chapters 40-55 which were written in the 6th century BC. For example, *"I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard, I did not hide my face from the mocking and spitting"* (Isaiah 50:6).

Mark 15:19 says, *"Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spit on him."*

5. The Messiah will die by crucifixion and his clothes will be gambled over.

Early in Psalm 22, David speaks of the Messiah's suffering. He then describes an execution. *"Dogs have surrounded me; a gang of evil men has encircled me; they have pierced my hands and feet."* And later, *"They divided my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."*

In Matthew 27:35 we read, *"When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots."*

6. The Messiah will be a guilt offering for others' sins and be buried in a rich man's grave.

Isaiah 53:8-10 says, *"By oppression and judgement he was taken away. And who can speak of his descendants? For he was cut off from the land of the living, for the transgressions of my people he was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich, in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring..."*

In Matthew 27:57-59 we read, *"As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea named Joseph... [He] took the body, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and placed it in his own new grave that he had cut out of the rock."*

7. The Messiah will resurrect from the dead.

In Psalm 16:9-10, David wrote, *“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body will also rest secure, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.”*

We read in Mark 16:6-7, *“Don’t be alarmed.” [the angel] 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.”*

And in I Corinthians 15:5-6, *“... he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep.”*

Discussion Starters

1. As the Dead Sea scrolls were scientifically proven to be written before the time of Jesus, where does this leave you when it comes to bending a knee to Jesus’ lordship?
2. Pop Quiz! Use your critical thinking skills to determine if the following statements are true or false:
 - a. 75 million years ago, Xenu, the tyrannical ruler of the Galactic Confederacy, seeded Earth with millions of people brought here by spaceships.
False. Even though this is a core belief of the Church of Scientology, there’s no evidence to support this fantastical claim.
 - b. The world will end on October 23, 1996, exactly 6000 years after its creation.
False. This was a prophecy of Irish archbishop James Ussher. The day came and went just like any other.
 - c. On April 23, 2018, the sun and moon will be in Virgo, as will Jupiter, which represents the Messiah. Because Revelations 12:1-2 perfectly describes this event, the rapture and second coming of Jesus will begin.
False. This was the prediction of British Christian numerologist David Meade.
 - d. In 2001, the lost city of Atlantis will emerge from the Caribbean Ocean and extra-terrestrials from the planet Myton will arrive in 33 spaceships to show mankind how to live in peace.
False. This prediction was made by retired psychology professor Charles Spiegel.

What themes do you notice about these wild and outrageous claims?

SECTION 4. EVIDENCE FOR JESUS - MIRACLES AND THE RESURRECTION

In the first lesson on Evidence for Jesus, we discussed how Jesus is an actual historical figure written about in 42 religious and secular texts within 150 years of his living. We also discussed the four logical possibilities as to who Jesus of Nazareth was; either legend, liar, lunatic or Lord. We then saw how in the centuries before Jesus' birth, prophets accurately predicted details of his life and mission.

In this lesson, we're going to learn how Jesus' miracles and resurrection were purposeful. We'll also learn how strong the evidence is for Jesus' physical resurrection from the dead.

The ultimate proof of Jesus' divinity is his resurrection from the dead. After the crucifixion and resurrection, he appeared to the apostles and "gave many convincing proofs that he was alive" (Acts 1:3). If indeed Jesus Christ came back from the dead, then he must be the Son of God, just as he said. In accordance with scripture, the purpose of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection is to cleanse us of our sins against God. It's through this forgiveness that we too can be resurrected to a pure and godly life (1 John 1:6-2:6).

It should come as no surprise, then, that the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the center of the Christian message. If the resurrection can be disproved, then the message and the movement fade away. Even Paul agreed that without the resurrection, Christians are to be pitied above all men.

Consider this. If God is infinitely powerful and unconfined by space and time, he could just as easily create a world, inspire a book, or raise a man from the dead as you and I breathe or tie our shoes. On the other hand, if there's no God *miracles* are ultimately meaningless. They'd be no more than happenings insufficiently understood by science.

By contrast, however, biblical miracles were undeniable and accepted even by the enemies of the faithful. Interestingly, ancient non-biblical sources do not contest Jesus' miracles, but in fact affirm them. They agree that Jesus was a worker of miracles. Jesus' miracles were neither out of character nor sensationalistic. They were recorded for a simple reason as explained in John 20:31:

"That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

With respect to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, scholars often note that other ancient divinities died and rose. However, these pagan gods typically died and rose annually, whereas Jesus' resurrection was a one-time event. And unlike them, Jesus returned with a resurrected body not in the underworld, but here on the Earth. Nor was his resurrection tied to annual agricultural cycles, as seems to have always been the case among pagan deities who "rose." Last, unlike mythical resurrections, Jesus' resurrection was documented by multiple independent eyewitnesses.

So what is the best proof of the resurrection? Several highly effective Christian apologists take a "minimal facts" approach. Rather than trying to harmonize all the resurrection accounts, these scholars focus on a few historical facts that the vast majority of scholars agree on:

1. Jesus had to be either dead or alive when he was placed in the tomb. He was certainly dead given all the eyewitness accounts.
2. The tomb had to either be occupied or empty on the third day. All admit it was vacant.
3. Soon after Jesus' resurrection, his once timid followers were boldly proclaiming that Jesus had risen from the dead. They were willing to die for this truth; as many ultimately did.

What accounts for the radical transformation of Jesus' disciples? No *natural* explanation accounts for all the data, including the appearances and the conversion of skeptics like Paul and James. The *resurrection* is the best explanation for these facts.

Of course, if Jesus was raised from the dead, then we can trust him and should obey him (Acts 17:34; Romans 1:4). No wonder Jesus is still opposed by those who won't surrender to his lordship.

A word to the wise, however. Openness to Jesus' miracles doesn't necessarily mean that we should all rush to believe every miracle or story we hear about him. In fact, there are many fanciful stories of Jesus' miracles recorded well after his death that lack any scholarly credibility. For example, there is a legend that a young Jesus transformed lumps of clay into live birds. Since he was being naughty by doing this on the Sabbath, he clapped his hands and the evidence flew off.

Here are a few more popular myths about Jesus that deserve to be debunked:

1. *"In Jesus' early adult years, he traveled to India and found enlightenment at the feet of the Buddha."* This is both implausible and impossible. *Implausible* because Jesus, the eldest of five brothers, would have had family responsibilities and certainly no time for a long trip to India. This is *impossible* because Buddha died some 500 years earlier.
2. *"Jesus' divinity evolved over time; the earlier written parts of the New Testament know nothing of his being God."* In truth, Jesus is equated with the God of the Old Testament early in the New Testament and later works expound on this insight. Jesus is clearly divine in the earliest gospel, Mark, the beginning of Acts, the earliest letter, and the Apocalypse (Mark 1:1, 11, 24, 2:7; Acts 2:36; Galatians 6:18; Revelations 1:8).
3. *"The miracles of Christ were concocted by the church. His teachings would be good even without the miracles."* If this were true, why did Jesus stir up so much trouble with the leaders of his day – as recorded in both religious and secular sources? Indeed, to remove key miracles like the immaculate conception, Jesus' incarnation, his healings, and his resurrection leaves Christianity without substance and credibility. Once done, it's easy to believe that God is unable to meet our spiritual needs, forgive us our sins, and offer us hope after death. Just as the resurrection vindicates Jesus' claims and teachings, discrediting his miracles subverts the entire gospel message. If this were indeed the case, we might as well not be Christians (1 Corinthians 15:15,19).
4. *"Jesus only wanted us to be good people, not saints... After all, he had a girlfriend, Mary Magdalene."* As recorded in the gospels, Jesus certainly *did* insist we lead holy lives (Matthew 5:27-30). And while Mary was one of his followers, the notion that he and Mary were involved is an myth that came centuries later. As for being good people, Jesus taught that no one can be good enough to be saved (Mark 10:18). Furthermore, *all* his followers are called to live holy lives (Mark 8:34; Ephesians 1:1).

Discussion Starters

1. What do you think of these touted modern-day miracles?
 - A mysterious adult voice yelling “Help me!” led rescuers to an infant who survived 14 hours in a submerged car. Her mother had apparently died on impact. (Utah, 2015)
 - A woman came back to life after having no pulse for 45 minutes. (Florida, 2014)
 - A boy who fell into an icy stream was resuscitated after two hours in the water. (Pennsylvania, 2015)

Do you think God still performs miracles today? How do these compare to Jesus’ recorded miracles?

2. Jesus performed countless miracles before thousands of people during his ministry and yet there were only 120 faithful disciples in the Upper Room following his death. What does this teach us about miracles?
3. Why do you think some people would prefer to believe in fantastical myths and legends instead of miracles supported by reliable eyewitnesses?

Section 4. Evidence for Jesus — Jesus and Other World Religions

With this lesson, we bring Section 4 – Evidence for Jesus – to a close. To recap, we’ve learned:

- Historical records indisputably show that Jesus lived in Palestine 2000 years ago.
- Of the “Legend, Liar, Lunatic, and Lord” possibilities, the most logical is that Jesus is Lord.
- Jesus fulfilled hundreds of OT messianic prophecies; some vague, some detailed, and many completely out of his control.
- There’s compelling evidence that Jesus performed many miracles with the most significant involving Jesus himself; his resurrection from the dead.

In this lesson, we’ll see at a very high level how Christianity compares with other world religions.

In the introduction to this lesson series, the question was posed, “If all religions are basically the same, how can Christianity claim to be the one true path to God?” While the claim that all religions are basically the same is agreeable in this politically correct modern age, it’s incumbent upon truth-seekers to look closer at each religion’s beliefs, methods and goals to see if they hold true.

We are sometimes asked how somebody can be expected to accept Christianity as the only true worldview without studying every religion in the world. The challenge is easier to meet than it seems. That’s because all worldviews fall into three categories: only the universe exists, or only God exists, or both exist.

- Eastern religions, like Hinduism and Buddhism, claim that the physical world is an illusion. In the more radical (original) form of Buddhism, nothing exists at all (including us).
- Atheism claims that the spiritual world is an illusion; only the physical world is real.
- The monotheistic religions are the only ones that get this right. These are Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Christianity is the extension and fulfillment of Judaism. Islam (a more recent religion), is derived from the biblical religions, although at various points misinterpreting their message.

Moreover, some religions have multiple gods, one god, or even none. In these religions with a “god” or “gods,” this is significant as most of these beings behave like selfish, immature humans, while others are coldly aloof. In the case of Christianity, Jesus boldly claimed to not only be God’s son in the flesh but also God’s main “message.”

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6).

When it comes to how God speaks to mankind, world religions are in broad disagreement. Christianity, Judaism and Islam urge that God speaks to man in Holy Scripture. Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Shinto play down the importance of scripture and instead emphasize looking within to discover truth. In other words, the Eastern religions typically hold to a more subjective standard, while the Middle Eastern and Western faiths hold to a more objective one.

And what of a religion’s final goal? What is our ultimate destination? In Islam, it’s being rewarded for earthly good works by living in a paradise of wine, women, and song. In Hinduism, it’s absorption into God and the loss of personal identity. In Buddhism, it’s the loss of desire and the realization that there

is no God and no you. In some other religions, it's discovering that you were God all along. In contrast, Christianity's goal is having a relationship with God through his grace - and not our works.

Because these approaches to life and meaning vary widely, perhaps the following story will help.

As a man was walking along the road of life, he fell into a pit filled with all kinds of discouragement, shame and guilt. As much as he tried, he simply couldn't reach the ledge to pull himself out.

Along the road came the Buddha, and so the man cried to him for help. Buddha replied, "Don't despair. You're suffering only because you falsely believe in your own existence. If you meditate hard enough, you can eventually rid yourself of all suffering." So for many years the man meditated, denying all earthly desires. But even so, he was unable to fully shed the discouragement, shame and guilt.

Then along came a humanist, and again the man cried out for rescue. The humanist replied, "It's religion that's made you think this way. Trust in your own truth and these feelings will go away." So the man thought hard about it and came up with his own truth, renouncing the very existence of discouragement, shame and guilt. Yet the more he denied them, the more deeply he felt them in his heart.

Next came Muhammad, who told him, "There's no God but Allah. Because suffering atones for sins, you must have offended Allah greatly. If you do a great many deeds that outweigh your terrible sins, Allah will forgive you, and you'll be free." So the man dedicated his life to prayer, fasting and charity. But the more earnestly he struggled to work his way free, the deeper he sank into despair.

Then along came a great Hindu guru. "For you to escape, you must journey inward to the divine self and embrace the pit for its truth and meaning." So the man searched intently inward. But in this too, he failed to free himself.

Finally, Jesus came along the road. When he saw man, he took off his robe, climbed down into the pit, hugged him, wiped off the mud and lifted him over the ledge.

"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held onto but made himself nothing by taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance of man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8)

We can easily see that the world's religions differ widely on core beliefs, methods, and destinations. Yet Christianity is uniquely centered on a man who not only claimed to be God in the flesh, but through his teachings and self sacrifice provided access to God, with complete forgiveness of past mistakes. Not because of anything we've done to deserve it, but solely because of his love and grace.

If you're still trying to make sense of the good you've seen in other religions, here's an analogy. The moon shines, though not with a light of its own. Moonlight is reflected light. Yet only the sun generates its own light that's both incandescent and blinding. Every human religion catches some of the sun's light.

So it is when we gaze into the face of the God of the Bible. The truth of Scripture far outshines all human attempts at religion for these, by comparison, are only *moonlight*.

In closing, it must be said that this lesson is in no way meant to trivialize the religious impulses of our fellow humans who are looking for redemption or something beyond this life. However, the question of finding God is not about sincerity, which as discussed in this series, does not create truth - but is about earnestly seeking and finding truth. If God, the Righteous Judge decides to extend grace to those who eagerly seek him by "moonlight", this will be a cause of great rejoicing. Christians should look forward to as many as possible being saved on the last day; "a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language." (Revelation 7:9) Yet that's God's call, not ours. And only he knows where his saving grace begins and ends.

Discussion Starters

1. Knowing there are significant differences among world religions, is it possible there are also multiple religious "truths" even though these religions seem at odds with each other?
2. Why do you think people prefer the notion that all religions are basically the same?
3. Do you think Hindus or Buddhists would appreciate being told their core beliefs are the same as yours? How would Muslims respond to being told that they actually *do* agree with the basic teaching of Christianity? (For example, Jesus being God in the flesh, the finality of the Jesus' gospel, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus?)

Epilogue – It’s Now Up to You

In this series, lessons were specifically designed to help you learn to think logically not only about faith-related matters, but about all matters. Consequently, it’s our sincerest hope that you’ve embraced the challenge to use your God-given intellect to fully explore your own questions and doubts. We pray that in so doing, you become a lifelong truth-seeker, and draw closer to God. But this isn’t all about intellectual exercise. At some point, you’re going to have to put your learnings into practice and as Jesus aptly said in John 7:17, “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.” In other words, action is the true key to knowing.

Just as it’s God’s will that you seek him, it’s also his will that you embrace three life-changing facts, each of which were addressed with substantial, logical evidence:

1. God is real. His existence is the reasonable conclusion of multiple lines of evidence.
2. The Bible is God’s communication to mankind.
3. Jesus is Lord, God’s son in the flesh. Through him, we can know God.

If our premises are valid and our reasoning is sound, a positive response is not only appropriate, it’s required. This point was well illustrated in the apostle Paul’s trial before Agrippa and Festus:

Festus interrupted Paul’s defense. “You are out of your mind, Paul!” he shouted. “Your great learning is driving you insane.”

“I am not insane, most excellent Festus,” Paul replied. “What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.”

Then Agrippa said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:24-29).

This exchange reminds us that we have free will, a choice to believe or not believe the message of Christ. Paul challenged Festus not to brainlessly leap into the dark — for the message is “true and reasonable” — but to step into the light!

God has sought us. Now it’s our turn to seek him.

Helpful Books and Websites for Christian Evidences

Collins, Francis S., *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

Copan, Paul, *Is Everything Really Relative?*

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Strobel, Lee, *The Case for Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998.

Zacharias, Ravi, *Can Man Live Without God?* Dallas: Word, 1994.

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Ben Witherington—www.benwitherington.com and benwitherington.blogspot.com

Bethinking.org Engage with Culture (UCCF: The Christian Unions) —www.bethinking.org

Beyond the Firmament – Understanding Science and the Theology of Creation (Gordon Glover) —www.blog.beyondthefirmament.com/welcome/

Bible Contradictions—www.kingdavid8.com/Contradictions/Home.html

The BioLogos Foundation (Francis Collins) —www.biologos.org

Craig Evans—www.craigaevans.com

Dean Overman—www.deanoverman.com

Does God Exist? —www.DoesGodExist.org

The Faraday Institute for Science and Religion—www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/faraday/index.php

Evidence for Christianity (Teaching Ministry of John Oakes) —www.evidenceforChristianity.org

International Teaching Ministry of Douglas Jacoby —www.douglasjacoby.com

John Polkinghorne—www.polkinghorne.net

J. Warner Wallace — ColdCaseChristianity.com

Offline Resources —www.megabaud.fi/~osmosa/index.htm

Outside the Box Blog: Cliff Martin —cliff-martin.blogspot.com

Paul Copan: PaulCopan.com

Putting Jesus in His Place—www.deityofchrist.com

Random Designer (Richard Colling) —www.randomdesigner.com

Ravi Zacharias International Ministries —www.rzim.org

Reasonable Faith with William Lane Craig—www.reasonablefaith.org

Reasons to Believe —www.reasons.org/index.shtml

Religion/Religions/Religious Studies —www.clas.ufl.edu/users/gthursby/rel/

Religious and Sacred Texts — webpages.marshall.edu/~wiley6/rast.htmlx

Religium/Religion Index — www.teleport.com/~arden/religium.htm

Risen Jesus: The Apologetics Ministry of Mike Licona —www.risenjesus.com