

TALKING
with YOUR KIDS
about
Jesus

30 Conversations
Every Christian Parent
MUST HAVE

NATASHA CRAIN



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To all of my family—
my husband, kids, parents, and in-laws—
I'm so blessed to love and be loved by you.

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Foreword

My descent into skepticism started early. When I was a youngster, I began asking questions about God, but nobody was willing to answer them. My conclusion was that Christians didn't want to discuss spiritual doubts because they didn't have any good responses.

Then, as a freshman biology student in high school, I was taught that Darwin's theory of evolution explained the origin and diversity of life. As a result, I concluded that science had put God out of a job.

Finally, when I was a freshman in college, I took a course on the historical Jesus from a cynic who convinced me that the Jesus of the four Gospels was not really the Son of God. My journey was complete: *I became an adamant atheist.*

Years later, prompted by my wife's conversion to Christianity, I dug deeper into these issues and discovered that the scientific evidence actually points toward a Creator and that history shows that Jesus did demonstrate his divinity by returning from the dead. Based on the facts, I put my trust in Christ—and instantly I became concerned about other young people who were embarking on the same path toward atheism that I had traveled.

We live in a world of increasing skepticism—and even hostility—toward Christianity. Youngsters who lack a solid foundation for their faith are at risk as they are challenged by doubters who pick up their

often-inaccurate information from friends, the internet, or even their parents. In fact, a Christian friend told me recently that his daughter—a *kindergartner*—was taunted on the playground by a classmate who mocked her by saying, “Why do you believe in fairy tales?”

Finally, Natasha Crain comes to the rescue.

A wife of twenty years and the mother of three children, Natasha knows what parents face as they seek to spiritually nurture the next generation. She has an uncanny combination of a warm and winsome writing style, keen insights born out of personal experience, and a wealth of knowledge about Christian apologetics, or evidence for the faith.

In short, she is a trusted source for parents who want to provide their children with a vibrant and well-informed belief in Jesus. They have come to trust Natasha for her practical and highly accessible teaching, which she unfolds in this book through thirty conversations about Jesus that every Christian parent should have with their kids.

My own kids are grown and—thank God!—faithfully serving the Lord. But now I’m the grandparent of four young ones—and you bet I’m putting this book, as well as Natasha’s other resources, into action in our extended family!

Here is another benefit of using Natasha’s materials: your own faith will be bolstered as you are reminded once again that Christianity is not built on legend, mythology, make-believe, or wishful thinking but is firmly anchored to a bedrock of scientific and historical evidence and in the eternal truth of Scripture.

Fairy tales? No, our faith is much more than creative fiction. Let Natasha partner with you to help your children not only defend what they believe but also share it in a positive way with their spiritually curious friends.

So turn the page and dive in. Keep a highlighter handy—you’re going to need it!

Lee Strobel, author of *The Case for Christ*
and *The Case for Faith*

Introduction

I was scrolling through Facebook recently when I saw an article that stopped me in my tracks: “5 Things People with Tidy Homes Don’t Do.”

Oh boy. This is one I need to read. Immediately.

I am constantly fighting a messy house. Whenever I take my kids to a friend’s home, I’m amazed at how relatively clean it is. How do they not have a pencil on every seat cushion? How do they not have returned homework papers carelessly scattered across the floor? How do they not have sticky spots on their counters and stacks of mail stuck to the sticky spots? What do these parents know that I don’t?

The article I clicked on that day provided a tantalizing clue to the answer. The author wrote:

Tidy People don’t act like a slob all day, and then get their house tidy in one fell swoop. . . . The number one thing I’ve learned from Tidy People is how valuable it is to develop some simple, non-dramatic, tiny habits that when added together will change the level of tidiness in your home. Tidy People are in a constant state of low-grade tidying.¹

Low-grade tidying. The point hit me like a ton of bricks (which, if they were in my house, would be all over the floor, and we'd continue to step over them for weeks before someone moved them outside). You see, my running assumption had been that I must have particularly messy kids. But I've since come to realize that—gasp!—the vast majority of kids are quite messy. Those clean houses I visit aren't the product of naturally clean kids. They're the product of parents with good habits—parents who are constantly in a state of low-grade tidying.

Low-Grade Tidying Is the Key to Faith Conversations

As parents, we're often as overwhelmed by the task of having deep faith conversations with our kids as I am by the task of keeping a clean house. We have a rough idea of how our *spiritual* house should look, but we feel we've let things get messier than they should be. We know we should have more faith conversations than we do, the ones we do have don't go as we'd like, and discouragement sets in when we don't feel equipped to answer the questions our kids raise. These subtle disappointments are like pencils on seat cushions—nagging reminders that things aren't where we'd like them to be.

Now you're holding a book telling you there are *thirty* conversations you must have with your child about Jesus. It's like I just dumped a laundry pile in your living room.

But that's not all. I've written two *other* books with “must have” conversations. My first one, *Keeping Your Kids on God's Side*, walks parents through forty important faith conversations in the subject areas of God, truth and worldviews, Jesus, the Bible, and science.² My second one, *Talking with Your Kids about God*, takes parents deeper into thirty conversations specifically about God (for example, the evidence for God's existence).³ *Talking with Your Kids about Jesus* now goes deeper into thirty conversations about—you guessed it—Jesus.

All together, that's *one hundred* faith conversations I'm saying every Christian parent needs to have with their kids! (And there are many other important topics I haven't covered.)

Lest anyone read my books with the guilt or pressure I feel when stepping into clean houses, I want to suggest a healthier mind-set: *know that impactful faith conversations happen through consistent low-grade tidying—not massive house clean-outs.*

A massive house clean-out requires you to set aside blocks of hours upon hours, as you attempt to order and beautify everything in one fell swoop. That's overwhelming. I want you instead to look at this book (and my others) as your guide to long-term, low-grade spiritual tidying through ongoing conversation. This book will help you do that in three key ways.

First, it will help you focus on what most needs tidying in your child's understanding of Jesus, given the challenging world in which they're growing up. No one can clean absolutely everything, so having focus is key. Interestingly, many of the subjects in this book are ones your child won't hear discussed in church (at least in much depth). Sunday school programs tend to teach only the basics of Christianity, and those basics are leaving kids unequipped to encounter today's secular world. Research consistently shows that at least 60 percent of kids who grow up in a Christian home walk away from Christianity by their early twenties, largely in response to intellectual challenges to their faith.⁴ Our kids need specific training for what they'll encounter today, and they need that training from *you*. That can sound intimidating, but this book will help you get focused on the kind of training they need most. We'll look at challenges from atheists, challenges from those who adhere to non-Christian religions, and even challenges from Christians who promote ideas that vary from what the Bible teaches. All are vital subjects that should continually be revisited as your child grows to both refresh and deepen their understanding over time.

Second, this book will help you learn the most essential points your child should understand about each subject. Much more could be said in any given chapter, but this book isn't about doing the deepest possible "cleaning" on the areas covered. Rather, the goal is to help you develop clarity on the essential points to emphasize in your conversations over time.

Third, this book will give you a vision for how to do your tidying. The chapter content itself is written for you, the parent. But at the end of each chapter, you'll find a step-by-step guide with questions designed to help you facilitate conversation with your child about the chapter's subject. The first question ("Open the Conversation") is an easy one to get your child talking. The subsequent questions ("Advance the Conversation") then open the door to discussion about more detailed content from the chapter. In "Apply the Conversation," you'll find a quote from a person who in some way challenges what was learned. These quotes are intended to give older kids practice applying their understanding. While each guide can be used in a single sitting, it's also intended to be a flexible tool you can use to revisit these subjects as your child grows. For example, with young kids, you might use the first question as a conversation starter, then casually discuss a few basic points from the chapter without using the remaining questions. With older elementary-age kids, you might use all the discussion questions but explain only a couple of key points in response to each one. With tweens and teens, I encourage you to walk through the full discussion guide, covering as much detail as you can from each chapter.

What this book won't do is create the actual *habit* of tidying. That's up to you. You'll have the tools for doing your work, but you'll need to make the time. If you need some ideas for when and how to weave these conversations into daily life, I've created a page on my website with tips to help; see this endnote.⁵

Homes where deep and meaningful faith conversations happen regularly aren't the product of lucky parents. They're the product

of intentional parents who believe nothing is more important than raising kids to know and love Jesus. All those sports events, music practices, play rehearsals, and other activities that fill our weeks can be great, but Jesus must come first. Getting our spiritual house in order starts with that simple commitment. Once that's in place, we're ready for cleaning—one tidying step at a time.

PART 1

The Identity
of *Jesus*

Overview

When I graduated from college, I realized that I hadn't taken my faith very seriously for a while. I decided I needed to spend time studying Christianity more deeply, so I headed to my local bookstore's "Christian" section one morning.

After haphazardly thumbing through a few titles, I eventually settled on a book called *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* by New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan. I liked the idea of learning more about Jesus's historical context, and this book seemed to contain a lot of material in that area that I had never heard about while growing up in church. I returned home eager to reinvigorate my fledgling faith.

The cover of the book described it as a "startling account of what we can know about the life of Jesus." And it delivered on that claim—I was completely *startled* by what I read. As it turned out, Jesus wasn't who I thought he was at all! He was a peasant who didn't perform the many miracles in the Gospels, didn't die for the sins of humankind, and didn't physically rise from the dead. The only thing that made him extraordinary was how he lived.

I was confused. Here was someone who identified himself as a Christian but in his scholarly work described a Jesus who was nothing like the Jesus I had always known. And as far as I could tell from the book, most scholars agreed with Crossan's assessment. I

distinctly remember wondering, *Was everything I learned in church all those years wrong, or did I profoundly misunderstand what I was taught?*

What I didn't know at the time was that Crossan's thinking was no different from that of many other liberal New Testament scholars. Crossan is the cofounder of the now famous Jesus Seminar, which was organized in 1985 to determine who the historical Jesus "really" was. Fellows of the Seminar met regularly to debate the authenticity of various words and deeds attributed to Jesus and to cast votes to obtain consensus. They eventually concluded that only about 18 percent of Jesus's sayings and 16 percent of his deeds (as recorded in the Gospels) are authentic.¹ The Jesus who remained—like the Jesus in Crossan's book—was unrecognizable compared to the Jesus I grew up worshiping in church.

The Jesus Seminar isn't the only group with an understanding of Jesus's identity that differs from what the Bible says, of course. There are many diverse ideas today of who Jesus is:

- Some believe he never existed (we'll address this in chapter 1).
- Some believe he was a failed Messiah (we'll address this in chapter 2).
- Some believe he was simply a good moral teacher or someone who had unique spiritual insights but never claimed to be God (we'll address this in chapter 3).
- Some believe he was a special part of God's plan in the world (even a "savior" in some cases) but not God himself (we'll address this in chapters 3–6 and part 4).

With so many competing ideas of who Jesus is, how can we know which one is correct? That's the fundamental question we need to help our kids answer, and it's the question I wasn't prepared to address when I picked up Crossan's book . . . despite having spent hundreds of hours in church.

As parents, we often focus more on the *teachings* of Jesus than on his *identity* because we're preoccupied with the task of shaping our kids' behavior. When we're faced with the daily parenting drama of kids fighting, lying, gossiping, hitting, cheating, back talking, yelling, and so on (all before 9 a.m., of course!), we have a multitude of natural opportunities to share how Jesus taught us to live. It's not so natural, however, to inject conversations into the mix about who Jesus is and how we can know who he is. But that doesn't make doing so any less important. Let's be clear: if Jesus was only a human, his teachings are no more authoritative for our kids' most recent behavioral issue than those of our next-door neighbor. Jesus's identity is foundational to *everything* we believe as Christians.

In part 1, we'll look at key questions kids should understand about who Jesus is. I'm going to warn you: these chapters contain a lot of detail, even though they're short. Don't just skim through them! Be patient and take the time to really understand the content, because these chapters will serve as an essential foundation for appreciating the importance of what Jesus taught, which we'll study in part 2.

Three Keys to Impactful Conversations about the Identity of Jesus

1. *Establish the importance of Jesus's identity before beginning these conversations.* For kids who have grown up in a Christian home or who have spent a lot of time in a Christian church, the identity of Jesus as God is often a foregone conclusion—so much so that they may never have considered the implications of that fact. Share examples from this overview about other Jesus beliefs and discuss how those beliefs result in people having very different worldviews.

2. *Make it clear that Jesus's identity isn't a matter of blind belief.* When you introduce competing ideas of who Jesus is, your child might assume that everyone just has to choose the belief that makes the most sense to them. It's important for them to understand, however, that we should form our beliefs about Jesus's identity based on the evidence we have. Knowing who Jesus is doesn't mean we blindly pick a belief but rather that we search for what is *true* of him.
3. *Emphasize how Jesus's identity is what makes him relevant to our lives today.* Skeptics like to say they don't care about a book written two thousand years ago or about a man who lived then. If Jesus were just another human, perhaps what he taught two thousand years ago *would* be irrelevant today. But if Jesus is God incarnate—perfectly knowing the past, present, and future—then what he taught couldn't be more important, no matter *how* long ago it was.

1. Is Jesus a Myth?

Four words make the hairs of annoyance stand up on my arms more than any others: “Mommy, I can’t find . . .” Of course, it’s not the words alone that annoy me. It’s the frenzied tone and timing—always the last possible moment before we need to go somewhere. Shoes are the most frustrating example. There’s not a single school morning that kids don’t need shoes, so they should automatically know they’ll need them and plan accordingly. Yet they regularly look at me when we’re trying to leave as if to say, “I have *no* idea where these crazy things called shoes are that you unexpectedly want me to find, so you have to help me search.”

The reason it’s so maddening when kids say they can’t find something is that we know they haven’t *really* looked. “I can’t find” means they quickly glanced around whatever room they happened to be in at the moment, then gave up. But as adults, we know that if we’re going to find something, we have to look in the right place, and we have to look thoroughly. Otherwise, we’ll draw the wrong conclusions.

In the same way, an increasing number of people today say they can’t find the historical Jesus . . . at all. Jesus “mythicists” claim there’s no reliable evidence he existed. In other words, they say they’re looking in the right places and are searching thoroughly, but Jesus just isn’t there.

The idea that Jesus is a myth has been around for hundreds of years, but it's become more popular recently. For example, the *Washington Post* featured an article just in time for Christmas titled "Did Historical Jesus Really Exist? The Evidence Just Doesn't Add Up."¹ This isn't an isolated example of something otherwise unheard of. Research shows that 8 percent of Americans don't believe Jesus was a real person, with the number significantly higher for millennials (13 percent).² In England, 40 percent of people don't believe Jesus existed!³

When you think of having conversations with your child about Jesus, you're probably not thinking about explaining how we know he was a real person in history, but that's where we need to start given the popular claims today.

What Evidence Should We *Expect* to Find?

When we're looking for a pair of shoes, we know exactly what we're looking for, and when we find them, we know it. When we're looking for someone in history, however, things aren't so obvious. We can't travel back in time, so there's no way to *prove* anything historical. Nonetheless, we can confidently reconstruct much of history by piecing together the evidence that remains today.

In order to establish that a person existed, historians like to have physical evidence such as photographs of or writings by the individual. But because such evidence is often not available, historians also look for written references to the person. Ideally, they want a number of sources that are (1) independent (not relying on one another for information), (2) dated close to the time of the person they're describing, (3) written by disinterested authors (to minimize bias), and (4) detailed in information.

Mythicists claim we don't have enough evidence matching these criteria to confidently determine that Jesus existed. To understand and evaluate their case, we'll look at the three most important

types of historical evidence under scrutiny: (1) early references to Jesus by non-Christians, (2) references to Jesus by the apostle Paul, and (3) references to Jesus by the Gospel writers.

Early References to Jesus by Non-Christians

The biggest objection mythicists have to a historical Jesus is that there's a lack of reliable non-Christian sources from the first century that reference him (Jesus lived until about AD 30). They say that if Jesus was such an important figure, there would have been more writings about him. This is a poor argument, however, because we don't even have many first-century writings about the *rulers* of Roman Palestine (the area where Jesus lived). For example, Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea from AD 26 to AD 36 and was one of the most important figures there during the years he reigned. However, we have no first-century Roman records today that document his rule. *Even so, no one doubts his existence.*

From Roman Palestine, writings survive from only *one* author from the first century—the Jewish historian Josephus. And Josephus mentions Jesus on two occasions in his work *The Antiquities of the Jews*. In one passage, he describes how Ananus, the high priest in Jerusalem, unlawfully put to death a man named James, “the brother of Jesus, who was called Christ.” In a second, more descriptive passage, Josephus writes about Jesus being a wise teacher who reportedly did “startling” deeds, was condemned and crucified under Pilate, and had followers who believed he rose from the dead.⁴ As a Jew, Josephus did not believe Jesus was the Messiah, but the details he provides clearly point to Jesus's *existence*.

Josephus is the only non-Christian reference to Jesus's existence from the first century, but if we expand our search even thirty years (still within a reasonable one hundred years of Jesus's death), we find three mentions of Jesus by Roman writers.⁵ The most valuable one comes from Cornelius Tacitus (AD 56–c. 117), a Roman

historian who wrote a history of the Roman Empire covering the years AD 14 to AD 68. In *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, Tacitus describes a devastating fire that raged through Rome during the reign of Emperor Nero. Many people believed Nero was responsible for setting it. Tacitus wrote:

Therefore, to squelch the rumor, Nero created scapegoats and subjected to the most refined tortures those whom the common people called “Christians,” hated for their abominable crimes. Their name comes from Christ, who, during the reign of Tiberius, had been executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate.⁶

Tacitus’s statement places Jesus in history by confirming that the time of his execution was during the reign of Tiberius (AD 14–37) and during the governorship of Pilate (AD 26–36). While some have questioned the source of Tacitus’s information, claiming it could have been “hearsay,” he’s generally considered to be a very reliable historian, and there’s little reason to claim this particular passage is inaccurate.

As we can see, several early and credible non-Christian sources reference the existence of Jesus. We’ll now look at how Christian sources provide further evidence, starting with the letters of Paul.

References to Jesus by the Apostle Paul

The apostle Paul wrote at least seven books of the New Testament, and his writings are considered by New Testament scholars to be the earliest surviving Christian texts (Paul’s first letter, 1 Thessalonians, is typically dated to AD 50 or before—within twenty years of Jesus’s crucifixion). Their proximity to Jesus’s life makes them of special interest to those studying the historical evidence for his existence.

Some mythicists claim that Paul never believed in a historical Jesus and that these early writings instead reflect a belief in a

“celestial Jesus”—a purely divine being.⁷ The reason this claim has gained traction is that Paul’s writings lack biographical details of Jesus’s life. Whereas the Gospels tell us much about what Jesus said and did, Paul mentions very little. Mythicists claim that Paul would have talked much more about important details of Jesus’s life (such as his miracles and teachings) *if he had known about them*. They say the details we have in the Gospels today were invented years after Paul wrote, in order to historicize what was originally a myth.

It’s important to understand, however, that Paul’s writings are letters, not biographies. He wrote to address specific needs that churches had, not to recount the details of Jesus’s life. Even so, several passages in Paul’s letters demonstrate that he knew Jesus was a real human and not simply a spiritual being:

- Jesus was born of a woman and was descended from David “according to the flesh” (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 1:3).
- Jesus had human brothers, and Paul personally met with his brother James (Gal. 1:19; 1 Cor. 9:5).
- Jesus died (1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 4:10; Gal. 1:1; Col. 1:22).
- Jesus was buried (1 Cor. 15:4).
- Jesus rose after he died (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 15:14; Phil. 3:10).

While mythicists often say these details were later added by Christians to “historicize” Jesus’s life, this is pure speculation. There’s no textual evidence that these passages were not originally in Paul’s writings, and they appear in every manuscript copy of his writings that we have.⁸

References to Jesus by the Gospel Writers

Most of what we know about Jesus’s life comes from the Gospels. Mythicists, however, believe these writings are unreliable

as historical sources. This is not the place to lay out a defense of the reliability of the Gospels—many extensive books have been written on the subject⁹—but given our current purpose, it’s also not necessary. As we’ve already seen, we have strong historical evidence for Jesus’s existence without even considering the Gospels. In addition, a skeptic doesn’t need to accept the truth of everything recorded in the Gospels to acknowledge that they must have been written in response to the life of someone who actually existed. As New Testament scholar, agnostic, and ex-Christian Bart Ehrman explains:

We are not dealing with just one Gospel that reports what Jesus said and did from sometime near the end of the first century. We have a number of surviving Gospels . . . that are either completely independent of one another or independent in a large number of their traditions. These all attest to the existence of Jesus. . . . The vast network of these traditions, numerically significant, widely dispersed, and largely independent of one another, makes it almost certain that whatever one wants to say about Jesus, at the very least one must say he existed.¹⁰

Articles such as the one in the *Washington Post* may grab people’s attention, but they’re misleading and sensational. Virtually all historians and New Testament scholars agree that Jesus existed, given the multiple independent sources we have from within just a few decades of his death.

KEY POINTS

- Three important types of historical evidence for Jesus’s existence are (1) early references to Jesus by non-Christians, (2) references to Jesus by the apostle Paul, and (3) references to Jesus by the Gospel writers.

- We don't have many non-Christian sources from the first hundred years after Jesus lived that reference him, but we wouldn't expect to. However, the few we do have—especially from Tacitus and Josephus—are strong evidence for Jesus's existence.
- Mythicists often claim that Paul believed in a “celestial” rather than a historical Jesus due to the few life details he recounts. However, Paul's writings are letters, not biographies. Even so, several passages in Paul's letters show that he knew Jesus was a real person.
- A skeptic doesn't need to accept the truth of everything recorded in the Gospels to acknowledge that they must have been written in response to the life of someone who actually existed.

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Open the Conversation

- If you were a historian who wanted to confirm that George Washington existed, what kinds of evidence would you look for? (*Think about what kinds of evidence would be useful to historians—paintings, personal writings, biographies, etc.*)

Advance the Conversation

- Now think about the kinds of evidence you would look for if you wanted to confirm that Jesus existed. What would you hope to find? (*Explore the four criteria historians use for written sources. Introduce the categories of references to Jesus by early non-Christians, Paul, and the Gospel writers.*)
- Some people think there's not enough evidence to believe that Jesus existed because we don't have many early writings from non-Christians that mention him. Would you expect there to

be a lot of early non-Christian writings about Jesus? Why or why not? (*Writings would have to survive for two thousand years, and few survive that mention even the rulers of the time. Discuss the writings we have from Tacitus and Josephus.*)

- There are also people who think the apostle Paul believed that Jesus was only a spiritual being and never existed as a human on earth. Look up what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4; and Galatians 1:19 and 4:4. What does this sample of verses tell us Paul believed about Jesus’s existence? (*Help make connections to the points that imply Jesus was a real person.*)
- Do you think someone who doesn’t believe all that the Gospels tell us about Jesus should also think Jesus didn’t exist? Why or why not? (*Read the Bart Ehrman quote and explain that the Gospels represent multiple, independent pieces of evidence for the historical life of Jesus.*)

Apply the Conversation

- In an online article titled “5 Reasons to Suspect That Jesus Never Existed,” the author’s first two points are (1) “No first-century secular evidence whatsoever exists to support the actuality of [Jesus],” and (2) “The earliest New Testament writers [Paul] seem ignorant of the details of Jesus’ life.”¹¹ How would you respond based on what you learned in this chapter?