

WHY I BELIEVE

**Straight Answers to
Honest Questions about God,
the Bible, and Christianity**

CHIP INGRAM



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Introduction

I didn't grow up as a follower of Christ and my experience with organized religion was negative. As a kid, I got the distinct impression that no one actually believed what they were telling me but felt children needed to hear stories about Jesus in order to keep them out of trouble. It was obvious to me that the adults who espoused the religious platitudes and rituals that I was expected to follow didn't live by them themselves. There was no expectation that the truth of the Word of God would have any impact on how we would live our lives.

The hypocrisy and lack of authenticity hardened my heart, and I became a full-blown skeptic prior to my sixteenth birthday. My inward attitudes toward church, organized religion, and God were suspect at best and highly negative at worst. I somehow intuitively concluded that God, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy were all adult fabrications to keep children in the dark and pacify their hard questions until they could come of age and discover the answers for themselves.

I share this important part of my early years because it created an attitude and a perspective that I've never lost. I'm a skeptic at heart. I'm not necessarily proud of that, but I simply don't believe what's presented at face value. My tendency is to assume there is an ulterior motive. I am always looking for the other side of the story, and wonder what someone is hiding from me until I can prove differently.

Immediately following high school, our great God met my skepticism with evidence that was overwhelming. At this stage of my life, it wasn't intellectual evidence but relational authenticity and love. God brought me into contact with a group of athletes whom I deeply respected. I had never read the Bible despite my church experience, and I had never heard it communicated practically and relevantly. In 1972, at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes weeklong camp, I both heard and saw the gospel for the first time.

I responded by faith to the invitation of Revelation 3:20 by inviting Jesus to come into my life and trusting Him for the forgiveness of my sins. The decision was mine. No one told me what to do. No lists of rules or rituals were given to me to follow. I had a new relationship with God that was personal, and I learned that He speaks to me through His Word.

I went home with the Bible that I was now beginning to understand and with a peace that I couldn't understand. I had an appetite for the Scriptures that was unexplainable. Within a few weeks, I saw dramatic changes in my desires and my behavior.

The change that first year was so dramatic that my father asked me what had happened to me. My priorities changed.

My insecurities and arrogance had surfaced and were softened with peace and confidence in Christ. I went to a secular school on a basketball scholarship where I met a bricklayer trained by the Navigators. By the time I graduated, his Bible study of three people (including me) had mushroomed to over 250 students, and countless others were impacted as God birthed a Christian movement on campus.

If this sounds a bit like a cheesy Christian movie, in many ways it was . . . that is, until just before graduation. Dr. P., the head of our department, asked me a question that exposed every skeptical bone in my body.

I can remember that day like it was yesterday. I can still picture the sun bouncing off the windows of the ivy-covered brick building outside of Dr. P.'s office as we had a conversation that would change the course of my life. He was a brilliant professor and the department chair. He liked me and I liked him. I may not have been the smartest in the department, but I got straight A's in my major and had a passion to learn. He watched my life for four years and was well aware of my love and passion for Christ.

As we talked outside his office, I had the sense that he had waited until I finished all my classes and was graduating with honors before he asked me this question:

“Chip, how can someone as well-educated and intellectually astute as you appear to be, really believe in a literal Jesus and all this born-again stuff?”

His tone was not harsh or attacking. It actually was more pastoral, born out of a heart of concern and disappointment

that one of his favorite students could potentially be throwing away his future, along with his brains, to blindly follow an ancient book and a mythical figure named Jesus.

I deeply respected Dr. P., and I did not take his question lightly. It cast a series of doubts deep down in my heart. Could all this be simply an emotional experience in my formative college years? Could I really answer the tough questions he began to ask about why I believed in Jesus, the Bible, creation, and life after death? Was I willing to throw my brains in the trash to be a follower of Christ? Was my faith real?

That conversation began a journey that is coming to a climax in this book. I made a number of very specific decisions that day:

1. I would not throw my brains in the trash to be a follower of Christ. If my faith was true, it must hold up under intellectual, philosophical, and historical scrutiny.
2. I could not deny the life-changing experience that Jesus had made in my life, and so I would not be intellectually intimidated into giving up my faith simply because those I respected in academia belittled it.
3. I would fully commit myself to discover the answers to those hard questions, if they existed, and let the consequences of my research and study direct my future.

It has been a long and sometimes difficult journey. I have read and researched multiple sides of these important issues, and my skeptical background has helped me to be objective. I knew that I could not follow Jesus if there were not real answers to the very deep questions that had to be addressed.

This book is aptly titled—*Why I Believe*. I am not an expert apologist and I do not have PhDs in multiple areas of research like some of our best Christian apologists. I'm so grateful for them and I've carefully studied their work along with those who disagree with them. My aim is to synthesize the best research and thinking in a way that makes it easy to understand and practical to apply.

This book is designed to provide well-researched and practical guidelines for us ordinary people to fully understand the intellectual and historical basis for our faith, and to talk intelligently and confidently with our friends, family, and coworkers over a cup of coffee about why we believe. Layout and design will allow you to grasp the material quickly and the endnotes will allow you to go to other resources for more specific information.

I have spent most of my ministry teaching in parts of the country where people have little or no biblical background but are very intellectually astute. I have learned and become fully convinced that I do not have to throw my brains in the trash to be a fully devoted follower of the historic Jesus, who died to pay for our sins, who rose from the dead, who believed the Scriptures to be the very Word of God, and who promised to come again to execute justice and make all things new.

So I want to invite you to go on a journey with me. I want to share with you what I have learned and answer the question my professor asked all those years ago. I want you to discover firsthand that there is substantial and reasonable evidence for our faith in the Jesus of the Bible. My faith in God and my life as a Christ follower is not belief “in spite

of the lack of evidence,” as some have claimed. Quite the contrary, my faith is built on an historical, intellectual, scientific, and philosophical foundation that answers life’s biggest questions and stands up to its harshest critics.

Join me now as we prepare our hearts and minds to respond to the admonition of the Lord Jesus through the apostle Peter:

But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. (1 Pet. 3:15–16)

1

Why I Believe in the Resurrection

Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 11:25–26

As we begin our journey together to answer the question my professor asked me, there’s one thing that very good atheists and very good Christians have in common. The central issue for these diametrically opposed groups is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s where we must begin. Either Jesus rose from the dead, or He’s just another religious teacher and you should go to the salad bar of religion and pick the one you like. But if He really rose from the dead, if He’s actually alive right now, and if we worship a living Savior and His

resurrection power actually lives inside our mortal bodies . . . then that is a whole different story.

Life after death is a timeless cultural preoccupation. The ability to beat death and have a second chance at life sounds like a popular movie plot. From comic book heroes to zombie outbreaks and everything in between, our culture seems to be obsessed with the idea of “coming back from the dead.” We binge-watch TV shows on the topic and search online for first-person accounts of what it’s like to come back to life after being pronounced clinically dead. Let me tell you, there is one “coming back from the dead” story that dramatically stands apart from all the rest. It offers real hope to all of humanity.

Listen to what the apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Cor. 15:13–19)

According to the apostle Paul, if the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ isn’t true, Christianity is a hoax, and it’s a bad one, and none of it is true.

Despite the centuries of skepticism and criticism, the truth remains that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central to

the Christian faith. Both Christians and atheists agree that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is vital.

Prominent atheist professor of philosophy Antony Flew and Christian professor of apologetics and philosophy Gary Habermas began debating in 1985. Over the next two decades, their debates led to several books, including *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead? The Resurrection Debate*. In this book, Flew writes,

First, we [Habermas and myself] both construe *resurrection*, or the rising from the dead, in a thoroughly literal and physical way. . . .

Second, we are again agreed that the question whether, in that literal understanding, Jesus did rise from the dead is of supreme theoretical and practical importance. For the knowable fact that he did, if it is indeed a knowable fact, is the best, if not the only, reason for accepting that Jesus is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel.

Third, we are agreed both that the identification is the defining and distinguishing characteristic of the true Christian, and that it is scarcely possible to make it without also accepting that the Resurrection did literally happen.¹

Both Christians and atheists agree that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is vital.

What Flew is saying is, if Jesus rose, you have an intellectually feasible argument that everything Jesus said could be true. If he didn't, all of Christianity falls.

As we continue our journey together in this chapter and the next, I want to share seven reasons why I personally believe in the Jesus of the Bible as an actual historical figure who literally died and was raised from the dead.

Reason #1: The Historicity of Jesus of Nazareth

Did Jesus of Nazareth really exist as a human being? Was He created by believers in an attempt to support their cause and then added to history books based on thousands of years of hearsay? Is there any record of His life in other writings, not just the Bible? How can I know for sure that He is not myth or legend like King Arthur, Zeus, or the Titans?

The written evidence for the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth is extremely strong. There are over twenty-five thousand New Testament documents that authenticate the reality of Jesus Christ. There is more evidence supporting Jesus' life than Shakespeare, Homer, or almost any other person who has ever lived.

Non-Christian, extrabiblical sources also support the authenticity of the life of Jesus. Prominent historians include Pliny, a Roman governor and historian; Tacitus, a Roman historian living during Jesus' time; and Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived shortly after the time of Jesus. Expert historians, Christian or not, agree that Jesus was a man who lived and died in first-century Palestine. Almost all would agree that He was born near the time of Herod the Great's death, spent His childhood in Nazareth, was baptized by John the Baptist, gathered a group of disciples, taught in the villages and towns, preached the "kingdom of God," caused disturbances in the temple with His teaching, and was arrested, questioned, and executed by the order of Pontius Pilate.

Archaeological evidence exists supporting the context of Jesus' life. In 1961, a limestone block was discovered that supported the existence of Pontius Pilate. Coins have been

found that were designed and minted by Pontius Pilate in 29 to 31 AD while he was the governor of Judea. In 1990, the family tomb of Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest who was involved in Jesus' trials and execution, was found. In 2012, archaeologists in Jerusalem discovered a *bullae*, a clay seal, that referenced the city of Bethlehem. Archaeologists are continually uncovering more artifacts, and I believe their findings will continue to support the historicity of Jesus. Volumes have been written with amazing examples of the archaeological support of New Testament people, places, and events. For further study in the area, I recommend *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* by Holden and Geisler.

Reason #2: The Character of Jesus Is Unquestioned

The second reason I believe in the resurrection of the Jesus in the New Testament is that the character of Jesus is unquestioned. At first blush, you may wonder why Jesus' character is a part of my rationale for believing in the resurrection. On my personal journey I studied the lives and movements of other religious leaders. Many of them were filled with myth and legend and divine revelations that were given to "unusual men" because of their purity and spiritual enlightenment. Yet upon further scrutiny I found historical documentation of their personal lives and history that called into question their claims of being prophets or receiving a revelation from God. Sexual immorality, greed, execution of opponents, and the like caused me to pause deeply at any of their truth claims.

So while Jesus' character does not prove His resurrection, I want you to see the significant connection of His one-of-a-kind life and the one-of-a-kind event—the resurrection. I

personally find it far easier to believe that a man who claimed to be perfect (and was never challenged on the statement) rose from the dead than someone whose truth claims and stories of spiritual reality are at odds with his or her life practice.

While people challenged Jesus' claim to be the Son of God, they did not doubt His nature. All over the world and throughout time, both friend and foe alike view Jesus as a great man and moral teacher. Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism all view Jesus positively. They do not recognize Him as the Son of God, but they see Him as a person of supreme moral character, love, and integrity. Even the New Age faith encourages a state of "Christ consciousness" and finding the "Christ within." The ideals of being a person who is good, kind, and connected to God are something to strive for. Jesus' pure actions and loving attitude toward people made it clear that He was different than anyone else.

During His lifetime, Jesus made a huge, outrageous claim—that He never sinned. Jesus says in John 8:46, "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you

Jesus made a huge, outrageous claim—that He never sinned. He is never challenged on it.

believe me?" Can you imagine going home or to work and calling everyone together to announce that you are sinless? "Hey, everybody, just want you to know that I am sinless—I have never sinned." Now, if I announced that, my kids would have volumes to say along the lines of, "Dad, you are crazy. Remember when . . ." My coworkers would probably have similar things to say.

But Jesus makes this claim and He is never challenged on it. All the crowds had to do was catch Him in sin one time and

the entire integrity of His message and His person would be gone. The people did not call Him out as a sinner because there was nothing to accuse Him of.

Jesus' supreme moral character, love, and integrity have been affirmed by the impact they have made on world history. He has influenced history, thinking, books, law, culture, values, and even time. We mark time with BC and AD, based on the birth and death of the one person who changed the world and said, "[I've] come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10 NASB). We know He was an actual, historical person who lived, and we know that He was good, kind, loving, and holy.

Jesus has influenced history, thinking, books, law, culture, values, and even time.

Reason #3: The Works of Jesus Went Unchallenged

Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding in Cana, healed the blind, the lepers, and the sick. He raised people from the dead, fed five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish, and performed many more miracles. The witnesses to His miracles and the religious establishment who felt threatened by Him never said, "You faked that miracle—you didn't really do it." The validity of the miracles was evident to all. While skeptics questioned the source of His power to perform miracles, it was undisputed that He did perform miracle after miracle.

In Matthew 12, Jesus heals a demon-possessed, blind, and deaf man. It was clear to everyone there that the man was healed. He was transformed—he could see and speak and

was free of the demon. All the people who witnessed this miracle were astonished and asked each other if Jesus was the Messiah. “But when the Pharisees heard this, they said, ‘It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons’” (Matt. 12:24).

Over a three-year time period, Jesus performed miracles in small towns and in the populated areas of Jerusalem and Judea. The crowds swelled as word got around that Jesus healed people. The consistently growing crowds verified the authenticity of the miracles. In that day, you could meet the lady in Nain with her son, who once was dead but was brought back to life. You could go talk to the guy who was once paralyzed and see him walking around town. Or you could go talk to the leper who was once a social outcast because of his disease, now healed and part of the community.

With all of today’s amazing digital editing capabilities, we are used to seeing manipulated magazine covers and computer-generated special effects in movies. We have come to expect reality to be blurred or enhanced. The agonizing decision for many people is which filter to choose before posting their pictures on their social media account. My point is that, as a culture, we are used to seeing altered images. Jesus did not use filters, computer-generated images, or special effects. Jesus’ miracles were verifiable and the fact that the crowds kept growing supports the validity of His miracles.

Reason #4: The Identity of Jesus Was Confirmed

The next reason I believe in the resurrection is that the identity of Jesus was confirmed. Who is Jesus? This is one of the

most important questions anyone can ask, and the answer has the power to change a person's life trajectory for eternity.

For such an important question, the variety of answers is staggering. A quick Google search pulls up pages and pages of possibilities, and the arguments between readers quickly turn personal and heated. With so many different beliefs about Jesus' identity, where do you begin to look for answers? Let's imagine you wanted to discover the identity of your new, mysterious next-door neighbor. Before you text message the contacts on your street or knock on the doors of everyone on your block, it makes sense to talk directly to the new, mysterious next-door neighbor. Go next door and find out. Get to know their name, where they are from, about their family, and what they do. This time-tested, old-school method still works. That is what we are going to do. We are going to start with what Jesus claims about Himself. Then we will look at what God says about Jesus' identity, and what many others say.

Jesus Claimed to Be God

Let's take a look at how Jesus identifies Himself throughout His life. In John 14:6, He says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Leading up to Jesus' crucifixion, He was taken before Caiaphas, the Jewish high priest, for a trial. In chapter 14 of Mark's account, we read that many people were testifying falsely against Jesus in front of Caiaphas, and Jesus remained silent. Finally, Caiaphas asked Jesus, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" and Jesus answered, "I am. . . . And

you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (vv. 61–62).

Jesus’ answer so offended Caiaphas that he tore his clothes and declared Jesus guilty of blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

Why was Jesus calling Himself the “Son of Man” so shocking?

Why was Jesus calling Himself the “Son of Man” so shocking? First, Jesus answered Caiaphas by affirming that He was the Messiah, the Savior. But the title “Son of Man”

has a very specific meaning. Yes, He was a human being, a son of man, but in Daniel 7 the title of “Son of Man” is given to the exalted heavenly One who will rule heaven, and that is why Jesus uses that name for Himself. He will save men from their sins, giving them eternal life, and be the exalted One who reigns forever over the kingdom of heaven.

God the Father Affirms Jesus’ Identity

In Scripture, we hear the voice of God telling the world that Jesus is His Son. The first time is during His baptism and the second is on the Mount of Transfiguration.

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well-pleased.” (Mark 1:9–11)

God clearly identifies Jesus as His Son. A little later in Mark 9, we read that Jesus took Peter, James, and John on a hiking trip up a high mountain. Then before their eyes His garments

became radiantly, exceedingly white, and the men could see Jesus talking to Elijah and Moses.

Then a cloud appeared and covered them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!”

Suddenly, when they looked around, they no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus. (Mark 9:47)

God clearly identifies Jesus as His Son.

Can you imagine what it was like for His disciples, Peter, John, and James? They were living life together with Jesus. Every day was spent walking together, eating together, talking together, and together they saw Jesus heal the sick and the blind and bring the dead back to life. The disciples’ account of Jesus in the Gospels further confirms His identity.

Jesus’ Disciples Claimed He Is God

If you could chart the book of Mark, the first eight chapters are full of Jesus serving, healing, and teaching people to establish His credentials as the Messiah. He launched His ministry by casting out a demon, healing a paralytic, calming a storm, raising a little girl from the dead, and feeding the hungry crowd of five thousand while he taught everyone about God, the kingdom, and eternal life. Then in chapter 8, He asked His disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” And they answered, “John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the prophets.” Then Jesus asked them, “Who do you say I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah” (vv. 27–29). Flesh did not reveal that to Peter; God, Jesus’ Father, did. Peter knew the Old Testament. He knew all the promises and what the prophet Isaiah had said. Peter was living life

alongside Jesus, listening to His teaching, watching Him heal and care for people. He was there when the blind could see, the lame walk, and the dead were raised. He heard teaching like he had never heard before, and he knew that Jesus was the Christ.

Jesus' Enemies Confirmed His Identity

Although Jesus' enemies didn't like who He claimed to be, His works went unchallenged. In John 10 we read that the Jews gathered around Jesus as He came into the temple and asked Him,

“How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus answered, “I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one.”

Again his Jewish opponents picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus said to them, “I have shown you many good works from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?”

“We are not stoning you for any good work,” they replied, “but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God.” (John 10:24–33)

Everyone in the temple listening to this escalating discussion understood what Jesus was saying and who He claimed to be.

Another account is found in Mark 1:21–28. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when a man in the synagogue, possessed by a demon, cried out, “What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Jesus commanded the demon to be quiet and leave the man. The demon obeyed, and all the people who witnessed this event were amazed at Jesus’ authority over demons. His power demanded obedience from demons. Even the demon knew who Jesus was.

Extrabiblical Sources Confirm Jesus’ Identity

About forty years after Jesus’ crucifixion, Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus, more commonly known as Pliny the Younger, was born. This future Roman senator and author is one of the few people from the first century who is well known because of his prolific writing. Throughout Rome’s turbulent years, Pliny maintained roles that kept him closely connected to government. One of the documents he composed for the emperor included investigations and accounts of the arrested followers of “the Way” called “Christians.” He explained how they were questioned, given the opportunity to recant, and if they did not recant, they were put to death. In his opinion, their beliefs were silly because they did the “strangest things”—they met at dawn, ate common food together, and worshiped a dead person they believed was God. They treated each other with outstanding love and would not worship idols. Pliny’s account confirms the identity of Jesus and His followers. (For more in-depth information from Pliny and other extrabiblical sources, see the Selected Bibliography.)

***The Fulfillment of Old Testament Prophecies Confirms
Jesus' Identity***

The Old Testament is full of prophecies about Jesus. A few of Isaiah's predictions include that Jesus will be born of a virgin,² will perform miracles,³ and will be smitten and called "the Lord."⁴ In the book of Micah, Jesus is prophesied to be born in the town of Bethlehem.⁵ The Psalms predict that the Messiah will be the Son of God⁶ and a descendent of David;⁷ will be crucified, will rise from the dead, and will ascend into heaven.⁸ These are just a few of the over seven hundred prophecies about Jesus.

Let's pause for a moment and catch our breath. I have covered a lot of information in these first four reasons. Much of this may be new to some of you. I've made some very broad statements in the last paragraph about fulfilled prophecies that we will unpack very specifically later in the book.

What I want you to get your mind around at this point is something very simple but profound:

- Jesus was a real person who actually lived on this planet. It is undeniable and factual. He is not a myth or a legend, but a real person who we can historically verify, not only from the Bible, but also from historians and from actual facts that we can know for certain. That may not sound like a big deal to some of you that have been followers of Christ for many years, but for some of us, the whole idea of Jesus was thrown into the "religious barrel" of fantasy thinking or mythology that we thought was made up by men.

- Jesus' actual life and lifestyle of love and kindness is validated and unquestioned by friend and foe alike.

Jesus is not a myth or a legend, but a real person who we can historically verify.

Conclusion

As we close out this first leg of our journey together, we can know for certain that a real man named Jesus lived, that He had impeccable character and extraordinary teachings, that His miraculous powers were validated by eyewitnesses, and that He made outrageous claims about who He was and why He came.

The evidence in the first century was so strong that His enemies and detractors aimed their attacks not at His life, His teaching, or the legitimacy of His miracles, but instead, they sought to prove He was merely a great man who was a great teacher with unexplainable, great powers. That is far less than His outrageous claims that He was in fact God and the Savior of the world.

Their strategy was basic—simply prove that He didn't really die. If He didn't die, then He didn't rise from the dead. If He didn't rise from the dead, He may be a great man, a great teacher, and even have great power, but He certainly is not God or the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who has come to bring a new way of living and offer eternal life to all who believe.

In the next chapter we will answer the critic's challenge that "He really didn't die."