

A Faith Worthy of our Examination

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other.” (Deuteronomy 4:39 ESV)

PROOF?

I was listening to a radio debate between a believer and an atheist. The atheist said, “Ok...you get to go first. Prove to me that God exists.” How would you answer him?

I suppose I’d want to work on the question first.

The language of “proof” is problematic. The first problem has to do with how we know things. When a detective or a scientist in a laboratory seek to “prove” something, they are looking for clues in the space-time material universe that point to an object in the space-time material universe that can’t be denied. You can see it, or touch it, or taste it, or its simply illogical and without foundation to deny belief in it. We call that “proof.”

The truth is, very few of the things we value most would hold up under the weight of something like that. I can’t prove that I won’t get in a car accident on the way home from church—but not only do I drive home, I put the two most precious people in the world in the car with me. I can’t prove that it’s right to love my neighbor and wrong to hate my neighbor, but its foundational to how I live my life and how we have cohesive civilizations. And I know the textbooks tell me scientists have proved all sorts of theorems I learned in school; but I couldn’t lay out the proof for them if you put a gun to my head. I reply on testimony of people I trust. This is how we live our lives. The hard rationalism that says “never believe anything unless you have 100% scientific verifiable proof” is not credible, it’s not livable, and it’s now actually how any of us go about our lives.

So the first problem with “proof” is in the area of knowledge. The second problem with “proof” language is when it comes to God. In 1961, Yuri Gagarin became the first

person to journey into outer space. Upon returning to earth, he is reported to have said “There is no God. I went to space and didn’t see him.” C. S. Lewis responded that this was a bit like Hamlet going up to the attic of his castle looking for Shakespeare. You see, Shakespeare is not an object in the play; he’s the author of the play. If Hamlet was to say “where’s Shakespeare?” the answer is—everywhere! All of this is Shakespeare. But where would you point? What test tube in Hamlet’s underground lab would produce him? St. Augustine once said God is not just “some big being” who is out there in the sky (after all, he made the sky); you can’t measure him (by height or weight) and you can’t pinpoint a moment in time when he began or will stop (he’s outside of time). So how do you describe God? Augustine said, “not A being”... “but being itself.”

It was C. S. Lewis who wisely and rightly said once “I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it but because by it, I see everything else.”¹ God is like that. To believe in God is to believe meaning and purpose are real and available; to believe love has an ultimate source; to believe truth has an objective ground, and justice is more than what a society wants it to be.

This is also why a common opening tactic of some new atheists really falls flat. They’ll say things like “ever heard of Zeus? Thor? Any of 100,000 other gods that people have proposed? You don’t believe in any of those, right? Well, I just believe in one less god than you do!” If we think of God as “that Christian God” who sits on the shelf along with all those other options, then that would make sense. But that’s not what we mean by “God.” We are talking about the ground, the source, what Shakespeare is to Hamlet. Thomas Aquinas and others in the great Christian philosophical tradition have said things like “do you believe in love? Goodness? Truth? Beauty? These are just names for God. When you talk about something that started it all, something to which we are accountable, something that makes life interesting, and keeps the music of life playing—this what we call “God.”

OPENNESS

I think some Christian apologists have been smug and overconfident. They speak as if God is just outside the door, and if you take these three steps you’ll run into him. And if you then say “I don’t believe he’s here,” you should be taken to the insane asylum, because everyone can see him holding you, you are just denying reality. I don’t believe that. That’s not generous to the host of non-believers who are careful, critical thinkers, who love their families, who are good citizens, who help make this world a better place, and who ask good questions. The fact that non-belief is on the rise in so many places

¹ C. S. Lewis, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *The Weight of Glory*.

should give us pause and challenge us to consider if being dismissive of their hard questions is doing us any favors.

On the other hand, smugness and close-mindedness is not entirely on one side. I appreciate Thomas Nagel (who shows neither smugness nor close-mindedness, but confessionally exposes the same weaknesses on both sides of the aisle) when he says:

“I am talking of...the fear of religion itself. I speak from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself. I want atheism to be true.... It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God: I don't want the universe to be like that.”

After this stunning but helpful confession, he challenges us all:

“I am curious whether there is anyone who is genuinely indifferent as to whether there is a God—anyone who, whatever his actual belief about the matter, doesn't particularly want either one of the answers to be correct.”²

Indeed. I told you I once listened to a radio debate between a believer and an atheist. The atheist said, “Ok...you get to go first. Prove to me that God exists. I'm all ears.” The believer thought for a second, then replied, “First, tell me what sort of evidence you'd accept as proof that God exists. What would convince you that there is a God?” The atheist thought for a second and replied, “I don't think there is anything you can show me that will cause me to believe that God exists.” And the believer responded, “Do you see the problem? You want me to show you that God exists, but there is nothing that you would accept as evidence there is a God. How are we supposed to proceed?”

I think that's a very good question. Now there are some false starts that need to be acknowledged on the front end. Believing that God exists does not give you power to determine what that God does. So it isn't exactly fair or helpful to say “well, if tell God to do x, y, or z in the next 15 minutes and I'll believe” or “tell him to show up and shake my hand and I'll believe.” Not only is that not in my jurisdiction, can I tell you that I am very skeptical that that would do the trick. Jesus once told a story about a man who had died, and in the afterlife was experiencing an unpleasant future as a result of a life spent in greed and self-indulgence. So he cries out “send somebody to tell my brothers who are still alive to give to the poor and to live with concern for their fellow man so they won't end up like me.” And Jesus says, “they've got the written record and the long history of tradition—they have information; if they won't see what I've already

² Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford: OUP), p.130.

provided them, they won't be convinced even if someone rose from the dead.” You know that is foreshadowing his own resurrection and the people who then and now still deny it. But I think that's true. We interpret facts on the ground through the lens we have already chosen.

But if we are honest, we have to admit that detective work doesn't start with what evidence we want to have in front of us, but what we actually have in front of us. And it doesn't help if I tell you I have a secret code you don't have, or I only will consider evidence that already fits into my system but nothing else. No...I want us to look at what is readily available to just about anyone and see what it suggests. So, I'd like to look at some clues...that's the phrase I prefer...clues...that point me to the story that defines my life.

THE WORLD

The first big question that confronts me is this: “why is there something rather than nothing?” And the clue that points me to God is what I see when I consider the world. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork” (ESV). Open just about any science textbook and you'll find at least a chapter on what has come to be known as “the Big Bang.” You know that was not originally intended to be the name for this thing. Fred Hoyle was trying to make fun of it when he called it that. But the name stuck. The idea is that the universe sprang into existence in a fiery explosion—in a flash of light and energy, which means the universe had a beginning. Big Bang Cosmology is the “standard model” in Cosmology, and it claims the universe had a beginning. In 1916, Albert Einstein published his general theory of relativity. Some cosmologists went to the chalkboard, listing all of Einstein's equations and then applying them to their own field of study. And what that revealed is that, if Einstein's theory is true, then we live in an expanding universe. Was he right?

Well maybe you've heard of Edwin Hubble (where we get the name the Hubble Telescope). In 1929, Hubble looked through his 100-inch telescope on Mount Wilson and confirmed Einstein's theory. He noticed that the light from distant galaxies was stretched (which we call “red shift” or “the Doppler shift”) which means those distant galaxies are moving further away. And he noticed this in every direction he looked! What he discovered is that galaxies—moving at several million miles per hour—were not only moving away from the earth, but they were moving at great speed away from each other.

Now, if everything is moving at the speed of light further and further away from each other, back the train up, and what you find when you put the gear in reverse is that

everything came from the same place, the same center—what scientists call “the Big Bang.”

In 1978, a scientist for NASA named Robert Jastrow wrote a book to help people see just how certain and how important this discovery truly was. “The astronomical evidence,” says Jastrow, “proves that the Universe was created...in a fiery explosion” and “I am fascinated by the implications in some of the scientific developments in recent years—the essence of these developments is that the Universe had, in some sense, a beginning—that it began at a certain moment in time.”³

“Ok, Nathan”—you are saying to yourself; “thank you for this short introduction to what I might find in a college science textbook. What’s the big deal?”

The big deal is that Dr. Robert Jastrow—an agnostic (someone who says the jury is out regarding the existence of God)—titled his book “God and the Astronomers.” Why in the world did he feel the need to call it that?

Because of where the argument leads. You see, there is an argument for God’s existence that goes back several hundred years called the Kalam Cosmological Argument, and it goes like this:

- (A) Whatever begins to exist, has a cause.
- (B) The Universe began to exist.
- (C) Therefore, the Universe had a cause (outside of itself)

We know that whatever begins to exist has a cause. This is a first principle in logic and science. Things don’t come into being out of nothing. So for years, the real debate on this argument revolved around the second line. Maybe the universe never really “began” to exist. But Dr. Jastrow, relaying the findings of Hubble and Einstein, explaining the standard model in all science textbooks—says the astronomical evidence is certain. The Universe had a beginning.

So that begs for an explanation. I’ve heard some people say “you want to know what caused the Universe? Well I can just turn the question back on you—who caused God?” But you see, when believers talk about God, part of our definition is that God is perfect in every way. That means God is not bound by time or space. God had no beginning and will have no end. That’s part of the definition of God. It turns out, only something like that—an uncaused, self-existing thing that causes all things—could fit the definition

³ Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (1978).

of what came at the beginning. So unless you want to say that the universe—nature—fits that description, then your counter question really isn't in the same ballpark.

The proof is in the pudding. Just consider the second law of thermodynamics. This law states that the total amount of energy available to do work is decreasing. The universe is moving irreversibly toward a maximum state of disorder. The sun, for example, is running out of fuel. Like all stars, the sun generates its energy by a nuclear process known as thermonuclear fusion. Each second, the sun fuses 600 million tons of hydrogen, compressing around 596 million tons of helium with 4 million tons of matter released as energy.⁴ And yet the sun hasn't run out of fuel. Not by a long shot. In fact, despite the tremendous consumption of fuel, the Sun still has a 98% full tank (with enough to run another 5 billion years)! If things are running down irreversibly, the second law suggests there was a time when everything was wound up. At the very least, it challenges any model of an infinite universe. On such a model, we would have run out of hydrogen by now! Instead, it's the most abundant material in the universe. As the scientist Paul Davies puts it, since we have not experienced heat death – but we will – “conclusion: the universe did not always exist.”⁵

Which means, something had to cause the universe. If something caused the universe, then that thing also needs a cause...unless you go back to a “primary” or “first cause” and the only thing that could match the definition of what is needed to be that thing is something uncaused, eternal, outside of time, outside of space, from which all power and knowledge and morality and love and beauty derive. And that is exactly what I call “God.”

Sir Arthur Eddington looked over the evidence proving a beginning point to an expanding universe and lamented, “I feel almost an indignation that anyone should believe in it—except myself...The beginning seems to present insuperable difficulties unless we agree to look on it as frankly supernatural.”⁶

In debates about science and religion, it seems like everyone wants to talk about how things developed. And I wonder why we pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. The truly interesting question for me is how did it all get *started*? How things came into being.

⁴ Star Date Online.
<https://www2.nau.edu/~gaud/bio301/content/sun/sun.htm#:~:text=Today%2C%20the%20Sun%20continues%20to,596%20million%20tons%20of%20helium>.

⁵ Paul Davies, *God and the New Physics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), 11.

⁶ Arthur Eddington, *The Expanding Universe* (New York: Macmillan, 1933).

And that is the start of what is known as the “fine tuning” argument. That language isn’t mine; it’s not even Christian. In 2016, Cambridge University Press released a book by Lewis & Barnes entitled “A Fortunate Universe: Life in a Finely Tuned Cosmos.” Do you know all the things that had to be *just right* in those initial conditions at the very beginning of the start of the universe for us to have any life at all? Lewis and Barnes say its “astronomically low.”

Sometimes numbers are so big, scientists need help. Suppose I flipped a quarter and asked you to guess heads or tails. You would have a 50% chance of getting it right—or 1 in 2. What about guessing it twice in a row? Well, that would be 1 in 2 TIMES 1 in 2, or 1 in 4. Three times in a row would be 1 in 8. You see how the number gets a lot bigger as we go along? So it doesn’t take a whole lot more to get a number too big to write. So the odds of getting it right 30 times in a row is one chance in 1 with 30 zeros after it. 30 zeros! That’s too big to write and too big to say! So they use scientific notation. They would say 1 chance in 10 to the 30th power. See how that works?

Do you understand how big that number really is? The number of seconds in 10 billion years is only 10^{17} . The distance to the farthest known galaxy in light years is only 10^{25} . What about the distance across the known universe in inches? Well that’s bigger. Its 10^{28} . How about how many “things” exist in the universe? That’s right, the number of electrons, proton, and neutrons in the known universe? Scientists estimate: 10^{80} .

So back to my earlier question. How many things have to be right, and just so very right, for life to exist? You tinker just one degree with the strength of gravity; you add just 1% to the amount of carbon or take away just 1% of the amount of hydrogen in the universe; you change the mass density of an electron; you change just a smidgen of the distance between planets and the distance of our planet to the sun, the perfect levels of all the ingredients. The numbers are astronomical. And the odds of getting the right ball of rock in the right place in the right galaxy, with the right chemicals in just the right amounts to produce the right chain of amino acids in order to have life that is full of beauty, love, romance, goodness, and charm...is beyond imagination.

The physicist Lee Smolin calculation the odds of life-compatible numbers coming up by chance to be 1 in 10^{229} .⁷ The odds are so astronomical, that some prominent scientists have argued there must be a multi-verse (that our world is just one of an infinite set of universes). What is the actual evidence for a multiverse? According to an author in *Scientific American* writing in 2021, no empirical evidence, just hypotheses. Interesting. So how does he conclude? “So, what should we make of the fine tuning? Perhaps there

⁷ Lee Smolin, *The Life of the Cosmos* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

is some other way of explaining it. Or perhaps we just got lucky.”⁸ Remind me again why God is not a viable option on the table?

Now the odds of you jumping out of a parachute at 10,000 feet and surviving is 1 in 10 to the 10th power. You wouldn't bet your life! I'm not willing to bet my soul.

In 1980, Henry S. Lipson (who was the former professor of Physics at the University of Manchester in the UK) wrote an article in *Physics Bulletin* and laid it on the line. The idea that the beginning of life—its ultimate origin—can be attributed to something coming from nothing and thus producing what we have simply won't work.

“If living matter is not, then, caused by the interplay of atoms, natural forces, and radiation, how has it come into being? I think...we must...admit that the only acceptable alternative is Creation. I know this is anathema to physicists, as indeed it is to me, but we must not reject a theory that we do not like if the experimental evidence supports it.”⁹

The natural Universe, with space and time, began to exist; it had to have a cause; and it would seem the cause that best fits is one that is supernatural, outside of space and time, who is itself uncaused. This is one clue that points me to God.

THE HUMAN

The second big question that confronts me is this: “where do objective moral values come from?” And the clue that points me to God is what I see when I consider the human being. In Psalm 8, David reflects on what we've already discussed—the moon and the stars in the heavens—and says “what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:3-4 ESV). A person can choose to live their life by any standard they wish. But moral obligation—your responsibility to live by my standard—can only work if there is some higher system to which you and I are both accountable. But it seems to me that if God does not exist, then objective moral values do not exist.

It was Dostoyevsky who said, “if there is no God, everything is permissible.” He was stating what seems to be a fairly obvious conclusion: there is no lawful requirement

⁸ Philip Goff, “Our Improbable Existence is No Evidence for a Multiverse.” *Scientific American* (January 10, 2021). <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/our-improbable-existence-is-no-evidence-for-a-multiverse/>

⁹ H. S. Lipson, “A Physicist Looks at Evolution,” *Physics Bulletin* 31 (1980), p. 138.

where there is no law or no lawmaker. Nietzsche said so. Bertrand Russell said morality is arises from the herd—groups just decide what works for them (which, by definition, is not an objective standard at all). Michael Ruse said rape seems bad to us, but there’s no real reason why we should think that if we found intelligent life on Andromeda, we should think that doing the same action would be wrong for them. The psychologist B. F. Skinner wrote a book entitled “Beyond Freedom and Dignity” and said since there is no God there is no absolute moral standard, which means there should be no laws, no cops, and no jails.

But we don’t live this way. You recall the story I told you last week, where Dr. Warren asked Dr. Flew what law did the Nazi’s violate when they obeyed the law of their land in torturing children. Dr. Flew said we settled that at Nuremburg. Yes, we did. But at Nuremburg the closing argument was that there is a higher law that transcends time and place. But don’t you see—Nietzsche, and Russell, and Ruse, and Skinner and even Dr. Flew earlier in the debate tell us there is no such thing as a higher law that transcends time and place because there is no thing that transcends time and place to which we are accountable.

If God does not exist, objective moral values do not exist. But objective moral values do exist. I know the phrase “cancel culture” is all the rage, and I’m sure you have strong feelings about it—pro or con. But I’m interested in what lies at the heart of something like that. By cancel culture, I mean if people find out a celebrity did something that violates their moral code—even if they did it a long time ago; even if the person died a long time ago; even if nobody at that time thought it was a violation of any moral code at the time they lived and died—we should hold them accountable. It does no good to point out that people can’t always anticipate what a future generation will or will not tolerate. Oh no. If it’s wrong—it’s wrong—always has been, always will be. And you will not escape judgment for it.

The only way to justify something like that is to appeal to some objective standard of right and wrong that transcends time and place. But let’s just take something we can all agree on—like stealing or murder. Animals take things from other animals all the time in nature; but we don’t call it stealing. Some creatures eat other creatures in the wild; but we don’t call it murder. We seem to think human life has an inherent value, and human liberty is sacrosanct; and thus our things belong to us, and you are obligated to respect my rights to life, and liberty, to property and to my pursuit of happiness. And we find language all over the world to this effect in charters about human dignity—but they aren’t rooted in anything deeper than “this is what we—at this point in time—think about human beings.” How can you root it in anything deeper? I mean, what would you appeal to? The American Founding fathers said we are “endowed by our

creator with certain inalienable rights.” You could appeal to that. But then you’d have to follow where that leads.

The writers of the declaration and the constitution were relying on writers like John Locke. But Locke makes it clear that the only reason human beings have rights of life and liberty—the only reason you are obligated to respect someone else’s life and liberty—is because we all have the same Maker, we are made in His image—and we are sent into the world to be about His business. We need liberty, you see, because we will face the final judge, and you need freedom to choose what you believe will best prepare you for that day. The agnostic philosopher Louis Pojman said that this is just about the best argument one can make for human dignity, human rights, and human equality; we still argue for these things, devoid of the language of God. But that just means we are arguing an empty perspective while borrowing the language that inherently belongs to a Christian worldview.

What about love, beauty, and music? Why do they touch me in ways that physical science can’t explain?

I’d like to introduce you to A. N. Wilson. An Oxford grad (and a classmate of Richard Dawkins), Wilson is a cerebral writer who, at one time, had a bone to pick with believers. He wrote a book about it called *Against Religion: Why We Should Try to Live Without It*. But in 2009, he shocked his friends and colleagues when an article appeared in the *New Statesman* entitled “Why I Believe Again” authored by A. N. Wilson.¹⁰ He couldn’t shake this nagging doubt—a doubt about his doubts. He called his move into atheism a “conversion experience” and then says he had periods of “doubt” about his doubts, and he would run to David Hume to find answers for his questions, like “a Catholic having doubts might return to the shrine of a particular saint to sustain them while the springs of faith ran dry.”

He said, “I was drawn, over and over again, to the disconcerting recognition that so very many of the people I had most admired and loved, either in life or in books, had been believers.” He read the biographies of believers who gave their lives for the poor, for outcasts, all because of their faith. “I found it impossible,” wrote Wilson, “not to realize that all life, all being, derives from God,” as many of these “gave their lives to demonstrate.” A life like Gandhi’s for example “which focused on God so deeply, reminded me of all the human qualities that have to be denied if you embrace the bleak, muddled creed of a materialist atheist. It is a bit like trying to assert that music is an

¹⁰ A. N. Wilson, “Why I Believe Again.” *New Statesman* (April 2, 2009). <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2009/04/conversion-experience-atheism>

aberration, and that although Bach and Beethoven are very impressive, one is better off without a musical sense.”

Wilson watched his friends die, and then he watched his mother die. And he said “purely materialist explanations for our mysterious human existence simply won’t do.” Take language, for example—how a particular set of sounds form words, and particular words form sentences, and those sentences in the right hands of the poet move civilizations. Take music, for example—how certain sounds partnering with certain other sounds in the right hands of the composer bring us to our knees and touch the deepest parts of our humanity? No, says Wilson, “the existence of language is one of the many phenomena—of which love and music are the two strongest—which suggest that human beings are very much more than collections of meat. They convince me that we are spiritual beings, and that the religion of the incarnation, asserting that God made humanity in His image, and continually restores humanity in His image, is simply true. As a working blueprint for life, as a template against which to measure experience, it fits.”

He then, in closing, reflects back on his former life. “When I think about my atheist friends, including my father,” writes Wilson, “they seem to me like people who have no ear for music, or who have never been in love... These unbelievers are simply missing out on something that is not difficult to grasp. Perhaps it is too obvious to understand; obvious, as lovers feel it was obvious that they should have come together, or obvious as the final resolution of a fuge.”

Genesis says God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul.” A living soul. Seems to ring true. And, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, “Materialism will never explain those last words.”

THE STORY

The final question that confronts me is this: “How do you explain the power and rise of Christianity?” And the clue that points me to God is what I see when I consider the story that has defined my life.

I love this line from Acts 26:26, where Paul says to Festus, “[T]he king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.”

There were other great sages and teachers...but “never man spake like this man” (Jn 7:46 KJV). Teaching that the way up is down, the way forward is through surrender.

The teaching that the good life is found not in money, or power, or fame, but in loving service to one's fellow man, and in glorifying God. There was no great regard for children in the ancient world, before Jesus said “let the little children come to me and do not hinder them, for of such is the kingdom of heaven.” And the early Christians took notice, raising unwanted children in their homes, becoming known in the second century as the people who “do not destroy their offspring,” and launching thousands of pregnancy care centers. There was no organized charity effort in the ancient world, before Jesus taught the parable of the good Samaritan and demanded that his followers put into practice the great teaching to love your neighbor as yourself. And the early Christians took notice, creating the first hospitals for all in need, launching charity efforts for those less fortunate. It's not a coincidence that the abolition leaders in England like William Wilberforce and the racial equality demanders in the US like Martin Luther King were Christian ministers. Jesus' teachings didn't just change, they revolutionized the world.

There were other great movements and empires in history...but nothing with the kind of profound influence on the world like the church. Western Civilization owes a great deal of gratitude to Christianity. The first universities were established by believers wishing to explore God's good world, the printing press was created because the Bible needed to be read, the Scientific revolution was at the hands of believing Christians. How do you explain the rise of the Christian movement based on the worship of a man crucified as a common criminal? A Christian movement made up of widows, orphans, fishermen, slaves, prostitutes, and lepers...eventually conquering the greatest empire the world had ever seen, and conquering it by love?

How do you explain the resurrection? Oh, I know skeptics tell us this is clearly a fanciful tale. But don't be so quick. The crucifixion of Jesus is one of the best established events of history. Even Bart Ehrman and the Jesus Seminar call this a clearly established fact of history. We know that. So what happened between the death of Jesus and the incredible rise of Christian faith rooted in the belief that this Jesus was raised from the dead?

Well, consider the facts we have before us. An ancient account that says Jesus was buried in the tomb of a well-known Jewish Sanhedrin member named Joseph of Arimathea. If you are inventing a fairy tale, within a generation of the time the supposed events happen, you leave out specific names of high-profile men who could easily prove your story wrong. In the early years, when critics tried to dispute various points of the story, no one—no one—ever came up with a different burial tradition. This is the kind of thing historians would take notice of (if it were not tied to a religious point). An early tradition, making specific historical claims including high profile witnesses, and not alternative burial tradition offered? That rings true.

The tomb was found empty. The teaching about the empty tomb is part of the earliest teaching on record. Paul says it was something that was “first delivered” in his earliest preaching. One of the easiest things to dismiss or do away with would be to produce the body. Or to make it very clear there was no empty tomb. But look at the historical record. The earliest counter claims to the resurrection do not say the tomb was full; they say someone must have stolen the body. Can I offer another piece of evidence that the empty tomb was part of the earliest preaching? Where do lovers of JFK, or MLK go to pay their respects? You know where. We know where they are buried. If you go to the Holy Land today, you will be told we don’t know for sure which tomb is the one Jesus was buried in. That is because it was never venerated as a shrine. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher—built on the supposed spot of his resurrection—is hundreds of years later. The earliest believers couldn’t point and tell you because there was nothing there to see.

Who would have stolen the body? Who could have stolen the body? Examine the case for yourself. The story of the resurrection is first told by Jewish women—people who could not testify in court. Not the way to spread a false story in which you are seeking credibility.

Oh, and early Christians claimed the risen Jesus appeared to them. To lots of people. To his brother James. To over 500 people at once. James was not a believer. Hardly the kind of wish-fulfillment apparition that fits the normal profile of seeing a loved one after they are gone. And hallucination? How does that fit with 500 people at once? Why does Paul say some of them are still living? And the early Jews did not expect a resurrection before the final one with all believers. To see a risen Jesus would blow open their worldview, not confirm one. It doesn’t fit their pre-conceived pattern.

The best explanation as a historian seems to me to be that the tomb of Jesus was found empty, the early disciples had claims of witnessing him alive, the early church took off and changed the world, all because God raised Jesus from the dead.

These are just a few of the reasons, arguments, clues that point me to God, and specifically the God I see in Jesus Christ. Last week, I shared the main reason I am a believer...because the story of Jesus overwhelms me and makes sense of life, reaches my deepest longings, and offers a narrative that inspires a life of service, love, and hope.