

Just One Book



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Introduction

I heard a story once about a wise old holy man who from his deathbed asked one of his assistants to bring him “the book.” When asked what book he was referring to he answered, “There is just one book, the Bible.”

I’ve often found myself wishing I had some kind of summary of the reasons I believe in the ultimate authority of the Bible and, in turn, the existence of God and Jesus Christ. This document is an outgrowth of this wish. In it, I take a high-level look at some of the factors I believe point to the validity of my beliefs. It’s not meant to prove anything in an absolute sense – you can’t absolutely prove or disprove the existence of God – but rather to take a look at some interesting criteria by which we can evaluate the Bible and draw the most logical conclusions. By the end of this write up, I hope you begin to believe as I do that the Bible is unlike any book ever written; its credibility is supported by a great deal of evidence; and it should be considered the ultimate source of wisdom and revelation concerning God (i.e., it’s the only book that’s truly needed by anyone). In the last part, I also present its central message (the Good News) in simple terms.

Ed

Grace

The word “grace” in the Bible most commonly refers to the unearned/undeserved favor of God. While humans are capable of expressing various forms of grace, god’s grace is a far more powerful thing. God’s grace is the ultimate expression of his perfect love for us. By grace, God chooses to bless us rather than punish us for our sin as his law requires.

Some people have gone as far as to describe such grace as shocking and scandalous¹ given how incredibly counter it is to human nature and our notions of what God should be like. God’s grace leads a person to forgive others despite unspeakable crimes.² It leads one person to keep forgiving another for repeating the same offense countless times.³ It leads us to love our enemies, to pray for them, and do good to them.⁴ And above all, it’s what led God to send his Son to earth in human form to live a sinless life filled with suffering and persecution, and die horribly and unjustly at our hands so that we might have eternal life.⁵

The last statement is pretty amazing. The Bible describes a God who loves us so deeply that, despite the fact that we repeatedly chose to turn our backs on him, he would sacrifice his only Son to have a relationship with us. I don’t know of any faith that describes such a personal God, one who reaches down to mankind rather than requiring us to reach up via our own efforts. In Christianity, a person’s salvation is dependent only upon a person’s belief in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ – not on a person’s good deeds. This unique attribute of Christianity is summarized in the following Bible verses.

God saved you by his grace when you believed [in Jesus’ sacrifice]. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.⁶

The Bible is a love story, one describing a father’s (God’s) incredible love for his children (his creation), and it’s filled with examples of God’s grace towards us – all of us. Throughout history, God has expressed his love for people who would be considered scoundrels by society and used them in his service. God took an adulterer and murderer (King David) and molded him into someone who is considered the greatest king in Old Testament times. He also took a murderer and torturer (the apostle Paul) and changed him into the greatest missionary of all time. Paul himself wrote:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his

¹ Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997.

² See Acts 7:60.

³ See Matthew 18:22.

⁴ See Matthew 5:44-47.

⁵ John 3:16.

⁶ Ephesians 2:8-9, NIV.

great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.⁷

Jesus was all about grace. He had a reputation for hanging out with people society judged as sinners and outcasts – lepers, prostitutes, foreigners and tax collectors, among others. He told grace stories like the one describing a father’s outrageous love and forgiveness for his son who took an early withdrawal of his inheritance and blew it on partying and prostitutes.⁸ He acted gracefully, like when he deftly prevented a mob from stoning a woman caught in adultery.⁹ And he talked about how a celebration breaks out in heaven whenever a single sinner repents.¹⁰

While I saw and was moved by examples of grace in the world and the Bible over the years, I didn’t come to truly understand its power and importance until I experienced it on a deep, personal level. My transformation began back in April, 2008, when my wife informed me that she wanted a divorce after well over 20 years of marriage. I cannot put into words how stunned and devastated I was. I knew we had our problems and had admittedly grown apart over the years, but we weren’t dealing with issues like extramarital affairs, drug use, physical abuse or bankruptcy. I soon came to realize, though, that there were far more serious things at work, things that would force me to take the hardest look ever at my heart, behavior, beliefs and priorities.

As I worked through the initial shock, I had a number of major revelations. The biggest one was that I had slowly come to live in a state of perpetual “ungrace” in my marriage. Among other things, I had become angry, selfish, impatient, grumpy and sometimes downright mean. I wanted my wife to do the things that were important to me and tried to get her to do them by increasingly showing my displeasure with her. I kept a record of her wrongs, often grumbled and cursed with displeasure, and could barely offer up a smile when around her. Of course, she wasn’t perfect either, but I realized that the only person I could change was me, and that acting ungracefully had brought me to the brink of divorce.

I began to think seriously about the example Jesus Christ set as recorded in the Bible. What I saw was truly amazing. I saw how badly Christ was treated throughout his life by so many people he came into contact with, and how he was eventually beaten and crucified. I realized he accepted all of this without lashing out at people and using his power to force them to change. Instead, he traveled around the countryside caring for people, teaching and healing them, and was often moved with compassion and tears when he saw suffering. This made me realize how badly I was behaving. Instead of accepting my wife’s differences and appreciating them, and using them to help me change and mature, I was continually exerting pressure on her to change.

So I decided to do a number of things. I committed to start seeing my wife through God’s graceful, loving eyes and not my own selfish ones. I also committed to treating her with grace no matter what happened. I simply did not want to get into the tit-for-tat downward spiral that characterizes so many divorces (and the world in general). Finally, I realized that

⁷ 1 Timothy 1:15-16, NLT.

⁸ Luke 15:11-32.

⁹ John 8:1-11.

¹⁰ Luke 15:3-7.

the only person I could change was me. So I decided to focus on identifying the things that God wanted me to change in myself, and not the things I wanted my wife to change about herself.

What I've been through since has been a remarkable combination of pain, joy, revelation, and growth. I've seen the realness, practicality, and power of grace first hand, and it's simply astounding. While the details of how I followed up on my commitments are in the Changed Lives section below, I'll include some nuggets of wisdom I gained from the experience here.

First and foremost, grace is the only way to go, and until you have and seize the opportunity to act counter to the world and express grace in the face of conflict and difficulty, you'll never really "get it." You also won't experience true healing and freedom in these situations until you decide to forgive and love those who have hurt you. I have a friend who went through a divorce at the same time as me. For years, every time he interacted with his ex-wife he was bitter, could barely look at her, and said things he would regret for days if not weeks. He simply would not allow himself to forgive her for what she did and let grace bring peace into his life. He was an unhappy prisoner of ungrace.

Second, my relationship with my ex-wife is as good as it's been in ages despite all we've been through, and it's all due to grace. Once I decided to break the cycle of ungrace that had gripped me and begin behaving with unconditional forgiveness and love, an amazing thing started to happen. My ex-wife's heart began to slowly soften and she began to talk with me more freely and let her hostilities melt away. We have a much healthier relationship than the other divorced people I know (and there are *lots* of them) despite the deep sadness and pain that accompanied the divorce. It's also been a wonderful example for our daughter and made dealing with the situation far easier for her. And lest you think I'm patting myself on the back, I acknowledge that I simply couldn't have done this without God's help.¹¹ It's God's grace that I'm expressing, not my own.

Third, the more I realized how much I screwed up and needed forgiveness, the more willing I was to extend grace and forgive others. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."¹² My increasing awareness of how flawed I was opened the door to unimaginable grace in my life. It was only when I realized and focused on *my* mistakes and sin that I began to yearn to serve my ex-wife and extend grace and forgiveness no matter what.

Fourth, the world is filled with ungrace. Everywhere I turned over the past three years I was greeted by someone encouraging me to behave ungracefully. Nearly everyone I talked to had advice for how to handle my wife or the situation – and it was mostly mean spirited. In the world, every bad act deserves an equal or greater bad reaction. Many people actually got mad at me or expressed frustration with me for treating my wife with grace after she left. Yet the wonderful things that came from my decision now stand as a testament to grace. A few people have actually come to me and acknowledged that their advice was wrong. Many more people have simply marveled at the relationship I now have with my ex-

¹¹ Matthew 19:26.

¹² C. S. Lewis, "On Forgiveness," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, New York, NY: Collier Books/Macmillan, 1980, pg. 125.

wife. I often wonder what my neighbors think when they see my ex-wife and I occasionally giving each other a tender goodbye hug in our driveway when she stops by to pick up our daughter. I hope that grace is touching their hearts.

In summary, the Bible's concept of grace is not only unique to Christianity, but I believe it's the only force powerful enough to overcome the spirit of ungrace that is so prevalent in the world. This amazing grace is Christianity's greatest contribution to the world, and dispensing it should be our highest priority.¹³ The good news of grace is that God loves us deeply, and there's nothing we can do good or bad to change that.

¹³ John 13:35.

Human Nature

To me, the Bible's teaching on human nature provides one of the greatest indications of its authority. When God made humans, he made them in His own image, giving all people the capacity to express His extraordinary love and righteousness. God also gave humans free will and the ability to choose their own path. Unfortunately, man chose to turn his back on God and pursue his own desires, which allowed sin and its consequences to enter the world. As a result, man's heart became deceitful,¹⁴ his mind became hostile towards God,¹⁵ and all people became sinful.¹⁶ The Bible tells us that we are born with a sinful nature,¹⁷ that our desires are never satisfied,¹⁸ and that this leads to contentions, strife, and wars.¹⁹ (For additional teachings, please refer to the sampling of scriptures in the footnote below.²⁰)

What makes the Bible's teaching so amazing is that it's so readily supported by people's behavior, yet most people completely deny it. This is truly fascinating. People are always asking for scientific proof of the Bible's claims – something that is observable, consistent and repeatable. To me, human nature and behavior are as predictably bad as the force of gravity is observable in everyday life. Want evidence? Consider the following.

War, Strife and Murder

I've seen estimates ranging from 188,000,000 to 262,000,000 for the number of people killed in the 20th century by war, homicide, genocide and dictators.²¹ This number doesn't even consider all the people who were affected by these deaths (friends, relatives, loved ones) nor does it account for all the people who were hurt by others but didn't die. The Washington Post called the past century "a hundred years of bloody warfare" while outlining its "many episodes" of genocide and other crimes against humanity.²² Here are some more statistics to consider.

- The Center for Systemic Peace notes that there have been 324 episodes of major armed conflict in the world between 1946 and 2014 (35 of them ongoing).²³
- The Global Terrorism Database cites over 140,000 incidents of terrorism from 1970 to 2014.²⁴
- The United Nation's Children's Fund notes that there were 55 civil wars worldwide between 1990 and 2004.²⁵

¹⁴ Jeremiah 17:9.

¹⁵ Romans 8:7.

¹⁶ Romans 3:9-12.

¹⁷ Ephesians 2:3; Psalm 51:5; Genesis 8:21 - New Living Translation.

¹⁸ Proverbs 27:20 - New Living Translation.

¹⁹ James 4:1-3 - New Living Translation.

²⁰ Genesis 6:5,11; 2 Chronicles 7:30,36; Psalm 53:3; Ecclesiastes 3:18; Isaiah 64:6; Matthew 15:19; Mark 7:20-23; John 2:24-25; Romans 8:7; Colossians 3:5; 2 Timothy 3:2-6 - New Living Translation.

²¹ Figures gleaned from two Web sources: <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/welcome.html>; and <http://necrometrics.com/all20c.htm>.

²² David Bosco, *Crime of Crimes*. Washington Post, March 6, 2005, Page B1.

²³ <http://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist/warlist.htm>

²⁴ <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/about/>

- 60 million people around the world are currently displaced due to war, conflict and persecution – the highest number in history.²⁶
- According to the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the United States had elite special forces deployed in 134 countries in 2013.²⁷

As of late summer 2015, among other things, unrest has spread throughout much of the Middle East including the implosions of Syria, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen; over half of Syria's entire population has been displaced due to its civil war; the Islamic State is trying to trigger a global conflict by killing what seems like everyone they come across; North Korea continues to oppress and starve its people, and threaten nuclear attacks; many believe Iran will continue to sponsor terrorism and develop nuclear weapons despite the pending nuclear deal; the United States has been involved in Iraq and Afghanistan for over a decade; and the Russians continue to escalate the conflict in the Ukraine, and seem to be getting involved in Syria.

This has all happened during a period when humans were supposedly more knowledgeable and enlightened than at any time in the past. In a letter to the early church at Rome, the apostle Paul wrote, "[People] are quick to commit murder. Wherever they go, destruction and misery follow them. They do not know what true peace is."²⁸ Sadly, his words ring truer today than ever.

Greed

Proverbs 27:20 says, "Human desire is never satisfied."²⁹ Let's consider America for a moment. We live in the wealthiest country on the planet and enjoy, by far, the highest standard of living. One could argue that we should have reached a point long ago where we don't need any more stuff. But the evidence indicates otherwise. Among other things, total U.S. consumer debt reached an all-time high of \$3.33 trillion as of January, 2015;³⁰ our houses are bigger than ever (new homes averaged 2,600 square feet in size in 2013 versus 1,725 square feet in 1983 – which is even bigger than during the housing bubble years³¹); and our national debt is so bad that many economists believe our country is broke. The official U.S. government debt is \$15.8 trillion and climbing, and that figure doesn't even include things like Social Security and Medicare.³² When these and other factors are taken into account, some estimate that government debt exceeds \$200 trillion.³³ These numbers are simply astounding. One would have thought that the biggest economic collapse since the Great Depression would have sobered us up, but I've seen little evidence of that. Stories about Wall Street's resurgent excesses,³⁴ the scandalous mal-distribution of wealth in America,³⁵ and our growing narcissism abound.³⁶ The fact that the richest country in the

²⁵ Celia W. Dugger, *UNICEF Says a Billion Children Now Suffer Deprivation Worldwide*. The New York Times, December 10, 2004.

²⁶ <http://www.newsweek.com/syrian-refugees-all-you-need-know-373475>

²⁷ <http://www.thenation.com/article/americas-secret-war-134-countries/>

²⁸ Romans 3:15-17 - New Living Translation.

²⁹ New Living Translation.

³⁰ <http://www.creditcards.com/credit-card-news/credit-card-debt-statistics-1276.php>.

³¹ http://money.cnn.com/2014/06/04/real_estate/american-home-size/.

³² <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikepatton/2012/07/23/is-america-bankrupt/>.

³³ <http://www.zerohedge.com/news/2013-09-11/lawrence-kotlikoff-us-fiscal-gap-200-trillion-our-country-broke>.

³⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/24/wall-street-excess-is-back_n_788043.html.

³⁵ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/26/opinion/26herbert.html?_r=1&ref=bobherbert

world is also the world's biggest debtor is clear proof that human desire, indeed, is never satisfied.

Porn

An April, 2012 ExtremeTech online article reports that, "It's probably not unrealistic to say that porn makes up 30% of the total data transferred across the internet."³⁷ This figure was later confirmed by a porn industry insider who said, "On balance, I think [that] report is OK."³⁸ The implications of this statement are truly staggering, given that over 31 exabytes of data (1 billion gigabytes) passed over the Internet every month in 2013.³⁹ The ExtremeTech reporter closed his story by writing, "The Internet really *is* for porn."⁴⁰ It would seem so.

There are many other disturbing Internet porn statistics, like estimates that 12% of all Web sites (over 24 million) are pornographic;⁴¹ there are 116,000 searches for "child pornography" per day;⁴² the average age at which a child first sees porn is 11;⁴³ and 90% of children between the ages of 8 and 16 have viewed pornography.⁴⁴ As if this weren't bad enough, an April, 2013 article on DailyMail.com drove the point home further. The article described a sex educator's encounter with 20 boys and girls, ages 13-to-14, in England.⁴⁵ When asked to write a list of sexual terms they know from A through Z, every single one of them wrote "anal" for the letter A. It turns out that every child in the group had seen the act of sodomy in an online video. The young teens went on to talk about things like bestiality and scenes "too graphic to describe in a family magazine." At one point, the author wrote, "The true stories of boys I met whose lives had been totally taken over by porn not only moved me to tears but also made me incredibly angry that this is happening to our children. And the looks of revulsion on those poor girl's faces in the playground enraged me. I feel as if an entire generation's sexuality has been hijacked by grotesque online porn."

When I first wrote this section several years ago, I noted how publisher Judith Regan talks about the "porno-ization" of our culture. "If you watch *every* single thing going on out there in the popular culture, you will see females, scantily clad, implanted, dressed up like hookers, porn stars, and so on – and that this very acceptable."⁴⁶ (Judith's former company – ReganBooks, a division of Harper Collins – published a book entitled "How To Make Love Like A Porn Star.") Photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders was shocked when there was intense competition to publish his book of porn star photos. Mainstream publishers called him, not the normal him chasing publishers. He called this "surreal" and said "there was a bidding war."⁴⁷ Porn production firms like Flynt Enterprises employ major accounting, law and legal firms, and no one blinks an eye. Major corporations like GM (which owns DirecTV),

³⁶ Jennifer Senior, *Me the People*. New York Magazine, November 8, 2010, page 28.

³⁷ <http://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites/2>

³⁸ <http://www.xbiz.com/news/146703>

³⁹ <http://www.cisco.com/c/en/us/solutions/service-provider/visual-networking-index-vni/index.html>

⁴⁰ <http://www.extremetech.com/computing/123929-just-how-big-are-porn-sites/2>

⁴¹ <http://www.dailyinfographic.com/the-stats-on-internet-pornography-infographic>

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ <http://erlc.com/issues/quick-facts/por/>

⁴⁵ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2432591/Porn-pernicious-threat-facing-children-today-By-ex-lads-mag-editor-MARTIN-DAUBNEY.html>

⁴⁶ Quote from January 5, 2006 episode of *60 Minutes*.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

big telecom and cable providers (like SBC and Comcast), and all major hotel chains (like Marriott and Hilton) make money when porn is sold to their customers. It's high-profit-margin business that they gladly accept without making a lot of noise. Clearly, what was once private, unthinkable, taboo and completely unacceptable has become commonplace, available for all to see, and sadly mainstream. Long ago, the apostle Paul wrote, "When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, your lives will produce these evil results: sexual immorality, impure thoughts [and] eagerness for lustful pleasure..."⁴⁸ How true.

Entertainment

Nothing's shocking anymore. As a society, the United States has become so accustomed to seeing and hearing about horrific, immoral and crazy things that we're fast becoming numb to it all. A Washington Post article summarizes, "Take any medium or art form – literature, film, TV, music, political discourse – and chances are you'll find that it has become more intense, more extreme, more desperate to provoke a reaction from a desensitized audience."⁴⁹ The author calls this the "Sledgehammer Effect." Need proof? Just turn on the TV and watch the litany of funk we call entertainment. Shows like Jerry Springer, Jersey Shore, Real Housewives, The Maury Povich Show, and countless others are designed to shock and titillate audiences while belittling and degrading people. A World's Dumbest Partiers episode that aired a few years back showed a video of a young man vomiting on a naked stripper's crotch while his mother and friends looked on, some of them cheering. The content in shows like South Park, Louie, and Man Seeking Woman would have shocked people not long ago, yet they barely elicit a yawn these days. I recently landed on an episode of Man Seeking Woman that featured a "penis monster" that was indescribably disgusting.

Movies are even worse. Joel Achenbach writes "...the sledgehammer has its ultimate source in Hollywood... Sledgehammer movie directors give us protracted rape scenes, dead children galore, vast armies of Orcs storming castles, [and] space monsters devouring human flesh the way fat kids eat Doritos."⁵⁰ Violent R-rated movies like The Texas Chainsaw Massacre air at all hours of the day on TV with scant editing so we can watch people repeatedly get ripped or sawed in half. What makes matters worse is that America is exporting all of this crap to the rest of the world. While it's true that people have reacted with shock to books and entertainment throughout the ages, there's no denying that the volume, pervasiveness and extreme nature of what's out there today is without equal - and it's picking up steam. Shortly after the creation account described in the book of Genesis, Moses wrote that violence, depravity and corruption were everywhere on earth.⁵¹ This has been the case throughout history, and is just as true today as ever.

Summary

⁴⁸ Galatians 5:19, New Living Translation.

⁴⁹ Joel Achenbach, *Numb Nation*. Washington Post, April 1, 2004, page C1.

⁵⁰ Ibid, page C4.

⁵¹ Genesis 6:5 – New Living Translation.

I could go on, but I won't. I will, though, ask you to consider your own daily behavior and thoughts. Are you offended by your neighbors, engaged in political battles at work, tempted to stretch the truth at tax time, bickering with your loved ones, blowing off people who have asked for your help, cursing too much, eyeing your neighbor's wife or married coworker, gossiping, etc.? These things (and uncountable others) represent sin in action.

Now consider the times you've wanted to do the right thing and didn't? Have you ever tried to change a bad behavior/habit only to immediately fall back into it? The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans about this phenomenon nearly 2,000 years ago. "...I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate... When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway... Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life dominated by sin? ...the answer is in Jesus Christ." (Romans 7:15,19,24-25)

The Bible nails human nature. But it doesn't stop there. Its message is incredibly encouraging. Despite the fact that we're sinful and unable to change on our own, God is willing to forgive our sins, give us good standing in His sight, and help us overcome our sin if we'll only let him. We'll discuss how this works later on.

Content

Unique & Diverse, Yet Unified

The Bible is a collection of 66 books/letters written over many centuries, by numerous authors, in varied geographic settings, and under a range of circumstances. It was written by men under the inspiration of God. God revealed his teachings and will to them in various ways including speaking to them directly, in dreams, in visions, and via miracles.⁵² While these men were required to carefully record God's messages without adding to or taking away from them,⁵³ they also wrote in a way that reflected their individual personalities, cultural & historical settings, emotions, and literary styles. In this sense it is, in fact, a very human book.

The Bible is a truly unique and diverse book, unlike any other. Try to name one other book that was:

- Written over the course of 1,500 years.
- Written by 40 authors from wide-ranging walks of life. For example, Moses was a prince of Egypt, then an outcast shepherd, and finally the leader of Israel; Solomon and David were kings; Isaiah was a prophet; Daniel was an senior advisor to the ruler of Babylon; Amos was a shepherd and farmer; Matthew was a tax collector; Peter was a fisherman; Luke was a doctor; Paul was a rabbi; etc.
- Written on three continents in various settings (e.g., prison, in the wilderness, in palaces, during military campaigns, etc.).
- Written in three languages (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek).
- Written in various tones (e.g., despair, joy, admonition, instruction, etc.).

The Bible also addresses hundreds of controversial subjects (e.g., adultery, how you should view/handle money, etc.) which elicit a broad range of reactions from people. Yet despite the fact that such a diverse/distributed group of writers handles these subjects, its core message and teachings are unified and consistent throughout. (Of course, you have to actually read it to know this.)

It's also worth noting that the Bible, to quote Russell Ash, is "by far the bestselling book of all time."⁵⁴ In his book *The Top Ten of Everything* he notes, "The Bible Society's attempt to calculate the number [of Bibles] printed between 1816 and 1975 produced the figure of 2.458 billion. A more recent survey for the years up to 1992 put it closer to 6 billion in more than 2,000 languages and dialects."⁵⁵ The Gideons International organization alone gave away 88 million Bibles in 2014, and has given away two billion Bibles and New Testaments since 1908.⁵⁶ One could say the Bible is unique in its circulation as well.

⁵² For some examples, see Exodus 3; Genesis 37:1-11; and Daniel 7.

⁵³ For some examples, see Deuteronomy 4:2 and Revelation 22:18-19.

⁵⁴ Russell Ash, *The Top 10 of Everything, 1997*, DK Publishing, 1996, pages 112-113. (Cited at <http://www.ipl.org/div/farq/bestsellerFARQ.html>)

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ <http://www.gideons.org/AboutUs/WorldwideImpact.aspx>

Common Themes & Consistency

As mentioned above, the Bible's core message and teachings are unified and consistent throughout. While there are certainly apparent discrepancies between some verses and accounts in its many pages, the fundamental story/message of the unfolding drama of redemption revealed in its pages is uniform throughout. From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible describes God's desire to have a relationship with man; how we have rejected him; how he has offered reconciliation; and how if we choose to love him (rather than being forced to do so) we will be welcomed into his arms and given a wonderful, eternal future. Creation, fall, redemption and restoration. Sound familiar? It should, because it's a common theme in much of man's writings, movies, TV shows, etc. Boy meets girl, they fight, he comes after her, they live happily ever after. We all want things to turn out like this. This is inherent in us because it mirrors the relationship between God and man. Once again, this cohesive story is told by numerous authors, from different walks of life – many who lived in different ages and in different parts of the world.

Wisdom

While there are a number of books that contain a good deal of wisdom, I have yet to see anything that rivals that which is contained in the Bible. Furthermore, counter to the argument I often hear, its wisdom is just as relevant today – in some cases more so – as when written. There are countless examples of this. The book of Proverbs alone is rife with them. What's amazing is how often the Bible's wisdom is repackaged by people who sell it as something new and revolutionary. One example (that I don't mean to pick on because I think so highly of it) is the popular book *How To Win Friends and Influence People*, by Dale Carnegie. I read this book years ago and quickly realized that most of what he writes can be found in the scriptures. Let's look at four basic principles from the book.

- Handling people, Principle 1: Don't criticize, condemn or complain. Sounds like:
 - Psalms 34:14 – Work hard at living in peace with others.
 - Luke 6:37 – Stop judging others, and you will not be judged. Stop criticizing others, or it will all come back on you. If you forgive others, you will be forgiven.
 - Philippians 2:14 – In everything you do, stay away from complaining and arguing.
 - Philippians 4:11 – ...be content whatever the circumstances...
- Handling people, Principle 2: Give honest and sincere appreciation. Sounds like:
 - Proverbs 11:25 – ...he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed.
 - Proverbs 12:25 – ...a kind word cheers [a man] up.
 - Proverbs 16:24 – Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
 - Ephesians 4:26 – Let everything you say be good and helpful, so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them.

- Ways to make people like you, Principal 1: Become genuinely interested in other people. Sounds like:
 - Romans 12:9-10 – Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them... Love each other with genuine affection.
 - Philippians 2:4 – Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing.
- Ways to make people like you, Principal 4: Be a good listener. Sounds like:
 - James 1:19,26 – ...be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.

I could go on, but you get the point. The Bible is a treasure trove of wisdom waiting to be uncovered.

Influence

According to Philip Yancey,⁵⁷ the historian H.G. Wells (a non-Christian) once said "The historian's test of an individual's greatness is 'What did he leave to grow?' Did he start men to thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first." Of course, almost all of the information we have about Jesus comes from the Bible, so its influence is profound. Consider the words of historian Philip Schaff as quoted by Josh McDowell:

This Jesus of Nazareth, without money and arms, conquered more millions than Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed, and Napoleon; without science and learning, he shed more light on things human and divine than all philosophers and scholars combined; without the eloquence of schools, He spoke such words of life as were never spoken before or since, and produced effects which lie beyond the reach of orator or poet; without writing a single line, He set more pens in motion, and furnished themes for more sermons, orations, discussions, learned volumes, works of art, and songs of praise than the whole army of great men of ancient and modern times."⁵⁸

Typology

Typology (in the theological sense) is the interpretation of characters and stories in the Old Testament as allegories or foreshadowings of New Testament events. The New Testament is seen in the Old. An examination of the scriptures reveals numerous examples like: The selection of a lamb without blemish for sacrifice at Passover, a foreshadowing of Christ's perfect sacrifice; Jonah's three days and nights in the belly of the whale, which foreshadowed Christ spending three days and nights in the grave; the innermost room of the tabernacle representing heaven, whose curtain was torn apart when Jesus died symbolizing our direct access to God; a seed needing to die before being reborn as a new plant, and all of us needing to die to sin in order to be born again in Christ; and Joseph sold into slavery for the going rate in silver, and Jesus later betrayed for a similar amount of silver.

⁵⁷ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, page 17.

⁵⁸ Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands A Verdict, Volume 1*. San Bernardino, CA: Here's life Publishers, Inc., 1979, Pages 19-22.

Old Testament books were written many centuries before the events recorded in New Testament times. I've heard it said that the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. A close examination of the scriptures reveals how true this is.

Survival

The Bible is unique in its survival over the centuries. Consider the following text from the book *I'm Glad You Asked*:

"The scriptures have survived through time, persecution and criticism. There have been numerous attempts to burn, ban, and systematically eliminate the Bible, but all have failed. The Bible has been subjected to more abuse, perversion, destructive criticism, and pure hate than any other book. Yet it continues to stand the test of time while its critics are refuted or forgotten."⁵⁹

One example is the Roman emperor Diocletian's 303 A.D. edict that Christians cease in their worship and that their scriptures be destroyed. Merely ten years later, Constantine (the subsequent emperor) issued the edict of Milan bestowing, for the first time, "imperial favor on Christianity in the empire."⁶⁰

The greatest example is Christianity's survival through the 300 year period following Jesus Christ's death. During this time, Christians endured periods of intense persecution for no worldly reward, but rather because of their faith in an eternal future.

Summary

From a content perspective alone, it's clear that the Bible is a book without peer.

⁵⁹ Boa & Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked*. Colorado Springs, Co.: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1994, page 100.

⁶⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constantine_I

Reliability

One common point of contention regarding the trustworthiness of the Bible concerns its reliability. In other words, how do we know the books are authoritative and contain what was originally written? Also, has the Bible's reliability been confirmed by tests of its historicity? Consider the following.

How It's Books Were Chosen

Contrary to popular belief, the books included in the Bible were not selected by mysterious religious councils or groups. Rather, they were included because they were already accepted by people as authoritative. The following excerpt from an interview with Bruce Metzger, a world-renowned biblical scholar, about the Bible's authority puts this into perspective.

"...the canon (i.e., the books of the Bible) is a list of authoritative books more than it is an authoritative list of books. These documents didn't derive their authority from being selected; each one was authoritative before anyone gathered them together.

For somebody now to say that the canon emerged only after councils and synods made these pronouncements would be like saying, 'Let's get several academies of musicians to make a pronouncement that the music of Bach and Beethoven is wonderful.' I would say, 'Thank you for nothing! We knew that before the pronouncement was made.'"⁶¹

The books of the Bible were chosen because they were already considered God-inspired, authoritative and authentic, and were accepted by God's people. These people saw something in these books that changed people's lives, and was unlike anything they read elsewhere.

Historical Confirmation

The historical authenticity of the Bible can be established by examining three lines of evidence – bibliographical, internal and external.

Bibliographical Evidence

Bibliographical examination of a text considers the quantity and quality of available manuscripts (i.e., very old copies of the text), as well as the time span between when the text was originally thought to be written and the date the earliest available manuscripts were written. Consider the following.

⁶¹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, page 69.

- Quantity – The number of ancient copies of the New Testament (24,000 and counting) dwarfs the number of ancient copies of other respected writings from antiquity. After the New Testament, the book with the most known ancient manuscripts is Homer's Iliad with 650 copies. Lee Strobel writes, "manuscript evidence for the New Testament [is] overwhelming when juxtaposed against other revered writings of antiquity – works that modern scholars have absolutely no reluctance treating as authentic."⁶²
- Quality – "The New Testament... has not only survived in more manuscripts than any other book from antiquity, but it has survived in a purer form than any other great book – a form that is 99.5% pure" (i.e., un-corrupted).⁶³
- Time span – The time period between when the New Testament books were written and the date of the oldest copies in existence is significantly shorter than that same time period for "almost any other piece of ancient literature."⁶⁴ "The time span for most of the New Testament is less than 200 years (and some books are within 100 years) from the date of authorship to the date of our earliest manuscripts. This can be sharply contrasted with the average gap of over 1,000 years between the composition and the earliest copy of the writings of other ancient authors."⁶⁵

While the bibliographical evidence supporting the New Testament appears strong, the Old Testament is a different story. According to Boa & Moody,

"In the case of the Old Testament, there are a small number of Hebrew manuscripts, because the Jewish scribes ceremonially buried imperfect and worn manuscripts. Many ancient manuscripts were also lost or destroyed during Israel's turbulent history."⁶⁶

So how can we test the authenticity of the Old Testament? Well, one way is to examine how the New Testament treats the Old. Having already established the strength of the New Testament's authenticity, one could conclude that if the New Testament treats Old Testament writings as authoritative, then they must be so. It turns out that, by a number of measures, this is the case. Consider the following:

"The New Testament contains an extraordinarily large number of Old Testament quotations. It is difficult to give an accurate figure since the variation in use ranges all the way from a distant allusion to a definite quotation... As a result, the figures given by various authors often reflect a startling discrepancy.

A very conservative count discloses unquestionably at least 295 separate references to the Old Testament. These occupy some 352 verses of the New Testament, or more than 4.4 per cent. Therefore one verse in 22.5 of the New Testament is a quotation.

⁶² Ibid, page 61.

⁶³ Norman L. Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1968, page 361.

⁶⁴ Harold Greenlee, *Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964, page 15.

⁶⁵ Ken Boa & Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked*. Colorado Springs, Co.: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1994, page 93.

⁶⁶ Ibid, Page 91.

If clear allusions are taken into consideration, the figures are much higher: C. H. Toy lists 613 such instances, Wilhelm Dittmar goes as high as 1640, while Eugen Huehn indicates 4105 passages reminiscent of Old Testament Scripture. It can therefore be asserted, without exaggeration, that more than 10 per cent of the New Testament text is made up of citations or direct allusions to the Old Testament.

Out of the 22 books in the Hebrew [Bible] only six... are not explicitly referred to. The more extensive lists of Dittmar and Huehn show passages reminiscent of all Old Testament books without exception."⁶⁷

Also, look at Jesus Christ's own endorsement of the Old Testament.

"Jesus Christ himself provides a most arresting example in this respect. At the very threshold of his public ministry, our Lord, in his dramatic victory over Satan's threefold onslaught, rested his whole defense on the authority of three passages of Scripture. He quoted the Old Testament in support of his teaching to the crowds; he quoted it in his discussions with antagonistic Jews; he quoted it in answer to questions both captious and sincere; he quoted it in instructing the disciples who would have readily accepted his teaching on his own authority; he referred to it in his prayers, when alone in the presence of the Father; he quoted it on the cross, when his sufferings could easily have drawn his attention elsewhere; he quoted it in his resurrection glory, when any limitation, real or alleged, of the days of his flesh was clearly superseded. Whatever may be the differences between the pictures of Jesus drawn by the four Gospels, they certainly agree in their representation of our Lord's attitude toward the Old Testament: one of constant use and of unquestioning endorsement of its authority."⁶⁸

Clearly, the New Testament views the Old Testament as authoritative.

Internal Evidence

A search for internal evidence is an examination of what the Bible says about itself. While this may seem like circular reasoning (how can you use the Bible to prove the Bible is true?), there's more to it than that. Here's a sampling of what I mean.

- The majority of the Bible was written by men who claim to be eyewitnesses to the events it records. If taken at their word – and we have no reasonable reason not to – they provide a first-hand account of events. In our society, we greatly value the testimony of eyewitnesses. The testimony of as little as one or two eyewitnesses is enough to send a man to his death in a court of law.
- While the Bible was written by numerous authors from various walks of life over a large span of time, its message is consistent throughout. For example, despite a handful of apparent contradictions among the four gospels, their message is

⁶⁷ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/nicole.html>, or see Roger Nicole's work in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl. F.H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), pp. 137-151.

⁶⁸ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/nicole.html>.

amazingly consistent and uniform. Most contradictions are minor in nature while the more famous ones have plausible explanations. If you were to read four books on, say, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, there would certainly be some variation in the accounts, but no one would question that they occurred or the core facts surrounding them. Also, if the gospels were too consistent it would invalidate each as an independent record of what happened.

- Bible authors like the prophets and apostles endured great hardship, persecution and even martyrdom for sharing their message. Many of the apostles were, in fact, executed for their beliefs. Now ask yourself, would you suffer – to the point of death – for something you knew to be untrue? I doubt it, and I doubt that’s what happened to the Bible authors who were martyred. Furthermore, Jesus Christ was crucified – a terrible, abhorrent thing. The fact that a powerful movement rose up, in the face of persecution, following a man who suffered such a fate is rather difficult to explain.
- The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke were written and named after “unlikely characters”⁶⁹ rather than well-known and influential people. Isn’t this contrary to all human logic? If you want to market something, you associate it with the famous and well-known – yet these books did the opposite and still thrived.
- Paul’s letters are believed to have been written between the late 40s and 60 A.D. The gospels are believed to have been written between the late 50s and 100 A.D. (End-of-century estimates are from very liberal sources.) These estimates are “...within the lifetimes of various eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus, including hostile eyewitnesses who would have served as a corrective if false teachings about Jesus were going around.”⁷⁰
- The New Testament contains 27 books/letters that attest to the life and times of Jesus Christ. Twenty seven. That’s a lot of books about one person at a time when writing was far less common than it is today.

The gospels themselves are history, rich with detail. I guess the reason people don’t treat them as such is because of their shocking claims of Christ’s resurrection and the forgiveness of sins.

External Evidence

A search for external evidence is one that looks for confirmation of the Bible in extra-biblical (i.e., outside the Bible) writings as well as archeology. We will treat archeology in a separate section below. For now, here’s a sampling of extra-biblical writings focused only on the New Testament (for brevity’s sake).

- Flavius Josephus (37-to-approximately 100 A.D.) – Josephus was a first-century Jewish historian. He is well-known among scholars and considered a “very good historian” by the standards of his day.⁷¹ His account of the war between the Jews and Rome starting in 66 A.D. (in *Jewish War*) has been corroborated by archeological evidence and other historical writings. In *Antiquities of the Jews*,

⁶⁹ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, page 23. Craig Bloomberg quoted.

⁷⁰ Lee Strobel, *The Case For Christ*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998, page 33. Craig Bloomberg quoted.

⁷¹ E. P. Saunders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, Page 16.

“Josephus made specific references to John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and James [the brother of Jesus]. In this work, Josephus gave us many background details about the Herods, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the high priests like Annas and Caiaphas, and the Roman emperors mentioned in the Gospels and Acts.”⁷² (FYI, Josephus’ writings “...provide most of our information about Palestine in Jesus’ day.”⁷³)

- Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56-117 A.D.) – Tacitus “...is one of the important historians of Roman Antiquity. The surviving portions of his two major works – the *Annals* and the *Histories* – treat the reigns of the Roman Emperors Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero.”⁷⁴ Some believe he recorded the most important extra-biblical reference to Jesus Christ. In *Annals* 15.44, he mentions “Christus” suffering “the extreme penalty... at the hands of... Pontius Pilate.”
- Pliny the Younger (63-133 A.D.) – Among other things, Pliny the Younger was a lawyer, author, poet, orator and eventually a Roman Governor. In his *Letters* (10.96), he wrote of Christians honoring Christ “as if to a God.”

There are other sources we could discuss (see reference below⁷⁵), but I’ll stop here. What I’d like to emphasize is that, despite the fact that Jesus was not well known outside of Palestine and that his ministry only spanned 3.5 years (a fraction of history), a number of references were made to him outside of the Bible not long after he lived.

Archeological Confirmation

Using archeology to prove the Bible’s accuracy can be a tricky exercise if one isn’t careful. People are apt to interpret findings in ways that supports their views. One extreme viewpoint is that of biblical minimalists who believe the scriptures are nothing but legends and fables and therefore of little-to-no historical value. There are also defenders of the Bible who point out data that supports their position while ignoring discoveries that appear at odds with it.

While I’m no archeology expert, and there are certainly significant gaps in the archeological record, it seems to me that with the passage of time more and more evidence appears in support of Biblical accounts than not. Many times, holes in the archeological record have been filled with dramatic discoveries. Jeffery Sheler seems to summarize the state of affairs nicely when he writes:

“In extraordinary ways, modern archeology has affirmed the historical core of the Old and New Testaments – corroborating key portions of the stories of Israel’s patriarchs, the Exodus, the Davidic monarchy, and the life and times of Jesus.”⁷⁶

In the following subsections, we’ll take a look at some significant discoveries.

⁷² Ken Boa & Larry Moody, *I’m Glad You Asked*. Colorado Springs, Co.: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1994, page 95.

⁷³ E. P. Saunders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*. New York, New York: Penguin Books, 1993, Page 15.

⁷⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tacitus>.

⁷⁵ Suetonius; Lucian; Thallus (via Julius Africanus); Papias (via Eusebius); Irenaeus; Clement of Rome; Ignatius; Polycarp; and the Talmud.

⁷⁶ Jeffery Sheler, *Is The Bible True?*. U.S. New & World Report, October 25, 1999, Page 52.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

No discussion of biblical archeology would be complete without mentioning the Dead Sea Scrolls. They've been called "the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times" by the famous biblical archeologist William F. Albright,⁷⁷ and are recognizable in name by most people. But what did the discovery of these scrolls tell us? Well, for one thing they show us that our modern Bible has been incredibly well preserved over the centuries. Consider the following.

"Before the discovery of the first of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, the oldest surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible were Masoretic texts dating from the ninth century A.D.

Now, scholars could lay the modern Old Testament alongside these ancient Hebrew texts and judge just how well it had weathered the centuries.

...the scrolls have shown that our traditional Bible has been amazingly accurately preserved for over 2,000 years.

A dramatic example of that textual preservation was found in the Great Isaiah Scroll, the only fully intact biblical document salvaged from the Qumran caves. [It] contains all 66 chapters of the book of Isaiah that are found in the traditional Bible. Beyond some incidental "typos" and minor copying errors, scholars have found only 13 relatively small variations – a phrase or a verse or two missing or added – when compared with the modern text. The average reader today... would look at these differences and say, 'It's no big deal.' For the most part, they do nothing to alter the meaning of the text and, taken as a whole, attest to the meticulous accuracy of the Masoretic scribes who hand-copied the Hebrew Bible through the first thousand years of the common era."⁷⁸

It turns out that about half of the Dead Sea Scroll's texts either contained passages not found in our modern Bible, or omitted some passages found in it. The total number of these passages does not appear to be great. For example, several of the many copies of the Book of Psalms found at Qumran contain 9 additional psalms plus most but not all of the 150 canonical (i.e., accepted) psalms. Most scholars, though, don't believe these additional psalms were written by David, as it's believed the canonical ones were. The other additions/omissions appear to be more limited and mostly minor. Nothing found at Qumran indicates a preference for any one version over another.

Davidic References

For many years, Bible critics noted that King David's name had never been found outside of the scriptures in recordings from antiquity. Then, in 1993, a ninth century B.C. basalt stone containing the expressions "king of Israel" and "the House of David" was unearthed. The

⁷⁷ Jeffery Sheler, *The Liberation of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. U.S. News & World Report Special Edition: Mysteries of the Bible, February 1, 2005, Page 62.

⁷⁸ Jeffery Sheler, *The Scrolls and Scripture*. U.S. News & World Report Special Edition: Mysteries of the Bible, February 1, 2005, Page 67.

stone was determined to be part of a monument commemorating a military victory for the king of Damascus over two of his enemies. In other words, the inscription was *not* created by Jewish scribes. This discovery renewed interest in a previously-discovered ninth century monument known as the Mesha Stele. The Mesha monument commemorates Moabite king Mesha's victory over Israel and specifically mentions Israel's King Omri (See 1 Kings 16:21-27 for Biblical references to king Omri). Furthermore, a partially obliterated line on the monument is now believed to say "house of David." According to National Geographic, until the discovery of the Mesha Stele, "there was no non-biblical evidence that David actually existed. Few dispute it now."⁷⁹

Twelve years later, an archeologist named Eilat Mazar claimed to unearth King David's palace in Old Jerusalem. While her claims are hotly contested, two additional announcements by archeologists have put critics on the defensive. The first proclaimed the discovery of a Judean city that has been dated to the exact period during which David ruled. The second announced the discovery of a vast copper-smelting operation that is believed to have belonged to David and his son Solomon. According to National Geographic, the archeologists involved in both discoveries "support their contentions with a host of scientific data... If the evidence from their ongoing excavations holds up, yesteryear's scholars who touted the Bible as a factually accurate account of the David and Solomon story may be vindicated."⁸⁰

Evidence Concerning Jesus

Jesus Christ's life spanned little more than thirty years and his public ministry lasted only a few. Archeologically speaking, this is a very small sliver in time. Furthermore, he preached in an area of the world (i.e., Palestine) that, at the time, was more remote than cosmopolitan. One shouldn't be surprised, then, that evidence of his life outside the Bible is difficult to come by. Regardless, there have been some discoveries that shed light on the validity of the gospel stories. For example, the 1968 discovery of the remains of someone crucified during Jesus' time confirmed Biblical details of his crucifixion. The skeleton's arms had been nailed to a cross bar, its knees were bent upward, an iron nail had been driven through both heels (and was still stuck in one of them), and its shin bones were broken. All of these things match the gospel accounts. Furthermore, the body was found in a cave. Biblical critics said such a burial was not allowed by the Romans at that time, but here was evidence to the contrary. Other examples include the 1961 discovery of the Pilate Stone that confirmed Pontius Pilate's first century rule over Judea, and the 1990 discovery of an ossuary with the Caiaphas inscription, which experts believe contained the remains of the Jewish high priest who interrogated and handed Jesus over to Pilate to be executed.

Perhaps the most important discovery of all, though, has only recently gained attention. A collection of 70 lead codices that is believed to date back to the first century, and possibly contain references to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, is being studied by British archeologists. "David Elkington, an ancient religion scholar who heads the British research team investigating the find, has pronounced this nothing less than 'the major discovery of Christian history.'"⁸¹ While the initial reaction from biblical scholars who have seen the

⁷⁹ Robert Draper, *The Search For King David*. National Geographic, December, 2010, page 73.

⁸⁰ Ibid, page 75.

⁸¹ http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_thelookout/20110330/ts_yblog_thelookout/could-lead-codices-prove-the-major-discovery-of-christian-history

codices is favorable, everyone involved in their examination is proceeding with caution in light of the potential importance of their contents.

Other Evidence

There is lots of other evidence we could discuss like: the discovery of the great gate of Solomon; how historical details recorded in the story of Joseph match information discovered from the same time period; how a river flow thought to be inaccurately portrayed in the scriptures was found to have flowed the way described when satellite images were inspected; how consistently the Bible portrays the Philistine people, who weren't even believed to exist until discoveries in modern times; the "Israel is laid waste" inscription on a monument commemorating a Ramses II 1207 B.C. military campaign; and evidence of the rapid expansion of the population in Canaan during the same period the Israelites were believed to have moved into the area (plus evidence that the new inhabitants didn't eat pork!).

Summary

I think you'd have to agree that there is solid evidence that points to the reliability and accuracy of the scriptures.

Science

Today, many (perhaps most) people in Western society consider science and Christianity to be adversaries. This has not always been the case. Consider the following excerpt from the book *Who Made God?*

“...for more than three hundred years between the rise of modern science in the 1500s and the late 1800s, the relationship between science and religion can best be described as an alliance... Historians of science now recognize the indispensable role played by the Christian faith in the rise and development of modern science... As [Loren] Eiseley states, “it is the Christian world which finally gave birth in a clear, articulate fashion to the experimental method of science itself. [Christianity views] the world [as] a rational place that is open to exploration and discovery. Up until the late 1800s, scientists were typically Christian believers who saw no conflict between their science and their faith – men like [Newton], Kepler, Boyle, Maxwell, Faraday, Kelvin and others. The idea of warfare between science and religion is a relatively recent invention of the late 19th century...”⁸²

Things have been improving, though. Today, numerous societies have been formed, conferences organized and professional journals created to promote a dialog between science and theology – and universities like Cambridge and Oxford have even established chairs focusing on the subject. A 2002 Wired magazine article touches on some of the reasons for this increasing dialog. In it, Gregg Easterbrook writes:

“[Decades] of inconclusive inquiry have left the science-has-all-the-answers script in tatters. As recently as the '70s, intellectuals assumed that hard science was on track to resolve the two Really Big Questions: why life exists and how the universe began. What's more, both Really Big Answers were assumed to involve strictly deterministic forces. But things haven't worked out that way. Instead, the more scientists have learned, the more mysterious the Really Big Questions have become.

Perhaps someday researchers will find wholly natural explanations for life and the cosmos. For the moment, though, discoveries about these two subjects are inspiring awe and wonder, and many scientists are reaching out to spiritual thinkers to help them comprehend what they're learning. And as the era of biotechnology dawns, scientists realize they're stepping into territory best navigated with the aid of philosophers and theologians. We are entering the greatest era of science-religion fusion since the Enlightenment last attempted to reconcile the two, three centuries ago.”⁸³

Let's take a look at some of the discoveries Gregg Easterbrook discussed in his article.

⁸² Ravi Zacharias & Norman Geisler (Editors), *Who Made God?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, page 50.

⁸³ Gregg Easterbrook, *The New Convergence*. Wired Magazine, December 2002, Page 166.

The Big Bang & Creation

Living in our high-tech day and age, it's easy to forget that the big bang theory hasn't been around that long. The existence of a "primordial atom" of infinite density was first proposed in 1927 by a Catholic abbey and astronomer named Georges Lemaitre. (Notice he was both a religious man and scientist.) Lemaitre predicted that if there had been some sort of bang the galaxies would be rushing away from one another. And that's exactly what Edwin Hubble found in 1929 using his famous telescope. From that point on, scientists have embraced the big bang theory. (It's interesting to note that Lemaitre's idea was criticized as an attempt to validate the book of Genesis. Once his idea was validated, though, few acknowledged its implications regarding the creation account.)

The big bang presents a thorny set of challenges to scientists. Quoting Gregg Easterbrook again:

"All this stuff — enough to form 50 billion galaxies, maybe fantastically more — is thought to have emerged roughly 14 billion years ago in less than a second, from a point with no physical dimensions. Set aside the many competing explanations of the big bang; *something* made an entire cosmos out of nothing. It is this realization — that something transcendent started it all — which has hard-science types such as [Allan] Sandage using terms like 'miracle.'

Nobody knows beyond foggy conjecture what caused the big bang, what (if anything) was present before that event, or how there could have been a prior condition in which nothing existed... [Scientific] explanations of how the mass of an entire universe could pop out of a void are especially unsatisfying."⁸⁴

Physicist Brian Greene, writing in *The Elegant Universe*, notes:

"We don't know what the initial conditions of the universe were, or even the ideas, concepts, and language that should be used to describe them... No one has any insight on the question of how things actually did begin. In fact, our ignorance persists on an even higher plane: We don't know whether the question of determining the initial conditions is one that is even sensible to ask or whether... it is a question that lies forever beyond the grasp of any theory."⁸⁵

Now let's consider what the Bible says about creation. First of all, the Bible does not fix the moment of creation at any particular point in time. Genesis 1:1 simply states, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." There is no point in time given for this anywhere in the Bible. Furthermore, Genesis 1:2 states, "The earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness." According to various sources, the Hebrew word translated *was* is more accurately translated *became* (also rendered *came to pass*).⁸⁶ This is significant because it allows for the possibility that the earth existed for quite some time and underwent significant changes prior to the appearance of modern man.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, Pages 365-366.

⁸⁶ *The Companion Bible*, King James Version, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990, Page 3 and Appendix 7. Also, see *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*, Dugan Publishers, Gordonsville, TN, Pages 1332 and 32 (the latter in the Hebrew Dictionary portion).

These two things eliminate the conflict many people perceive between science and Christianity regarding the creation of the earth and universe. Some Christians count backwards through the family chronologies cited in the scriptures while assuming that each creation “day” in Genesis is a literal 24 period. This places the creation no more than 10,000 years ago. (Christians who do this are sometimes called “young earth” proponents.) But this is not in agreement with the majority of scientific evidence. It also ignores the points made in the previous paragraph while discounting alternative interpretations of the word “day.” Consider the following text by William Lane Craig in *Who Made God?*

“I am not denying that a literal reading of Genesis is a legitimate interpretation, but it can hardly claim to be the only interpretation permitted by the text, nor does it represent the historic understanding of the majority of Jews and Christians... [Furthermore,] Genesis tells us virtually nothing about how God made plants and animals. Did he create them out of nothing? Did he create them out of existing life-forms? Did he use evolution to produce them gradually? These are scientific questions the Bible does not address. The main point of the Genesis story is to tell us that God is the Creator of everything in the world... How he did so seems to be left open. Now what this means is that the Christian is free to follow the evidence where it leads.”⁸⁷

This statement, written by a well-known professor/theologian, is an example of a Christian who is open-mindedly searching for explanations that reconcile the biblical account of creation with the ever-increasing body of scientific evidence that supports an “old earth” view. Francis Collins, a well know scientist and Christian, states a stronger position in his book *The Language of God*.

“Over the past century, the term “Creationist” has been hijacked (and capitalized) to apply to a very specific subset of believers, specifically those who insist on a literal reading of Genesis 1 and 2 to describe the creation of the universe and the formation of life on earth. The most extreme version of this view... interprets the six days of creation as literal twenty-four-hour days and concludes that the earth must be less than ten thousand years old.

If these claims were actually true, it would lead to a complete and irreversible collapse of physics, chemistry, cosmology, geology, and biology. [They are] the equivalent of insisting that two plus two is really not equal to four.

In fact, [the] narrow interpretation [of young earth proponents] is largely a creation of the last hundred years, arising in large consequence as a reaction to Darwinian evolution.”⁸⁸

A number of explanations have been posited that harmonize the biblical creation account and scientific evidence. One fascinating example was put forth by Dr. Gerald Schroeder in his book *The Science of God*. In it, he compares the scientific model for creation with the

⁸⁷ Ravi Zacharias & Norman Geisler (Editors), *Who Made God?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, page 67.

⁸⁸ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God*. New York: Free Press, 2006, pages 172-175.

Biblical description using concepts like Einstein's time dilation to show a remarkable correlation between the two accounts. He notes that both descriptions assume a beginning to the creation process, and that there is great similarity between the sequence of events described. His explanation uses time dilation to show that the concept of a day meant something dramatically different during the initial formation of the universe than it does today. For example, he hypothesizes that the first day of creation corresponds to an eight billion year period, the second day a four billion year period, and so on. Such an explanation is line with a verse in the New Testament that states that, to God, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years like a day.⁸⁹ Other explanations simply note that the Hebrew word for day in Genesis can have four different meanings, one of them referring to long periods of time.

So what are we to make of all of this? I think that Tim Keller summarizes my thoughts well in his book *The Reason for God*.

"Since Christian believers occupy different positions on the meaning of Genesis 1..., those who are considering Christianity as a whole should not allow themselves to be distracted by this intramural debate. The skeptical inquirer does not need to accept any one of these positions to embrace the Christian faith. Rather, he or she should concentrate on and weigh the central claims of Christianity."⁹⁰

In summary, "the most important aspect of the continuing [creation] discussion is not the process of creation, but the origin of creation."⁹¹ The Bible basically states that the world had a beginning, and God is responsible for its creation. Within the past century, science has come to agree with the first part of this claim, and I believe that a subjective examination of both scientific evidence and biblical revelation will naturally lead people to accept the second claim.

Delicate Balance (Why Life Exists)

It turns out that our universe and earth are finely tuned – incredibly and precisely tuned – to support life. In his book *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, Bill Bryson writes:

"If the universe had formed just a tiny bit differently – if gravity were fractionally stronger or weaker, if the expansion of the universe had proceeded just a little more slowly or swiftly – then there might never have been the stable elements to make you and me and the ground we stand on.

Martin Rees, Britain's [royal] astronomer... maintains that six numbers in particular govern our universe, and that if any of these values were changed even very slightly things could not be as they are. For example, for the universe to exist as it does requires that hydrogen be converted to helium in a precise but comparatively stately manner – specifically, in a way that converts seven one-thousandths of its mass to

⁸⁹ 2 Peter 3:8-9

⁹⁰ Timothy Keller, *The Reason For God*. New York, NY: Dutton, 2008, page 94.

⁹¹ *Life Application Study Bible*, New Living Translation. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996, page 5.

energy. Lower that value very slightly – from 0.007 percent to 0.006 percent, say – and no transformation could take place: the universe would consist of hydrogen and nothing else. Raise the value very slightly – to 0.008 percent – and bonding would be so wildly prolific that the hydrogen would long since have been exhausted. In either case, with the slightest tweaking of the numbers the universe as we know and need it would not be here.”⁹²

Rees has been quoted as saying that, when all six numbers are considered together, the structure of the universe is “unlikely to an absurd degree.”⁹³ The late astronomer Fred Hoyle has been quoted as saying, “The probability of life originating at random is so utterly miniscule as to make the random concept absurd.”⁹⁴

This combination of highly improbable conditions that make life possible has come to be known as the anthropic principle. Scientists are so baffled by these perfect conditions that many have proposed that there are as many as an infinite number of universes and that we happen to live on the one that perfectly supports life. This is known as the theory of the multiverse. Now I have to ask you to stop and think about this for a second. Can you imagine the reaction a Christian would get if he/she had proposed such a thing? I would think that person would be laughed out of town, and yet our greatest thinkers have proposed such ideas rather than consider the possibility of a Creator.

It seems appropriate to close this section with the following scripture:

“The heavens tell of the glory of God. The skies display his marvelous craftsmanship. Day after day they continue to speak; night after night they make him known... their message has gone out to all the earth, and their words to all the world.”⁹⁵

Evolution

And now we’ve arrived at one of the most sensitive subjects known to man – evolution. It’s become quite popular these days to define two general types of evolution – micro and macro. Micro-evolution generally refers to that which occurs over relatively short periods of time and can be reproduced in a microbiology lab. The evolving resistance of bacteria to antibiotics is a good example of this phenomenon.⁹⁶ Any reasonable person would agree that this form of evolution is very real, and it’s widely accepted today.

The other type of evolution is macro-evolution, and this is the one that causes a great deal of consternation. Macro-evolution is that which occurs over great periods of time and therefore cannot be reproduced in a lab. (Nobody’s ever seen an ape evolve into a human in a lab, have they?) Difficulties arise when the concept of macro-evolution is extended to the extreme – when the appearance and development of all life forms is attributed to chance and

⁹² Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. New York, New York: Broadway Books, 2003, Pages 15-16.

⁹³ Lee Strobel, *The Case For A Creator*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004, page 139.

⁹⁴ Gregg Easterbrook, *The New Convergence*. Wired Magazine, December 2002, Page 167.

⁹⁵ Psalm 19:1-4 - New Living Translation. Also, see Romans 1:19-20.

⁹⁶ For an interesting timeline of the battle between bacteria and antibiotics, see *The Bug Wars* on Pages 52-53 of the October, 2005 issue of *Wired* magazine.

random occurrences over great periods of time. Much like the existence of God, these things can't be proved using the scientific method, and there are simply too many unanswered questions – profound questions – to accept macro-evolution as a fact.

And what are these questions I refer to? Well, first of all, science simply has no idea whatsoever how life began. This is huge. Gregg Easterbrook writes:

“The late biologist Gerald Soffen, who oversaw the life-seeking experiments carried out by NASA’s Viking probes to Mars, once outlined the early milestones in the evolution of living processes: development of organic compounds, self-replication of those compounds, appearance of cells isolating the compounds from their environment, photosynthesis enabling cells to use the sun’s energy, and the assembly of DNA. “It’s hard to imagine how these things could have happened,” Soffen told me before his death.

No generally accepted theory exists [for how life began], and the steps leading from a barren primordial world to the fragile chemistry of life seem imponderable.”⁹⁷

Now the fact that we can't answer questions doesn't necessarily disprove anything. It does, though, clearly prevent us from making sweeping statements about macro-evolution. It's just as much a matter of faith to simply assume these things “evolved” as to believe a Creator brought them about. Frankly, I think the latter is far more believable.

Magazine articles, books and other sources often talk about all the evidence that has convincingly “proved” macro-evolution. We’ve already discussed the thorny issue of how life began. Now let’s turn our attention to the “evolution of man.” Consider the following excerpts, again from Bill Bryson’s book:

“Since the dawn of time, several billion human (or humanlike) beings have lived, each contributing a little genetic variability to the total human stock. Out of this vast number, the whole of our understanding of human prehistory is based on the remains, often exceedingly fragmentary, of perhaps five thousand individuals. “You could fit it all into the back of a pickup truck if you didn’t mind how much you jumbled everything up,” Ian Tattersall, ...curator of anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, replied when I asked him the size of the total world archive of humanoid and early human bones.

The shortage wouldn’t be so bad if the bones were distributed evenly through time and space, but of course they’re not. They appear randomly, often in the most tantalizing fashion [spread out over millions of years.]

[According to Tattersall,] “It’s from these kinds of fragmentary pieces that you’re trying to work out the histories of entire species. It’s quite a tall order. We really have very little idea of the relationships between many ancient species...”

⁹⁷ Gregg Easterbrook, *The New Convergence*. Wired Magazine, December 2002, Page 169.

With so little to be certain about, scientists often have to make assumptions based on other objects found nearby [where remains are found], and these may be little more than valiant guesses.

Finally, perhaps above all, human nature is a factor in all this. Scientists have a natural tendency to interpret finds in a way that most flatters their stature. It is a rare paleontologist indeed who announces that he has found a cache of bones but that they are nothing to get excited about."⁹⁸

Bryson goes on to note that museums often create incredibly detailed scenes of early humanoids in their exhibits using little more than, say, some footprints. He notes that most everything in these scenes is "imaginary" and "suppositional."⁹⁹ When Bryson asked Ian Tattersall if he was troubled by the amount of license taken to construct these scenes, he responded by saying, "We simply can't know the details of what they looked like."¹⁰⁰ (Please remember these excerpts the next time you read an article or book that authoritatively speaks about the origins of man.)

Now let's stop and think about this. We basically have a pickup truck's worth of "humanlike" fragments from which to draw conclusions about all of human prehistory. And it's highly fragmented and spread over millions of years, sometimes consisting of little more than a molar or some small portion of a skull. I don't know about you, but I'm not convinced in the least about the evolution of modern man. Bryson goes on to note that modern man "seemed to arise from out of nowhere."¹⁰¹ Sounds like the creation account to me.

Scientists insist that the gaps in the "human" fossil record are regularly being filled by new discoveries, but I have yet to see a clean summary of all of these discoveries along with an honest description of: exactly what each consists of (e.g., is it just a tooth or a tiny portion of a skull?); what techniques were used to date each one (e.g., carbon dating, positioning in the rock strata, proximity to other objects?); any suspicions that the discovery was fudged; and other important information. This information simply isn't out there.

Is it possible that God allowed the process of evolution to play some part in the development of the world prior to the creation account found in Genesis 1:3-31, and then he created man and the animal/plant life we see today. Who's to say? An all-powerful, omniscient God can do as he pleases.

Before closing this section, it's interesting to note that Charles Darwin, the father of evolutionary theory, was different than most laypeople view him. Darwin:

- "...did not become an atheist because of evolution. Instead, his growing resistance to Christianity came from his moral criticism of 19th century doctrine, compounded by the tragedy of his daughter's death. Darwin did not believe that evolution proved there was no God."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. New York, New York: Broadway Books, 2003, Pages 440-442.

⁹⁹ Ibid, Pages 444-445.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, Page 445.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, Page 449.

¹⁰² Gary Wolf, *The Church of the Non-Believers*. Wired magazine, November, 2006, Page 191.

- “...never claimed” humans are descended from apes.¹⁰³
- “[was] far from being anti-religious. [He] saw evolution as evidence of an orderly, Christian God. [He] believed he was showing... God’s hand was present in all living things.”¹⁰⁴

Darwin described himself as an agnostic¹⁰⁵ in the latter part of his life. While he believed in a deity, he no longer felt it was the personal God he had first believed in.

Other Examples

The Bible touches on other topics that are simply too numerous and complex to discuss here without taking up significantly more space. Here’s a sampling, though, of some of the things written in its pages thousands of years ago:

- A limit on man’s age that endures to this day.¹⁰⁶
- Observations of the enormous number of stars, which scientists are increasingly confirming is nearly limitless.¹⁰⁷
- Details about the earth and its position in space.¹⁰⁸
- Reference to four key elements of physics (time, energy, space, matter) in its first sentence.¹⁰⁹
- A summary of dietary principals that we’re increasingly coming to appreciate these days.¹¹⁰
- Rules of sanitation, many whose importance was only understood in the past couple of centuries.¹¹¹
- A description of under-sea terrain.¹¹²
- A description of sea currents.¹¹³
- An introduction to the concept of dualism – the combination of body and consciousness.

The “Faith” of Unbelievers

It’s worth pointing out that non-Christian scientists often act with the same sort of faith they criticize Christians for, except that it’s cloaked in the robe of scientific theory. Physicists like Alan Guth of MIT presume unknown pre-big bang conditions to make their theories work.¹¹⁴ Brian Greene talks about hidden dimensions in space (ten of them!), additional time dimensions, and vibrating strings so small we would need a particle accelerator “the size of

¹⁰³ Bill Allen, *From The Editor*. National Geographic magazine, November, 2004, letter-from-the-editor page.

¹⁰⁴ Shankar Vedantam, *Eden and Evolution*. The Washington Post Magazine, February 5, 2006, Page 24.

¹⁰⁵ Wikipedia defines agnosticism as “the philosophical view that the truth value of certain claims — particularly theological claims regarding metaphysics, afterlife or the existence of God, god(s), or deities — is unknown or (possibly) inherently unknowable.”

¹⁰⁶ Genesis 6:3 – New Living Translation.

¹⁰⁷ Jeremiah 33:22 – New Living Translation.

¹⁰⁸ Isaiah 40:22; Job 26:7 – New Living Translation.

¹⁰⁹ Genesis 1:1 – New Living Translation.

¹¹⁰ Deuteronomy 14:1-21 – New Living Translation.

¹¹¹ Deuteronomy 23:12-13; Leviticus 11:31; Mark 7:2 – New Living Translation.

¹¹² Johan 2:6 – New Living Translation.

¹¹³ Psalm 8:8 – New Living Translation.

¹¹⁴ Gregg Easterbrook, *The New Convergence*. Wired Magazine, December 2002, Page 169.

the galaxy” to see them.¹¹⁵ Physicists propose concepts like dark matter, the multiverse and numerous particles (e.g., quarks and tachyons) at the quantum level, all that cannot be seen, and all that are needed to make sense of the things we observe.

Frankly, a lot of this sounds like appealing to the supernatural.

Christian Men of Science

As noted in the Science introduction, many of history’s greatest scientists were men of faith including Sir Isaac Newton, Johannes Kepler and James Maxwell. But what about today? Are there contemporary scientists who we can look to for understanding? The answer is yes, and four are listed below.

- Allan Rex Sandage, perhaps one of the greatest cosmologists in the world, who decided to become a Christian when fifty years old.
- Francis Collins, the head of the international Human Genome Project, who has recently written a book entitled *The Language of God*.
- Sir John Houghton, “widely recognized as one of the world's preeminent climatologists.”¹¹⁶ An interview with him can be found at the link in the footnote just cited.
- John Polkinghorne, a British particle physicist, Templeton prize winner (for progress toward research or discoveries about spiritual realities), and author of numerous books on faith and science.

I invite you to learn more about them, listen to them and/or read their writings. I believe you’ll get an interesting perspective from each of them.

Summary

Once again, there are many more things we could discuss in this section. The important point is that there are fundamental areas, like the finite beginning to the earth/universe and the need for *something* to have made it all, where science and Christianity agree. Admittedly, there are things they still seem to disagree on as well.

I also invite you not to judge the various opinions you’ll hear from Christians (and the Christians themselves) on this topic. None of us has all the answers, and many of the issues being debated are not central to the core gospel message which we’ll review below.

Remember what Einstein said. Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.

¹¹⁵ Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, Pages xi, 203-204 & 215.

¹¹⁶ http://www.pbs.org/moyers/faithandreason/portraits_houghton.html.

Prophecy

It's been said that two-thirds of the Bible is prophecy. While I don't know whether or not this is true, there are certainly an awful lot of predictions between its covers. Let's first take a look at a couple of examples that have a strong bearing on modern times, and then some other interesting ones.

Jewish Persecution

This is a very sensitive yet compelling place to start. The Jews are God's chosen people. They hold a special place in His heart. God calls Israel his "special possession" and "the apple of his eye."¹¹⁷ Despite this, though, God himself warned the Israelites what would happen to them if they chose to forget him throughout history. Some of God's warnings are downright chilling.

Let's consider some verses in the book of Deuteronomy. As God prepared to lead the Israelites out of the wilderness and into the land of Canaan, "a land flowing with milk and honey,"¹¹⁸ he said the following:

"...be careful! Beware that in your plenty you do not forget the Lord your God and disobey his commands, regulations, and decrees that I am giving you today. For when you have become full and prosperous and have built fine homes to live in, and when your flocks and herds have become very large and your silver and gold have multiplied along with everything else, be careful! Do not become proud at that time and forget the Lord your God, who rescued you from slavery in the land of Egypt. Do not forget that he led you through the great and terrifying wilderness... He did [this] so you would never say to yourself, 'I have achieved this wealth with my own strength and energy.' Remember the Lord your God. He is the one who gives you power to be successful..."¹¹⁹

Following this admonition, God told the people what would happen to them if they did or did not obey him.

"If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully keep all his commands that I am giving you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the world. You will experience all [sorts of] blessings if you obey the LORD your God.

But if you refuse to listen to the LORD your God and do not obey all the commands and decrees I am giving you today, [many] curses will come and overwhelm you.

¹¹⁷ Deuteronomy 32:9-10 – New Living Translation.

¹¹⁸ Deuteronomy 31:20 – New Living Translation.

¹¹⁹ Deuteronomy 8:11-18 – New Living Translation.

The LORD will cause you to be defeated by your enemies. You will be an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth.

You will suffer under constant oppression and harsh treatment. You will go mad because of all the tragedy you see around you."¹²⁰

Now consider the words used in this warning. Terms like "object of horror," "constant oppression" and "you will go mad because of all the tragedy" leap off the pages of the Bible. And what has happened from that moment until this very day? The answer is that the Jewish people have suffered far more persecution for a far greater time period than any people on the earth, and God predicted it over and over. In the 31st chapter of Deuteronomy, God said to Moses:

"After you are gone, these people will... abandon me and break my covenant that I have made with them. Then my anger will blaze forth against them. I will abandon them, hiding my face from them, and they will be devoured. Terrible trouble will come down on them.

...they will despise me and break my covenant."¹²¹

From this point on, the pages of the Old Testament are filled with the stories of God offering his people the choice between obedience plus blessings and rebellion plus punishment. In almost every case, the people chose to go their own way and suffered the consequences. The Israelites suffered many military defeats; broke into two groups that began fighting each other; and were eventually carried away into captivity. (For more prophecies describing the future sufferings of Israel, see: Jeremiah 24:9-10, 29:16-19, 42:18 and 44:8,12; Ezekiel 5:14-15; and Daniel 9:16.)

The trouble continued all the way up to the "horrors" of the holocaust during World War II, during which 6 million Jews were murdered, and it persists to this day when the tiny nation of Israel is surrounded by hostile neighbors bent on its destruction. To me, these prophecies are amazing.

Israel's Survival & Political Significance

Stop and think about all of the mighty nations and empires that have come and gone over time. Nations and empires like Egypt, Babylon, the Persian empire and the Roman Empire. Now ask yourself, where are they today and what influence do they currently have on the world scene. Now stop and think about Israel, tiny Israel – a nation that had no land of its own for many centuries until the 1948 War of Independence. Now ask yourself, how central is Israel to the global political landscape today. The answer, obviously, is it's incredibly central and important. The eyes of the entire world are fixed on Israel these days. The fate of no other country threatens the global balance of peace like that of Israel – and keep in mind that there are nearly 200 countries in the world today.

¹²⁰ Deuteronomy 28:1-2,15,25,33-34 – New Living Translation.

¹²¹ Deuteronomy 31:16-17,20 – New Living Translation.

If you were a betting man living during the time of Israel's enslavement in Egypt, or during the time of any of the great world empires, the last country you would've picked to not only survive but to play such a central role in the world would've been Israel. And yet that's exactly what happened and it was predicted long ago in the scriptures.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets begged Israel to turn from its sin or face serious trouble. As already discussed, Israel repeatedly rebelled and was punished quite severely. Despite God's deep disappointment with his chosen people, though, he revealed his plan to save a "remnant"¹²² of them from destruction, and eventually gather Israelites from around the world and restore them to their land. Consider the words of the Lord delivered through the prophet Isaiah.

"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you. I have called you by name; you are mine. When you go through deep waters and great trouble, I will be with you... I will gather you and your children from east and west and from north and south. I will bring my sons and daughters back to Israel from the distant corners of the earth."¹²³

(Additional verses can be found in Jeremiah 23:3-4, 29:14 & 31:10, and Ezekiel 11:17, 28:25 & 36:24.) I can't say for sure if these verses refer specifically to the establishment of an independent Israeli state in 1947, but it certainly seems like a clear first-step in the final gathering process. I can say for sure, though, that in the past 60 years, Jews from around the world – from places like Russia and even the United States – have been returning to Israel.

Jesus Christ also notes that, just prior to his return to the earth, we should be watchful of events in Jerusalem. In Luke 21:20, he states:

"And when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then you will know that the time of its destruction has arrived... And Jerusalem will be trampled down by the Gentiles until the period of the Gentiles comes to an end. And there will be strange signs in the sun, moon, and stars. And here on earth the nations will be in turmoil, perplexed by the roaring seas and strange tides. People will be terrified at what they see coming upon the earth, for the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then everyone will see the Son of Man coming on a cloud with power and great glory."¹²⁴

As we mentioned in the previous section, Israel today is surrounded by hostile nations. These nations' feelings towards the Jews range from strongly disliking them and trying to hide it (e.g., the Saudis) to utterly wanting them destroyed and vocalizing it (like the Iranian leadership). Then there are groups like Hezbollah and Hamas who cause all sorts of problems for Israel from the north (Lebanon) and south, respectively. There is constant tension in Israel and fear of attacks. Frankly, the only thing preventing a significant attack is Israel's close ties with the U.S. If this relationship were ever to deteriorate to the point where Israel could no longer count on the U.S.'s military support, look out. Israel would

¹²² See Ezra 9:8; Isaiah 6:13, 37:32 & 65:9; Jeremiah 50:20; and Micah 2:12 for some examples.

¹²³ Isaiah 43:1-2,5-6 – New Living Translation.

¹²⁴ Luke 21:20, 24-27 – New Living Translation.

almost certainly be attacked in short order. (Christians believe such an attack is prophesized in the book of Ezekiel, chapters 38 and 39.) One could imagine such a scenario as the U.S. grows increasingly weary from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and is pressed by other matters (the cost of the Katrina cleanup, for one) on the domestic front.

All of this brings to mind something I saw on the cheezburger.com Web site. It was a table of the civilizations, nations, empires, and others that have tried to destroy the Jewish people. The first column listed them, including Ancient Egypt, the Philistines, the Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Persian Empire, the Greek Empire, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, crusaders, the Spanish Empire, Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, and Iran. The second column indicated their status, which was "GONE" for all of them except Iran. Just below the table it said: "The Jewish people, the smallest of nations, with a friend in the highest of places! So... be nice!"

Clearly, Israel's survival throughout the millennia and its central role in end times is both highly unlikely and amazing, and it's predicted in the scriptures.

Christ's Coming

I've heard various estimates for the number of Old Testament scriptures that point to Jesus Christ's coming – some exceeding 1,000. To arrive at one of the higher estimates, though, you have to include the entire list of similarities, "prefigurements," symbols and foreshadowings. To a person unfamiliar with the Bible, many of these seem vague and confusing.

What's most interesting to me is the uncanny similarity between certain Old Testament verses and the things that happened to Jesus. For example, Isaiah chapter 53 describes a servant of God who was rejected by his people, beaten and whipped, and led away to be slaughtered – all so that he might bear our sins. The account also includes several other unique details of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion.

In Psalm 22, David cried out to God in the middle of an intense trial. Parts of the Psalm provide a uncanny foreshadowing of the fate Christ would suffer a thousand years later. He writes about being scorned, despised & mocked; his hands and feet being pierced; and people casting lots for his clothes – all things that happened to Jesus.

I've included a sampling of these types of scriptures below.

#	Prophecy	Source	Fulfilled
1	The Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah	Genesis 49:10	Matthew 1:1-16, Luke 3:23-33
2	He would be a prophet	Deuteronomy 18:18	John 6:14
3	He would be resurrected	Psalm 16:10-11	Acts 2:25-32
4	He would be a priest	Psalm 110:4	Hebrews 5:5-6
5	He would be (briefly) forsaken by God and cry out	Psalm 22:1	Matthew 27:46

#	Prophecy	Source	Fulfilled
6	He would be scorned and despised	Psalms 22:6	Matthew 27:39, Mark 15:29
7	He would be mocked	Psalms 22:7	Matthew 27:31, Mark 15:20, Luke 22:63 & 23:35-36
8	"Let the Lord save him... Let the Lord rescue him"	Psalms 22:8	Matthew 27:43
9	His hands and feet would be pierced	Psalms 22:16	John 19:23,37
10	He would be stared and gloated at	Psalms 22:17	Matthew 27:36, Luke 23:35
11	People would cast lots for his cloths	Psalms 22:18	Matthew 27:35, John 19:23-24
12	None of his bones would be broken	Psalms 34:20	John 19:31-36
13	He would be betrayed by a friend	Psalms 41:9	Matthew 26:47-50
14	He would be born of a virgin	Isaiah 7:14	Matthew 1:18, Luke 1:27
15	He would be preceded by a messenger	Isaiah 40:3, Malachi 3:1	Matthew 3:1-2, Luke 3:3-6
16	He would be spat upon and beaten	Isaiah 50:6	Matthew 26:67-68 & 27:30
17	He would suffer and be rejected	Isaiah 53:3	(Numerous)
18	He would be wounded and whipped	Isaiah 1153:5	Matthew 27:26
19	He would be silent before his accusers	Isaiah 53:7	Matthew 27:12-14
20	He was led away to be killed	Isaiah 53:7	Matthew 27:31
21	He died for our sins	Isaiah 53:8	1 Corinthians 15:3
22	He had done no wrong	Isaiah 53:9	Luke 23:13-15
23	He would be buried in a rich man's tomb	Isaiah 53:9	Matthew 27:57
24	He was filled with grief	Isaiah 53:10	Matthew 26:36-38
25	He would be crucified with thieves	Isaiah 53:12	Matthew 27:38; Mark 15:27-28
26	He would be rejected and killed	Daniel 24-26	(Numerous)
27	He would be born in Bethlehem	Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:1-6, Luke 2:4-7
28	He would enter Jerusalem on a donkey	Zechariah 9:9	Luke 19:35-37, John 12:12-16
29	He would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver	Zechariah 11:12	Matthew 26:15
30	The blood money would be thrown into a potter's field	Zechariah 11:12	Matthew 27:5-7
31	He would be pierced (in this case, his side)	Zechariah 12:10-11	John 19:34,37

Various people have calculated the odds of Jesus satisfying only a handful of the prophecies to be astronomically low. (One estimate of him satisfying just eight prophecies came in at 1 in 1×10^{17} .)¹²⁵ Whatever the odds truly are, it's clear they are prohibitively low. Furthermore, the thing that strikes me as I read through the Old Testament is the unified message of these prophecies, a message about a Messiah who would come and suffer so that our sins would be forgiven.

As you think about this section, consider what Jesus said to doubters following his resurrection:

¹²⁵ Ravi Zacharias & Norman Geisler (Editors), *Who Made God?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, page 95. Professor Peter Stoner's cited.

Then Jesus said to them, "You foolish people! You find it so hard to believe all that the prophets wrote in the Scriptures. Wasn't it clearly predicted that the Messiah would have to suffer all these things before entering his glory?" Then Jesus took them through the writings of Moses and all the prophets, explaining from all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.¹²⁶

End Time Prophecies

Before closing out this section, let's take a moment to look at just a handful of "end time" prophecies along with observations for each. Without question, we live in interesting times. It seems to me that a great deal that has been prophesized about the period just preceding Christ's return is coming to pass today. Read on and judge for yourself.

Daniel 12:4 – [During the end times,] "Many will rush here and there, and knowledge will increase."

Many of the things we take for granted today – routinely flying between continents, sequencing the human genome, and instantly communicating with people around the globe – were unthinkable not too many years ago. Furthermore, the pace of technological development/advancement is only accelerating. These days, scientists are working on efforts like the development of molecular computing technology based on DNA and other substances, and technologies they hope will eventually extend our lives forever. As an example, a recent Wired Magazine article described a gene editing technique called Crispr-Cas9 which makes it "...easy, cheap, and fast to move genes around – any genes, in any living thing, from bacteria to people."¹²⁷ The article went on to say that the revolutionary technique "...could at last allow genetics researchers to conjure everything anyone has ever worried they would – designer babies, invasive mutants, species-specific bioweapons, and a dozen other apocalyptic sci-fi tropes." One scientist described its development as a "monumental" moment in the history of biomedical research. When you realize that man has been around for thousands of years, yet the great surge in technological development only began during the industrial revolution, it makes you wonder what it means that these things are happening now.

Matthew 24 – When asked for signs of his return and the end of the world, Jesus said to look for several things including:

- Wars breaking out near and far. (Verses 6-7)

As already noted in the Human Nature section above, it's estimated that between 188-to-262 million people were killed in the 20th century alone by war, homicide, genocide and dictators.¹²⁸ This number doesn't even consider

¹²⁶ Luke 24:25-27 – New Living Translation.

¹²⁷ <http://www.wired.com/2015/07/crispr-dna-editing-2/>

¹²⁸ Figures gleaned from two Web sources: <http://www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/welcome.html>; and <http://necrometrics.com/all20c.htm>.

all the people who were affected by these deaths (friends, relatives, loved ones) nor does it account for all the people who were hurt by others but didn't die. The Washington Post called the 20th century "a hundred years of bloody warfare" while outlining its "many episodes" of genocide and other crimes against humanity.¹²⁹ The Center for Systemic Peace notes that there have been 324 episodes of major armed conflict in the world between 1946 and 2014 (35 of them ongoing).¹³⁰ The Global Terrorism Database cites over 140,000 incidents of terrorism from 1970 to 2014.¹³¹ The United Nation's Children Fund notes that there were 55 civil wars worldwide between 1990 and 2004.¹³²

- Famines and earthquakes in many parts of the world. (Verse 7)

According to the World Food Programme, there are 842 million undernourished people in the world today.¹³³ The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates the number to be 795 million.¹³⁴ The good news is that these estimates have dropped in the past 25 years (i.e., from about 991 million in 1991), with the most pronounced progress occurring in developing regions.¹³⁵ The not-so-good news is that there is emerging malnourishment in developed countries, like the 49.1 million people in the United States who are living in "food insecure" households.¹³⁶ Furthermore, the UN Development Program warns that hundreds of millions of people in developing countries are at risk of falling back into poverty (and, in turn, malnourishment) if certain setbacks occur.¹³⁷

With respect to earthquakes, four of the 10 most deadly earthquakes in the past 115 years have occurred since 2004, including the deadliest one in Haiti that killed 316,000 people, injured over 300,000 others, and left 1.5 million people homeless.¹³⁸¹³⁹ The death toll from the 2004 quake that caused the tsunami in Sumatra stands at 227,898 people, the third highest death toll ever.¹⁴⁰ Even when recent earthquakes didn't claim hundreds of thousands of lives, they often caused tremendous problems. For example, while the 2011 Japan earthquake/tsunami didn't make the top ten fatality list, the total estimated damage due to the quake is \$300 billion, and 230,000 people are still living in temporary housing.¹⁴¹ Other residual effects from the Japan quake include the "Fukushima plume," a large body of radioactive water that hit America's west coast in 2014.¹⁴² While trends in earthquake activity can

¹²⁹ David Bosco, *Crime of Crimes*. Washington Post, March 6, 2005, Page B1.

¹³⁰ <http://www.systemicpeace.org/warlist/warlist.htm>

¹³¹ <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/about/>

¹³² Celia W. Dugger, *UNICEF Says a Billion Children Now Suffer Deprivation Worldwide*. The New York Times, December 10, 2004.

¹³³ <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/faqs>

¹³⁴ <http://www.fao.org/hunger/key-messages/en/>

¹³⁵ Ibid

¹³⁶ <http://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger/hunger-and-poverty/hunger-and-poverty-fact-sheet.html>

¹³⁷ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2014-report>

¹³⁸ <http://www.statista.com/statistics/266325/death-toll-in-great-earthquakes/>

¹³⁹ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/12/12/world/haiti-earthquake-fast-facts/>

¹⁴⁰ <http://www.statista.com/statistics/266325/death-toll-in-great-earthquakes/>

¹⁴¹ <http://www.livescience.com/39110-japan-2011-earthquake-tsunami-facts.html>

¹⁴² <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116969/fukushimas-radioactive-plume-hit-us-2014-should-we-worry>

certainly be debated, the distribution and severity of earthquakes over the last 10 years is intriguing to say the least.

- The threat of human extinction unless Christ intercedes. (Verse 22; see also Mark 13:20)

Just 60 or 70 years ago, this would have been considered unthinkable. Now, with the advent and spread of nuclear weapons, the ever-increasing negative impact man has had on the global ecology, threats from space, and the potential for biological/genetic abuses, this doesn't seem like such a stretch.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 – "...in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God.

When I tried to write a short blurb on this scripture, I was a bit overwhelmed. I felt like I could write a book and still not do it justice. In western culture, many people seem to be chasing some combination of wealth, fame, power, and pleasure, and often with little regard for how they behave and/or who they might hurt, offend, or negatively influence. I thought of Miley Cyrus, the Kardashians, Bernie Madoff, Enron, Floyd Mayweather, reality TV "stars", ugly social media exchanges, people who don't return phone calls or respond to e-mails, and so on. Then I thought about Kathy Griffin and her infamous "Suck it Jesus" comment while accepting an Emmy award back in 2007. Actually, the full line she said was, "Suck it Jesus, this reward is my god now." Wow, I thought. This one line captures so many things at once – love of self, scoffing at God, disregard for the sanctity of sex, hatred of what is good, etc. – and all in front of a packed auditorium of cheering people. Then I looked at the comments below the YouTube video of her speech. It seemed like the majority of people were praising her, and many of them were piling on more insults towards Jesus and Christians. One man gushed, "This is the greatest line ever spoken by a comedian!" Others were far cruder, writing things about God and Christ that would've been considered unimaginable and shocking not long ago. What can one say about such things, except that we're in deep trouble.

Revelation 6:5-6 – While describing the sequence of events just prior to Christ's return, the apostle John wrote about seeing a black horse, "...and its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. And a voice... said, "A loaf of wheat bread or three loaves of barley for a day's pay..."

According to the United Nations Development Program, "1.2 billion people live with \$1.25 or less a day... [and] almost 1.5 billion people in 91 developing countries are living in poverty with overlapping deprivations in health, education and living standards. [Although] poverty is declining overall, almost 800 million

people are at risk of falling back into poverty if setbacks occur.”¹⁴³ The World Bank estimates that 2.2 billion people lived on less than \$2 per day in 2011,¹⁴⁴ and another source estimates that over 3 billion people live on less than \$2.50 per day.¹⁴⁵

Revelation 13:16-18 – This verse contains the famous “mark of the beast” passage in which people without this mark on their right hand or forehead cannot buy or sell anything.

What this means has been greatly debated for a long time. Does it refer to people who can live their lives without interference because they think (forehead) and do (right hand) was it right according to this “beast,” or are people’s rights denied because of something specific they lack on/in their head or hands because of their beliefs? While I cannot say for sure, I find it fascinating that the latter scenario is not hard to imagine these days. Increasingly, our transactions are handled electronically. Our paychecks can be deposited directly to the bank, we can buy nearly everything with a credit card, and we frequently use services like PayPal and Bitcoin to settle Internet transactions. These transactions are made possible in part by things we know (e.g., credit card numbers, account numbers, passwords, etc.). There are also transactions that are based on what we have (e.g., an E-ZPass device) or what we are (e.g., our fingerprints). I’ve been reading that more and more retail stores, school cafeterias, etc. are testing fingerprint readers as a means of accepting payment for goods. Many believe we will soon reach a point where cash and other tangible payments for goods and services are a thing of the past. Now all this is well and good, but imagine what the wrong government or some other authority could do with such a system if they wanted to blacklist certain people. Food for thought.

Summary

Since very early in biblical history, the words of the prophets have been despised by those who heard them. The prophets were called crazy (Hosea 9:7-8) and told to shut up (Amos 2:12). They were hated, taunted, mocked, and in many cases killed by the very people they were sent to help. We even killed Jesus Christ, the greatest prophet of all. Unfortunately, things are as bad today if not worse.

Long ago, the Lord speaking through the prophet Amos said, “When disaster comes to a city, isn’t it because the Lord planned it? Buy always, first of all, I warn you through my servants the prophets. I, the Sovereign Lord, have now done this.”¹⁴⁶ The Lord also said through Habakkuk, “...these things I plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, wait patiently, for it will surely

¹⁴³ <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2014-report>

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.dosomething.org/facts/11-facts-about-global-poverty>

¹⁴⁶ Amos 3:6-7 – New Living Translation.

take place.”¹⁴⁷ Finally, Peter in the second half of the first century wrote, “But you must not forget, dear friends, that a day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief.”¹⁴⁸

Don't be pessimistic like those around you. Take heed of the warnings contained in the Bible.

¹⁴⁷ Habakkuk 2:3 – New Living Translation.

¹⁴⁸ 2 Peter 3:8-10 – New Living Translation.

Teachings

We've already touched on a number of the Bible's teachings on topics like grace and man's nature that seem to upend conventional wisdom and human logic. This section contains teachings on other topics that are similarly interesting. While there are many subjects I could have chosen to highlight, and much could be written about each, I write briefly on only a few to keep things simple.

Purpose

The Bible provides the answer to the question, why are we here (i.e., what is the purpose of life). It gives meaning to our lives. It reveals a higher power (i.e., God) who created and sustains everything seen and unseen for his purposes. The Bible says, "Everything got started in Him and finds its purpose in Him."¹⁴⁹ Elsewhere it says, "The Lord has made everything for His own purposes."¹⁵⁰ In other words, life is not about us – it's about fulfilling God's purposes.

So what are those purposes? Simply put, God is building and preparing a family that he can enjoy, love, and trust throughout eternity. Everything we do in this life on earth is meant to prepare us for our role in his family, and each of us has been given both common and unique purposes that we're expected to know and honor to that end. An example of a common purpose is the commandment to love God and our neighbor.¹⁵¹ Every one of us was literally created to love, and this directive is known as the greatest commandment. A unique purpose is something you were specifically designed and gifted to do that helps fulfill God's plans. It could be something as lofty as ruling a nation or as humble/noble as offering a smile and encouraging words to people as you work as a doorman.

Much can be said about purpose, as evidenced by excellent books like Rick Warren's *A Purpose Driven Life*. I mention it only briefly here to make the point that the Bible offers an explanation for the purpose of our lives that is far clearer, more meaningful, and more hopeful than anything else I have ever seen or heard.

Leadership

A lot has been written about leadership, especially in recent years. It seems everybody has an idea for what an ideal leader looks like, usually captured in some sort of clever acronym summarizing the key traits of a great one. One example of many is the acronym developed by proponents of the Conscious Capitalism movement, which encourages businesses to operate according to higher purposes that serve, align, and integrate the interests of all of their major stakeholders – a very worthy goal, I might add. They define a "conscious leader" as one represented by the SELFLESS acronym (i.e., one who exhibits strength, enthusiasm,

¹⁴⁹ Colossians 1:16 (MSG).

¹⁵⁰ Proverbs 16:4 (NLT).

¹⁵¹ Matthew 22:37-40.

listening, flexibility, love, emotional intelligence, systems intelligence, and spiritual intelligence).

I recently read a handful of business and leadership books, and while their advice is fine and good it all tends to blend together into what seems like a mountain of words and clichés that can confuse as much as illuminate. This led me to examine the Bible to see what it says about leadership. In particular, I wondered if there was a single verse or collection of verses that seemed to capture the essence of what the ultimate leader looks like. I eventually landed on Philippians 2:5-8. It reads, “You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being; [and he] humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.” Could there be a more beautiful and powerful example of leadership than that captured in these verses? Here is the most powerful leader there is – God himself, the creator of everything seen and unseen, who is capable of doing infinitely more than we could ever ask or imagine¹⁵² – acting in an incredibly humble, servant-minded, obedient, empathetic, and sacrificial way for the benefit of those below him. *This* is the kind of leader I want. Heck, it’s the kind of *God* I want! And it’s the leader and God revealed in the Bible.

I then began to think of our current leaders in government and business. I tried to imagine any one of them living out such a radical example of leadership. I thought about Jesus washing his disciple’s feet, including the feet of his betrayer, the night before he was arrested¹⁵³ – an act considered so degrading at the time that Jewish slaves couldn’t be required to do it. I tried to imagine Steve Jobs or Larry Ellison washing the feet of their competing CEOs, or Saddam Hussein washing George Bush’s feet the night before he was hanged. I then looked on the Web at pictures of some of the palaces that our business leaders and celebrities call homes and the cars they drive. A review of the scriptures reveals that Jesus had no home of his own¹⁵⁴ and that he had no “car.” In fact, the only recorded example of him using anything other than his feet to get around on land was when he borrowed a donkey (not a stallion or fancy chariot) to ride into Jerusalem the week he was crucified.¹⁵⁵ I thought of Jesus associating with lepers, foreigners, beggars, cripples, tax collectors and prostitutes – people others considered beneath them. I thought of him taking the time to praise and interact with “insignificant” people, like a poor widow placing her last two cents in a Temple collections box.¹⁵⁶ I thought of the love, grace, compassion, and vulnerability he demonstrated – at times moved to tears in front of others,¹⁵⁷ and healing *all* of the sick and diseased people that were brought to him, not just those he cherry picked.¹⁵⁸ I thought of how he championed the underdog, famously saying “blessed are the meek, mournful and merciful,” and that such people would inherit the Kingdom of God and be comforted and shown mercy.¹⁵⁹ And I thought of how much Jesus was like us, how he displayed the same range of emotions as me or any other person, including anguish, distress

¹⁵² Ephesians 3:20.

¹⁵³ John 13:1-17

¹⁵⁴ Matthew 8:20.

¹⁵⁵ John 12:13-15.

¹⁵⁶ See Luke 21:2.

¹⁵⁷ See John 11:35, Luke 19:41 and Matthew 9:36.

¹⁵⁸ See Matthew 4:24, 8:16, 14:36, 15:30; Mark 6:56.

¹⁵⁹ See Matthew 5:3-10.

and grief.¹⁶⁰ To use Philip Yancey's words, "God... 'found out' what life is like in the confines of planet earth. Jesus got acquainted with grief in person, in a brief, troubled life..."¹⁶¹

There's a well-respected author named Simon Sinek who recently published a book entitled *Leaders Eat Last*. I would assert that the ultimate leader is one who dies first – to his or her selfish interests for the benefit of those under and around him or her, and even literally if circumstances warrant it. Jesus is that ultimate leader, and the type of God I want to follow.

Kingdom Principles

The Kingdom of God refers to the government that God will establish on earth at the return of Jesus Christ – a government that was partially realized at his first coming, and which will be fully consummated when he returns to rule as king. The Old Testament of the Bible contains a host of preview passages that describe this kingdom with an overarching emphasis on justice (via rescue, equity, and restoration) and peace (with God, self, others, and creation).¹⁶² In the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is one of the leading topics, if not *the* leading topic, of Jesus Christ's teaching. Jesus likened his coming kingdom to many things in the gospels including, but not limited to, hidden treasure buried in a field; something that belongs to the childlike (i.e., innocent) in faith; a place ruled by a righteous yet merciful king; a difficult place for the rich to enter; and a place characterized by a reverse order. It's interesting to expand on the last point. Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God is characterized by principles that are quite different than those of our world. The following bullet points highlight some of these principles followed by a scripture for each.

- You have to give up your life to find it – If you give up your life for me, you will find it. (Matthew 10:39)
- You have to humble yourself to be honored – So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. (1 Peter 5:6) For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Luke 14:11)
- You have to give in order to get – [The rich] should be rich in good works and generous to those in need, always being ready to share with others. By doing this they will be storing up their treasure as a good foundation for the future so that they may experience true life. (1 Timothy 6:18-19)
- You have to serve in order to lead – But among you it will be different. Those who are the greatest among you should take the lowest rank, and the leader should be like a servant. (Luke 22:26)
- You have to become last in order to become first – (See Luke 22:26 again in the previous bullet point)
- You should love your enemies and do good to them whether they love you or not – You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven... [You] are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

¹⁶⁰ See Matthew 26:36-38; John 12:27.

¹⁶¹ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995, Page 18.

¹⁶² Please see Amy Sherman's *Kingdom Calling*, Chapter 1, for an excellent summary of these passages.

- Our power and success come from God – Wealth and honor come from you alone [God], for you rule over everything. Power and might are in your hand, and at your discretion people are made great and given strength. (1 Chronicles 29:12; 2 Corinthians 3:5)
- Do unto others as you would have them do to you – Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)

Can you imagine a world governed by these principles? It's hard to do when you consider all of the chaos, violence, arrogance, selfishness, and self-promotion in our world today. But this is exactly the sort of kingdom God has promised to those who love and follow him.

I find it odd and funny when people talk about Christianity like it's some terrible conspiracy, and the Bible like it's been distorted over the ages to somehow lead people astray. This is utterly ridiculous when one considers that the greatest commandment is to love God and neighbor, including the strangers, foreigners, and enemies among us; when one considers that God loves us so much that he gave his one and only son for us, a son who beautifully and radically exemplifies sacrifice, servanthood, love, truth and passion; and when one considers that it promotes the kind of government that wonderfully balances justice, love, truth, mercy, and grace.

If there's some sort of conspiracy here, it's the kind I think most people would be happy to sign up for.

Changed Lives

Several years ago while I was attending church services, a representative of Gideons International got up to speak. It was a woman in her late thirties who described her severe drug addiction spanning many years. She talked about her downward spiral and the extreme financial, emotional and health toll accompanying it. She finally reached the point where, in a prison infirmary, she was told she would live only a matter of days. While somewhat distraught, she said she was ready to call it quits and die. Later that same day, she discovered a copy of the Gideons Bible in her bedside table. She opened it up and landed in chapter 1 of the book of Isaiah. In it, she read the following words of the Lord:

“Come now, let us argue this out... No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I can remove it. I can make you as clean as freshly fallen snow. Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you as white as wool. If you will only obey me and let me help you.”¹⁶³

She said she was startled by the passage. Here was the God of the universe inviting her to argue things out with Him, and offering to forgive her no matter what state she was in or what horrible things she had done. That day, she accepted Jesus Christ as her Lord and Savior, and she has never looked back. She got her addiction under control and her life back in order. She also began working with other drug addicts in an addiction crisis center and spends many of her weekends going around to churches to thank their members for their financial support – the same sort of support that resulted in that Bible being placed in her prison, available to anyone who needs it. At last check, she had been drug free for many years and helped numerous people with the same problem.

I can’t begin to convey the conviction and power with which this woman spoke. She left a strong impression on me. More important, though, is the fact that stories like these are unfolding every day – stories about people who have lost all hope but then find the one true source of hope. I’ve heard many such stories, and they strengthen my faith greatly.

Now there are those who mock such stories and say that the people affected were basket-cases and therefore more apt (even gullible) to accept the notion of Jesus Christ. You might say a belief, even if untrue, is fine if it benefits people like this. It’s interesting to note that Jesus himself spoke about this sort of thing. While forgiving a sinful woman he said, “I tell you, her sins – and they are many – have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.”¹⁶⁴ Jesus was confirming the fact that people in desperate situations are much more willing to accept his message than those who are not.

Earlier we noted that Jesus said “blessed” are the meek, mournful and merciful, and that such people would inherit the Kingdom of God and be comforted and shown mercy?¹⁶⁵ The

¹⁶³ Isaiah 1:18-20 – New Living Translation (’96).

¹⁶⁴ Luke 7:47 – New Living Translation.

¹⁶⁵ See Matthew 5:3-10.

word “blessed” is far more sedate than Jesus intended. What he really was saying was, “Oh, you lucky person!” In other words, the weak, addicted and sick *are* more apt to listen to and accept his message than a “normal” person, and they’re incredibly fortunate because of it.

So think about yourself. Is your life in good shape overall? Are you a fairly intelligent and successful person with a good job, home and health? Do you not suffer from the more serious ails (like starvation, joblessness or a lack of freedom) that threaten so many others on our planet? Are you pretty impressed with what you’ve accomplished in life and attribute much (if not all) of it to your smarts and hard work? If you answered yes to most or all of these questions, you are, indeed, less open to the gospel than people who answer no. Give it some thought. Maybe some of life’s basket-cases know something incredibly important that you don’t recognize.

Change Process

Not all people experience dramatic moments of conversion like the one described above. Many (most) arrive at their decision to follow Christ over a period of time in a process that seems a little bland by comparison. That was my experience. Furthermore, once a person makes that decision they don’t instantly become perfect (and they never will be in this lifetime). Instead, they embark on a process of ongoing change typically marked by periods of stronger and weaker faith, and usually including a handful of spiritual turning points.

I personally experienced two such turning points and their associated change process over 20 years into my Christian life. It began when I went to my first church men’s retreat back in September of 2007. Up to that point, I couldn’t be bothered with such things. I didn’t want to take the time or share a room with someone or spend the money. Even worse, I later came to realize that I was a self-righteous biscuit head who thought he didn’t need to go. My reward for going was a huge wakeup call. The organizers showed a Rob Bell video entitled Flame. In it, Rob describes the different Hebrew words translated into the English word love in the Song of Solomon in the Bible – one meaning friend/soulmate; another meaning deep affection for, desire to be with, and commitment to someone; and another meaning sexual intimacy. He talked about how these three things (i.e., flames) were meant to exist (burn) together, and the satisfaction (heat) that results when they do. I remember thinking “I don’t have that anymore” for each of the words he described. I actually got up, left the auditorium, and went to a private place to weep. In that moment I realized how bad my 20+ year marriage had gotten, and my significant role in its demise. This was the first of the two turning points.

I left the retreat determined to change, and to deliberately and tenaciously pursue God’s help in doing so. I went home and hugged my wife – something we almost never did in those days – and created a list of focused requests that I began praying about every day. Among other things, I asked God to profoundly change everything about me (i.e., the way I think, see, feel, behave, hear, speak, and react); to give me uncommon faith, godly love in my heart, and the wisdom of Christ; and to give me five things in my marriage, none of which I had at the time. What was my reward for doing this? Well, about seven months later my wife informed me that she wanted a divorce. An even bigger wakeup call.

Despite the devastation of this news, a couple of days later I felt moved to tell my wife that I did not want to get into the downward tit-for-tat spiral that characterizes so many divorces, and that I was committed to treating her with grace from that point on no matter what she did. I don't think she believed me. I know her lawyer didn't. To her, my comments were simply what a desperate spouse says when trying to avert a breakup?

What happened a few weeks later over a three-day period was the second of the two turning points. It started in court on a Friday where a judge temporarily ruled that I owed thousands of dollars of monthly alimony and child support to my wife despite the facts that I had no job/income, all of our bank accounts were frozen except one, and the unfrozen account was nearly drained by my lawyer's retainer fees. I spent that night sleepless on my parent's condo floor while my wife and a number of her friends packed up half of our house. When I returned home the next morning, I told my wife I didn't think what happened the day before was fair. But I also wanted to honor my grace commitment, so I told her I was going to help her move. And that's what I did, for 10 hours.

When the move was done, I tipped the movers and said goodbye to my 13-year-old daughter, which was gut wrenching. Then I went to my wife and told her that I loved her and was proud of her, and I gave her a hug and kiss on her forehead. Then I left. To this day, I'm still shocked by what I said and how I behaved. It was highly unusual given the events of the previous two days. I'm utterly convinced that God spoke through me as a reward for my persistent prayers, moving me to say things I hadn't said in years, things my wife dearly wanted and needed to hear.

At 4 p.m. the next day – Mother's Day, I might add – my wife called me. She began to describe how difficult things had been for her through the separation process while juggling her job, school, and our daughter. She noted that they didn't have any food and asked if I would bring them a pizza. Now I've told this story to a lot of people, and many of them get mad at this point – some viscerally so. But, of course, that's what un-grace looks like, and it's the very behavior that had led me to a separation. So I agreed to help and brought them a pizza and a house warming gift. That night, we ate dinner as a family, the day after my wife moved out with my daughter, two days after the court massacre, and in the new apartment where they had just spent their first night. It was surreal.

Now comes the most important part of those three days. After dinner, as I went to leave the apartment, my wife came to me, thanked me, and hugged me. As I mentioned earlier, there wasn't much hugging going on between us in those days. We were basically enemies in our own home. As I stood there I thought, I've been pounding on this dear woman for years trying to change her into something I want, and it brought me to the brink of divorce. Now, after two days of extending genuine grace, she's hugging me. It was a revelation bigger than any I have had in my life, and it's changed everything for me. It also gave me a far deeper understanding of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for each of us. A sacrifice that doesn't require us to be worthy, to earn it, or to respond within time constraints. I walked out of that apartment, looked up towards heaven, and told God "I'm in! I'm going with grace and only grace from now on."

From that moment on, I determined to seize any and all opportunities to serve my wife, regardless of what was happening in the divorce proceedings. And that's what I've done – or rather, what Christ has done through me – for over 7 years. At first, I was met with a chorus of criticism and mean-spirited advice. Many people told me I was stupid and letting her abuse me, that I needed to get mean, and that I should cut off all communications between her and my family. I told them that type of behavior was what led to my separation, and that I was going to try grace. I strived to be kind and loving whenever I saw my wife, went out of my way to help her, and even spent every major holiday with her, my daughter, and my parents, all in parallel with the ugliness and emotional extremes of dealing with the lawyers, courts, and settlement negotiations. I have so many amazing stories about what came from this expression of grace that it's difficult to pick one or two to highlight. So instead, I'll include the following “grace tidbits.”

- Extending grace in the midst of so much difficulty and pain softened our hearts and led to unexpected love, service, and humility. And the more we expressed those traits, the more automatic their expression became. I've become fond of saying that over time I turned into, in essence, a grace machine.
- My ex-wife eventually began to truly enjoy time with me again. On more than one occasion, our daughter remarked about how happy her mom was while we were all sharing a meal together.
- Grace enabled me to re-earn the right to have my ex-wife listen to and value my opinion, and she periodically calls to discuss important issues.
- My attorney, who practiced divorce law for 40 years prior to my case, called me his star client. He said that in all his years of practicing law he had never seen someone handle a case with grace the way I did. A pretty mind blowing observation.
- Remember that list of five things I said I prayed for in my marriage prior to our separation? Well, I pulled it out several months ago and it turns out I have four of them now – and I'm not even married. This also blew my mind.
- The more I experienced the realness, practicality, power, and beauty of grace, the more I wanted to share it. As a result, it eventually extended to my family, workplace, neighborhood, and even to people across the country that heard about my unusual divorce and sought encouragement/advice from me.
- What I went through was indescribably difficult, yet I wouldn't trade it for anything. God took me to places I would never have chosen to go in order to bring about change that could only happen in those places.

I learned some profound lessons from this experience. Several of them are detailed at the end of the Grace chapter above. And here's one more. Despite being a “Christian” for over twenty years, I had allowed bad behavior to slowly, insidiously creep into my marriage until I reached a point where I was continually expressing displeasure with my wife. This is a terrible and shameful thing to realize and admit. I was basically in one of those periods of weaker faith I mentioned at the start of this subsection. The Good News of the Gospel is that I'm forgiven these sins. And the experience drove home the fact that Christians are, and always will be in this lifetime, sinners like everyone else. The ongoing battle with our sinful natures is a core aspect of the gospel.¹⁶⁶ God calls sinners, not those who “think” they

¹⁶⁶ See Galatians 5:17.

are righteous.¹⁶⁷ Christians *are* going to make mistakes, and sometimes they are big mistakes spread out over long periods of time. But this doesn't invalidate the truth and beauty of the gospel. It actually supports it. And it's part of a lifelong process that God has promised to complete in each of us.¹⁶⁸

A Word About Christians

As noted in the previous section, Christians are sinners like everyone else and they *will* make mistakes. These mistakes, unfortunately, are a reason many non-Christians give for not believing. They expect perfection from Christians, and the minute they see one stumble they dismiss the Christian faith. What a shame. They're missing the whole point. Again, God calls sinners, not those who think they're righteous.

Now I'll admit that there are Christians out there who make me shake my head. There are good and bad in every group, and so it is with Christians. Jesus himself said there would be surprise on judgment day regarding who receives salvation and who doesn't.¹⁶⁹ So don't be so quick to judge. Leave it in God's hands to sort things out.

Instead of focusing on the people who are busy condemning others, focus on those who are busy serving and caring for those around them. For every unyielding Christian you see there are numerous ones who have dedicated their lives to serving others and spreading the good news of Christ. Jesus said the world would recognize his followers by their love for others.¹⁷⁰ Look for *these* people and learn from their example.

¹⁶⁷ See Matthew 9:13.

¹⁶⁸ See Philippians 1:6.

¹⁶⁹ See Matthew 7:22-23.

¹⁷⁰ See John 13:35.

Summary

Ask yourself why you believe the things you believe, especially things about God and faith. Is it because of the culture you live in, the way you were raised, or your likes/dislikes? Is it because you're following the beliefs of someone influential in your life? Is it simply because of a movie you've seen or a magazine article you've read? Or is it because you really took the time to research things and think them through? Seldom is the answer the latter.

Now ask yourself, have you ever picked up the Bible and read it, and if you have, how much of it have you read? In the words of two authors, "Most people's knowledge of the Bible is derived almost completely from second-, third- and fourth-hand sources... It is a rare person who has personally examined the text."¹⁷¹

The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Corinth two thousand years ago said, "Now we see things imperfectly as in a poor mirror, but [when Christ returns] we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely."¹⁷² Experience has shown me that this is true. We can't know everything in this life, and God doesn't want us to know everything. He wants us to look at the evidence we have and draw the most logical conclusion. If that conclusion points to him, we then need to take a leap of faith and see what it means to follow him.

In the preceding pages, I believe we demonstrated that the Bible is unlike any book known to man. While we haven't absolutely proven anything, we've seen lots of evidence that points to its credibility, which sensibly should lead us to trust it.

"For the word of God is full of living power."¹⁷³ Why don't you pick up the Bible and tap into that power?

¹⁷¹ Ken Boa & Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked*. Colorado Springs, Co.: Victor Books/SP Publications, Inc., 1994, page 89-90.

¹⁷² 1 Corinthians 13:12 – New Living Translation.

¹⁷³ Hebrews 4:12 – New Living Translation.

The Good News

The good news (i.e., gospel) about Jesus Christ can be succinctly summarized as follows.

1. God loves each of us deeply and wants to have a relationship with us.
2. God wants to give us great gifts and an unimaginable future.
3. Unfortunately, all of us are sinners and our sin has separated us from God.
4. Jesus Christ's sacrifice removes our sin and therefore our separation from God.
5. All you have to do is believe, and it's never too late and you can't be too bad.
6. Eternal life and other great gifts await those who believe. Eternal life is a free gift.

Below I include supporting scriptures for each point above for those who would like to dig deeper, plus some additional points.

1. Bottom line: God loves each of us deeply and wants to have a relationship with us.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that *everyone* who believes in him will not perish but *have eternal life*." (John 3:16)

The Lord is like a father to his children, tender and compassionate... (Psalm 103:13)

Nothing in all creation [our fears, worries, death, calamity, distance...] will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Jesus Christ. (Romans 8:39)

Since God's love is revealed in Jesus Christ, then looking at Jesus' life will teach us much about that love. Among many things, Jesus was incredibly humble (Philippians 2:7 – He made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave...); approachable (he associated with lepers, foreigners, tax collectors and prostitutes - people others considered beneath them); and a champion of the underdog (Matthew 5:5 – "Blessed are the meek... mournful... merciful..."). Throughout the gospels we see him behaving with tremendous love, grace and compassion – at times moved to tears in front of others (for an example, see John 11:35).

The most remarkable thing is that the God who created the heavens and earth - where scientists can't seem to find any limit to the breadth and richness of the universe or the complexity of matter on a quantum level - would become like those He created, endure their scorn and torture, and die so they might live. The next time you get upset at someone for the slightest infraction, or can't be bothered with the simplest act of service, consider Christ's sacrifice.

2. God wants to give us great gifts and an unimaginable future.

Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God, who gave us Christ, also give us everything else? (Romans 8:32)

...our perishable bodies [will] be transformed into heavenly bodies that will never die. (1 Corinthians 15:52-53)

Our earthly bodies, which die and decay, will be different when they are resurrected, for they will never die. Our bodies... are weak now, but when they are raised, they will be full of power. ...our heavenly bodies will be just like Christ's. (1 Corinthians 15:42-43,48; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10)

In the last days... all nations will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. *All wars will stop*, and military training will come to an end. (Isaiah 2:2,4) [God] will remove all weapons of war from the land... so that you can live in peace and safety. (Hosea 2:18) Quietness and confidence will fill the land forever. (Isaiah 32:17) ...there will be nothing to fear. (Micah 4:4)

...the home of God [will be] among his people! He will live with them... God himself... He will remove all of their sorrows, and there will be *no more death or sorrow or crying or pain*. For the old world and its evils [will be] gone forever. (Revelation 21:3-4) (Also, Isaiah 35:10)

Isaiah 35:4-6 ...He [Jesus] is coming to save you." ⁵And when he comes, he will open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf. ⁶The lame will leap like a deer, and those who cannot speak will shout and sing! Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert.

3. Unfortunately, all of us are sinners and our sin has separated us from God.

...all people... are under the power of sin. No one is good - not even one. (Romans 3:9-12)

For *all* have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. (Romans 3:23)

When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished from the Garden of Eden and separated from God. (Genesis 4:23) All people have been separated from true fellowship with God since.

Examples of man's sinful nature can be found above in the Human Nature write up.

Have you ever badly wanted to do the right thing and didn't? Have you ever tried to change a bad behavior/habit only to immediately fall back into it? The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans about this phenomenon nearly 2,000 years ago. "...I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate... When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway... Oh, what

a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life dominated by sin? ...the answer is in Jesus Christ.” (Romans 7:15,19,24-25)

4. Jesus Christ’s sacrifice removes our sin and therefore our separation from God. It’s the *only* way.

We are made right in God’s sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we can all be saved in this same way, *no matter who we are or what we have done*. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty... There is... only one way of being accepted by him. He makes people right with him only by faith. (Romans 3:22,24,30)

...we were restored to friendship with God by the death of His Son... (Romans 5:10)

...overwhelming victory is ours (over troubles, trials, etc.) through Christ. (Romans 8:37)

There is no other name [besides Christ’s] in all of heaven for people to call on to save them. (Acts 4:12)

Jesus said, “I am the way... No one can come to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

5. All you have to do is believe, and it’s never too late and you can’t be too bad.

What does God want us to do? Jesus said, “This is what God wants you to do: Believe in the one he has sent.” (John 6:28-29)

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – and I [Paul] was the worst of them all. But that is why God had mercy on me, so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life. (1 Timothy 1:15-16)

Jesus said, “Those who believe in me, even though they die like everyone else, will live again. They are given eternal life for believing in me and will never perish.” (John 11:25)

...our acquittal is not based on our good deeds. It is based on our faith... [God] makes people right with himself *only* by faith. (Romans 3:27,30)

We live by faith, not by sight. (2 Corinthians 5:5 – NIV translation)

What is faith? It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see. (Hebrews 11:1)

Isaiah 1:8 “No matter how deep the stain of your sins, I [the Lord] can remove it.”

... I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you... By this gospel you are saved... For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures... (1 Corinthians 15:1-5)

Consider the parable of the workers in Matthew 20:1-16 for an example of how it's never too late to believe.

Consider the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-31 for an example of how it doesn't matter what you've done in the past.

6. Eternal life and other great gifts await those who believe. Eternal life is a free gift.

I will give you a new heart with new and right desires, and I will put a new spirit in you. (Ezekiel 36:26)

Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into [a] place of highest privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. (Romans 5:2)

...the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

"I assure you, anyone who believes in me *already has eternal life.*" (John 6:47)

Some Additional Things To Consider

7. While the world is a mess, and life and its trials are difficult, they serve a purpose.

Isaiah 38:16 Lord, your discipline is good, for it leads to life and health.

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us – they help us learn to endure. And endurance develops strength of character in us, and character strengthens our confident expectation of salvation. (Romans 5:3-4)

For our present troubles... produce for us an immeasurably great glory that will last forever... For the troubles we see will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)

... I was given a thorn in my flesh [i.e., a trial]... to torment me and keep me from getting proud. ... I begged the Lord to take it away. Each time he said, "...My power works best in your weakness." ... I am quite content with my weaknesses and with

insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

... There is wonderful joy ahead, even though it is necessary for you to endure many trials for a while. These trials are only to test your faith... (1 Peter 1:4-7)

... don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad – because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering... (1 Peter 4:12-14, 19)

Ecclesiastes 3:18 Then I realized that God allows people to continue in their sinful ways so he can test them.

8. What's the alternative to accepting Christ and serving others? Being a selfish and uncaring? Saying you won't help others because others don't? It's very simple. You either live a life of love and caring for others, or you don't. Jesus Christ's life was above deep love, compassion, service, etc. Wouldn't you rather your life be about this than the alternative?

Let love be your highest goal (1 Corinthians 14:1)

The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love. The entire law is summed up in one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:6,14 - NIV)

9. Pressures will abound around you to ignore this message. Family members, friends, media and popular culture will ridicule your attempt to know Christ. But what should you care? It's *your* life and future, not theirs. Seize control of it.
10. If you're encouraged by what you've read and want to accept Christ as your Lord and Savior, all you have to do is pray to him in your heart, admit your sinful nature, accept his sacrifice, and ask God to work with you to change and draw close to Him.