

Lee Strobel

Is God Real?

March 24, 2024
Genesis 1:1; Psalm 19:1

Thanks so much. I was going to start out and say how happy I am to be here, but I have to be totally honest with you and tell you I'm glad to be anywhere after what happened to me in Little Rock, Arkansas. I went to Little Rock to speak at a charity event, and this pastor picked me up from the airport.

We're chatting along the way. He said, "Yeah, I told a young woman in our church, 'Lee Strobel is going to speak tonight.'" She said, "Oh, the guy who wrote *The Case for Christ*? Is he still living?" So I'm glad to be alive after that. I'm glad to be anywhere after that, but especially here at this great church in this beautiful new sanctuary that God has used you to create as a light to the community and beyond.

I'm thrilled to be here. I have to say, though, my wife Leslie and I flew into Charlotte and drove up here, and along the way, I kind of had a flashback. I had one of the most embarrassing episodes of my life happen at a Cracker Barrel restaurant. We're driving along. "Oh no! There's a Cracker Barrel. Now I remember what happened." It was truly embarrassing.

A number of years ago, my buddy Mark Mittelberg and I were speaking at a conference down South, and we had to get some food before we flew home. We saw one of these Cracker Barrels. I'd never been to one. He said, "Well, let's try it." I said, "Great." We noticed they have rocking chairs on the front porch, and people watch while they're waiting for a table. No big deal.

We had to walk in front of two people to get to the door. One was a young woman about 18 years old, dark hair, dark eyes, and a young man about the same age sitting next to her. We had to walk in front of them to get to the door. Not a big deal. Right? We're walking along, and just as I step in front of this young woman, I hear her say, "What's a deist?" I thought, "I just wrote a book about that."

So I turned on my heel. I said, "Young lady, a deist is someone who believes that God created the universe and then walked away." I said, "A deist believes that God sort of wound up the universe like a giant clock and is just letting it tick down." I said, "A deist believes that God is distant and disinterested in us, but that's not what the evidence shows."

I began to give her the evidence for God's involvement with the cosmos, God's involvement with humankind. I started to give her the evidence of cosmology and physics and biochemistry and genetics. I'm just laying this stuff on her, and she's looking at me. Her eyes are getting bigger and bigger. I'm on a roll now. You can't stop me. I talk about Jesus entering into human history, the incarnation, his miracles, and his death.

I started to give her the evidence that Jesus rose from the dead. She stared at me, and her eyes are getting bigger and bigger. I turned to my friend. I said, "Can you believe this? I happened to walk in front of her. She said, 'What's a deist?'" He said, "Lee, she said '*Buenos días*.'" I wish that were a joke. That's exactly what happened. It was so embarrassing.

But do you know what the good news was? The ice was already broken. How do you not get into a spiritual conversation at that point? It turned out she was there with her boyfriend for the state track meet, and they took us back to the hotel where the coach and all of the athletes were, and we got to talk about Jesus for about 45 minutes. So, it turned out all right, but that was embarrassing. I got a flashback as I saw that Cracker Barrel restaurant.

Anyway, it's great to be with you. I want to start by mentioning something that a techy friend of mine brought up to me a couple of years ago. He said, "Lee, I've discovered something quite amazing on the computer." I said, "What?" He said, "I've discovered that 200 times a second, around the clock, someone on the planet is typing into a computer search engine basically the question, 'Is God real?'"

Wow! Think of the depth of curiosity that represents...200 times a second. I thought, "Well, that makes a lot of sense," because this is the foundational question of all time, isn't it? So much depends on the answer to the question of whether God is real. In fact, a famous atheist professor, William Provine, from Cornell University was debating a Christian a few years ago.

During that debate, the atheist, Dr. Provine, said, "Look. I'm just going to be honest. I'm an atheist, but let's just lay all of the cards on the table. If there is no Creator, then five things are true: there is no evidence for God, there is no life after death,

there is no absolute foundation for right or wrong, there is no absolute meaning for life, and we don't really have free will."

Well, those are some big things that are hanging on this question of whether God is real, yet a declining number of Americans believe that God is real. When I met my wife Leslie when we were high school freshmen back in 1966, 98 percent of American adults said they believed in God. Do you know what the number is today? It's 81 percent. It's the lowest ever in history.

If you look especially at young people, Generation Z, the so-called post-Christian generation, there are twice as many young people who call themselves atheists as members of my generation. So, that's kind of depressing, but there are several positive signs as well. One study showed that three out of four American adults say they want to grow spiritually. Maybe you're one of them. You want to grow spiritually.

Of American adults, 44 percent say, "I'm more open to God today than I was before the pandemic." I have a friend, Shane Pruitt, and his ministry is to travel the country to speak to college students and high school students about God. He said to me, "Lee, I've seen more young people begin to follow Jesus Christ over the last three years than in the previous 18 years of ministry combined."

So, there are some trends showing there *is* a curiosity. There *is* an interest. There *is* a receptivity to the idea that God is real. So, I've written a new book. It's called *Is God Real?* In it, I build the affirmative case for the existence of God using science, using philosophy, and using history. Where I'm not the world's leading expert, I go out and find them with PhDs from Cambridge, Harvard, Brandeis, and major universities, and I ask them the tough questions I had when I was an atheist.

I kind of force them to explain things in ways I can understand. If I can get it, anybody can get it. I also have chapters on "If God is real, why is there suffering in the world?" and "If God is real, why does he seem so hidden?" We have copies of the book here if you're interested afterward. I'm not trying to sell you anything.

I don't get a dime from this. I don't get a royalty. I don't get any financial benefit. The church is not taking anything from it as well. We got them at my author discount and are trying to just offer them. So, we're not trying to sell you something, but if you're interested or if you have a friend who you think might be open to reading a book like this, then I'd love to sign a copy for you, maybe a note to your friend or whatever.

In all, there are about 20 lines of evidence and arguments that point toward the truth of Christianity, but to me, if I were still an atheist, I would become a believer in God just based on two areas of science in which we've had a series of discoveries in the

last 50 to 80 years that have been absolutely earth shattering. The first area has a fancy name: *cosmology*. It just means the origin of the universe. Where did the universe come from?

For centuries, scientists believed the universe was eternal...it was always here...until, thanks to some persuasive philosophical arguments and, more importantly, a series of scientific discoveries over the last 50 to 80 years, it has gotten to the point, because of the evidence for the expansion of the universe, that virtually every scientist on the planet now says the universe did have a sudden beginning at some point in the past.

Dr. Alexander Vilenkin, who is the head of the Institute of Cosmology at Tufts University, said all the evidence we have says the universe had a beginning at some point in the past. In fact, he and two other cosmologists have come up with a theorem that says any universe that is expanding, on average, through its history like ours must have had a beginning. In fact, the theorem says even if we later discover our universe is just a tiny part of a much bigger multiverse, that multiverse must have had a beginning.

Well, why is it important that the universe had a beginning? Because it leads to one of the most persuasive arguments for the existence of God. It's very simple. It just has three parts. It has been popularized, by the way, by Dr. William Lane Craig who was recently named one of the top 50 philosophers in the world. He's a good friend of mine. This is how it goes.

First, whatever begins to exist has a cause. Now stop there. Can you think of anything that has come into existence that didn't have some sort of a cause behind it? No. Even the famous atheist David Hume said, "I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause." So, whatever begins to exist has a cause.

Secondly, scientists now believe and are convinced that the universe began to exist at some point in the past. So, whatever begins to exist has a cause. The universe began to exist; therefore, the universe has a cause. The Bible agrees. The very first verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1, says, "***In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.***" That phrase *heavens and earth* is a Hebrew figure of speech called a *merism*. It simply means God created everything.

So, I think cosmology goes a long way toward establishing that there is a creator, that God is real, but a common challenge people raise is "Well, wait a minute. If God created the universe, then who created God?" It's usually followed by "Na-na, na-na, na-na." You know, "What about *that*?" Well, that just misunderstands the argument.

The argument is not whatever *exists* has a cause; the argument is whatever *begins* to exist has a cause.

God, by definition, is eternal. He never began to exist. He has always existed. In fact, before he created the world, there was no such thing as time. There was simply timelessness. By the way, atheists shouldn't have a problem with something being eternal, because they used to believe the universe is eternal until they were disproven by the evidence. Based on this, we can draw some logical conclusions about the Creator of the universe. I think we can reach nine conclusions.

First, he must be transcendent because he exists apart from his creation. Second, he must be immaterial or spirit because he existed before he created the material world. Third, he must be timeless or eternal because he existed before he invented physical time at the beginning of the world. Fourth, he must be powerful given the immensity of the creation event. Fifth, he must be smart given the precision of the creation event.

Sixth, he must be personal because he had to make the decision to create. Seventh, he must be creative because, my goodness, just look at the universe. It's creative. Eighth, he must be loving or caring because he so carefully crafted a habitat for all of us to flourish in. Finally, the scientific principle of Occam's razor tells us there would be just one Creator.

So, what do we have? Transcendent, spirit, eternal, powerful, smart, personal, creative, loving, and unique. Friends, that is a description of the God of the Bible right there. In fact, since there's just one Creator, this rules out polytheistic religions that believe there's a multiplicity of gods.

Since the Creator is separate from his creation, this rules out pantheistic religions, which say everything is god. Since the universe is not cyclical... In other words, it doesn't come into existence, then shrink, and then continue to come into existence and shrink. The math does not support that. This contradicts Eastern philosophy.

So, from one area of science, recent discoveries, I think that is a powerful case that there is a God, that God is real, but then that is amplified by a second area of science, which is *physics* (in other words, the fine-tuning of the universe). The Bible puts it this way in Psalm 19:1: ***"The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."***

One of the most striking discoveries of modern science...again, just going back the last 50 to 80 years...has been that the numbers that govern the operation of the universe (in other words, the laws and the constants of physics) conspire in an

absolutely extraordinary way to make the universe habitable for life. In other words, the universe is finely tuned on a razor's edge in a way that defies mere chance and which is better explained as the work of a creator.

Picture this. It's a summer night here in North Carolina. You go into your backyard. There are no clouds. You look up, and you're expecting to see a bunch of stars, but on this night you don't see stars. Do you know what you see? Fifty to 100 giant dials in the sky. Each dial represents a number that governs the operation of the universe, a law or constant of physics.

Every one of these dials could be calibrated to one of trillions upon trillions of possible settings, yet every dial is perfectly calibrated so that life can exist. Friends, that is the picture modern physics gives us of our universe. Let me give you some examples. One of the dials represents the force of gravity. We all know what gravity is. Right? If you drop something, it's going to hit the floor.

Well, gravity could have been calibrated in a variety of different ways. Picture a continuum, a ruler, that goes across the entire universe, 15 billion light-years in width, and it's broken down in one-inch increments. This represents the plausible range along which the force of gravity could have been calibrated, any point along that line, yet it's set at the exact right place so life can exist.

What if we were to change it? What if we were to change the force of gravity one inch compared to the 15 billion light-year width of the universe? If we did that, intelligent life would be impossible anywhere in the universe. That's how finely tuned just that one parameter is.

Another is the strong nuclear force. This is what binds together atoms. You have to have the atoms bound together. The strong nuclear force does that. What if we were to change it? What if we were to decrease the strong nuclear force by just one part in ten thousand billion, billion, billion, billion? Just that tiny change, and all we would have in the universe would be hydrogen. No life would be possible.

I mean, it's unbelievable...these 50 to 100 dials. My favorite is the ratio between the electromagnetic force and the force of gravity. That has to be exactly correct so life can exist. How precisely is it tuned? It is tuned to one part in ten thousand trillion, trillion, trillion. How do we understand that number?

Well, one astrophysicist with a PhD from University of Toronto did a calculation. He said, "Okay. You want to understand that number. Here's how you do it." Think of this in your head. Can you imagine a continent the size of North America with dimes piled

up to the moon...238,000 miles. Got that in your head? A continent the size of North America, from Toronto to LA, with dimes piled up 238,000 miles.

Now picture a billion continents, a thousand million continents just like North America with dimes piled up 238,000 miles. Now imagine reaching into all that and picking out one dime at random, spray painting it red, and then mixing it among all of those dimes on a billion continents.

Now pick one person at random, blindfold them, and say, "You can wander anywhere you want among the billion continents and the dimes piled up to the moon, but you can only reach in one time, and you can only pull out one dime." What are the odds that it would be the dime that had been previously spray painted red? One chance in ten thousand trillion, trillion, trillion.

That's just one of the dials. Friends, it's unbelievable. So dramatic is this evidence that Dr. Vera Kistiakowsky, PhD, professor of physics at MIT, former president of the Association for Women in Science, said the exquisite order displayed by our scientific understanding of the physical world calls for the divine. In other words, there's no other way to explain it. You can't say this happened by chance.

I was interviewing one astrophysicist, PhD from UCLA, hundreds of published peer-reviewed papers, professor at a major secular university, and I said to him, "In light of these odds, what are the chances this could have happened by chance, just by happenstance?" He said, "Well, Lee, we physicists have a term for that." I said, "What is it?" He said, "Ain't gonna happen." It just ain't gonna happen.

So, how do you get around that? I was an atheist. How would an atheist get around that? Well, I'll tell you how. By saying, "What if we're just one of an infinite number of universes? What if you spin those dials in an infinite number of universes? Maybe by chance in one universe the numbers would come up correctly. We won the cosmic lottery, and that's why we're here. That's the only explanation."

Well, there's a big problem with that. Do you know what it is? There is no physical evidence whatsoever for an infinite number of other universes that we can't see. In fact, recently (this is just going back to last year), one of the most prominent theoretical physicists in the world, Sabine Hossenfelder of Germany (who, by the way, is an agnostic, so she's not reading religion into this)...

She said this theory that there are actually an infinite number of universes is, in her words, a waste of time, scientifically speaking. She said it's much more popular with the media than with actual scientists. Besides, friends, if one universe requires an

explanation, then an infinite number of universes would require an even bigger explanation, and that would point even more powerfully toward God.

Friends, if I were still an atheist today, the kind of evidence we just talked about from cosmology and physics would convince me personally that there is a supernatural Creator. I would find this persuasive. But then you ask, "Well, which God are we talking about?" Now we have to shift from science to history, and we have to look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By the way, today is Palm Sunday, which is when we remember Jesus entering into Jerusalem in a manner that matches ancient prophecies. He comes in and begins Holy Week that culminates, ultimately, with his resurrection from the dead and Easter, which is next Sunday.

Why is the resurrection pivotal? Because Jesus clearly, in a variety of different ways, made transcendent, messianic, and divine claims about himself. He claimed to be the Son of God. At one point, he got up before a group in John 10:30 and said, "I and the Father are one."

The Greek word for *one* there is not masculine; it's neuter, which means Jesus was not saying, "I and the Father are the same person." He was saying, "I and the Father are the same thing. We're one in nature. We're one in essence." The audience got what he was saying, because they picked up stones to kill him. They said, "You're just a man, and you're clearly claiming to be God."

So, Jesus claimed to be God. But so what? I could claim to be God. Anybody can claim to be God, but if Jesus claimed to be God, died, and then three days later returned from the dead, that's pretty good evidence he was telling the truth. That's why the apostle Paul said if the resurrection is not an actual, historical event... I'm paraphrasing him, but he basically said if it's not true, you're fully justified in walking away from the faith. That's how important it is. It's the bedrock.

So, what is the evidence that Jesus did return from the dead and prove he's the Son of God? Well, Easter begins with the letter *E*, so I use four words that begin with the letter *E* to summarize the evidence for the resurrection. That way, if anybody ever asks you, "Why do you believe in Easter? Why do you believe in the resurrection?" you can say, "Let me tell you about the four *Es* that summarize the evidence."

The first *E* stands for *execution*, that Jesus was truly dead after being crucified. Now, I thought when I was an atheist that maybe he didn't die. Maybe he just fainted on the cross, and the cool, damp air of the tomb resuscitated him, and that's where they got the idea that he rose from the dead. That's what I thought, but then I looked into it.

What did I find? I found that there is no record anywhere of anybody ever surviving a full Roman crucifixion.

In fact, most of what we believe to be true about the ancient world... When you dig down into it, you find out it's based on one source of information, maybe two sources of information, yet for the death of Jesus on the cross, we not only have multiple first-century accounts in the ancient biographies called *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, but there are five ancient sources outside the Bible confirming his execution.

Friends, this is so well established of an historical fact that no less of a source than the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, a secular, scientific, peer-reviewed medical journal, carried an investigation into the death of Jesus, and this was their conclusion: "Clearly, the weight of historical and medical evidence indicates that Jesus was dead before the wound to his side was inflicted..."

This is not controversial among historians. They all, virtually to a person, agree. In fact, you could go to an atheist New Testament scholar, like Gerd Lüdemann of Vanderbilt, and he'll tell you Jesus' death as a consequence of crucifixion is indisputable. That's an atheist speaking.

I don't know how much you've studied ancient history, but there are very few facts of ancient history that a critical, skeptical, atheist historian like Gerd Lüdemann will say are indisputable. One of those facts is the death of Jesus. The first *E* is *execution*. Jesus was dead.

The second *E* I think is the most fascinating. It's the word *early*...early reports or early accounts that Jesus rose from the dead. In other words, we have reports of his resurrection that come so quickly after his death that I don't think you can write them off as a legend.

I used to think, "Okay. The resurrection was probably a legend that grew up 100, 150, or 200 years after the life of Jesus. Stories got invented. Mythologies got spawned, and that's where it came from." But what I learned decimates the claim that the resurrection is a legend.

Get this. This is mind-blowing. We have, preserved for us, a report of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, including named eyewitnesses and groups of eyewitnesses, including 500 people at once, that has been dated back by scholars to within months of his death. That's historical gold.

The great historian, Dr. James D.G. Dunn, put it this way. This tradition, this report, he said, we can be entirely confident was formulated within months of Jesus' death.

Within months. It comes in the form of a creed of the first Christians. The apostle Paul wrote it in a letter to the church in Corinth. So, if you want to read that report later, it's in 1 Corinthians 15, starting at verse 3.

So, there's no huge time gap between the death of Jesus and the later development of a legend that he rose from the dead. We have a news flash that goes right back to the beginning. In fact, one of the greatest historians who ever lived, indisputably, was A.N. Sherwin-White of Oxford and Cambridge.

He studied the rate at which legend developed in the ancient world, and he determined that the passage of two generations of time is not even enough for legend to grow up and wipe out a solid core of historical truth. We don't have two generations of time passing here. We have a news flash that goes right back to the beginning.

And that's not the only early report we have. We have others in Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and the book of Acts, all of which date back right to the first century, so early they were circulating during the lifetimes of Jesus' contemporaries who would have been all too happy to point out the errors if they were making this stuff up.

So, we have an execution. Jesus was dead. We have reports of his resurrection that are so early I think they dispute the idea that it's a legend. The third *E* stands for the word *empty*. We have an empty tomb. The historical record tells us Jesus' body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. Remember the Jewish council? It's sealed. Matthew tells us it's guarded, yet it's discovered empty that first Easter morning.

Now, we could talk the rest of the day about all of the strands of historical evidence that prove the tomb was empty, but I'm just going to give you one fact, because to me this is conclusive. Even the enemies of Jesus admitted the tomb was empty. How do we know? Because we know from sources inside and outside the New Testament that when the disciples began proclaiming that Jesus had risen, what the enemies of Jesus said was, "Oh, well, um, the disciples stole the body."

Now think about that. What is that? That's a cover story. They're admitting the tomb is empty. They're trying to explain how it got empty. It's like if you're a teacher and a student comes up to you and says, "Um, the dog ate my homework." That student is admitting, "Look. I don't have my homework, but I can tell you what happened to it. The dog ate it." It's the same thing.

Everybody in the first century, whether they were supporters of Jesus or enemies of Jesus, implicitly or explicitly, was conceding the tomb was empty. That's not the

question of history. The question of history is...*How did it get empty?* You go through the usual list of suspects. The Romans weren't about to steal the body. They wanted Jesus dead. The religious leaders of the day weren't about to steal the body. They wanted Jesus to stay dead.

The disciples weren't about to steal the body. They didn't have the motive, they didn't have the means, and they didn't have the opportunity. In fact, I found seven ancient sources, six of them outside the Bible, that confirm the disciples lived lives of deprivation and suffering as a result of their proclamation that Jesus had risen. Why were they willing to do that?

Because they heard on the radio Jesus rose from the dead? No. Because a Sunday school teacher told them? No. Because they were there. Of all human beings who have ever lived, the disciples were in a unique position to know for a fact "Is this true or is it a lie?" They said, "We talked to the risen Jesus. We ate with him. We touched him." Of all people who have ever lived, they knew the truth, and knowing the truth, they were willing, at least, to give their lives for it.

That takes us to the fourth word that begins with the letter *E*: *eyewitnesses*. Not only was Jesus' tomb discovered empty, but over a period of time, Jesus appears alive in a dozen different instances to more than 515 people...to skeptics and doubters as well as to believers, to men, to women, to groups, to individuals, daytime, nighttime, indoors, outdoors. People touched him. They talked with him. They ate with him.

Remember I said earlier we're lucky in ancient history if we have one source to confirm a fact or maybe two sources that confirm a fact. Well, get this. For the conviction of the disciples that they encountered the resurrected Jesus, we have no fewer than nine ancient sources, inside and outside the New Testament, confirming and corroborating the conviction of the disciples that they encountered the risen Jesus. Friends, that is an avalanche of historical data.

In my book *Is God Real?* I interview Dr. Michael Licona, a scholar who got his PhD on the resurrection from the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He has written a 700-page book based on his doctoral thesis on the case for the resurrection. He lays out all of these sources. I'll mention them really quickly just so you'll know what they are.

The first source is that report I mentioned earlier that comes within months of the death of Jesus. It's in the form of a creed of the first Christians. That's one source. A source, by the way, that one of the few Jewish New Testament scholars, Pinchas Lapide, said is so good it may be taken as a statement of eyewitnesses.

The second source is the apostle Paul. I mean, he was a persecutor of Christians, Saul of Tarsus. He encounters the risen Jesus. He becomes the apostle Paul. He gets to know the other disciples, and he says in 1 Corinthians 15:11 (I'm paraphrasing), "Look. We're all saying the same thing about the resurrection. We all saw it, we all experienced it, and we're all reporting the same thing."

So, he's confirming that the disciples encountered the risen Jesus. Then we have sermon summaries in the book of Acts. Even skeptical scholars will admit the book of Acts contains summaries of sermons of the earliest church. And what was their central theme? The resurrection of Jesus.

We have Peter quoted, who gets up in the very same city where Jesus had been put to death, just a few weeks later, and says, "Men of Israel, listen to these words. This Jesus, a man attested to you by miracles and wonders and signs, which he did in your midst... You know that he did."

He appealed to their common knowledge, and then he said, "This Jesus God raised from the dead to which we're all witnesses." And what was the result? Three thousand people said, "Peter, we know you're telling us the truth. What do we do?" They repented, and the church was born.

Next, sources four, five, six, and seven are the ancient biographies we find in the New Testament of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are nine appearances of the risen Jesus reported in those gospels. In my book, I document why... Set aside the question whether it's the Word of God. Are they historically trustworthy? I believe the case can be made that, yes, they are, and they report the resurrection.

Then we have two sources outside the Bible. Let me ask you a question. If you came to this church for two years every week, and every week Kyle was preaching, do you think at the end of two years you'd have a pretty good idea of what Kyle believes? Yeah, I think you would. Well, guess what? We have letters written by people who sat under the teachings of the eyewitnesses themselves, and they tell us what they said.

We have Clement. He was ordained by Peter himself. And we have Polycarp. He was commissioned or appointed by John himself to be bishop at Smyrna. Both of them wrote letters in which they confirm they were taught by the eyewitnesses that the resurrection is true. So, there are nine ancient sources, inside and outside the Bible, confirming and corroborating the conviction of the disciples that they encountered the risen Jesus. Friends, that is an avalanche of historical data.

So, how strong is the evidence? Does it only convince the gullible? Well, let me tell you a little story, a true story, about the greatest lawyer who ever lived. I don't know if

we have any attorneys here, but if we do, I'm going to blow your minds. His name is Sir Lionel Luckhoo, knighted twice by Queen Elizabeth, appointed to the supreme court of his land.

As a defense attorney, he won 245 murder trials in a row, either before the jury or on appeal. He was in *Guinness World Records* book as the most successful attorney who ever lived. I was a student at Yale Law School, and I got my law degree. I admired this guy. Who's better than Sir Lionel Luckhoo? My goodness!

Do you know what I loved about him? He was a skeptic about the resurrection...just as I was; was an atheist...until one day someone went to him and said, "Sir Lionel, you're the greatest lawyer in the world. Have you ever taken your monumental legal skill and applied it to the historical record and come to an informed conclusion about whether the resurrection really occurred?" He said, "No, I haven't, but I will."

So, Sir Lionel Luckhoo... If anybody knows what evidence is, it's Sir Lionel Luckhoo, because he was able to take what looked like airtight cases against his clients and find all of the flaws, all of the loopholes, and win their acquittal. So, Sir Lionel spent years investigating the historical data, and here was his conclusion: "I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt." This from the most successful lawyer in the world.

By the way, I told that story at a church in Orange County, California. I had just moved out there. This was a number of years ago. Afterward, a woman came up to me and said, "Hey, you just moved into my neighborhood. I'm your neighbor." I said, "Oh, great. Great to meet you." She said, "Yeah, I'm Sir Lionel's sister." What are the odds of that? She not only confirmed the story, but she gave me some of his private records where he investigated the resurrection of Jesus.

I remember coming to the same conclusion. I used my law background and my journalism background to systematically investigate the scientific evidence, but especially the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus. I spent two years doing it until November 8, 1981, when I reached my verdict based on the data of history that Jesus didn't just claim to be the Son of God; he backed up that claim by returning from the dead.

Then I didn't know what to do. I'd spent two years doing this, and I was like, "Okay. Am I done? Is that it?" My wife pointed out a verse to me, John 1:12. It says, "But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name."

I looked at that verse, and I noticed if you take out the key words, it forms an equation of what it means to become a child of God: *believe* plus *receive* equals *become*. I said, "Okay. I get it. I believe based on the data of history that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God and backed it up by returning from the dead. I believe it, but that's not enough."

The Bible says even the demons believe it, and they shudder. There was another step I needed to take to receive. Receive what? Receive his free gift of God's grace, this free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that he purchased on the cross when he died as my substitute to pay for all of my sin.

When I would receive this free gift in a prayer of repentance and faith, I would become a child of God. So I got on my knees, and I poured out a confession of a lifetime of immorality that would absolutely curl your hair. At that moment, I received complete and total forgiveness through Jesus Christ, and I became a child of God.

Then, over the months and over the years, as I became part of a great church like this one, as I learned to read the Bible with fresh eyes, as I learned to pray, as I learned to worship, God began to change my values, my character, my morality, my attitudes, my philosophy, my worldview, my relationships, and my marriage. All of these things, over time, began to change for the good.

Friends, can I tell you something? God is real. That's good news, but there's better news than that. There's better news than God being real. Do you know what it is? God is not only real, but he offers a personal relationship with him that will enrich your life today like nothing else, and you will be able to have the confidence that when you close your eyes for the last time in this world, you will open them in the world to come in the presence of God forever. That's the best news of all.

So, let me close by talking to two groups. Most people here, I would say, are already a follower of Jesus. You're confident in that, and that's awesome. I just want to say to you the Bible addresses you in 1 Peter 3:15. It says, "If you're a follower of mine, always be prepared to give an answer to anyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have, but do it gently and respectfully."

We live in a skeptical world. We live in even a hostile world toward the gospel. We need to understand why we believe what we believe, and we need to teach our kids and our grandkids. I was talking to a guy whose 6-year-old granddaughter went to public school, and at recess, the other students were taunting her and making fun of her because she believes in God. "Oh, you believe in fairy tales. You believe in make-believe."

Friends, our children and our grandchildren are going to be challenged in their faith in a way that older generations never were. We need to be prepared. We need to prepare them to understand that our faith is not built on wishful thinking. It's not built on legend, make-believe, or mythology. It is built on a solid foundation of truth.

The last group I want to mention as I close is those who don't know where they stand with God. You're confused about that. It's ambiguous. You know, the first verse I ever memorized as a new Christian comes from 1 John. It says, "These things are written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God in order that you may know that you have eternal life."

God doesn't want you in a state of ambiguity and confusion. You can know that you have become a child of God for *this* life and the life to come. Do you know? Do you feel confident? Are you sure? Friends, I couldn't come all the way from Houston without giving you an opportunity to be sure today and to be able to drive a stake in the ground and say, if there are any doubts, "Wait a minute. I remember the day I received." You can always point back to this day.

So, if you're not sure and you want to be sure... I'm not going to ask you to do anything weird. Let's just all close our eyes and bow our heads. If you want to take that step in receiving, just in your heart... God will hear you... say, "Lord Jesus, as best I can, I do believe you are the Son of God. You proved it by returning from the dead. Right now, I confess the obvious. I'm a sinner. I know that. I've done things. I knew they were wrong, and I did them anyway. I've sinned.

I want to confess that, and I want to turn from that. In an attitude of repentance and faith, I want to receive. I want to receive this free gift of forgiveness and eternal life that you purchased for me on the cross when you died as my substitute to pay for all of my sin. Thank you for your gift of grace. Thank you for being willing to suffer the torture of the cross so we could be reconciled forever. Help me, Jesus, to live the kind of life you want me to live, because from this moment on I am yours."

Father, we know based on your Word that anyone who has prayed that prayer with a sincere heart has received your gift of grace, has become a child of God. We celebrate that. We know the angels of heaven are celebrating that. We pray that you would help them become strong and confident in their faith, that you would use them as strong salt and bright light to share this message with others the rest of their lives.

We thank you for that. We thank you for those who are still on the journey. They're not ready yet. They have too many doubts, too many questions. Father, use this great church, like a city on a hill, to shine your message of hope and grace and love and

redemption and eternal life into hearts all over this place and beyond so that someday we can celebrate their rebirth as well.

Father, for the rest of us who have been your followers for maybe many, many years, I pray that some time in this coming week you would open up an opportunity for us to invite someone to come here next weekend in celebration of Easter, because we know the gospel is especially powerful when that day comes.

So, give us an opportunity. Give us the courage to invite someone to come next week. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ, who is our forgiver and who is our leader and who is our very, very best friend. And all God's people said, "Amen."