

# Periscope Experience at The Hope Center



Join Probe Ministries for a free 7-week event here at The Hope Center of our 7-week Periscope experience to help you develop a biblical worldview and deepen your eternal perspective as a Christ-follower. We want to help you learn to “See Above, Live Beyond.” This involves:

- A weekly message given during a provided box lunch
- A free 49-day daily devotional in online PDF book form, written by Probe President Kerby Anderson
- 7 weeks of small group sessions viewing a video
- Daily reminders by phone, text, or email, whichever you prefer, if you choose to receive them.

## Schedule

February 13	Tuesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm
February 20	Tuesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm
February 28	Tuesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm
March 5	Tuesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm

March 12	Tuesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm
March 20	Wednesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm
March 27	Wednesday	11:30 am – 1:00 pm

This “iron sharpening iron” opportunity for ministries within the Hope Center is, we believe, one of the benefits of the synergistic potential of this amazing place. We would be honored to have you take advantage of this opportunity to grow your eternal perspective and deepen your biblical worldview as a benefit of working here.

**84 seats available – Register by February 12**

## Periscope Registration

Periscope at The Hope Center - Feb-Mar 2024

Name(Required)

Ministry(Required)

Age(Required)

Phone(Required)

Email(Required)

(Required)

I will enjoy a free box lunch

☐ Yes please

☐ No thank you

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# Apologetics and Spiritual Skirmishing

*Kyle Skaggs urges Christians to use the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6 in engaging in apologetics.*

As I was working towards my degree at Dallas Baptist University I did volunteer work with an online ministry. There, I encountered people from all walks of life; all of them having questions about Christ and Christianity. For a while, I was doing well. I found joy in encouraging and counseling other believers. I also learned to tell the difference between non-believers who were willing to listen and those who were only there to argue.

Around a week from graduation I logged to the ministry's website feeling confident. I'd spent hours reviewing various arguments and counterarguments, I was certain I would use what I had learned over four years to lead the conversation to the Gospel. This was not what happened. Instead, the people I talked to became either confused or frustrated before leaving. Figuring I was just having one of those bad days, I thought nothing of it. The same thing happened the next day. Now I was conflicted. I wondered why I was ineffective, because everything I said was supported by Scripture, so I logged off

and puzzled over what I was doing wrong. While I was lost in my thoughts, a very clear voice in my head said, “You cannot lecture people into the Kingdom of God.” I had forgotten 1 Peter 3:15; “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect...” That rebuke from the Holy Spirit sent me on a journey of reflection on the spiritual skirmishes that we so easily lose sight of in our daily routine.

## Spiritual Warfare

“Enemy-occupied territory—that is what this world is. Christianity is the story of how the rightful king has landed, you might say landed in disguise, and is calling us all to take part in a great campaign of sabotage.” [\[1\]](#) Our adversaries are the rulers, authorities, and the powers of this dark world. (Ephesians 6:12) Every ideology, philosophy, and worldview not of the Gospel is controlled by the spiritual forces of darkness.

The devil knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12), so he is intent on dragging as many souls down with him as he can. To his annoyance, if you have already been saved by grace through faith, and are now saved, you are called to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). He is resourceful, and if he can't stop you from having a relationship with God, then he will use every trick to make you as ineffective as possible in your walk with Christ, and in evangelism.

The Devil and his forces are relentless. Whenever we attempt to evangelize, every gap in our defenses can and will be exploited. How are we Christians to contend with these forces of darkness? Paul tells us to put on the full armor of God so that we can take our stand against the Devil's schemes. Let's take a look at the parts of the spiritual armor God provides.



## **The Belt of Truth**

First, we must remain grounded in the truth. Ephesians 6:14 refers to the Belt of Truth, which holds our equipment within easy reach. When we face an enemy whose only weapons are lies and deceptions, we have the advantage. We have nothing to hide! All we need to do is tell the truth!

To wear the belt is to be ready. There has been increasing pressure to ignore fundamental Christian teachings for the sake of convenience. Do not do this. Know your scripture and gird yourself in the truth of the Gospel.

## **The Helmet of Salvation and the Breastplate of Righteousness**

Second, we must wear the helmet of salvation (Ephesians 6:17) and the breastplate of righteousness (6:14) to turn aside any attacks that slip through our defenses. In those days, just as it is now, the helmet and breastplate are essential equipment to protect the head and the heart, and just one of the things separating the true soldier from the levy and the ad hoc militia.

In the same way, the certainty of our salvation and the

righteousness of Christ are key pieces of our armor. As I have said before, Satan is ruthless. He will use every sin you have committed to shift your focus away from those who need Christ, and onto yourself. Being assured of our salvation and our righteousness before God is our greatest defense against these attacks.

## The Gospel of Peace

What made the Romans such a formidable force? Discipline and adaptability. Being able to march long distances and maneuver across a variety of terrain. Timing and distance determine the victor of any confrontation. To do this, they needed shoes that were durable and able to grip the ground firmly.



With the readiness that comes from the Gospel of Peace (Ephesians 6:15), we can rapidly move to where the Lord needs us. “[God’s Soldier’s] movements are dictated by the needs of the Gospel witness.”[\[2\]](#)

## The Shield of Faith



We are also told to take up the Shield of Faith (Ephesians 6:16) to extinguish the flaming arrows of the evil one. The favored shield in the time Ephesians was written was the Roman *scutum*, a large shield that protected most

of the soldier's body, enabling the Romans to protect both themselves and each other in tight formations without sacrificing their defense when fighting in looser formations. Most deaths in ancient battles occurred after, during, and after a rout. Therefore projectiles were used to disrupt and to instill fear before the two sides met in melee. Standing firm against hails of projectiles was key to surviving the battle.

It is the same with all believers. Our faith is our primary defensive and offensive tool. People who have faith in Christ are willing to risk being made to look foolish. They are confident in the hope they have in Christ, and are therefore enabled to do great things. People who act out of faith inspire others to do the same. Our faith also protects us from the feelings, falsehoods, and ideas the Devil likes to use to discourage us. If we are discouraged from our walk, then we have already lost.

## The Sword of the Spirit

Finally, Ephesians 6:17 refers to the Sword of the Spirit, or the word of God. In conjunction with the *scutum* was the *gladius*, a short sword primarily used for thrusting and short cuts. It was the legionary's primary weapon. After throwing their *pila* (specialized javelins) to disrupt the enemy formation, the Romans drew their swords and closed the distance to engage in hand-to-hand fighting. Their armor and discipline enabled them to weather the brutal melee far better than their opponents. Ideally, this caused the enemy to rout.



There is a good reason the word of God is described as a sword



in other passages. It is absolute truth. Revelations 9:15 and Hebrews 4:12 describe God's word as a double-edged sword. In Hebrews, Paul says "it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." Like a sword, learning to use God's word effectively requires constant training. Christians should therefore study and seek to live according to the word so they can stand firm when confronted by the Enemy.

By being willing to close in, to deliver the word of God straight into the heart of the matter, shrewdly providing an answer for our faith with gentleness and respect, we can establish common ground with those who do not know Christ, thus opening the way for them to hear the gospel. We do this knowing full well that friends and even family may hate us for confronting the world. Because we are willing to push through, we are able to form relationships with people and show what it means to walk with Christ! As with Roman equipment in Jesus' day, the armor of God is tailor made to allow us to safely close the distance with the enemy, and with the word of God, drive them from the field.

All we have to do is put it on.

### Notes

1. Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*, 1952.
2. Ellicott, C. J. (1970). *Ellicott's commentary on the Whole Bible Volumes VII-VIII: Acts to Revelation*. Zondervan Publishing House. 1959.

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# The Biology of Human Uniqueness

*Dr. Ray Bohlin demonstrates unique biological attributes that set humans apart because we are made in the image of God.*

## What's So Special About Humans?

As humans we tend to think of ourselves as rather unique in the created order of things. As Christians, we understand ourselves to be created in the image and likeness of God as we learn in Genesis 1:26. But what does this really mean? Certainly being made in God's image does not refer to our physical construction; God is spirit and therefore does not have a physical body. But God's plan from the beginning was to rescue us from our sin through the incarnation, God becoming man. Jesus was and is the Son of God, Messiah, the God-Man. Therefore it is not a stretch to suggest that our bodily make-up is meant to be the unique earthly home of Jesus and His Spirit within us. Therefore, I suggest that our biological make-up is unique in the animal kingdom since no other animal is made in His image.

But what does this really mean? I am going to borrow from several sources, principally Michael Denton's *Nature's Destiny*[\[1\]](#), to discuss the biological uniqueness of humans. The [Discovery Institute](#) is also in the process of producing a film series based on Denton's work, titled *Privileged Species: How the Cosmos is Designed for Human Life*.



We are able to point out numerous qualitative abilities in the human species found nowhere else in the animal kingdom. I will discuss these in detail below, but I'll provide a brief overview now to whet your appetite.

First, I'll be discussing our unique intelligence. Humans' ability to think abstract thoughts appears to be absolutely unique. It is difficult to arrive at a selective advantage in an evolutionary sense to this type of thinking, so where did it come from?

Second, and related to our intelligence, is our unique language capability. Most animals communicate with their own species, but no other species, including primates, actually use *language*. As toddlers we accumulate language by simply being around it. Chimps and gorillas have to go through painstaking trial and error and still can't communicate as a three-year-old does.

Third, our excellent vision allows us to use our intelligence, language and other capabilities to manipulate our surroundings in precise and advantageous ways.

Fourth, our excellent manipulative tool, the hand, is unsurpassed in other primates. We have both strength and fine motor control in our hands, allowing us to combine a strong grip and delicate finger movements that allow a wide range of movements. This, combined with our upright stance, provides an ability to restructure our immediate surroundings as no other species can.

We are also a highly social species which allows for quick distribution of ideas to everyone's benefit. And all these combine to allow us to be the only species to use and manipulate fire, which brings a host of unique abilities.

## **Human Intelligence and Language**

As I mentioned above, our intelligence separates us from any other primate species. Our brain is three times the size of the brain of a chimp. But beyond that, the number of neurons and connections between neurons far surpasses any other mammal. Michael Denton cites that in each cubic millimeter of

the human cortex, are 100,000 cells, about 4 kilometers of axonal wiring and 500 meters of dendrites, and around 1 billion synapse connections between neurons. We have 10 million more of these synapses than a rat brain.

The size and scope is one thing, but our mental capabilities are indeed unique. As mentioned above, humans are capable of abstract and conceptual thought. No other primate exhibits any signs of this capacity. In addition, our mathematical reasoning is completely *other* compared to other animals. You might suspect that some animals can count. But it is a learned response attached to reward. We don't really suspect the rat/horse/chimp knows what they are doing. Comparing calculus to simply counting bananas is just no comparison at all.

When you stop to consider our appreciation of the arts, there is no place to go but humans. James Trefil is a physicist fascinated by biology and evolution. But when considering the arts he says, "No matter how hard I try, I can't think of a single evolutionary pressure that would drive the ability of humans to produce and enjoy music and dance. . . . This has always seemed like a serious problem to me—perhaps even a more serious problem than that perceived by most of my colleagues."

When we turn to language, our uniqueness is informed even further. Plants and animals all communicate in one form or another, but not by language as humans communicate. We communicate both new information and abstract concepts, something other species don't even approach. We possess the proper equipment to both produce and receive language and speech. And by proper equipment I mean both the brain processes and the anatomical necessities for actual speech (e.g., teeth, tongue, voice box, etc.). There is also a social ability that can utilize these upper levels of communication.

But we've heard about chimps and gorillas learning language. Kanzi, a bonobo chimpanzee, learned words and even symbolic use of a keyboard. Kanzi also learned through hearing the use

of new words. But that is where it stopped.

To quote James Trefil again, "If we take the claims being advanced for Kanzi at face value, where are we? We have a member of the most intelligent primate species, a veritable Shakespeare of non-human animals, raised under special and unusual conditions, performing at the level of a human child of two and a half. But remember that in humans, real language begins just after this age. . . . Then we have to conclude that even in this optimal case, animals other than humans cannot learn real human language."

## Human Vision and the Hand

Now I'd like to introduce two features we can easily take for granted, our hands and our eyes.

Ordinarily we don't think of our hands as being anything special. But just try to think of any other creature that can do the many and diverse things we can do with our hands. The closest match is the hand of a chimp. But chimp hands are larger, stronger, and even clumsy. Simple things like using all ten fingers to type, peel an apple, or tie a knot are beyond what chimps can do.

The strength in our fingers comes from larger muscles in the forearm and the fine manipulative control comes from much smaller muscles in the hand itself. Our ability to manipulate our environment with our hands is unparalleled. Using our intelligence we even devise additional tools for our hands to further extend our mastery of the world around us. Full use of our hands comes about from our upright and bipedal gait, allowing our hands the freedom not found in any other mammal.

In his book *Nature's Destiny* Michael Denton asks about the human hand "whether any other species possesses an organ approaching its capabilities. The answer simply must be that no other species possesses a manipulative organ remotely

approaching the universal utility of the human hand. Even in the field of robotics, nothing has been built which even remotely equals the all-around manipulative capacity of the hand."

But in order to even use our hands well, we need exceptional vision to be able to detect all the little things our minds notice to manipulate. Given the physics of visible light and the dimensions and molecular process of detecting light in our eyes, the resolving power of the human eye is close to the optimum for a camera-type eye using biological cells and processes.

Some animals such as high-flying hawks and eagles detect motion from far greater distances than we can, and some organisms see much better in the dark than we do, but for all-around color vision, detail and resolution, our eyes seem to be the best there is. Combined with our highly interconnected brain, our upright gait for easily seeing straight ahead, a swiveling neck to see side to side, and our overall size, our eyes open the world to us as for no other species.

Developing science and technology, communicating to thousands and even millions through the written word, and simply exploring the world around us, are only possible through an integrated use of our unique intelligence, social structure and speech, hands and vision.

## **The Use of Fire**

As I have explored the biology of human uniqueness, I have focused on some of our individual capacities such as our intelligence, speech, our marvelous hands, and our unique all-around color vision. I have used throughout, the wonderful book by Michael Denton, *Nature's Destiny*. Now I'm looking at one of our key distinguishing characteristics which combine all of these. Humans are the only biological creatures that

have mastered the use of fire. If you think for a minute, every other animal has nothing but fear when it comes to fire. We are also fearful of fire and the damage it can do, but we have also managed to harness it and use it.

There are a couple of obvious advantages for the use of fire. First it provides additional light after sundown that extends our activity into the evening. Second, fire provides additional warmth in the evening and allows us to venture into colder climates. Third, fire allows us to cook food, particularly meat which is a very significant source of fat calories and protein. Cooking our food certainly distinguishes us from any other creature and has allowed us to add the necessary energy to fully use that big brain of ours which is a major drain on our energy stores, even at night.

But beyond these, if we never harnessed the energy and power of fire, we would not have been able to develop tools involving metal. Using heat to forge ever more powerful hand tools and weapons revolutionized human culture. Without fire we could not have developed any form of chemistry and especially the use of electricity. Electricity has revolutionized human existence in the last 100 years. Fire is an influential and powerful tool indeed.

But how have we been able to do this? First, we need to take advantage of our intelligent capability for abstract thought and reasoning. As I said earlier, we too fear fire, but we need to be able to think about it and be curious enough to not only rationalize that we might be able to harness its power, but that it would also be useful. This ability to deduce the control and use of fire requires high-level reasoning.

Denton also points out that for a fire to be sustainable it needs to be at least 50 centimeters across (or about a foot and a half). To create a fire of this size we need our upright stance to walk the distance to gather the right amount and size of branches. That means that our upright stance, free

arms, the manipulative tools of our hands, and our discerning vision work together to allow us to create a sustainable fire.

Therefore, the control and manipulation of fire requires a combined use of most of our unique biological capacities. Think about this the next time you sit around a campfire or grill your supper on a warm summer day. It's part of what makes us human!

## **Human Anatomy and Genome**

In this article I have been focusing on aspects of human biology that make us unique in the universe of living organisms. I discussed in some detail our unique intelligence, allowing us complex and abstract thought. We have a unique ability to communicate audibly and through a symbolic written word. These combine with our stereo vision and unique manipulative tool the hand, to allow us sole possession of the ability to use and manipulate fire. All of these capabilities are made possible by several unique aspects of our anatomy.

Humans have the largest brain of any primate species. Whales, dolphins, and elephants have larger brains, but size is not the main distinctive. Our human brain is structured like no other. If you were to open up just one cubic millimeter of our brain you would find over 100,000 cells with 4 kilometers of cell wiring and 1 billion connections between neurons. The structure and organization of our brain is definitely without parallel. Studies of our entire genome compared to chimpanzees indicate vast differences in non-coding sequences that influence the production of brain proteins. These changes are in the thousands.

In 1999, famous MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, reflected that "Thus, in the case of language, . . . (new research) is providing interesting grounds for taking seriously an idea that a few years ago would have seemed outlandish: that the



language organ of the brain approaches a kind of optimal design, that it is in some interesting sense an optimal solution to the minimal design specifications the language organ must meet to be usable at all.” Without our unique brain structure, our language ability would not be forthcoming.

When comparing our skeletal structure to those of our supposed closest ancestors according to an evolutionary explanation, there are major changes that would have been needed to be accomplished in a relatively short time. Casey Luskin from the Discovery Institute does an admirable job digging into these differences and makes some sweeping conclusions. Numerous studies indicate that between the lineage of *Australopithecus* and *Homo* there would need to be significant changes in shoulders, rib cage, spine, pelvis, hip, legs, arms, hands and feet. But of these major transitions, the fossil record is silent.

Luskin also refers to a study by Durrett and Schmidt in 2007 that estimates that a single-nucleotide mutation in a primate species would take 6 million years to become fixed. But what is needed are multiple mutations in multiple segments of the skeletal system and in the physiology of the brain. *Homo sapiens* are far more unique than many have suspected. The more we learn, the more unique we become.

Since humans are created in the image of God, we expect human biological uniqueness. Even more significantly, bearing His image indicates an affinity for humans by the Creator we cannot fully comprehend.

## Notes

1. Michael Denton, *Nature's Destiny: How the Laws of Biology Reveal Purpose in the Universe* (New York: The Free Press, 1998).

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# The Glory of Grace

*Sue Bohlin explores God's marvelous grace as the unending flow of His power, presence and favor in our lives.*

I bet you recognize “grace” as a theology word. Many of us are quick to say, “Oh yeah, I know what that is. We’re saved by grace through faith.” Or we know of churches with the word “grace” in their name. But many of us don’t have a real handle on it. Often that’s because we haven’t seen it modeled in our families, our churches, or our communities. We’re too focused on trying to prove ourselves good enough, too busy trying to keep God from getting mad at us.

But this misunderstood blessing of grace is *hugely* important. It’s one of the big things that sets Christianity apart from all other religions! Any other world religion involves performance-based works. Biblical Christianity says, “We’re messed-up broken people before a holy God, and there’s nothing we can do to earn His approval. But He loves us and delights in us despite the fact that we don’t deserve it.” With all other religions, the emphasis is on “do.” Because of grace, in Christianity the emphasis is on “done.”[{1}](#)



One of the most powerful elements of grace is simply *acceptance*. The book of Romans assures us that we are accepted by both the Father (Romans 14:3) and the Son (Romans 15:7). We can do nothing to earn Their acceptance; it’s a gift. The Father says, “I accept you just the way you are, but I love you too much to leave you that way. Come to Me: My arms and My heart are open to you because of what My Son did in His incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. I have always loved you, My precious child. I chose you before the

foundation of the world, to adopt you into My family.”{2} I love to think of God stamping our foreheads with an invisible tattoo that says, “Accepted in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6, KJV).

Pastor Mark Driscoll has an especially great definition of grace. Instead of the one we’ve heard for years, “God’s undeserved favor,” Mark calls it “ill-deserved” favor.{3} But my all-time favorite definition comes from John Ortberg: “Grace is the offer of God’s ceaseless presence and irrational love that cannot be stopped. It’s the flow of God’s power and presence and favor in your life from one moment to the next that enables you to do whatever it is God has for you to do.”{4} I want to focus on God’s power, presence, and favor, as well as giving some real-life examples of what grace looks like.

## Power

A little boy was playing in his sandbox one Saturday morning when he discovered a large rock in the middle of it. The boy dug around the rock, managing to dislodge it from the dirt. With a little bit of struggle, he pushed and nudged the rock across the sandbox. But then he found that he couldn’t roll it up and over the little wall. The boy shoved, pushed, and pried, but every time he thought he had made some progress, the rock tipped and then fell back into the sandbox.

All this time the boy’s father watched from his window as the drama unfolded and his son burst into tears of frustration.

As the tears fell, a large shadow fell across the boy and the sandbox. It was the boy’s father. He asked, “Son, why didn’t you use all the strength that you had available?”

The boy sobbed, “But I did, Daddy, I did! I used all the strength that I had!”

The father corrected kindly, “No, son, you didn’t use all the strength you had. You didn’t ask me.” With that, the father reached down, picked up the rock and removed it from the sandbox.

Experiencing God grace means depending on Him to provide the power for our lives, whether it’s dislodging a big ol’ rock in our sandbox or simply making it through the day.

I like to think of the power of God’s grace as electricity that is available twenty-four hours, seven days a week. God’s grace is always available to us at every moment of our life, and because of His goodness and faithfulness, we never have to fear a power shortage of God’s grace.

The key to experiencing the flow of God’s power is what Jesus called *abiding*, choosing to remain in a state of trustful dependence on God. Jesus said in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for *apart from Me you can do nothing.*”

I love to illustrate this by turning on a shop light that’s plugged into an electrical outlet. When I press the switch, the light goes off, even though the power is still flowing and available. We can shut off the expression of grace, the flow of God’s power, by quenching the Spirit—by actively disobeying God, or by passively ignoring Him. But His power can shine in our lives again as soon as we open ourselves up to Him, asking for His help, intentionally depending on His power and not our own. Grace is the flow of God’s power in our lives.

## Presence

One morning, as I swam laps in the health club pool, I was meditating on these three aspects of grace. I said, “Lord, what do You want me to know about Your presence?” At that very second, I “just happened” to see a large sign on the wall right in front of me: “WARNING: NO LIFEGUARD ON DUTY.” I

literally laughed out loud, realizing that this was code for “You’re on your own, buddy.” God’s grace means we never have to fear that there’s no lifeguard on duty, that we’re on our own, because He has promised to never leave us or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6, Hebrews 13:5). The Lord Jesus’ last promise was, “I am with you always” (Matthew 28:20).

My favorite illustration of grace as God’s presence is the building of the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco. Dwight Edwards relates that during its initial stages of construction, “Twenty-three workers fell to their deaths. Finally, halfway through the project, a large net was put in place beneath the bridge. From then on, only ten men actually fell—all caught by the net. Plus, the workers’ productivity was raised by twenty-five percent. Assured that their safety was no longer in question, they pursued their work with far greater freedom and effectiveness than before. This is exactly what God has done for us. Stretched wide beneath us, extending from eternity past to eternity future, is God’s perfect grace, assuring every believer that we can never fall from His favor. No matter how badly we falter or fail, we can never plunge past the grace of God.”[\[5\]](#)

Think of grace as the hand of God ready to catch you when you fall. Because God is good and He is sovereign, that means nothing can happen that He cannot redeem. There is no such thing as an unrecoverable disaster. Even when we sin deliberately and stupidly, we cannot jump beyond the bounds of His grace. Now, His grace usually involves painful discipline, because God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6), but we cannot out-sin God’s love and grace.

Recently, a friend of mine was anguishing, “Why did God allow me to wreck my marriage and family? I wouldn’t let my children run out into the street and be hit by a car, why did He let *me* go that far?” As I turned to the Lord for an answer, He whispered, “I’m always protecting My children, but you don’t see the disasters I avert.” Part of God’s grace is the safety

of His protecting presence.

## Favor

One important element of grace is favor. One dictionary defines favor as “an attitude of approval or liking.”

Five-year-old Matt got up from his nap one day and said, “Guess what, mommy, I just had a dream about Jesus!” The mommy asked, “Well, what did Jesus say to you?” “Nothing.” “Well, what was Jesus doing?” “Nothing.” “Now Matthew, you just said you had a dream about Jesus, he **MUST** have said or done *something*!” Matt was quiet for a moment, and then with a wiggle and grin he looked up and said shyly, “He just stood there and *liked* me.”

When somebody likes you, their eyes light up when they see you. Did you know God’s whole face lights up when He looks at *you*? The Bible talks about His face shining on us.[{6}](#) God doesn’t only love us, He *likes* us! Experiencing God’s grace means He showers not only love but *like* on us, and His face reflects His heart of favor toward us.

Every child needs to receive the “3 A’s” of favor from his daddy: attention, affection, and approval. The Father poured out the 3 A’s on the Lord Jesus at His baptism when He said, “You are My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.”[{7}](#) Those words are like gold, and we can receive them into our own hearts as well.

I love the way one daddy blogger expresses grace toward his daughter. He writes,

I love you. I love the way your hair rolls into ringlets and falls into your eyes. I love the way you read yourself books, even though you can’t read. I love the way you dance and twirl around the kitchen. I love the way you wave at cars that pass on our walks. I love the way you scream “Dad”

in the middle of the night. I love the way you say “do it again” when we do something fun. I even love the permanent marker custom design you put on my new Mac. But as much as I love you, Jesus loves you more. I sacrifice a lot because I love you, but Jesus sacrificed everything because he loves you. So if somewhere along the way you fail a test or love a boy who does not love you back or have a mastectomy or develop Alzheimer’s or gain some weight or lose a job, you will still hold infinite value because Jesus loves you. No matter what. You are loved exactly as you are. Always.[\[8\]](#)

Oh yeah. That’s the beauty of grace.

## What Grace Looks Like

I want to share some examples of what grace looks like, both the way God showers grace on us, and the way people share His grace with others.

God has poured grace on me in a huge way when traveling internationally. Because of a schedule change, I found myself flying back to Dallas from Germany just in time to speak at a weekend women’s retreat. I arrived home from the airport with just enough time to repack my bags and pick up my speaking notes and props. I then drove two hours to the retreat facility, arriving while the women were still singing. I literally got out of the car with my notebook in hand, walked in the door and up to the stage to start speaking. With the time difference, my body felt like it was five o’clock in the morning and I’d been awake for twenty-two hours. But God not only kept me alert, He filled me with His energy, and the women couldn’t tell any difference.

When we’ve received God’s grace, we are able to turn around and give it to others.

Grace means responding with patience when someone forgets they already told you something, or that you told *them* something,



and just going with the flow. Grace means lifting off the burden of needless “shoulds” that weigh people down. One grace-filled speaker invited people to respond in song at the end of her message, saying, “If you’d like to sing, great! Join us! If you need a rest, feel free to just listen.” She removed any pressure to perform. At our church, a couple of pastors managed to deliver a message on giving and stewardship without even a hint of shame, or condemnation, or pressure. That’s what grace looks like.

When my friend’s mother contracted Alzheimer’s, she told her daughter early in the progression of the disease, “If I get to the point where I don’t recognize you, don’t take it personally.” She was expressing grace in being more concerned about her daughter’s hurt than her own loss of memory.

Another friend needed eye surgery to keep her from losing her sight. Her friend Angela, who has been blind for a number of years, told our friend, “Don’t be concerned about talking about your vision to me—I am so over that!” That’s what grace looks like.

One of my favorite stories happened one night to my dear friend who was starting to realize what monsters her abusive parents were. She had always patterned herself after her mother, and suddenly realized she had even chosen the same dishes as her mother’s when they got married. Suddenly she couldn’t abide the thought of keeping them in the house a moment longer. She grabbed a plate out of the cupboard and hurled it to the floor, smashing it to pieces. Her husband heard the noise and came to see what was going on. When she explained the connection between their dishes and her mother, her husband calmly said, “Have at it. Tomorrow morning I’ll take you to get new dishes.” Not only did he clean up the mess when she was done, but all those shards damaged their kitchen floor—and he never once mentioned it. That’s grace.

## Notes

1. See, for example, John 15:5; 19:30; Colossians 3:4; Ephesians 2:8-9.
2. Ephesians 1:4-5
3. [marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace](http://marshill.com/media/religionsaves/grace)
4. This quote came from a sermon preached at Pastor Ortberg's church, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in Menlo Park, California, 2003. When I emailed him asking for a specific citation, his answer was, "I have no idea, Sue."
5. Dwight Edwards, *Experiencing Christ Within Workbook: Passionately Embracing God's Provisions for Supernatural Living* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2002), p. 105.
6. Numbers 6:25
7. Matthew 3:17
8. [jeffdlawrence.com/2011/12/23/some-thoughts-on-how-to-talk-to-little-girls/](http://jeffdlawrence.com/2011/12/23/some-thoughts-on-how-to-talk-to-little-girls/)

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# The Historical Jesus Matters

*Tom Davis provides several lines of evidence that Jesus was a real, physical person of history.*

## Introduction

Does the historical Jesus matter?

Can Christians get by with purely theological Jesus? Some early Christians asked if faith needed philosophy to function. They used Athens to represent philosophy and Jerusalem to represent faith. In a similar way New Testament scholar Dale Allison asks, "What can the historical Jesus of Athens have to do with the biblical Christ of Jerusalem? Where two or three historians are gathered together, can the biblical Christ be

in their midst?"[\[1\]](#) Allison thinks that by using historical methodology we cannot connect the historical Jesus to the Biblical Jesus. Faith and historical knowledge cannot be completely reconciled. Is this the case?

While there are many biblical scholars that agree with Allison's view, there are other scholars that believe that the historical Jesus and the biblical Jesus must be the same Jesus in order for Christianity to be true. N. T Wright states, "The Bible, after all, purports to offer not just 'spiritual' or 'theological' teachings but to describe events within the 'natural' world, not least the public career of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew who lived and died within the 'natural' course of world history."[\[2\]](#) New Testament scholar Ben Witherington also calls out Allison's way of thinking:

"The problem with this bifurcation is that despite numerous attempts in this century to turn Christianity into a philosophy of life, it is and has always been a historical religion—one that depends on certain foundational events, particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus, as having happened in space and time. A faith that does not ground the Christ of personal experience in the Jesus of history is a form of docetic heresy, for it implies that what actually happened in and during Jesus' life is inconsequential to Christian faith."[\[3\]](#)

Wright and Witherington think that a methodology that does not allow for the possibility of miracles is flawed. The Old Testament and the New Testament claim that certain events happened. Either these events happened in the real world, or they did not. If these events happened in the real world, then we can know about them using the same methods that historians use to investigate any other historical event. Dale Allison cannot have it both ways.

Craig Blomberg argues:

“An understanding of any religion depends heavily on the historical circumstances surrounding its birth. This is particularly true of Judaism and Christianity because of the uniquely historical nature of these religions. Centered on Scriptures that tell the sacred stories of God’s involvement in space and time with communities called to be his people, the Judeo-Christian claims rise or fall with the truthfulness of those stories. For Christianity, the central story is about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—the story that forms the topic of the four New Testament Gospels.”{4}

Blomberg proposes that all religions should have to deal with historical scrutiny. Among the world’s religions only Islam, Judaism and Christianity claim to be built on a foundation on historical events. This historical foundation makes historical Jesus studies useful for apologetics and theology.{5} The usefulness of this field of study is important for Christian discipleship. N. T. Wright states, “I see the historical task, rather, as part of the appropriate activity of knowledge and love, to get to know even better the one whom we claim to know and follow.”{6} Christians are representatives and disciples of Jesus. This means we should know who Jesus is and what He did. Studying the life of Jesus is a part of necessary discipleship.

In this article I argue that we have evidence outside the Bible that shows that Jesus existed. Then I argue that the Gospels are ancient biographies, and therefore count as historical evidence for examining the life and teachings of Jesus. Next, I demonstrate that the narratives of the virgin birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke do not contradict each other. After that I show that the central theme of the teachings and actions of Jesus show that the kingdom of God was coming through his ministry. Finally, I provide evidence that Jesus rose physically from the dead.

# Evidence Outside the Bible

One of the complaints that Christianity's critics have is that Jesus is not mentioned much outside the Bible. These critics claim that if Jesus were as prominent as the Gospels portray Him to be, there would be more evidence to corroborate the claims of the Gospels. Luke Timothy Johnson explains the issue:

"There are a handful of authentic but very brief references to John the Baptist, Jesus, and James in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus: but from the great ocean of Jewish literature, there are otherwise fragmentary, coded, and oblique references to Jesus and his followers. From the Greco-Roman side we have the cryptic and not completely comprehending observations of the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus: the precious firsthand observation reported to the emperor Trajan by his governor in Bithynia, Pliny the Younger: and possible allusions by the philosopher Epictetus." [\[7\]](#)

For some people, this simply is not enough evidence to believe that Jesus existed. We will examine four sources outside the Bible: Josephus, Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger.

## Josephus

Josephus is the most important historical source for Jesus outside the New Testament. He was a Jewish officer that fought in the war against Rome from A.D. 66-70. After surrendering to the Romans, he wrote several important histories. In his "Jewish Antiquities" he mentions Jesus:

"At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus, if indeed one should call him a man. For he was a doer of startling deeds, a teacher of people who received the truth with pleasure. And he gained a following both among the Jews and among many of Greek origin. He was the messiah. And when

Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to the cross, those who had loved him previously did not cease to do so. For he appeared to them on the third day, living again, just as the divine prophets had spoken of these and countless other wonderful things about him. And up until this very day the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out.”{8}

Most scholars think that this passage was changed by early Christians to add credibility to their claim that Jesus was the Messiah. Several scholars tried to reconstruct the original passage by removing the most flattering sections out of this passage.{9} In 1972 Professor Schlomo Pines released a study of a manuscript written in Arabic. The Arabic manuscript was similar to the reconstructed passage that previous scholars had come to.{10} The original wording is as follows:

At this time there was a wise man who was called Jesus. His conduct was good and (he) was known to be virtuous. And many people from among the Jews and the other nations became his disciples. Pilate, because of an accusation made by the leading men among us, condemned him to be crucified and to die. But those who had become his disciples did not abandon his discipleship. They reported that he had appeared to them three days after his crucifixion, and that he was alive.

Most scholars agree that the reconstruction of the text and the corresponding text from the Arabic manuscript show that this is an authentic reference to Jesus by Josephus.{11} Josephus was aware that Jesus had a reputation to be a moral person, and that he had Jewish and Gentile followers. He knows that some Jewish leaders brought Jesus to Pilate, and the result was that Pilate executed Jesus by crucifixion. Josephus also tells us the Jesus’ disciples claimed that they saw Jesus alive three days after his crucifixion.

## Suetonius

Suetonius was a Roman historian who wrote about the lives of the Caesars and other important men of the first century. Writing early in the second century, he makes one mention of Christus. The context is that during the reign of Claudius the Jews were causing a public disturbance over Christ. This fits with known tensions between Jews and Christians at the time. Most historians are convinced that Christus is a variant spelling or misspelling of Christ. Suetonius writes, "As the Jews were making constant disturbance at the instigation of Christus, he expelled them from Rome."[{12}](#) Suetonius also tells us about Nero persecuting Christians after a fire burned much of Rome. "Punishment was meted out to the Christians, a group of individuals given over to a new and harmful set of superstitions."[{13}](#) While this does not tell us much, it does tell us that Christians in Rome were worshiping Jesus, and that the people of Rome noticed that they had different religious practices concerning Christ.[{14}](#)

## Tacitus

Tacitus was a Roman historian who lived from A.D. 55-120. He mentions Christ in his *Annals*, which covers Roman history from the death of Augustus to the death of Nero (A.D. 14-68). Below is his mention of Christ Christus):

"Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition broke out."[{15}](#)

While Tacitus does not give us much information to work with, there are a few observations that we can make. First, Jesus was crucified by Pontius Pilate. Second, Second, Jesus' followers were called Christians by the people. Third, the



Christian movement spread to Rome quickly.{16}

## Pliny the Younger

Pliny the Younger was the governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor. As governor he interrogated Christians that lived in the area. He wrote a letter to Trajan, the Emperor at the time, to get advice on how to handle the Christians in his province. The relevant part of the letter follows:

“They affirmed, however, that the whole of their guilt, or their error, was that they were in the habit of meeting on a certain fixed day before it was light, when they sang in alternate verse a hymn to Christ as to a god, and bound themselves to a solemn oath, not to any wicked deeds, but never to commit any fraud, theft, adultery, never to falsify their word, not to deny a trust when they should be called upon to deliver it up; after which it was their custom to separate, and then reassemble to partake of food—but food of an ordinary and innocent kind.”{17}

From this letter we find that Christians in Bithynia held themselves to a certain moral code, sang hymns to Christ as if he was a God, and gathered to partake of food. It does not tell us much, but it does tell us that Christians early on worshiped Jesus as God.{18}

What conclusions can be reached from these sources? First, Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. Second, Some of Jesus’ disciples claimed to see Jesus alive after his crucifixion. Finally, the followers of Jesus worshiped him as if he were a god.{19}

## The Gospels

The gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the primary sources for the life of Jesus. Many New Testament scholars claim that these Gospels were written anonymously, but there is good reason to think that the traditional authors wrote

these gospels. Nonetheless, skeptical scholars do not trust the Gospels as reliable sources.

Skeptical scholars argue that the traditional authors could not have written these Gospels because they were wrong about geographical details, and that they were illiterate. Concerning the geographical details, while there are several good scholarly responses addressing the asserted errors, this simply does not lead to the conclusion that the Gospels were not authored by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The worst-case scenario only shows that they made an error in describing the geography. (I don't think they made an error, I simply do not have to show that they didn't make an error to show who the authors were.)

Matthew was a tax collector, so he would have known how to write, probably in both Aramaic and Greek. Mark was from a wealthy family and easily could have learned to write in Greek. Luke was an educated Gentile that would have been able to write in Greek. Even if John couldn't read or write, he could have had a literate Christian record what John dictated to him as a scribe.

In claiming that we do not know who the authors of the Gospels were, the skeptics also ignore the traditions and the manuscript evidence. The earliest attestation of authorship for the Gospels is a Christian named Papias, a student of John. Papias claims that John wrote a gospel. He tells us that Mark wrote a gospel based on Peter's teachings. He also tells us that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel in Hebrew. From Papias we can conclude that John and Mark wrote gospels, and that Matthew wrote a sayings gospel that we do not have.[\[20\]](#)

The next person of importance is Irenaeus, a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John. Irenaeus tells us that the gospels were written by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The most reasonable explanation as to how Irenaeus came across

this information is that it is what Polycarp taught him.[{21}](#) There are two early sources that the gospels were written by the traditional authors. This means that the tradition is early, and no one challenged it until the Enlightenment.

Most scholars believe that Mark was the first gospels to be written. The majority of scholars think Mark wrote his gospel around A.D. 70, although it could have been earlier. Most scholars believe that John was the last gospel to be written, around A.D. 90. Jesus' death occurred in either A.D. 30 or 33. This means that these gospels were written within living memory of the earthly life of Jesus. The gospels being written within living memory of Jesus means that people who were eyewitnesses to the events were alive and could have provided corrections if they thought that the gospels were in error. This combined with the unanimous traditions and manuscript evidence of who the authors were gives us good reason to say that the information in these gospels is reliable, and that they are good historical sources for examining the life of Jesus.[{22}](#)

## **The Virgin Birth**

In studying the life of Jesus, the first event we come to is his birth. This is a fantastic claim, and it is understandable why people would be skeptical of a claim like this. The question is, where does the evidence lead?

The narratives of the virgin birth are found in Matthew chapter 1 and Luke chapters 1 and 2. When examining these narratives, skeptical scholars like Bart Ehrman point out perceived contradictions in Matthew and Luke.[{23}](#) They see that in Matthew, Joseph and Mary live in Bethlehem; in Luke they lived in Nazareth and moved to Bethlehem. In Matthew the angel appears to Joseph, but in Luke the angel appears to Mary. In Matthew the baby Jesus is visited by magi, in Luke Jesus is visited by shepherds. In Luke Jesus is presented in the temple, in Matthew he is not. In Matthew Joseph takes Mary

and Jesus to Egypt to protect them from Herod, in Luke they move to Bethlehem. They conclude that these differences mean that both stories are made up. Is that the right conclusion?

When examined closely the perceived contradictions disappear and the narratives fit together like a puzzle to form one consistent narrative. The following narrative solves all the issues listed above.

Zechariah was burning incense in the temple when an angel appeared and told him that his wife Elizabeth would become pregnant. An angel visits Mary in Nazareth and tells her that she will become pregnant with Jesus. When Elizabeth was six months along, Mary came to visit her. When Mary returns to Nazareth, Joseph sees that she is pregnant and was going to divorce her. An angel appears to Joseph and tells him that Mary's pregnancy is from God and he is to care for Mary and the Child. Due to a Roman census Joseph and Mary travel to Bethlehem. When Jesus was born angels appeared to shepherds and told them that the Messiah was born and that they could find him in Bethlehem. The shepherds go to Bethlehem and visit Jesus. Joseph and Mary take Jesus to be presented at the temple according to Jewish law. The magi from the east come to visit Jesus. After the magi leave, Joseph is told by an angel to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt because Herod wants to kill Jesus. After living in Egypt, an angel appears to Joseph and tells him to move back to Israel.

This shows that while the narratives in Matthew and Luke are different, they do not contradict each other. This also shows that the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke are not borrowing from each other. These two sources are independent historical sources.

## **Jesus Proclaimed the Kingdom**

The central theme of the preaching of Jesus is the coming of the kingdom of God, also called the kingdom of heaven. These

two phrases appear eighty-three times in the gospels. The kingdom was the central message of Jesus' preaching.

In Luke, when the angel visited Mary, the angel told her that Jesus would ". . . be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." [\[24\]](#) Mark states that Jesus first preached, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel." [\[25\]](#) John records a conversation Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, who wanted to learn about what Jesus was doing. Jesus' first statement to Nicodemus was, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." [\[26\]](#) Matthew described the beginning of Jesus ministry: "And he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people." [\[27\]](#) These quotes, and all the teachings of Jesus, show that proclaiming the kingdom of God was the central theme of His preaching. [\[28\]](#)

Jesus also demonstrated that He was bringing the kingdom of God with his ministry by casting out demons. After one particular instance of casting out a demon the Pharisees said, "It is only by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons." [\[29\]](#) Jesus' response was, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." [\[30\]](#)

We can see that the instances of Jesus casting out demons is proclaiming the kingdom of God and the end of the reign of the ruler of this age through His actions. Orthodox priest Andrew Stephan Damik describes the meaning of Jesus' exorcisms: "Therefore, the exorcisms Jesus performed in His time on earth were not a mere sideshow to demonstrate his power or an *ad hoc* fix for people's bodily ailments. Driving out demons was core to His mission. He had come to claim the world for God's

kingdom, so it makes sense that He would spend time driving out the oppressors and false rulers.”{31}

Through His proclamations of the coming kingdom, and by casting out demons, Jesus demonstrated that God was bringing His kingdom to earth. Jesus, and later his apostles, called people to come to God and join His kingdom. The kingdom of God is God’s kingly rule over His people and His creation.{32} The coming of God’s kingdom means that through Jesus, God has begun the work of setting things right.{33}

## **The Resurrection of Jesus**

The resurrection is the most foundational claim made by the earliest Christians. Jesus is the central person in the New Testament. The central event in the life of Jesus that confirms all His claims about who He is and what He said about the kingdom is the resurrection. Paul states the importance of the resurrection clearly:

“But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”{34}

In Paul’s view there is no other event in history that is more important than the resurrection. William Lane Craig, a Christian philosopher, summarizes the importance of the resurrection, “The Christian faith stands or falls on the event of the resurrection. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Christianity is a myth, and we may as well forget it.”{35} In theology and history, nothing is more important than the resurrection.

What kind of evidence could we have for such an event? Our evidence is the New Testament documents. These sources were written by real people in real time and places. We have already seen that the Gospels are ancient biographies of Jesus that are reliable historical sources. Paul's letter 1 Corinthians is also an important source of information about the resurrection of Jesus.

How does the evidence for Jesus' life compare with the evidence we have for other significant historical figures? Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C. The first existing biography we have of Alexander was written by Diodorus of Sicily sometime in the first century B.C. This means there is roughly a 200-year gap between the death of Alexander and the first existing historical literature about his life. While some historians may be skeptical about accuracy on some points of the life of Alexander, no historian says that we cannot learn about Alexander from Diodorus. Muhammad died in A.D. 632. Ibn Shaq wrote the earliest biography of Muhammad 150 years after Muhammad died. What we have of that biography is found in the work of Ibn Hisham. No one doubts that we can learn about the life of Muhammad from these writings. When it comes to Jesus, we have four biographies written about him within 70 years of his death. That means that all four biographies were written while people who were alive when Jesus was crucified were still living. As I argued earlier, two of these biographies were written by people who knew Jesus. This implies that the Gospels are good sources to take seriously.

What can we learn from the Gospels? First, Jesus died by crucifixion. All the Gospels have a crucifixion narrative in them.[\[36\]](#) While the Gospels give different minor details, they agree that Jesus was prosecuted by the Sanhedrin in an unjust trial. The Gospels also show that Jesus died of crucifixion under the rule of Pilate. This is supported by evidence from the works of Josephus and Tacitus that were discussed earlier.



New Testament Scholar Michael Licona writes, "We have looked carefully at the data pertaining to Jesus' death by crucifixion and have observed very strong reasons for granting the historicity of this event, and we have observed that it is granted by the overwhelming majority of scholars."[\[37\]](#) Given the evidence from the Gospels, Josephus, and Tacitus, we can confidently say that Jesus died of crucifixion.

Second, all the Gospels state that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[\[38\]](#) Joseph was part of the Sanhedrin, the governing body that just convinced Pilate to execute Jesus. It is unlikely that Jesus' disciples would invent a story where a member of the Sanhedrin would give him an honorable burial after having him executed as a criminal. Given the early consistent testimony from the Gospels, and that it is unlikely that Jesus' disciples would invent the story, it is reasonable to believe that Joseph took Jesus' body and buried Him in the tomb. All the evidence shows that Jesus was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.[\[39\]](#)

Third, the tomb of Jesus was found empty by a group of Jesus' women disciples. Once again, this is found in every Gospel.[\[40\]](#) There are differences in the lists of women who showed up at the grave of Jesus, but there are no contradictions. A variation of details such as who was in the room vary when examining eyewitness testimony. It is unlikely that men would invent a story where they were hiding, and the women were going to Jesus' grave. N. T. Wright wrote, "If they could have invented stories of fine, upstanding reliable male witnesses being first at the tomb, they would have done it. That they did not tells us either that everyone in the early church knew that the women, led by Mary Magdalene, were in fact first on the scene, or that the church was not so inventive as critics have routinely imagined, or both."[\[41\]](#) The evidence shows that it is reasonable that Jesus' grave was found empty by a group of His women disciples.

Fourth, Jesus appeared to multiple people in multiple

settings. Mark does not record a post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. The earliest manuscripts of Mark end at verse 16:8, He records the appearance of an angel to the women who found the tomb empty. Matthew, Luke, and John record Jesus appearing to the women, then several appearances to several people in different settings and even to groups of people. While harmonizing these appearances is difficult, there is enough evidence here to conclude that the apostles believed that they saw the risen Jesus.

While the Gospels are early evidence of the death and resurrection of Jesus, there is earlier evidence. This evidence is a creed found in one of Paul's letters, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8:

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

This creed was designed to be memorized easily and is not Paul's normal style of writing. The differences and the creedal pattern indicate that this was not originally composed by Paul. So where did Paul get it?

In his letter to the Galatians Paul provides a clue to where he got this creed. In chapters 1 and 2 Paul gives his “resume” to the church at Galatia. Paul says that after his conversion he went to Arabia, then returned to Damascus. Three years later he visited Peter and James for 15 days. 14 years later Paul met with Peter, James and

John. Both times Paul says that they approved of his ministry.[\[42\]](#) Most scholars are convinced that Paul got this

creed from Peter and James. N. T. Wright states, "It was probably formulated within the first two or three years after Easter itself, since it was already in formulaic form when Paul 'received' it. We are here in touch with the earliest Christian tradition, with something that was being said two decades or more before Paul wrote this letter."[\[43\]](#)

What information does this creed give us? It tells us that Christ died, that he was buried, that Jesus was raised, and that Jesus appeared to multiple people. This evidence is consistent with the evidence from the Gospels. All the evidence indicates that Jesus rose physically from the dead. William Lane Craig's conclusion is, "Each of these three great facts—the empty tomb, the appearances, the origin of the Christian faith—is independently established. Together they point with unwavering conviction to the same unavoidable and marvelous conclusion: Jesus actually rose from the dead."[\[44\]](#) There are good reasons to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. If Jesus did rise from the dead, his claims about the kingdom of God/Heaven are true.

## Conclusion

Skeptics often say that there is no evidence that Christianity is true. They say that faith is blind, and that Christians only believe because they were raised by Christians. It is true that many Christians were raised by Christians, but this does not show that Christianity has no evidence to support its claims. These critics say that the Bible, in this case the Gospels, are not allowed as evidence because they are religious books. The academic discipline of natural theology generally excludes the examination as well. They say if we allow the Bible to be examined this way then we have to allow all religious books to be examined this way. I welcome the challenge. N. T. Wright responds to the exclusion of the Bible in natural theology, "But Jesus was a figure of the real world. The Gospels are real documents from the real world. To

refuse to treat them as 'natural' evidence because the Christian tradition has seen them as 'revelation,' and to dismiss Jesus similarly because the Christian tradition has confessed him to be God incarnate, looks like the skeptic bribing the judges before the trial." [\[45\]](#) The best and most important evidence for the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is the Gospels. If my arguments are true, then Jesus is who He claimed to be, the Messiah, the world's sovereign King. Studying Jesus is not useful only for apologetics, it is a necessary part of Christian discipleship. When we know what the Gospels teach about Jesus, then we will be better followers of Jesus, we will love Him more, and we will be better at representing Him to those around us.

## Notes

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15. Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44
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26. John 3:3
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28. Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1969) 270. "In fact, an analysis of 119 passages in the New Testament where the expression 'Kingdom' occurs, shows that it means the rule of God; which is manifested in and through Christ; is apparent in the Church: gradually develops amidst hindrance; is triumphant in the second coming of Christ, (the end); and, finally, perfected in the world to come." Ratzinger, Joseph (Pope Benedict XVI). *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) Translated by Adrian J. Walker, 62. "The 'Kingdom of God' is a theme that runs through the whole of Jesus preaching."
29. Matthew 12:24
30. Matthew 12:28
31. Damek, Andrew Stephan. *Arise O God: The Gospel of Christ's Defeat of Demons, Sin, and Death* (Chesterton: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2021) 91.
32. Morris, Leon, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974) 73. "Jesus is thus brought into relation with this kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not to be understood as a temporal kingdom, an earthly realm; rather it is God's kingly rule, as Jesus would in due time make clear."
33. Witherington, 72. "Jesus, as part of his program of reform, confronts supernatural evil, nature gone haywire and human nature that is sick. This means that his mission is about more than just the salvation of individuals, for the coming of the kingdom means a world set right, in the fuller sense of the term world."
34. 1 Corinthians 15:13-17
35. Craig, William Lane, *The Son Rises: The Historical Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1981), 7.
36. Matthew 27:32-56; Mark 15:21-41; Luke 23:26-49; John

19:16-37

37. Licona, Michael. *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 318.

38. Matthew 27:57-61; Mark 15:24-42; Luke 50-56; John 19:38-42

39. Craig, 53-57.

40. Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1:10-18

41. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God: The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 608.

42. Galatians 1:11-2:9

43. Wright, N. T. *Christians Origins and the Question of God*, 319.

44. Craig, 134.

45. Wright, *History and Eschatology*, 74.

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# Faith Trends in America: How Is Christianity Faring as We Enter the Third Decade of the 21st Century

*In looking at the state of American Christianity, Steve Cable examines how handling data inaccurately can produce wildly varying conclusions.*

Recent reports on the current state of Christianity in America could create emotional whiplash, making one feel elated one moment and depressed the next. People are quick to comment on survey results and their own experiences. Within the last year, we have run the gamut from Glenn Stanton's book, *The Myth of the Dying Church: How Christianity is Actually Thriving in America and the World*,[{1}](#) to a Pew Research article, *In U.S. Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*.[{2}](#)



These titles appear to represent two very different viewpoints. Which is it? Are we thriving or declining at a rapid pace?

Finding the answer requires one to thoughtfully articulate your question in at least two ways:

1. What do you mean by Christianity? Are you referring to all potential Christians both Protestant and Catholic or are you focused on a subset, such as Evangelicals? And,
2. Is anything beyond affiliation with a church necessary to be considered an active Christian? Examples might include a biblical understanding of how one gets to heaven and belief in the Bible.

You also need to thoroughly understand the available survey data that might throw light on your question. You need to understand what questions are asked and how they are worded. Then you analyze the responses to the set of relevant questions to gain insight on your topic of interest. Remember, no survey asks the exact questions you would ideally use. That sounds like more work than most of you want to attempt. Unfortunately, most of the pundits writing today do not attempt to do that work either. Generally, they take fragmented data and attempt to draw intelligent inferences.

In this article, I have done this work for you, drawing



primarily on data from the Pew Research Group and the General Social Survey. We will look at which groups are growing as a percent of our population and which groups are not. Both Pew and the GSS have taken surveys over an extended period of time, helping us identify trends in religious affiliation and beliefs.

As you will see, the picture is certainly not rosy, but perhaps better than you expect. Although the growth of non-Christian segments is continuing at a fairly rapid pace, Evangelical Christianity is only declining slightly as a percentage of the population. However, I will point out how some data has been misunderstood to paint either a rosier picture or a gloomier picture than the actual current state of affairs.

## **Evangelicals: Thriving or Declining**

All surveys we have reviewed covering this century show the same general result: the percent of people claiming an affiliation with a Protestant or Catholic church has been declining.

GSS surveys<sup>[3]</sup> found across all ages the percentage who identify as Protestant or Catholic has dropped from 84% of the population in 1988 down to 69% in 2018. Looking only at Protestants (both Evangelical and Mainline), the drop was from 58% down to 46%. Considering those who are Millennials now, that is ages 18 to 34, we find a decline from 53% down to 36% over this thirty-year period. And the data does not show any leveling off in the rate of decline.

But we may ask, “Are Evangelicals participating in this general decline or are they thriving as some authors claim?”

The bottom-line answer is that Evangelicals are declining as a percent of the overall population but at a much slower rate. Across all ages, the percentage who identify as Evangelical

has dropped from 30% to 28% over this twenty-year period. For those aged 18 to 34 the drop was from 29% to 25%. In October 2019, Pew released a report showing that from 2009 to 2018, the percentage of Evangelicals of all ages dropped from 28% to 25%, a significantly faster rate of decline.

Even with a slow rate of decline, if Evangelicals make up around 25% of the population, they can have a significant impact on American culture and life and perhaps begin to grow again.

However, does Evangelical affiliation equate to an active Evangelical practice? We need to know how many who affiliate with an Evangelical church *are active Christians* as opposed to just being affiliated if we want to truly assess the strength of the American Evangelical movement.

Using the GSS surveys, we can look for people who:

1. Know God really exists
2. Pray multiple times per day
3. Attend church at least twice a month
4. Believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, and
5. Call themselves a strong Christian

I think an active, evangelical Christian would have these basic beliefs and practices.

The percentage of the population who meet these criteria has dropped from about 9% down to just over 7% of the population over the last twenty years. This result is a large enough group to have some impact but not enough to crow about the growing Evangelical presence. We can say that Evangelical Christianity is certainly not thriving but clinging to a position of some relevance.

## **What's Happening with the Nones**

Nones are people who state their religious affiliation is

either atheist, agnostic or nothing at all.{4} The dramatic growth of the Nones has been an ongoing headline story.

Surveys{5} indicate the Nones were 8% of the population in 1988. By 2018 they had grown to over 23% of the population. For ages 18 through 29, they tripled from 13% to 35% of the population. No one denies this growth, but some question the importance of this trend.

For example, Glenn Stanton states, “(The Nones) are simply reporting their actual faith practices in more candid ways, largely due to new ways in which polling questions have been asked in the last ten years or so.”{6} Oddly enough, he primarily relies on data from GSS for long term trends and they have asked exactly the same question regarding Nones since 1972.{7}

Some suggest Nones are primarily Christians who will return to the fold as they move into marriage and child rearing. Is there any indication that this is happening?

Well, in 2007, among those aged 18 to 32, 24% of them are classified as Nones. In 2014, for this same group now seven years older, 32% of them are Nones. As this group began rearing children, *a significantly larger percentage of them were Nones than when they were younger*. Also, instead of attending church, only 4% of these Nones attend church more than once a month.

Instead of emerging adult Nones turning into church-attending Christians as they age, more of them are becoming Nones. It appears that the cultural pressures against Christianity are outweighing the tendency of prior generations returning to seek religious training for their children.

The Barna Group has found that there are genuine differences between Millennials and older generations that will not be removed as they age. As Dave Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, states in his book, *UnChristian*,{8} “I would caution

you not to underestimate the widening gap between young people and their predecessors. Those who think that in due time Mosaics . . . will ‘grow up’ and look like everyone else should prepare to have unfulfilled expectations.” Dave’s comment is based on their analysis of multiple surveys covering thousands of individuals and a large number of in-depth interviews with young adults.

## Are the Nons THE Major Growth Story?

Is the growth of nondenominational Christians a more important trend than the Nones? Glenn Stanton states, “Growth of nondenominational churches has been many times larger than the nones. . . it is not the rise of the nones that is the major story . . . It’s the “nons” and not the nones that are mushrooming.”[\[9\]](#)

This condition would be an amazing finding if true. However, it is not true for three major reasons which we will discuss today:

1. The percentage growth of the “nons” is *not many times larger*. From 2007 to 2014, “nons” grew their percentage of the population by 44%. But, Nones grew by almost the same rate at 42%. Looking at absolute growth, the “nons” grew by four million people versus the Nones’ 19 million—almost five times the number of “nons.” The growth of the “nons” is relegated to a minor factor when compared to the Nones.
2. The “nons” are a subset of the Evangelicals. And Stanton states, “*Evangelicals* have benefited more from these ecclesiastical exoduses than anyone else. They even . . . *outpaced the nones.*”[\[10\]](#) In fact, most of the “nons” growth came as a result of switching between evangelical denominations. Thus, any growth by the “nons” is offset by declines in other evangelical groups, resulting in an overall *decline of about 1%*. Evangelicals have not even come close to outpacing the Nones.

*In fact, for the first time, we have the total number of nones exceeding the number of Evangelicals in America.*

3. Stanton says, "It's the evangelical churches identifying as nondenominational that have been growing faster than any others including the nones and the atheists."[\[11\]](#) Taking a look at percentage growth, *the atheists and agnostics have shown the most explosive growth by far*, growing their numbers from 9 million in 2007 to 17.4 million in 2014—a growth of 92%—while the “nons” grew from 8 million to 12 million over the same time period, a growth of 56%. So perhaps Stanton meant to say, “It’s the non-believers and not the Nones that are mushrooming.”

In summary, the growth of the “nons” may be of interest to those who study the relative make-up of Evangelicals in America. But to those interested in how Evangelicals are doing as a whole it is not relevant. The fact that the “nons” are increasing just reflects some churning of affiliations within the Evangelical realm. On the whole, Evangelicals are decreasing at a slow, but steady pace.

## **Confusing Expansion with Same-Store Growth**

A commercial enterprise may report sales growth. But the savvy investor wants to know why. Opening new stores may increase sales. But if it masks lower sales per existing store, it is a red flag. They are actually losing market share.

Similarly, with parachurch ministries, their number of locations gives little indication as to the health of Christianity. However, their growth rate per location can signal increased interest in Christianity.

Unfortunately, this distinction is often overlooked. For example, one pundit points to impressive growth by two respected student ministries in adding new locations as

evidence to support an optimistic projection of Evangelical growth. However, they are not reporting an increased impact on a per site basis.

Looking at their annual reports, [{12}{13}](#) we see that one of them reports per location attendance *declining* at a rate of almost 1% per year over the last decade.[{14}](#) The other is declining even faster, reporting a growth rate of *negative* 3% per year.[{15}](#)

These declines could be caused by several different factors such as lower attendance at new locations, competition with other student groups, lower interest in their Christian message, etc. But we can be sure that these two ministries do not indicate an overall growth trend for Evangelicals.

Surveys and statistics can be very helpful in understanding the status of a ministry. However, we can be seriously misled by listening to those who do not know how to interpret the data contained in these sources.

Wrapping up our look at faith trends, in this article we saw:

1. American Evangelicals are declining slightly in the overall population with actively engaged Evangelicals holding about 7% of the population.
2. The Nones continue to grow and now exceed Evangelicals. Their growth clearly reflects the unimportance of religious affiliation among a large percentage of Americans.
3. The growth of Non-denominationals (although interesting) made no impact on the overall size of American Evangelicals and is less than the growth of atheists and agnostics.
4. Looking at growth per location of parachurch ministries is more important than growth in number of locations in assessing the growth of Christianity.

We live in a challenging time but Evangelical churches are strong enough to make a huge difference in America if we will follow the Holy Spirit's lead and present the eternal truth of

the gospel in ways that communicate to today's "nothing in particular" culture.

## Notes

1. Glenn Stanton, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Franklin TN: Worthy Publishing), 2019.
2. Pew Research Center, *In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, October 17, 2019.
3. General Social Surveys from 1988, 1998, 2018.
4. Terms used in the Pew Research Surveys; the GSS survey uses None to capture all of those responses and other surveys use variations of these approaches.
5. Ibid.
6. Stanton, p. 54.
7. General Social Surveys, 1972-2018: Cumulative Codebook, March 2019.
8. Dave Kinnaman and Dave Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity . . . And Why It Matters*, Baker Books, 2007, p. 22.
9. Stanton, p. 30-31.
10. Stanton, p. 28.
11. Stanton, p. 31.
12. Young Life Annual Reports 2009 and 2017;  
[https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/2017\\_Annual%20Report.pdf](https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/2017_Annual%20Report.pdf)  
<https://www.younglife.org/ResourceLibrary/Documents/AR2009final.pdf>
13. InterVarsity Annual Reports 2007 and 2017;  
<https://intervarsity.org/news/bringing-new-life-every-corner-every-campus;>  
<https://intervarsity.org/news/2006-2007-annual-report;>  
<https://intervarsity.org/about-us/2016-2017-annual-report>
14. The years looked at were 2009 and 2017.
15. For InterVarsity, we looked at 2007 and 2017.

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# 2024 Radio Podcasts



2024	Program Title	Author	MP3
May 20-24	<a href="#">Two Genders, Two Spectrums</a>	Sue Bohlin	<a href="#">Download</a>
May 13-17	<a href="#">Spiritual Abuse</a>	Kerby Anderson	<a href="#">Download</a>
May 6-10	<a href="#">A Philosophical Critique of Theistic Evolution</a>	Dr. Ray Bohlin	<a href="#">Download</a>
Apr. 29- May 3	<a href="#">5 Things You Need to Know About Jesus</a>	Tom Davis	<a href="#">Download</a>
Apr. 22-26	<a href="#">Mind Games Camp</a>	Sue Bohlin	<a href="#">Download</a>
Apr. 15-19	<a href="#">Transhumanism and Artificial Intelligence</a>	Kerby Anderson	<a href="#">Download</a>
Apr. 8-12	<a href="#">The Self-Understanding of Jesus</a>	Dr. Michael Gleghorn	<a href="#">Download</a>
Apr. 1-5	<a href="#">The Scandal of Blood Atonement: "Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?"</a>	Byron Barlowe	<a href="#">Download</a>



Mar. 25-29	<a href="#"><u>The Answer is the Resurrection</u></a>	Steve Cable, read by Kerby Anderson	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Mar. 18-22	<a href="#"><u>In His H.A.N.D.S.: How We Can Know That Jesus is God</u></a>	Don Closson	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Mar. 11-15	<a href="#"><u>Mind Games Camp</u></a>	Sue Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Mar. 4-8	<a href="#"><u>Loneliness and the Lockdown</u></a>	Kerby Anderson	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Feb. 26- Mar. 1	<a href="#"><u>Return of the God Hypothesis for Regular People</u></a>	Dr. Ray Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Feb. 19-23	<a href="#"><u>Gospel Truth or Fictitious Gossip?</u></a>	Dr. Michael Gleghorn	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Feb. 12-16	<a href="#"><u>Abusive Churches</u></a>	Dr. Pat Zukeran, read by Sue Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Feb. 4-9	<a href="#"><u>Biblical Archaeology</u></a>	Kerby Anderson	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Jan. 29- Feb. 2	<a href="#"><u>Mind Games Camp</u></a>	Sue Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Jan. 22-26	<a href="#"><u>The Biology of Human Uniqueness</u></a>	Dr. Ray Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Jan. 15-18	<a href="#"><u>The Glory of Grace</u></a>	Sue Bohlin	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>
Jan. 8-12	<a href="#"><u>Faith Trends in America: How Is Christianity Faring as We Enter the Third Decade of the 21st Century?</u></a>	Steve Cable, read by Kerby Anderson	<a href="#"><u>Download</u></a>

Jan. 1-5	<a href="#">Prophecies of the Messiah</a>	Dr. Michael Gleghorn	<a href="#">Download</a>
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# Prophecies of the Messiah

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues that the Bible contains genuine prophecies about a coming Messiah that were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.*

## The Place of His Birth

Biblical prophecy is a fascinating subject. It not only includes predictions of events that are still in the future. It also includes predictions of events that were future at the time the prophecy was given, but which have now been fulfilled and are part of the past. This latter category includes all the prophecies about a coming Messiah that Christians believe were accurately fulfilled in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. If the Bible really does contain such prophecies, then we would seem to have evidence that's at least consistent with the divine inspiration of the Bible. One can see how an all-knowing God could accurately foretell the future, but it's not clear how a finite human being could do so. Thus, if there are accurately fulfilled prophecies in the Bible, then we have yet another reason to believe that the biblical worldview is true.



Let's begin with a prophecy about the Messiah's birthplace. "Messiah" is a Hebrew term that simply means

“anointed one.” When translated into Greek, the language of the New Testament, the term becomes “Christ.” Christians believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (see Mark 14:61-62).

In Micah 5:2 we read, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” This prophecy was given in the eighth century B.C., more than seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus!

Notice, first, that it refers to a future ruler who will come from the town of Bethlehem. When King Herod, shortly after Jesus’ birth, asked the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ (or Messiah) was to be born, they told him that he was to be born in Bethlehem and cited this verse from Micah as support (Matt. 2:1-6). Both Matthew and Luke confirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1 and Luke 2:4-7). So He clearly meets this necessary qualification for being the promised Messiah.

But that’s not all. Micah also says that the origins of this ruler are “from of old, from ancient times.” How should we understand this? One commentator notes, “The terms ‘old’ . . . and ‘ancient times’ . . . may denote ‘great antiquity’ as well as ‘eternity’ in the strictest sense.”[\[1\]](#) Dr. Allen Ross states, “At the least this means that Messiah was pre-existent; at the most it means He is eternal.”[\[2\]](#) Micah’s prophecy thus suggests that the Messiah will be a supernatural, perhaps even divine, person. And this astonishing conclusion is precisely what Jesus claimed for Himself![\[3\]](#)

## **The Time of His Appearing**

Let’s now consider a fascinating prophecy that, in the opinion

of many scholars, tells us when the Messiah would make His appearance. It's found in Daniel 9.

Daniel was one of the Jewish captives who had been brought to Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar. The prophecy in Daniel 9 was given in the sixth century B.C. While much can be said about this passage, we must focus on a few important points.

To begin, verse 24 gives us the time parameters during which the prophecy will unfold. It reads, "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin," and so on. Although we can't go into all the details, the 'seventy 'sevens'" concern seventy distinct seven-year periods of time, or a total of 490 years.

Next, verse 25 tells us that from the issuing of a decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the coming of the Messiah, there will be a total of sixty-nine "sevens," or 483 years. There are two views we must consider. The first holds that this decree was issued by the Persian ruler Artaxerxes to Ezra the priest in 457 B.C.{4} Adding 483 years to this date brings us to A.D. 27, the year many scholars believe Jesus began His public ministry! The second view holds that the reference is to a later decree of Artaxerxes, issued on March 5, 444 B.C.{5} Adding 483 years to this date takes us to A.D. 38. But according to this view, the years in question should be calculated according to a lunar calendar, consisting of twelve thirty-day months.{6} If each of the 483 years consists of only 360 days, then we arrive at March 30, 33 A.D. Dr. Allen Ross says "that is the Monday of the Passion week, the day of the Triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem."{7} The views thus differ on the date of Jesus' death, but each can comfortably fit the evidence.{8}

Finally, verse 26 says that after the period of sixty-nine "sevens" the Messiah will be "cut off" and have nothing. According to one scholar, "The word translated 'cut off' is

used of executing . . . a criminal.”{9} All of this fits quite well with the crucifixion of Jesus. Indeed, the accuracy of this prophecy, written over five hundred years before Jesus’ birth, bears eloquent testimony to the divine inspiration and truth of the Bible.

## The Nature of His Ministry

In Deuteronomy 18:15 Moses told the Israelites, “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.” This verse promised a succession of prophets who would speak God’s words to the people. Ultimately, however, it refers to Jesus Christ. One commentator notes that the Messianic interpretation of this passage is mentioned not only in the New Testament, but also among the Essenes, Jews, Gnostics, and others.{10} Peter explicitly applied this passage to Jesus in one of his sermons (Acts 3:22-23).

But not only was the Messiah to be a great prophet, it was also foretold that he would be a priest and king as well. The prophet Zechariah was told to make a royal crown and symbolically set it on the head of Joshua, the high priest. The Lord then said, “Here is the man whose name is the Branch . . . he will . . . sit and rule on his throne. And . . . be a priest on his throne. And there will be harmony between the two” (Zechariah 6:12-13). ‘The title “Branch” is a messianic title.’{11} So the scene symbolizes the future Messiah, here referred to as “the Branch,” uniting the offices of king and priest in one person.

But why is it important that the Messiah be a priest? As a prophet he speaks God’s word to the people. As a king he rules from his throne. But why must he also be a priest? “Because priests dealt with sin,” says Michael Brown, a Christian scholar who is ethnically Jewish. “Priests bore the iniquities of the people on their shoulders.”{12} And this, of course, is

precisely what Jesus did for us: “He . . . bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Pet. 2:24).

Dr. Brown points to a tradition in the Talmud that says that on the Day of Atonement there were three signs that the animal sacrifices offered by the high priest had been accepted by God. According to this tradition, in the forty years prior to the temple’s destruction in A.D. 70, all three signs turned up negative every single time.[{13}](#) Dr. Brown comments, “Jesus probably was crucified in A.D. 30, and the temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.”[{14}](#) So during this forty-year period God signaled that he no longer accepted these sacrifices. Why? Because final atonement had been made by Jesus![{15}](#)

## **The Significance of His Death**

Without any doubt, one of the most astonishing prophecies about the promised Messiah is found in Isaiah 52-53. The verses were written about seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus. They largely concern the death of the Lord’s “Suffering Servant.” According to many scholars, a careful comparison of this passage with the Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’ suffering and death reveals too many similarities to be merely coincidental.

In some of the most-cited verses from this intriguing passage we read: “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5-6). Here we have a vivid depiction of substitutionary atonement. The Lord lays upon His servant “the iniquity of us all” and punishes him “for our transgressions.” In other words, God’s servant dies as a substitute in our place. This is precisely what Jesus claimed for himself, saying, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The parallels between Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" and Jesus are certainly impressive. But some scholars have suggested that Isaiah's "servant" is actually the nation of Israel and not the Messiah. Dr. Michael Brown dismisses this notion however, insisting that 'nowhere in the . . . foundational, authoritative Jewish writings do we find the interpretation that this passage refers to the nation of Israel. References to the servant as a people actually end with Isaiah 48:20.'[\[16\]](#) What's more, he says, "Many . . . Jewish interpreters . . . had no problem seeing this passage as referring to the Messiah . . . By the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe Alshech said, 'Our rabbis with one voice accept and affirm . . . that the prophet is speaking of the Messiah, and we shall . . . also adhere to the same view.'[\[17\]](#)

For his part, Dr. Brown is so convinced that this passage prophetically depicts the suffering and death of Jesus that he feels "as if God would have to apologize to the human race and to the Jewish people for putting this passage into the scriptures" if Jesus is not the one in view![\[18\]](#) Although this is a strong statement, it's not unjustified. For Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant for the sins of the people, it also implies his resurrection!

## **The Mystery of His Resurrection**

In the opinion of many scholars, Isaiah 53 not only foretells the death of God's servant; it also implies his resurrection from the dead!

It's important to notice that Isaiah 53 makes it absolutely clear that the Messiah is put to death. It says that "he was cut off from the land of the living" (v. 8), and that 'he poured out his life unto death" (v. 12). On the other hand,

however, it also says that ‘he will see his offspring and prolong his days” (v. 10), and that after his suffering “he will see the light of life and be satisfied” (v. 11). So the text teaches both that the Messiah will die and that he will live again. And although the passage doesn’t explicitly teach the Messiah’s resurrection, it’s certainly consistent with it. This is really staggering in light of the compelling historical evidence for the death and resurrection of Jesus!{19}

Let’s now pause to consider what we’ve learned in this brief article. Micah 5:2 teaches that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. Also, by teaching the preexistence, or even eternality, of the Messiah, the prophecy suggests that he’ll be a supernatural, possibly even divine, figure. In Daniel 9:24-27 we saw that the Messiah would appear to Israel sometime around A.D. 27 – 33, precisely the time of Jesus’ public ministry! Deuteronomy and Zechariah teach that the Messiah would minister as prophet, priest, and king. As a prophet, Jesus spoke God’s word to the people. As a priest, he offered himself as a perfect sacrifice for our sins. And while he didn’t reign as king during his first advent, he was called “the king of the Jews” (Matt. 27:11, 37). And Christians believe that he’s in some sense reigning now from heaven and that he’ll one day reign on earth as well (Luke 1:32-33). Finally, Isaiah 53 teaches that the Messiah would die for our sins—and then somehow live again. This is consistent with the New Testament’s record of Jesus’ substitutionary death and bodily resurrection.

Of course, we’ve not been able to consider all the prophecies. But hopefully enough has been said to conclude with Dr. Brown that if Jesus isn’t the Messiah, “there will never be a Messiah. It’s too late for anyone else. It’s him or no one.”{20} Well, you’ve now heard the evidence; the verdict is up to you.

## Notes



1. Thomas E. McComiskey, "Micah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 427.
2. Allen Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at [www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=2764](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764). Accessed on September 6, 2007.
3. See, for example, Matthew 11:27; John 8:58 and 10:30.
4. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., "Daniel," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 114. See also Ezra 7:11-26.
5. J. Dwight Pentecost, "Daniel," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1362. See also Nehemiah 2:1-8.
6. See, for example, the discussion in Ross, "Messianic Prophecies," at [www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=2764](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=2764). Accessed on September 6, 2007.
7. Ibid.
8. The first holds that He was crucified in A.D. 30, the second in A.D. 33.
9. Pentecost, "Daniel," 1364.
10. Earl S. Kalland, "Deuteronomy," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 122.
11. F. Duane Lindsey, "Zechariah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1985), 1558. See also Zechariah 3:8.
12. Michael Brown, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus* (Advance Reader Copy) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2007), 199.
13. See Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 39a.
14. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 201.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 213.
17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., 212.

19. For a defense of this important claim, please see some of the excellent articles by William Lane Craig at [www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org). For more scriptural support, please compare Peter's sermon in Acts 2:22-36 with Psalm 16:8-11.

20. Brown, interviewed in Strobel, *The Case for the Real Jesus*, 203.

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## Truth You Can Sing About: 5 Christmas Carols

*When was the last time you thought about the great truth found in Christmas hymns and carols? Probe Radio producer Steven Davis focuses on the theology of five Christmas carols. The podcast features new music for each carol written by Steven's son and Probe's Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis.*



### Hark the Herald Angels Sing

**Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King;  
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,  
God and sinners reconciled!"**

Charles Wesley penned these words in the early 1700's. And this hymn is filled with inspiration and insight.

**The 1st line** tells us who delivers this great message: the angels.

**The 2nd line** reveals Who is the content: the Christ child.

**The 3rd line** shows results of this miraculous birth: peace and mercy incarnate came to earth.

**But the 4th line** exclaims what has happened—that which mankind had been incapable of doing, and centuries of sacrifices could not accomplish: God and sinners were finally and fully reconciled.

Reconciliation literally means “according to change.” The situation between God and man had to be changed; both parties were at enmity with one another, and we needed to be reconciled.

“This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body.” (Colossians 1:21-22)

“We were God’s enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God’s friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ’s life!” (Romans 5:10)

On that angel-filled night, we became witnesses to the first step of this reconciliation: the Son had come in the flesh to earth! And that’s the point of the Incarnation—God became man so that He could reconcile us to Himself, and that was the miraculous, wondrous Christmas Change.

Don’t miss what the Apostle Paul and Wesley were saying about our condition: we were sinners and we were enemies. But now, because of Christ, we are reconciled.

When you consider His birth this Christmas season, may you be wondrously changed.

# 0 Come, 0 Come Emmanuel

0 come, 0 come, Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear.  
*Rejoice! Rejoice!*  
*Emmanuel shall come to thee, 0 Israel.*

Emmanuel: *God with us*. This was not a new concept, for Israel knew and saw on numerous occasions that God was “with” them:

“Praise the Lord who has given rest to his people Israel, just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the Lord our God **be with us** as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us or abandon us.” (1 Kings 8)

“Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria nor because of all the horde that is with him; for the one **with us** is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but **with us** is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.” (2 Chronicles 32)

“The LORD of hosts is **with us**; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46)

During the exodus God was with them as seen in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day. His presence was with them in the Holy of holies. And at times His presence was with them in battle.

But Emmanuel being **with us** is different.

John tells us in his gospel, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14)

And Paul continues in his letter to Timothy: “Here is the

great mystery of our religion: Christ came as a human. The Spirit proved that he pleased God, and he was seen by angels. Christ was preached to the nations. People in this world put their faith in him, and he was taken up to glory.”  
(1 Timothy 3:16)

The Son of God has appeared, and that is a reason for Israel—and us—to rejoice.

## Joy to the World

Joy to the world! The Lord is come  
Let earth receive her King!  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And heaven and nature sing  
And heaven and nature sing  
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing!

I love this carol. It is indeed joyous, and is rightfully sung as such. But is the world joyous? Will Earth receive her king? Will every heart prepare Him room?

No.

And that greatly saddens me. There are those who worship other gods, and will find no joy in His coming. There are those who think Him a myth and will not receive Him. There are those who think Him irrelevant or undeserving, and will not make room for Him. For these . . . there is no joy.

Part of the reason there is no joy is our fault—the Church’s fault. Do we judge instead of love? Are we inconsistent? Do we preach legalism rather than forgiveness? And though we understand the Truth, do we wield it as a weapon rather than share it with grace?

For those who may have ended up on the receiving end of our hypocrisy, I am so sorry. But don’t let our failings get in the way of you seeing a loving heavenly Father, and His Son,

dying for your sins.

Scripture tells us that “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11) So we **will** kneel and confess Christ, either because we love Him and find our joy in Him, or because we have to, and we find only fear.

Listen to the music; listen to the words; and discover The One who loves you this Christmas. He came for you; and He brings you joy!

## What Child Is This?

**So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,  
Come, peasant, king, to own him.  
The King of kings salvation brings,  
Let loving hearts enthrone him.  
Raise, raise a song on high,  
The virgin sings her lullaby  
Joy, joy for Christ is born,  
The babe, the Son of Mary.**

In the verse preceding this one, there's a question asked, which has to do more with you and me, than the shepherds and wise men who are part of this story: *Why lies He in such mean estate, where ox and ass are feeding?* That's a 19th century way of saying, “Why was Jesus born in a barn?” So then comes my question: “Why was the King of Kings born in a barn?” The answer comes in this last verse: *Come peasant, king, to own Him.*

The Apostle Paul had an opportunity to speak with the philosophers in Athens on Mars Hill, and his speech explains this invitation to all:

“As I was going through your city and looking at the things

you worship, I found an altar with the words, 'To an Unknown God.' You worship this God, but you don't really know him. So I want to tell you about him. This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people. God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him." (Acts 17)

Peter, after having a vision from God, said, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him." (Acts 10:34)

A barn would give access to everyone; a palace—where a king *should* be born—would have guards and ministers and red tape and bureaucracy to negotiate; and those who would have seen and heard the angels would have never been able to see the One of Whom the Angels sang.

The angels sang the song for you. Don't miss seeing Him.

## **Il Est Né Le Divin Enfant**

### **Chorus:**

**He is born, the divine Christ child.  
Play on the oboe and bagpipes merrily.  
He is born, the divine Christ child.  
Sing we all of the Savior's birth.**

**Through long ages of the past,  
Prophets have foretold his coming;  
Through long ages of the past,  
Now the time has come at last.**

You probably noticed this was a French carol by the title. The above is but one of a multitude of translations, which bespeaks of its long and celebrated life in English performances.

Verse 1 talks about prophets and prophecy, and now is the time. That is a rather famous phrase in the New Testament. For He says, "At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you." Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'" (1 Corinthians 6)

This salvation is quite literally Jesus Christ, and we see this truth beginning in the above lyric, and concluded by the writer of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. This shows that the Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is greater than their names." (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Do you understand what an awesome privilege it is for you to be born in this time? No waiting for many days and many prophecies to be fulfilled. This song is a celebration: the Savior has come into the world, and now is the time. So what are you doing "Now"?

May your Christmas be filled with praise.

*The music for this program was composed and performed by my son and Probe Mind Games Camp alumnus, Jon Clive Davis.*

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# Truth You Can Sing About – Part 2

*When was the last time you thought about the great truth found in Christmas hymns and carols? In this program we focus on the truth of five Christmas carols. Be sure to listen to the podcast to hear the music for each carol, written just for us, playing underneath the content! [Part 1](#), produced in 2015, featured five different Christmas carols.*

## The First Noel

And by the light of that same star  
Three wise men came from country far;  
To seek for a King was their intent,  
And to follow the star wherever it went.

The first two verses speak about angels and shepherds; the remaining verses speak of three Wise Men.



Tradition gives us their names, but not only do we *not* know their names (because the Bible doesn't mention them), we don't even know if there were three. We assume three because of the number of gifts mentioned.

But the point of this carol is not about a number, or gifts; it's about the **commitment** of these Magi: *"To seek for a King was their intent, and to follow the star wherever it went."*

Is there something in your life you've pursued, *wherever* it went? A person? Stuff? Wealth? Position? Power? The Magi were accustomed to wealth, position and power. But who did they **pursue**? A foreign King. A Jewish King. Why? Well, if they knew about the birth of this Jewish King, then they knew about the

Jewish God. And I believe they understood that this Jewish God, was The One True God.

**To choose to follow** the King was and is counter-cultural, and oftentimes is perceived as foolish. But the WISE men didn't care. They chose to follow the star *wherever it went*, until they found . . . Him. Do you know who to follow? Are you willing to look for Him with that same kind of commitment?

## **Come Thou Long Expected Jesus**

**Born Thy people to deliver,  
Born a child and yet a King,  
Born to reign in us forever,  
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.**

"You will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end."  
(Luke 1:31-33)

It's been about 400 years since Israel had heard from the Lord, and within six months, the angel Gabriel came down twice to speak of Messiah's birth. When Mary heard those words, Scripture mentions how she treasured them in her heart. The big thing: she's going to be pregnant! (Well, and that He was a King.) But the first thing Gabriel told Mary was to name Him Jesus; and we learn from another angelic vision that Jesus would live up to His name: "[F]or He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

Mr. Wesley got it right; the first line of this verse is, "Born Thy people to deliver." The advent we celebrate now is

for the One Who has delivered us from our sins. The advent we still expect is when He will rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, forever.

May Christ rule in *your* heart . . . forever.

## **Come, All Ye Faithful**

**Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;  
Jesus, to Thee be all glory given;  
Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing.  
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.**

Singer/Songwriter Michael Card was explaining how it was difficult for the disciples to see **Christ as God**. Seeing Him as man—standing five-foot something, walking, eating and drinking with them everyday—was easy. But for us, the opposite is true—seeing Him as God is easier; but **Christ as man**, is a bit more difficult.

One of the reasons to celebrate His birth, is to give us a tangible and “In Time” beginning of One who is everlasting. And so like the hymn, we **can** come before Him in our hearts and minds, see Him lying in a manger in a barn. We can rejoice how the Word became flesh, and, we can rejoice that He laid down that life, to save us.

John 1 reveals the author’s inspiration: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) But how is it we come to adore Him? John tells us in a few verses earlier: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

Will you receive that right, and greet Christ the Lord today?

# Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent

Rank on rank the host of heaven  
spreads its vanguard on the way,  
as the Light of light descendeth  
from the realms of endless day,  
that the powers of hell may vanish  
as the shadows clear away.

When the author of the hymn composed this verse he must have had Isaiah 9:2 in mind: "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined." He must have visualized the host of heaven in a vanguard invading the earth, and leading the Son of God to His incarnation in a glorious, dazzling, and blinding display. All who worshiped darkness were put on notice: the light of the world had come into the world.

And the light is still here, which is why the shadows are being cleared away and the powers of hell will vanish: "You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:14, 16)

"But you are the chosen race, the King's priests, the holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light." (1 Peter 2:9)

Will you come out of your darkness and into His light?

## Good Christian Men Rejoice (*In Dulci Jubilo*)

Good Christian men, rejoice,  
With heart, and soul, and voice;

Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy!  
Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He hath opened the heavenly door,  
And man is blessed forevermore.  
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

So what was Christ born for? Or as the hymn goes: What's the "this?"

"Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep . . . If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:7,9)

Christ not only opened the door, He **IS** the door. He's the **only door** to Heaven, and to our Father in Heaven: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." (John 14:6)

When Christ died upon the cross, **He did it for you**, so that you would have a way into heaven, and experience endless, eternal bliss. "Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne." (Hebrews 11:3) He was willing to die **for the joy** that was awaiting Him; of accomplishing His Father's will, and making a way for you, to the Father.

The door is open. Listen, you could be hearing the songs of Heaven.

May your Christmas be filled with praise.

*This program was written by Probe Radio producer, Steven Davis, whose blog is [Singing With the King](#). The music was composed and performed by his son and Mind Games Camp graduate, Jon Clive Davis.*

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